HANDOUT #9
March 18, 2004

GOALS AND ATTRIBUTES OF EXISTING ACCREDITATION SYSTEM (Excerpt from Accreditation Framework)

Professional Accreditation and Certification

Professional accreditation is the process of ascertaining and verifying that, at each college and university that prepares individuals for state certification, sufficient quality characterizes that preparation. State certification is the process of ascertaining and verifying the qualifications of each future member of a profession like education. These two processes -- professional accreditation and state certification -- have distinct objectives but they serve a common set of overarching purposes. It is critical, there-fore, that accreditation and certification function as *an integrated system* for the purposes that are outlined below.

In education, the first purpose of a professional accreditation and certification system is to assure the public, the students and the profession that future educators have access to excellence in content education, specialized preparation and professional practica in education, and that these components of educator preparation are oriented to the educational needs of future elementary and secondary students. Assuring excellence in educator preparation is the distinctive objective of *accreditation* in this system. Ensuring that each licensed educator has completed accredited preparation is the distinctive function of *certification*. By integrating accreditation with certification, policymakers can also ensure that educator preparation will be responsive to the critical dynamic needs of elementary and secondary schools.

A second essential function of an accreditation-certification system is to ensure that future educators have actually acquired abilities and perspectives that are essential for fulfilling specified professional responsibilities such as teaching or other services in schools. To ensure that professional credentials provide such assurances, *certification* decisions should be based on valid assessments of accepted standards of competence for entry-level service as professional educators. *Accreditation* also contributes to these assurances by ascertaining and verifying that each candidate's growing competence is assessed and confirmed by an accredited institution. An integrated accreditation-certification system provides the strongest possible assurance that professional credentials are awarded to individuals who have earned them on the basis of their competence.

A third critical purpose of accreditation and certification is to verify that each educator's specialized preparation and attainments are appropriate for the assignment of particular responsibilities in schools, and that these responsibilities are related to his or her preparation and expertise in the profession. Assuring the appropriateness of specialized

preparation for future responsibilities is a distinctive objective of *accreditation* in the system. Verifying that each educator's responsibilities are based on actual preparation and expertise is a function of *certification.* An integrated system of accreditation and certification maximizes the prospect that assigned duties will be consistent with prior preparation and competence as an educator.

Finally, the fourth goal of an accreditation-certification system is to contribute to broader efforts to enhance the personal stature and professional standing of teachers and other educators as members of a profession that has a strong base of specialized knowledge and a demonstrated record of accomplishment in elementary and secondary schools. Related to this important goal, an objective of *accreditation* in education is to foster improvements in the design, content and delivery of professional curricula and practica, and in the selection, guidance, supervision and assessment of candidates. A related objective of *certification* is to provide reliable information about the collective knowledge, competence and accomplishments of professional educators. Functioning together, accreditation and certification have greater capacity to enhance the stature of education as a profession in the eyes of students, parents and other citizens.

The overall effectiveness of education in California depends, in part, on the systemic cohesiveness of educator preparation, accreditation, assessment and certification. Attempts to disassemble the components of this system may serve the interests of some of its participants, but the effective education of elementary and secondary students requires that they be integrally linked. This linkage with the certification system is one of seven essential attributes of an accreditation system for educator preparation institutions in California.

Key Attributes of Accreditation in a Certification System

Prior to reviewing accreditation policies originally proposed by the Advisory Council, the Commission decided that an accreditation system in education should have seven essential attributes, which were published in a preliminary report entitled *Educator Preparation for California 2000: Background Information for a New Accreditation Framework* (November, 1991). The seven essential attributes of an accreditation system are summarized below. In drafting the accreditation policies in this *Framework*, the Accreditation Advisory Council and the Commission's professional staff sought to incorporate these attributes in a new accreditation system for California educators.

First Attribute of Accreditation: Orientation to Educational Quality. Accreditation policy should focus primarily on the educational *quality* of educator preparation in colleges and universities. Accreditation *standards* should describe levels of quality that are deemed to be acceptable by the body that has statutory responsibility for accreditation standards, which is the Commission. Standards should not focus on purely technical or operational aspects of educator preparation, but should enable trained reviewers with

professional expertise to find out whether educator preparation in an institution is characterized by acceptable levels of quality.[1]

Accreditation *reviews* should also be oriented to issues of quality. During a review, the judges need to obtain evidence that relates to the educational quality of preparation programs and policies within the institution. Through experience, expertise and training, the reviewers must be skilled at discerning the important from the unimportant in educator preparation.

The *results* of accreditation reviews should also bear on issues of quality in the education of educators. The findings and recommendations of accreditation reviewers should focus on important matters of quality. Accreditation decisions should hinge on findings that are educationally significant and clearly related to quality-oriented standards.

Second Attribute: The Professional Character of Accreditation. Professional educators should hold themselves and their peers accountable for the quality of professional education. Professionals should be involved intensively in the entire accreditation process. They should create accreditation standards, conduct accreditation reviews, and make accreditation decisions. Participants in these aspects of accreditation should have experience, expertise and training that are appropriate for their specific roles in accreditation. In each step of accreditation, decisions should emerge from consultative procedures, and should reflect the consensus of the professional participants.

The general public has a compelling interest in accreditation decisions that are part of the public education system in California. So do professionals whose work is judged *by* the accreditation system, or whose future success depends *on* its results and effective-ness. The expertise and experience of the accreditors should be credible to the general public *and* the education profession in California.

Third Attribute: Breadth and Flexibility. For institutions to be effective in a dynamic state like California, they must be creative and responsive to the changing needs of prospective educators. In a society as diverse as California, universities and colleges must also be highly varied in their missions and philosophies. Accreditation should not force institutions to conform to prescribed patterns unless these conventions have a firm basis in principles of educational quality and equity.

Accreditation standards should be drawn so different institutions can meet them in a variety of acceptable ways. There *are* acceptable and unacceptable forms of educator preparation; accreditation should differentiate between them. There are also *multiple ways* of educating prospective educators acceptably; accreditation should not favor any of these over the others.

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[1] In addition to quality standards, accreditation systems often include requirements for compliance, which are usually more technically focused than the standards. Often called "preconditions," these compliance requirements are appropriate secondary elements of an accreditation system.

Accreditation standards should relate to broad domains of educator preparation, not to specific practices or procedures. They should describe *levels of quality* without stipulating *how* institutions are to comply. Explanations of the standards should clarify their meaning without making the standards restrictive. The expertise and training of accreditation reviewers should, moreover, emphasize the importance of preserving institutional diversity and creativity.

Fourth Attribute: Intensity in Accreditation. Accreditation should focus with *intensity* on key aspects of educational quality. The process should allow and encourage divergence among programs and institutions, and should also be exacting in assembling key information about critical aspects of educational quality. The *scope* of accreditation should be comprehensive, and the information generated by the review process should be sufficient to yield *reliable judgments and conclusions* by the reviewers.

Accreditation standards should encompass the critical dimensions of educator preparation. In order to recommend an institution for accreditation, experienced professional reviewers should be satisfied that the institution provides a comprehensive array of excellent learning opportunities for future educators. The reviewers should not have a gnawing concern that 'something is missing here.'

Accreditation decisions should be based on information that is sufficient in breadth and depth for the results to be credible and dependable. Regarding each broad standard, accreditation reviewers need to fully understand the educationally important aspects of educator preparation at the institution. If an accreditation system relies on information that is too superficial or incomplete to serve as a basis for sound decisions, its lack of reliability will foster mistrust in the institutions and contempt in the profession.

Intensity in accreditation (Attribute 4) is consistent with a focus on quality (Attribute 1), involvement of professionals (Attribute 2), and breadth and flexibility (Attribute 3). To find out if broad, quality-oriented standards are met, and to make reliable judgments and sound recommendations, reviewers need to assemble a considerable body of data that is *collectively* significant. It is not necessary that each item of compiled information be critically important *on its own*.

Fifth Attribute: Integration with the Certification System. As noted earlier, accreditation and certification should function in ways that are systemically coherent, in order to ensure the appropriateness of specialized preparation for the future responsibilities of professional educators.

There would be no reason to require future educators to earn credentials, or to pursue excellent preparation, if their subsequent professional responsibilities in schools were 'out-of-sync' with their preparation. There would also be little reason to include an accreditation process in the certification system if the preparation and expertise that accreditation verifies were not directly linked to the authorizations of credentials.

For these reasons, accreditation decisions about postsecondary institutions should parallel the kinds of decisions to be made about individual educators in the certification system. Accreditation decisions should be as specialized and specific as the authorizations of credentials because the latter are based, in part, on specialized preparation in accredited institutions. To the extent that the credential structure differentiates among distinct professional roles and responsibilities, these distinctions must be based, in part, on an accreditation system that has a parallel structure.

Sixth Attribute: Contributions of Accreditation to Improved Preparation. Accreditation standards, reviews and decisions should contribute to improvements in the preparation of educators. The quality of an institution's policies, practices and outcomes should improve as its faculty, administrators and students strive to meet accreditation standards. The institution's offerings should also benefit from the quality orientation of an accreditation review. When these effects of accreditation fall short, however, specific accreditation decisions should also provoke needed improvements in educator preparation institutions.

For improvements to occur, accreditation reviews must identify and describe weak-nesses in the quality of an institution's offerings. Rather than viewing accreditation reviews as troublesome or intimidating forms of interference, institutions should expect substantive benefits from an intensive, professional, quality-oriented process. Over time, the Commission should reexamine its accreditation policies to ascertain whether substantive improvements are actual bi-products of those policies.

Seventh Attribute: Efficiency and Cost-Effectiveness. An accreditation system should fulfill its purposes efficiently and cost-effectively. Review procedures, decision processes and reporting relationships should be streamlined and economical. Participants' roles should be clearly defined, and communications should be efficient.

There are costs associated with establishing standards, training reviewers, assembling information, preparing reports, conducting meetings and checking the accuracy of data and the fairness of decisions. Containing these costs is an essential attribute of accreditation, but efficiency must not undermine the capacity of accreditors to fulfill their responsibilities to the public and the profession. Accreditation costs, which are borne by institutions, individual accreditors and the accrediting body, should be re-viewed periodically by the Commission in relation to the key purposes of accreditation.