The Accreditation Process: From Start to Finish to Start

accreditation is not a one-time event. It is an ongoing process that begins at least two years prior to submitting the initial self-study. As long as the program remains accredited, an annual report must be submitted, and every five to seven years the process is repeated. This article will describe the steps involved in obtaining initial accreditation.

Although outcomes are the primary determinant in the accreditation decision, the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP) and the Joint Review Committee on Athletic Training (JRC-AT) closely tie outcomes to process. The 2001 Standards have increased the program accountability for demonstrating outcomes, a significant departure compared to the previous Standards. Some Standards are process-based, assuring that the program is properly staffed and financed and that appropriate facilities are available. This determination is made on an institution-by-institution basis and is based on the number of students, clinical instructors and other factors. The gold standard for the program is how it compares in these areas relative to other similarly sized programs at the institution.

While the educational process is moving toward outcome-based criteria, there must also remain a significant portion that is process based. At the same time, the institution is able to retain its autonomy by demonstrating how it meets the Standards. This is the crux of the accreditation process where the written self-study is validated by the site visit process to insure that the athletic training education program is in fact doing what it says it is doing.

candidacy

Candidacy was established to assist programs through the accreditation process and to assure that the institution has the minimum resources needed to maintain a quality athletic training education program. This process guides the program through the development of classroom and clinical experiences, and helps to assure that all professional courses have been taught prior to the on-site visit, usually two to three years. The program would submit the self-study at the end of its candidacy period.

An annual fee of $500 is due each year during the candidacy period. Other expenses associated with accreditation and the on-site visitation are presented in Table 1.

preparing the self-study

The self-study generally consists of four primary elements, each bound separately: The Narrative, The Appendices, data forms and a current college catalog.

The self-study is an opportunity for the program to conduct a thorough review of all aspects of the student's education. The Narrative is the core of the self-study. Here the program responds to a series of

table 1

fees	comment
Two-Year Candidacy Fee: $500 Each Year	This fee, an application, plan of didactic and clinical study, academic catalog, and program personnel are required to begin the accreditation process. Programs must be a candidate for two academic years.
One-Time JRC-AT Application Fee: $500	This fee, a CAAHEP application form and four copies of a completed Self-Study is considered an application for accreditation.
Annual JRC-AT Program Fee: $600 (Payable to the JRC-AT)	This annual fee is billed directly to the program for the financial support of the JRC-AT Office. NATA support of the JRC-AT expired in 2002; therefore, the JRC-AT is now financially independent. The annual fee is billed at the end of December or first of January each year.
Annual CAAHEP institution fee: $300 (Payable to CAAHEP)	This annual fee is billed to the institution sponsoring a CAAHEP accredited program and goes to support the CAAHEP offices in Chicago. This annual fee remains the same regardless if the institution sponsors one, two, three or all 18 programs accredited by CAAHEP.
JRC-AT Site Visitors' Expenses: Appx. $2,000 to $2,500	All expenses for two site visitors to the institution are borne by the institution requesting consideration for accreditation. This includes airfare, lodging and meals.
Two-Year Candidacy Fee $500 each year	
Total Annual Accreditation Fees: $900 ($600 JRC-AT + $300 CAAHEP)	

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questions such as those about the institution, program faculty and personnel, curriculum (classroom and clinical), students and budget (program data). This is followed by details explaining how the institution and program are meeting each of the standards. A series of appendices containing the program's documentation, course syllabi, course matrix, proficiency matrix and so on is also required. Because of the enormity of this undertaking, a team of individuals – rather than a single person – should take on the responsibility of preparing the self-study.

The Standards and Guidelines make use of the verbs "shall," "must," "should" and "may." "Shall" and "must" describe imperative statements. For instance, Standard IA1 (Sponsorship) states that "The sponsoring institution and any affiliates shall be accredited by recognized agency or meet equivalent standards." This means the institution that sponsors the athletic training education program has to be accredited by a recognized accrediting agency.

"Should" and "may" denote a moral imperative or ethical obligation. Note that "should" is not used in the Standards, but is used frequently in the interpretation (Guidelines). For example, the Interpretation of Standard IIA1F (Description of the Program) states that "[Clinical experiences] may include athletic training rooms and athletic practices and games in secondary schools, colleges and universities, professional sports organizations, or other organizations involved in physical activity." If the institution is located in a town where no ATCs are employed in secondary schools, the program is not penalized for not making use of this setting.

Outcome data are also required in the Self-Study. Measures such as the students' academic achievement, passing rate on the NATABOC certification examination and job placement are all considered in this process. Just as important as the results of these data is how the program analyzes the meaning and uses these findings to improve the program.

Additional forms of outcomes would include course evaluations, instructor and clinical instructor evaluations, and student achievement of the competencies and clinical proficiencies. Certification examination results in and of themselves do not indicate the total picture of program quality, as several individual factors may affect examination results in a specific year and skew the data. The review of these results many times result in being listed as a strength of the program or as the grounds for a recommendation to the program for future improvement.

The Standard "The athletic training curriculum shall be an undergraduate academic major or graduate degree program in athletic training as defined by the sponsoring institution. The institution and institutional governing body requirements for a major shall be met" has caused some confusion. This Standard actually dates back to prior NATA Professional Education Committee documents, but was dropped when the NATA shifted toward CAAHEA (now CAAHEP) accreditation. This Standard does not require a "tagged" degree (i.e.: Bachelor of Science in Athletic Training). Indeed, the majority of institutions offer a Bachelor of Science, Education, Humanities or Arts. Within these bachelor degrees are various majors and, potentially, concentrations within the majors.

An example of this would be a major in kinesiology. Within this major may be concentrations of athletic training, exercise physiology, health education and exercise science. The student would receive a Bachelor of Science, a major in kinesiology, with a concentration in athletic training. If the academic transcript reads the same, the institution has met the Standard.

A "tagged" BS in athletic training meets the Standard, as does a BS with an athletic training major. What does not meet the Standard is a program that does not indicate the major on the transcript (an interpretation since 1990 under the NATAPEC). To use the previous example, a BS from the institution with a major in kinesiology, a concentration in health education, with a program in athletic training would not meet the Standard.

The rule of thumb is very simple. How does the athletic training education program compare to other designated academic majors or programs within the institution? Are there advisement sheets for the major?

submitting the self-study

The Self-Study is submitted to the JRC-AT's administrative offices. Upon receipt, an administrative assistant will review the documents for completeness. In the event of glaring omissions (e.g., failure to include a college catalog), incorrect appendices, lack of formatting (no labeled tabs or no page numbers), not submitting the fee or CAAHEP application, the program director will be contacted to supply the necessary information.

Upon acceptance of the Self-Study, the program director is contacted about possible site visitors. When the site visitation team is finalized, they will receive the Self-Study and serve as the readers (in the past, an individual other than a site visitor served as the reader and then forwarded the findings to the site visitation team). The team will thoroughly review the Self-Study, and if further information or clarification is needed, will contact the program director for further information.

The actual on-site visitation dates are set and, working from a template, an agenda for the meeting is determined. Table 2 presents a typical timetable for the accreditation process from the point of Self-Study submission to the final recommendation from the CAAHEP Board of Directors.

the on-site visitation

While the Self-Study focuses on process, the on-site visitation emphasizes outcomes. The primary function of the on-site visit is to verify the information that was presented in the Self-Study. This is achieved by interviewing the program director, team physician, dean, department chair, faculty, staff and students. The team will also review student files, academic and clinical records, and other necessary documentation.

Another purpose of the on-site visitation is to resolve any questions or concerns that may have arisen as the visitation team reviewed the Self-Study. Student-faculty ratios, clinical experiences, budget, clinical and academic resources, and staffing are examples of these concerns.

table 2

typical accreditation timeline

	self study submitted	
	June 1	September 15
On-Site Visitation	Fall	Spring
Written Report to the Institution	Two Weeks After Visit	Two Weeks After Visit
Written Rejoinder by Institution to JRC-AT	30 Days After the Report is Received	30 Days After the Report is Received
JRC-AT makes recommendations to CAAEP	March June	August December
CAAHEP considers JRC-AT recommendations	January April	July October

Upon conclusion of the on-site visit, the team will meet with the program director and other appropriate administrators to review the team's findings and recommendations. All programs have strengths and all programs have weaknesses. Recommendations in and of themselves are not grounds to withhold accreditation, but are stated for program improvement. Recommendations made during the current site visitation will be reviewed for program action at the time of the next site visit.

If present, the review team will also go over areas of possible noncompliance with the Standards. Noncompliance areas may be grounds for withholding accreditation or for placing a program on probation. The JRC-AT first and foremost evaluates the impact of the noncompliance area on enrolled students. The students, as consumers of the program's education, are the first concern relative to these areas.

the accreditation decision

Ultimately it is the CAAHEP Board of Directors that makes the accreditation decision. The on-site team makes its recommendations to the JRC-AT, which considers the findings and the institution response before voting to determine a recommendation to CAAHEP. In the case of initial programs this recommendation is to grant accreditation or to withhold accreditation. If the program has already been granted CAAHEP accreditation in the past, the JRC-AT votes to recommend that accreditation be continued or that the program be placed on probation.

Initial programs may receive accreditation for a maximum five-year period. New programs are either accredited or not accredited. There is no probationary status for initial programs. Existing programs may be granted accreditation for up to seven years or placed on probation, a status that may necessitate a follow-up on-site visit. Administrative probation may also be rendered for failure to pay the required dues, submit annual reports, and so on. Programs that are on probation are still recognized as being accredited. However, there are issues that must be corrected before it is recognized as being fully accredited.

preparing for the next visit

Upon receiving accreditation, programs must submit an annual report, the list of names of graduating students (for their program certificates), and graduate placement reports. The annual report is reviewed by a JRC-AT committee member. If questions arise during this process, the program director will be contacted for further information. Programs may also be required to submit additional program data as requested by the JRC-AT or CAAHEP.

Approximately one to two years prior to the next scheduled accreditation visit, another Self-Study team should be assembled and the process repeats. nn

training, selection and evaluation of site visitors

Site visitors must attend a four-hour workshop for initial training. This workshop covers the mechanics, common situations that arise, interpretations of Standards, interviewing techniques and scenarios. Just as with any accrediting process in any profession or accreditation generalists, the most common complaint entails the site visitors.

While all site visitors are trained the same, it is impossible to take into account each individual's personality. The Standards Interpretation Manual will assist not only the program but is to also be used by the site visitors. This should provide an increased agreement on the interpretation of whether an institution has met the Standards. Site visitors also receive annual "points of emphasis" from the JRC-AT. These points are provided to assist in consistent interpretation.

Site visitors are selected based on trying to match individuals of comparable institutions whenever possible. Geographic considerations may also be used, but to a much lesser extent. A program may reject a site visitor if there is a conflict that would impede the visit, and the JRC-AT is notified. Site visitors also complete a conflict of interest form prior to being assigned to the visits.

One of the strengths of the site visitors is diversity. An MD has been trained and serves as a site visitor, as do educators and clinicians. This provides the JRC-AT with a wide scope of individuals who may be assigned.

The institution's administrator and program director evaluate site visitors. Each site visitor also evaluates the other. This feedback is provided to the visitors after the final disposition of the program is determined and is also reviewed by the JRC-AT office. Site visitor evaluations from the program director and institutional administrators are necessary to identify those individuals who are strong site visitors and those who need improvement. These comments are not shared with the site visitation team and in no way affect the accreditation recommendation/action.

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