

Quality Review and Accreditation in U.S. Higher Education

The United States system of higher education is the most diverse in the world. It encompasses private vocational schools, public open-access community colleges, research universities and public and private four-year institutions. Higher education providers include the for-profit sector as well as the public and private nonprofit sectors.

Higher education quality review in the United States is a similarly diverse enterprise. The functions of quality review are performed variously by federal and state government agencies, nonprofit nongovernmental organizations. The result is a set of arrangements for external quality review that is neither unified nor coordinated—a loose, decentralized approach that may be seen as contributing to the richness and vitality of United States higher education or, alternatively, as a weakness and source of conflict in the system. Whether dynamic and responsive or ad hoc and episodic, this approach to quality review both reflects and helps to shape this country's unique higher education system.

Accreditation in the United States is carried out by private, nonprofit organizations designed for this purpose. Accreditation is the primary means of assuring the public that colleges, universities and programs can and do provide students with a quality education.

External and Internal Quality Review

“External quality review” refers to activities undertaken by organizations or agencies outside of a college, university or program to measure, validate or certify its quality. External quality review takes many forms, from accreditation to federal data collection and from state accountability and licensure reviews to survey-based rankings of institutions. The purposes of external quality review are also manifold and include promoting institutional accountability, assuring that institutions meet specific certification or licensing requirements, establishing the eligibility of institutions to offer degrees and certificates, enabling institutions or programs to receive public funding, enforcing financial and administrative standards, providing consumers with information on which to base education-related decisions and—last but hardly least—improving quality within institutions and programs.

Accreditation is an important indicator of quality to the public, employers, students, universities, colleges and programs.

External reviews are by no means the sole form of quality assurance in higher education. Governing boards play an influential internal quality assurance role, as do tenure and promotion reviews, peer reviews of research, student evaluations and program reviews. In general, internal quality reviews are linked more closely than external quality reviews to institutional planning processes and decisions about resource distribution and setting new program priorities.

Accreditation is one of the chief forms of external quality review of higher education. It is a nongovernmental process and differs from other external quality review processes in that it is essentially a peer evaluation. Decisions about quality are based on the review of evidence—including written reports from the institution or program being evaluated, as well as site visits and interviews—and on the judgments of informed experts. For the most part, accreditation standards are applied in the context of an institution's or program's mission.

Accreditation is designed to serve three purposes:

- To assure the quality of institutions and programs;
- To encourage the improvement of institutions or programs that have already met basic standards, through continued focus on goals and achievements; and
- To certify institutional or program sufficiency as required for the receipt of public funds and for institutional licensure by states--and as a partial basis for decisions about the transfer of academic credit from one institution or program to another.

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