**Chapter Seven:**

**Preparation for an Accreditation Site Visit**

## Introduction

This chapter provides information for institutions preparing for an accreditation site visit and is intended as a guide for those who are charged with the administrative tasks of a site visit. Included is information on the procedures, activities, and decisions that precede the accreditation site visit. Additionally, the responsibilities of the Commission consultant assigned to the institution are detailed. For information about the accreditation team, see Chapter 10.

**I. Scheduling an Accreditation Visit**

Accreditation visits occur during the sixth year of the accreditation cycle. The Committee on Accreditation (COA) retains the right to schedule more frequent site visits as a stipulation of institutional accreditation or based on reviews of annual data submissions, preconditions, Program Review, or Common Standards review. The COA may also schedule an accreditation visit if the institution has not cooperated with the established accreditation deadlines and submission dates or if information has been brought forward that raises concerns about whether the institution is operating Commission-approved programs in alignment with statutes, requirements, and/or standards.

Institutions will be asked sometime in year five of the accreditation cycle to choose from a selection of possible site visit dates provided by Commission staff. The institution should consider the following criteria when determining a date for the site visit:

* Select a time period when candidates are on campus, student teachers are in classrooms, and all stakeholder groups (e.g., candidates, completers, mentors/coaches, and partners) will be available.

Be certain to avoid local school holidays, testing schedules (when possible), major academic conferences, and/or other times that will draw faculty away from campus or otherwise impede collection of information from candidates, completers, employers, and/or community members.

* Institutions of higher education should keep in mind that the most common site visit schedule begins on Sunday with team members arriving by noon and beginning their work mid-afternoon.
* For PK-12 institutions, the site visit schedule most often begins on Monday with team members arriving in the morning and beginning their work.
* Other schedules may be permitted if feasible, but they must be requested early in the process by the institution.
* Institutions with multiple sites, unconventional class schedules, or other unique circumstances should make these conditions known early in the planning process.
* If the institution is seeking national accreditation in addition to Commission accreditation, the visit scheduling must be coordinated with the national accrediting body in accordance with the Commission’s agreements with these bodies. In these situations, early planning must be initiated.

The institution should identify the most appropriate dates from a series of dates proposed by Commission staff. The Administrator of Accreditation will confirm the dates for the site visit and the assignment of a Commission consultant approximately eight months prior to the site visit.

**II. Support Prior to the Visit**

## The consultant will contact the institution for an introduction and to schedule an initial meeting, often referred to as a “one year out visit” to provide an overview of the accreditation site visit process. The institution may invite anyone it chooses to attend this meeting, although it is expected that those with day-to-day interactions with the unit and its programs will be in attendance (e.g. the superintendent, dean of the school of education, program directors/coordinators, credential analysts).

***Logistical and Budgeting Arrangements***

For in-person accreditation visits, the Commission is responsible for all direct expenses of the state accreditation team, including travel expenses, lodging, meals, and per diem. The Commission is also responsible for the direct expenses incurred by the team lead and the consultant in working with the institution on arrangements for the visit and, if requested, the cost of substitute teachers that may be needed for team members who are classroom teachers. The institution is also responsible for identifying, in consultation with the Commission’s travel team, an acceptable hotel in close proximity to the campus, arranging for meals for the team, and arranging parking permits or other forms of transportation during the visit for team members.

The Commission will initiate a contract with the institution through which the lodging and meal expenses of the team members will be paid at the rates established by the State of California. Only breakfast, lunch, and dinner are allowable meal expenses.

The institution is responsible for covering the costs of assigned time to its faculty and staff for the development of reports or documents and collection of required data. Please note that the site visit process does not include a “reception” or “event” sponsored by the hosting entity.

Institutions seeking national accreditation assume all the costs for that process with the exception of any reviewers appointed by the Commission in accordance with the agreements and protocols established with these bodies. This is also true if the institution elects to have one or more of its credential programs accredited by a national professional association.

The institution is responsible for providing the team with the following:

* A team work room at the institution site and at the hotel that is secure, accessible only to the team, and appropriately sized for the team
* A team work room at the hotel site, that is secure, accessible only to the team, and appropriately sized for the team
* Space for all team members to conduct interviews
* Access to a printer at the institution site and hotel site
* Access to telephones/technology in a confidential setting for team members required to conduct virtual interviews, if needed
* Access to wi-fi at the institution site and hotel site

The institution is responsible for the preparation of all necessary documents needed for the site visit, the establishment of an accreditation website accessible by team members, required data, and any other materials deemed useful to the team by the institution or as requested by the team.

The institution is responsible for working with the Commission consultant to make all necessary arrangements regarding the interview schedules. The institution is responsible for scheduling the interviews, ensuring that an adequate number of interviews are scheduled for the institution and all its programs, providing parking for interviewees, assigning campus guides to direct individuals to their interview locations, and arranging for back-up interviews as needed. When necessary, institutions are encouraged to propose innovative arrangements for handling interviews (e.g., virtual interviews or dispersed interview sites) and required to ensure that sufficient numbers of interviews are scheduled across all key groups.

Attendance at COA meetings by the institution may be in-person or virtual, via technology. If the institutional personnel choose to attend the COA meeting in person, the institution is responsible for all expenses involved in attending the COA meeting . Further, in the event of an appeal of an accreditation decision, the institution must bear the cost of making the appeal and attending any appeal hearings or meetings. If a revisit is required, the institution must assume the costs under the extraordinary fee policies of the Commission, and the institution must assume the cost for attending the COA meeting in which the revisit decision is being made

**III. Preparation for a Site Visit**

The site visit team relies on a comprehensive process of evidence collection and evaluation and interviews in order to make decisions regarding an institution’s alignment to the standards and make an accreditation recommendation to the COA. This includes the following:

***1. Preconditions Report***

Program sponsors will prepare a response to Preconditions and submit it to the Commission during years one and four of the accreditation cycle. Preconditions submissions provide current information about institutional and program compliance with the preconditions.The institution must respond to Commission adopted General Preconditions and program specific preconditions for all credential programs offered by the institution. The Preconditions may be found on the Precondition [web page](http://www.ctc.ca.gov/educator-prep/STDS-preconditions.html).

***2. Annual Data Submission***

Submitted in each year of the accreditation cycle, this data provides information about the institution and its programs such as the number of candidates and completers, demographics, delivery models, locations,, and other unique features of the institution/program sponsor. It also includes specified outcomes measures such as pass rates on examinations and survey data.The specifics about what data must be submitted and the definitions for the data to be submitted are provided by the Commission. All Commission approved institutions must comply with all required data submissions in order to maintain ongoing accreditation.

***3. Program Review and Common Standards Review Submissions, Feedback, and Addendum***

The Program Review and Common Standards Review submissions are due in the year prior to the site visit (Year Five) and provide documentation demonstrating how the institution and its programs are addressing the standards. Feedback is provided to the institution and programs who will develop addendum responses that must be made available to the site visit team. For information about Program Review, please refer to Chapter 6 of this handbook or to the Commission’s Program Review webpage. For information about Common Standards Review, please refer to Chapter 4 of this handbook or to the Commission’s Common Standards Review webpage.

***4. Campus Exhibits***

Institutions with an accreditation site visit must post all information on an accreditation website and make the website available to the team. Material and artifacts that cannot be posted electronically, such as candidate files, should be available to the team in some other fashion that ensures the security of these files; institutions should discuss the appropriate manner of doing so with the Commission consultant and team lead. Institutions planning to use multi-media presentations should confer with the Commission consultant early in the planning process. No less than 60 days before the visit, the institution must post all relevant materials, including but not limited to responses to Program Review and Common Standards feedback (addendums), on the accreditation web page and provide access to the site visit team. Once the team has access to the accreditation web page no additional changes, modifications, or edits should be made to the page without first consulting the team lead and Commission consultant.

***5. Scheduling Interviews***

It is the institution's responsibility to set up the interview schedule for the team. Interview schedules should be developed in consultation with the Commission consultant. Since the time available to the team is limited and COA policy dictates that sufficient numbers of individuals from all constituent groups be interviewed, **creating a workable interview schedule is a critical task for the institution and should receive as much attention as does document preparation for the site visit.** A matrix identifying interviewees can be found in Appendix B. In addition to ensuring sufficient numbers of critical constituents, interview schedules must also include adequate breaks for team members to examine documents and other evidence, organize notes from interviews, and check in with the team lead and Commission consultant throughout the day.

It is very important that the interviews occur in an environment that is secure and private. Interviewees who believe their comments might be overheard by others may be less willing to identify concerns or problems they are experiencing in the program. The same consideration needs to be made for interviews using technology or phones; team members need to feel that their responses and questions are not being overheard by anyone associated with the program, institution, or agency.

**Who Should be Scheduled for Interviews by the Team**

Site visit team members must have the opportunity to interview a wide variety of constituencies who can shed light on the quality of the programs being offered by the institution. These will include persons involved in the development and coordination of all approved programs and the preparation of candidates, program participants, and other constituency groups, as discussed further below.

A list of persons who are typically scheduled for interviews is noted below. This list may not include all pertinent constituents for a particular program. Institutions should work closely with their Commission consultant to ensure all necessary individuals are included in the interview schedule.

**Candidates**

* Beginning candidates (very small number)
* Middle of program candidates (larger number than beginning candidates)
* Candidates who are nearing completion, especially those in student teaching and/or field experiences (majority of candidates interviewed)
* Candidates enrolled in the various pathways to each credential that the program offers

**Master Teachers/Clinical Supervisors/Support Providers**

* Currently working with candidates or have worked with a candidate in the past two to three years

**Administrators**

* From schools where candidates and student teachers are placed, and/or who assist with field work placements
* School sites where placements are routinely made or where program participants are working
* If the program works with multiple school districts, representation from a broad spectrum of districts is required

**Program Completers**

* Completers from the two previous years
* In cases where most program completers leave the area, it may be necessary to go back one more year to ensure that a sufficient number of interviews are conducted
* Completers from many years ago should not be included as in most cases thier experiences with the current program are likely outdated and any comments they make nonrelevant.

**Employers of Program Completers**

* School district personnel office administrators
* School site principals

**Administration and Faculty of the Institution**

* President (optional unless merged CAEP/COA visit)
* Provost/superintendent
* Academic vice-president/deputy superintendent
* Chief Financial Officer of institution
* Dean of the college or school of education/department director
* Chairs of the involved departments
* Program coordinators of each credential program
* Field supervisors in each credential program
* Professors/instructors from each credential program (full-time and part-time)
* Credential analyst
* Advisory committee for credential programs

**Partner Organizations**

* Any PK-12 district, school, or institution of higher education partners that provide advice and/or oversight of the programs
* Any community organizations that play an important role in the program
* Relevant vendors or contractors that provide instructional or other educational services for the program

Institutions that have satellite campuses or locations in addition to a main campus must ensure that a representative sample of each category of constituency at each satellite campus is scheduled for interviews. Review teams cannot, with confidence, develop program findings or accreditation recommendations if they have not interviewed enough constituents from all aspects and locations of the program. The responsibility rests with the institution to anticipate the need for adequate interviews with off-campus constituencies. If the institution has concerns about off-campus interviews, it must work with the assigned consultant to address these concerns. Only in rare instances and only when warranted will review teams be traveling to other locations to conduct interviews.

The number of individuals to be interviewed will vary by category and program, and will depend upon program size, relative "importance" to the credential preparation program, and location of the interviewees. For a small credential program, everyone associated with the program will be interviewed. Specific problems or concerns with interview sample size must be discussed well in advance of the visit with the team lead and the Commission consultant.

**Selection of Interviewees**

The institution should begin assembling lists of potential interviewees as early as one year before the visit. The names of current candidates and completers should be assembled as soon as practicable in the months prior to the visit. Faculty who teach or provide services in the program should be alerted to the visit dates as soon as possible to ensure their availability. Consideration should be given to ensure sufficient participation of part-time or adjunct faculty, faculty who are on sabbatical leave, or other key personnel who might not otherwise be present at the time of the visit.

Candidates and program completers may be interviewed in small groups (8-20 individuals).Faculty and field supervisors may be interviewed in small groups (3-10 individuals), school district site administrators may be interviewed in small groups (3-10 individuals), and institution leadership should be interviewed individually. It is important to note that no individual with supervisory or oversite responsibilities of a particular constituent group should be included in the same interview, in which case additional, individual interviews may need to be scheduled for these individuals. **Telephone interviews, videoconferencing, and other means of conducting the interviews are useful when travel is difficult or where program completers or other constituents work at significant distances from the campus.**

**Review of Interview Schedules by Team Lead**

A nearly finalized interview schedule must be available no later than the Two-Month Out Pre-Visit, and the interview schedule should be finalized approximately four weeks before a site visit. When the schedule is complete, it is sent to the Commission consultant and the team lead for their final review.

Failure to have an interview schedule prepared well in advance of the site visit is likely to cause significant issues and may result in the team not being able to gather all the relevant information needed to make decisions on standards and an accreditation recommendation that reflects the institution’s true alignment to standards. Institutions are strongly urged to avoid this problem. Once any changes are made by the team lead, the schedule will be followed as amended. Late additions to the schedule, if needed, must be clearly noted and communicated to the consultant and team lead.

**Additional Notes on Creating an Interview Schedule**

The interview schedule should be a table with one column for each team member across the top and time slots on the left margin. Consultants may be able to provide examples to institutional personnel to assist them in conceptualizing the interview schedule. Whenever possible, the scheduler should be cognizant of teaching and travel schedules. Programs with heavy afternoon and evening classes will need to work with the Commission consultant to balance the time commitments of the team. Scheduling interviews during the late afternoon of the first full day will be critical for campuses with evening classes. Interviews may take place via technology, if needed.

The most frequent concerns expressed by team leads/members relate to lengthy introductions which delay the onset of the interviews, gaps in the interview schedule, significant imbalances in the numbers of interviews scheduled, and insufficient privacy for sensitive interviews. Institutions are urged to attend to these concerns.

The schedule must also allow sufficient time during each day for document review and team meetings. Interviews should not be scheduled after 6:00 p.m. without agreement from both the team lead and Commission consultant.

Institutions are encouraged to not just “invite” interviewees, but to take steps to ensure they will attend. Confirmation calls or emails in the days just prior to the visit are advisable. Schedulers are urged to over book the number of interviewees to account for individuals that may not make the interview. Scheduling one constituency (e.g., program completers) only once should be avoided as it will not give team members any opportunity to follow-up on comments or new information that may come out in an interview session. For in-person site visits, schedulers should consider the institution’s technology spaces such as “smart” classrooms or conference rooms where interviews with off-campus constituents can be held or consider ways to entice these individuals to make the journey to campus. The institution may also wish to combine an alumni event, professional development offering, or some special activity with group interviews to encourage candidates, program completers, master teachers, and district-employed supervisors to come to the campus. A final suggestion is to have someone at the institution available to make stand-by calls or to provide the names and telephone numbers to the team lead and Commission consultant of individuals who could be interviewed by telephone.

Given the importance of the interview process to the team’s accreditation recommendation and the complexities of ensuring sufficient representation and participation in interviews, it is important that institutional planning teams begin early to develop plans for handling this element of the program evaluation.

**IV. The Accreditation Site Team Daily Schedule**

The length of each accreditation site visit will depend on a number of factors including the number and size of the programs, enrollment, and the results of the Program Review and Common Standards review processes. Generally, the length of a visit for larger institutions with many programs will be four days, while smaller institutions with one or two programs could be three days in length. HThe specific facts surrounding the particulars related to the institution and its programs will determine the length of time of the visit. The information presented below is provided as general guidelines regarding the length and structure of a typical accreditation visit. The Commission consultant will work with the institution and the team lead to ensure the appropriate number of days and structure for the visit that will allow the team to accomplish its objectives.

***Day One***

The team arrives at its hotel site sometime before noon or, for virtual site visits, assembles in the virtual team room. Some examples of activities include:

* Team meeting
* Orientation
* Overview of institution and its programs\*
* Document/evidence review
* Interviews

*\* The overview is an opportunity for the leadership to provide the site visit team with information and context specific to the institution and its programs. This overview may take place virtually in the weeks preceding the site visit.*

***Day Two***

The first full day of the accreditation visit is devoted to interviews with samples of all major interest groups -- faculty, administration, candidates, program completers, employers , district-employed supervisors, program providers, advisory boards, cooperating school personnel, and community members. Team discussions take place to determine where any issues may be and to plan for the next day’s activities.

***Day Three***

The second full day of the accreditation visit is similar to the first full day. The team schedule created by the institution must include time for a mid-visit meeting early in the morning to permit the team lead to share the following with representatives of the institution:

* Areas where the team is still not finding alignment to the standards
* Requests for additional information pertaining to those standards

If possible, interviews should conclude by 5:00 p.m. to ensure that the team will have sufficient time for its evening activities.

***Day Three evening***

The evening of the second full day is set aside for report writing by the team and no other activities can be scheduled. During this time, individual members will report their findings about each program and the team will deliberate about its accreditation recommendation. The team may find it necessary to request last-minute clarification or documentation during this time. An institution representative should remain on-call. Once the team agrees on the program and Common Standards findings and accreditation recommendation, the team, team lead and Commission consultant will write their various portions of the report. If possible, a complete draft of the report will be completed this evening.

***Day Four***

The morning of the fourth day, the team meets in the team work room at the hotel so that all members have an opportunity to read and comment on the draft report. As soon as all edits are completed, the team and Commission consultant will prepare to present a summary of the team’s findings and accreditation recommendation to the institution. Team members are given the option to attend.

***Exit Report***

The institution may invite anyone to attend this presentation of the report. Usually, the team lead and Commission consultant hold a private briefing meeting with the dean or director prior to the formal exit report to provide a review of the report and answer any questions. During the formal exit report that includes all institution representatives, as determined by the institution, the team will not take questions.

***Report to the COA***

At the next soonest regularly scheduled COA meeting following the site visit, the team lead will make a presentation of the team's findings and accreditation recommendation to the COA. The institution may invite anyone to attend this public presentation of the accreditation team's report. The COA will make an accreditation determination after its deliberation at a public meeting where the institutional personnel, team lead, and Commission consultant are in attendance to respond to questions from the Committee about the report..

**V.** **Important Considerations**

According to the *Accreditation Framework*, the COA makes a single decision about the continuing accreditation of educator preparation at each Commission-approved institution including a decision about the specific programs an institution offers. Thus, the following important considerations need attention:

1. **Off-Campus Programs, Distance Learning Programs, Extended Education Programs, Consortiums, and Professional Development Centers** - Information about all sites where programs are offered must be a part of the planning for the accreditation visit. Interviews must be scheduled to represent participants at all sites. These interviews may be conducted via technology. In some cases, the team size may be increased to facilitate the gathering of data from multi-site institutions. It is expected that the Commission’s standards are upheld at all sites where the programs of the institution are offered. Information from the various sites will be a part of the accreditation decision made about the institution.
2. **Programs Offered Outside the School of Education** - Even though a particular credential program may reside outside of the school of education at an institution, it is considered to be a part of the education unit and will be included in the accreditation visit and will be affected by the single accreditation decision that is made about the institution. The education unit is responsible for ensuring program quality for all credential preparation programs.

**4.** **Special Circumstances** - As special circumstances arise, they will be handled on a case-by-case basis with the Administrator of Accreditation, team lead, and Commission consultant to ensure that they are given proper consideration. If these special circumstances begin to arise more commonly, the COA will develop policies and procedures to address them.

**VI. Accreditation Findings, Accreditation Recommendations, and Team Report**

The accreditation team report includes a statement about the team’s accreditation recommendation, summary information about the standards findings, and summary information about the institution and its programs. The report will be augmented by a COA agenda item that includes a table that identifies for each program, how many standards apply to the program, and separately, how many of those standards were met, met with concerns, and not met. A similar table is included for the Common Standards.

**Accreditation Team Recommendations**

Once the team reaches consensus at the site visit about program and Common Standards findings, the team must deliberate on its accreditation recommendation. For a thorough discussion of possible accreditation recommendations and their operational implications, see Chapter 8 of this handbook. The team lead and Commission consultant will support the team as it determines whether the findings of the institution and its programs support a recommendation for *Accreditation* or whether the findings are substantive enough to warrant a recommendation of *Accreditation with Stipulations*, *Accreditation with Major Stipulations*, *Accreditation with Probationary Stipulations*, or *Denial of Accreditation*. All of these possible options are described in further detail in Chapter 8.

**VII. Activities after the Site Visit**

***Committee on Accreditation Actions***

Following the site visit, the Commission consultant will assist the team lead in preparing the team’s accreditation report for submission to the COA. At the COA meeting, the team lead and Commission consultant will present the team’s report and its accreditation recommendation. The institutional representatives will be present and will have an opportunity to make a statement, although it is not the time to dispute the findings. The COA will deliberate about the report and act upon the recommendation, deciding whether to accept or modify the recommendation. The COA will include in its accreditation action any stipulations placed on the institution, the due date by which the institution must remedy any stipulations, and whether a follow up report or a revisit in the seventh year should occur. For a thorough discussion of this process, see Chapter 9 of this handbook.

***Appeal Procedures***

In the event the institution believes the site visit team demonstrated bias or acted arbitrarily or capriciously or contrary to the policies of the *Framework* or procedural guidelines, it may appeal the team recommendation to the COA within 30 days of its decision (see *Accreditation Framework, page 20)*.

The institution may also file a dissent with the Commission regarding the action of the COA if it believes that the COA demonstrated bias or acted arbitrarily or contrary to the policies of the *Framework* or procedural guidelines. In that case, the Commission consultant will help the team lead prepare for and present the review team perspective.

***Committee on Accreditation Actions***

In accordance with the Bagley-Keene Open Meeting Act, the COA’s agendas are posted 10 days prior to the scheduled meeting. The accreditation team report is posted on the COA meeting webpage in advance of the scheduled meeting where the institution’s report will be discussed. Committee members study the materials in advance of the meeting and are prepared to ask for clarification and to discuss their perspectives of the report and the findings. Questions posed by the COA may be directed at the institutional personnel, team lead, consultant on the visit, and/or the Administrators of Accreditation. The COA may not refute the standards findings of the site review team. The COA’s task is to review the standards findings and to discuss the accreditation recommendation in light of the findings. Following deliberations, the COA will vote on an accreditation status and will specifically identify any stipulations to be placed on the institution and the means by which the stipulations may be removed.