Accreditation of educational institutions and professional programs in the United States is a voluntary, nongovernmental, self-regulating, peer review system. There are two types of accreditation. Institutional accreditation is granted by regional or national accrediting commissions that assess the whole educational entity—the university or college. Specialized accreditation is granted to professional and occupational schools and programs by commissions or similar bodies established by national professional organizations.

Accreditation is both a process and a status. The process of accreditation guides the development and assesses the educational quality of an institution or program. The process assists in the ongoing review and improvement of the institution or program. Accreditation status grants recognition that the institution or program meets or exceeds predetermined standards for educational quality. Specialized accreditation, in addition, provides assurance to students and the public that institutions provide evidence that they are striving to exceed standards for the improvement of institutional effectiveness.

The system of accreditation provides a balance to the special interests of education, regulation, and the dental workforce that ensures accountability to the public. The American Dental Education Association hereby endorses these principles for accreditation and will collaborate with institutions and agencies to promote the active and consistent use of these principles.

Accreditation must be autonomous and independent of undue influence from any individual, organization, or group.

The communities of dental education, regulation, and practice may jointly develop accreditation policies and procedures. The authority of the accreditation body, however, must remain autonomous and accountable for quality education that serves the students and the public. Therefore, the Commission on Dental Accreditation should be a separate entity—indeed of undue influence and the appearance of undue influence—whose structure and costs are shared by its members. The process of accreditation, however, is essentially self-regulating and peer-based. Therefore, it should be conducted primarily by dental educators.

Accreditation must inform the public about the quality of individual programs.

The privilege of self-regulation is granted by the public. Accreditation and its place in a system of self-regulation must be both public and accountable to the public. The public must be informed that institutions and programs are providing quality education and producing competent graduates.

Accreditation must require the development of clearly defined goals and objectives.

Education in the United States is characterized by academic freedom and flexibility of institutions in structuring their educational programs. Goals and objectives clearly defined by each program ensure educational quality. They are the fundamental elements against which the institution assesses and validates how well it is meeting its stated mission and using available resources for education programs.

Accreditation must recognize institutional and program diversity.

Rather than focus on uniformity of programs, accreditation must respect the autonomy and integrity of the institution, recognize the varying missions of educational institutions and programs, and acknowledge the variety of ways in which educational goals can be met or exceeded.

Accreditation must recognize experimentation, innovation, and modernization of teaching methods, curriculum design, and content.
Institutions and faculty must continuously respond to scientific and technological advancements, the changing needs and demands of society, and evolving requirements of practice. Accreditation must encourage responsiveness to opportunities rather than programmatic conformity. Institutions and faculty must ensure that educational innovations maintain and enhance educational quality and academic excellence.

Accreditation must place emphasis on the outcomes of the educational process.

Outcomes assessment is a continuous process committed to creating sound information bases and using technology to validate institutional and program mission and goals, determine educational effectiveness, confirm appropriate allocation and use of resources, and make recommendations for program improvements. Evaluation must focus on graduates’ attainment of knowledge, skills, performance, and competence. Assessment of institutional governance and organization, educational content and processes, resources and support services, and procedural and quantitative information must be based on the evidence that these factors affect student competence and the quality of education.

Accreditation must encourage and facilitate broad participation in the professional and scientific programs, service endeavors, and governance of the parent institution.

Program integration and contribution are essential to maintaining a strong purpose and position for specialized education in the institutional mission. Accreditation should examine relationships between the program and other institutional programs, schools, and/or colleges in teaching, research, institutional service, community and patient service as appropriate, financing, governance, and change management.

Accreditation expenses must be cost-effective and commensurate with value received.

Preparation of information and data requirements for self-study should focus on outcomes assessment and analyses, documentation of accomplishments, and needed areas of and recommendations for improvement. The site visit team should be only as large as needed to provide a representative, objective peer review. Procedures related to review, responses, complaints, appeals, and special appearances must be appropriate, timely, and consistent with the principles of due process. Relationships and responsibilities of institutional and specialized accrediting bodies should be clearly defined and, when possible, coordinated.

Accreditation must provide impartial advice, counsel, and guidance.

Accreditation must facilitate ongoing objective internal and external review, assist in unbiased interpretation and confirmation of findings, and contribute to constructive resolution of educational issues identified through self-study and external review. Accreditation must ensure educational quality and accountability to the public without prescribing institutional and programmatic requirements.

Authority over educational policies must lie with the academic community.

The communities of dental education, regulation, and practice share values regarding appropriately prepared professionals who are competent. It is the education community, however, that has responsibility for what is taught and how it is taught. It is the education community that must have ultimate authority in establishing policies, systems, and procedures whereby institutions and programs can validate their existing efforts and make continuing improvements in content, processes, and effectiveness.

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