



August 1, 2016

MEMORANDUM

TO: Chief Executive Officers of SACSCOC Member and Candidate Institutions

FROM: Belle S. Wheelan, Ph.D., President, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges

RE: SACSCOC Legislative Brochure

Enclosed please find three (3) copies of a new brochure produced for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) that is designed to provide an easy to understand guide to accreditation. Copies were sent to the Chairs of the House and Senate Education Committees in your state.

As you know, in addition to signaling the quality of an institution to the general public, accreditation also allows institutions to participate in the federal student financial aid program (Title IV). It is our sincere hope that this guide will help everyone better understand the role accreditation plays in the health of our institutions.

If you have any questions or would like some additional brochures, please do not hesitate to contact me at [bwheelan@sacscoc.org](mailto:bwheelan@sacscoc.org) or (404) 679-4512.

Thank you for all you do on behalf of the Commission.

cc: Accreditation Liaisons (w/o brochure) ✓

## THE VALUE OF ACCREDITATION

Accreditation assures stakeholders that institutions or programs that pass muster have been rigorously evaluated and meet or exceed standards defined by the higher education community.

An institution's accreditation status tells students and their families that it offers quality instruction, supports for student success, and degrees of distinction. Accreditation tells employers that they can trust the quality of the degree their new hire brings to the job or that providing tuition assistance for employees is a smart investment. It affirms that institutions do what is necessary to prepare students to enter, grow in, and change careers, and to apply knowledge across all contexts, as educated workers and active citizens in a democracy—with a broad, worldly perspective honed through exposure to the liberal arts.

Accreditation status also affirms for other institutions the value of credits qualifying for transfer. States rely on accreditation to judge whether institutions or programs are of a quality to merit licensing and the federal government uses it to determine institutional and student eligibility to receive federal funds, student financial aid, or other forms of aid.



## REGIONAL ACCREDITING COMMISSIONS

Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACCJC/WASC)—Dr. Barbara Bano, President

Higher Learning Commission (HLC)—Dr. Barbara Galiman-Danley, President

Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)—Dr. Elizabeth Sipolski, President

New England Association of Schools and Colleges-Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE)—Dr. Barbara Brittingham, President

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)—Dr. Sandra Elman, President

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)—Dr. Belle S. Wheelan, President

Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)—Dr. Mary Ellen Petrisko, President



SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS  
COMMISSION ON COLLEGES

18165 Southern Lane • Decatur, GA 30035  
(404) 679-4500 • [www.sacscoc.org](http://www.sacscoc.org)

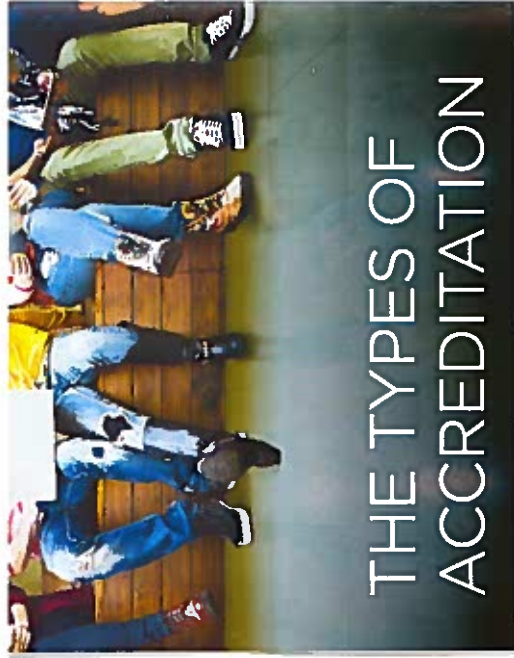
## HOW CAN WE BE SURE THAT EVERY STUDENT RECEIVES THE BEST EDUCATION POSSIBLE?

**ACCREDITATION ASSURES QUALITY ACROSS INSTITUTIONS**  
Accreditation is a process of external review used by the higher education community to assure quality and spur ongoing improvement. Accrediting commissions are private, nonprofit organizations whose members are the colleges and universities themselves. The commissions and visiting teams are made up of volunteers, and one of every seven commissioners is a distinguished member of the public. It's an unusual set-up as accountability systems go, but it has worked for more than 100 years because it relies on the rigorous process of peer review, not governmental monitoring, to define and evaluate whether institutions meet high standards. Self-regulation preserves the autonomy and diversity of higher education, two unique characteristics of our higher education system that contribute to its high quality.



SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS  
COMMISSION ON COLLEGES





# THE TYPES OF ACCREDITATION

## THERE ARE THREE KINDS OF ACCREDITATION:

**REGIONAL**—accredits entire colleges and universities, the majority of them degree-granting and not-for-profit, within a designated region of the United States. Most nonprofit institutions are regionally accredited.

**NATIONAL**—accredits entire colleges and universities anywhere in the country, most of which have a single focus, such as career or trade schools, and are often for-profit.

**SPECIALIZED/PROGRAMMATIC**—accredits programs, departments, or schools within a college or university.

## HOW DOES REGIONAL ACCREDITATION WORK?

The regional accreditation process lasts seven to 10 years, depending upon the accrediting agency's parameters. It requires that institutions conduct a comprehensive, extended self-study to assess:

- the appropriateness of its mission and its strategic planning;
- the level of student achievement;
- the quality of its educational practices intended to sustain learning and teaching, including: academic and student support programs and services; faculty, administrative, and staff qualifications; and governance; and,
- the financial stability of the institution.

## HOW DECISIONS ARE MADE: THE IMPORTANCE OF PEER REVIEW

Accreditation relies on one of academe's most effective means of validation—the rigorous process of peer-review. Teams of well-trained expert faculty and administrators from institutions similar to the one being evaluated review assessments and documentation and offer an in-depth look into the vital systems and educational characteristics of the institution. They judge the institution by whether it has met standards using clear indicators of performance, including measures of what students learn.

The team or committee forwards its report to the regional body's decision-making board for its consideration and approval. That accrediting board is responsible for:

- Awarding candidacy or initial accreditation.
- Approving continued membership with or without additional monitoring.
- Imposing or removing sanctions.
- Approving and monitoring changes of a substantive nature an institution makes.
- Removing an institution from candidacy or membership.

An institution denied or removed from candidacy or membership is afforded the opportunity to formally appeal the decision of the board to an appeal committee composed of members who must attest to having no conflicts of interest or involvement in the adverse decision.

During the period between formal reviews, institutions must provide annual reports and updates to the accrediting agency, which needs to monitor changes of a substantive nature that affect the quality, structure, or accountability of an institution. The reports may include financial information, changes in curriculum, or the addition of higher degree levels, mergers, and so on.



## THE NATIONAL INFLUENCE OF REGIONAL ACCREDITATION

Beyond individual determinations of an institution's accreditation status, regional accreditation serves as a recognizable force for quality and good educational practices in higher education. In terms of national policy, some of the broader roles of accrediting agencies include:

- Promoting innovation within a framework of self-imposed accountability.
- Serving as a "gatekeeper" in assessing quality for federal financial aid to its accredited institutions.
- Serving as an advocate for diversity and autonomy.
- Encouraging institutions to collaborate on expected requirements for undergraduate and graduate admissions and graduation.
- Serving as a tool for collaboration among national and international institutions, governance systems, the workforce, the public, states, and the federal government.

Please note that regional accreditation is a seal of institutional quality but is still no guarantee of the success of programs, courses, or individual students. Identifying serious weaknesses is supposed to spark change. If institutions do not address them, they can lose their accreditation.

## ROLE OF STATE AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN ACCREDITATION

**FEDERAL.** Title IV of the Higher Education Act requires that higher education institutions receiving federal funds be accredited by an accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education. The accreditation process provides valuable oversight in administering student financial aid programs and ensuring institutions' fiscal integrity.

**STATE.** States play a larger role in regulating higher education, especially their public systems. Thus, accreditation factors into state licensing of institutions and helps to promote cooperation and collaboration among institutions located within the state. Accreditation results make it possible for states to serve as the principal protector for



consumers, and to provide funding to state institutions, and often support for private institutions, in the form of both operating dollars and scholarships.

## WHY ACCREDITATION IS IMPORTANT TO THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

If the public wants to know how well an institution is really performing, simple numbers like graduation rates, job placements, or student demographics will only reveal so much. But the intensive peer-review process conducted by accrediting bodies provides a view into all the vital systems of the institution: the quality of instruction, the availability and effectiveness of student support, how the institution is led and governed, its financial management, and how it uses data. Accreditors challenge institutions to look beyond symptoms for root causes. It forces all providers of postsecondary education to deeply investigate every aspect of their performance to foster institutional excellence, continuous improvement, and innovation.

For our diverse system of higher education to continue to evolve and maintain its place as a world leader in postsecondary education, accreditation is essential to the accountability framework for our colleges and universities.

# 10 THINGS LEGISLATORS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT REGIONAL ACCREDITATION

Accreditation is a voluntary external review process used in higher education to assure quality and spur ongoing institutional improvement. Because federal and state aid programs and licensing are tied to accreditation determinations, lawmakers have a stake in understanding how it really works.

- 1. It drives student success.** Accrediting standards focus on learning, retention, and completion to ensure that students graduate with degrees that have meaning in the marketplace.
- 2. It is based on high standards** established by the colleges and universities themselves.
- 3. It uses the rigorous process of peer review to ensure fiscal and educational integrity.** The process engages the entire college community in self-study, documentation of practice and outcomes, and interaction with evaluators who know what to look for and demand quality.
- 4. It is an efficient system that places no burden on government.** The work of accreditation is done by expert volunteers to assure quality without putting financial burdens on states and the federal government.
- 5. It has teeth.** Institutions can lose their membership and, subsequently, access to financial aid when they have failed to address identified shortcomings.
- 6. It is reliable** and ensures that information generated by the self-study is thoroughly documented based on evidence and implementation of standards.
- 7. It protects the public and promotes transparency.** Accreditation attests to the quality of the investment for students, families, and the public and brings out into the open information about institutional operations and performance.
- 8. It fosters continuous improvement.** Accreditation is an ongoing process that heightens institutional self-awareness and identifies areas to be targeted for improvement.
- 9. It promotes autonomy and institutional diversity,** two of U.S. higher education's great strengths.
- 10. It brings out the best in the campus community** by engaging on-campus faculty and staff with leaders from outside colleges who all have a stake in ensuring similar programs measure up to high standards.

## WHY DOES ACCREDITATION MATTER?

Accreditation is critical for all stakeholders of higher education including students, policymakers, the constituents they serve, and postsecondary institutions.

Students and families invest significant financial resources to attend college. Accreditation provides assurance that the institution they choose to attend is well run, is of high quality, and provides:

- Degrees and credentials that meet agreed-upon standards and have value in the marketplace;
- Opportunities to transfer credits from one institution to another;
- Access to federal student aid to help pay for college.

Policymakers responsible for funding and regulating institutions of higher education want assurance that money directed to colleges and universities will provide a significant return on investment in the form of a better-educated citizenry and a career-ready workforce. Accreditation provides assurance that institutions are:

- Transparent about the academic and other educational services colleges and universities provide;
- Fiscally responsible and investing in continuous quality improvement to serve the needs of their students, states, and communities;
- Maintaining diversity to serve a multitude of student needs while assuring accountability across all types of institutions.

Higher education institutions themselves need assurance from external experts that their missions, strategic goals, and educational practices are appropriate for the students and communities they serve and on par with their peer institutions. Accreditation assures that institutions:

- Place student success and achievement at the forefront of their mission and are continually seeking to improve in the areas of student persistence and attainment.
- Can evaluate their own performance against a common set of standards for their sector.
- Include continuous improvement and innovation as part of the institutional culture, to ensure that our postsecondary institutions are responsive to an ever-changing world. The process of accreditation is as important as the outcome.