



Understanding Accreditation

By Nicole Adrian

I found myself nodding my head when I read the first sentence to Hank Lindborg and Stephen D. Spangehl's *ASQ Higher Education Brief* article: "Accreditation' is a word used to describe colleges and universities that most people understand only vaguely." I've always had a general sense of what the term means in U.S. higher education, but I didn't realize its history and complexity, and certainly not its challenges—until now.

The United States is unique in that the accreditation, or quality assurance process, is performed by private associations and is completely separate from the government. There are three kinds of accreditation agencies: regional, national and specialized. Each type of accreditation body has standards, minimums and processes in place related to its evaluations and measures.

Some accreditation experts hope to see significant changes come to the process, including making American college graduates more marketable careerists.

Clifford Adelman, one of the leading American experts on the Bologna Process—the move to make academic degree and quality assurance standards more comparable and compatible throughout Europe by making academic degree standards and quality assurance standards more comparable and compatible throughout the continent—has said it's important to shift the way American colleges define degrees.

"When U.S. colleges and universities describe what students must do to earn a degree in a specific field, they list courses, credit requirements and a minimum grade-point average," he said.

In their article, Lindborg, a founder of ASQ's Education Division, and Spangehl, vice president of one of the United States' regional accreditation bodies, present some interesting insight into the history of accreditation in this country and distinguish individual type of accreditation from one another. They also touch on some of the challenges associated with U.S. accreditation, including the ability of American students to complete with those abroad based on the current accreditation process.

David Little describes how ABET, a specialized accreditation agency, provides world leadership to ensure quality and stimulate innovation in applied science, computing, engineering and technology education. Little, a former ABET Board of Directors member, details how ABET evaluates programs and the criteria it uses.



Finally, Fernando Padró, ASQ Higher Education Advisory Committee chair, explores possible changes to the U.S. accreditation system. He sees accreditation becoming part of a quality control process, and would like to see the process become a self-accreditation procedure with an external peer review.

To learn more about accreditation in the United States, check out the websites listed in the main section of this issue—each of the six regional accreditation associations has its own website.