

ACCREDITOR SELF IMPROVEMENT

PROGRAMMATIC
ACCREDITATION
APPROACHES

ASSOCIATION OF SPECIALIZED
& PROFESSIONAL ACCREDITORS
JUNE 2025



Accreditor Self Improvement: 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 quality in the accreditation process and self-improvement.

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

- Acupuncture and Herbal Medicine
- Allopathic Medicine
- Anesthesia Technologist
- Anesthesiologist Assistant
- Architecture
- Art and Design
- Art Therapy
- Athletic Training
- Assistive Technology
- Audiology
- Blood Banking Technology/ Transfusion Medicine
- Business
- Cardiovascular Sonography
- Cardiovascular Technology
- Chiropractic
- Clinical Ethicist
- Clinical Laboratory Sciences
- Clinical Pastoral Education
- Clinical Research Professional
- Computing
- Construction
- Counseling
- Credibility Assessment
- Cytologist
- Dance
- Dentistry
- Diagnostic Medical Sonography
- Engineering
- English Language Programs
- Exercise Physiology
- Exercise Science
- Forensic Science
- Funeral Service
- Genetic Counseling
- Health Education
- Health Informatics/Information Management
- Healthcare Management
- Inclusive Rehabilitation Sciences
- Intraoperative Neurophysiologic Monitoring
- Kinesiotherapy
- Lactation Consultant
- Landscape Architecture
- Law
- Library/Information Studies
- Marriage and Family Therapy
- Medical Assistant
- Medical Illustration
- Midwifery
- Montessori Teaching
- Music
- Naturopathy
- Neurodiagnostic Technology
- Nuclear Medicine Technology
- Nursing
- Nurse Anesthesia
- Nurse Practitioner
- Nutrition and Dietetics
- Occupational Therapy
- Osteopathic Medicine
- Optometry
- Orthotics and Prosthetics
- Paramedics
- Perfusion
- Personal Fitness Training
- Pharmacy
- Physical Therapy
- Physician Assistant
- Podiatric Medicine
- Polysomnographic Technology
- Project Management
- Public Health
- Psychology
- Recreational Therapy
- Respiratory Care
- Speech-Language Pathology
- Surgical Assisting
- Surgical Technologist
- Teaching – Young Children
- Theatre
- Urban Planning
- Veterinary Medicine

Specialized and professional accreditors

Report at a glance

set educational quality standards for programs at colleges and universities with an end goal to ensure students achieve the necessary skills and learning outcomes for safe and effective practice in their chosen discipline or profession. In addition to quality assurance, accreditation requires programs to look for ways to continually self-improve. Just as accreditors require programs to have quality improvement practices in place, accreditors serve as models of that behavior with their own self-improvement practices.

This report compiles data obtained in a survey completed by fifty-three member agencies of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA). Members were asked to identify practices related to improving quality in their accreditation process.

All ASPA member respondents have practices in place for self-evaluation and quality improvement activities.

These practices can be documented in policy and procedure or undocumented, with many accreditors having some combination of both.

All programmatic accreditors review governance and decision making, internal operations, the site visit process, and quality of evaluators.

Many other areas reviewed include strategic planning; content and interpretation of accreditation-related documents; training offerings for Board, staff, committees and evaluators; standards review and revision; self-study report preparation; student achievement benchmarks; and staff performance.

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.

Accreditors review and act upon evaluation data, at a minimum, annually, with most accreditors making more frequent evaluations and implementing changes to improve as soon as issues are identified.

Overall, specialized and professional accreditors continually look to improve the quality of their accreditation process through review of data and implementation of change informed by these data to improve the accreditation process.

Introduction

Specialized¹ and professional accreditors (also known as programmatic accreditors) work to safeguard the public interest by setting quality educational standards² that help ensure graduates of accredited programs are competent and capable practitioners in their chosen professions or disciplines. Educational standards have been established collaboratively with stakeholders in the profession (practitioners, employers and industry representatives, educators, professional associations, and other communities of interest) for programs³ at colleges and universities.⁴

Consumers of most any professional service can be confident that they are receiving high-quality services based on standards established by experts in the field. Accreditors assure that the curriculum of professional programs is aligned with the competencies required by the relevant profession as determined by that profession.

Higher education accreditation has dual roles of quality assurance and quality improvement. Accreditors believe that if they require their accredited programs to self-assess against their mission, goals, and objectives and to periodically

evaluate for needed changes to their mission, goals, and objectives, accreditors should have similar practices in place to model the behavior they want their accredited programs to follow.

In the fall of 2024, the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) surveyed its accreditor members to identify their practices related to maintaining quality in the accreditation process and self-improvement activities. This report summarizes the responses provided by 53 ASPA member agencies.

Findings indicated that:

- All survey respondents either have policies that prescribe evaluation and self-improvement activities or practices (not documented) for evaluation and self-improvement.
- All accreditors evaluate their governance and decision making, internal operations, their site visit process, and quality of evaluators, among many other areas.
- Data is reviewed and acted upon, at a minimum, annually, with most accreditors making changes for improvement as soon as issues have been identified.

Just as accreditors require programs to have quality improvement activities in place, accreditors serve as models of that behavior with their own practices to improve the accreditation process.

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 (e.g., podiatry schools).

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.

Practices for Evaluation and Self-Improvement

All survey respondents indicated they perform self-evaluation and improvement activities: 64% have documented policies and 70% have undocumented practices, and most indicated a combination of both. Respondents commented that policies and practices for self-evaluation and improvement activities for the accreditation process include such areas as:

- governance and decision making;
- strategic planning;
- content and interpretation of documents (e.g., report templates, letters, email messages);
- training offerings for the board, staff, committees and evaluators;
- site visit process and evaluator quality;
- standards review and revision;
- committee self-improvement;
- self-study report preparation; and
- staff performance.

Policy and Procedure Review

Seventy-seven percent of respondents described their frequency of review as being at a minimum annually, and ongoing or as needed. Several indicated that policy reviews occurred at each council meeting and ad hoc as the need arose. Twenty-three percent of respondents indicated that they review policy and procedure ranging from every 2 to 8 years, usually in tandem with or following their review of standards. Two thirds of those in the 2-8 year range indicated their reviews were conducted at a minimum of every 5 years.

Most respondents described a staff-led or staff-facilitated review of policies and procedures with involvement of various committees and then final review and approval by the decision-making body. Approximately 40% of accreditor respondents invited comment/input from accredited programs, stakeholders and the public. Some accreditors indicated that legal counsel is involved with updating policy and procedures.

Most accreditors review policies and procedures at least annually for quality improvement.

This staff led process may involve input from accredited programs and legal counsel.

Standards Review

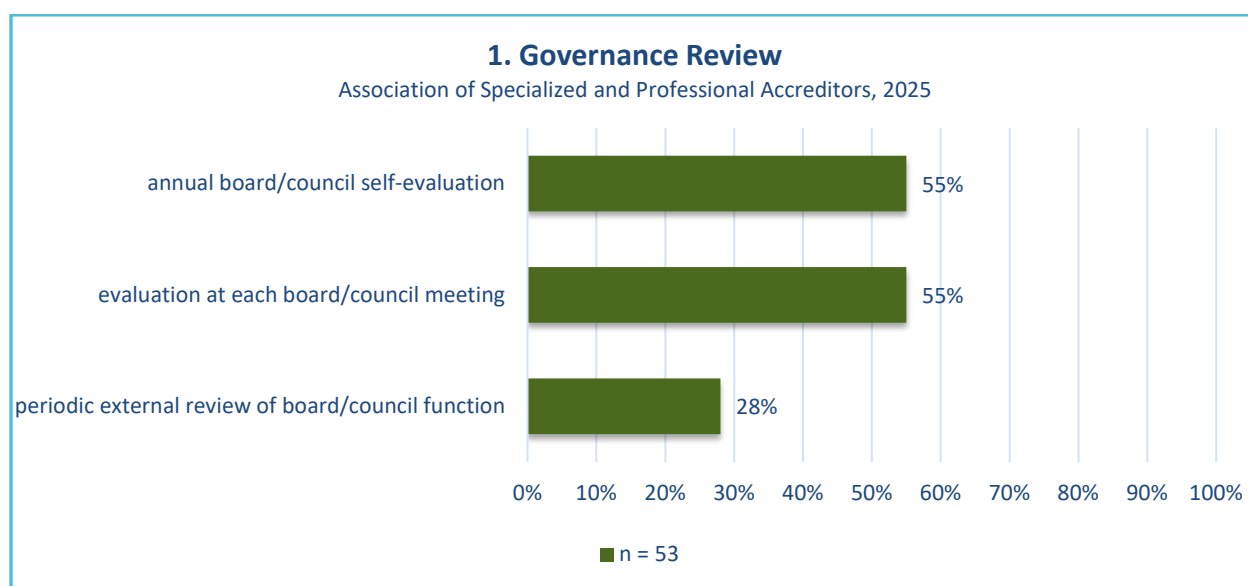
An earlier report - *Standards Review Practices - Programmatic Accreditation Practices, May 2021*⁵ - provides detail on the practices accreditors employ to review and revise standards for quality in educational programs at colleges and universities:

⁵ Available on the ASPA website: [Standards Review Practices - Programmatic Accreditation Practices, May 2021](#)

- 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, such as in response to changing needs in the field or discipline, regulatory requirement changes, or to address a standard necessitating revision through the accreditor's internal evaluation activities.

Governance Review

How respondents review their governance function for improvement is demonstrated in Figure 1.



In addition to evaluations at each meeting, board annual self-reviews, and the use of external reviewers, respondents commented on periodic:

- reviews to determine if agency mission, goals, and objectives are being met;
- reviews of bylaws and strategic plans for relevance and currency; and
- training for decision makers on specific issues identified in the reviews and change of policies and procedures as warranted.

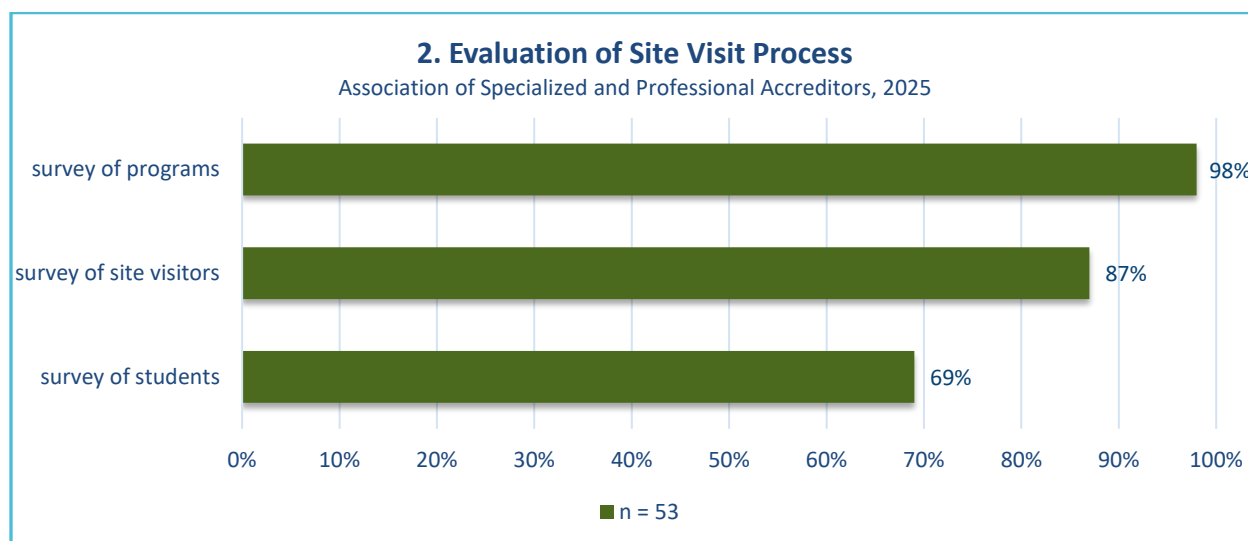
An earlier ASPA report - *Consistency in Decision Making - Programmatic Accreditation Practices, February 2023*⁶ - describes the various methods employed by accreditors to ensure consistency in their decision making:

⁶ Available on the ASPA website: [Consistency in Decision Making - Programmatic Accreditation Practices, February 2023](#)

- 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 provide 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 by the decision makers prior to making an accreditation decision. Accreditors review site visit reports and the program response to those reports, self-study documentation, monitoring and/or status reports of programs submitted during the accreditation cycle, public comments and program responses to those comments, complaints about programs, and actions taken by other entities against 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 providing ongoing monitoring during decision-making meetings.

Evaluation of Site Visit Process

Figure 2 demonstrates how accreditors gather data for improvement of their site visit process.

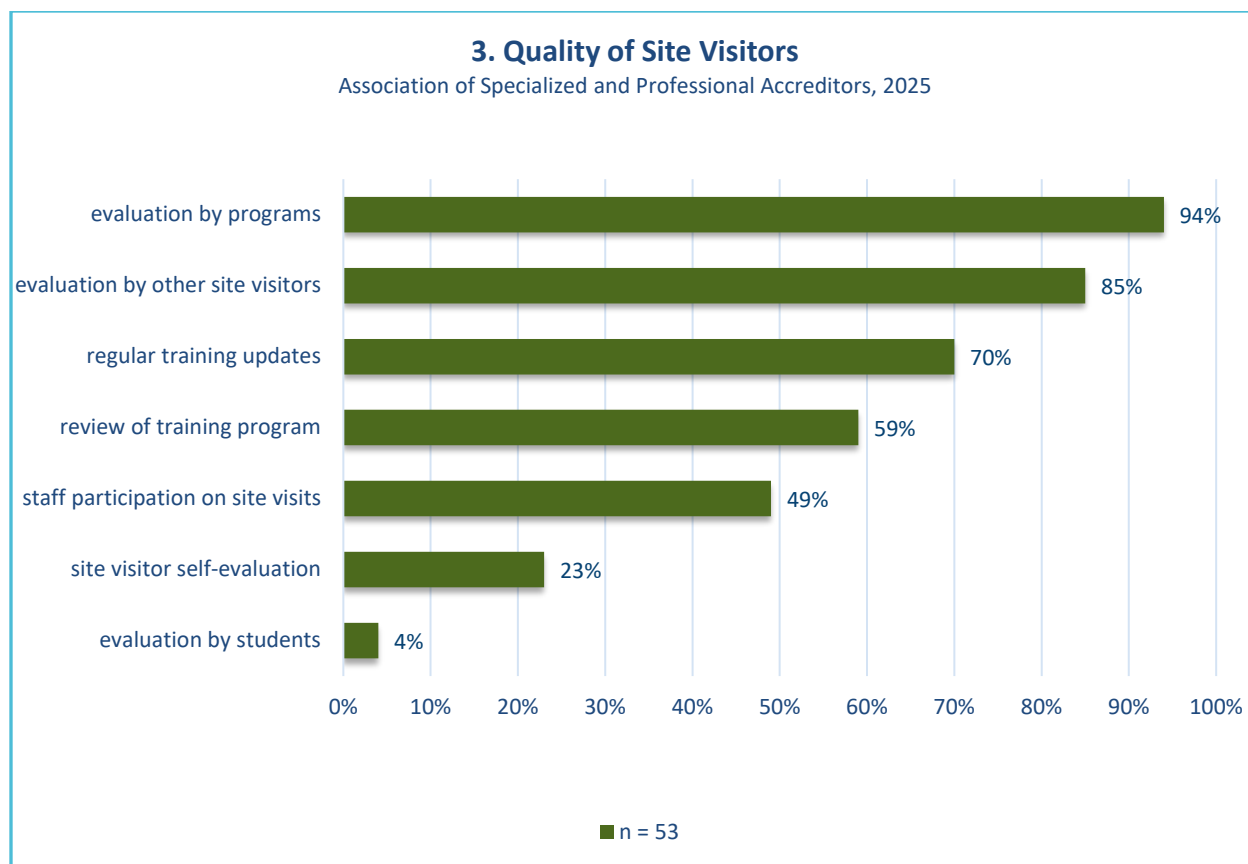


In addition to surveys of programs, site visitors, and students, respondents indicated other means employed to gain input for improving the site visit process:

- bi-annual meetings with site visit team chairs;
- staff attendance at site visits to monitor for improvements;
- informal and formal meetings at conferences to discuss accreditation topics; and
- virtual focus groups for program directors and team chairs (separately for each group).

Evaluation of the Quality of Site Visitors

Figure 3 demonstrates methods used to collect data for the review of site visitor quality.

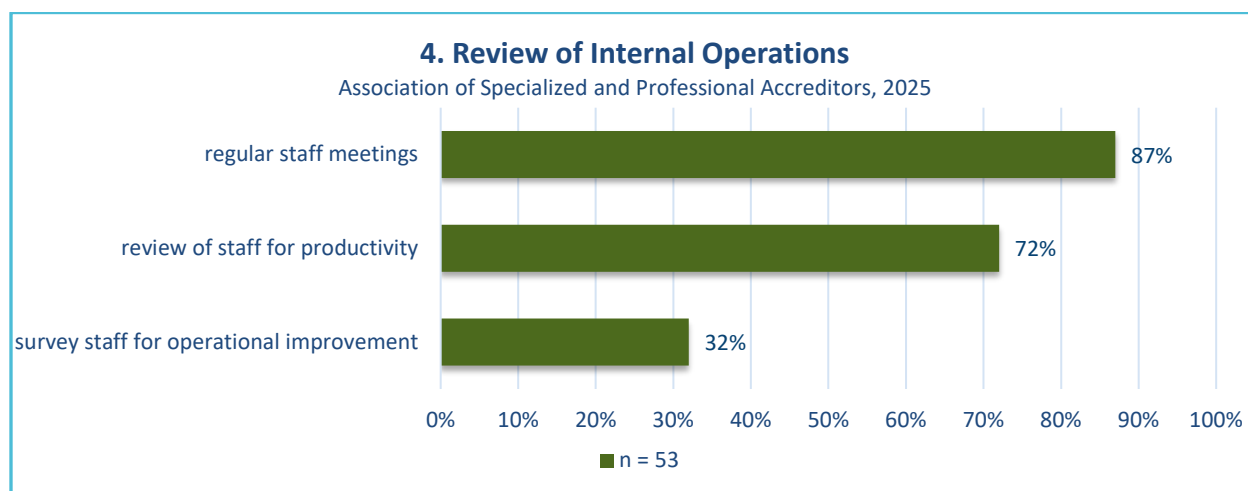


Respondents also noted other methods they use to evaluate the quality of site visitors, including:

- reviews of site visitors' reports and the effectiveness of evaluative visits; and
- measures to determine inter-rater reliability.

Review of Internal Operations

Figure 4 demonstrates methods used to collect data for the review of internal operations for improvement.



In addition to the methods of review for operational improvement identified in the graph above, several respondents commented that:

- all staff continually look for ways to improve and streamline processes so that more and better work can be done, and issues can be solved or managed as soon as they are identified; and
- operational improvement is reviewed as part of the annual review of the accreditor's mission, goals, and objectives.

How Accreditors Use Data for Quality Improvement - Cycle of Review, Frequency, and Process

At a minimum, all respondents indicated that data collected on various aspects of the accreditation process were reviewed on an annual basis with action items identified for improvement. Many indicated it was an ongoing, weekly or monthly process. The majority reported that some sort of data collection occurred after each board and committee meeting, after each site visit, and after each training session and workshop. Data collected after any given meeting is typically reviewed at the subsequent meeting. A few accreditors mentioned benchmarking against peer accreditor practices and ASPA conferences as sources of input for quality improvement.

Data is collected and compiled by accreditation staff for whichever committee has the authority to make or direct changes for improvement. In many instances, staff will include their own recommendations. Depending on the topic and level/severity of change required, processes may include:

- staff making immediate changes to an internal process, such as improving the preparation and flow for meetings and workshops and improving clarity for the use of forms based on feedback from programs;
- boards/councils determining what changes are needed for policy/procedure, strategic planning, general operations, and the decision-making process; and
- standing committees may implement changes to training offerings, the site visit process, etc.

Limitations of this Analysis

The findings for this study 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

Programmatic accreditors set quality standards to help ensure that students who complete accredited programs at colleges and universities develop the necessary skills and competencies through their educational programs to practice safely and effectively in their chosen profession. In addition to this quality assurance role, accreditors encourage accredited programs to continually improve their quality, and accreditors model that behavior with their own self-improvement practices. Stakeholders can be assured that accreditors continually look to improve the quality of their accreditation process through review of data and implementation of improved practices to ultimately protect students and the public.