

FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY

**ANALYSIS OF THE DESIGN ELEMENTS
OF THE EXISTING ACCREDITATION SYSTEM**

The American Institutes for Research identified seven key elements of California's existing accreditation model. Included below is the list of those elements as well as preliminary staff analysis of each element based upon preliminary research and COA discussion. Also included are three additional elements of the accreditation system to be considered. The purpose of this paper is to invite stakeholder dialogue and analysis about key aspects of the existing accreditation system.

1. Standards-based System

At the center of the Commission's current accreditation system are professionally derived and supported common and program standards that define the acceptable level of program quality for educator preparation programs. The common standards describe aspects of program quality that are common to all credential programs offered by an institution such as educational leadership, resources, faculty, evaluation, admissions, and advice and assistance. Program standards are those standards unique to particular aspects of each program such as program design, curriculum, field experience, and knowledge and skills to be demonstrated by candidates. All accreditation decisions are based on whether an institution has met these standards.

The information collected by staff thus far suggests that no change is needed to this element of the Commission's accreditation system. In the survey conducted of other states, all 11 other states surveyed used standards as a central component in their accreditation process. In fact, the use of standards appears to continue to be a strong and consistent part of educational accountability trends and supported by most policymakers and educators alike. State academic content standards for K-12 continue to be strongly supported and central to California's educational reform movement. Data from Title II of the Higher Education Act indicates that 41 states across the nation have either adopted quality and effectiveness standards for their educator preparation programs that are aligned with their K-12 academic content standards or are moving toward that alignment. In some instances, California's standards have been used as models of exemplary standards. In the report *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge*, issued in July 2003, U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige in describing standards developed by the American Board for the Certification of Teacher Education (ABCTE), characterized California's standards (along with those of Virginia and Massachusetts) as "among the finest in the nation." (page 26).

2. Institutional Focus

California's existing system of accreditation focuses on the institutional accreditation rather than individual program approval or accreditation. However, this represented a major shift from previous California practice of program approval. Some of the assumptions in making this change are that unit accreditation fosters collaboration among programs, streamlines and make more efficient and cost effective the accreditation process, and allows for the combination of information and judgments about the various programs with that of the institution as a whole.

Even though the current system provides findings about programs, program approval holds specific advantages. It allows for the Commission to independently make decisions for each and every program and thus places additional pressure on institutions to address those concerns specifically. Some proponents of this approach suggest that under institutional review, it would take very serious deficiencies in one or more programs to bring down the level of full accreditation of an institution.

Preliminary research conducted to date, specifically the survey of other states, suggests that the approach to program approval/institutional accreditation is fairly equally divided.

3. Professional Judgment and Peer Review

The Commission's *Accreditation Framework* emphasizes the professional character of accreditation. It notes that key to the accreditation process is that professional educators should hold themselves and their peers accountable for the quality of professional education and that professional educators should be involved in the creation of standards, in conducting reviews, and making accreditation decisions.

In general, the information collected thus far by the Commission staff suggests that professional educators should continue to play a central role in accreditation reviews. However, Commission staff could also conceive of various scenarios, particularly around the collection and analysis of quantitative data, where Commission staff could play a more active role. A modified system might include some preliminary staff review and recommendations and might reflect the type of review system utilized by NCATE. The exact role played by professional educators and by Commission staff will depend largely on the nature of the revised processes and procedures ultimately adopted by the Commission.

4. Internal Self-Study

The internal self study document prepared by the institution is the primary means by which the institution demonstrates that the programs and services it offers are aligned with the standards of quality and effectiveness adopted by the Commission. One of the primary objectives of the document is to ensure that the institution has the opportunity for self-reflection and ultimately, to use that self-reflection to drive program improvement. Currently, the document is fairly comprehensive and it is compiled once in preparation for the accreditation visit.

While it is hard to imagine an accreditation process that does not include the institution's own demonstration of the manner in which it meets each of the standards, it is quite possible that issues related to the format, the comprehensive nature, the frequency and timing of the document may be altered.

5. External Review

California's current accreditation system is dependent upon an on-site review as the primary means for conducting an external review. There are numerous advantages to such a system. It allows for the comprehensive collection of data not available from documents, it allows for a process of dialogue and deliberation with the institution that supports a more thorough understanding of the issues and the context in which the institution is operating, and allows for a team of experts to discuss complex issues with one another prior to making an accreditation recommendation.

Based on the information collected by staff thus far, external review is an essential component of accreditation. However, it is clear that there are numerous ways that external review may take place. For instance, while most of the states surveyed do conduct site visits as a primary means of external review, many of them supplement these site visits with more frequent information collected from the institutions. While the information collected from these institutions vary and the manner in which the information is eventually used in the accreditation process varies, it appears that many states do not rely on the site visit alone to understand issues of program quality. The review should include investigation of alternative external review models to determine what might yield the most useful information in making critical accreditation decisions.

6. Regular Review Cycle

One of the central notions of California's accreditation process is that all institutions must undergo regular review cycles. California's current accreditation cycle occurs on a five- to seven-year basis, and is commonly six years. The notion of regularly scheduled review cycles is based on the issue of fairness to all institutions. In addition, since the review is a "point in time" review which assesses the quality of the institution at the time of the review, it is assumed that regular accreditation cycles will be able to capture and respond to any changes that take place at an institution during that period.

The information gathered to date suggests that the review cycle is an area that begs further research and investigation during the review process. One of the persistent concerns about the current accreditation system used by the Commission is the length of time between accreditation reviews and the inability for the Commission to monitor on an on-going basis what is occurring at institutions.

At the same time, it is not reasonable to assume, given the current fiscal constraints of the Commission, that the Commission would be able to conduct full site visits in the manner in which it does more frequently than the six-year cycle. However, the Commission could build into its system more regular

monitoring of institutions and develop explicitly designed criteria by which it may allow for focused reviews, that is, reviews focused on particular standards or points of concern of institutions where appropriate.

While a six-year cycle appears to be in line with that of other states, and with national trends, more states are requiring annual reporting systems for their teacher education programs. These annual reporting systems differ from state to state in both content and use. Further investigation of the range and scope of the annual reporting systems used in other states may help assist California in developing a more responsive accreditation system. The collection of annual or, at least, more frequent data from institutions may help identify emerging problems at institutions as well as confirm that institutions that have been deemed to offer high quality educational services continue to offer no evidence to the contrary.

7. Emphasis on Current Quality Rather than Over Time

California's current accreditation process examines the quality of a program and its services at a point in time. Accreditation decisions do not take into account past team recommendations or accreditation decisions. It is based on the general assumption that this is the fairest manner to conduct accreditation visits such that an institution is judged on its current state of quality, not past weaknesses or strengths. It also takes into account that standards change over time and to look at past practices may not be an equitable way of looking at accreditation.

While there is merit to this manner of approaching accreditation, the information collected by staff to date indicate that there is an increasing need to ensure consistency in the quality of services offered by an institution over time. The Committee on Accreditation has discussed this aspect of the existing accreditation system and some members expressed concern over the Commission's inability to monitor the progress that institutions are making in addressing issues raised during the accreditation process. Despite the fact that institutions receiving stipulations are required to address those stipulations within one year of the accreditation review, some members of the Committee on Accreditation expressed concern that this process may be less than sufficient to ensure that institutions are, in fact, addressing concerns. In addition, the existing accreditation system does not allow for an understanding of persistent and continuing problems at an institution because of the inability to reference the findings of past reviews.

In addition, the information gathered thus far indicates that the following should be considered in the review of the existing accreditation system.

Alignment with state and national accountability trends. The review should take into consideration new accountability requirements such as those contained in the proposed reauthorized Title II of the Higher Education Act.

A focus on institutional effectiveness as well as program quality. By design, California's standards for teacher preparation include both issues of quality and effectiveness. In the past, the accreditation process has been an effective tool for

gauging the quality of educational services offered by an institution. The review should address the manner in which accreditation system can be strengthened to assess effectiveness.

Ensure flexibility. While the issue of fairness to all institutions should continue to remain an important goal of the accreditation process, the accreditation review process should consider ways in which to ensure appropriate levels of flexibility to respond in a timely manner to possible concerns identified at institutions while taking into consideration those institutions with demonstrated effectiveness.