

Consistency in Decision Making

Programmatic Accreditation Practices

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Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors

Consistency in Decision Making - Programmatic Accreditation Practices

About this report

This report is based on a survey of members of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors on their practices related to ensuring that decisions about the accreditation status of programs and institutions are made in a consistent manner.

Contributors to this report accredit programs in these professions and fields:

- Acupuncture and Herbal Medicine
- Advanced Cardiovascular Sonography
- Anesthesia Technology
- Anesthesiologist Assistant
- Architecture
- Art and Design
- Art Therapy
- Assistive Technology
- Athletic Training
- Audiology
- Blood Banking Technology/ Transfusion Medicine
- Business
- Cardiovascular Technology
- Chiropractic
- Clinical Laboratory Sciences
- Clinical Pastoral Education
- 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
- Funeral Service
- Health Education
- Health Informatics/Information Management
- Healthcare Management
- Inclusive Rehabilitation Sciences
- Intraoperative Neurophysiologic Monitoring
- Kinesiotherapy
- Lactation Consultant
- Landscape Architecture
- Library/Information Studies
- Marriage and Family Therapy
- Medical Assistant
- Medical Education
- Medical Illustrator
- Midwifery
- Music
- Naturopathy
- Neurodiagnostic Technology
- Nuclear Medicine Technology
- Nursing
- Nurse Anesthesia
- Nurse Practitioner
- Nutrition and Dietetics
- Occupational Therapy
- Orthoptics
- Osteopathic Medicine
- Optometry
- Orthotics and Prosthetics
- Podiatrist
- Perfusion
- Personal Fitness Training
- Pharmacy
- Physical Therapy
- Physician Assistant
- Podiatric Medicine
- Polysomnographic Technology
- Project Management
- Public Health
- Public Policy, Affairs and Administration
- Psychology
- Rabbinical & Talmudic Studies
- Recreational Therapy
- Rehabilitation/Disability Studies
- Respiratory Care
- Social Work
- Speech-Language Pathology
- Surgical Assistant
- Surgical Technologist
- Theatre
- Urban Planning
- Veterinary Medicine

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Report at a glance

Specialized and professional accreditors

serve the public interest by working to ensure that higher education programs produce competent practitioners in many fields and disciplines. Programs at colleges and universities are reviewed against an established set of educational quality standards so that students achieve the necessary skills and learning outcomes for safe and effective practice in their chosen profession. These programs and institutions have an expectation that they will be judged by and held to accreditation standards in a fair and consistent manner. To achieve this end, accreditors have a range of practices in place to ensure consistency in the way that accreditation decisions are made.

This report compiles data obtained in a survey completed by fifty-one member agencies of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) on the measures they take to ensure that accreditation decisions are made in a consistent manner.

ASPA member accreditors train decision makers with a variety of materials to facilitate consistent decision making.

During training sessions, all respondents address the accreditation standards, policies and procedures for the accreditation process, and conflict of interest and recusal guidelines. More than 50% of respondents include examples of decision letters, site visit reports and program responses to those reports, self-study documents and decision-making guidelines.

A comprehensive set of documentation is reviewed prior to making an accreditation

decision. Accreditors review site visit reports and the program response to those reports, self-study documentation, monitoring status reports of programs during the accreditation cycle, public comments and program responses to those comments, actions taken by other entities against programs, and any complaints about programs.

Accreditation staff play an integral role in ensuring that decision makers act consistently by preparing materials for review, serving as resources for policies and procedures, providing historical knowledge and data relating to accreditation decisions, and ongoing monitoring of the process during decision-making meetings.

Overall, specialized and professional accreditors employ a broad array of practices that promote consistency in accreditation decision making.

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 members accredit education programs for more than 100 different disciplines, from construction to nursing and architecture to occupational therapy.

Introduction

Specialized¹ and professional accreditors set educational quality standards² for programs³ at colleges and universities⁴ with the expectation that students completing these programs are equipped with the competencies necessary for entry-level practice in a variety of professions.

This public interest mandate that focuses on education resulting in competent practitioners is inextricably linked with the premise that accreditors will apply standards and hold programs accountable in an ethical manner. Consistency in accreditation decision making is a necessity as it gives the public assurance of the accountability of the accreditor and enables a bond of trust to be established with programs and institutions under review.

In the fall of 2022, the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) surveyed its accreditor members to identify mechanisms that ensure accreditation decisions are made in a consistent manner. This report summarizes the responses provided by 51 ASPA member agencies.

Findings indicate that:

- Decision makers⁵ are trained on an ongoing basis with a broad array of materials to prepare them to make accreditation decisions in a manner consistent with policy and established interpretation of standards.
- Prior to making a decision about the accreditation status of programs, accreditors review site visit reports and programs' responses to those reports, self-study documentation, monitoring status reports of programs during the accreditation cycle, public comments and program responses to those comments, actions taken by other entities against programs, and any complaints about programs.
- Accreditation staff play a fundamental role in supporting consistent decision making by preparing materials for decision-making body review, serving as policy and procedure resources, providing historical knowledge and data, and ongoing monitoring of the process during decision-making meetings.
- Many accreditors have processes in place to promote inter-rater reliability.

Materials Used for Training Decision Makers

A wide array of materials is included by accreditors in the training of their decision-making bodies as demonstrated in Figure 1.

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

² 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.

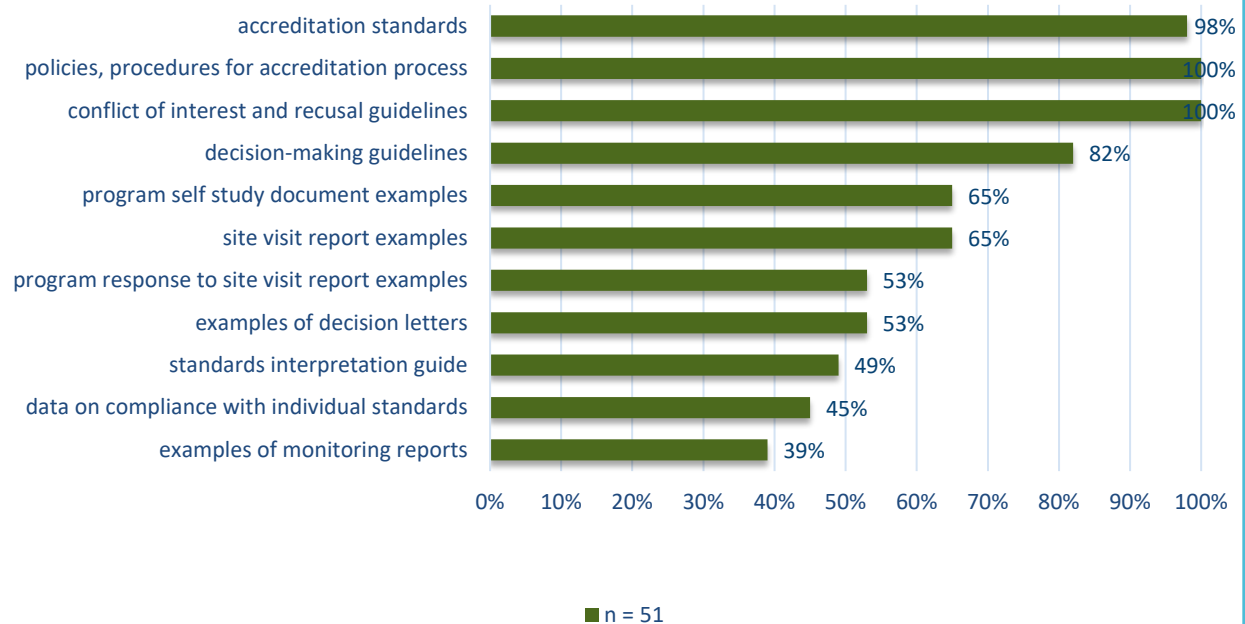
³ "Program" is used in this report for brevity. Several ASPA members also serve as institutional accreditors, for instance in the case of single purpose schools such as podiatry.

⁴ The phrase "colleges and universities" is used for brevity; ASPA members also accredit programs in hospitals and healthcare settings and postsecondary adult education programs in public K-12 school districts.

⁵ Accreditation decision-making bodies/participants thereon may be called boards/directors, councils/councilors, commissions/commissioners, as well as other terms.

1. Materials Included in Training Decision Makers

Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors, 2023



One respondent noted that orientation for decision makers does not include the standards as those individuals have extensive related experience via their own programs and having served as site visitors.

Respondent comments indicated additional training items not listed in the survey query, including student and faculty program evaluations, reviewer worksheets, and staff analyst reports. A few respondents indicated that new decision makers are assigned experienced mentors.

Frequency of Training for Decision Makers

All respondents provide initial orientation and onboarding for their decision makers. This is a comprehensive process and may occur as a single event or consist of several components that address various aspects of the accreditation process.

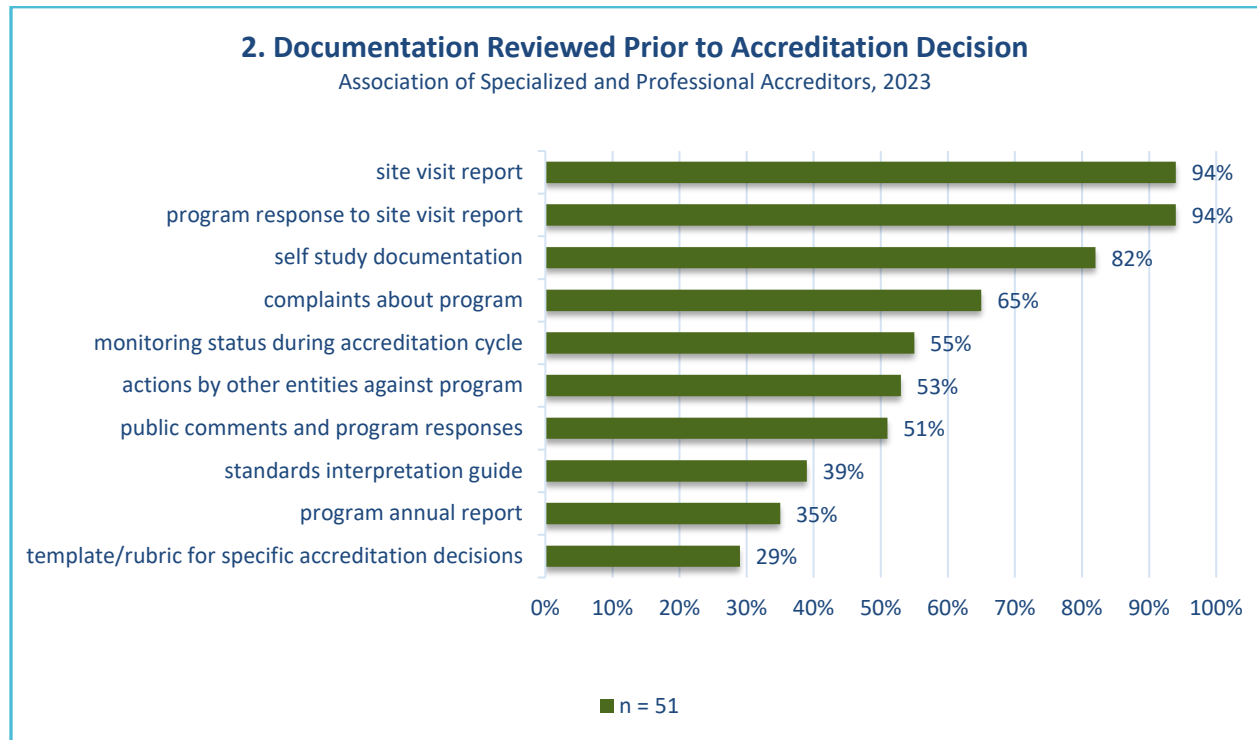
Almost 50% of respondents provide annual training for decision makers and 10% do full training every 2-5 years. Sixty-five percent provide training as needed related to standard updates and interpretation and policy and procedure changes. Several respondents indicated that training on a policy, procedure or standard interpretation occurs at every decision-making meeting.

Decision-Making Process

Eighty-two percent of respondents have an established and documented process for coming to an accreditation decision. Eighty-nine percent of those respondents review and update the process periodically and 62% make the process available to the public.

Documentation Reviewed Prior to Making an Accreditation Decision

Figure 2 displays the various documents reviewed by accreditation decision makers to inform the decision.



In some instances, all decision makers will review summaries of site visit reports; in other cases, a subset of the decision-making body will do a complete review and make accreditation recommendations to the full group; the full report is available to the entire decision-making body if desired. In a few cases, summaries of programs' self-study reports are reviewed as opposed to the full reports.

Respondent comments identified additional documentation reviewed prior to decision making:

- faculty and student surveys,
- history of accreditation decisions or compliance with standards for the program,
- progress reports if applicable,
- recent accreditation decision letter and any subsequent correspondence, and
- data on types of decisions and number of standards deficiencies by program type and length of grant of accreditation.

Review of Accreditation Decisions for Consistency

Approximately 50% of respondents indicated that they conduct a review of recent accreditation decisions to evaluate consistency in decision making and alignment with standards and policies and

procedures. These reviews can be formal or informal and may occur during the decision-making process, at the end of decision-making meetings or retrospectively (often on an annual basis). Records of prior decisions and reports on compliance trends are often used as guides or for reference. These reviews may be performed by staff, committees of the decision-making body, the full decision-making body, or various combinations thereof.

Based on the findings of the reviews for consistency, accreditors may:

- update decision-maker or site team review materials and training to strengthen or clarify related sections to ensure accreditation decisions are consistent,
- revise accreditation standards,
- implement changes to improve the accreditation process, or
- update guidance to programs on compliance with standards.

Staff Role in Ensuring Consistency in Decision Making

Accreditation staff play an integral role in ensuring that decision makers act consistently in formulating decisions. Survey respondents indicated a variety of methods of support that staff provide to decision makers:

- Staff prepare materials for decision-making body reviews, ensuring consistent content and presentation.
- Staff serve as resources on accreditation policies and procedures, historical information on precedence in standards interpretation (both as historians and in maintaining written histories/databases) and decisions made.
- Staff ensure established processes are followed and identify potential inconsistencies in decision making during meetings.

Approximately 20% of respondents indicated that accreditation staff performed desk reviews or analyses in preparation for decision-making meetings. This may include preparing summaries that highlight unique issues and give background/context for the programs under review. They emphasize areas in need of attention and make recommendations for accreditation actions to be taken by the decision-making body with evidence obtained from the staff reviews.

Several respondents noted staff involvement with supporting site visit teams, as information from site visits is essential for the decision-making process. Such staff support includes training in interpretation and implementation of standards and ensuring consistent preparation of team reports. Five respondents indicated that staff attend, monitor and support site visit activities.

Inter-rater Reliability

Forty-three percent of respondents provided comments describing their processes to promote inter-rater reliability. These include:

- Calibration exercises wherein each decision maker (or a subset of the decision-making body) reviews the same program individually, staff aggregate the findings, and the full decision-making body reviews the findings and discusses areas of disagreement.
- Each program is assigned two reviewers (i.e., decision makers) who independently review the documents and the proposed decision.
- Training on policy, procedure or standard interpretation is conducted at each decision-making meeting.
- Utilization of various tools to assist accreditation decision making such as decision trees, rubrics, compliance "checklists" and review templates.

Limitations of this Analysis

The findings for this work are reported based on the wording of the survey questions. There is a broad array of practices, organizational structures, and usage of terminology across accreditors for the diverse professions represented by the respondents. With such diversity among accrediting agencies, all survey queries may not have been interpreted in the same manner by all participants.

Conclusion

Specialized and professional accreditors 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 programmatic accreditors have several methods in place to promote consistency in accreditation decision making as part of the accreditation enterprise.