

Collaborative Evaluations by Regional and Specialized Accrediting Agencies

Guidelines and Procedures

(Endorsed by ASPA: September 8, 1997)

August 1, 1997, Proposal:

This document is a proposal by a national task force of representatives of regional and specialized accreditors for a process to facilitate and coordinate the accreditation review processes of specialized and regional accreditors.

An institution and each of its accrediting agencies would elect whether to participate in the process. Each institution, together with its regional accreditor and one or more of its specialized accreditors, would cooperate in a single collaborative process that would involve one self-study, one team visit, and one visiting team report, with variations as described in the document.

Accrediting agencies and institutional representatives are invited to submit comments.

The task force encourages pilot projects with volunteer institutions and accrediting agencies based on this working document.

Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Section 1: Purpose

Section 2: Definition

Section 3: Approach

Section 4: Responsibilities of the Accredited Institution

Section 5: Responsibilities of the Accrediting Agencies

Section 6: Institutional Self-Study and Collaboration

Section 7: Issues to be Agreed Upon by Accrediting Agencies and Institution

Section 8: The Evaluation Team Report and Collaborative Evaluation Visits

Section 9: Actions Following Collaborative Team Visits

Section 10: Training and Evaluation of Agency Representatives

Section 11: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Collaborative Activities

Appendix A: [ASPA Code of Good Practice](#)

Acknowledgments

The following document is the product of a national task force jointly created under the auspices of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education and the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors. The document reflects the true spirit of cooperation between two sectors of accreditation and many hours of work by representatives of both sectors.

Task Force Members

Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors

Cynthia A. Davenport, Executive Director

Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programs and Chair, Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors

Carol L. Bobby, Executive Director

Council for Higher Education Accreditation

Larry A. Braskamp, Director

Council on Podiatric Medical Evaluation

Jay Levrio, Director

Joint Review Committee on Education in Radiologic Technology

Marilyn Fay, Executive Director

Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Higher Education

Arturo U. Iriarte (Task Force Chair), Executive Associate Director

National Association of Schools of Theatre, Art and Design

Karen P. Moynahan, Associate Director

New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education

Peggy Maki, Associate Director

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education

Stephen D. Spanghel, Associate Director

Collaborative Evaluations by Regional and Specialized Accrediting Agencies: Guidelines and Procedures

Collaborative Evaluations by Regional and Specialized Accrediting Agencies: Guidelines and Procedures is the product of a national task force. In the true sense of the word this effort has been a collaborative venture. It has been an opportunity to work together and cooperate in a joint intellectual effort. It is the word that embodies the spirit in which these guidelines and procedures were developed, since it describes the manner in which the nine individuals on the task force worked together over a six month period to create the document you are about to read.

The document was written with two primary audiences in mind? representatives from accrediting agencies and representatives from institutions. It is meant to be used as a resource that will motivate institutions to consider the potential benefits of requesting that collaborative evaluations be conducted by regional and specialized agencies. Likewise, it is meant to serve as a resource guide for accrediting agencies interested in embarking on a cooperative endeavor with another agency. With both of these audiences in mind, the document was written to generically describe the types of issues that should be considered and discussed by agency and institutional representatives prior to scheduling a collaborative visit and to broadly outline some of the practices that have worked successfully in the past.

The task force members recognize that this document does not cover all of the questions or concerns that may arise once a decision to host a collaborative visit has been extended from an institution to its accrediting agencies. For instance, it does not indicate whether or not there is an optimum number of agencies that should be invited to collaborate at one time. It also does not set optimum timelines for planning, visits, and actions to occur. In other words, it was not written to be a trouble-shooting guide. It was, however, written to serve as a catalyst for cooperation among accrediting agencies and for reduction of duplicative efforts by institutions. It is the hope of the task force that all accrediting agencies who read this document will be encouraged to formally adopt it as a basic guideline that establishes the protocol for collaborative evaluation procedures

Comments on this document may be forwarded to either of the following accrediting agencies:

Middle States Commission on Higher Education

3624 Market Street

Philadelphia, PA 19104

(215) 662-5606

Executive Director: Jean Avnet Morse

Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors

1020 W. Byron Street, Suite 8G

Chicago, IL 60613-2987

(773) 525-2160

Executive Director: Cynthia A. Davenport

Section 1: Purpose

Institutions of higher education may elect to benefit from coordinating the accreditation reviews of various specialized and regional agencies. This document outlines processes to facilitate such collaborative evaluations. Institutions may request that their accrediting agencies work together with the institution to conduct an evaluation process that produces one self-study document, one on-site evaluation team, and one coordinated evaluation report. This information would be used by

each accreditation agency during its decision-making process.

The purpose of collaborative evaluation is to provide better service to institutions by:

- conserving institutional resources,
- eliminating duplicative procedures by preparing one set of review materials for more than one agency's review,
- providing the evaluative expertise of more than one accrediting agency,
- providing a setting for the institution to initiate a consultative discussion about resource allocation if the institution perceives any conflict or competing demands between recommendations made by participating accrediting agencies,
- enabling institutions to improve their planning processes by integrating the various perspectives represented by the different accrediting agencies in a single, coordinated self-study process and team visit, and
- ensuring that institutional and specialized accreditation benefits students and graduates by strengthening each process through cooperation and coordination.

In the early stages of implementation, the process of collaborative review will develop most efficiently with two collaborating accreditation partners. Collaboration of more than two agencies is possible. This process will apply only to accredited institutions and not to those seeking candidacy for accreditation or initial accreditation.

The host institution must satisfy each agency's requirements and procedures in a single self-study submitted to both the regional and specialized accrediting agencies. The agencies may provide procedural flexibilities to each institution on a case-by-case basis.

Section 2: Definition

Collaborative evaluation is defined as a cooperative accreditation review process conducted jointly by regional and specialized accrediting agencies at the invitation of an accredited institution. The collaborative evaluation process attempts to ensure that the needs of the institution, regional accreditation, and specialized accreditation are well served in the completion of an institutional self-study and the conduct of an on-site evaluation. The outcomes of the collaborative evaluation process inform the participating accrediting agencies and the public of significant strengths and weaknesses of an institution and its programs.

Section 3: Approach

Note: Throughout this document, the term "recommendation" identifies issues which must be addressed by the institution in order to comply with agency standards.

The participating regional and specialized accrediting agencies will identify a single accreditation team composed of representatives from the agencies for the on-site collaborative evaluation. The institution must satisfy each agency's educational standards and requirements in a manner

acceptable to the accrediting agency.

The institution will submit a proposed outline for the format of its self-study report to each agency as soon as possible to produce early agreement on the format and content of the single document. Thereafter, arrangements for the on-site visit will be coordinated by a staff person from each of the cooperating accrediting bodies. Institutions agree to appoint a liaison who will serve as the primary contact with the staff persons throughout the self-study process and visit.

The composition of the team for collaborative visits usually will include a balance of representatives from the accrediting bodies. The team will be selected early in the process, and will be organized according to the needs and nature of the self-study of each institution. The team will be led by a single chair, selected by consensus of the agencies and in consultation with the institution. The situation of each institution and the identity of the participating accrediting agencies will determine the choice of a chair, as described later in this document.

The on-site evaluation will follow the procedures which are described later in this document. Modifications to accommodate agency representatives may be instituted if approved by the team leader. Members of the collaborative team will work together in collecting information, interviewing personnel, and reviewing the facilities. Team members representing each agency will be assigned to areas of review that best correlate with that agency's standards and criteria. The agenda and schedule for the visit should be structured to accommodate the needs of all of the participating agencies, as well as those of the institution.

The collaborative team will develop a first draft of the team report prior to its departure from the institution. This draft will provide information about the institution and programs in a manner that generally meets the needs of all agencies involved in the visit. Team findings for institutional and programmatic improvement will be agreed upon and included in the report. The representatives of each agency may file separate addenda to the collaborative report in order to provide information that may be specific to the needs of their respective agencies. A single team evaluation report along with any separate addenda will be used by agencies in their separate decision making processes. Responsibility for preparing and/ or assigning the preparation of the evaluation report rests with the team chairperson, and with the coordinators representing the other agencies with respect to non-joint sections that affect only their agency.

Separate recommendations for accreditation action from each agency will be contained in the final report, but it is anticipated that the joint nature of the process will promote agreement among the agencies on recommended accreditation actions, especially in areas of joint concern such as general education. Recommendations in the report will be linked to each agency's standards and will thus refer to specific deficiencies in the education provided to students. At the request of the institution, the members of the collaborative team will discuss the impact of the recommendations in the report on the institution's resources.

Exit summations or interviews should include discussion of the findings of the entire team. If one of the accrediting agency's policies permits or requires its representatives to inform the institution of its recommendation for accreditation, then representatives of the other agency or agencies will clearly indicate that each accrediting body acts independently of one another in determining final accreditation actions, and therefore the disclosed recommendation does not bind any other agency.

**Throughout this document, the term "recommendation" identifies issues which must be addressed by the institution in*

Section 4: Responsibilities of the Accredited Institution

The decision to participate in a collaborative evaluation and team visit is the prerogative of the institution. The decision should be based upon careful consideration of the institution's specific situation and its objectives for the evaluation in question. Staff from both the regional and specialized accrediting agencies are available for consultation. Such consultation should help the institution to determine whether a collaborative evaluation would be appropriate and to assist in reviewing the structure of the evaluation process. After a decision has been reached, the chief executive officer must take the initiative to contact formally the accrediting agencies to be involved in the evaluation. The chief executive officer may find it necessary to request that one or more of the participating accrediting agencies adjust its respective evaluation cycle in order to facilitate a collaborative evaluation .

Section 5: Responsibilities of the Accrediting Agencies

Accrediting agencies will guide the institution taking advantage of the collaborative process to follow a self-study process that addresses the future of the institution from the multiple perspectives represented by the different accrediting agencies

Upon notification by the chief executive officer that the institution has chosen the collaborative evaluation and team visit, the accrediting agencies' staffs will coordinate their re-evaluation schedules to make the adjustments that are appropriate and necessary in order to implement the process. The institution and the participating accrediting agencies will together select the agency that will serve as the principal coordinating agency.

Communication must be maintained by all parties involved in the collaboration. The principal coordinating agency will serve as the coordinator throughout the process and will serve as a clearinghouse for all procedural paperwork regarding the collaborative evaluation visit.

Team composition and leadership will be decided by the accrediting agencies and will include consultation with the institution. A single peer reviewer may represent overlapping interests, such as financial reviewers. In some situations, the agencies and the institution may select co-chairs who will jointly and cooperatively discharge the responsibilities of the chair.

Section 6: Institutional Self-Study and Collaboration

A single self-study report will be prepared by the institution. The self-study will follow a model or approach which satisfies the needs of the institution and the accrediting agency. Although each agency is governed by its own guidelines for the process and content of the self-study, the agencies will exercise the flexibility inherent in the process in order to allow the institution to

produce one document. It remains the institution's responsibility to produce a self-study report that best represents its own unique situation in terms of its mission and resources, strengths and concerns, and plans for the future. Each accrediting agency, however, may require additional documentation and materials according to its policies and procedures to supplement the self-study report. The agencies participating in this process agree to use joint materials whenever possible.

The self-study may take a variety of forms, including the following:

- one self-study that satisfies the requirements of all participating accrediting agencies
- core self-study supplemented by sections addressing specific questions of the institution or of one or more of the accrediting agencies
- a non-traditional alternative to the usual "comprehensive" self-study, such as those permitted by some accreditors for institutions with unique needs or on-going institutional review processes that already include self-study and planning.

Section 7: Issues to be Agreed Upon by Accrediting Agencies and Institution

When a regional and specialized accrediting agency agree to conduct a collaborative evaluation visit, there are a number of issues that must be agreed upon in advance. The following list should stimulate thinking about such issues, but should not be considered exhaustive; either an agency and/or the institution may propose additional issues for advance agreement:

- adherence to a code of good practice (for example, see Appendix A);
- the calendar of events (e.g., when staff visits might occur, when the final self-study report is to be mailed to team members, date of the site visit, etc);
- the size of the team, the background and experience of the chair, and the nature of its membership (especially the competencies or academic specialities to be represented);
- the structure of the institution's self-study process, and the scope of involvement by institutional stakeholders in that process;
- the structure, organization, length, and style of the self-study report prepared by the institution;
- the scope and format of materials (e.g., catalogs, handbooks, audits, data compilations) the institution sends to evaluation team members along with the self-study report, or materials available on-site;
- evaluation responsibilities for the collaborative team representing each accrediting agency;
- the protocol to be followed in conducting the exit report with representatives of the institution, and the range of specific matters to be covered at that gathering;
- the structure, organization, length, and style of the evaluation report prepared by the site visit team;
- the cost to the institution for the visit, and the methods to be followed for billing the institution and reimbursing team members;
- process to be followed by each agency after the visit, the timetable for these processes and the degree to which each agrees to report its processes and action to the institution;
- any procedure to be used for reviewing or evaluating the effectiveness of the evaluation and site visit.

Section 8: The Evaluation Team Report and Collaborative Evaluation Visits

A single report directed to the accrediting agencies will be prepared by the collaborative visiting team. The basic responsibility for preparing the evaluation report is vested with the team chair, who will draft a report as compatible as possible with the requirements of the accrediting agencies involved in the collaboration. Where necessary to meet broader institutional or specific professional concerns, additional sections may be appended by one of the accrediting agencies. This supplementary material will ordinarily be prepared by those team members who represent the agency citing the specific concern. The evaluation team chair and individual team members shall ensure that the report covers the items required by each accrediting agency.

Separate recommendations on accreditation for each agency will be listed on separate pages and attached to the end of the team report.

Section 9: Actions Following Collaborative Team Visits

Actions on accreditation will be shared among the respective agencies for information only. As noted earlier, each agency will reach an independent decision regarding reaffirmation of accreditation. In instances involving serious divergences among the accreditation actions recommended by each agency, full inter-staff discussion will precede the meeting of groups and efforts will be made to identify reasons and resolve differences.

Each agency will receive copies of all correspondence.

As each agency is free to make its own recommendations regarding accreditation action, so it is also free to require its normal follow-up activities during the period for which accreditation is granted or renewed. Each agency will follow its own reporting procedures.

Section 10: Training and Education of Agency Representatives

There is general agreement among participating accreditors regarding the overall purposes and values for accreditation, but the unique characteristics of each become apparent as collaborative efforts occur in which the standards and procedures of different agencies are intermingled. In the spirit of mutual cooperation, collaborating agencies must ensure that the policies of each are respected and allowed to be executed as fully as necessary. Agencies that participate in collaborative accreditation activities recognize the importance of informing members of their accrediting boards, commissions, and councils, as well as members of their evaluation teams, of the role, purpose, and value of collaborative visits. When possible and feasible, each agency will inform its representatives about any unique aspects of its relationships with other accrediting agencies. Also, agency representatives need to become familiar with the policies in this document.

Section 11: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Collaborative Activities

The efforts of collaborative evaluations among accrediting agencies should not only produce appropriate and effective results, but they also should instill confidence in the process for enabling future collaboration. In order to ensure the continued success of collaborative activities among accrediting agencies, the agencies will identify a mutually acceptable process to review the effectiveness of collaborative evaluations. Such review may take into consideration an assessment of the pre-evaluation arrangements and organization for the on-site visits, conduct of the overall evaluation process including performance of the team, degree and level of cooperation of team members, clarity with which policies of the collaborating agencies are articulated, and effects on the institution. The agencies should seek feedback from the institution and from one another about the collaborative evaluation process, and they should use this information to improve the process for future collaborative activities.