

WHY DOES ACCREDITATION MATTER?

Accreditation is critical for all stakeholders of higher education including students, policymakers, the constituents they serve, and postsecondary institutions.

Students and families invest significant financial resources to attend college. Accreditation provides assurance that the institution they choose to attend is well run, is of high quality, and provides:

- Degrees and credentials that meet agreed-upon standards and have value in the marketplace;
- Opportunities to transfer credits from one institution to another;
- Access to federal student aid to help pay for college.

Policymakers responsible for funding and regulating institutions of higher education want assurance that money directed to colleges and universities will provide a significant return on investment in the form of a better-educated citizenry and a career-ready workforce. Accreditation provides assurance that institutions are:

- Transparent about the academic and other educational services colleges and universities provide;
- Fiscally responsible and investing in continuous quality improvement to serve the needs of their students, states, and communities;
- Maintaining diversity to serve a multitude of student needs while assuring accountability across all types of institutions.

Higher education institutions themselves need assurance from external experts that their missions, strategic goals, and educational practices are appropriate for the students and communities they serve and on par with their peer institutions. Accreditation assures that institutions:

- Place student success and achievement at the forefront of their mission and are continually seeking to improve in the areas of student persistence and attainment.
- Can evaluate their own performance against a common set of standards for their sector.
- Include continuous improvement and innovation as part of the institutional culture, to ensure that our postsecondary institutions are responsive to an ever-changing world. The process of accreditation is as important as the outcome.

10 THINGS LEGISLATORS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT REGIONAL ACCREDITATION

Accreditation is a voluntary external review process used in higher education to assure quality and spur ongoing institutional improvement. Because federal and state aid programs and licensing are tied to accreditation determinations, lawmakers have a stake in understanding how it really works.

- 1. It drives student success.** Accrediting standards focus on learning, retention, and completion to ensure that students graduate with degrees that have meaning in the marketplace.
- 2. It is based on high standards** established by the colleges and universities themselves.
- 3. It uses the rigorous process of peer review to ensure fiscal and educational integrity.** The process engages the entire college community in self-study, documentation of practice and outcomes, and interaction with evaluators who know what to look for and demand quality.
- 4. It is an efficient system that places no burden on government.** The work of accreditation is done by expert volunteers to assure quality without putting financial burdens on states and the federal government.
- 5. It has teeth.** Institutions can lose their membership and, subsequently, access to financial aid when they have failed to address identified shortcomings.
- 6. It is reliable** and ensures that information generated by the self-study is thoroughly documented based on evidence and implementation of standards.
- 7. It protects the public and promotes transparency.** Accreditation attests to the quality of the investment for students, families, and the public and brings out into the open information about institutional operations and performance.
- 8. It fosters continuous improvement.** Accreditation is an ongoing process that heightens institutional self-awareness and identifies areas to be targeted for improvement.
- 9. It promotes autonomy and institutional diversity,** two of U.S. higher education's great strengths.
- 10. It brings out the best in the campus community** by engaging on-campus faculty and staff with leaders from outside colleges who all have a stake in ensuring similar programs measure up to high standards.