

# **AGB-CHEA Joint Advisory Statement**

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## on Accreditation and Governing Boards



**AGB** ASSOCIATION OF  
GOVERNING BOARDS  
OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

**CHEA** Council for  
Higher Education  
Accreditation  
CHEA International Quality Group **CIQG**



1133 20<sup>th</sup> Street NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20036

## About AGB

The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) is the premier membership organization that strengthens higher education governing boards and the strategic roles they serve within their organizations. Through our vast library of resources, educational events, and consulting services, and with 100 years of experience, we empower 40,000 AGB members from more than 2,000 institutions and foundations to navigate complex issues, implement leading practices, streamline operations, and govern with confidence. AGB is the trusted resource for board members, chief executives, and key administrators on higher education governance and leadership.

AGB works to identify emerging trends and issues in higher education governance and to promote their visibility by conducting research, developing publications, facilitating programs, and serving as a guide to address challenges and opportunities. The association focuses exclusively on higher education governance and helps board members and other higher education leaders assess their governance policies, practices, and strategies to improve performance, build leadership capacity, and plan for the future. AGB's comprehensive portfolio of information and services for boards and chief executives is nationally recognized. Our ultimate goal is to ensure that higher education remains a strong and vital national asset.

## About CHEA

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a nonprofit organization started by college and university presidents in 1996 in an effort to respond to the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Congress, as well as to “recognize” institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations in the United States. CHEA “recognition” indicates that an accrediting organization has met rigorous CHEA standards for the promotion of academic quality, institutional improvement, and advancement of student success; demonstration of public accountability for performance and transparency; and sustains an effective accreditation structure and organization.

It was the efforts of these presidents who insisted that universities should be the primary determinants of quality academic performance. The institutional and program “self-study” processes and the philosophy of academic continuous improvement are the cornerstones of CHEA's advocacy and recognition. For more than 25 years, CHEA has been the primary advocate for institutions in the accreditation process. Previous years have indicated a growing assertive effort by the federal government to issue more regulations regarding academic quality in higher education, which are often tied to federal funding. CHEA continues to advocate on behalf of public, private, two- and four-year degree-granting institutions.

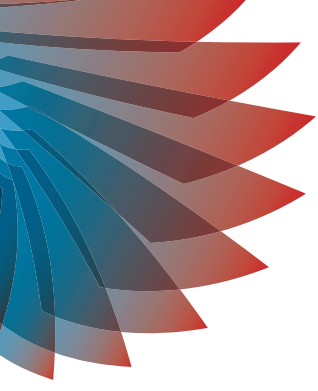
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This joint advisory statement was approved by the board of directors of AGB and by CHEA and represents the best thinking of both organizations on the relationship of governing boards to the process of accreditation.



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# PREFACE

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The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) have both recognized the importance of engaging governing boards in the accreditation process. AGB affirms<sup>1</sup> that a key element of board accountability for educational quality and institutional autonomy is awareness of and engagement in the process by which the institution and its various educational programs are accredited. CHEA recognizes and values the responsibility that governing boards share in helping colleges and universities attain the highest possible standards for good governance, management, and student success,<sup>2</sup> and it actively encourages the involvement of governing boards in this process.<sup>3</sup>

While accreditation is a critical tool for quality assurance and accountability for higher education, many—perhaps most—board members lack a solid understanding of what accreditation is and why it signals an institution’s commitment to academic quality and fiscal integrity. To help governing boards better understand the process of accreditation, AGB and CHEA have published this updated report; the first was published in 2009 in response to heightened concern about higher education academic quality and heightened pressure for accountability. The higher education landscape has changed significantly since 2009; institutions are operating within an extremely challenging environment—one of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. In addition to the extraordinary stresses posed by the pandemic, including the shift to remote instruction, higher education institutions are grappling with the now routine stresses of declining enrollment, increased public skepticism

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- 1 *AGB Statement on Board Accountability*, adopted by the AGB Board of Directors, January 17, 2007.
  - 2 *New Leadership for Student Learning and Accountability: A Statement of Principles, Commitments to Action*. AACU and CHEA, 2008.
  - 3 *A Board Member’s Guide to Accreditation*, CHEA, 2016.

about the value of higher education, declining state funding, and financial sustainability. They are also grappling with new challenges and opportunities related to freedom of speech and goals of justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion across all institutional levels. Yet another challenge is balancing the promise of technology with sound pedagogy and programmatic and institutional goals.

But perhaps the greatest challenge is that posed by external influences, which threaten the independence of governing boards and principles of citizen trusteeship. This threat can be especially problematic at public institutions whose board members are typically political appointees, though undue influence and intrusion can also come from influential donors, alumni, legislatures, the media, and others. Institutional accrediting bodies may afford boards a measure of protection from undue influences, as their standards for institutional accreditation include board independence in governance. That is one of the many reasons why AGB and CHEA believe that boards need to understand more about accreditation as a process, the role of accrediting bodies, and how they do their work.



# HISTORY AND CONTEXT OF ACCREDITATION

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Accreditation in the United States is a voluntary, nongovernmental, periodic, peer-based system of review of higher education institutions and programs. The process is one element of several that are designed to assure the public of an institution’s commitment to academic quality and fiscal integrity, as well as to stimulate continuous improvement by the institution. Accreditation incorporates the academy’s goal of academic quality and complements other elements of regulation and standards, including those of the U.S. Department of Education and states. These three entities (accreditors, the U.S. Department of Education, and state higher education agencies) are often referred to as the “Triad,” and work together to assure the academic, financial, and governance integrity of our nation’s postsecondary institutions.

While accreditation is a voluntary practice of review that has existed for more than 100 years, accreditation is mandatory for institutions and their students to be eligible for receipt of federal funds, including access to federal student financial aid. Since 1952, the federal government has required that institutions or programs seeking eligibility for federal funds be accredited by an accrediting organization that the federal government has recognized as meeting federal standards. Federal funds include student aid grants and loans, research funds, and program funds—more than \$150 billion per

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year in recent years. This relationship between accreditors and the federal government is often referred to as the “gatekeeping” role of accreditors and the accreditation process. Accreditors are principally voluntary membership organizations of colleges and universities that have been granted recognition by the U.S. Department of Education, usually based on a recommendation from a nationally appointed board, the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI).

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) also recognizes U.S. institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations. CHEA recognition was established by the academic community to assure that accrediting organizations contribute to maintaining and improving academic quality. CHEA and the U.S. Department of Education recognize many of the same accrediting organizations, but not all.

At present, nearly 90 recognized accrediting organizations operate throughout the United States, reviewing public and private, two-year and four-year, nonprofit and for-profit institutions and a large and varied range of academic programs (for example, business, law, medicine, allied health, social work, and teacher education). Accrediting organizations are gener-

ally classified as either institutional or programmatic, although some agencies engage in both types of accreditation activities. A college or university may hold institutional accreditation as well as specialized accreditation for many academic programs. Examples of institutional accreditors include but are not limited to the Higher Learning Commission, Middle States Commission on Higher Education, and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Examples of programmatic accreditors include but are not limited to the American Bar Association, Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, and Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

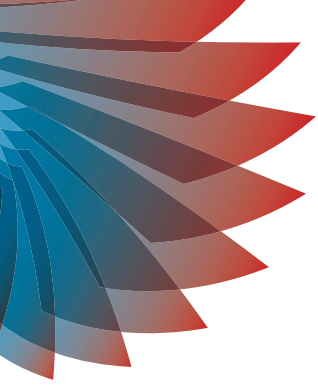
Accrediting organizations set standards, including those for academic quality and student achievement, that institutions and/or programs must meet in order to receive accreditation from the organization. The accreditation

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process typically begins with a self-study process by an institution or program. Next an institution or program receives a site visit from members of the accrediting organization—experienced faculty, administrators, and, as appropriate, practitioners who have been specifically trained to evaluate institutional and/or programmatic performance. It is noteworthy that institutions and programs are accredited on varying cycles (e.g., every seven years, every ten years, or other intervals). As such, it is important for boards to know the number and types of accreditations held by their institution or system.

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# SUGGESTED PRACTICES FOR GOVERNING BOARDS AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICERS

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**T**his statement offers suggestions for effective practice to governing boards and chief executive officers as they work with accrediting organizations. The statement is advisory and is not intended to be prescriptive. It is left to presidents and governing boards to determine whether the suggested practices are of value at their individual institutions and how to make use of them in a manner that best fits the specific environment and needs of each college or university.

## For Governing Boards

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Governing boards, working in collaboration with institutional leadership, are obligated to ensure mission achievement and institutional fiscal integrity as part of their fundamental fiduciary responsibility. Accordingly, understanding accreditation, accrediting standards, and their relevance to board accountability is extremely important. Governing boards of institutions and systems need to be appropriately engaged in the accreditation process, respect the leadership of the chief executive officer, the chief financial officer, the chief academic officer, and the faculty; acknowledge the importance of accreditation to serving students; and understand that board engagement, awareness, and follow-up are fundamental to their fiduciary responsibilities.

To meet their ultimate responsibilities in accreditation, board leadership may consider the following actions to more fully engage the board in the accreditation process:

- Establish an ongoing orientation or accreditation education program for board members, with particular attention to the way in which accreditation relates to such core values as mission, institutional independence, educational quality, and academic freedom. Through the program, boards should come to understand their oversight responsibilities regarding allocation of human and financial resources and their ongoing stewardship of the academic mission; institutional commitment to assessment of student-learning outcomes; completion rates; and both qualitative and quantitative measures that demonstrate educational quality and institutional commitment to assessment of institutional effectiveness.<sup>4</sup>
- Include an overview of the accreditation process and the number and types of accreditations held; how to determine if the institution's educational programs are consistent with its mission; how academic priorities are supported by resource-allocation decisions; and how the accreditation report can aid institutional planning.
- Monitor the institution's accreditation status (institutional and programmatic) on an annual basis by the appropriate board committee, paying particular attention to where the institution is in the various accreditation cycles, preparation for self-studies and site visits, progress in addressing issues raised in past reports, and any concerns institutional leadership may have about upcoming accreditation reviews.
- For system boards, understand the accreditation processes of constituent institutions. Systems present a particularly complex and challenging environment for boards due to the number of institutions within their purview. It is incumbent on system chief executives to keep the system board informed of upcoming reviews, alerting the board to any perceived difficulties, and providing reports to the board.
- Familiarize the board with the standards of accrediting organizations that apply to board governance and actions that may be required to

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4 *The Board's Role in Accreditation*. Michael F. Middaugh. AGB, 2007.

address them. These typical institutional accreditation standards relate to board governance:

- ensure the institution’s mission is kept current—regularly reviewed and aligned with academic programs;
- focus on strategic governance and oversight, not operations and management;
- select and regularly evaluate the president;
- define and address conflicts of interests;
- protect the institution from undue influence; and
- periodically discuss and evaluate the board’s responsibilities and performance.

*Board independence and institutional autonomy are foundational tenets of higher education and standards for accreditation.*

- Discuss real or potential examples of undue influence. Board independence and institutional autonomy are foundational tenets of higher education and standards for accreditation.

- Develop, with the leadership of the chief executive officer, a plan for ongoing governing board involvement in accreditation reviews (for example, self-study preparation, site visits, and review of accreditation reports and decisions).

This links the board’s responsibility to monitor educational quality and fiscal integrity in the

process of self-regulation and self-study in accreditation to other continuous, annual, and periodic institutional processes (i.e., budgeting, planning, and oversight).

- Establish clear expectations of the board leadership to work with the president on the accreditation process, including opportunities to meet with the visiting team, and an expectation that the visiting team’s final report will be available to the full board.

- Participate in the accreditation process. Some board members may be asked to participate in campus self-study committees, and/or to meet with the visiting team during the accreditation process and need to be prepared to contribute in other ways.
- Assure that faculty participation in the process is cultivated to take advantage of the faculty’s institutional knowledge and academic expertise.
- Review key elements of the accreditation self-study, the visiting team’s report, and formal action and decision letters from the accrediting organization and consider their implications for the institution’s strategic goals, mission, and resources.
- Become aware of the public policy role of accreditation and its relationship with federal and state government and how this affects an institution or program. In November 2019, regulations by the U.S. Department of Education (<https://agb.org/news/agb-alerts/accreditation-and-state-authorization-regulations/>) changed, allowing institutions to choose an institutional accreditor. Boards should be aware of changes of accreditors under consideration and the rationale or implications.
- Understand accreditation processes as they relate to planned institution (or system) mergers or acquisitions. Accrediting organizations are often included in early conversations about mergers or acquisitions for a variety of reasons, particularly processes related to “change of control” and governance of the newly restructured institution or system.

## For Chief Executive Officers

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Chief executive officers provide leadership in the accreditation process and can guide governing boards through the experience and various stages. Accreditation can be used as an opportunity to assess institutional or programmatic impact and success, as well as to leverage change. Chief executive officers can assist the board in assuming appropriate participation and oversight in the following ways:

- Engage the board in periodic reviews of the various accreditations held by the institution, the costs involved, the obligations incurred, and the

value added to the institution and its programs, as well as the anticipated schedule for future accreditation processes.

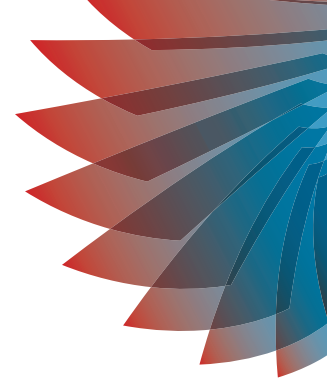
- Provide leadership and participate in orientation programs for new and current board members on issues related to accreditation.
- Inform the board about specific standards and expectations related to board governance that will be evaluated in upcoming accreditation reviews and ensure the availability of board members to meet with the visiting team.
- Prepare strategies, with board leadership (perhaps led by the board's executive committee), for board engagement in pending accreditation processes.

*Board engagement in accreditation process and policy is central to the ongoing vitality and value of accreditation. . . . Accreditation can be used as an opportunity to assess institutional or programmatic impact and success, as well as to leverage change.*

- Provide the board with periodic updates on the status of all pending accreditations and institutional actions that have resulted from previous accreditation reviews.
- With the chair, ensure that board agendas include relevant issues for board consideration resulting from accreditation reports.
- Work to more fully engage faculty in accreditation, including participating in their own institution's accreditation reviews, participating in reviews of other institutions, and serving on accrediting decision-making committees. The leadership role of the faculty and academic administration is critical to the success of the accreditation process.

Board engagement in accreditation process and policy is central to the ongoing vitality and value of accreditation and its work on

behalf of students, colleges and universities, government, and the public. This engagement also benefits board members by affirming and strengthening their fiduciary roles in assuring the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of the institutions for which they are accountable.



## CONCLUSION

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**A**GB and CHEA work collaboratively to support student success, institutional and program integrity, and financial vitality. Although two separate organizations, they share support for core principles and alignment of thought regarding the role and responsibilities of governing boards in accreditation, especially related to board oversight of mission fulfillment, institutional independence, educational quality, and financial vitality. Both organizations place a major emphasis on boards' commitment to building their knowledge of accreditation at the institution and program levels. Because board membership often changes during the course of an accreditation cycle, it is imperative that new board members are oriented to understand the review process.

As presidents and chief academic officers establish a campus culture of continuous improvement and evidence of student success, boards can support the administration's agenda through engagement in accreditation processes. Engagement comes before, during, and after the accreditation visit. As appropriate to the standards of governance, boards and institutional leadership should share common understandings regarding the trajectory of the institution; financial health and solvency; commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion; innovation and change; and the future of the institution. It is through consistent review and self-study of institutional activities that boards and campus communities can identify

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strengths, opportunities for change, strategies for improvement, and evidence of mission achievement.

Finally, boards and campus leadership must continue to be attuned to the changing federal and state political landscapes and policies that influence campus decisions. CHEA and AGB, two professional organizations, provide information to their members regarding existing and pending regulations, standards, and guidance on how to work with accreditors.

Accreditation is not a singular process. It is designed to foster engagement by institutional stakeholders (i.e., board members, administration, faculty, staff, and students). The process is fluid, continuous, rigorous, and intentionally designed to always improve academic quality, financial integrity, and ultimately provide evidence of student success.



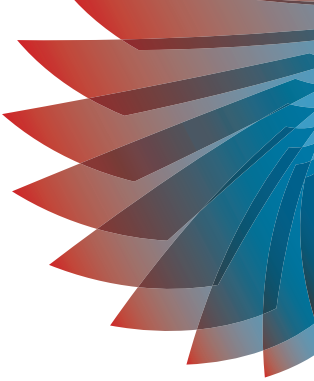


# QUESTIONS FOR GOVERNING BOARDS AND CHIEF EXECUTIVES

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- What is the institution's plan for self-study?
  - Who will lead it? How will board members be involved?
  - What's the timeline?
  - Has the institution/system allocated adequate resources to complete the self-study?
- In terms of assessing progress, what (if any) issues were raised in the last self-study and accreditation report? Have those issues been fully resolved?
- Are there accreditation issues embedded in components of the current strategic plan that require attention before the next accreditation review(s) can begin?
- How can accreditation reports aid institutional/system planning efforts?
  - How will your board discuss the alignment between educational programs, allocation of resources, and mission?
  - How will your board ensure that academic priorities are supported by resource-allocation decisions?
  - Are there any concerns about trends in financial sustainability for the institution and, if so, how will this be addressed by the board and administration?
- What are your accreditor's standards for board governance? How will the board assess itself and demonstrate continued improvement?
- How will your board's orientation program for new members include an overview of accreditation processes and the number and types of accreditations held?





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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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