Accreditation

Today’s calls for accountability in higher education come from federal and state government, students and their families, employers, taxpayers, and other stakeholders. Institutional accreditation is regularly included in the discussions related to accountability. This issue of Inquiry, Trends & Insights provides an overview of accreditation processes and Tulane’s accreditation activities. In 2011, Tulane’s accreditation was reaffirmed by SACSCOC with no recommendations. In 2018, just three short years from now, Tulane must submit a Fifth Year Interim Report (FYIR) to retain its SACSCOC accreditation status. The FYIR requires Tulane to demonstrate full compliance with selected accreditation principles, including those required by the federal government. Faculty, staff, and students will be asked to contribute to the FYIR and your participation in the process will help ensure Tulane’s continued accreditation.

Katie Busby
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Accreditation 101: Overview of Accreditation

Accreditation in the United States dates back to the 1880s when institutions formed membership associations to ensure quality educational standards and admissions procedures. Since that time accreditation has evolved and expanded to assure quality to stakeholders, provide access to federal and state funds, engender private sector confidence, and aid in the transfer of credit between institutions (Eaton, 2012).

Accrediting organizations are non-governmental, non-profit organizations whose purpose is to execute accreditation activities as designated by the organization. There are four types of accrediting agencies in the United States: national faith-related accreditors, national career-related accreditors, programmatic accreditors, and regional accreditors (Eaton, 2012). The most widely known agencies are the six regional accreditors with member institutions in the Northeastern, Mid-Atlantic, Southern, Midwestern, Western and Northwestern United States. Some regional accreditors also accredit institutions outside of the United States. The six regional accreditation associations are as follows:

- Higher Learning Commission (HLC)
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE)
- Northwestern Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WSCUC) and Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)
Institutional Accreditation

Purpose of Accreditation

The primary purposes of accreditation are quality assurance and quality improvement. The accreditation processes are based on association standards, evidence that standards have been met, and peer review executed by volunteers from other member institutions (Brittingham, 2009; Eaton, 2012). Although each accrediting organization establishes their own standards for quality, many similarities exist across accreditors. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a non-profit group of degree-granting institutions and the United States Department of Education both recognize accrediting organizations and each maintains a database of recognized accreditors and accredited post-secondary schools and programs.

Accreditation Cycle

Accreditation is an ongoing process with program or institutional reviews occurring periodically every three to ten years. Although each accrediting organization determines its own review procedures, many similarities exist across accreditors (Brittingham, 2009; Eaton, 2012). The process generally adhered to in an accreditation review is as follows:

- Accrediting agency establishes review standards or criteria
- Institutions or programs conduct a self-study based on established standards
- Volunteers from member institutions conduct peer review
- Accreditation status is determined by accrediting agency

“What is SACSCOC?”

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) accredits two- and four-year, degree-granting institutions in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. SACSCOC also accredits institutions in Latin America and the United Arab Emirates. Tulane earned its initial accreditation from SACSCOC in 1903, just eight years after the commission was founded, and has been continually accredited since that time. SACSCOC reaffirms institutional accreditation every ten years and requires institutions submit a Fifth Year Interim Report five years after reaccreditation. The SACSCOC accreditation process includes completion of a compliance certification report (self-study), off-site peer review, submission of a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), on-site peer review, and accreditation decision by the Board of Trustees.

“Accreditation is ongoing; the initial earning of accreditation is not entry to indefinite accredited status.”

—Judith S. Eaton

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Accreditation at Tulane

Tulane’s last SACSCOC review occurred in 2011. The SACSCOC Board of Trustees voted to reaffirm Tulane’s accreditation in December 2011 following a successful on-site visit by a peer review team in April 2011. During that review process Tulane submitted a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) that led to the establishment of the Center for Engaged Learning and Teaching (CELT). Tulane will seek reaffirmation again in 2022, and is required to submit the Fifth-Year Interim Report in March 2018. Below is a timeline of institutional accreditation activities.

Faculty and Staff Involvement with Accreditation

Leadership and participation from faculty and staff are necessary to achieve a successful accreditation review. For example, there are over 20 SACSCOC standards directly related to educational support services, libraries, facilities, and institutional administration. Tulane staff regularly provide documentation of programs, services, and facilities and that information is utilized to demonstrate ongoing compliance with SACSCOC requirements.

Similarly, over 25 SACSCOC standards are directly related to undergraduate and graduate/professional programs, faculty role in governance, and faculty qualifications. Faculty members provide important information that is used to demonstrate Tulane’s academic programs are in compliance with accreditation standards. This includes articulating student learning outcomes on course syllabi and uploading all course syllabi to Blackboard/MyTulane.

Tulane must also demonstrate the qualifications of our faculty to execute the academic mission of the institution and meets this requirement by providing SACSCOC with the educational and professional qualifications of faculty members including highest degree earned, professional certifications, honors and awards, and summaries of other qualifications and experiences.

Faculty qualifications are gathered and reported through Digital Measures. Entering and/or updating faculty credentials is necessary for completion of the Fifth Year Interim Report and significant improvements have been made to Digital Measures to simplify and streamline that process. Contact OAIR for information about Digital Measures.
Professional Accreditation

Regional accreditors such as SACSCOC grant institutional accreditation, but do not accredit particular academic programs or departments. Programmatic, disciplinary, specialized, or professional accreditation associations execute a standards-based, peer-review evaluation of particular programs or departments, most of which are part of regionally-accredited, post-secondary institutions (DOE, n.d.). Examples of programs/departments with specialized accreditation include architecture, business, law, medicine, engineering, psychology, and public health.

Professional Accreditation at Tulane

Over 50 Tulane programs have earned professional or specialized accreditation. The Teacher Preparation and Certification Program is completing their reaccreditation this year with the on-site team scheduled to visit campus this fall. A complete list of Tulane’s accredited programs is available on the OAIR website.

Did you know?

Tulane faculty, staff, and administrators volunteer to serve on peer review committees for professional and institutional accreditation. John Nonnamaker, Associate Vice President of Student Affairs, served as an on-site peer reviewer for SACSCOC in Spring 2014. The duties of SACSCOC peer reviewers include ensuring institutional compliance with SACSCOC standards and reviewing the Quality Enhancement Plan.

“The on-site team was comprised of a number of reviewers from SACS schools including deans, directors and even a university president...this experience gave me deeper insights into the accreditation process and will assist me in preparing for our own review.”

“John Nonnamaker

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