

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 is 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 accreditation 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 is responsible for managing the accreditation process, and for ensuring that all procedures, policies, and operations are carried out fairly and in accordance with association practice. The staff does not engage in evaluations of programs, nor does staff take overt responsibility for operating the accreditation process at specific institutions. However, the staff is responsible for providing 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. However, public relations, as important as it is, 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 than 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.

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