Tough Questions and Straight Answers About Arts Accreditation

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COUNCIL OF ARTS ACCREDITING ASSOCIATIONS

National Association of Schools of Art and Design
National Association of Schools of Dance
National Association of Schools of Music
National Association of Schools of Theatre

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General Notes

The Council of Arts Accrediting Associations is a joint, *ad hoc* effort of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design, the National Association of Schools of Dance, the National Association of Schools of Music, and the National Association of Schools of Theatre. The Council works with matters of general concern to the arts community in higher education, with particular focus on the issues and policies affecting instructional quality and accreditation.

From time to time, the Council issues Briefing Papers, each of which covers a specific issue. The objective is to distill major themes, trends, and prospects into a form that encourages individual and institutional reflection, analysis, and action. The Council particularly encourages the sharing of its analytical documents with faculty and other administrators at the institution.

Readers are encouraged to share ideas about subjects or contents for future analytical documents by contacting CAAA at the National Office for Arts Accreditation.

Disclaimer

This text is analytical and consultative only. Although produced by organizations that accredit, *it is not a statement of accreditation standards, policies, or processes, and must not be referenced as such.*

Official accreditation documents are available from the separate accrediting associations for art and design (NASAD), dance (NASD), music (NASM), and theatre (NAST). The address appears at the bottom of this page.

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Institutions and organizations are invited to use extracts from this document to develop or revise their own statements regarding arts accreditation.

Tough Questions and Straight Answers About Arts Accreditation is available online. Inquiries may be directed to the National Office for Arts Accreditation whose contact information is provided below.

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PURPOSE

Accreditation is a complex arena where content, process, history, philosophy, and values all impact each other. Accrediting operations differ in their responsibilities, approaches, methods, and track records. This paper answers questions frequently posed by critics of accreditation in general. Responses represent the shared point of view of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design, National Association of Schools of Dance, National Association of Schools of Music, and National Association of Schools of Theatre. This document is intended primarily as a resource for administrators and faculty in higher education, although other audiences are welcomed and other uses encouraged. Its purpose is to clarify, and thus to provide accurate information as the basis for dialogue.

It is structured so that each question and answer pair can be used without reference to what comes before or after. Because answers reflect common sets of principles and practice, there is some repetition across the document as a whole.

For more linear presentations of fundamental issues governing the work of the arts accreditors, see page 15, Appendix I, *Code of Good Practice for the Accreditation Work of NASAD, NASD, NASM, NAST*, and page 17, Appendix II, *A Philosophy for Arts Accreditation in Higher Education*.

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Tough Questions and Straight Answers
About Arts Accreditation

COUNCIL OF ARTS ACCREDITING ASSOCIATIONS

Introduction

Accreditation is an assessment and development approach deeply rooted in American values and character. Focused on accountability and improvement of institutions and programs, it has made invaluable contributions to building the largest and most effective higher education system the world has ever seen. Accreditation holds forth high standards, while simultaneously promoting and protecting institutional and academic freedom. It evaluates performance through peer review, thus minimizing the need for governmental regulation. It facilitates innovation, encourages improvement, creates baselines of commonality for academic practices and credentials, and provides the public with indicators of basic quality. As a result, it has helped millions of students get a better education. Accreditation is a major linchpin holding the credit-hour system together, thereby allowing work and credentials to be interpreted, transferred from one institution to another, and understood by the public. Accreditation encourages a vast interchange of expertise across institutions and professions. It does all these things and more primarily through the work of volunteers. The cost is small, given the professional expertise applied and results achieved.

If accreditation is so successful, why are generic negatives expressed regularly in higher education forums and publications? This simple question has many answers, and each answer has its own complexities. However, here are several basic reasons:

- *The culture of activist cynicism and mistrust that pervades much of higher education.* Such a culture breeds myopic analyses: too often, connections and flanks are left egregiously unprotected. While producing illusions of superiority and incentives for self-congratulation, myopic activism increases vulnerability for critic and object alike. It enthrones politics and public relations at the expense of academic and artistic substance. It cheapens and thus vitiates core values and purposes. It corrodes public confidence.

- *An information explosion that seems to promote confrontation rather than consensus.* The result is reports, studies, and positions that focus on specific stories rather than comprehensive analysis, on who is right rather than what is at stake, and on power concentration rather than interdependency.

- *Acceptance of cultural mores that justify attacking with falsehoods, half-truths, and misinterpretations and sustaining them even in face of facts.* Under these conditions, dialogue stops and wars of images reign. The search for truth is replaced by struggles over who has the power to act mendaciously without being questioned.

- *An advancing regulatory mindset that sweeps away all other accountability approaches, especially those based on trust.* Accreditation is thus pressured to become more regulatory but simultaneously criticized whenever it does so.

- *Actions of one or more accrediting agencies that displease a large number of people.* These might include enforcement of controversial policies and standards or practices, attitudes, or behaviors in specific accreditation reviews. Too often, the results are false extrapolation and manipulation by anecdote: "what one does, all will do" or "what happened once will happen again and again."

- *Ideological opposition to accreditation.* These attitudes range across a broad spectrum from those who feel that accreditation exercises authority that government or some other entity should have or control, to those who promote more or less centralization in reviews, to those who study or receive accreditation and evaluation but have no real influence on the actual operation of accrediting organizations. The result is constant effort from disparate sources to delegitimize accreditation and some or all accrediting bodies.

- *Use of propaganda and political techniques to create "newsworthy" texts and events that blame accreditation for problems it did not create and cannot solve, or even address, alone.* Student default rates and campus balkanization are ready examples. The result is revisionist history and policy based on false or too narrow premises that, in turn, promote cynicism and mistrust.

- *Anxieties of academic managers who respond to accreditation decisions.* As pressures increase to do more with less, presidents and provosts become concerned about responding to entities beyond their own campuses, especially with regard to deployment of resources. This anxiety can be a positive force in systems of checks and balances for accreditation, but too often it is pooled and manipulated to damage the partnership that should exist between campuses and accrediting bodies.

- *Education reform rhetoric that oversimplifies evaluation purposes, procedures, and accountability mechanisms.* The result is a scoreboard mentality that reduces everything to numbers and posts winners and losers in terms that misrepresent conditions for excellence. This mindset is naturally negative to accreditation. Even in its most specialized applications, accreditation requires comprehensive, integrated consideration of multiple factors and results presented in sophisticated combinations of facts and analysis, all of which are applied unequally to local situations.

- *Fear that expertise is being applied on behalf of parochial aggrandizement rather than the general interest.* Dedicated high competence can make people, organizations, and governments nervous. Thus, expertise is positioned as contrary, even inimical, to the public good.

- *Perceptions that accreditation is easy to attack with impunity.* Accreditors cannot retain integrity if they retaliate through accreditation decisions. The result is a lightning rod syndrome. Criticism of accreditation becomes a surrogate for myriad other frustrations.

In the recent past, transactions based on these and other negatives have caused the virtues and achievements of accreditation to be obscured. In Washington, the result has been government adventurism and private-sector dysfunction; amelioration has been slow, painful, and tenuous. But Washington is not the nation, and at the same time these negatives are being propagated, the national accreditation system continues to work, often producing tremendous results on behalf of learning. Of course, no organization or institution is perfect. Without doubt, criticism can be useful. But there is a difference between analytically effective criticism intended to improve and propaganda-based criticism crafted to destroy credibility and value. In a society that has lost distinctions between these two kinds of criticism, it is often necessary to provide forthright responses to inaccuracies which, when spin-doctored and repeated enough times, become negative myths almost impossible to counter by reasoned argument or evidence. When reason and evidence no longer matter, it is clear that propaganda technique has accomplished its malignant purpose: a negative knee-jerk reaction at the mention of a word. We are concerned that this condition has been reached about accreditation in enough quarters to require a forthright response.

Accreditation in General

What basic characteristics can be seen in the accreditation arena today? Accreditation is defined by three core elements: self-study by an institution or program; an on-site visit by peer evaluators; and review of the Self-Study document, evaluators' report, and any response of the institution or program by a peer commission that makes a decision based on published standards. There are numerous other common practices such as the publication of annual directories, inclusion of public members on decision-making bodies, and regular reviews of standards and criteria, to name but a few. Despite these commonalties, accrediting agencies exhibit many differences. This is as it should be. Each accreditation organization is devoted to a specific set of functions driven by particular modes of thought and action. These differences also demonstrate a strength of accreditation itself, the encouragement of diversity within basic commonality.

What are some of these differences? Some accreditation is tied directly to eligibility for governmental or other funds, or the eligibility of graduates to work in licensed professions. In these cases, accreditation is not truly voluntary. However, in other cases, there are no such linkages, and participation is based on decisions about value. Some accreditation operations are owned completely by institutions, others by professions. Some exhibit combined ownership. In addition, there are different approaches to governance, different definitions of peer review, different attitudes about mission, goals and objectives, and different organizational cultures. The same could be said of almost all other institutions and organizations in higher education, or indeed in American society as a whole.

Such diversity is healthy and reasonable; its presence leads to the inescapable conclusion that all accreditation and all accrediting bodies are not the same. This fact leads to another: It is inappropriate and unfair to suggest that an approach taken by one accreditor is taken by all, or that failures in specific instances indicate general failure in all agencies and the accreditation system as a whole. Whether derived from ignorance or conscious application of propaganda technique, such assertions are a detriment to constructive analysis and policy-making.

One additional point is essential: because confidentiality is required for effectiveness, accrediting bodies are not in the position to parade their specific successes before the public. Thus, an accrediting body faces public relations battles with an extreme disadvantage. Trust in accrediting agencies is derived from their aggregate work with institutions and programs, and from the maintenance of rigor, integrity, and consistency in accreditation reviews so that the public and the academic community can rely on decisions made. The search for the best stewardship to fulfill these responsibilities leads all accreditation organizations to seek continuous improvement. Standards, procedures, and policies are under constant review and change.

Accreditation in the Arts

Given the common and diverse characteristics of accrediting bodies, how do the arts associations approach their work? The comprehensive answer to this question can be found in the documents of the associations, their handbooks, their directories, statements of philosophy, project documents, analytical papers and so forth. A simpler answer can be made in seven points:

1. Arts accreditation is truly voluntary; there is no connection between accreditation and licensure, because for almost all arts disciplines and arts-related fields, licensure is inappropriate. Every institution or program that is accredited by one of the associations has volunteered to seek, maintain, and participate in the accreditation effort.

2. The accreditation standards of the associations are written in terms of student competencies. They emphasize function over method, ends over means, artistic and intellectual development over specifications of resources. This philosophy has been in effect since the beginning of arts accreditation in the 1920s, and has been pursued with particular rigor since the mid-1970s.

3. Each association is owned by its accredited institutional members. Although the associations maintain strong connections with various professions in the arts disciplines, it is member institutions, through their designated representatives, that have the final say.

4. The associations are centered in true peer review and peer governance. The accreditation process and the determination of standards and policies are made by those with expertise and experience in the disciplines, professions, and academic responsibilities of each art form.

5. Standards, bylaws, and other legal organizational documents are democratically developed and enacted after broad consultation. Every standard in force has been approved by representatives of member institutions and programs where the standards will be applied.

6. The associations operate under the principle of "the rule of laws, not persons." This means that standards, policies, protocols, and other written documents govern the actions of individuals and provide a framework for consistency and fairness.

7. Organizational structures reflect a separation of powers into policy, judicial and administrative functions. This structure is supported by multiple systems of checks and balances. No one person is ever "in charge" of everything.

Role and Value

1. **What is the value of NASAD, NASD, NASM, and NAST accreditation to the public?**

   Specialized accreditation in the arts disciplines:

   - Responds to society's demands for competent professionals. It helps ensure that practitioners who graduate from accredited programs have had formal preparation that meets nationally accepted standards of quality and relevance.

   - Renders institutions of higher education more accountable to the public for the quality of education they offer in specialized arts fields by identifying those educational programs that meet published standards.

- Provides the primary quality review mechanism for training in the arts disciplines. Because employment in the arts is gained and held more by presentation of accomplishment and promise than by credentials or licenses, accreditation of education programs takes on special importance in assuring the public of quality instruction.

2. How do students benefit?

Arts accreditation:

- Assures students that accredited programs meet established standards and thus provide education that will prepare them to pursue careers or further study in the arts.

- Provides students with clear descriptions of basic knowledge and skills needed to prepare for specific arts and arts-related professions.

- Identifies programs of institutions by type, specialization, content, and degree level.

- May facilitate employment opportunities for graduates by informing prospective employers, other professionals, and related industry representatives about standards established for the education of arts professionals.

3. Why do educational institutions participate?

NASAD, NASD, NASM, and NAST:

- Enhance accountability and autonomy in all of higher education by making available peer review assessments of the means by which educational institutions generate, transmit, and apply knowledge from professional arts disciplines and their various specialized fields.

- Facilitate and supplement the internal review processes institutions conduct, and thus validate and strengthen the quality of their professional educational offerings in the arts.

- Help foster a climate for ongoing program evaluation and endeavor to protect institutions and programs against encroachment that might jeopardize their institutional effectiveness or academic freedom.

- Use standards in the arts disciplines developed on a national consensus basis, so that widely accepted review criteria are used to evaluate the programs of study that institutions offer. At the same time, these criteria represent characteristics of excellence that allow a wide range of approach and method.

- Encourage programs and the institutions in which they are housed to assist each other in improving the quality of professional education through peer evaluation. One result is significant professional growth for faculty and administrators.

- Assist institutions in determining the acceptability of transfer of credits between similar programs of professional study.

- Identify programs worthy of receiving public and private support and provide, under certain legislation, one of several considerations used to determine institutional eligibility for federal financial assistance.

4. What do the arts professions gain?

Accreditation in the arts disciplines:

- Identifies for practitioners and their professional associations those educational programs deemed suitable to prepare individuals for entry into the professions.

- Enhances the image of the arts professions by providing professionally competent peer evaluations of the programs offered by institutions.

- Provides an organized means of combining professional wisdom and practice with programs and resources engaged in the artistic and academic preparation of future practitioners.

- Evaluates the scope, objectives, and quality of professional educational programs to assist in the modification of curricula to meet the evolving requirements of their respective fields.

Costs

1. Isn't accreditation expensive? How can we justify the cost?

Accreditation in the arts is one of the most economical forms of review and consultation available. Peer reviewers receive no compensation beyond personal satisfaction and professional development. Annual dues for arts accreditation remain low in comparison to other accrediting bodies, and to alternative review procedures. Although calculations will show different results for different situations, the average dues costs in the arts disciplines are only a few dollars per arts major student, considerably less than the usual cost of a single textbook. Clearly, arts accreditation costs, though real and continuous, are minimal in comparison to the overall expenses of most educational institutions. Given this fact, the real issue is not cost but value. Hundreds of institutions believe that their investment pays developmental dividends to their arts programs.

2. Doesn't arts accreditation take too much time?

All review procedures take time. The more comprehensive and integrated the procedure is, the more time it takes. In the arts, the ultimate question is not time, but results: Did the time spent produce something of value? In this spirit, the arts accreditation associations continue to refine their procedures and requirements to make reviews as efficient as possible without losing the kind of comprehensiveness and depth that makes a review worthwhile. The associations consciously minimize their presence on campus and keep periodic self-studies and visits to a reasonable minimum. Normally, this means that only one year in ten is spent in intensive preparation for full reviews.

3. Don't accreditors constantly find small reasons for shortened review cycles and extra on-site visits, resulting in additional costs to an institution?

No, just the opposite. Normally, when questions or problems arise in accreditation reviews, the arts commissions defer action and seek a response that reaches closure in the short term without sending more visitors. The exceptions are for performance and accountability issues that cannot be reviewed on paper. The associations use annual reports and mechanisms for reviewing substantive change between regular visits. Together, all these approaches save time and money for institutions and the associations while maintaining appropriate accountability and objectivity.

4. Does our investment buy anything besides accredited status?

Yes, much more, including linkage to other institutions engaged in similar and related efforts; participation in the setting of national standards; access to consultant and policy analysis services; and support of systems dedicated to academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and public accountability for professional work. Administrators and faculty engaged in these efforts benefit from professional development that, in turn, benefits their work at the institution. Statistical and other analytical services provide information useful in local decision-making. Common effort to assist each institution and program promotes the health of an education infrastructure that is the source of students and the eventual primary workplace of many graduates. Thus, each institution invests not just to promote the size, but also the quality of the educational enterprise in the arts.

Relationships to the Campus

1. Aren't specialized accrediting organizations just special interest groups seeking special advantages and unnecessary benefits for their particular disciplines or professions?

The arts accrediting associations focus on what students are learning, on what they know and what they are able to do. The associations' expertise is channeled into development of the competencies necessary to practice and carry forward the work of the arts disciplines. This expertise is applied in light of the specific mission, goals, and objectives of each institution and program. Thus, any concerns raised about resources must be correlated to purposes and aspirations established by the institution itself, and to the development of knowledge and skills indigenous to those purposes.

Since institutions of higher education justify themselves as centers for developing high levels of expertise, it hardly seems appropriate to equate expertise with inappropriate pursuit of special interest. Combinations of and negotiations among special interests or areas of expertise provide the basis for successful decision-making in complex organizations and societies. Careful, synergistic deployments of such special interests are responsible for in-depth advancements across a broad range of work. Thus, the main issue is not the presence of special expertise, but rather, expertise responsibly applied in terms of citizenship within a community. The principles, standards, and approaches of the arts accrediting associations concentrate on positive and productive citizenship both on individual campuses and within higher education as a whole.

2. Doesn't arts accreditation duplicate regional accreditation?

Regional accreditation ensures that the whole institution meets an inclusive set of institutionally oriented standards. Although the arts accrediting associations at times act as both institutional and specialized accreditors, in most cases, they act as specialized accreditors in regionally accredited institutions. The arts accreditors target student competencies in various specializations of the arts disciplines and the context that supports the development of specific competencies indigenous to the arts mission of specific institutions. Rather than duplicating the work of the regional bodies, NASAD, NASD, NASM, and NAST provide in-depth peer review processes centered on their arts disciplines and professions. Regional accreditation is not intended to serve the same functions, and it does not. The arts associations maintain procedures for concurrent or joint reviews with the regional bodies that are applied at the request of institutions.

3. **Is there any real difference between specialized accreditation in the arts and internal reviews mandated by campus authorities?**

Beyond the obvious difference of objectivity, the answer varies widely depending upon the content and orientation of specific internal reviews. In general, however, specialized accreditation is more comprehensive. It takes a more in-depth look at the relationship among wholes and parts, and relates the review to a national set of baseline standards and competencies. It provides not only on-site reviewers, but also formative and summative decisions by an external commission that works free of all specific institutional pressures and conditions. It also connects internal self-study with public accountability.

The arts accrediting associations support the concept of internal reviews and encourage combining them with accreditation reviews. Normally, a combined approach is more efficient, more comprehensive, more effective, and less expensive.

4. **Does arts accreditation duplicate state reviews?**

Like internal reviews, state-mandated reviews may address some of the same issues as arts accreditation; however, the arts accreditation process is always related first and foremost to a set of national standards established by an arts accrediting association through regular and extensive procedures for developing professional consensus. These standards do not change from state to state or from moment to moment. By federal law, both the setting of the standards and their application are completely removed from external political pressure and governmental decision-making; the review process is not under governmental control. State reviews are often targeted in specific directions, or conducted for a specific purpose such as resource or program allocations among institutions. The specialized accreditation review is always the same from institution to institution in terms of its basic purposes and the application of standards and procedures.

Over the years, the arts accrediting associations have participated in joint reviews on campus with state agencies. The associations are regularly contacted by state authorities for nominations of trained evaluators to conduct specific state-wide reviews. The arts accrediting associations support the states in carrying out their various responsibilities and encourage coordination of reviews at specific campuses wherever possible.

5. **Isn't accreditation intrusive, producing interference with local decision-making?**

The arts accrediting associations are fervent supporters of institutional autonomy. Their record is clear. Over many years, they have encouraged and protected independent thought and action. Since creativity is central to the arts disciplines, it is natural for the arts accreditors to respect autonomy. Without autonomy, there is no diversity, and without diversity, there is no creativity.

Charges of intrusion usually occur when accreditation agencies make specific demands that upset pre-determined priorities or schedules. Although such demands can be clearly derived from accreditation standards or represent interpretations of standards applied to specific institutions, most often problems occur when an accrediting body is insensitive to the mission, goals, objectives, and resource prospects of an institution; when it forces priorities rather than serving those with responsibility for setting them. The arts accrediting agencies work hard to respect conditions in institutions which normally include a desire to meet reasonable standards. The agencies do not demand amenities for programs as conditions for accreditation.

In addition, the associations draw a bright line between accreditation decisions and recommendations for improvement. They understand that large goals affecting budget priorities often require time. Their goal is to advocate and assist thoughtful decision-making at the institution rather than to intrude inappropriately in a partisan way.

6. **Is it true that accreditors always seek to find something negative, no matter how small? Isn't antagonism their basic posture?**

Accreditation in the arts is not primarily a search for problems, but rather a way of seeking a wise course of action based on relationships between accountability to national standards and institutional aspirations for improvement. Both the course and the search for it are primarily each institution's responsibility. The accreditation process provides a framework of standards, analytical techniques, a cyclical timeframe, expertise, and wisdom gained through years of study and experience.

Centered on peer review and peer governance, arts accreditation is conducted by colleagues representing institutions that share basic purposes. Those reviewing will also be reviewed. The associations prohibit a vigilante attitude. They refuse to act as controlling ministries, or to become pulverizing bureaucracies. Institutions or persons within them are not opponents or subjects to be regulated. Everyone—from students, to faculty, to arts administrators, to provosts, to presidents—is to be learned from, assisted, and served. This goal cannot be accomplished in an antagonistic spirit. Diplomacy, respect, patience, and focus on results are the principles of engagement.

7. **Aren't accreditors imperious about their decisions? Isn't it impossible to enter a dialogue once the commission has acted?**

Dialogue remains central to the arts accreditation process, including the period after commission action. Commission Action Reports continue the peer conversation about competency-based standards, aspirations, and quality. They are an event in a continuum; not a diktat.

All human processes are subject to miscommunication and error. The arts agencies try to make accurate, thoughtful decisions, but they are quick to admit mistakes and correct misunderstandings. They are more committed to preserving the integrity of information, analysis, and process than to building images of their power.

8. **Isn't accreditation focused more on compliance than improvement?**

Accreditation status means that published standards have been met. The accreditation process focuses on improvement based on a framework of standards. In most reviews, improvement receives far more attention than compliance. Indeed, the institution determines the proportion when it determines the goals for its self-study.

9. **Isn't accreditation controlled by agency staff?**

Not in arts accreditation, where staff have an administrative, not an evaluative, role, and where the focus is on the institution and not the accrediting association. Staff is available to consult with institutions about any aspect of the process, but does not set requirements or standards. All staff decisions must be consistent with published policies established through procedures mandated by the Bylaws and associated documents. The staff function is to keep the rules of the Association and to facilitate communication among peers engaged in accreditation reviews. Accreditation decisions are made by an elected Commission, not by staff.

General Policies

1. Are the arts accrediting agencies opposed to liberal education?

To the contrary, one of the first purposes behind the original development of arts accreditation was the uniquely American idea that general studies taught as the liberal arts had a vital role in the development of arts professionals. This turning from older European notions of pure vocational professionalism resulted in the development of professional undergraduate degrees such as the Bachelor of Fine Arts and Bachelor of Music. The associations also strongly support undergraduate liberal arts degrees with majors in an arts discipline. They protect the basic characteristics of each degree type. While the liberal arts degree is weighted in favor of general education, and the professional degree in favor of an arts discipline, a core of liberal studies and concentrated work in the arts major are essential elements of both.

2. Is accreditation primarily about leveraging resources in favor of arts programs?

No comprehensive review of any organization or program in any field can avoid the subject of resources. This truth is balanced by another: ample resources do not necessarily indicate excellence or even the meeting of threshold standards. Resources are only one part of a much larger equation. They are neither the starting nor the ending point, but rather threads in a fabric interwoven with purposes, aspirations, and program size, all of which are established by each institution. Resource issues may arise in accreditation reviews, but always in the context of basics necessary to develop student competencies, and always in light of institutional and program goals. However, many issues of standards and improvement are not fundamentally based in tangible resources.

If leveraging means making a reasoned case for resources based on locally determined purposes, the arts accreditors leverage, but if it means the application of inappropriate force, the arts accreditors avoid it. This position is taken on principle, but also reflects experience. Normally, institutions are aware of resource problems. Needs identified in the self-study are often on the way to consideration or resolution by the time the team arrives or the commission acts. Furthermore, the arts accreditors realize that in multipurpose institutions, resources must be shared; priorities and timetables for major resource allocations must be set locally.

3. Doesn't accreditation essentially enforce one model or one set of values?

We cannot speak for other accrediting efforts, but such an agenda would be folly in arts accreditation. The arts are centered on individuality, creativity, and personal vision. The standards for accreditation establish a common framework, the arts equivalent of a national decision to drive on the right side of the road or of par in golf. They do not tell people what kind or color of car they must buy or what course they must play on, or how they must learn to drive or play. The standards delineate competencies for work in various aspects of the professions at various levels. They represent frameworks for local decision-making. They establish baselines; not ultimate absolutes. They are benchmarks; not calipers. They assiduously avoid favoring specific methodologies, repertories, or subject matters, all of which are local responsibilities. Thus, accredited institutions and programs exhibit many different models and sets of values; in other words, diversity within community.

4. Doesn't accreditation standardize curricula?

In arts accreditation, standards represent a national consensus about basic competencies for various degrees and program levels. (Remember, the standards cannot be enacted except by vote of the

accredited institutions.) However, it is quite a leap from consensus on basic competencies to curricular standardization. The standards present common bodies of knowledge and skills, not course requirements or outlines. Looking across the programs of institutions accredited in the arts, one finds hundreds of curricular approaches. For example, one institution will develop a particular competency through a dedicated course; another will develop the same competency in the context of a more comprehensive course or series of experiences. The arts accreditors encourage local solutions to curriculum planning and implementation.

5. **Doesn't accreditation hamper innovation and experimentation?**

    Not in the arts disciplines. Innovation and experimentation are so central to the arts that inhibiting them would be self-defeating. Over the years, the arts accrediting associations have developed standards and procedural frameworks that both encourage and accept innovation. The associations' responsibility is to assure that innovation and experimentation are brought into programs in an effective manner, that they build student competencies, that they are properly supported, and that they have internal and external integrity. Fulfillment of this responsibility does not thwart innovation and experimentation, but instead ensures their health, growth, service, and long-term productivity.

6. **Doesn't arts accreditation inhibit interdisciplinary programs?**

    By the nature of their fields, arts professionals must be able to work in, across, and through a variety of disciplines. The arts operate in creative, recreative, analytical, and cultural areas that utilize intellectual techniques of the arts, the humanities, science, and the social sciences. Works of art address subject matter across the whole range of human action. The arts accrediting associations support integration and synthesis both within the art forms and between the arts and other disciplines.

    The associations are concerned, however, about clear distinctions between cores and connections with respect to the publication of specific curricular goals and objectives. Each discipline has its core set of knowledge and skills, the mastery of which enables basic fluency in the work of that discipline. Each is also connected to all others in myriad ways. The associations encourage the development of both cores and connections. However, as a matter of public accountability, they do become concerned when connections are substituted for cores or vice versa.

Public Relations

1. **Given the number of accredited institutions, is the accreditation process truly rigorous?**

    Accreditation is not awarded on a bell curve. A set of standards is developed, representing consensus about basic thresholds of acceptability for specific credentials and operations. Standards evolve over time and are rigorously applied as current at the time of initial membership and subsequently in periodic reviews.

    It is important to remember that the arts accreditation standards indicate what large numbers of professionals in the field deem essential rather than what one or a few deem to be best. There is broad consensus on what is essential. Consensus on what is best is virtually impossible. There is no single definition of "best." "Best" is determined in specific cases by individuals, institutions, and organizations as they make philosophical and operational decisions fulfilling responsibilities that are theirs alone. There is tremendous variety among programs traditionally considered outstanding. Instead of attempting to require or regulate toward a "best" that cannot be defined, the arts associations accredit on the basis of threshold necessities and work with the institutions through self-study and peer analysis to move each

institution as high in the realm of excellence as it can possibly go. This approach—accredit on essentials and encourage improvement—is effective in producing excellence, creativity, innovation, and experimentation in diverse ways. It maintains productive balances between autonomy and mutual accountability.

2. Isn't the credibility of the effort compromised by the absence of institutions whose programs I respect?

Compromised credibility is usually in the eye of the beholder; however, it is important to recall that affiliation with the arts accrediting associations is voluntary. Functional credibility rests more in the integrity with which the associations conduct their business than in the participation of specific institutions. The arts accreditation effort is not centered on public relations imagery, but rather on artistic and academic citizenship that embraces participation in a common effort to maintain standards and raise quality. Reasons for not participating range across a wide gamut of possibilities: unwillingness to engage in the work of membership; lack of support for the value of peer review; belief in self-validation; concerns about standards, readiness, or public relations, to name a few. The associations welcome the participation of every qualified institution, but understand that in a free society no particular service or affiliation is attractive to everyone.

3. Does arts accreditation have any impact on student recruitment?

The answer is yes and no, depending on the student. The arts accrediting associations receive daily inquiries from students and parents wanting to know which institutions are accredited, what accreditation means, and why it is important. Obviously, not all potential students are equally inquisitive or are willing to sustain a rigorous research effort when making their educational choices. However, there seems to be an increasing understanding of what accredited status means. Additionally, member institutions mention their accreditation status in publications and interviews. This plus public access to the associations' Web site is producing a new level of public exchange with the associations that will grow over time.

4. Hasn't the impact of accreditation been significantly eclipsed by the various national ratings programs?

Not really, and especially not among the thoughtful. National ratings are centered in public relations. Accreditation is not. Ratings provide a numerical representation of individual perceptions at a particular point in time developed through polling technique. Accreditation makes its decisions based on in-depth analysis of programs. Most of those participating in ratings projects have not visited the campuses they rate or otherwise studied them in-depth. Accreditation is based on a comprehensive on-site evaluation. Ratings are based on reputation. Accreditation is based on comparisons of institutions and programs with published standards. Similar distinctions could continue for some time, but it is clear that while each system has its functions, one is not a substitute for the other.

5. Are all schools on an accredited list equal or equivalent?

Since accreditation signifies meeting threshold standards concerning the development of student competencies, and since the standards are written in ways to encourage diversity among institutional approaches, meeting the standards does not signify equality or equivalence with all others that meet them. Accreditation status does signify the fulfillment of educational, organizational, and ethical responsibilities defined in common. It denotes achievement in the development of competencies necessary to work in various aspects of the arts professions. It does signify willingness to join with other institutions in a mutual effort to develop and meet threshold standards. But beyond these

commonalties, great differences play themselves out in every aspect of education, resulting in a positive demonstration of diversity and creativity. Missions, goals and objectives differ. Faculties and resources differ. Results differ, sometimes by field of specialization. Different institutions accomplish different things for different people. They serve different roles across the range of necessities for the conduct of the various arts disciplines. They reflect strong geographical, historical, and cultural differences. Accreditation thus identifies a certain level of commonality within a community, but it does not indicate sameness.

Futures

1. What is the future for arts accreditation?

Arts accreditation has a long and distinguished history, and it expects to have a long and distinguished future. Although times, conditions, and fashions change, peer review, service, respect for differences, and dedication to high standards continue. As is typical with successful accrediting bodies, the arts accrediting associations have grown slowly in membership over many decades. Their continuing focus on core issues, their commitments to thoughtful innovation, and their dedication to promoting and facilitating local improvement make affiliation attractive for hundreds of institutions. The future involves trying to become better at what the associations have always done and placing that work in all sorts of contexts to serve an increasing range of objectives. This means sustaining belief in the endurance of core values as practice and standards evolve, both from local work and common action of the membership. It also means sustaining faith in the power and legitimacy of peer governance and peer review as a developmental forum that promotes autonomy, diversity, and creativity.

2. How will the associations deal with change?

Enthusiastically, but also thoughtfully and carefully. The associations recognize a number of facts. Change is inevitable, but not every change is inevitable. Change can be good or bad. Change that is inevitable in one circumstance may not be in another, and change that is good in one circumstance may not be in another. Therefore, the role of the associations is to promote and facilitate the best possible thinking about specific changes in both national and local circumstances. The objective is to get deep below the surface of generic or particular change mantras to engage in sophisticated searches for wise decisions in specific places at specific times.

3. How do the associations help institutions work with the future?

In any work with futures questions, it is important to distinguish between what can be accomplished nationally, and what must be accomplished locally. For over ten years, the associations have been engaged in in-depth futures studies analyzing major trends and issues to support the best possible decision-making at the local level. On occasion, analysis has produced changes in accreditation standards. These always reflect a common commitment to changes beneficial to preparation of students. However, changes to standards are supported and enhanced by a much larger effort associated with providing information and analysis to be used in various ways and with various results by faculties and administrations throughout the nation. This approach supports diversity, creativity, and autonomy. It recognizes a broad range of mission, goals, and objectives necessary to produce the richness and depth of the arts in American higher education. It is based on a realistic assessment of how the arts work and how arts professionals go about their work. It is an approach that recognizes both past and present achievements while preparing to continue those achievements in

future conditions. It continues long and productive traditions of autonomy balanced by mutual accountability. It maintains a reciprocity of service, work, and professional exchange between institutions and the larger community of the arts in higher education.

A Final Word

This paper began with a dark analysis of values and conditions in higher education and society generally. It has ended with affirmations about the future, a belief that it is possible to work through this period of darkness and find or rediscover concepts and balances that generate light. The arts accrediting associations realize that fulfillment of this dream depends on many factors beyond their control. At base, all they can do is pledge two things: a commitment to the best possible service through accreditation and willingness to toil in partnership and good faith with any institution, organization, or individual that wishes to do the same on behalf of substantive knowledge and skills development. The arts accreditors will do what they can do—pledging, working, thinking, encouraging reason, seeking consensus, respecting differences, and serving. They offer these efforts in the cause of civilization, a fundamental purpose of both the arts and education.

APPENDIX I:
Code of Good Practice for the Accreditation Work
of NASAD, NASD, NASM, NAST

To fulfill its values, principles, and responsibilities in accreditation, each arts accreditor:

1. **Pursues its mission, goals, and objectives, and conducts its operations in a trustworthy manner.**

    *   Focuses primarily on educational quality, not narrow interests, or political action, or educational fashions.
    *   Demonstrates respect for the complex interrelationships involved in the pursuit of excellence by individual institutions or programs.
    *   Exhibits a system of checks and balances in its standards development and accreditation procedures.
    *   Maintains functional and operational autonomy.
    *   Avoids relationships and practices that would provoke questions about its overall objectivity and integrity.
    *   Analyzes criticism carefully and responds appropriately by explaining its policies and actions and/or making changes.

2. **Maximizes service, productivity, and effectiveness in the accreditation relationship.**

    *   Recognizes that teaching and learning, not accredited status, are the primary purposes of institutions and programs.
    *   Respects the expertise and aspirations for high achievement already present and functioning in institutions and programs.
    *   Uses its understanding of the teaching and learning focus and the presence of local expertise and aspirations as a basis for serving effectively at individual institutions and programs.
    *   Keeps the accreditation process as efficient and cost-effective as possible by minimizing the use of visits and reports, and by eliminating, wherever possible, duplication of effort between accreditation and other review processes.
    *   Works cooperatively with other accrediting bodies to avoid conflicting standards, and to minimize duplication of effort in the preparation of accreditation materials and the conduct of on-site visits.
    *   Provides the institution or programs with a thoughtful diagnostic analysis that assists the institution or program in finding its own approaches and solutions, and that makes a clear distinction between what is required for accreditation and what is recommended for improvement of the institution or program.

3. **Respects and protects institutional autonomy.**

    *   Works with issues of institutional autonomy in light of the commitment to mutual accountability implied by participation in accreditation, while at the same time, respecting the diversity of effective institutional and programmatic approaches to common goals, issues, challenges, and opportunities.
    *   Applies its standards and procedures with profound respect for the rights and responsibilities of institutions and programs to identify, designate, and control (a) their respective missions, goals, and objectives; (b) educational and philosophical principles and methodologies used to pursue functions implicit in their various missions, goals, and objectives; (c) specific choices and approaches to content; (d) agendas and areas of study pursued through scholarship, research, and policy developments; (e) specific personnel choices, staffing configurations, administrative structures, and other operational decisions; and (f) content, methodologies, and timing of tests, evaluations, and assessments.
    *   With respect to professional schools and programs, recognizes the ultimate authority of each academic community for its own educational policies while maintaining fundamental standards and

fostering consideration of evolving needs and conditions in the profession and the communities it serves.

4. **Maintains a broad perspective as the basis for wise decision making.**

   - Gathers and analyzes information and ideas from multiple sources and viewpoints concerning issues important to institutions, programs, professions, publics, governments, and others concerned with the content, scope, and effectiveness of its work.
   - Uses the results of these analyses in formulating policies and procedures that promote substantive, effective teaching and learning, that protect the autonomy of institutions and programs, and that encourage trust and cooperation within and among various components of the larger higher education community.

5. **Focuses accreditation reviews on the development of knowledge and competence.**

   - Concentrates on results in light of specific institutional and programmatic missions, goals, objectives, and contexts.
   - Deals comprehensively with relationships and interdependencies among purposes, aspirations, curricula, operations, resources, and results.
   - Considers techniques, methods, and resources primarily in light of results achieved and functions fulfilled rather than the reverse.
   - Has standards and review procedures that provide room for experimentation, encourage responsible innovation, and promote thoughtful evolution.

6. **Exhibits integrity and professionalism in the conduct of its operations.**

   - Creates and documents its scope of authority, policies, and procedures to ensure governance and decision making under a framework of "laws not persons."
   - Exercises professional judgment in the context of its published standards and procedures.
   - Demonstrates continuing care with policies, procedures, and operations regarding due process, conflict of interest, confidentiality, and consistent application of standards.
   - Presents its materials and conducts its business with accuracy, skill, and sophistication sufficient to produce credibility for its role as an evaluator of educational quality.
   - Is quick to admit errors in any part of the evaluation process, and equally quick to rectify such errors.
   - Maintains sufficient financial, personnel, and other resources to carry out its operations effectively.
   - Provides accurate, clear, and timely information to the higher education community, to the professions, and to the public concerning standards and procedures for accreditation, and the status of accredited institutions and programs.
   - Corrects inaccurate information about itself or its actions.

7. **Has mechanisms to ensure that expertise and experience in the application of its standards, procedures, and values are present in members of its visiting teams, commissions, and staff.**

   - Maintains a thorough and effective orientation, training, and professional development program for all accreditation personnel.
   - Works with institutions and programs to ensure that site teams represent a collection of expertise and experience appropriate for each specific review.
   - Conducts evaluations of personnel that involve responses from institutions and programs that have experienced the accreditation process.
   - Conducts evaluations of criteria and procedures that include responses from reviewers and those reviewed.

APPENDIX II:

A PHILOSOPHY FOR
ACCREDITATION IN THE ARTS DISCIPLINES

A Statement of
National Association of Schools of Music
National Association of Schools of Art and Design
National Association of Schools of Theatre
National Association of Schools of Dance

Professional Responsibility, Public Benefit

Dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts are professions requiring talent, knowledge, skill, and dedication. Professional artists have created some of man's highest achievements. Yet, artists need no license to practice: employment and success depend almost entirely on competence demonstrated through audition or portfolio review. Respect, even initially, is based primarily on work as an artist rather than on academic credentials. Capabilities as artists are also central to work in interdisciplinary professions requiring formal credentials such as the creative arts therapies and teaching the arts disciplines in the public schools.

Professionals know from personal experience that art, though dependent on talent, inspiration, and creativity, requires much more to function as a significant spiritual and educational force. Talent without skills, inspiration without knowledge, and creativity without technique count for little but lost potential.

In fulfilling their responsibilities to the futures of their respective arts, professionals seek to ensure that each individual's artistic potential is realized to the maximum extent possible. Therefore, the establishment and operation of education and training programs for artists have been concomitant with the development of the arts disciplines. This tradition, which began in Europe, has been continued and extended in the United States which now enjoys the benefits of numerous, diverse, and effective means for the preparation of professional artists. Institutions with a broad range of objectives in the arts are geographically distributed throughout the nation.

Consistent with its free enterprise philosophy, the United States has relied primarily on the concept of self-regulation for improving the quality of institutionalized education. Growing from the concept of self-regulation, and integral to it in educational affairs, is the technique of accreditation, which involves the establishment of standards and guidelines, self-evaluation, and peer review. Although accreditation represents a generic technique, it can be used to create results uniquely useful to specific educational programs. In addition, the process of accreditation reflects many concepts used in creating or recreating works of art. Both accreditation and making art involve the use of conventions as bases for inspired creativity or as points of departure; both are effective to the extent that their elements and procedures are rationally integrated; and both are successful to the extent that the final product reflects uniqueness of its source and concept while fulfilling commonly held objectives.

In summary, professional responsibility, the nature of the arts enterprise, characteristics of quality development in American higher education, and similarities between the artistic and accreditation

processes, combine to establish the context for voluntary, nongovernmental accreditation among institutions preparing individuals for careers in dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts.

This context now supports four autonomous accrediting associations, one for each discipline. Thus, the chain begun with professional responsibility results in public benefit, because the accreditation process is a powerful means of assuring the integrity and effectiveness of the education process. Further, accreditation works to ensure that opportunities will be available for those who have talent to develop skills, for those who are inspired to acquire knowledge, and for those who are creative to become technically proficient. These transfers from natural ability to professional competence are essential if our society is to continue its high level of contribution to the development of civilization.

Additionally, accreditation in the arts disciplines provides a mechanism for quality assessment and enhancement without resort to government control of or interference in the content of education for professional artists. Accreditation is also the most cost-effective review mechanism possible because most of the work is done by volunteers who donate their time and expertise to the evaluation process. Finally, and perhaps most important, accreditation stands as the primary mechanism for addressing issues of educational quality at the national level in dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts because individual licensure or certification is inappropriate for most aspects of these professions.

Organizational Structures, Evaluation Mechanism

The National Association of Schools of Music, founded in 1924, is the oldest arts accrediting agency in the United States. The National Association of Schools of Art and Design followed in 1944, the National Association of Schools of Theatre was established in 1965 but reorganized in its present, autonomous form in 1980, and the National Association of Schools of Dance was founded in 1981. Each of these associations is operated by its member institutions. Representatives of member institutions hold elected offices and serve as volunteers in the accreditation process. Since 1981, all four associations have shared the same national office utilizing the services of the same office personnel. This arrangement combines the virtues of efficiency and autonomy based on differences among the disciplines with possibilities for cooperation on projects of mutual concern.

In addition, the four associations share a common philosophy about the role, scope, and purpose of accreditation. This philosophy provides the base from which each organization fulfills its responsibilities to the many constituencies that consider the accreditation status of an institution in their own decision-making processes.

The evaluation mechanisms used for accreditation in the arts disciplines are consistent with those of most educational accrediting organizations. They include:

- development of standards and guidelines having the validity of logical exposition and professional consensus;

- extensive self-evaluation by the unit to be accredited;

- on-site review by peers to verify and extend conclusions reached during self-evaluation;

- final review of all documentation by an independent commission of peers and public members which makes an accreditation decision based on compliance with previously established standards and develops recommendations for improvements;

- public designation of institutions and/or programs that have received accreditation.

These techniques are effective in assessing the extent to which an institution maintains a level of performance, integrity, and quality deserving the confidence of the educational community and the public. However, to be effective, any technique requires an appropriate set of underlying values and the attention of skilled practitioners to make it productive and worthwhile.

Operational Premises, Analytical Integrity

NASM, NASAD, NAST, and NASD are controlled by their respective members: educational institutions that have agreed to establish and operate a mechanism of self-regulation and self-improvement. This ensures that the accreditation process and the other work of each Association are focused on providing services to its members. No outside organizations or groups have ultimate authority over the policies, directions, or accreditation standards of the four organizations. Autonomy is thus assured as a continuous foundation for all operations.

Although each organization retains its prerogative to make decisions solely on the basis of action by its institutional members, serious attention is given to the need for advice and counsel from individuals and groups beyond each membership. This is especially important in the development of accreditation standards, since these standards must reflect both the conditions and expectations for professional practice in the various arts disciplines.

Each of the arts accrediting associations is committed to the concept of accreditation as a service to support the capabilities and aspirations of professional education and training programs. Each of the organizations remains viable only to the extent that it is able to provide services supporting the work of its members. For most institutional members of the four accrediting agencies, there is neither licensure nor any other set of conditions to intervene in the voluntary nature of accreditation in the arts disciplines. Thus, while educational accreditation in general began as a voluntary endeavor, accreditation in the arts disciplines is one of the few accreditation efforts where a pure voluntary system remains in effect. Each of the four arts accrediting bodies is committed to the preservation of this condition.

NASM, NASAD, NAST, and NASD also share a common approach to delineation of responsibilities within the accreditation process. In addition to avoiding conflicts of interest, assignment of specific roles ensures that the accreditation process is fair and consistently applied from institution to institution and program to program. Essentially, these roles are as follows:

- The membership determines standards and guidelines for accreditation in consultation with a broad range of applicable constituencies. Each member institution volunteers to prepare a self-study and to be reviewed against these standards.

- On-site evaluators review the institution's self-study and the operating program of the institution as fact-finders for the accrediting commission.

- The accrediting commission reviews all materials developed in the process and makes an accreditation decision on behalf of the Association.

- The Board of Directors and its Executive Committee serve as policy development and review bodies particularly concerned with mechanisms for reviewing and developing the overall effectiveness of the accreditation process. These groups establish and monitor procedures for formulating and revising standards and conduct all business of the Association to provide a supportive context for the accreditation effort. The Board of Directors also acts as an appeal body in matters of accreditation.

- The staff manages the accreditation process and ensures that all procedures, policies, and operations are carried out fairly and in accordance with association practice. The staff does not engage in evaluations of institutions or programs, nor does it take overt responsibility for operating the accreditation process at specific institutions. The staff does provide consultative services when requested to do so, and is involved extensively in the development of literature, workshops, and other services to assist institutions in structuring their own uses of requisite accreditation procedures.

This delineation of responsibilities whereby institutional members, Boards of Directors, and Executive Committees exercise policy functions, Commissions exercise accreditation review functions, and staff exercises procedural management functions produces an accreditation system that historically has been rigorous, yet almost totally free of conflict. Simultaneously, the system produces outstanding specific results as well as long-term growth in the capabilities of arts programs in higher education.

The four arts accrediting associations strive to maintain a balance between tradition and change in their approaches to all aspects of the accreditation process. There is a conscious effort to analyze each emerging trend to determine the extent to which it represents significant evolution or passing fad. The associations are grounded in the ancient and basic traditions of the arts disciplines, and thus recognize that consistency and continuity are more important to the success of their work than being able to claim change for change's sake. Despite this analytical and conservative approach, the four organizations have been pioneers in such areas as competency-based accreditation standards, statistical services in support of accreditation, and outcomes assessment in on-site evaluation. Each of the associations has also moved expeditiously to develop appropriate accreditation capabilities for emerging and interdisciplinary work related to their various fields. Clearly, cautious deliberation has characterized their philosophical approaches more than their operating styles.

Cooperation with other elements of the American accreditation system also has been a central premise in arts accreditation. The two oldest agencies, NASM and NASAD, have a long record of cooperation with other institutional and regional accrediting bodies. All four associations have agreements among themselves and with other accrediting bodies concerning joint reviews and interdisciplinary curricula.

Each association is also service-oriented, regarding the accreditation process as an integral part of each institution's program of self-improvement. Each cooperates with institutions and other organizations to ensure that the accreditation process is efficient, cost-effective, and as serviceable as possible in a variety of institutional contexts involving internal and external evaluation.

The analytical integrity of the accreditation process in the arts depends upon utilization of knowledgeable and skilled evaluators, constant attention to the appropriateness and utility of standards and guidelines statements, clarity and reliability of accreditation procedures, and respect for institutional autonomy. Each of the associations has extensive procedures to ensure ongoing attention to these issues.

Regular efforts are made to identify, prepare, and develop individuals with the interests, aptitudes, and willingness to serve effectively as volunteers in the accreditation process. In order to assure consistency and maintain continuity, these volunteers are professional artists, teachers, and administrators serving as representatives of their institutions to each association. Each volunteer is briefed extensively, not only on the policies and practices of each association, but on the values, philosophies, and organizational purposes essential to appropriate application of its standards and

procedures. Continuing education for experienced volunteers is an essential feature in maintaining a highly-qualified pool of individuals directly involved with accreditation as on-site evaluators and commission members.

Standards review and development are continuous efforts. On occasion, comprehensive reviews of all accreditation standards are undertaken. In periods between these comprehensive reviews, portions of the standards are evaluated in detail. This produces an evolutionary cycle which not only assures that standards are kept current with professional practice, but also maintains standards statements as living documents.

At least three times during the course of the accreditation process, each institution has an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of its specific accreditation review. Accreditation procedures are basically the same among all accrediting associations operating in the United States, although there are many variations on common practice. Studies of these variations by the arts accrediting agencies, as well as internal and external reviews of their own operations, ensure continuing development of the best possible procedures for evaluation of professional education and training in the arts disciplines.

Coupled with the premise that accreditation is a service to institutions is an operational concept that emphasizes the importance of institutional autonomy. Institutions volunteering to be a part of the accreditation process do so recognizing that a primary purpose of accreditation is to foster excellence in postsecondary education through the development of uniform national criteria and guidelines for assessing educational effectiveness. However, participating institutions must also be assured that the existence of standards will not result in standardization. This view is strongly shared by all four arts accrediting agencies. All personnel involved with arts accreditation are reminded constantly that each institution is unique because it is the result of the work of many individual craftsmen, not an automated assembly line. Therefore, analytical integrity must rest on a foundation of respect for the uniqueness of each institution and must be based on the premise that accreditation ultimately reviews the extent to which important functions are being served rather than the extent to which particular methods are being utilized.

Evaluation Concepts, Developmental Results

A direct result of accreditation has been the establishment of common definitions for certain academic credentials. Both degree titles and degree levels have been defined largely through the work of institutional and specialized accrediting agencies. These definitions, along with guidelines concerning institutional resources necessary to support academic work, form the basis for any accreditation effort.

Obviously, accreditation standards must be sufficiently detailed to provide adequate criteria for the evaluation process. However, the accreditation effort can be hampered severely if standards become too detailed and prescriptive. No matter what an agency's operational philosophy, over-prescription will turn the accreditation process from attention to function to enforcement of method. A focus on method quickly leads to problems with institutional autonomy, since method by definition is concerned with matters of operational detail.

NASM, NASAD, NAST, and NASD promote a concept of evaluation which focuses on the need for (1) balance between qualitative and quantitative methods and (2) recognition of appropriate interrelationships among rational, analytical, statistical, and inspirational approaches in educational programs preparing artists, teachers of the arts disciplines, and other arts professionals.

- First, there is recognition of the distinction between (1) accreditation as an indication that an institution's program in an arts discipline has met basic standards for accreditation in that discipline, and (2) accreditation as a primary mechanism for review and improvement. While it is the purpose of accreditation to provide periodic assurance that institutions and programs are indeed beyond the threshold of acceptability, the arts accrediting associations attempt to go far beyond this basic responsibility while maintaining a posture of service. The accreditation effort is devoted to providing institutions with an opportunity to use the resources and expertise of each association in a program of local development. The goal is improvement based primarily on an assessment of the relationship of institutional objectives and resources, but extending beyond this assessment into short- and long-term planning, programmatic change, and operational advancements. Ultimately, the process should place each institution in a position to review how well its curricula contribute to, and provide leadership for, the particular arts discipline under review.

- Second, each association regards each specific accreditation procedure as the property of the institution rather than the property of the association. The associations view the accreditation process as an encouragement to individual thought and action at the local level rather than an opportunity to impose standards, procedures, and methods from the national level. Although association standards and procedures are guidelines within which the accreditation process is expected to operate, they are also springboards to new approaches, both with respect to the educational program of each institution and to the accreditation process which reviews it. For this reason, the associations leave much to each institution with respect to specific organization and development of its self-study procedure. While advice and counsel are readily available and constantly sought, no heavy association presence is imposed on preparations for on-site evaluation or Commission review. This represents additional evidence of each association's strong commitment to the concept of institutional autonomy and control.

- Third, the associations exhibit a common approach to evaluation at various academic levels. Following academic practice in the United States, association standards are more detailed for undergraduate education than for graduate education. While the accreditation process is devoted to results at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, respect for diversity and institutional autonomy leads to recognition that the higher the level of education, the more opportunities there are for workable variations in approach.

- Fourth, there is attention to maintaining appropriate connections between accreditation and public relations. Clearly, being accredited has public relations advantages. As important as it is, however, public relations is not a primary purpose of the accreditation effort. Rather than emphasizing images, accreditation provides an opportunity for institutions to work together in a substantive self-improvement program that benefits the entire field in which accreditation is conducted, and thus the public at large. This self-improvement program is important regardless of any specific institution's current reputation, particular strengths and weaknesses, geographic location, or future prospects. Accrediting bodies are often asked to provide a list of "the best" institutions. It important to remember that at any moment a list of "the best," given any particular set of parameters, would include only one institution. A change in parameters would result in a change of institution. Further, a working definition of "best" is most elusive since the best institution for one individual is not necessarily the best for another. Therefore, the type of exclusiveness conferred by the awarding of accreditation is an exclusiveness based in large part on the meeting of standards deemed fundamental to operation of educational programs at certain levels, but also in some part, on the presence of an institutional approach

to educational and cultural development that recognizes the importance of mutual cooperation, peer review, and self-regulation.

- Finally, the evaluation concepts important to the arts accrediting agencies necessarily reflect the working procedures, techniques, and thought processes indigenous to the arts enterprise itself. Of course, evaluation of works of art, even by professionals, is highly subjective, especially with respect to contemporary work. Therefore, there is a built-in respect for individual points of view. At the same time, in all of the arts disciplines, there is recognition that communication through works of art is impossible unless the artist possesses a significant technique in his or her chosen medium. Professional education in the arts disciplines must be grounded in the acquisition of just such a technique. This is the case whether the individual is a practicing artist, historian, theorist or critic, a teacher of art, an arts therapist, or an administrator. Accreditation of professional training programs in the arts disciplines must therefore reflect attention to the provision of requisite knowledge and skills to allow individual talents, inspirations, and creativities to grow and flower. The evaluation concepts of the four accrediting associations focus on assuring that these opportunities are present for the development of student abilities.

The evaluation concepts explained above produce a variety of results as they are applied to different types of institutions and programs. Often, these results are developmental in the sense that they produce ideas for immediate improvement or questions for immediate resolution. However, the accreditation process should do much more than address immediate concerns. It should provide a long-term developmental service to the work of the institution. The developmental results can occur only when the structure of the accreditation process facilitates the use of accreditation in long-term analysis and planning and when personnel at the institution actively seek to use the accreditation effort as a developmental tool.

Quality, Diversity, and Cultural Development

The American system for delivering postsecondary education is diverse by design. There is a wide variety of educational objectives, institutions, and curricular formats. This diversity provides real strength in the development of American culture. It recognizes that individuals have a variety of needs and talents that each individual should have the opportunity to develop his or her specific talents to the highest possible level. In addition to its benefits, diversity also brings its challenges. For example, the broad range of objectives held by various institutions and programs in higher education makes the job of defining quality more difficult that would be the case if all institutions intended to produce exactly the same result.

The relationship of quality to diversity is problematic in all facets of American educational development; however, it provides particular challenges in the arts disciplines. The linkage between art and quality is axiomatic among those with even the most cursory knowledge of great works in the arts disciplines. This concept of quality is based in judgment about the particular effectiveness of a given performance or work of art.

However, there is another concept of quality that is equally important. This involves the development of capabilities and contexts for quality over long periods of time. The education and training of professional artists is an example of such a process.

Accreditation of professional education and training programs in the arts disciplines has the continuing challenge of grappling with the issues of quality and diversity while dealing simultaneously with both immediate and long-term quality assessment. The record of arts

accreditation in the United States demonstrates that the philosophical approach outlined above can accomplish these difficult operations in a variety of institutional settings. Accreditation has shown that it can establish reasonable standards and expectations common to the development of professionals in each arts field while recognizing diverse approaches to the application of those standards to evaluations of specific curricula. Accreditation has also shown that it can find a balance between assessments of quality based on immediate impressions of student work and projections of an institution's ability to contribute to the long-term development process essential for quality work in the art form. These connections are particularly important because of the significant role that American institutions of higher education committed to professional training in the arts disciplines play in the maintenance and development of our nation's capabilities in the arts.

Thus, the institutional members of NASM, NASAD, NAST, and NASD are committed to accreditation and convinced of its importance not only in the context of higher education, but also in the development of American culture. Nevertheless, the character of this commitment is molded by the realization that accreditation is a means rather than an end in itself. This realization both confirms and regenerates the commitment of each association to serve and support diverse approaches for developing professionals who will have primary responsibilities for our nation's cultural future.

NOTES AND RESOURCES

- The section entitled "Role and Value" was adapted from an earlier document entitled *The Role and Value of Specialized Accreditation in the Arts Disciplines.*

- The standards and policies of each arts accrediting association are contained in its *Handbook*.

- Each association's *Membership Procedures* documents provide detailed information about the review process.

- The associations publish many documents to assist institutional planning and improvement, including sets of assessment questions on various topics, briefing papers, futures studies, and projection techniques.

- All publications may be found on the respective Associations' Web sites, all of which may be reached via **http://www.arts-accredit.org**.

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