

Provision of Public Information by Specialized and Professional Accreditors: Answering Calls for Transparency

This paper articulates ASPA's position on the provision of public information by specialized and professional accrediting agencies. The use of the term "public information," as opposed to the more popular term "transparency," indicates a specific focus on policy issues relating to meaningful and useful information provided by accreditors to a variety of stakeholders.

Ensuring that meaningful information is available serves the public interest and is an important accountability function. When accomplished in a thoughtful manner, this function maintains trust with programs and allows candor about areas needing improvement, as well as recognition of those improvements.

Accreditors and programs under review cooperate to define their publics.

Stakeholders with an interest in professional and specialized accreditation (i.e., the public) include, at least, the following:

- prospective and currently enrolled students;
- members of the profession;
- faculty, administrators and professionals involved in developing and providing the field's education and training;
- consumers of the professional service, employers and other individuals affected by the content and level of education and training in a given profession; and
- legislators and regulators involved in decisions relating to certification, licensure and eligibility to practice in a given profession.

Providing objective information about accreditation contributes to informed decision making by stakeholders and allows accredited programs to distinguish themselves in ways that may be important to them.

All specialized and professional accreditors publish final accreditation decisions.

A status of "accredited" means that a program meets minimum quality standards in an area of study or a field of practice. Specialized and professional accreditors ensure that students in educational programs receive an education consistent with accepted standards in their respective fields or disciplines. A specialized accreditor's function includes detailed examination and validation of programs' performance against field-specific standards and communication to stakeholders about whether those standards have been met. This is indicated by a determination of "accredited." In this way, students are assisted in selecting a quality educational program and non-student stakeholders can verify that professionals have received adequate education and training.

There is a common, long-standing expectation in the accreditation community that accreditation status, accreditation terms and schedules for subsequent reviews, and adverse actions, such as the revocation of accreditation, are published and widely available. Agencies vary in the level of specificity provided, consistent with the principles of diversity discussed below.

Specialized accreditors work with their stakeholders to identify public information needs and to define meaningful indicators of quality.

Specialized accreditation is a deep examination of a specific program area or discipline by recognized faculty and practitioner experts in that field. In contrast, institutional accreditation reviews quality from the perspective of the institution as a whole; this may involve a broad look across specialized and professional program areas but is not a substitute for a review using discipline-specific standards. These distinctions are important because measures of quality that make sense for one field of practice will often not be useful or meaningful for another. Quality indicators of interest to an aspiring physician may not be the same quality indicators of interest to an aspiring dancer. Defining a common approach for public information across specialized accreditors, or among specialized and institutional accreditors, does a disservice to professions and the public. It is important for specialized accreditors to engage their communities of interest to identify the most meaningful indicators of quality and to determine how best to provide those to the public in a useful way.

Traditionally, specialized accreditors have shared information with their respective stakeholders in ways that serve the public interest. These ways vary because fields and professions vary. ASPA members represent approximately 80 unique professional fields, from construction to religious studies and from midwifery to funeral service direction. This diversity confirms the need for different types, amounts, and presentations of information. Dialogue and deliberation among stakeholders inform agency-specific policies that address the various information needs of students and other stakeholders.

Accreditors balance the need for public information with the interests of stakeholders, including programs under review.

There is often value in providing different types and amounts of information to different stakeholders depending on their functions, needs, interests, and responsibilities. Information might be tailored for clarity while avoiding extraneous or irrelevant information for some stakeholders. This process generates trust and openness between the accreditor and the program under review. Trust is essential because specialized and professional accreditation does far more than basic quality assurance. For most institutions already holding accreditation, accreditation's fundamental value lies in its ability to foster continuous quality improvement. Continuous improvement efforts are institution-specific and involve identification of program aspects which meet standards, but have the potential to reach even higher levels of quality—and working with the programs to improve those aspects to better serve students and the public.

Accreditation information, no matter how much or how widely distributed, is not designed to provide rankings or individual guarantees to any stakeholder.

Despite the human tendency to want to simplify all information to quantitative indicators which can be measured and compared, many aspects of concern to students and the public

cannot be measured in this way. An accredited status means that the program has been judged to meet threshold standards. Threshold standards are not low standards but rather the standards necessary to obtain a specific credential such as occupational therapist, or a designation such as accreditation as a program that grants a degree in engineering. Threshold standards reflect the consensus of experts and are continuously reviewed and revised as disciplines and fields evolve. Many individuals and institutions exceed threshold standards, which is one goal of the continuous improvement process mentioned in the previous section.

What accreditation information cannot provide is an assessment of the “best” program for a prospective student, the “best” employee for a certain employer, or the “best” practitioner for a potential consumer. It cannot provide information about a program that allows a student to predict his or her individual performance in that program, or in a profession.

Recognizing that many factors contribute to student and other stakeholder outcomes is basic to thoughtful and prudent use of accreditation information. For example, two accredited programs in the same discipline may emphasize different aspects of the discipline (e.g., urban or rural, research or practice). With such differences among programs and individuals, rankings can be misleading as often as they are helpful. The fine distinctions some individual stakeholders want are usually available only through careful comprehensive study and analysis by those stakeholders themselves.

Ensuring public access to meaningful information can be a balancing act. Accreditors’ provision of public information fulfills an important accountability function that must also be structured to maintain trust with programs, allowing them to be candid about areas in which they need to improve and recognizing those improvements. Thoughtful, ongoing discussion and examination among stakeholders within accredited fields, is an optimal method for defining the scope and content of public information that best serves the public interest.