100 Black Men of America

Education Committee Subcommittee on Higher Education Committee

Understanding Accreditation

Introduction

Accreditation is a process through which colleges and universities are evaluated for demonstrating academic and non-academic quality, governance, and financial **100 Black Men of America**

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viability. Therefore, some type of accrediting body governs the vast majority of colleges and universities in America. Accrediting agencies are non-governmental entities that are licensed by the Department of Education to approve or disapprove institutions of higher education disbursing and managing federal funds.

This paper will provide a brief overview of the accreditation process as well as its utility for parents, students, and the community writ large. The following themes will be addressed: 1) History of Accreditation, 2) Types of Accreditation, 3) Salient Accreditation Standards, 4) The Process of Accreditation, 5) Stakeholder Recommendation, and conclusion. Although this paper will address the topic of accreditation from the general view, extra emphasis on the unique role and relationship between accrediting bodies and Historically Black Colleges and Universities will be highlighted.

History & Philosophy of Accreditation

The history of accreditation in America was birthed out of necessity to distinguish between secondary and postsecondary education. The constitution of the United States deems the responsibility of education to individual states and, therefore, never established a centralized governing body that required national educational standards. Thus, at the turn of the 20th century, the first non-governmental postsecondary accrediting body was formed to distinguish between secondary and postsecondary schooling. By the mid-century, the U.S. government intervene in matters concerning higher education through the G.I. Bill to ensure that soldiers attended reputable colleges. Further, the government started to require a peer review process for colleges and universities to measure quality and started listing publicly institutions that met its standard. Furthermore, the 1965 Higher Education Act sanctions accrediting bodies to determine which colleges and universities were of good standing and which institutions could receive and distribute federal funds. Finally, the creation of the Department of Education in 1980 formalized the relationship between accreditors and the government by allowing them to serve as gatekeepers for federal funds.

The philosophy behind the accreditation process is to allow colleges and universities to self-govern under each institution's unique mission that is affirmed by a group of peers and thereby providing a public good through education. The peer-review process is essential because it does not allow the accrediting body or government to assess the quality of a college. Instead, other higher education faculty, staff, and administrators from similar institutions do so based on the standards set by accrediting agencies. Therefore colleges and universities are judged by their peers who, assumingly, understand the unique and sometimes specific circumstances around providing higher educational services.

Most recently, the Trump Department of Education released a new set of regulations that is designed to weaken the oversight powers of accrediting bodies making it easier for proprietary institutions to remain open. The new rules include:

- Eliminating geographical boundaries for accreditors
- Making it easier for colleges to get program approvals or make institutional changes
- Loosening accreditor compliance standards
- Easing the path for some new accreditors to become recognized
- Giving accreditors more leeway over sanctions
- Requiring financially shaky colleges to submit teach-out plans sooner

Despite the changes, regional accreditors have agreed to respect the previously agreed upon boundaries in order to maintain continuity and quality of programs within their regions.

Types of Accrediting Bodies

There are three types of accrediting bodies: 1) regional accreditors, 2) national accreditors, and, 3) specialized and professional accreditors. Regional accreditors cover a particular geographical area of the country, and there are seven regional accreditors.

1. Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges
2. Higher Learning Commission
3. Middle States Commission on Higher Education
4. New England Association of Schools and Colleges
5. Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
6. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
7. Accreditation Commission for Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges

Regional accreditors are generally known to be the highest standard of quality among the three types of accrediting bodies.

National accrediting bodies are the next form of agencies that focus on either religious or career specialization. Because of the broad nature of these agencies, often, they are not viewed in high higher educational circles, as rigorous with regards to standards as regional bodies. Many national

accrediting organizations were not designed for colleges and universities in mind. The Department of Education
recognizes the following entities as national accrediting agencies:

- National Faith-Related Accrediting Agencies
    - Association of Advance Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools, Accrediting Commission
    - Association for Biblical Higher Education, Commission on Accreditation
    - Association of Institutions of Jewish Studies
    - Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools
- National Career-related Accrediting Agencies
    - Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools
    - Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges
    - Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training
    - Council on Occupational Education
    - Distance Education and Training Council, Accrediting Commission
    - National Accrediting Commission of Career Arts and Sciences, Inc.

The last form of the accrediting body is specialized and professional agencies that are most often limited to academic disciplines or career fields. Some colleges and universities, among their academic offerings, have specialized accrediting for programs like education, business, and nursing. Like regional and national bodies, each one of these specialized and professional agencies has their criteria and process when assessing each program. There are over seventy of these agencies, and below are just a few examples.

- American Bar Association
- American Dental Association
- American Society for Microbiology
- Council on Social Work Education
- National Association of School of Dance
- Psychological Clinical Science Accreditation System

Salient Accreditation Standards

National and regional accrediting bodies have a set of standards that they use to assess how well a college or university is providing a quality education for its students and fostering a healthy organizational culture. Specialized professional accrediting bodies have their own specific set of standards based on their discipline or career regulation and requirements. Thus, this section provides a generic, rather than exhaustive, overview of a few salient criteria that national and regional bodies require higher education institutions to abide by to remain compliant.

Government Standards- The Department of Education and state governments have some basic guidelines that serve as essentially a baseline that colleges and universities must adhere to receive federal funds. For public institutions, some basic curriculum standards are required sometimes called common core that aligns all general education classes in

public colleges and universities that make it easy to transfer academic credits. At the federal level, an example of one of these standards is Title IX, which requires actions by institutions to report sexual assaults or harassment.

Mission-Each college or university must make a case for its institutional mission and how the academic programs, strategic plan, student experience, community engagement, or religious affiliation informs its operation. Furthermore, there has been broad expectations in the higher education world that colleges and university would implicitly or explicitly address issues of diversity and globalization in their mission or core values.

Governance-Colleges and universities must demonstrate that there are policies that govern the board of trustees, administrative officers, staff, and faculty interaction. Also, accrediting bodies look for evidence of shared governance between administrators and faculty with regards to institutional decision making in financial, policy, and strategic planning.

Student Success-Accrediting bodies look for alignment among student support services (tutoring, student activities, residential life, etc.) and academic life. Colleges and universities must provide evidence that their student support services complement the educational experience through non-academic assessments of these programs. Proof of this alignment results in retention, persistence, and completion of students at the college or university.

Quality Control-Each college and university must demonstrate that they have a culture of assessment, especially in regards to academic delivery. Accrediting bodies look for evidence that academic programs are regularly reviewed, there is an annual assessment process, that faculty are adequately credentialed, and the curriculum is current and aligned with learning outcomes.

Institutional Effectiveness-Evidence that there is a strategic plan with goals, objectives, timelines, outcomes, and resources to carry out the mission of the college. Part of this process is ensuring that there are up to date policies, adequate staffing of essential workers, conducting and publishing institutional research, protocols around assessment, and regularly communicating with accrediting bodies on accreditation criteria.

Resource Management-Institutions of higher education must demonstrate that the financial condition is adequate to carry out the mission of the college and university. Institutions are required to conduct annual financial audits, prove that there are budgets for academic and non-academic programs, and have qualified persons and systems to manage funds coming into and out of the college and university. Additionally, accrediting bodies look at the condition of the buildings and grounds, campus master plans, and the Composite Financial Index, which gauges the overall institutional financial health.

The Process of Accreditation

The accrediting process can be understood in four parts: 1) Submission of application or self-study to accrediting agency; 2) Peer review visit and assessment of application or report; 3) Accrediting body approves in part, whole, or rejects the application; and 4) Accrediting body continues to monitor the institution.

In the first step of the accreditation process, colleges apply for approval, or if they already have accreditation, submit a report for reaffirmation. Institutions are evaluated based on the accrediting bodies' criteria standards. This assessment is conducted by a set of peer evaluators employed by the accrediting body and not the accrediting agency itself.

In the second phase, an accrediting body sends a team of peer evaluators to the campus to verify that the application or self-study meets the standards set by the agency. During this visit, the peer evaluators interview all of the stakeholders of the university, including board members, administrators, faculty, staff, and students. The team may ask for additional evidence to assist in their decision-making process.

The third part of the process is the peer evaluator team writing a report to the accrediting body, either acceptance of the application, to reaffirm the institution accrediting status, or to recommend partial accrediting of some criteria, sanction, and monitoring of others. The report goes to the accrediting body, and the board of the accrediting body decides to either accept or reject the team's decision. The college or university has an opportunity to respond to the team's report by providing clarity, evidence, or context for an accrediting body board to consider before a decision is made.

The last part of the accrediting process, if institutions are affirmed or approved, is the continuous monitoring that the accreditation standards are being met. The time varies among accrediting bodies when they will return to campus for interim reports depending on the accrediting board decision. An institution that meets all of its criteria may be granted a ten-year reaffirmation with a five-year mid-term check-in. Other institutions, who may have a sanction or concern regarding one or more criteria standards, may require a one or two-year revisit to see if changes are made to bring the college of to all of the accreditation standards.

Stakeholder Engagement in the Accreditation Process

The 100 Black Men of America understands that students, parents, colleges, and community members all have a role to play in the accrediting process. Therefore, everyone must find ways to assist colleges in universities to attain and keep its accreditation. This is especially true for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) who had in recent time, some significant trouble with accrediting bodies. In the past decade, there have been several HBCUs who have lost their accreditation status with regional accrediting organizations and have sought national accrediting agencies to remain in good standing with the Department of Education. As such, we have provided some recommendations for parents and students to determine how to understand the relationship between a college and its accrediting body. Furthermore, we have provided suggestions on how college officials and community members can participate in making sure that colleges and universities remain compliant with accrediting bodies.

Students & Parents
- Review public documents at accrediting bodies when choosing a college or university to see its accrediting status.
- Look to see if the college or university has any discipline-specific accredited academic programs.
- Ask college officials for a copy of the most recent self-study or report to their accrediting body. These documents ought to be available to the public and will provide you an in-depth view of the institution's response to the accrediting body standards.
- Familiarize yourself with the complaint process of an accrediting body and what the limits are to contacting them. Most agencies will defer most queries back to the college or university for resolutions; however, in some cases, these agencies will respond depending on the issue.
- Students and parents can write letters of support for their college and university during the reaffirmation process to lend support to the institution's application.

College Officials
- Faculty, staff, and administrators should become a peer reviewer for an accrediting body so that they can assist other peer institution in going through the process.
- Demonstrate and document efforts of shared governance among faculty, staff, and administration in the decision making processes at the college or university.
- Build a culture of assessment among academic and non-academic programs.
- Faculty and administrators should attend the annual conference of accrediting bodies to stay abreast of accrediting standards and expectations.
- Faculty, staff, students, and administrators should participate in the reaffirmation process.

Community Members
- Members in the community can write letters of support by issuing third party comments when accrediting bodies solicit input during visits.
- When colleges hire upper-level administrators, community members can serve on the hiring committee to demonstrate community engagement with the institution.
- During the strategic planning process, community members can serve on the committee to provide input into the process.
- Community organizations can partner with academic and non-academic programs in formal or informal agreements to service the surrounding community.

Conclusion

Overall, accreditation is a vital part of the collegiate experience. The process of accreditation is designed to ensure that colleges and universities provide a quality education for students by ensuring that it operates with integrity with regards to how it plans, assess, graduate students governs and manages its resources. Regardless if you work at a college, are community members, students, or parents, there is an important role you can play in assisting colleges and universities in keeping and retaining its accreditation.