

## **Chapter Ten**

### **Accreditation Site Visit Team Member Information**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the responsibilities and duties of the individuals who actually conduct accreditation visits and the principles that guide the visit. Individuals selected for the Board of Institutional Reviewers (BIR) will have received specialized training prior to service on one of the Commission's accreditation activities including serving on an accreditation team. BIR members are encouraged to attend additional periodic trainings and meetings of team members to learn about the changes instituted since their last training. Members with a gap of two years or more in their service are strongly encouraged to attend these meetings and trainings before resuming their service in California's accreditation system.

The information presented in this handbook is designed to reinforce that formal training and to provide other interested parties with an understanding of the responsibilities and duties of accreditation team members. This chapter provides descriptions of essential team activities that occur during the actual accreditation visit and that culminate in an accreditation recommendation, which is discussed in Chapter Eight. Chapter Eleven contains a description of the skills and techniques used by BIR team members. The audience is BIR members, educator preparation program sponsors, and other parties who are interested in institutional accreditation.

#### **I. Purposes and Responsibilities of Accreditation Site Visit Teams**

Accreditation teams convene at educator preparation institutions to review the institution's narrative response to the Common and Program Standards, examine program documents and evidence, and to interview a variety of individuals representing stakeholders of the institution's educator preparation programs. The purpose of the team's work is to provide the Committee on Accreditation (COA) with sufficient information that the COA can determine whether the educator preparation program sponsors of California fulfill adopted standards for the preparation of professional educators. Accreditation teams are expected to focus on issues of quality and effectiveness across the educator preparation portion of the institution (the unit) as well as within all credential programs. A site visit accreditation team determines not only whether the institution and its programs meet standards in documentation, but that the standards are being *implemented* effectively. An accreditation team is expected to make its professional recommendation to the COA on the basis of the preponderance of evidence collected from multiple sources (e.g., Program Assessment Reports of Preliminary Findings, Program Narratives, supporting documentation and related evidence; Common Standards Narrative, supporting documentation and related evidence; interviews across stakeholder groups; and data in the biennial reports) and verified during the site visit. Site visits include off-campus programs as well as those on the main campus. To accomplish the purpose of the accreditation teams, its members will complete the following tasks:

1. Develop a preliminary perspective on the extent to which an institution and its educator preparation programs meet the Common and Program Standards by reviewing: a) the institution's narrative addressing the Common Standards; b) the institution's Biennial Reports and the CTC staff's responses, and c) the Program Assessment Preliminary Reports of Findings and Program Summaries.
2. Collect additional information to confirm or disconfirm the preliminary perspective by: a) interviewing credential candidates, program completers, employers of program completers, field experience supervisors, program faculty, administrators, advisory boards, and other key stakeholders; and b) reviewing materials, such as course syllabi, formative assessment documentation, candidate records, and reports of follow-up studies or surveys, as well as any other pertinent sources of information available.
3. Develop consensus decisions on whether the institution's education unit meets each of the Common Standards and whether each educator preparation program meets each of the appropriate Program Standards.
4. Develop a consensus accreditation recommendation with supporting documentation to submit to the COA. The recommendation must be one of the following: *Accreditation*, *Accreditation with Stipulations*, *Accreditation with Major Stipulations*, *Accreditation with Probationary Stipulations* or *Denial of Accreditation* for the institution and all its credential programs. An accreditation team may recommend *Denial of Accreditation* only if an institution has extremely serious and pervasive issues or failed to make sufficient progress in addressing deficiencies identified by the COA in a previous accreditation decision.

## **II. Responsibilities of Accreditation Team Members**

During the accreditation site visit, team members represent the COA rather than their own institutions. As such, team members should identify themselves as a member of the Accreditation Team when introducing themselves to an institution's constituencies. In addition, effective and rewarding accreditation site visits occur when team members focus exclusively on tasks required for the visit and are fully committed to providing an impartial and comprehensive review of an institution and its programs. In keeping with this, team members are not permitted to schedule any professional or personal activities during the team visit.

Team members will be assigned to focus on the unit (e.g., one or more of the Common Standards) or on two to three educator preparation programs by the team lead or the CTC Administrator of Accreditation. In general, team members will be assigned to review either the unit, teacher preparation programs (e.g., multiple subject, single subject, education specialist, adult education, etc.) or services programs (e.g., education administration, pupil personnel services, etc.). Team members are expected to focus on

interviews and documents that are relevant to their assigned standards or programs. As the visit progresses, team members will share what they are learning about their assignments with the rest of the accreditation team. Accreditation teams work on a consensus basis. Team members are expected to participate throughout the visit in that spirit.

Team members fulfill their responsibilities by participating in the following activities:

- Reviewing all documentation prior to the visit;
- Participating in all team meetings;
- Conducting all scheduled interviews; and
- Reviewing supporting evidence available only at the institution.

### **III. Roles of Accreditation Team Members**

#### ***Team Lead***

The role of a team lead during an accreditation visit is complex and challenging. The team lead helps team members make full use of their interview and document review time; conducts the pre-visit planning meetings, the Mid-visit Status Report meeting, and the final team report presentation; and leads all deliberations and writing tasks of the team. Additionally, the team lead serves as the representative of the COA, conducts interviews, and participates in other key activities of the visit.

Finally the team lead, in collaboration with the state consultant, has responsibility for presenting the report to the COA and ensuring that the COA has accurate and timely information about the review to make its accreditation decision.

To function effectively as a team lead, an individual must be completely familiar with the CTC's Common Standards and the current CTC procedures for accreditation visits. In addition, the lead must be knowledgeable about facilitating group work and handling complex decision-making. The overall effectiveness of the accreditation process and the value it has for California institutions depends, in part, on the preparations and professionalism brought by the team lead to this critical task. Information related to the specific roles and tasks for the team lead can be found in Chapter Eleven.

#### ***Team Members***

Team members are assigned to credential areas about which they have knowledge and experience. Team members are charged with the task of reviewing the education unit or its programs and of determining the extent to which the institution and its programs are aligned with the Common and Program Standards. Team members are expected to conduct all assigned interviews, review all documents appropriate to their assignments, familiarize themselves with any additional supporting evidence, and participate fully in all team meetings. They participate in deliberations about the quality of the institution's response to the Common and program standards and reach consensus on 1) whether there is sufficient evidence to find that each Common or program standard is "Met," 2) whether there is sufficient evidence to find that a standard is "Met with Concerns" or

“Not Met” and how the institution’s response to that standard or element of that standard is inadequate, 3) an accreditation recommendation to the COA for the institution and all of its credential programs, and 4) any stipulations. As part of the review and reporting process, all team members have writing responsibilities during the visit.

#### **IV. Role of Commission Staff**

The state consultant’s role begins before the site visit. The state consultant will typically work with an institution for about a year prior to the site visit. The focus of this work is on the logistics and preparation for the visit. The consultant likely has fielded questions from the institution about the meaning and intent of standards, state credential requirements, and various implementation issues. The state consultant works closely with the institution on the overall visit schedule, the development of the interview schedule, and general logistics to ensure that the accreditation review team has what it needs to carry out its responsibilities once on site.

Once at the site, it is the state consultant’s job to ensure the integrity of the accreditation process during the site visit. The consultant, with the team lead, will interact with the institution’s accreditation coordinator throughout the entire visit on behalf of all team members. The consultant works to ensure that the reviewers conduct their visit under the auspices of the *Accreditation Framework*, and the standards, procedures and protocols established by the COA. The consultant serves to assist the accreditation review team by providing information and assistance to the reviewers as necessary. In particular, it is critical that the consultant keep lines of communication open between the reviewers and the institution – ensuring that the institution has every opportunity to provide reviewers with information the reviewers need to make informed decisions. The consultant helps the team in its deliberations as well as in editing and reviewing the report.

Finally the state consultant, in collaboration with the team lead, has responsibility for presenting the report to the COA and ensuring that the COA has accurate and timely information about the review to make its accreditation decision.

#### **V. Conflict of Interest, Professional Behavior, and Ethical Guidelines**

##### ***Conflict of Interest***

The COA will not appoint a team member to an accreditation team if that person has had any official prior relationship with the institution. Such relationships can include, but are not limited to, employment, application for employment, enrollment, application for admission, or any of these involving a spouse or family member. Moreover, team members have a responsibility to acknowledge any reason that would make it difficult for them to render a fair, impartial, and professional judgment. If a potential team member is uncertain whether a conflict of interest exists, it is that individual’s responsibility to alert the CTC consultant about the relationship so that a determination can be made. This avoids embarrassment and the possibility that a team’s findings will be vacated.

The list of potential team members is sent to the institution prior to the visit. If the institution believes one or more team members may have a conflict of interest, the Administrator of Accreditation will be notified as soon as possible. The Director of the Professional Services Division of the CTC will not assign a state consultant to an institution if the consultant has been employed by that institution, applied for employment to that institution, been an enrolled student at the institution, or otherwise had a prior relationship that would adversely affect the visit. Finally, members of the COA are required to recuse themselves from any decisions affecting institutions with which they have potential conflicts of interest.

### ***Professional Behavior***

Team members are expected to act professionally at all times. Intemperate language, accusatory questions, hostile behavior, or other actions or deeds that would compromise the professional nature of the accreditation process are not permitted. Any such conduct will bring a reprimand from the team lead and possible disqualification from the BIR. As representatives of the COA, team members and the state consultant are expected to comport themselves with dignity, cordiality, and politeness at all times. Institutions will evaluate the performance and conduct of all team members and the evaluation will be considered in the determination of which individuals continue as members of the BIR.

### ***Ethical Guidelines***

The COA requires all team members to adhere to the highest standard of ethics while performing any accreditation-related activity. Interviews are to be held in strict confidence. Team sessions are also confidential and are not to be shared with non-team members. The presentation of the Team Report at the Exit Meeting is public and open. The meetings of the COA must follow all public meeting laws.

## **VI. Preparation for an Accreditation Visit**

### ***Being Assigned to a Team***

The Administrator of Accreditation is responsible for developing the accreditation site teams. All team members must be trained BIR members who are free of all conflicts of interest (see above). BIR members are annually asked to identify dates during which they are available to participate in an accreditation site visit. Teams are usually created about six months before each site visit is scheduled to occur; team members will learn about their scheduled visit immediately afterward.

### ***Travel Plans***

Team members will receive instructions from the state consultant regarding their travel plans. Team members should make travel arrangements immediately upon receipt of the instructions, following the guidelines on arrival and departure.

### ***Review Materials***

The consultant should contact all team members to ensure they have received all materials and to determine if they have any questions about the visit. Team members should contact their consultant if they have questions or do not receive their materials 45 days prior to the scheduled visit.

### ***Clothing***

Team members should dress in a professional manner while performing accreditation duties in public. Team members should also bring comfortable and casual clothes for evening team meetings at the hotel and to take advantage of fitness equipment that is available in most hotels.

### ***Telephone Use and Internet Access***

Although personal and professional telephone calls should be kept to an absolute minimum, team members should leave the hotel telephone number and the campus telephone number so they can be contacted in an emergency. On most accreditation visits, wireless connectivity will be available at both the institution and the hotel. Team members are encouraged to bring a laptop to the visit.

### ***Special Needs***

If a team member has allergies, specific housing needs, dietary restrictions, or other special needs, the state consultant should be contacted as soon as possible so appropriate arrangements can be made.

### ***Participate in All Team Meetings***

Members of the accreditation team are expected to arrange their travel so as to arrive at the team's hotel in time for all team meetings. Throughout the duration of the visit, team members are expected to travel together, dine together, and be available for all required meetings. Team members should plan to work every evening. Finally, team members must not leave the host campus prior to the presentation of the team's report, without prior arrangement with the state consultant.

### ***Conduct All Assigned Interviews***

Team members will be assigned to a series of interviews by the team lead. Team members should review the interview schedule and may request adjustments based on that review. Any changes in the schedule must be facilitated by the team lead and the state consultant. The institution being accredited has gone to substantial effort to produce the requisite number of interviewees, and team members must respect that effort by conducting the interviews as scheduled, if possible. Any unusual events or problems regarding the interviews should be discussed with the team lead or the state consultant.

### ***Review Appropriate Supporting Documentation***

Team members will be assigned time in the document room to research issues that were identified in the Program Assessment Preliminary Report of findings, through the team's review of the documents, or that arose during interviews. All supporting documentation and evidence is the property of the institution and may not be removed from the campus

by team members. Since the accreditation process calls for a recommendation based on a balanced review of all available information, team members should ensure that they are as familiar with the supporting documentation and evidence as they are with the interview data.

### ***Participate in all Team Deliberations and Report Writing***

Site teams are expected to use a consensus model in making decisions and teams that strive to be mutually supportive during deliberations arrive at consensus more readily. Respecting the viewpoint of all members and focusing the discussion on evidence about the institution and its programs facilitates making a decision that reflects a holistic assessment of the evidence. Writing the report is the shared responsibility of the entire team. The team lead will assign writing tasks which may begin as early as the first full day of the visit. It is every team member's responsibility to stay in the team room until, either the report is finished, or the team lead and staff consultant indicate that members may return to their rooms.

## **VIII. Collecting and Analyzing Data**

The accreditation team is limited to interview data collected during the visit as well as documents and evidence supplied by the institution or the CTC. Team members may not collect data from other sources or use anecdotal information collected outside of the visit. All team members are required to keep a detailed record of all interviews conducted, materials reviewed, and the findings that result from the process. All information from the interviews is considered private and confidential. Any data or quotes used by the team will be reported anonymously or in the aggregate. All team member notes taken during the interviews or during document reviews are the property of the COA and are collected by the state consultant at the end of the accreditation visit. These materials will be retained by the consultant for one calendar year after the visit. Similarly, all materials placed in the documents room or electronic exhibits remain the property of the institution.

Institutions are encouraged to utilize technology (e.g., phone, video conferencing) if necessary to ensure that an adequate number of individuals representing each group can be interviewed. Similarly, the CTC encourages institutions to utilize electronic documents and evidence (e.g., CD-ROM or an internet website) that can be easily accessed by the visiting team members. BIR members are expected to be flexible as institutions make the transition to electronic media and communications.

### ***Reading and Analyzing Documents***

The initial data collection task is completed during the Program Assessment process. This process, which is described in more detail in Chapter Six, occurs in the fourth year of the accreditation cycle. During Program Assessment, trained BIR members read and analyze all program documents submitted by each institution. The outcome of a Program Assessment is a *Preliminary Report of Findings*. In addition, each team member will review the Program Summary for identified programs.

Beginning sixty days before the visit, each team member will receive various documents about the institution's education unit and its educator preparation programs. Some of the information will come directly from the institution. Some types of information will come from the CTC and will reflect the preliminary findings of BIR members who reviewed the institution's program documents during the Program Assessment process (see Chapter Six). The documents are likely to arrive in electronic form and must be thoroughly read and reviewed prior to the visit. This is important because one of the team's first tasks will be to share concerns that were identified by team members as they prepared for the visit. Being prepared allows all team members to help collect information pertinent to any concerns identified and allows the reviewer more time at the site to focus on interviews and evidence available only at the site.

### ***Develop Initial Questions***

Team members should read the documents carefully, making notations where they have questions or concerns or require clarification. Team members should begin to write interview questions based on documents appropriate to their assignments. The Preliminary Report of Findings will identify areas of concern identified by the Program Assessment reviewers, if any. These areas of concern may suggest interview questions or documents to review.

### ***Read the Common Standards Narrative***

The *Common Standards Narrative* will be provided electronically and, if requested by a team member, in paper copy to facilitate team members' review prior to the site visit. In responding to each Common Standard, the *Common Standards Narrative* should clearly state how the institution implements each standard and the quality of the institution's implementation, and should provide evidence of the institution's actions. Typically, the *Common Standards Narrative* includes, but is not limited to, the following components:

- Letter of Transmittal by Dean or Director;
- Background of Institution's and Education Unit's Mission and Goals;
- Institutional Response to the Common Standards; and
- Links or references to documents and evidence available electronically.

### ***Read Assigned Program Documents***

Each member of the review team will review all documents, in their assigned areas, that were already submitted to the CTC by the institution and that was generated by the Program Assessment reviewers. This includes the following:

- *The Preliminary Report of Findings* prepared by the Program Assessment Review Team;
- The Program Summary prepared by the program;
- Current Narratives Addressing the Program Standards, for reference only
- Biennial Reports for years one, three, and five; and
- the CTC Biennial Report Responses.

### ***Interview Techniques***

A critical method of obtaining sufficient data to make a determination of institutional and program quality and effectiveness is through interviewing many people with direct knowledge of the institution and/or program. Sufficient numbers of people from all the major constituencies related to the institution or program (faculty and administration from the institution, candidates in the programs, cooperating master teachers and school administrators, support providers, graduates of the programs, and advisory groups) must be interviewed carefully about their experiences with the institution and its programs in relation to the selected standards of quality. In order to maximize valuable interview time, the institution will schedule interviews with like stakeholders from the different programs team members are reviewing. For instance, for an institution with many programs, a reviewer focusing on teaching programs may interview candidates from the multiple subject, single subject, and adult education programs. At another time, that reviewer will interview district-employed supervisors from across programs. Some interviews will continue to be scheduled with individuals (e.g., department chairperson).

Accreditation review interviews are usually semi-structured. There is not sufficient time for a true, open-ended interview and the groups will vary enough in background and knowledge level that a structured interview is not appropriate. Reviewers should have some prepared questions in mind based on team discussions and the constituency of the person/people being interviewed. Depending on the initial responses, follow-up questions may vary significantly.

## **IX. Making Decisions about Standards**

As team members complete the interview schedule, examine all available documents and evidence, and amass as much information as possible, the complex process of making sense out of the data and arriving at defensible decisions about each standard is occurring. The overall determination and recommendation of the team is contained in the final team report, which is written after the team has discussed all the standards. The team will discuss each standard and make a consensus determination using one of three available categories: “Met,” “Met with Concerns,” or “Not Met.” It is critical that the team’s assessment relies exclusively on evidence that was accumulated through the site visit and the *Preliminary Report of Findings* and not on anything else. The fact that the team has evidence from a number of different constituencies (students, faculty, supervising teachers, employers, program completers, and documents) is important in making the final decision. If the team decides that a standard is “Not Met” or is “Met with Concerns,” the team must document the basis for that judgment.

While the COA has developed statements about what constitutes a Standard as “Met,” “Met with Concerns,” and “Not Met,” it is the professional judgment of the team members that will determine which category the collected data best fits.

### ***Standards Findings***

For each standard the team will make one of three decisions:

#### **Standard Met**

All phrases of the standard are evident and effectively implemented.

#### **Standard Met with Concerns**

One or more phrases of the standard are not evident or are ineffectively implemented.

#### **Standard Not Met**

Significant phrases of the standard are not evident or are so ineffectively implemented that it is not possible to see the standard in the program.

In all cases where a standard is “Met with Concerns” or “Not Met,” the team will provide specific information about the rationale for its judgment and how the institution was deficient in meeting the standard.

## **X. Writing the Team Report**

The report should be written with this purpose in mind: to inform the COA about the extent to which an institution and its educator preparation programs satisfy applicable standards and to support the COA in rendering an accreditation decision. Basic declarative prose utilizing simple sentences, active verbs, and clearly defined subjects will result in a valuable report. Findings should be supported by evidence collected by the team during the visit. The report should contain specific comments about the group's judgments of program quality, strengths or deficiencies, and suggestions for improvement. The team lead will edit the final draft of all report sections for clarity, smoothness, and uniformity.

Chapter Eight provides guidance to teams about how to determine whether the standards findings suggest a recommendation for *Accreditation*, *Accreditation with Stipulations*, *Accreditation with Major Stipulations*, *Accreditation with Probationary Stipulations* or *Denial of Accreditation*.

## **XI. Concluding the Visit**

When the draft report is finished and ready for presentation, team members should prepare to return home. Prior to departure, team members must complete expense forms and evaluation forms. The expense form allows the state to reimburse the team members for out-of-pocket expenses associated with the site visit. The evaluation form is part of the accreditation system's on-going improvement process as described in Chapter Thirteen. The state consultant will collect interview notes and any other documentation that was generated during the site visit.

The CTC follows state administrative guidelines for reimbursing individuals. As required by different team members, the CTC will purchase airline tickets or reimburse for mileage at state rates. The agency will directly pay the hotel bill. In addition, the CTC will pay *per diem* expenses for meals and incidentals paid for by team members in accordance with state policy. The consultant assigned to the accreditation team is responsible to review details with the team. Any expenses beyond those specified in state regulations will not be covered. If a team member's district requires a substitute during the site visit, the CTC will pay for that substitute when billed by the district.

### ***Concluding Activities and Team Report***

The presentation of the draft team report is typically held during the late morning or early afternoon of the last day of the team visit. The draft team report is duplicated for each team member, and for program faculty and administration members as determined by the Dean or Director. If possible, time will be allotted so that the institution's administration can read the team report prior to the meeting. The format of this meeting is an oral presentation of the draft team report by the team lead. Typically, the team lead summarizes the report and discusses the rationale for the accreditation recommendation. On occasion, the team lead may invite comments from team members. This is not a time for the institution to debate the recommendation, submit new data, or discuss the team's judgment. The program has one week to review the draft team report for accuracy and to correct errors of fact. It is the program's responsibility to notify the CTC of needed changes.

Limited edits may be made in accreditation team report for clarity, but its substance will not be changed. The report will be posted on the CTC website as part of the COA agenda. The final copy of the report, as it will appear when presented to the COA for its review and final decision, will be sent to the institution and team lead prior to the date of the COA meeting.

In the case of a merged visit (NCATE/CAEP/CTC or TEAC/CTC), the NCATE report is prepared and submitted to the Unit Accreditation Board in accordance with NCATE policy. The institution may prepare a rejoinder, a document that explains steps that have been taken to address any deficiency or addressing why no deficiency ever existed, as described in NCATE policy. The decision of the NCATE Unit Accreditation Board will be made separately from the decision of the COA. Merged visits are discussed in Chapter Thirteen.

### ***Evaluation of Accreditation Process and Personnel***

The CTC provides everyone associated with an accreditation site visit an opportunity to evaluate all aspects of the visit, ranging from the initial contact through the report presentation, including an evaluation of all team members. The instrument is comprised of multiple-choice and open-ended questions, and requests recommendations for improving the accreditation process. These data are used to identify areas for improvement in the process and areas where team members need additional support.

To assist in the quality of the BIR, the Dean or Director provides feedback about each member of the accreditation team. Team members also evaluate each other and are asked to identify future team leads as well as team members who were not strong members of the team. These data will be considered by the Administrator of Accreditation when decisions are made regarding retention of individuals on the BIR and identification of individuals able to assume leadership roles in future visits. If the institution has concerns about the performance of the state consultant, the Director of the Professional Services Division should be contacted.

***Final Note***

The accreditation team's responsibilities and workload may seem overwhelming when put into print, but the collective experiences of hundreds of professional educators suggests that participation in a COA accreditation visit is a tremendously valuable professional development activity. Working with fellow educators on a matter that will significantly improve the education profession is the primary purpose and value of the accreditation system. Of nearly equal importance is the professional growth that individuals experience by actively participating in an important project that requires the full participation of each individual supported by high levels of individual accountability.