

Becoming An Accrediting
Organization

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The U.S. Secretary of Education is required by law to publish a list of nationally recognized accrediting organizations and agencies. The Office only evaluates those who have applied for this recognition.

Organizations, thus accredited, have no legal control or authority over educational institutions or programs. They merely promulgate standards of quality or criteria of institutional excellence and approve or renew membership of those institutions that apply for and meet their accreditation standards or criteria. An organization must have two years' experience as an accrediting agency before it can apply for recognition as an accrediting organization.

Assessing an accrediting organization which seeks to evaluate post-secondary programs is under the jurisdiction of the Accrediting Agency Evaluation Unit, in the Office of Postsecondary Education, and it performs the following basic functions:

1. Conducts a continuous review of standards, policies, procedures, and issues relative to accreditation generally;
2. Administers the process whereby accrediting agencies secure initial and renewed recognition by the Secretary of Education;
3. Serves as the US Department of Education's Liaison with accrediting agencies;
4. Provides consultative services to institutions, associations, state agencies, other federal agencies, and the US Congress regarding accreditation;
5. Interprets and disseminates policy relative to accreditation issues in the case of all appropriate programs administered by the Department of Education;

6. Conducts and stimulates appropriate research; and
7. Provides support for the Secretary of Education's National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity.

Federal Register 34 CFR Part 602, Subpart B, sets forth the way in which accrediting agencies desiring recognition by the Secretary of Education must contact the Unit for information on the basic processes and an application form and then formally apply for and demonstrate their compliance with the "Criteria for Secretarial Recognition, including (34 CFR Part 602, Subpart C):

- A statement of the organization's requested scope of recognition
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- Proof of the agency's compliance with the criteria for recognition
- Supporting documentation

Application process begins with Accrediting Agency Evaluation, Accreditation Division, US Department of Education, 1990 K Street, NW, #8065, Washington, DC 20006-8509, 202-219-7011.

An application for initial recognition or renewal of recognition:

1. Narrative statement, with supporting documentation
2. Criterion-by-criterion basis
3. Agency compliance with Criteria for Recognition
4. Controls over conflict of interest or appearance of conflicts of interest by board members, commissioners, evaluation team members, consultants, administrative staff, other agency representatives, with policy documents attached, as well as minutes for meetings in which board member with conflict abstained from voting

5. Per Sector 602.21, an agency must maintain a systematic program of review demonstrating its standards are adequate to evaluate the quality of the education or training provided and relevant to the education or training needs of students
6. Policy statements pertaining to its review program for validating and updating its standards, surveys and results of those surveys, the constituencies needed to establish that program of comprehensive review, occurs at regular and reasonable intervals, on an ongoing basis, examines each of the agency's standards and the standards as a whole; and involves all of the agency's relevant constituencies in the review, affording them a meaningful opportunity to provide input
7. Show requisite procedures in place for timely changing its standards in response to results of review
8. Additional support documentation:
 - Accreditation standards and procedures
 - Policies and procedures
 - Most recent externally audited financial statement
 - Published lists of accredited schools or programs
 - Self-study guidelines
 - Guidance and training materials for visiting team members
 - Sample completed self-study reports
 - Sample site visit reports
 - Sample institution responses to site visit reports
 - Submit a list of 2 – 3 scheduled site visits and decision meetings
 - Sample minutes of decision meetings

- A list of all complaints received by the agency against an accredited program during the six-month period immediately preceding the agency's submission of its application
- Agency's constitution and by-laws
- All at least six months before consideration by the NACIQI
- Department staff may observe at least one of the agency's site visits and decision meetings

An agency or organization does not have to seek recognition before it begins to accredit institutions or programs. If it wants to receive the Department's recognition, however, it must demonstrate its reliability and the quality of the institutions it accredits. An agency that applies for recognition is invited to make an oral presentation before the Committee.

Renewal notices are sent to agencies one year before their recognition as an accrediting agency will expire, after five years. The renewal application is much like the original application process.

Sources:

Federal Register, 34 CFR Part 602

www2.ed.gov/admins