

# ACA Accreditation Service

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## ACA PROGRAM ACCREDITATION CRITERIA AND PROCEDURES MANUAL

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### Introduction

The American Communication Association (ACA) was founded in 1993 for the purposes of fostering scholarship in all areas of human communication behavior, promoting and improving excellence in the pedagogy of communication, providing a voice in communication law and policy, and providing evaluation and certification services for academic programs in communication study. This manual provides specific information on the criteria and procedures adopted by the ACA Board of Directors for the accreditation of such programs.

The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) describes accreditation in the following manner:

*While accreditation is basically a private, voluntary process, accrediting decisions are used as consideration in many formal actions--by government funding agencies, scholarship commissions, foundations, employers, counselors and potential students. Accrediting bodies, have, therefore, come to be viewed as quasi-public entities with certain responsibilities to the many groups which interact with the educational community.*

*The accrediting process begins with an institutional or programmatic self-study examining goals, activities, problems, and achievements. The resulting report is the basis for an on-site evaluation by a team of professional peers. The [accrediting organization] reviews the self-study documents and the team reports as the basis for action on accredited status.*

The unit's self-study should be futuristic and propose a clear plan for the future of the unit. The faculty should be actively involved in the development of the self-study.

The American Communication Association (ACA) Accrediting Committee has examined the accreditation documents from a variety of respected and prestigious organizations in the construction of our procedures. Among those organizations are the American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA), the National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST), the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges (SACS), and the Accrediting Council on Education

in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC). The ACA provides accreditation to Certificate Programs, Associates Degree Programs, Diploma Programs, and Baccalaureate Programs, but not graduate programs at this time. The following criteria and procedures aspire to the same high goals and standards of these organizations.

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### **Criteria Considered in ACA Accreditation**

- **GOVERNANCE:** The chief administrative officer of the Unit should provide the leadership to advance the cause of the Unit. Faculty control over basic educational policy is imperative. The chief administrative officer of the Unit must have the expressed confidence of both the faculty and the higher levels of administration in the institution. Students should be represented in governance within the policy and philosophy of the institution.
- **CURRICULUM:** Students should be well served by the Unit curriculum. A model curriculum should clearly reflect an understanding of both the humanistic and the social science dimensions of the field of communication. At a minimum, students should take coursework in communication history, research, theory, criticism, as well as law and ethics. No student should be graduated without coursework in presentational skills, both written and oral.
- **INSTRUCTION:** Quality instruction is crucial to effective education and should be encouraged in every way possible. A regular program of teaching evaluation should be in place. Teaching loads in the Unit should be consistent with the institutional balance of emphasis on research and service. For tenure track faculty, the presumptive teaching load should not exceed nine credit hours (or equivalent) per semester. In the case of certificate programs in which instruction is focused upon individual areas such as public speaking, public relations, training and development, or interpersonal communication, the curriculum should reflect both the theoretical grounding and the practical applications of the areas taught.
- **FACULTY:** Faculty should be academically qualified for their responsibilities in the Unit. All full-time faculty should hold at least Master's degrees in a communication discipline. Part-time faculty should have not less than 18 graduate hours in a communication discipline. If graduate teaching assistants are used in undergraduate instruction, they should be under the supervision of a full-time faculty member. Full-time faculty must have primary responsibility for teaching, research, and service.
- **FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT:** The Unit must have equipment and facilities of sufficient quality and quantity to complete its mission. Faculty offices should have privacy, ample space, and in-office access to the internet and World Wide Web. Students must have access to the internet and WWW, and have sufficient technical support and available hours for access. Units with courses in technical or scientific areas of the field (e.g., media production, psycho-physiological

measures, etc.) must support these curricula with adequate equipment, studios, and labs.

- **LIBRARY:** Library budget and holdings should be adequate to support the Unit's mission. Journal holdings should reflect the mainstream interests of the discipline as well as the specific expertise of the faculty of the Unit.
- **FACULTY SCHOLARSHIP, RESEARCH, AND PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Communication educators have a responsibility that extends beyond the limits of the classroom. This obligation includes scholarship and professional activities. These activities should be institutionally supported through such resources as computer facilities, release time, travel support, direct or in-kind support of research costs, laboratory space, and mentoring.
- **PUBLIC SERVICE:** The unit should be able to show evidence of service to the general public and the community. This service should take the form of pro bono faculty contributions to the community in their various fields of expertise.
- **ALUMNI:** The Unit should track its graduates, utilizing their feedback in the assessment process.
- **FACULTY EVALUATION, TENURE, AND PROMOTION:** Detailed standards developed by the faculty should be published and readily available to the evaluation team. Faculty evaluations should occur at regular published intervals, but not less frequently than annually. Appeal processes should be in place.
- **MENTORING:** The ACA strongly supports a program in which senior faculty serve as mentors for their junior colleagues. This is especially important in encouraging women and minorities. Faculty mentoring of students is also strongly encouraged, again particularly in the case of women and minorities as an effective means of increasing the diversity of the applicant pool in the communication disciplines. Peer mentoring of fellow undergraduates by senior communication majors is also encouraged.
- **DUE PROCESS:** The Unit must have procedures in place for dealing with complaints and grievances of students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Such procedures may include, but are not limited to grade appeals committees, tenure and promotion committees, appeals of annual faculty evaluations, etc. Such procedures must comply with the principles of due process.
- **STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS:** Units are encouraged to promote student organizations in the various interest areas reflected by the unit. Examples are Lambda Pi Eta National Undergraduate Communication Honor Society, Pi Kappa Delta Honorary Forensics Society, Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), and Women in Communication, Inc. (WICI).

- **BUDGET:** The Unit's budget should be sufficient to meet its mission, including support for student financial assistance, faculty research and travel, office and lab space, technical and secretarial support, and other such services.
- **STUDENT ADVISING:** Quality of student advising is extremely important and should receive appropriate weight in the faculty evaluation process. All regular tenure-track faculty should be involved in student advising.

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### **Steps in the Accreditation Process**

#### Applying for Accreditation

1. The Unit applies for accreditation by requesting self-study documents from the ACA Accreditation Committee. The self-study documents and supporting materials will be sent within two working days of receiving the request. These documents may be requested from the ACA Board of Directors, or may be downloaded directly from the ACA Website. No Unit should initiate a self-study without explicit approval from the Accreditation Committee of the ACA.
2. The co-chairs of the Accreditation Committee will appoint a team to evaluate the self-study documents. Teams consist of two to four members having specific expertise relative to the unit being evaluated.
3. The Unit completes the institutional self-study, prepares the self-study documents, and returns 15 copies of them to the ACA Accreditation Committee co-chairs. Within three weeks of receiving the self-study documents, the Accreditation Committee will advise the Unit as to whether the documents are in acceptable form for proceeding. If they are found to be incomplete or unacceptable, they will be returned to the Unit with specific instructions on what changes or additions are required. It is recommended that the Unit dedicate at least one full semester to the preparation of the self-study document. In any case, the approved self-study documents must be received by the Accreditation Committee not less than 60 days prior to any anticipated site visit.
4. After receiving the completed self-study documents, the ACA Accreditation Committee, in consultation with the Chief Administrative Officer of the Unit requesting accreditation, sets a date for the site visit and appoints the site evaluation team. Depending upon the type and size of the Unit being evaluated, the site team will be comprised of two to four members. Unless specific circumstances prevent it, the self-study evaluation team and the site evaluation team will be comprised of the same members.
5. After the dates of the site visit are set and the site evaluation team is assigned, specific timetables for the visit are determined by the site team leader and the Chief Administrative Officer of the Unit.

## The Site Visit

- Each accreditation visit is tailored to fit the institutional and Unit mission, scope, and size. Typically, site visits begin on Sunday afternoon and conclude on Wednesday morning. However, they may also be scheduled to begin on Tuesday afternoon and run through Friday morning. If significant airfare savings can be realized by the Unit, the team may arrive on Saturday evening. In no event should the site evaluation team arrive later than 2:00 p.m., local time.
- On Day One the site evaluation team should be given a tour of the Unit's facilities including classrooms, computer labs, studios, faculty offices, library facilities, and the general campus. This should take no more than two hours.
- On the evening of the day of arrival, the site evaluation team should have a dinner meeting with the Unit's Chief Administrative Officer.
- Day Two of the site visit begins with the site evaluation team, Unit faculty members, and unit Chief Administrative Officer having a breakfast meeting. This meeting is followed by a forty-five minute to one hour meeting between the site evaluation team and the Institution's Chief Executive Officer and/or Chief Academic Officer. The Chief Administrative Officer of the Unit being evaluated will not be present for this session.
- The site evaluation team will conduct several "batch" interviews with groups of students. These groups may be classes, student organizations, or other representative groups selected by the Unit faculty or Chief Administrative Officer.
- Site evaluation team members will observe regularly scheduled classes in progress. The Chief Administrative Officer of the Unit should provide the team leader with a complete schedule of classes offered during the duration of the visit.
- The site evaluation team will conduct private interviews with individual members of the faculty. Typically all members of the team will be present for these interviews, but in the case of larger Units containing faculty specializing in several areas of the discipline, the team leader may assign individual members based upon their expertise to interview different faculty members.
- Day Two of the site visit should be concluded no later than 4:00 pm. Some units choose to hold an informal reception on the evening of Day Two to allow members of the site evaluation team and faculty and administrators of the Unit to interact in a less structured environment.
- The morning of Day Three is typically dedicated to continued meetings with student groups, observing classes, or conducting faculty interviews.
- On the afternoon and evening of Day Three, the site evaluation team will write its preliminary report.

- On the morning of Day Four, the site evaluation team will meet with the Chief Executive Officer and/or Chief Academic Officer of the Institution, present its preliminary report, and then depart.

#### Required Support for Site Visitors

1. The site evaluation team should be provided private office space on campus for the duration of the site visit. It should be equipped with computers with standard word processing capability. At least one letter-quality printer should be available. The team will require a supply of printer paper and floppy disks.
2. One rental car should be available to the site evaluation team for the duration of the site visit.
3. Two student assistants should be assigned to the site evaluation team for the duration of the site visit. Their duties will include clerical assistance, running errands, copying, etc.

#### Final Report

Within three weeks after completion of the site visit, the site evaluation team leader, in consultation with all site team members, will complete the final report.

The report will be forwarded to the Chief Executive Officer of the institution, the Chief Administrative Officer of the unit, and all members of the Board of Directors of the American Communication Association. The report shall make one of three recommendations to the Board:

- The unit should receive unconditional accreditation for a five year period of time.
- The unit should receive one-year conditional approval contingent upon making recommended changes reflected in the final report.
- The unit is not recommended for accreditation by the ACA.

*In the case of conditional approval, a follow-up site visit will be required at the end of the probationary year to confirm that recommended changes have been implemented. In the case of a unit being not recommended for accreditation by the ACA, that unit may reapply after two academic years. Reapplication should detail specifically what changes have been implemented since the initial site visit.*

Accreditation is the exclusive prerogative of the Board of Directors of the ACA, and comes only upon a majority vote of all members. This vote is taken annually at the convention of the American Communication Association.

## Costs of Accreditation

The costs of ACA Accreditation of academic programs in communication fall into four categories: (1) Fees and dues to the Association, (2) honoraria for the site evaluation team members, (3) travel expenses for the members of the site team, and (4) in-kind support for the site evaluation team during the site visit. These costs are borne exclusively by the institution being evaluated and must be paid in advance of the site visit and regardless of the team's recommendation.

The American Communication Association shall receive \$1,000 for its accreditation service. This fee includes one year of institutional membership in the ACA for the Unit being evaluated. Annual institutional membership dues after the first year are \$200 if the Unit chooses to continue its affiliation. This fee must be received in the office of the ACA Executive Director at least one week prior to the site visit. The total per diem payment for all members of the site evaluation team is made in a separate payment to the American Communication Association, and also is due in the office of the Executive Director at least one week prior to the site visit. All airline tickets for the site evaluation team should be purchased by the institution and forwarded to the team members at least two weeks prior to the site visit.

The site evaluation team leader receives \$600 per day for the site visit. His or her responsibilities also include writing the preliminary and final reports.

Each member of the site evaluation team receives \$400 per day for the site. Their responsibilities also include assisting in the preparation of the preliminary and final reports.

All travel, meal, and lodging expenses for the site evaluation team are paid by the institution being evaluated. Travel is by air, tourist class. Lodging should be at major hotels (or their equivalent) in closest proximity to the campus.

*Disclaimer: The institution being evaluated assumes full liability for the evaluation process, and shall not hold liable the American Communication Association, its Board of Directors, or any members of the evaluation teams.*

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## **Outline for Self-Study Report**

### A. PART I: OVERVIEW

1. History of the Institution and Unit
2. Mission Statement for the Institution and Unit

### B. PART II: PREVIOUS UNIT STUDIES

Here please list any previous accreditation or self-studies conducted by the Unit, any existing strategic planning reports, annual progress reports, etc. Copies of these documents should be included in Part IV, the Appendix.

#### C. PART III: ACA CRITERIA FOR ACCREDITATION

Here please address the 15 criteria for ACA accreditation in a direct, specific, and documented manner, indicating how the Unit is in accord with each. Use of charts and graphs is recommended wherever appropriate. Materials such as course syllabi and faculty resumes should be included in Part IV, the Appendix.

#### D. PART IV: APPENDIX

Here please include copies of all relevant documents such as previous evaluation reports, course syllabi, faculty resumes, etc. Please feel free to include in the Appendix any other documentation that you feel will assist the ACA Accreditation Committee in its deliberations.