



Accreditation Committee

The Accreditation Committee, a committee of TEAC's Board of Directors, makes the accreditation decision. At its meeting, the Accreditation Committee reviews the *Inquiry Brief* or *Inquiry Brief Proposal*, the final Audit Report, any reports from consulting reviewers, the Case Analysis, the Accreditation Report, any additional information provided by TEAC's president, and any responses from the program under review. After deliberation, the Accreditation Committee either accepts or rejects by a majority vote the recommendation of the Accreditation Panel.

In the unlikely event that the Accreditation Committee fails to accept the panel's recommendation, the committee must give written reasons for its own decision to reject the recommendations in the Accreditation Report and to formulate new ones. The program may appeal the Accreditation Committee's decision and an Appeals Panel, appointed by the chair of the Board of Directors, hears the appeal in accordance with TEAC's policy on appeals.

Order of business

At the opening of the Accreditation Committee meeting, the chair of the committee introduces the members, staff, observers, and guests. The chair reminds those in attendance of the guidelines for the meeting and reviews pertinent information, including an orientation to the committee's procedures and policies, the availability of materials, and the schedule. Following the introductions and orientation, the chair asks if any committee member has a conflict of interest to declare with regard to any case before the committee.

The consideration of each *Brief* conforms to the following format:

1. **Presentation of the case.** One member of the committee, selected beforehand by the chair, gives an overview of the panel's recommendations and the evidence that the TEAC staff complied with TEAC's policies and regulations.
2. **Certification of the process.** Certification that TEAC has followed its procedures in the case before the committee is determined by a majority vote of the committee. The committee examines the documentation cited by the staff liaison to the committee and certifies that TEAC's procedures, policies, and regulations were followed. In cases where the committee finds that the staff's failure to satisfactorily comply with the procedures was of some consequence, it orders remedies for the errors made by the staff.
3. **Acceptance of the panel's recommendations.** Once the committee certifies that TEAC has followed its process appropriately, or determines that the process was not unduly compromised and/or did not adversely affect the program's accreditation case, the committee examines each finding and recommendation the panel has made.

Recommendation for an *Inquiry Brief*

In the case of an *Inquiry Brief*, where the recommendation typically is for accreditation for two, five, or ten years, the committee scrutinizes the panel's conclusions with regard to each of the three quality principles, including any stipulations and weaknesses cited in the Case Analysis or by the panelists themselves during the discussion. The committee examines the record to see if there is any basis for a different accreditation recommendation from the one the panel brought forward.

The committee's examination of *weaknesses* and *stipulations*, for example, entails searching for supportive evidence for the subcomponent or component in the record that might have been overlooked or misinterpreted by the panel. If it fails to find conclusive supporting evidence, the committee accepts the *weaknesses* and *stipulations* cited by the panel.

While the panel need only find that the preponderance of the evidence is consistent with claims and TEAC's principles, the committee must find evidence *conclusive* for the opposite of the Panel's recommendation, not just evidence that is *consistent* with the opposite recommendation. If the panel finds

the evidence inconsistent with the rival hypotheses and rejects it, the committee must find that the evidence would support and prove the rival hypotheses before it could accept it.

Recommendation for an *Inquiry Brief Proposal*

In most cases, the panel, based on its evaluation of the entire record, finds that the *Inquiry Brief Proposal* supports the program's overall claim that it can produce an acceptable *Inquiry Brief* within five years if it follows the plan presented in the *Inquiry Brief Proposal*. The committee's task, however, is to see if there is credible evidence to show that the program faculty will *not* succeed. If there is credible evidence, the committee would not award *initial accreditation*. If, on the other hand, there is no *counter* evidence of consequence, the committee accepts the panel's recommendation for *initial accreditation*.

If the panel had not recommended *initial accreditation*, or recommended it for only two years, then the committee would seek evidence in the record that the program *can* produce an acceptable *Inquiry Brief* within five years if it follows the plan presented in the *Inquiry Brief Proposal*. If the committee finds credible and persuasive evidence that the program can produce an acceptable *Inquiry Brief*, the committee rejects the panel's recommendation to deny or limit accreditation and awards initial accreditation status in its place.

- 5. *Committee's decisions, minutes, and report.*** After the committee has made each of its accreditation decisions, by majority vote, it discusses the contents of the draft minutes of its meeting. The committee's minutes in the instance where it accepts the panel's recommendations can be brief and simply state the outcomes of the committee's deliberations.

In the cases where the committee rejects any of the panel's recommendations, including those about stipulations and weaknesses, and makes a new accreditation decision, the committee must fully justify its findings and new decision. This will require a separate report to the program faculty and to the TEAC staff.

The committee's minutes also present its findings, its decision on the certification of TEAC's procedures, and any remedies it orders. The minutes may also present recommendations to the staff and the full board of directors about changes in TEAC's policies, regulations, and procedures.

- 6. *Debriefing.*** At the close of its meeting, the committee will analyze its own decision-making, particularly with reference to its individual and collective confidence in its conclusions and accreditation decisions and to procedural modifications it would like to implement at its next meeting.

The Accreditation Committee's decision process

The Accreditation Committee is asked to make two decisions. The first concerns whether TEAC followed its own procedures throughout the entire accreditation process.

The second concerns the accreditation decision itself. The Accreditation Committee must decide whether the Accreditation Report, which contains the Accreditation Panel's recommendation, is convincing and consistent with its own reading of the *Brief*, the Audit Report, the Case Analysis, any reports of the consultants, any correspondence, TEAC's Guidelines, and TEAC's policies. To modify the recommendations of the Accreditation Report, the Accreditation Committee must find evidence that falsifies or contradicts the panel's recommendation.

Certification of TEAC procedures

The Accreditation Committee determines whether the TEAC staff has complied throughout the accreditation process with TEAC's policies and regulations by examining the documentation provided by the staff liaison to the committee for each stage of the accreditation process. If the TEAC staff did not follow a policy, the committee would need to determine if the error had a material effect on the accreditation recommendation. If the program faculty was not given an opportunity to respond, for example, to errors in the audit report (favorable or unfavorable to the program) before it went to the Accreditation Panel, the panel's recommendation might have been different from the one it submitted to the Accreditation Committee. On the other hand, if the program faculty waived its right to the full period it had in which to comment, the effect on the recommendation might be negligible.

If the director of the Accreditation Panel made no suggestions for audit tasks, as recommended in TEAC's policy, and the panel's deliberations raised no additional issues of verification, this departure from TEAC policy could be a matter of no consequence.

If the panel's deliberations were frustrated by the fact that some key pieces of evidence were not verified owing to the auditors not receiving proper instructions, the committee might conclude that the audit would need to be conducted again, or that some other remedy should be found to compensate for the effects of the staff's error.

If an auditor strayed from verifying evidence into making judgments about whether the claims were supported by the evidence in the *Brief* (apart from the evidence about institutional commitment), the committee would need to consider whether this auditor's error interfered with the proper deliberations of the Accreditation Panel.

It may be that some important elements of TEAC's procedures cannot be documented directly owing to the staff's oversight, carelessness, inattention, and so forth (e.g., there may not be a letter formally accepting the *Brief*, panel minutes might be silent on the matter of a quorum, or some dues or fees may not have been paid, etc.). Here again, the committee will need to decide if the point is sufficiently important to call into question the panel's recommendation.

Occasionally there may be departures from TEAC's established policy that were driven by local exigencies. A conflict of interest between the program and an auditor or panel member may not have been declared in a timely manner or at all. The committee would consider whether the existence of the conflict, or even the appearance of the conflict, had compromised the auditors' or panel members' conclusions.

The auditors may have been unable to avoid, as required in TEAC policies, occasions of "*wining and dining*" while they were on the campus. Compromises in the procedures may have been made over unavoidable changes in travel plans, flight delays, and so forth. The committee would assure itself that these compromises were of little consequence.

It is the responsibility of the Accreditation Committee to probe the evidence the staff has assembled to verify that the procedures followed in each case have the integrity required by TEAC's system.

Scrutiny of the Accreditation Report

The TEAC system is designed so that the Accreditation Committee is able to easily accept the recommendations that the Accreditation Panel makes in its Accreditation Report.

The method the committee uses to determine whether it will accept or reject the panel's recommendations is the common method of *falsification*. If the committee cannot falsify a panel recommendation, the committee must accept it, because its *opposite* cannot be supported with evidence based in the record.

In this method, the committee considers each recommendation in the Accreditation Report to see whether it can find some evidence in the *Brief*, the Audit Report, the Accreditation Report itself, or any other documentation about the case, that would conclusively undermine a recommendation or finding in the Accreditation Report.

For example, the panel may have recommended accreditation but with the stipulation that the program must remedy its weak evidence for the graduates' subject matter knowledge. The topic, in the panel's judgment, may have been overlooked, misconstrued, or the modes of assessment may have been suspect with regard to their validity. The committee would then seek to find evidence that would undermine or falsify the panel's conclusion. The committee, for example, would look for persuasive evidence of the valid assessment of subject matter, or a cogent rationale for the assessment of subject matter that adequately reflected the current state of scholarship about the subject matter. If the committee found sufficient evidence in the record to satisfy the *Quality Principle I* requirement that the program's graduates learned their subject matter, they would reject the panel's recommendation for a stipulation. The stipulation would be removed from the TEAC accreditation decision. However, if the committee could find no evidence in the record that could undermine or nullify the panel's recommendation of a stipulation, the committee would accept it, and the stipulation would stand.

To take another example, the panel may have recommended *accreditation for two years* on the grounds that, while there was sufficient evidence that the students had learned the elements of *Quality Principle I*, the evidence was inconclusive about *Quality Principle II*. The committee's approach on this point, as on all points,

would be to seek evidence that would disconfirm the panel's conclusion. The committee would examine the evidence about the internal audit and *Quality Principle II* presented in the *Brief* and in the Audit Report to see if it were sufficient to support the program's claim that it had in fact satisfied *Quality Principle II*. To accept the panel's recommendation for accreditation for two years, the committee, in other words, would need to satisfy itself that there was insufficient evidence that the program's quality control system was effective.

If the panel were to recommend initial accreditation on the strength of the program's rationale, quality control system, and the evidence of commitment, the committee would seek evidence that would show that each of these areas were problematic insofar as there was conclusive evidence to show that the rationale was weak, or that the internal audit failed to perform adequately, or that there was persuasive evidence that the institution was not committed to the program. Should the committee fail to find the evidence it sought on these points, it would have to accept the panel's recommendation.

The Accreditation Committee's method is closely connected to the panel's method and is, in a sense, its mirror image. The committee is attempting to find sufficient and persuasive evidence for the opposite of what the panel claimed. Thus, when the panel rejects an alternative or rival explanation, the committee seeks evidence that would enable it to accept the rival explanation.

In a field like education, where the evidence is rarely conclusive, greater weight is given by necessity to the panel's conclusions because of the difficulty in finding conclusive evidence on any point that would rebut the panel's determination.

Thus, the standard of evidence for the panel is somewhat lower than is the standard for the committee in the sense that the threshold for the panel's recommendation is that the evidence in the *Brief* and record be consistent with the program faculty's claims, while the standard for the committee is that the evidence against the panel's recommendation must be conclusive. In other words, if the panel found that the program's evidence is consistent with the conclusion that the program's graduates know their subject matter, the committee would have to base its challenge to the panel's recommendation on evidence that indicates that the graduates do *not* know their subject matter, not merely that there was evidence that was inconsistent with their knowing subject matter.

The Accreditation Committee's decision

The Accreditation Committee makes one of the following determinations:

- 1. Accreditation (*Inquiry Brief*).** The committee accredits for five or ten years, upon the recommendation of the panel, when it cannot find conclusive evidence that is contrary to panel's recommendation.
- 2. Initial accreditation (*Inquiry Brief Proposal*).** The committee awards initial accreditation for five years, upon the recommendation of the panel, when the committee cannot find conclusive evidence contrary to the panel's recommendation (e.g., it cannot find that the rationale for the assessments was unsound, that the institution was uncommitted to the program, that the quality control system failed to operate as designed, and overall the plan for an *Inquiry Brief* would not succeed).
- 3. Accreditation or Initial Accreditation for two years.** The committee, following the procedures described for the committee's work, may accept the panel's recommendation for the award of a two-year term for accreditation or initial accreditation. However, it may also reduce the term of the panel's recommendation from five or ten years to two years when it finds conclusive evidence that any single element (1.0-3.0) the panel found as above standard was below standard (see Table 1 or 6).
- 4. Denied accreditation.** The committee may deny accreditation upon the recommendation of the panel, when the committee cannot find conclusive evidence that would support the program faculty's claims. It may also deny accreditation to a program the panel recommends for accreditation if it can find conclusive evidence in the record that shows that any two elements the panel found above standard were below standard (see Table 1 or 6).