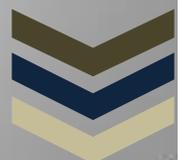


Higher Education Accreditation Handbook



Included Contents

Background

Purpose of Accreditation

AER National Accreditation Council

Standards

Eligibility

Application Process

Accreditation Process

Panel Reviewers

Q&A

Appendix A

Background

As professionals we are dedicated to ensuring that the services being provided to individuals who are blind and those who have low vision are of the highest quality. The providers of these services must utilize specialized knowledge and skills to benefit those receiving such services.

The disciplines of orientation and mobility (O&M), vision rehabilitation therapy (VRT), low vision therapy (LVT) and adaptive technology instruction (ATI) have established professional certification; and teachers of visually impaired children (TVI) obtain state licensure. These programs ensure that those providing these services have met rigorous professional development in accordance with a scope of practice. Each discipline has developed and systematically reviews a Codes of Ethics addressing professional practice to ensure that services are being provided by highly competent professionals. The culminating process to assure quality services is the accreditation of the higher education professional preparation programs for each of these disciplines. The professional preparation programs are expected to offer professional and curricular standards which far exceed minimum qualifications.

To that end, the Association of Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AER) Accreditation Program is designed to ensure that O&M, VRT, LVT, ATI, and TVI higher education personnel preparation programs meet high quality standards. Personnel preparation programs are reviewed on administrative, faculty, clinical and curricular standards set forth by experts in the field. Higher education programs with the "AER Accredited" distinction have demonstrated through performance, systems, processes, faculty and procedures that they offer excellent learning experiences; and high quality preparation for jobs, related certifications and licensure.

The administration of the certification programs has successfully moved from AER, a membership organization, to the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals (ACVREP) which is an independent certification body. ACVREP, which became incorporated in 2000, is now the evaluative body responsible for granting professional certifications to those meeting the certification requirement of education, internships and the passing of the certification examination.

As with AER's decision to move discipline-specific professional certification from within AER to a separate governing body, AER has now moved the approval of university curricular and standards, to a more rigorous external review and evaluation by a separate governing accreditation body, administered independently from but within AER. The rationale for this decision is based on the need to demonstrate that graduates from these higher education programs continue to meet the highest of professional and ethical standards of practice.

Accreditation is used to describe both a status and a process. As a status, it denotes a third-party's attestation to conformity with specific standards as set forth by an

accrediting authority. The scope of an accreditation is determined by the specific disciplines being assessed for conformity with standards benchmarks. As a process, accreditation symbolizes a sustained commitment to self-monitoring and continuous quality improvement.

Purpose of Accreditation

Self-assessment (i.e. self-study) is the process undertaken internally by an educational institution to assess its conformity with specific standards and other normative attributes that are described for accreditation. This self-validation consists of a thorough and systematic process that documents the institution's conformity to recognized standards for administration, faculty, clinical instruction, and curricular instruction. The administrative, faculty, and clinical standards are core standards that are designated as absolute, and are necessary for full accreditation. The curricular standards, while critical, may be met to a greater or lesser extent. Independent verification by peer reviewers uses a systematic, arm's length and documented process to evaluate the institution's self-reported conformity to the specific standards and other normative attributes that are described for accreditation.

The goal of this standards compilation is to present a concrete benchmark against which any higher education vision related program can be compared. Ensuring the relevance and contemporariness of these standards requires ongoing monitoring and adjudication of objective feedback from all relevant stakeholders, including university faculty, service providers, and service administrators. Changes to standards must be informed by evidence of high quality and review by the disciplines.

A Descriptive Profile is an important component of any self-study because it provides a valuable written summary of the institution and its academic offerings. This summary can be used as a boiler plate description for a host of future documents, ranging from press release to grant applications.

Throughout this self-assessment guide, the term "program" refers to the discrete academic program under review. The term "institution" refers to the college or university of which the program is a part. "Student" is used to refer to those persons receiving an education through the institution's program.

AER Accreditation Council

The AER Accreditation Council has chief responsibility for setting and enforcing standards set forth in the accreditation program. The Council consists of 10 members who are appointed by the Council Chair; the AER Executive Director serves as the Council Chair. The Council consists of individuals who have skills and experience with program administration, systems, educational and rehabilitation protocols and service delivery. The Council acts as the overseeing body that ensures that the standards are current, relevant, and advance excellence in service delivery and that those entities seeking accreditation meet the standards.

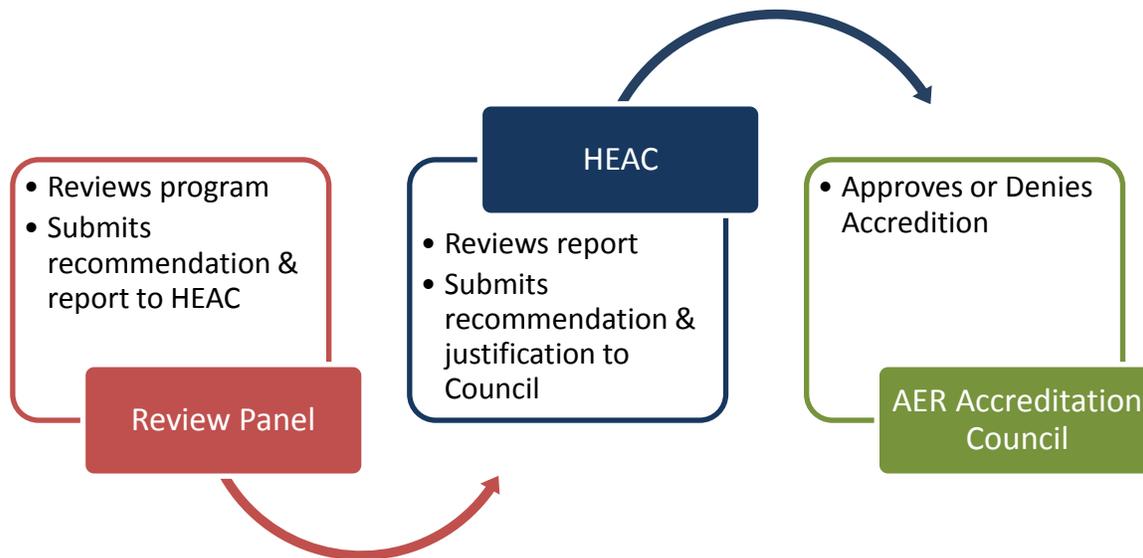
The primary responsibilities of the Council include:

- Define standards and criteria for evaluation of entities and programs and assure compliance to the standards.
- Develop methods for measuring the effectiveness of standards and the accreditation process.
- Establish guidelines and policies applicable to the accreditation and approval processes.
- Review accreditation application with supporting documentation and recommendations for reviewers.
- Move to either approve or deny the accreditation request.
- Hear and decide appeals related to the denial of full accreditation.
- Establish the re-evaluation of standards cycle and make improvements to the standards as needed.
- Work in collaboration with workgroups and the Higher Education Accreditation Commission (HEAC) to advance the mission of the accreditation program.

Institutions of Higher Education Seeking Program Accreditation

The Higher Education Program Accreditation is a process under which academic programs are evaluated by an external team (i.e. Review Panel) to determine if standards that are deemed indicators of quality performance and measures of sound practices are met. The process provides a framework for self-study, continuous improvement and ensures the course of study is designed to generate growth in applicable skills and competencies. Institutions of higher education may seek accreditation for ATI, LVT, O&M, TVI and VRT academic programs.

Established by the Council, the Higher Education Accreditation Commission (HEAC) has chief responsibility for creating and revising higher education program standards, establishing policies and procedures; and submitting both to the Council for approval. In addition, the HEAC approves each review panel that is selected to conduct a program review; and the committee examines and ratifies the review report and accreditation recommendation submitted by the panel. The HEAC completes a written Accreditation Decision report and submits to the Chair of the AER Accreditation Council (Council) for final consideration and vote. The final decision is then communicated to the institution.



Standards

Accreditation requires a review of Core Standards and Curricula Standards. Core Standards are administrative in nature and includes absolute and critical standards. All Absolute Standards must be fully met to receive accreditation. All Critical Standards must be at least partially met to receive accreditation. The curricula standards relate to the course of study.

The standards are formatted to allow the institution to conduct a meticulous self-assessment, wherein the faculty can assess and report it's the compliance with the core and disciplinary standards against a structured and transparent collection of relevant benchmarks.

Conformity with these standards ensures that the institution provides the appropriate program content and has a clearly articulated plan for providing students with a comprehensive education in the discipline.

This self-assessment is optimally effective when it is conducted by faculty within the program who are knowledgeable about the program as they pertain to the standards under consideration. For transparency purposes, all members of the Self-Assessment Committee who participated in the preparation of each section are identified in the summary table provided at the end of the guide.

The standards are grouped according to particular aspects of each section relating to the program. The following rating scale is embodied to evaluate the extent to which the program meets each of the standards:

- The standard is met.
- The standard is partially met.
- The standard is not met.

In the space provided for Assessments, the institution describes its perceived compliance with each standard section and the basis for self-ratings; and references the documents that provide evidence that the standards are being met. Such documents are typically found in the college or university's bulletin, in course syllabi, or in other documents being used by the institution.

Assessments should be completed for all standards sections, including when the standard is not met or partially met. When the standard is not met or partially met, additional commentary is required to explain the response. Whenever any non-compliance is recognized for a relevant standards section, the institution must acknowledge this and propose an actionable remedial response (a proposed plan of action with a timeline not to exceed one year).

A more rigorous and authoritative conformity verification requires a review by a panel of independent content experts with recognized knowledge and experience in the field of blind and low vision rehabilitation. This review panel will include, one university faculty member, two members who are practitioners in the discipline, and one member who is from a related discipline in visual impairment. The panel will review the self-assessment and the various documents that make up the body of evidence. Once this electronic review has been completed, the chair of the review panel will hold a telephone conference call with the chair of the program in review and gather information on specifics that need further investigation. The chair of the review panel will also hold a telephone conference call with the students in the program to verify certain compliance with certain standards. Upon completion of the telephone conference calls, the review panel will meet to resolve the unanswered or ambiguous questions. When necessary, the chair or his/her designee will conduct an onsite review of the program. **See *Appendix A for the set of standards.***

Program Accreditation Eligibility Requirements

There are certain baseline criteria that must be met in order to be eligible to apply for accreditation. These objective requirements affirm that the institution where the program is offered is in good standing and that the program meets a threshold that indicates program performance over at least a 1 year period of time.

1. The institution offering the certificate or degree program(s), if located in a U.S. state, district, or territory or Canada, must be currently accredited by a regional institutional accrediting agency that is recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the U.S. Department of Education or other applicable authority in Canada. If outside of the U.S., it must meet applicable required recognitions and accreditations.

2. The program must have been in existence for at least one year and have at least 1 enrolled student.
3. The TVI program must be in good standing and not be designated as “low-performing” as outlined by Title II of the Higher Education Act.
4. Programs not in a College of Education must be in good standing and not be designated as “low performing” as outlined by the supervising administrative unit.
5. The program must offer a certificate or degree in the related field with at least 15 credit hours of concentration coursework; and in addition, offers field experiences.

Application Process

Applications are accepted at any time throughout the year. There is a two-part process: A and B. The accreditation begins with the completion of an application —termed “Letter of Intent,” which is Part A. Submission of an application communicates a commitment to quality programming, intent to submit the required documents within the specific timeframe and commitment to participate in applicable interviews and subsequent telephone calls. The application allows the institution to provide important information related to the accreditation process. One “Letter of Intent” can be used if the institution is seeking accreditation for multiple programs. There is a \$1750 application fee per initial program. Discounted fees apply when submitting multiple programs for accreditation. See chart below. Part A, which is the “Letter of Intent” and payment should be mailed to: 1703 N. Beauregard Street, Suite 440, Alexandria, Virginia 22311 or sent via email to accreditation@aerbvi.org if paying via credit card.

Application Fees	
Program 1	\$1,750
Program 2	\$1,500
Program 3	\$1,250
Program 4	\$1,000

Part A: Letter of Intent (SAMPLE)

Submitted to:
 AER Accreditation Program
 1703 N. Beauregard Street, Suite 440
 Alexandria, VA 22311
 Email: accreditation@aerbvi.org

The institution identified below is seeking accreditation consideration and has enclosed the required processing fee of \$1750 for the 1st program, \$1500 for the second, \$1250 for the third, and \$1000 as applicable.

Institution Information	
Name of Institution	
Web Address	
Department	
Telephone	
Fax	
Mailing Address	
Billing address	
Contact Person Information	
Name	
Title	
E-mail	
Department	
Degree Program Information- LVT, O&M, TVI, ATI or VRT	
Degree Program	

Total Fees Submitted \$ _____

We understand that:

- Upon receipt of a copy of this Letter of Intent, a 4 person Review Panel will be selected that will be responsible for reviewing the documents/materials. When informed of the names of the specific individuals, should there be an unforeseen conflict of interest, I understand I have the right to challenge the appointment or inclusion of any member for a justifiable cause within seven days of the date of receipt of the individuals assigned to the review.

- The review process will be initiated within 45 days from the date of receipt of the above files, unless specified and or requested otherwise. I understand that after each panel member has reviewed the materials and produced a rating on each criterion, the Chairperson of the Review Panel may request additional information to clarify adherence to all criteria. I understand that as part of this process, the Chairperson of the Review Panel will contact you to set up conference call interviews: One to interact with faculty and one to interact with students in the program.
- At the completion of the review process, the following determinations are possible: 1) Accreditation (five years); 2) Provisional Accreditation (one year), pending compliance with recommended revisions and changes; and 3) Accreditation Denied. Procedures for an appeal of the recommendation are outlined in the *Guidelines*.
- I understand that I will receive a determination of approval status within 120 days of the receipt of the electronic files, pending no delays in the process. If full approval is granted, the institution will have the right to display the Accreditation Logo on its website and on other promotional materials. All data will be kept strictly confidential.
- The signature below indicates that the institution has met the eligibility requirements and is committed to the accreditation process.

Print Name	
Signature	
Date	

Part B

Once part A (The Letter of Intent) has been received by AER and processed, the institution will be contacted and provided an agreed upon due date to submit the following:

- Completed Accreditation Form B Sections I-III. See Appendix B.
- A self-study of all core standards with respective supporting documentation that substantiates that the standard has been met and curricular standards that includes a written explanation of how and where each required competency is met within the curriculum, including appropriate documentation through course syllabi and other supporting documentation. The files must be sent electronically via Dropbox with the following names: Core Standards, Curricular Standards, Program Narrative, Budget, Faculty Credentials and Certification, Faculty Vitae,

Clinical Experience, Clinical Supervisors, Sample Letters to Sites, Sample Logs, and Course Syllabi. If necessary, additional files may be submitted to further explain elements of the program.

Accreditation Process

Programs are evaluated according to compliance with core and curricular standards. The core criteria can be subdivided into administrative and faculty criteria. The curricular standards include both academic and clinical criteria. Criteria are further weighted according to the level of necessity for compliance. Absolute criteria are of the highest level and critical criteria are important but at a level just below absolute.

The Higher Education Accreditation Commission (HEAC) approves the assignment of a four-member team to complete the review. The reviewers communicate through a conference call (which will be arranged by the AER office) to assign responsibilities for the review. The core standards are reviewed by all four of the panel members. Each of the curricular standards is reviewed by at least two members of the review team to provide for interrater reliability. Review teams decide which members review which set of components. The reviewers study the materials submitted in Sections I-III of the application packet. Section I primarily contains contact information for the program. Section II contains information to support the program's claim that it meets the standards for approval. Section III is the program narrative.

After reviewing Sections I-III, each reviewer completes the last columns of an individual copy of the Standards Self-Study form, scoring each standard as either fully met, partially met, or not met/insufficient information. The information and supporting documents in Sections II and III should provide sufficient information for the reviewers to score each standard. The review team notes if there is insufficient information to determine that standards are met so that questions about those standards can be addressed in the upcoming teleconference interviews.

After gathering as much information as possible from the submitted application, the reviewers schedule at least one teleconference with program students, and at least one teleconference with program faculty and administrators. The purpose of the teleconferences are three-fold: (1) the teleconferences confirm that the information represented in the application packet is accurate and reflects the true state of the program; (2) some standards may not be fully documented in the supporting documents and must be partially evaluated through interviews. For example, whether or not program accessibility meets the students' needs should be reflected in the application and confirmed by interviews with students and faculty; and (3) on occasion, a team may have questions about a few standards that can best be answered through interviews. However, if the team feels that the application did not provide enough information, the team is NOT expected to use the interview to gather information that should have been submitted in the application. In that case, following the conference call, the university is asked to supply the missing information in written form.

After the application documents have been fully evaluated and the teleconference interviews completed, the chair of the review team writes to the university to request any additional information that the team deems necessary. Once all remaining documentation is received and shared with the team members, each reviewer finishes scoring his/her assigned sections on their individual self-study reports. The AER central office compiles the individual reports into one consolidated report. The review team then meets via conference call to discuss their findings. If there is disagreement about scores, the review team looks at the information provided again and determines if consensus can be reached. If there is disagreement about the score of a core criterion, it is discussed and evaluated by all team members. If there is a split decision between the four team members, the chair of the HEAC is called in to cast the deciding vote. If there is a split decision between the two reviewers assigned to a curricular standard, a reviewer from the second team of panelists is asked to review the material and cast the deciding vote. When the review panel has completed voting on each of the standards, members of the panel make a recommendation for the appropriate accreditation status:

- Full accreditation
- Conditional Accreditation
- Accreditation Denial

For full accreditation, the absolute criteria must all be met for each section of the core standards. Also for full accreditation at least 95% of the curricular standards must be fully met and the remaining standards partially met. Conditional accreditation can be granted if one of the absolute core standards is not met and/or if 85% to 94% of the curricular standards are met. Conditional accreditation will only be granted when a program commits to meeting all core standards and achieving 95% of curricular standards within one year. Conditionally approved programs that have demonstrated that they meet the conditions stipulated by the HEAC within one year from the date of review will be granted full approval status. Students who enter a program with a status of conditional approval, and who successfully complete the degree, are considered to have completed an accredited program. Accreditation Denial is issued when the college or university program did not meet minimum standards in a large number of criteria and this situation cannot be remedied in the short term.

Panel Reviewers

The AER Accreditation Program is made possible by a volunteer-based review process system. The success of the program depends on having experienced and skilled professionals to carry out the task of evaluating an applicant's compliance to identified standards. These professionals, known as Reviewers, provide each organization with an objective, professional and quality review of their services and operations.

Reviewer Requirements

AER seeks individuals with strong core competencies to review agencies, schools and higher education institutions. Reviewers will be responsible for evaluating service delivery systems and operations against a set of accreditation standards. Reviewers will have the following desired requirements:

- Two or more years of related field and or administrative experience.
- No conflict of interest with the subject agency, school or higher education institution.
- Completion of the reviewer training and exam with a “passing” score.
- Excellent oral and written communication skills.

Review Teams

Review teams consist of 4 individuals. The size of the team depends on the size and operation of the institution. Each team has a team leader—referred to as the Panel Chair. Among other duties, the Panel Chair is responsible for submitting the final written report and accreditation recommendation to the HEAC Chair within 30 days of completing the review.

Reviewer Training & Onboarding

The Council is committed to ensuring that each reviewer has the skills needed to successfully complete an accreditation review. Each reviewer is required to:

- Complete a 1.5 hour facilitated training (virtual or a face-to-face training held at an AER Conference).
- Complete a pass/fail based-exam with a score of 75 or higher.
- Review accreditation handbook and sign verification page.
- Complete the Accreditation Reviewer Information Form.

Onsite Reviewer Stipend

Each reviewer will receive a \$250 stipend to conduct an onsite review.

Commonly Asked Questions

What is the AER Accreditation Council?

The Council is the governing body responsible for the standards and has final authority to award or deny accreditation. It awards accreditation to degree programs that demonstrate evidence of high quality by meeting administrative and professional preparation standards.

What is the higher education program accreditation?

It is an in-depth review of an academic program that provides validation and that helps to facilitate a high quality learning experience for students.

Is accreditation important?

The Higher Education Accreditation communicates an institution's commitment to quality and provides an opportunity to raise the visibility of the program. Accreditation encourages intentional, insightful, and innovative program design and facilitates an alignment between the institution and the programs' missions and goals.

How long is the accreditation process?

There is a 3 step process that includes submitting a Letter of Intent, completing the self-study and the 4-member panel review process. The entire process can take up to 6 months depending on the adherence to the submission process and completeness of all application parts.

How do I obtain an application for accreditation?

Applications and related information can be obtained by sending an email to accreditation@aerbvi.org.

How can I become a reviewer?

Send an email to accreditation@aerbvi.org to submit an application. All reviewers are required to complete the accreditation reviewer training and pass the exam.

What is the period of Higher Education Accreditation?

An accreditation is valid for 5 years and requires that the institution submit an annual update report.

Can an institution's accreditation be revoked?

Yes, the accreditation can be revoked at the discretion of the Council if the institution does not submit an annual update report and or fails to demonstrate a continuous adherence to the standards.

Is there an application fee to seek accreditation?

There is a fee for each program: \$1750 for the 1st program, \$1500 for the second, \$1250 for the third, and \$1000 for each additional.

Contact Information:

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call (571) 982-4018 or send an email to accreditation@aerbvi.org.

Appendix A

Form B

SECTION I

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

University name:

Program name:

Contact person:

Street address:

Mailing address:

Telephone number for contact person:

Email address for contact person:

Current Dean:

Dean's telephone number:

Dean's email address:

Dean's mailing address:

Current Department Head:

Department Head's telephone number:

Department Head's email address:

Department Head's mailing address:

University url:

Department url:

Program url:

Who should be notified of the outcome of the review process? Check all that apply.

Program Contact:

Department Head:

Dean:

SECTION II

PROGRAM INFORMATION

LIST OF REQUIRED DOCUMENTS TO BE SUBMITTED

All documents in this list must be submitted. It will be necessary for programs to submit additional documents or information to prove that all standards have been met. Please provide a table of contents for all additional documents.

1. Curricular vitae/resume for all program faculty and staff
2. Syllabi
3. Current and proposed budgets
4. Inventory of program materials for candidate use

SECTION III

Please answer the following questions.

1. When was the program established?
2. What is the total number of students instructed by your program each year?
3. How many students graduate/complete the program per year?
4. How many students withdrew from your program within the last three years?
5. Provide a list of the clinical placements used by students in the past year.

Provide:

Mission Statement of Institution under review
Services and/or Education Provided
Strengths
Areas for Further Development
Letter of Commitment from Dean
List of Possible Evidence for Compliance