Educator Preparation for California
The *Accreditation Framework*

This Framework addresses the accreditation of colleges and universities that prepare teachers and other educators for professional state certification in California. Accreditation is an assurance of quality in the preparation of professional educators, and is therefore important to the Commission, the education profession, the general public, and the accredited institutions. This Introduction to the Framework describes the context for accreditation of educator preparation in California, and articulates the purposes of the accreditation system in the field of educator preparation.

Accreditation of Educator Preparation Programs

The Purposes of Professional Educator Program Accreditation

Professional accreditation is the process of ascertaining and verifying that, at each program 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.

A primary purpose of a professional accreditation and certification system is to ensure accountability. Accountability to the public, the students and the education profession that educator preparation programs are oriented to the educational needs of current and future students. Only an accredited teacher preparation program may recommend a candidate for a license to teach in California. 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 effectiveness. The expertise and experience of the accreditors should be credible to the general public and the education profession in California.

A second purpose of accreditation and certification is to ensure that educator preparation programs are of high quality and provide education and experiences consistent with the knowledge and skills required of an educator in the California public schools. 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.

Accreditation reviews should also be oriented to issues of quality. During a review, the reviewers 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.

A third purpose of the accreditation and certification system is to ensure adherence to standards. California's educator preparation programs are designed to meet the appropriate Commission approved program standards which are aligned to the K-12 student content standards. Through the accreditation system, educator preparation programs must provide evidence that the programs meet all standards.

Finally, the fourth goal of an accreditation and certification system is to support program improvement. 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 weaknesses in the quality of an institution's offerings.

Key Attributes of Accreditation of California's Teacher Preparation Programs

The key attributes described below function within the four purposes of accreditation. These attributes pertain to the development of program standards, the initial program approval process, and the subsequent reviews and accreditation of educator preparation programs.

First 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.

Second 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. Institutions must have the breadth and flexibility within the accreditation system to support program improvement.

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. 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.

Third 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.

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.

Fourth 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 reviewed periodically by the Commission in relation to the key purposes of accreditation.