

Music Study, Mobility, and Accountability Project

Overview of Accountability and Quality Assurance Systems for Schools of Music in the United States

The United States relies on a decentralized system of accreditation for institutional and programmatic accountability and quality assurance. Early in the twentieth century, this system began to develop educational standards and review institutions. Accreditation in the United States is almost totally nongovernmental. There are many reasons for this separation. The Tenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution effectively prohibits the federal government from setting educational standards and regulating institutions. This principle is reflected in numerous pieces of legislation controlling the federal relationship with higher education. Although the Constitution does not prohibit the states from setting standards, it is not practical to have over fifty sets of standards in a society with high mobility. The meanings of degrees and other credentials, educational standards and expectations, and entry into various professions need common frameworks for the nation as a whole. Thus, legal and practical conditions develop the rationale for private-sector standards and review organizations whose judgments can be used and trusted by the public, governments, and organizations.

In the United States, there are two basic types of accrediting groups: institutional and specialized. Institutional accreditors are responsible for reviewing an institution as a whole and assuring its basic quality and continuity. Institutional accreditation is a prerequisite for most governmental funding and, thus, it is fundamental and involuntary. Institutional reviews are conducted by six regional accreditors, each responsible for a certain group of states, and by a number of smaller national accrediting agencies that work primarily with for-profit institutions. Specialized accreditation is national in scope. These organizations accredit educational programs preparing students for a variety of licensed and unlicensed professions. The National Association of Schools of Music is both an institutional and a specialized accreditor; however, for most institutions, it acts as a specialized agency. It accredits music programs in all types of institutions.

The United States is a highly competitive place. Institutions compete with each other for students, recognition, and funding. Students compete vigorously for places in prestigious institutions. This condition produces the necessity of a standards and review framework that allows and encourages individual and school creativity. The goal is to develop and review against standards without producing standardization.

Music accreditation in the United States is voluntary. Institutions agree that it is in their best interests to co-operate in setting standards and operating a system of accountability, in part lest the job be undertaken by those with less knowledge and interest in the discipline. Standards are developed through extensive searches for consensus about what needs to be accomplished at all institutions that offer a particular degree or credential. Over time, it becomes relatively easy to develop these thresholds of acceptability. The thresholds are not low. However, they do not reflect any one person's concept of the highest possible achievement. It is possible and desirable to agree on what is necessary; it is almost impossible to agree nationally on what is best.

The standards are mission-specific. Different levels, different types of programs, and different areas of content have different standards. The standards focus on function, not methodology. For

example, acquisition of knowledge and skills in common practice harmony is essential. How this knowledge and skill is achieved is up to each institution.

The entire accreditation process in music is based on the decisions, judgments, and evaluations of peers. Individuals from the institutions themselves volunteer to be trained and serve as visiting evaluators to other institutions. Those who are reviewing will also be reviewed.

Operationally, music accreditation involves the same basic elements as all other accrediting organizations in the United States. These include a self-evaluation or self-study by the institution or program, an on-site visit by peers, a report by the visiting team to the institution, a written response to the visitors' report by the institution, and review and action by an elected commission on accreditation on all documentation, including the institution's response to the visitors' report. Accreditation is usually awarded for five years to institutions early in their accreditation experience and for ten years to institutions with a longer history of accreditation. New programs or major changes are submitted for review in the interim.

From the institution's perspective, the self-study is an opportunity not only to demonstrate compliance with threshold standards, but also an occasion for intensive evaluation against its own aspirations and, for many, an occasion for strategic planning. Although at times the accreditation process does reveal failures to meet specific standards and results in corrections thereof, most institutions believe that the primary benefit is in the self-analysis they undertake and the peer review they receive.

U.S. accreditation in music works well because approaches and systems are compatible with the nature of music itself and the ways that artists and scholars work. Many approaches to success are welcomed. Technique and process, though important, are not substituted for content. Student learning is paramount. Review procedures are full of checks and balances. There is a significant commitment to rigour, fairness, and consistency in a way that produces growing respect for the richness and productivity that occurs when highly educated and dedicated individuals are free to develop the specifics of their own programs.

At this time, approximately six hundred institutions and programs are accredited in music in the United States. Voluntary participation on this scale attests to the value that administrators and faculties place on common efforts to articulate standards and document accountability to them. In the U.S. context, accreditation has played a major role in maintaining a workable balance between commonality and freedom while keeping the focus on disciplinary content and the development of individual competencies.