

# Key to accreditation: A high-quality, balanced self-study

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The stamp of approval essential to higher education institutions — accreditation — is dependent on following a proscribed process, with a top-notch self-study being its most notable component.

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With an accreditation expiration ranging from a few years to up to 10, your institution has likely been accredited at least once before. For repeat accreditation, this self-study can spotlight areas for improvement and serve as an overall guide.

## **Accreditation is valued by many stakeholders**

Accreditation provides quality assurance to multiple stakeholders. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education notes that the “accrediting process is intended to strengthen and sustain the quality and integrity of higher education, making it worthy of public confidence and minimizing the scope of external control.”

Attaining accreditation “is an expression of confidence in an institution’s mission and goals, its performance and its resources.”<sup>1</sup>

Providing further confidence is the confirmation by financial officers — at your institution or on a peer-review team — that resources adequate to achieving mission and goals are maintained and allocated to strategic plan initiatives.

For students, an institution’s accreditation status is a threshold requirement for application, and the means to an efficient transfer of courses between institutions. In addition, an institution’s reputation rests, in part, on the scrutiny represented by accreditation, which in turn is essential to attraction and retention of researchers, faculty and other staff. Federal and state governments view accreditation as a dependable measure of academic quality; federal student aid, as well as participation in other federal programs, is available only to accredited institutions and programs.

## **Focus is on the self-study**

A self-study is the first requirement in the approval process and the defining factor in a successful accreditation review.

<sup>1</sup> Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education (Copyright 2006, Revised 2011, Middle States Commission on Higher Education). See [www.msche.org/publications/CHX-2011-WEB.pdf](http://www.msche.org/publications/CHX-2011-WEB.pdf) for the report. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) is recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education to conduct accreditation and pre-accreditation (candidacy status) activities for institutions of higher education in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, including distance education and correspondence education programs offered at those institutions. MSCHE is also recognized by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) to accredit degree-granting institutions, which offer one or more post-secondary educational programs of at least one academic year in length in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and other geographic areas in which the commission conducts accrediting activities.

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The accreditation organization will have provided its standards, and the accreditation team will examine your self-study for, among other things, adherence to those standards.

The team will also expect projections and plans, and evidence of results, with metrics, financial information and a report of activities related to mission and goals.

Participation in your institution's self-study must be broad-based. The self-study will demand a significant amount of time for many individuals across functions. Be assured that the investment is worthwhile. Because the self-study will be submitted to a typically diverse peer-review team from a variety of institutions, a comprehensive assessment from your own diverse representatives is appropriate and invaluable. A well-balanced self-study covering many bases can reduce the number of issues raised by reviewers.

Leadership is critical. The self-study should be headed up by an individual experienced in preparing or reviewing a self-study. A steering committee should design the process, outlining what your institution wishes to accomplish with its self-study, including such elements as the rationale, scope, anticipated outcomes, questions to address, participants and timeline.

Preparing the draft should be a collaboration of the steering committee and working groups comprising cross-functional teams that bring deep institutional knowledge from key academic and administrative areas. Before it is finalized, the draft should be shared campuswide to include input from those with specialized knowledge of areas or topics being reviewed.

While the self-study will have a scheduled submission deadline, you should consider adopting this review mindset as an ongoing process. The effect of significant changes in business and academic practices to accreditation standards should be considered as a standard operating procedure. And it's best to keep in mind that one of the five accreditation steps is periodic external review, which minimally requires a self-study in an abbreviated form.

### The self-study is step No. 1 of 5

The first of the five steps is the all-important self-study. All five are intended to prove an institution worthy of accreditation:

1. **Self-study**, the written summary of performance
2. **Peer review**, principally conducted by faculty and administrative professionals who serve on visiting teams and review the self-study
3. **Site visit** from the accrediting organization to review the institution or program, using the self-study as the foundation for the review
4. **Judgment** of the accrediting organization, whose decision-making bodies comprise administrators, faculty and public members
5. **Periodic external review** of institutions and programs between formal accreditation reviews

### Accreditation follows success in all 5 steps

With the accrediting organization's judgment resulting in approval, your institution receives accreditation — assurance to the public of fulfillment of your mission and attainment of goals, performance and appropriateness of resources.

As an important reminder, starting the self-study at six months or even a year before the formal review would be inefficient and surely less than comprehensive. If your institution is at year seven of a 10-year plan, it's time to begin. A meaningful self-study — one that could have informational benefits to your institution beyond accreditation requirements — is a process that takes time to plan, to staff, and to execute in a deliberate and thoughtful manner.



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### Accreditation is generally via peer review

Accreditation review is conducted by four types of private, nonprofit organizations — each with reviewing responsibilities for different institutions:

- **Regional** — Public and private, principally nonprofit and degree-granting two- and four-year institutions
- **National faith-related** — Religiously affiliated and doctrinally based institutions, principally nonprofit and degree-granting
- **National career-related** — Mainly for-profit, career-based, single-purpose institutions, both degree and nondegree
- **Programmatic** — Specific programs, professions and freestanding schools such as law, medicine and engineering

Accrediting organizations are regional, each with its own process. The organizations principally comprise institutional peers — faculty and administrators — and are chiefly funded by annual dues from accredited institutions and programs, as well as by review fees charged to those undergoing accreditation. The private national nonprofit Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)<sup>2</sup> and the U.S. Department of Education develop standards for accrediting organizations.

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<sup>2</sup> Eaton, Judith S. *An Overview of U.S. Accreditation*, The Council for Higher Education Accreditation, revised August 2012. See [www.chea.org/pdf/Overview%20of%20US%20Accreditation%202012.pdf](http://www.chea.org/pdf/Overview%20of%20US%20Accreditation%202012.pdf) for the report or [www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org) and search for "An Overview of U.S. Accreditation."

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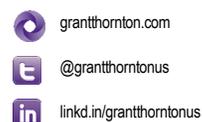
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