

WASC & Accreditation Frequently Asked Questions

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What is WASC and WSCUC?

The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) was formed in 1962 to promote the development and accreditation of higher education in the western region of the United States. WASC was previously a single entity that encompassed three accrediting commissions: WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC), Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), and the Accrediting Commission for Schools (ACS – accredits K-12, non-degree programs). In 2012-2013, the three commissions reincorporated as separate entities that share the same ‘WASC’ acronym but are otherwise separate organizations with independent scopes and government structures.

WSCUC, which accredits The Claremont Colleges, is one of six regional accrediting agencies in the U.S. that accredits public and private higher education institutions, specifically those in California, Hawaii, the Pacific region, and a limited number of institutions outside the U.S. WSCUC is a non-governmental organization but is reviewed periodically for renewal by the US Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

According to its website: “WSCUC aids institutions in developing and sustaining effective educational programs and assures the educational community and the general public that an accredited institution has met high standards of quality and effectiveness. The Commission accredits institutions rather than individual programs. Therefore, in addition to assessing the academic quality and educational effectiveness of institutions, the Commission emphasizes institutional structures, processes, and resources.”

<https://www.wscuc.org/about/>

The Commission’s responsibilities include the following:

- Establish bylaws for the governance of the Commission
- Establish criteria for accreditation
- Grant accreditation
- Maintain adequate financial resources
- Maintain complete and accurate records of accreditation reviews and actions
- Perform other functions consistent with the bylaws and operational guidelines
- Participate in accreditation visits

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What is accreditation?

Accreditation is a voluntary evaluation process that schools undergo in order to maintain standards of educational quality that are agreed upon by members of an accrediting agency. In the practical sense, however, it has become difficult for institutions to forego accreditation in a world where they are competing for students, status, financial resources (including federal funding), quality faculty, and other valuable benefits.

The goal of accreditation is to examine students' performance continuously, maintain a qualified faculty within an effectively organized school, collaboratively assess the quality of the school's educational programs on a regular basis, and plan for the future with a focus on continual self-improvement. Accreditation is an ongoing process; once initially being granted accreditation status, a school must continue being evaluated every few years to maintain that status.

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What are the Accreditation Standards?

The Accreditation Standards are used by the accrediting association's member institutions to gauge their success in providing high quality education and in continually improving. The Accreditation Standards describe good practices in areas of institutional operations, including institutional mission, institutional effectiveness (e.g. achieving stated mission, providing effective educational services), instruction, support services, library and learning resources, human resources, facilities and physical resources, information technology resources, fiscal resources and fiscal management, and governance and decision making.

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How does accreditation directly affect students?

Financial aid

- In order to receive and use federal (and sometimes state) grants and loans, students must be enrolled in an accredited school/program

Transfer credits

- Institutions will not accept transfer credits from an unaccredited school/program

Career prospects

- Employers often determine whether an applicant is qualified based on if their degree is from an accredited school/program
- Several professions require graduation from an accredited school/program in order for a new practitioner to gain employment or to obtain appropriate professional licensure in their field (i.e. take state- or profession-required exams)

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What is the importance of accreditation?

- Allows students to trust that the institution is legitimate and that they are not being scammed
- Assists prospective students or faculty in identifying acceptable institutions for enrollment or employment
- Contributes to the assurance that graduates of the institution have formal preparation that meets nationally accepted standards of quality
- Creates goals for institutional self-improvement to support student learning
- Involves staff, faculty, students, graduates, and advisory boards in institutional evaluation and planning
- Helps identify institutions and programs for the investment of public and private funds

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What does the accreditation process look like?

1. If the institution meets the eligibility requirements, it submits an application to be accredited by WSCUC
2. Initial one- or two-day visit by a two-member team so that the Commission can understand more about the school (e.g. its purpose, program, and operations)
3. Commission grants approval for the institution to be a candidate for accreditation
4. Institution addresses initial visit recommendations
5. Institution completes self-evaluation process; includes involvement of all stakeholders
6. Full visit by visiting committee to determine first-hand if the institution meets the established standards
7. Visiting committee issues report of findings
8. Visiting committee recommends accreditation status
9. Institution submits its schoolwide action plan for annual assessment and refines it as needed
10. Institution submits interim progress reports
11. Subsequent reviews and reaffirmation of accreditation occur periodically (about every 10 years)

There are two different paths for reaccreditation: the traditional (i.e. lengthy, in-depth) process outlined above or the Thematic Pathway for Reaffirmation (TPR). Institutions that are eligible for the TPR process, including Scripps College, are ones that demonstrate consistent evidence of a healthy fiscal condition, strong student achievement indicators, and sustained quality performance. This alternate pathway is just as rigorous as the traditional review process, but it is an abbreviated process with a streamlined timeline.

Through the TPR process, eligible institutions demonstrate compliance with all Standards through a document review, and then undertake a self-study that focuses on a theme or themes chosen by the institution and related to one or more of the standards. Additionally, the institution provides a brief overview of the institution and its response to previous Commission recommendations, as well as reflects on what has been learned and outlines next steps. Completing these four Components is in lieu of responding to all nine of the Components in the current institutional review process.

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