



Federal Recognition Is a Choice – Accreditation Is the Mission

Statement from the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA)

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Recent attention to decisions by some accrediting organizations regarding recognition by the U.S. Department of Education, along with the Department's own recent actions, provides an important opportunity to clarify a fundamental point: **federal recognition is not accreditation.**

Specialized and professional accreditors, also called programmatic accreditors, do not require federal recognition to accomplish their key purposes. Accreditation serves purposes that long predate the federal government's modern role in higher education and extend far beyond access – or links – to federal funds. Indeed, some programmatic accreditors serve fields that predate the founding of the United States itself.

Specialized and professional accreditors are independent, nongovernmental organizations. They are created and governed outside the federal government, receive no taxpayer funding for performing accreditation, and serve missions that extend well beyond federal policy. They work with professions, educational institutions and programs, practitioners, employers, states and licensing bodies, students, and the public to establish expectations for educational quality and professional preparation. Most heads of ASPA member accreditors are themselves experts credentialed in the field they accredit, not government bureaucrats in D.C.

In many fields, accreditation is closely connected to professional competence, licensure, workforce readiness, continuous improvement, and public protection. Those responsibilities do not begin or end with federal recognition.

Many specialized and professional accreditors have never sought recognition by the U.S. Department of Education because their missions do not require it. Fewer than half of the 61 member agencies of ASPA choose to pursue federal recognition. They are no less committed to quality because of that choice.

Choosing not to pursue federal recognition – or choosing to relinquish it – does not mean that an organization ceases to be an accreditor. It means that the organization has chosen not to maintain a particular relationship with the federal government. Where federal law attaches specific consequences to recognition, those consequences must of course be carefully evaluated by each accreditor and its stakeholders.



Accreditors may choose to pursue recognition by the U.S. Department of Education when there is a federal purpose for doing so – primarily when recognition links their accredited programs or students to federal funds, grants, or other benefits for which accreditation by a federally recognized accreditor is required. **A federal link is important where it serves a purpose – but it is not what creates an accreditor nor is it the only measure of an accreditor’s mission, authority, standards, value, rigor, and outcomes.**

The circumstances that once led an accreditor to pursue federal recognition can also change. Congress or the President may alter or eliminate a federal program. Programs may cease using a particular federal benefit. The costs and regulatory requirements associated with recognition may change. When circumstances change, an accrediting organization has both the right and the responsibility to determine whether maintaining federal recognition continues to advance the interests of the programs, students, professions, and public it serves. That principle is especially relevant at a time when the current Administration itself is committed to closing the U.S. Department of Education and substantially reducing the federal government's role in education.

ASPA supports the ability of each accrediting organization to make an informed, mission-driven decision about federal recognition based on the needs of its programs, students, professions, and other stakeholders. For some accreditors, continued federal recognition may remain important. For others, the federal purpose that once justified recognition may no longer exist or may no longer outweigh the regulatory and administrative obligations that accompany it.

Those choices should be understood for what they are: organizational decisions about participation in a federal recognition system – not judgments about whether accreditation itself matters.

Specialized and professional accreditation is bigger than federal recognition. Its enduring purpose is quality assurance, continuous improvement, professional preparation, and protection of students and the public. That work continues regardless of an accreditor's federal recognition status.

About ASPA

ASPA is a national voluntary association of 61 specialized and professional accreditors that advance good accreditation policy and practice and collectively accredit more than 28,000 programs at postsecondary education institutions worldwide.