

***Accreditation:
A Statement
of Principles***



***The Committee on
Institutional Cooperation***

The University of Chicago
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The Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) is made up of the chief academic officers of twelve major teaching and research universities: the University of Chicago, the University of Illinois, the University of Iowa, Indiana University, the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, the University of Minnesota, Northwestern University, Ohio State University, Pennsylvania State University, Purdue University, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Since its founding in 1958, the CIC has successfully fostered academic cooperation and collaboration among its members in many areas of university policy and practice.

This statement, first adopted in 1984 and periodically reviewed, updated, and reconfirmed by the Committee members, describes the standards we believe accreditation must meet to serve the universities, their students, and the public.

June, 1995

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External reviews of academic programs are a useful and valuable means of protecting quality in higher education. They can generate suggestions for program improvement that are both specific and practical. Often, too, the stimulation they give to institutional self-examination produces improvements beyond those recommended by the accrediting body. Finally, the accrediting process itself promotes useful discussion about quality, standards, and performance in higher education.

For all of these reasons, even the strongest universities have an obligation to do their part to make accreditation work. To do so effectively, however, they must be able to argue that the accreditation process is fundamentally sound. They face a painful dilemma when they conclude that a particular accrediting agency has exceeded its competence or is using standards that relate less to quality of education than to disciplinary or professional self-interest.

They can, of course, consider the option of withdrawing. Even when that is feasible, it can only be viewed as a last resort, for withdrawal from an accreditation process will inevitably damage the credibility of the university, the accrediting agency, or both.

This suggests that every university has some obligation to be frank about its own expectations from accrediting bodies. What standards should the accrediting body itself meet in dealing with the universities it is designed to serve? In connection with any proposed accreditation the CIC universities believe it is appropriate to ask the accrediting agency to indicate its acceptance of, or state its reservations in regard to, the following principles:

1. Evaluation must place its emphasis on the outcome of the educational process.

Criticisms by accrediting teams directed at procedural or organizational details must be based on reasonable evidence that those details affect the performance of graduates or the quality of education provided to them. Where quantitative standards are cited or advice is offered on the organization of the instructional unit, structure of the curriculum, sequencing of courses, teaching loads, methods of instruction, graduation requirements, and designation of the degree or other credentials conferred, the university has a right to expect evidence of a reasonably direct relationship between what is being recommended and the ability of the program to achieve its goals.

2. The standards applied in the accreditation process must not discourage experimentation, innovation or modernization, either in teaching methods or in the curriculum itself.

An accrediting body can legitimately point out deficiencies it believes will result from a particular innovation. It can ask for assurance that the institution will provide the resources that the innovation will require, and it can insist on some plan of evaluation. What it must not do is impose standards that place obstacles in the way of originality, creativity, or innovation on the part of the faculty or the institution.

3. Recommendations should be diagnostic, not prescriptive.

For example, an accrediting agency could properly question whether there is enough effort to evaluate teaching performance, or whether student input on such evaluation is adequate, but it should not try to prescribe a particular form of or approach to evaluation.

4. The accreditation process must explicitly recognize institutional diversity.

Every university has its own unique resources, methodologies, special mission, and educational philosophy. In particular, the interplay among graduate education, undergraduate education, research and public service will differ greatly among programs and from one university to another. Each university can expect that accrediting teams will familiarize themselves with its special circumstances and resources and will take them into account in relation to the programs being reviewed.

5. Accreditation should not encourage the isolation or self-containment of an academic program.

In larger universities with substantial program depth, even the most specialized professional school can benefit by drawing upon the library holdings, courses being taught, research in progress, and faculty interests in other schools and colleges. A university can expect an accrediting team to file a report that shows awareness of these supporting resources and actively encourages their shared use.

6. The burden of accreditation must be kept as light as possible, both for the institution being accredited and for the accreditation team.

Size of team and duration of the accreditation visit should be limited to the minimum necessary for a productive review. Data requirements and other advance preparation should also be kept to a minimum, recognizing, however, that encouragement for self-study may be one of the best products of an accreditation review. Finally, there must be a reasonable, fair, and expeditious procedure for questioning conclusions of the accrediting body without elaborate interim or supplementary reviews or reports.

7. The institution being accredited should be consulted as to the composition of the accrediting team, and has a right to expect that a majority of team members will be drawn from peer institutions and comparable programs.

A useful evaluation requires substantial input from persons who are directly familiar with the nature of the institution and program being accredited. Without experience at comparable universities or in similar programs, not even the most careful observer can acquire such familiarity in the course of a brief team visit or by reading documents, however carefully prepared.

8. In the case of professional schools, although there must be significant input from the profession itself, the ultimate authority over educational policies must remain firmly in the hands of the academic community.

If a realistic program of training for a profession is to be offered, the contributions of practitioners must be solicited and welcomed. We do our students no favor if we fail to equip them to practice according to standards enunciated by the profession and by society in general. At the same time, universities cannot escape the ultimate responsibility for what they teach, how it is taught, by whom, and to whom. They cannot meet this obligation if final authority over standards and sanctions for academic programs rests largely in non-academic hands. Forging an effective partnership between the professions and the professional schools in this regard will continue to offer a major challenge and opportunity for both groups.

9. The greatest help an accrediting agency can offer to a program is to demand that its educational goals be clearly stated and that the program be reasonably calculated to achieve those goals.

An accrediting body can offer useful advice—but only advice—as to whether, in its opinion, the

resources are adequate to meet program goals. The primary question must be whether these goals are being achieved, however, rather than whether square footage or salary levels or teacher-student ratios or telephone accessibility meet some arbitrary measure. The essential purpose of accreditation is to assure the prospective student and the public that necessary standards of quality are being satisfied. However meritorious it may be to advance the salaries, perquisites, or working conditions of the faculty or administration of the unit being evaluated, the accrediting process is not the proper vehicle to use for this purpose. An educational program is validated first and foremost by how well it accomplishes the goals set for it. This, in turn, rests ultimately on how well its students and graduates are able to perform—no matter how difficult that is to appraise or predict.

10. The accrediting process offers greatest value to an established institution when it provides an avenue toward impartial advice on the educational issues of primary importance and concern to the institution at the time.

The institution's right to frame its report in a manner that reflects and evaluates its own priorities while responding to the agency's main reaccreditation criteria must be respected and maintained. An accrediting agency should not seek to impose its particular current interests as the dominant feature of the institutional review.

The Committee wishes to express its special appreciation to Bryant E. Kearl, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1978-1983, for his leadership in the development of these principles.
