

Review Procedures

All accreditors follow procedures that take institutions and programs through several stages of review, documentation and analysis. Depending on the outcome of a review, accreditors may require additional reports. Review cycles vary, with some accreditors requiring comprehensive reviews every three years, others requiring five-year reviews and still others requiring comprehensive reviews every 10 years, plus mid-cycle reviews.

Stages of Accreditation

The accreditation review and decision-making process typically involves six stages.

1. Establishment of Institutional or Program Eligibility

Every accrediting organization has certain basic requirements that institutions or programs must meet before they can apply for a review. Not all accrediting organizations have eligibility requirements, but all accreditors do require that an institution have authority to operate from the state in which it is located and have education as its primary purpose. For example, in the case of "regional" accreditation, there is a good deal of consistency among the eligibility requirements of the seven commissions. Most institutions seeking accreditation from these commissions must be degree-granting, they must have a governance structure that is sufficiently autonomous from the administration to assure academic integrity and they must maintain a faculty with appropriate credentials for the educational program. The "regional" commissions all require evidence that the institution's undergraduate curriculum is coherent and, where appropriate, includes some general education components consistent with the institutional mission. Institutional or program eligibility requirements serve as a pre-screening for quality before an institution or program undertakes the more detailed self-study required by the accreditation process.

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2. Institutional or Program Self-Study

Upon acceptance for review, each institution or program must engage in a comprehensive evaluation of its performance based on the accrediting organization's established standards or criteria. Each institution or program prepares a self-study document involving preparation of a detailed written report demonstrating how the institution or program meets or exceeds the standards, as well as how it plans to improve in the future. This report may be prepared as a confidential document, although many institutions publish theirs after the accreditation review cycle has been completed.

Each institution or program must provide data reports on a periodic basis (most often annually) to its accrediting organization on student learning outcomes. Data required may address attrition/retention rates, graduation rates, certification and/or licensure rates, employment rates, and/or the number of students continuing their education.

3. On-Site Team Visit

The self-study document becomes the basis for scrutiny by an accrediting organization's review team during a visit to the campus. Team members have an opportunity to talk to faculty, students, staff and administrators about issues and questions arising from the self-study. The typical review team is composed largely of peers who have some prior experience in accreditation review and some knowledge of the particular type of program or institution being reviewed. Depending on the accrediting organization, review teams may include members of the general public, representatives of comparable institutions or programs located in another region or representatives from an altogether different sector of higher education. The team usually conducts an exit interview with the president or dean at the conclusion of the visit.

4. Written Team Report

The visiting team prepares a comprehensive accreditation report that includes judgments about the institution's or program's strengths, weaknesses and potential for improvement. Staff of the accrediting organization may meet with the visiting review team to discuss the draft report. The draft report is usually shared with the campus or program leadership before it is made final. The final report is then submitted to the accrediting organization, with recommendations on action to be taken. Often a representative from the institution or program appears before a commission of the accrediting organization when the report is discussed and accreditation decisions are made.

5. Final Decisions/Appeals

After a rigorous review of the self-study document, team report and data provided by the institution or program, accrediting decisions can take several forms, from granting accreditation to revoking accreditation. If accreditation is granted, an institution or program will be assigned to the accrediting organization's standard review cycle, whatever that may be. An appeal is available to institutions or programs that are deemed not to have fully met accreditation standards.

6. Monitoring

Accrediting organizations also monitor institutions and programs between reviews and may require annual reporting, interim reviews or substantive change reports from the institutions and programs they accredit. Annual reporting could include financial statements and updated curricular or planning information and student data. Interim reviews are required when issues are left unresolved from a comprehensive evaluation. Substantive change reports are typically required to document important changes in the scope, standards or practices of an institution or program.

During 2022-2023, the accrediting organizations:

- Granted initial accreditation to 1,592 colleges, universities, programs and freestanding institutions;
- Denied initial accreditation to 29 colleges, universities, programs and freestanding institutions;
- Continued the accreditation of 5,744 colleges, universities, programs and freestanding institutions; and
- Gave warning, placed on probation, or "show cause," terminated, removed or considered appeals of 783 colleges, universities, programs and freestanding institutions.

Summary of Accreditation Actions, 2023

Accrediting organizations take a range of formal actions when reviewing an institution or program for initial or continuing accreditation. This chart indicates the types and frequency of actions reported by accrediting organizations arrayed by type of organization. Definitions used for these actions vary among accrediting organizations. Please contact individual accreditors for additional information about use of these terms.

Figure 28:

Summary of Accreditation Actions, 2023

Accreditation Action	Regional	National Faith-Related	National Career-Related	Institutional	Programmatic	Totals
Grant Accreditation	25	18	33	12	1,504	1,592
Reaffirm Accreditation	561	52	604	12	4,515	5,744
Deny Accreditation	0	0	3	0	26	29
Withdrew Accreditation	4	0	20	0	90	114
Defer Accreditation	3	0	0	0	140	143
Notice/Warning	32	2	39	0	220	293
Show Cause	6	0	18	4	38	66
Probation	6	2	11	0	274	293
Appeals	2	0	2	0	13	17
Total	639	74	730	28	6,820	8,291

Figure 29:

Summary of Accreditation Actions, 2018-2023

Accreditation Action	2018	2019	2020	2021	2023
Grant Accreditation	1,068	880	619	809	1,592
Reaffirm Accreditation	2,946	2,908	1,951	2,708	5,744
Deny Accreditation	28	20	21	17	29
Withdrew Accreditation	279	344	259	252	114
Defer Accreditation	501	326	367	353	143
Notice/Warning	276	186	67	74	293
Show Cause	218	102	102	78	66
Probation	212	204	132	102	293
Appeals	2	3	4	7	17
Totals	5,530	4,973	3,522	4,400	8,291

Next: **Recognition of Accrediting Organizations**