

—An Overview—

Purpose and Philosophy of Accreditation

The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools is the regional body for the accreditation of higher education institutions in the southern states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) and Latin America awarding associate, baccalaureate, master's, or doctoral degrees.

Accreditation of an institution by the Commission on Colleges signifies the institution has a purpose appropriate to higher education and has resources, programs, and services sufficient to accomplish that purpose on a continuing basis. Accreditation evaluates whether an institution maintains clearly specified educational objectives that are consistent with its mission and appropriate to the degrees it offers and whether it is successful in achieving its stated objectives.

The regulation of accreditation relates to a traditional U.S. philosophy—that a free people can and ought to govern themselves, which is done best through a representative, flexible, and responsive system. Accordingly, accreditation is best accomplished through a voluntary association of educational institutions. Accreditation enhances educational quality throughout the region by improving the effectiveness of institutions and ensuring to the public that institutions meet standards established by the higher education community. Accreditation is a common denominator of shared values and practices among the diverse range of institutions within the higher education community.

Both a process and a product, accreditation relies on integrity, thoughtful and principled judgment, the rigorous application of requirements, and a context of trust. It provides an assessment of an institution's effectiveness in the fulfillment of its mission, its compliance with the requirements of its accrediting association, and its continuing efforts to enhance the quality of student learning and its programs and services. Based upon reasoned judgment, the process serves to stimulate evaluation and improvement, while providing a means of continuing accountability to constituents and the public.

The "product" of accreditation represents a public statement of an institution's continuing capacity to provide effective programs and services based on agreed-upon requirements. The statement of an institution's accreditation status with the Commission on Colleges is also an affirmation of an institution's continuing commitment to the Commission's principles and philosophy of accreditation.

The Commission on Colleges supports the right of an institution to pursue its established educational mission; the right of faculty members to teach, investigate, and publish freely; and the right of students to opportunities for learning and the open exchange of ideas. However, the exercise of these rights should not interfere with the overriding obligation of an institution to offer its students a sound education.

The fundamental characteristics of accreditation outlined by the Commission on Colleges are these:

- Participation in the accreditation process is voluntary and is an earned and renewable status.
- Member institutions develop, amend, and approve accreditation requirements.

