

# General Accreditation in Higher Education

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Following is a statement from the staff of the Commission on Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. THE CHOWANIAN reprints this statement for the information of the faculty, staff, and students of Chowan College, which is accredited by the Association.

## GENERAL ACCREDITATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Accreditation is an educator's term, but the principle involved is widely understood and applied throughout the United States. Many American enterprises have associated themselves to set up standards or criteria to protect and improve the quality of products or services, and in doing so they have utilized the concept of accreditation.

Accreditation as applied in education has been defined as the recognition accorded to an institution which meets criteria or standards of achievement established by a competent agency or association for educational activities of the nature and level being offered by the institution. For the layman it may clarify the term somewhat to describe it more simply as recognition of the intellectual or academic respectability of educational institutions. Respectability in this sense would imply functions of accreditation are to discover and propagate good educational practices, to improve the educational process, and to strengthen educational institutions.

In addition, there must be an attempt to distinguish stronger institutions from the weaker ones, the good from the poor; it is reasonable to assume that the distinction is made best by qualified educators. This assessment of quality should be made from within the framework of higher education and not from without. In many nations of the world quality control in programs of higher education is a function of national government, usually applied through a national ministry of education; that is, accreditation of an institution is awarded by government and becomes political in nature. Accreditation in the United States is unique in that it is applied from within voluntary, non-political professional organizations and not from without. This is especially true of regional or general accreditation which is not identified with state or national boundaries and, therefore, is not as subject to the patterns of conformity often associated with political control.

Accreditation should be distinguished from licensing and certification which are designed to protect society from malpractice by incompetent individuals. Responsibility for these functions rests with the state. Accreditation is the responsibility of educators. For institutions of higher learning accreditation serves several purposes. In the first place it encourages institutions to improve their programs by providing for them standards or criteria established by competent bodies. Furthermore, it serves to facilitate the transfer of students from one institution to another. In addition, it helps inform those who employ graduates of an institution about the quality of training which its graduates have received. In another sense accreditation can serve the general public by providing the layman some guidance on the institutions he may wish to patronize.

Accrediting procedures followed by most accrediting agencies consist of several steps. In the first place there is the establishment of standards or criteria. It is then necessary to carry out an evaluation of institutions by competent educators to determine whether the established

standards or criteria are met. A list of institutions which meet the standards or criteria is usually published. Finally, periodic reviews are generally scheduled to ascertain whether accredited institutions continue to meet the standards or criteria.

These procedures are followed by the six regional or general accrediting agencies in the United States which are the only organizations above the state level charged with accrediting institutions as a whole. One of these is the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, a voluntary, non-profit organization, representing the institutions which make up its membership and are accredited. Membership is synonymous with accreditation.

The Commission on Colleges of the Association is charged with the responsibility of accrediting institutions of higher learning, its decisions being subject to review and approval by the College Delegate Assembly. The latter body consists of one voting representative from each member institution, either the president or his appointee. All matters concerning accreditation of institutions of higher learning and their membership in the Association are finally decided by this group. Most of the work of the Commission and of the College Delegate Assembly is done by individuals representing member institutions, and serving on committees. The programs of the Commission are coordinated by an executive staff consisting of an executive secretary, an assistant executive secretary, and two secretaries. The staff is directly responsible to the Executive Council which is elected from the Commission membership.

The budget of the Southern Association (including the College Commission) is based on dues paid by member institutions. It covers operating expenses and is published annually. There is no accumulation of funds. A very large percentage of the budgeted funds for the Commission goes into travel expenses for professional staff and committee members to carry out assignments made by the Commission, and into publications. This means that most of the money is funneled back to the contributing member institutions in the form of services they desire. Less than one-half of one per cent of the time and money expended by the central office is used for "inspection." The remainder goes into programs designed to assist institutions to become more effective, educationally.

Accreditation by the College Delegate Assembly of the Southern Association extends to the entire institution. It does not certify that every part is of equal quality, but it does indicate that none of them is so weak as to undermine the educational effectiveness of the institution and its services to its students. Regional or general accreditation, then, is extremely important because it is the only form of accreditation that applies to the institution as a whole.

The Southern Association, through the criteria for membership established by its Commission on Colleges and the College Delegate Assembly, is committed to a policy of preserving academic integrity and academic freedom in institutions of higher education. All Standards for measuring quality are useless these rights can be safeguarded. To borrow from the Executive Secretary's report to the College Commission of the Southern Association in 1962, "We need no Standard for faculty unless their teaching can be free, we need no Standard for libraries unless books can be freely selected and read, we need no Standard for administrative organization if administrators are intimidated or

controlled by organized ignorance which gains support in a period of fear and tension."

At the same time there is no inclination to protect the spread of obnoxious ideologies, which might occasionally fan across institutions. Policies governing the teaching of communism or related dogmas, and procedures for applying them are determined by governing boards. These matters are not normally within the province of the Commission on Colleges. However, in the final analysis it is ingrained in the philosophy of the Commission that we must "stand ready to protest in the name of academic integrity when the educational effort is hampered by political interference, stifled by authoritarian fiat or in any way menaced by those who would subvert the search for truth." This last phrase should apply equally to politicians, business and community leaders, or college professors.

On the few occasions when the Commission has felt compelled to act when an institution's integrity and autonomy were threatened there have been a few voices raised in protest against the need for regional accreditation at all. At these times some have clamored for a system of state accreditation only. Free institutions would soon smother in such an environment for most of their communication and rapport with the outside world of intellect would be lost. Certainly, state accreditation can serve a valid purpose and is very effectively utilized by many states to improve education and afford recognition to good institutions within their boundaries. But in practically every one of these cases, accreditation by a state agency (whether political or non-political) is closely coordinated with efforts by the regional association to recognize and support sound educational endeavors. In many instances, state accreditation has been organized and structured to serve as a stepping stone to or preparation for regional accreditation. This kind of state accreditation can be desirable but it is totally different from the concept of state accreditation only, which can hang like an "ivy curtain," thick enough to bar the entry into the classrooms of all ideas and people except those deemed worthy by the power center of the individual state.

When we object to outside interference in the affairs of colleges we do not mean political interference, only. Frequently, institutions are subjected to unusual or extraordinary pressures from local communities, citizens groups, church groups, and even professional organizations. The Southern Association institutional integrity and academic freedom are threatened by forces originating from any of these sources.

This is not to say that institutions should not be subject, regularly, to normal pressures. Many groups and organizations have a responsibility to make themselves heard in the affairs of the institutions with which they are concerned. This is as it should be. Such pressures are expected and are healthy as long as they are within the group's or organization's jurisdiction and do not clash with the stated purpose of the institution. However, "interference" in the affairs of institutions from any of these sources is an entirely different matter, and should not be confused with the terms "normal pressure," "interest," or "concern."

At the annual meeting of the Southern Association in November, 1962, new Standards of accreditation were adopted by the College Delegate Assembly. As a device for measuring academic excellence the new Standards could ultimately

represent a landmark in the development of higher education in the South. It is believed by the colleges whose representatives wrote them and by those who will interpret them that these Standards will measure more effectively the quality of an educational enterprise, with less dependence on quantitative criteria than before.

There has been much confusion in the past as to the meaning of the term Standards when applied to accreditation. The term has been wedded most frequently to the word "standardization." This confusion of terms can be unfortunate—indeed appalling—because of the implication that there exists an attempt to standardize or mold into a pattern all institutions of higher learning. The use of "Standards" by the College Delegate Assembly relates to a minimum level of achievement in many categories expected of any educational enterprise desiring general recognition as an institution of high learning. A Standard may set a minimum level of training for faculty, or minimum enrollment; or it may delineate a basic organizational pattern or structure for institutions, broad enough to include the differing purposes and objectives of a great variety of colleges and universities. In another instance, a Standard may identify and define basic principles of academic freedom or academic integrity to which accredited institutions are expected to adhere. At the same time, a firm belief in the importance of institutional autonomy and in the right and responsibility of colleges and universities to develop independently, and individually is implied in the philosophy of the College Delegate Assembly and in the Standards which it has adopted. It follows then that Standards are not encased in concrete, immovable, inflexible. They are simply the by laws of academic activity—a frame of reference.

With its new Standards, the College Delegate Assembly can now fulfill a more useful role in southern higher education. It can stimulate greater improvement in the qualifications of faculty members,

the conditions under which they work, the provisions and services for students, and the financial support of higher education. At the same time it can permit institutions wider latitude in their operations and can offer more encouragement to experimentation and innovation.

In addition to meeting each of the new Standards, it is assured that institutions joined in the work of the Commission on Colleges and the College Delegate Assembly admit the responsibility they have to each other and to their society. A foremost objective of these groups is to organize and direct the accumulated talent of the human resources represented in their membership toward the improvement of education in the South.

An institution as a whole represents the sum of many parts. It has a personality, an image, and the totality of its effectiveness reflects the totality of this effort. Most of the functioning parts of an educational institution which presents its public image and prove the quality of its services are people. It is important, therefore, that all of the people associated with the institution understand the role and function of the regional accrediting association in which membership is held. Administrative officers, members of governing boards, faculty, students, service personnel, alumni, parents, and as far as possible the public at large should be helped to realize that maintaining accreditation, a symbol of respectability in the academic world, is the responsibility of all.

It has been said that there is no agency or group better able to assist and protect colleges and universities than the regional or general accrediting association. The public, therefore, must be helped to know that this voluntary association, operating under the principles of self-regulation and self-control as reflected in its Standards, can be depended upon to preserve higher education as an essential force in a society of free men.



REGISTERED NURSE—Miss Miriam Alice "Jonnie" Musser of Portsmouth, Va., is attending Chowan College, working toward a B.S. degree in nursing. Jonnie graduated from Woodrow Wilson High in 1959 and entered training at Louise Obici School of Nursing the same year, graduating in 1962. She became a registered nurse after passing the State Board examinations in November 1962, and is using her profession here to help pay college expenses.