

ACA Accreditation Service

CRITERIA AND PROCEDURES MANUAL

(Last updated September 29, 2013)

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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. One aspect of our mission is to recognize communication programs that meet or exceed ACA's expectations on 15 standards of program excellence. ACA accredits certificate, 2-year, 4-year undergraduate, and graduate programs in communication in the U.S. and around the world. The common denominator is that each of these programs focuses on one or more aspects of the human communication experience including, but not limited to: interpersonal, organizational, mass, computer-mediated, advertising, public relations, and international communication.

How does ACA differ from other accrediting bodies? Our organization recognizes that a "one size fits all" approach is counter to the idea that there are multiple paths to excellence. ACA's service reviews programs based on our 15 standards of excellence – within the context of the academic and social cultures the program represents. (For instance, 2-year programs in one region are compared to similar types of programs at that institution and in that region, not to 4-year programs based in another area.) The standards are firm. How they are applied is flexible, and based on a realistic assessment of the environment in which a communication program resides.

Program accreditation is a voluntary process initiated by the institution seeking accreditation. The material provided here offers 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.

Criteria Considered in ACA Accreditation

Because the ACA reviews a wide variety of programs both in the U.S. and around the world, we realize that there is more than one approach to institutional excellence. The following criteria will be utilized when reviewing Units that request accreditation. These assessments will be made within the cultural context of the institution. That is to say, a Unit will be benchmarked to similar units within the institution, the particular academic culture, and the social values of the region. (For instance, a 2-year program in Idaho would be assessed on the criteria listed below relative to other units within their own institution as well as what is considered allowable by the state's 2-year college system.)

- STANDARD 1. **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.
- STANDARD 2. **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, communication literacy, as well as law and ethics. No student should be graduated without coursework in presentational skills, both written and oral.
- STANDARD 3. **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. 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.
- STANDARD 4. **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.
- STANDARD 5. **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.
- STANDARD 6. **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.
- STANDARD 7. **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.
- STANDARD 8. **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.
- STANDARD 9. **ALUMNI:** The Unit should track its graduates, utilizing their feedback in the assessment process.
- STANDARD 10. **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. If the institution tenures faculty, there should be a written standardized procedure for the process. Documentation should be available for all departmental employment decisions including recruitment, evaluation, tenure, and termination.
- STANDARD 11. **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

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- 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.
- STANDARD 12. 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.
- STANDARD 13. STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS: Units are encouraged to promote student organizations in the various interest areas reflected by the unit.
- STANDARD 14. 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. If unit needs are supplemented by budgets external to the Unit, these must be available and document how resources will be allocated to meet Unit needs.
- STANDARD 15. STUDENT ADVISING: Quality of student advising is extremely important and should receive appropriate weight in the Unit's mission. A documented process for advising should be available and consistently followed.

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Steps in the Accreditation Process

Applying for Accreditation

1. The Unit applies for accreditation by contacting the Executive Director of the ACA via email to request initiation of the accreditation review process. No Unit should initiate a self-study without explicit approval from the Accreditation Committee of the ACA.
2. The chair 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 emails them to the ACA Accreditation Committee chair. 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.
6. Before the site visit occurs, the Chief Administrative Officer of the Unit ensures that ACA has received the fees due the association and that arrangements have been made to cover in advance the airfare and lodging accommodations for the site team as well as to pay the site team their honoraria and reimbursements for other associated travel costs upon completion of the visit.

The Site Visit

Each accreditation visit is tailored to fit the institutional and Unit mission, scope, and size. Typically, site visits require about 4 days on location – plus travel. Larger programs, or those spread across multiple campuses – may require a longer visit.

In the case of international travel, an additional day at the beginning of the visit should be included to allow site team members time to rejuvenate after lengthy travel.

Site visits should include all of the following:

- An initial meeting with the Unit's Chief Administrative Officer and chair of the Unit's accreditation effort.
- A tour of the Unit's facilities including classrooms, computer labs, studios, faculty offices, library facilities, and the general campus.
- Meetings with 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.)
- Meetings with academic personnel that supervise the Unit's Chief Administrative Officer. (For example, the dean of the college in which the Unit is housed.)
- 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 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.
- The team should also hold group meetings with faculty from differing specializations within the Unit.
- 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.
- Sufficient time during each work day must be allocated for the site team to meet privately and compare notes on the events of the day.
- Time should be set aside, particularly near the end of the visit, for the site team to draft its preliminary report.
- On the final day of the visit, the site evaluation team will meet with the Chief Executive Officer and/or Chief Academic Officer of the Institution, to discuss its preliminary report, and then depart.

After the Site Visit

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. After ACA has received its accreditation evaluation fee and annual dues; and the site team members have received their honoraria and any travel reimbursements (see Cost of Accreditation), 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.

After receipt of the report, the ACA Board of Directors will vote on the recommendation of the site team. They may accept the recommendation of the site team or vote for one of the other two options.

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.

Once the Board has voted, the results of the process will be communicated to the Unit under review and to the institution / organization where it resides.

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 receiving a determination of the Unit's accreditation status – regardless of the site team's recommendation or the ACA board of directors' ultimate decision.

Fees and dues to the Association: 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. (In the case of an institution receiving probationary accreditation, this fee does not need to be paid a second time when the organization is reassessed to determine whether it can now be accredited.)

Honoraria for the Site Evaluation Team Members: Honoraria for the site team members should be paid directly to each member of the team. Although it is preferred that these payments be made prior to the site visit, payment at the end of the visit is also acceptable. Please note that the site team report will not be released to the institution or to the ACA board of directors until all honoraria are paid.

The site evaluation team leader receives \$600 per day for the site visit, including travel days. 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, including travel days. Their responsibilities also include assisting in the preparation of the preliminary and final reports.

(In the event that, after an initial site visit, the communication unit of an institution receives probationary accreditation and a follow up visit is necessary, site team members will receive an honorarium for the second visit at the same rate and with the same conditions as the first visit.)

Travel Expenses for the Members of the Site Team: All airline tickets for the site evaluation team must be purchased by the institution and travel information provided to the team members at least two weeks prior to the site visit. Hotel, ground transportation, meals and other on-site accommodations must also be set up by the host institution in advance. One rental car should be available to the site evaluation team for the duration of the site visit.

Site teams should be provided with reasonable accommodations, meals, Internet service (both at their hotel and on campus), etc. while visiting. Any additional reasonable expenses should be reimbursed (if receipts provided) at the end of the visit. Travel is by air, tourist class. Lodging should be at major hotels (or their equivalent) in closest proximity to the campus.

In-Kind Support for the Site Evaluation Team During the Site Visit: During the visit, the host institution should provide in-kind support to the site evaluation team which should include:

- Private work space for the team; computers with standard word processing capability and Internet access; printers; office supplies (including digital storage media); wireless Internet access.
- Student support staff for clerical assistance, running errands, copying, etc.
- Internet access (wireless preferred) must be provided at the lodging accommodations.

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.*

Outline for Self-Study Report

(Examples of self-study reports by other institutions may be available upon request to the ACA Executive Director.)

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.

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ACA and Your Program

ACA has accredited private and public institutions in the U.S. and around the world. Whether your program provides communication certifications, 2-year degrees, 4-year degrees, or graduate degrees in communication, the ACA Accreditation Service can provide strong communication programs with the certification that their unit meets or exceeds the criteria of excellence advocated by our organization.

For more information on ACA Program Accreditation, email ACA Executive Director, Prof. Philip J. Auter philauter@gmail.com