

## **The Commission's Commitment to Effective Peer Review**

Peer review in accreditation is based on the fundamental assumption that quality in higher education is best served through a process that enables peers of the organization, informed by standards best understood and applied by professionals in higher education, to make the comparative judgments essential to quality assurance. At every step in the accreditation processes, higher learning professionals contribute their time and expertise to render the judgments and establish the policies that embody the Commission's primary purposes: organizational improvement and public certification of organizational quality. Peer review means bringing expert judgment based on experience and knowledge to the evaluation process—from setting the standards, to conducting the evaluation, to making final decisions. In all accreditation processes and events, judgment, reason, and the documentation of evidence are critical to effective peer review, for the Commission's decision on the accreditability of an organization rests on qualitative criteria rather than on inflexible or absolute quantitative standards. Thus, peer reviewers play a far more critical role in the accreditation process than would be the case if it relied on a more automatic or "checklist" approach to determining educational quality.

### **The Peer Review Corps**

The Commission relies on a cadre of carefully selected and trained professionals who serve the Commission in its accreditation processes. This group of more than a thousand individuals is called the Peer Review Corps. These volunteers are marked by their knowledge of and direct experience with higher education, their willingness to give generously of their time and expertise, their dedication to educational excellence, and their commitment to the principles underlying voluntary accreditation.

### **Responsibilities of Peer Reviewers**

Whether involved in the Eligibility Process, PEAQ, or AQIP, peer reviewers have two primary responsibilities. They offer consultative information intended to help improve the quality of an organization's education and services, and they evaluate and confirm the quality of an organization of higher learning, using the Commission's written criteria as a foundation for their evaluation. For peer review to maintain its credibility as an effective tool in self-regulation and self-improvement, peer reviewers must be professional, competent, and objective. They are expected to know and understand the Criteria for Accreditation and the accreditation processes. They must demonstrate a willingness to commit the time to the betterment of higher education. They must possess the ability to learn and apply skills and aptitudes particular to the work of the Commission. They are expected to prepare well so as to be informed and knowledgeable about the organization, to make fair and objective judgments using relevant information, to participate effectively in review processes, to interact effectively with other peer reviewers and organizational staff and students, to protect confidentiality, and to show respect for the organization and the people associated with it.

Peer reviewers commit to participating in the Commission's professional development opportunities, confirming objectivity for each proposed assignment, and undergoing periodic performance evaluation.

### **The Roles of Peer Reviewers within the Commission's Processes**

Members of the Peer Review Corps are identified by experience and training to fill specific roles within Commission processes.

- ◆ Eligibility reviewers support the Eligibility Process by reviewing the documents of nonaffiliated organizations seeking to affiliate with the Commission.
- ◆ Consultant-evaluators serve PEAQ processes and the Candidacy Program as team members and team chairs; some specially trained consultant-evaluators serve in the Team Chair Corps, from which the chairs of evaluation teams are drawn.
- ◆ AQIP reviewers serve AQIP processes.

### **Selection and Training of Peer Reviewers**

The Commission staff review and select new Peer Review Corps members every year. In so doing, the Commission strives to maintain a diverse and representative group that can effectively serve its purposes. Only people who apply to serve as peer reviewers are considered for membership in the Peer Review Corps. College and university presidents are informed of all appointments to the Corps from their institutions.

During the late 1950s, the Commission adopted the policy of developing and maintaining a corps of trained and experienced peer reviewers, reasoning that restricting the number of peer reviewers would enhance the reliability of evaluation processes and would quickly develop the professionalism of the peer reviewers. The restricted size of the Corps allows peer reviewers to be regularly involved in review processes, developing in a short period of time the experience, wisdom, and sensitivity necessary for effective peer review.

Because the Commission employs teams and individuals who collectively embody much training and experience in conducting evaluations, the Commission's teams tend to be relatively small. Also, because of the Commission's commitment to peer review and the experience level of peer reviewers, it is unnecessary for Commission staff members to accompany teams or individuals during evaluation processes. To ensure currency and vitality in the Peer Review Corps, the Commission strives to involve every peer reviewer in one or two accreditation events annually.

The Commission continually improves the effectiveness of the Corps through enhanced education and training programs; through its processes for recruiting, screening, and selecting peer reviewers; and through ongoing evaluations. Prior to full membership and service as peer reviewers, corps members must complete required training programs; and they are expected to pursue additional Commission-related professional development opportunities throughout their term of service. New peer reviewers receive additional mentoring from experienced peer reviewers when participating in Commission processes. Peer reviewers serve an initial

internship term and may be reappointed to multiyear terms. At the end of each term, Commission staff members review their work and decide whether service will be continued.