



Questions and Answers about Membership in a Regional Accrediting Commission

ACCJC has received a number of questions from member institution CEOs about the discussion ongoing in the California Community Colleges regarding whether the State Chancellor or the Board of Governors can make the decision for the colleges to drop accreditation with one accreditor and join another. We are providing the information below in response to the most frequently asked questions we have received.

1. How did the regional accrediting associations and commissions form?

Answer: The six regional accrediting associations were each formed when groups of institutions came together to develop standards for educational quality. They agreed to enforce the standards through voluntary peer review. The regional associations that formed were geographically based and generally had a name referencing their geography, such as “Southern Association of Schools and Colleges”, “Western Association of Schools and Colleges”, etc. The regional associations created accrediting commissions within each region – one for K-12 schools, and one or two for different segments of postsecondary education. Each commission was given a name that used its regional association name and its commission name, such as “WASC –Accrediting Commission for Schools.” Each region, and thus each commission, delineated its borders by states. WASC region formed in 1962 and included the states of California, Hawaii, and the (then) Pacific Territories¹.

2. Do any regional accrediting commissions overlap in the states they serve?

Answer: No, each regional accrediting body has designated its geographic region as a set of specified states, and these are included in that commission’s bylaws and in its scope of recognition by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE). An institution seeking regional accreditation must do so from the regional accreditor operating in the state in which the institution is incorporated or publicly authorized.

3. Why does WASC have two higher education commissions?

Answer: When WASC formed, the higher education institutions decided to create two education commissions – one for “junior and community colleges”, and one for “senior colleges and universities.” Historical documents indicate that the community colleges anticipated becoming a large segment, and for that reason, all desired two commissions.

4. What keeps the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) and the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) from accrediting the same institutions?

Answer: ACCJC and WSCUC each have a statement of scope approved by the USDE, as well as bylaws, that describe the distinct types of institutions they accredit. ACCJC accredits institutions which have as a primary mission, the granting of associate degrees, but which may also award certificates and other credentials, including bachelor’s degrees. WSCUC accredits institutions that offer the baccalaureate degree and higher. Its scope does not include community colleges.

¹ The Territories of American Samoa and Guam; the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas.

5. Who makes the decision to join an accrediting commission or to leave an accrediting commission?

Answer: Commissions are institutional membership organizations; therefore, *the institution*, through its governing board and institutional Chief Executive Officer, applies for membership or notifies an accreditor of its desire to voluntarily withdraw from membership. In joining a commission, the institution commits to meeting the standards and requirements of the commission. No other group or body can make the decision that a particular institution will join or leave an accrediting body.

6. What is the process for an institution to join an accrediting commission?

Answer: It is a process that takes several years. If the institution fits the scope of the accrediting agency, it must apply for accreditation and demonstrate it meets the requirements of the accreditor at each stage in the process. The stages for regional accreditation are eligibility, followed by candidacy and accreditation. To gain eligibility, an institution establishes through a report and supporting evidence (paper review), that it meets basic and foundational requirements of an accreditor. Only institutions that gain eligibility can move forward to seek accreditation. The processes for gaining candidacy, and then gaining accreditation, each require an institution to demonstrate it meets the accreditor's standards by writing an institutional report (a self-study report), which is followed by an evaluation by a group of peers from the accreditor's pool of evaluators, and then the commission's action. The key point here is that the established process applies to all institutions seeking accreditation, and the institution must demonstrate it meets the standards of the (new) accreditor. No accreditor can accredit an institution using anything but its own standards and requirements. If an institution is already accredited, it will need to maintain membership and adhere to all requirements of its current accreditor, including reporting requirements and dues, while it goes through the stages to achieve accreditation with a new accreditor.

7. What must an accreditor do if it wishes to change its scope and accept new types of institutions into its membership?

Answer: An accreditor would have to seek approval from the institutions currently in its membership to make a change in its scope to accept a new type of institution or to expand its geographic boundaries. An accreditor that changes the type of institutions it accredits would have to change its bylaws to include a revised scope. It would have to demonstrate capacity: add appropriate standards (working with its member institutions) for the new type of institution or degree level; add new or changed policy language; add persons with appropriate expertise to its pool of evaluators, and add new training content; change the participation or representation of individuals on its commission to include the new institutional type; change its organizational resources and capacity to provide necessary accreditation oversight, including staff expertise, and sufficient resources of other kinds; change its training sessions, manuals and resource materials, etc. An agency would have to demonstrate its capacity and experience in accrediting the new types of institutions to the USDE to achieve approval for a change of scope. These changes in the accreditor, if undertaken, would take many years of complex work.

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