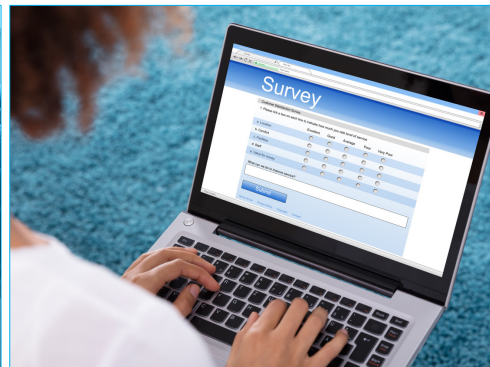


# Standards Review

## Programmatic Accreditation Practices

May 2021

Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors



## Standards Review - Programmatic Accreditation Practices

## About this report

This report is based on a survey to members of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors on their review practices of standards for educational quality for programs at colleges and universities.

### This report's contributors accredit programs in these professions and fields:

- Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine
- Advanced Cardiovascular Sonography
- Anesthesia Technology
- Anesthesiologist Assistant
- Art and Design
- Art Therapy
- Assistive Technology
- Athletic Training
- Audiology
- Business
- Cardiovascular Technology
- Chiropractic Medicine
- Clinical Laboratory Sciences
- Clinical Research Professional
- Construction
- Counseling
- Credibility Assessment
- Cytotechnology
- Dance
- Dentistry
- Diagnostic Medical Sonography
- Early Childhood Teacher
- Emergency Medical Services – Paramedic
- English Language Programs
- Exercise Physiology
- Exercise Science
- Forensic Science
- Funeral Service
- Genetic Counseling
- Health Education
- Health Informatics/Information Management
- Healthcare Management
- Homeopathy
- Interpreter Education
- Intraoperative Neurophysiologic Monitoring
- Kinesiotherapy
- Lactation Consultant
- Landscape Architecture
- Library/Information Studies
- Marriage and Family Therapy
- Medical Assistant
- Medical Education
- Medical Illustrator
- Medical Scribe Specialist
- Montessori Teacher
- Midwifery
- Music
- Naturopathy
- Neurodiagnostic Technology
- Nuclear Medicine Technology
- Nursing
- Nurse Anesthesia
- Nutrition and Dietetics
- Occupational Therapy
- Orthoptics
- Osteopathic Medicine
- Orthotics and Prosthetics
- Perfusion
- Personal Fitness Training
- Pharmacy
- Physical Therapy
- Physician Assistant
- Podiatric Medicine
- Polysomnographic Technology
- Project Management
- Public Health
- Public Policy, Affairs and Administration
- Psychology
- Recreational Therapy
- Rehabilitation/Disability Studies
- Respiratory Care
- Specialist in Blood Banking Technology/Transfusion Medicine
- Speech-Language Pathology
- Surgical Assistant
- Surgical Technologist
- Theatre
- Urban Planning
- Veterinary Medicine

## Specialized and professional accreditors

### set quality standards

for programs at colleges and universities so that students achieve the necessary competencies for safe and effective practice in a variety of professions. These quality requirements are developed and established through an inclusive process with input from a broad range of stakeholders in their respective disciplines and professions. Peers and subject matter experts contribute to all aspects of the accreditation process and are critical to ensure that students attain essential learning outcomes, with practice skills to meet the needs of today's workforce. In general, these experts include practitioners, employers, educators and members of professional associations and other communities of interest.

Professions advance and evolve through academic and field research, practitioner experience, and technological developments. To ensure that accreditation standards reflect state-of-the-art practice, accreditors review and update their standards on a periodic basis to consider changes in education delivery methods and competency requirements for entry into practice for the given profession or field of study.

This report compiles data obtained in a survey completed by fifty-two member agencies of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) on the practices that these accreditors employ to review and revise standards for quality in educational programs at colleges and universities.

## ASPA member accreditors employ an open

### review process

with public calls for comment to a broad base of communities of interest. Accreditors provide rationales for proposed revisions to standards. Several iterations of revisions will go out for comment before approval and implementation, reflecting the serious consideration of the input received and the efforts to gain consensus from communities of interest.

**Educational quality standards are reviewed on a regular basis.** On average, ASPA member agencies review their standards on a 5-year cycle. Accreditors monitor their standards on a continual basis and will implement a new or revised standard as the need arises — in response to changing needs in the field or discipline or to address a standard identified to require revision through the accreditor's internal evaluation activities.

Overall, it is apparent that specialized and professional accreditors regularly review and revise standards for educational quality to reflect industry standards so that accredited programs prepare students for safe and effective practice in their chosen profession or field of study.

## Report at a glance

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*The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) is a membership organization that communicates the value of specialized and professional higher education accreditation and promotes quality by facilitating discussion among and providing educational opportunities for programmatic accreditors.*

*ASPA member accreditors represent more than 100 different disciplines, from construction to nursing and architecture to occupational therapy.*

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## Introduction

Specialized<sup>1</sup> and professional accreditors set standards<sup>2</sup> that define essential elements for the educational quality of programs at colleges and universities for various professions. These programs must provide an environment that supports the achievement of student learning outcomes.

Accreditation standards and processes are developed collaboratively with input from subject matter experts in the profession, including practitioners, employers and industry representatives, educators, and representatives from professional associations and other communities of interest. Programmatic accreditors focus on educational standards that protect the public interest by ensuring that students who complete programs are safe and competent practitioners in their chosen professions or fields of study.

In early 2021, the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) surveyed its members to determine how accreditors review their standards. Overall, ASPA members review their standards on a regular basis and employ an open process with public calls for comment. As well, respondents noted that the complexity and length of time of the review process, and degree of involvement of stakeholders could vary based on the type of the revisions to standards:

- Minor revisions that do not significantly impact a program's ability to demonstrate compliance or change the standard's intent: editorial changes to clarify language, correct errors, or otherwise improve the standards. In these instances, reviews and revisions may be accomplished through a shorter and less involved process.
- Major revisions or substantive changes that alter the original intent of the standard or that have a significant impact on a program's ability to demonstrate compliance or implement the standard. For these cases, standards review would be more complex and occur over longer time periods.

## Establishing the Standards Review Process

For most accreditors, the agency's decision-making body<sup>3</sup> ultimately approves the process for standards review. The process may be specified in established policy and procedure (88% of respondents) or it may be determined at the time of the decision to review standards with input to varying degrees from different entities. For instance, a designated review committee (31% of respondents) or staff members (35% of respondents) of the agency may propose a process and timeline for standards review which is then approved by the decision-making body. For a few agencies, stakeholders or a consultant provide input into how and when standards review is to be performed.

## Components of Accreditation Standards Review

Whether the agency has formal standing policies and procedures in place or not, survey respondents identified the following elements of the process employed to review and revise standards:

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "specialized," "professional" and "programmatic" are used synonymously in this report.

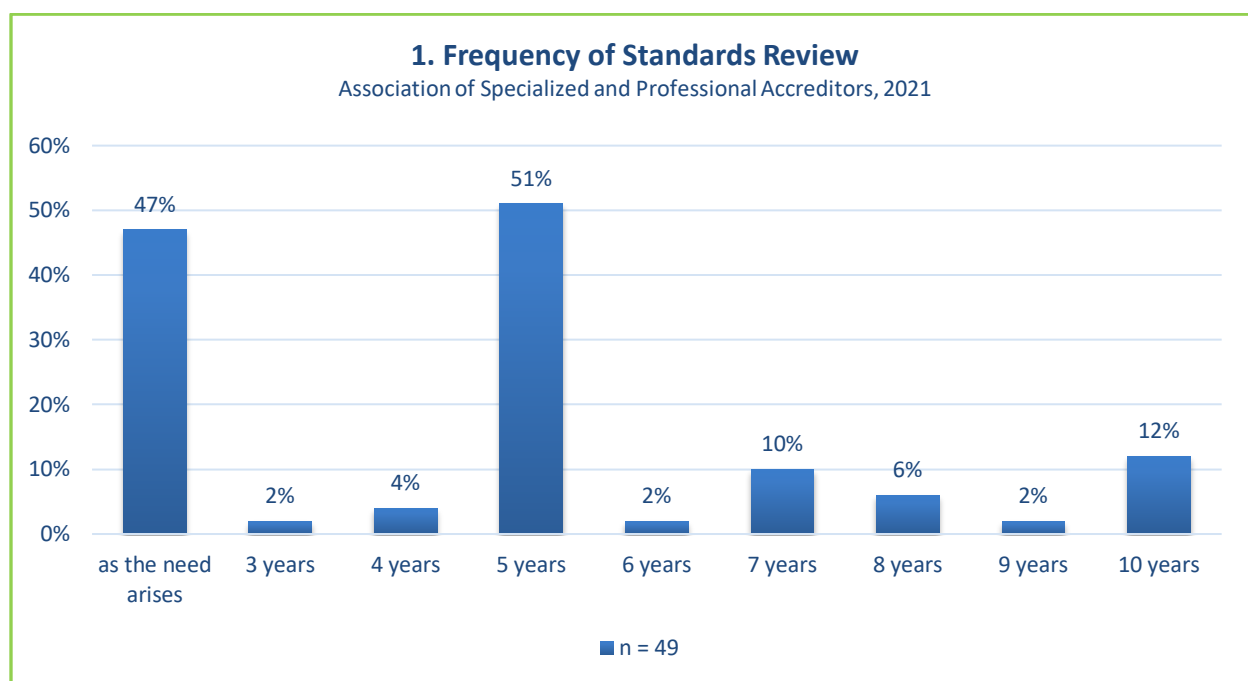
<sup>2</sup> The term "standard" is used generically in this document. Accreditors may use other terms such as "evaluative criteria" to denote the requirements for programs to demonstrate quality.

<sup>3</sup> An accreditor's decision-making body is typically composed of peers and content experts in the profession (i.e., practitioners, educators, members of professional associations, employers) as well as members of the public.

- Entities responsible for implementing the review process.
- Frequency of standards review.
- Entities approached to provide input on standards.
- Modalities for collection/receipt of input on standards.
- Number of and timeframes for comment periods.
- Process and entities responsible for approving new and revised standards.
- Timeframes for accredited programs to come into compliance with new or revised standards.
- Processes for ongoing reviews of standards and reviews between regular review cycles.

### Frequency of Standards Review

Respondents review their full set of standards in cycles that are between 3 and 10 years, with 51% at the 5-year mark. Agencies will also revise a subset of their standards as needed — when there have been changes in professional practice requirements, or standards have been identified to require changes through monitoring of program compliance, or recognition<sup>4</sup> requirements for accreditors have changed — and waiting to the next cycle is not reasonable. Figure 1 demonstrates the frequency of standards review.



With regards to the frequency of their review of standards, respondents' comments included:

- A review of related policies and procedures is included in the standards review process (39%).
- Specific standards may be reviewed outside of the regular cycle if warranted (86%).

<sup>4</sup> Some accreditors undergo an external review in order to be “recognized” as guarantors of educational quality by either the US Secretary of Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

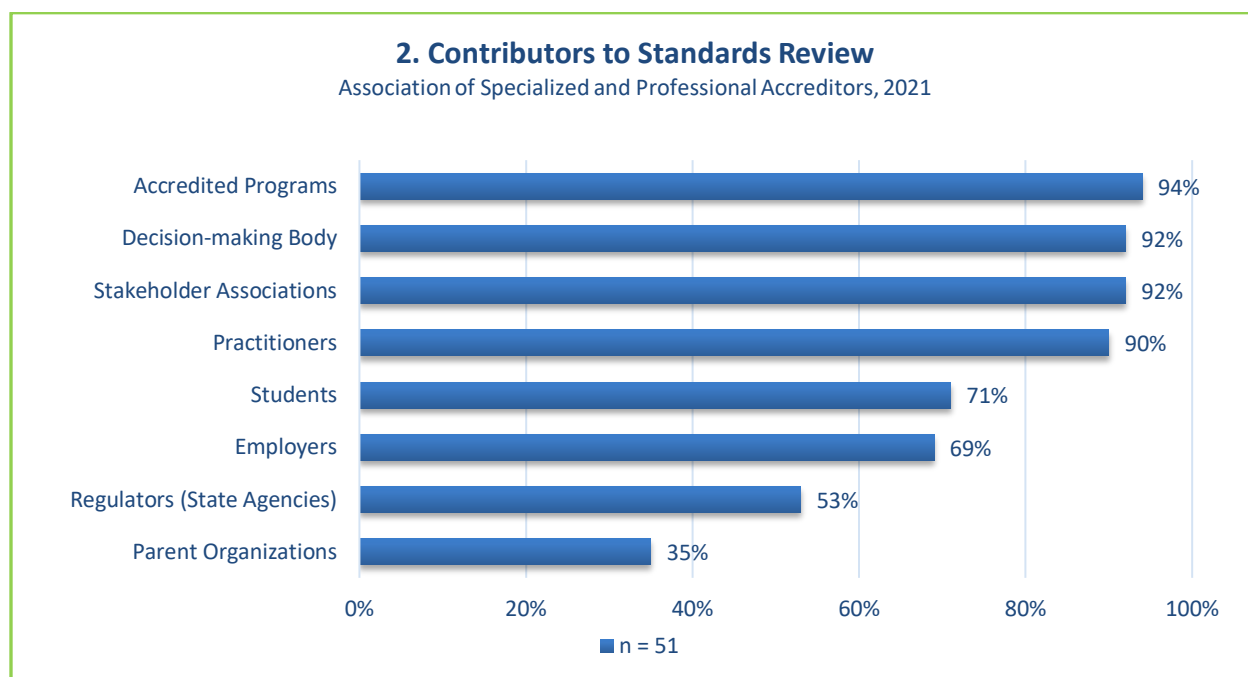
- Subgroups of the full set of standards are reviewed on shorter cycles (sometimes annually) than the full set of standards (33%).
- Interpretive guidance that elucidates and operationally defines accreditation standards to assist program compliance is often updated more frequently than the actual standards, sometimes as frequently as annually.
- Recognition requirements may impact the timing of standards review.

### Use of Evidence in Standards Review

Respondents noted that the review process was informed to varying degrees by the agency's previous experience with standards review, a consultant with standards review expertise, and relevant research. Research data included: white papers and peer-reviewed articles on trends in evaluation, practice, and education in the profession; data collected from accredited programs (e.g., accreditor evaluation of standard performance such as validity, reliability, and issues with compliance); licensure and certification statistics; and data from pertinent surveys conducted by related professional organizations.

### Contributors to Accreditation Standards Review

Programmatic accreditors are characterized by the inclusive nature in which they develop and establish standards with input from a broad range of stakeholders in their respective professions. Figure 2 identifies the communities of interest that are approached for input when accreditors review their standards.



Many respondents commented that their process was a public affair, and that feedback was welcome from any interested source including but not limited to individual members of the public and organizations, accreditation staff and peer reviewers/site visitors. Input from accredited programs could include comments from administrators, faculty, staff, and students.



Some respondents noted that if major revisions were needed, input would be requested from broader communities of interest, whereas minor revisions may have comments solicited only from accredited programs.

### **How Information is Provided to Solicit Input for Standards Review**

Depending on the nature of the review, the current standards may be provided for general comment, or proposed changes may be offered in redline. Potential or needed revisions presented in redline may have been identified through:

- input from site visitors/peer reviewers,
- commentary from programs following a site visit,
- accreditor evaluation of standard performance (validity, reliability, issues with program compliance),
- revised requirements for the profession by licensure or credentialing bodies,
- revised recognition requirements, or
- commentary received from the public or any other source.

Fifty-six percent of respondents indicated that they provide their current standards for comment, 44% distribute proposed changes in redline, and several commented that both methods are used including general calls for feedback. Whenever possible, rationales for any proposed changes are included.

Some accreditors start the review process by gathering comments on the “clean” standards and then go back out for comment with redlined versions that have incorporated revisions based on the input received. One respondent noted that for its upcoming review, such significant changes are required that the initial presentation for comment will be the draft standards as a new document.

As noted in the section on establishing the review process, those responsible for drafting new or revised standards varies among agencies. This activity may be staff-led or staff-supported, conducted by a subset of the decision-making body or an appointed committee, or some combination thereof.

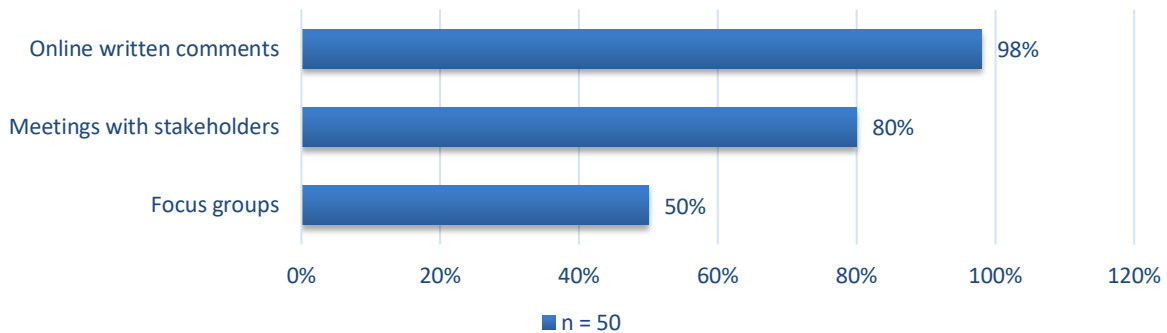
### **How Input for Standards Revision is Gathered**

Most accreditors issue a broad call for comment during their standards revision process. The methods used to solicit input includes postings on the agencies’ websites and blogs, messages to their stakeholder distribution lists, and announcements at related conferences and in publications. Many accreditors will include supporting documentation (see “Use of Evidence” section above) for the comment gathering process.

Figure 3 gives an indication of the various methods that accreditors employ to gather input during the standards review process.

### 3. How Input is Gathered for Standards Review

Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors, 2021



Online comments may be accepted through regular email, online surveys and sharing platforms. In-person or virtual meetings and focus groups may be held with stakeholders separately or in conjunction with national meetings and conferences of related associations. Most respondents (73%) collect both open-ended and forced response comments, 27% of respondents indicated that only open-ended responses are collected.

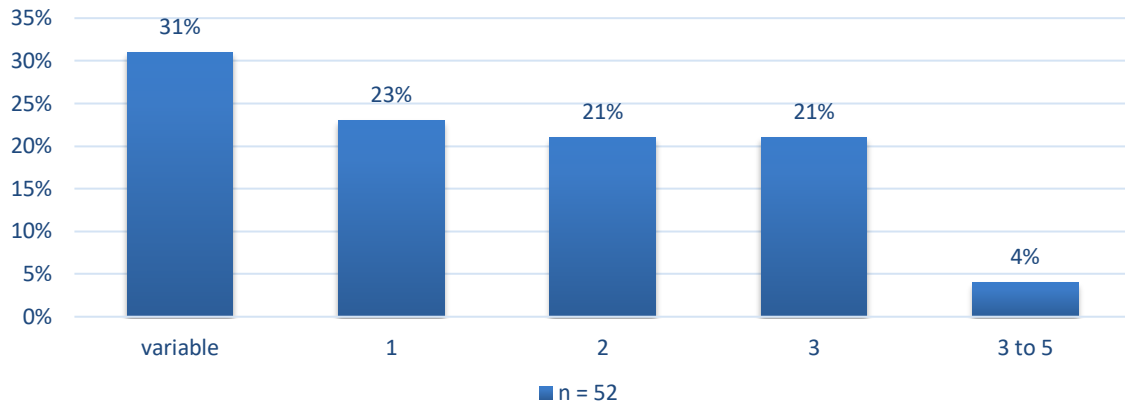
### Timeframes for Standards Review

Respondents indicated that the timeframe for planning, determining, and approving the review process could range from one month to two years – dependent on the magnitude and scope of the review. Most (83%) fell within the one month to one year range. For the collection of initial input and providing revisions for comment, 76% of respondents varied from one month to one year, and a small percentage took up to 3 years. The ranges are based on the nature of the comments received, the changes to the standards, and the number of iterations that go out for comment.

Figure 4 gives an indication of the number of times that proposed revisions are presented for feedback.

### 4. Iterations of Revisions for Comment

Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors, 2021

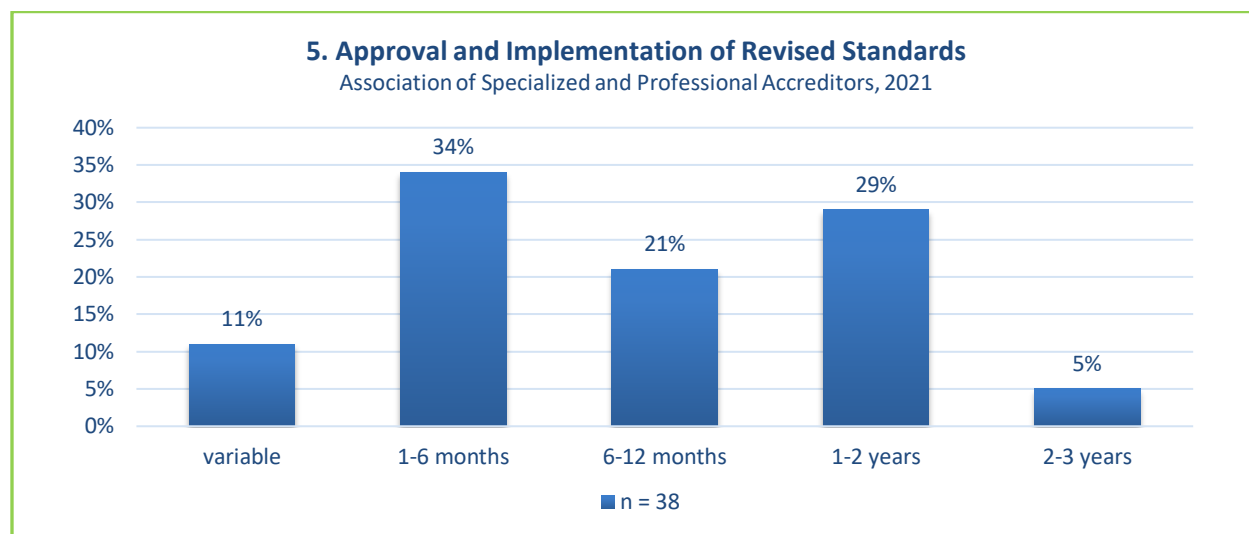




Several accreditors who indicated that the number of iterations going out for comment was “variable” commented that more iterations were generally needed for major or substantive revisions, allowing for dialog until the product was generally agreed upon by all involved.

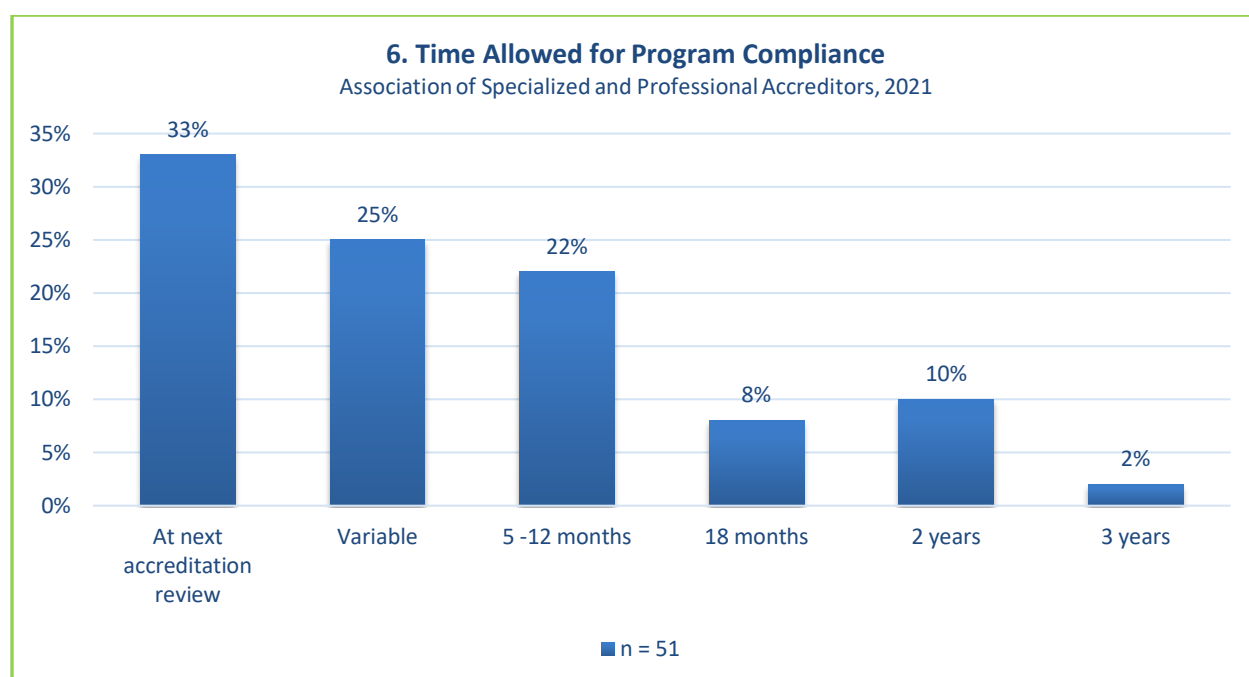
### Approval and Implementation of Revised Standards

Figure 5 provides an indication of the time ranges for approval and implementation of revised standards.



### Program Compliance with Revised Standards

Figure 6 indicates the time frames that respondents prescribe for programs to come into compliance with new or revised standards.



Most (67%) respondents indicated that accredited programs must come into compliance with new or revised standards within a determined period. Those indicating a variable timeframe for program compliance commented that the time allowed was dependent on the nature, significance, and complexity of revisions. Accreditors will determine the time based on a reasonable window, often with input about this from their accredited programs.

Accreditors will employ various means of communication to advise programs on timelines for compliance with new or revised standards and provide education and guidance on expected evidence to demonstrate such compliance.

### **Limitations of this Analysis**

The preceding survey findings are reported based on the wording of the survey questions. From the respondents' comments, it is evident that there is a broad array of practices, organizational structures, and usage of terminology across accreditors for diverse professions. With such diversity among accrediting agencies, it was challenging to construct all survey queries in a sufficiently generic fashion to guarantee equivalent interpretation by all participants.

### **Conclusion**

The business of specialized and professional accreditors is to set quality standards for programs at colleges and universities so that students who complete such programs are prepared to practice safely and effectively in their chosen profession. Stakeholders can be assured that as part of the accreditation enterprise, specialized and professional accreditors review and update their standards on a regular basis to reflect state-of-the-art practice for the given profession or field of study.