

## **Why Accreditation Matters**

by Deborah Smith Bailey, gradPSYCH Staff  
*gradPSYCH*, Volume 2, Number 2, April 2004

April 1, 2004 -- Imagine if your graduate program didn't have a process to resolve student grievances. Or if your internship site offered no feedback on your progress. Or, when you applied to graduate programs, you had no information on the programs' curricula or such policies as whether you had to participate in student group therapy.

It could be a daunting prospect to invest so much time and money with no way of knowing whether you're getting the education you signed up for.

That's why there are organizations devoted to letting students know whether programs provide students with a quality education -- including APA's Office of Program Consultation and Accreditation and its Committee on Accreditation (CoA). The committee -- made up of two members of the general public, a student nominated by the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS) and 18 representatives from nine different psychology organizations -- evaluates professional graduate programs, internships and postdocs that voluntarily apply for accreditation.

The process requires programs to conduct a self-study of their curricula and resources, allows for public comment periods and includes a CoA site visit and review.

Although APA is the only organization authorized by the U.S. Department of Education to accredit doctoral-level professional psychology programs, other psychology organizations -- such as the Association of Psychology Postdoctoral Internship Centers and the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology -- publish lists of programs that can be useful tools for students. Moreover, on a broader level, regional associations also accredit entire academic institutions.

Such accrediting organizations give students assurances that their doctoral programs meet the basic standards of the profession, says Charlotte Tilson, a fourth-year clinical psychology student at the Wright Institute in Berkeley, California, who represents students on APA's accreditation committee.

"As consumers of education, we want to know that the education we are getting is as high quality as possible," Tilson explains. Accreditation, she says, gives students a measure of assurance that they can get a return on their educational investment.

Plus, students who attend accredited programs may have an easier time in the job market, says Ted Packard, PhD, CoA chair and a University of Utah educational psychology professor. For example, some employers may prefer graduates with an accredited internship and doctoral program on their resume.

### **QUALITY ASSURANCE**

Indeed, accreditation serves as a quality-control guide for students, says Susan Zlotlow, PhD, director of APA's accreditation office. For example, students can expect APA-accredited programs will offer organized, sequential training curricula and

qualified faculty in adequate numbers. They also will offer a certain level of supervision and sufficient physical resources, such as libraries, computers and office space. Moreover, accredited programs must outline all of their requirements and policies in their program handbook, so students get no surprises after they're enrolled.

All of these requirements are outlined in CoA's handbook -- the Guidelines and Principles for Accreditation of Programs in Professional Psychology -- available at [www.apa.org/ed/G&P2.pdf](http://www.apa.org/ed/G&P2.pdf) (PDF document, 92K). The committee's home page -- [www.apa.org/ed/accreditation](http://www.apa.org/ed/accreditation) -- also includes lists of accredited programs and those whose accreditation has been revoked. Currently, 346 doctoral programs, 472 internships and 27 postdocs are accredited. And the number of postdocs is growing, in part because the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs now requires all of its postdoctoral residencies to be accredited.

The APA accreditation policies that these doctoral programs, internships and postdocs must heed are divided into eight domains for each kind. For example, Domain E on student-faculty relationships offers a wealth of student protections, including:

- Mutually respectful student-faculty relationships that follow APA's Ethics Code
- Accessible faculty
- Respect for cultural and individual diversity
- Feedback to students on their progress on at least an annual basis
- Student grievance procedures

"Accreditation guides a lot of what your program does," explains Kent Wilson, a first-year clinical psychology student at the University of Virginia who worked in APA's accreditation office for two years. "It ensures that all programs that have this certification meet these minimal standards, so that everyone coming out of accredited programs has the same base knowledge."

## **LICENSURE AND EMPLOYMENT**

Because accredited programs give students that knowledge base, their graduates are usually well-prepared for licensure, says Packard, a former chair of the American Board of Professional Psychology.

"In general, accredited programs are more comprehensive and more uniform in terms of what they cover -- and they're tied into the general requirements of most of the licensing boards," he explains.

In fact, many states require licensure candidates to either have a degree from an APA-accredited doctoral program or prove that their program is equivalent -- a growing trend among state licensing laws, says Packard. Some state laws also require an APA-accredited internship or the equivalent.

Many states also accept licensure candidates who attended doctoral programs on the list of designated doctoral programs published jointly by the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPPB) and National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology, a credentialing bank. This year's list includes 410 designated programs, which the National Register requires to be APA-accredited or to meet

specific criteria.

However, a handful of states have more stringent, APA-specific requirements, according to ASPPB's Handbook of Licensing and Certification Requirements, a state-by-state listing of licensing requirements available at [www.asppb.org/pubs/handbookusr.asp](http://www.asppb.org/pubs/handbookusr.asp). Specifically:

**Florida** accepts only APA-accredited doctoral programs for those who graduated after 1999 and requires internships to meet APA standards.

**Mississippi** requires internships to be accredited by APA or the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA).

**Oklahoma** accepts only APA-accredited doctoral programs for those who graduated after 1997.

**Utah** accepts only doctoral programs and internships that are APA- or CPA-accredited.

That said, students must carefully examine the licensure laws of the state they want to practice in, says Zlotlow. Every state is different, and some states, such as New York, require specific coursework regardless of whether candidates have attended an APA-accredited or National Register-designated program. Since state boards evaluate each candidate as an individual, an accredited program and internship doesn't necessarily guarantee licensure, she notes.

Accreditation comes into play more, she adds, when students begin their internships and post-graduation job hunts. Many internships prefer students from accredited doctoral programs, she says, and employers frequently prefer psychologists who interned at an accredited site and graduated from an accredited program. Such positions include academic jobs at professional psychology programs or positions on competitive managed-care panels. And some employers, such as the Department of Veterans Affairs, require an accredited education, Packard says.

"In general, there's a reasonable expectation that you're going to have a better level of developed skills having gone through an accredited program," he says of employers' accreditation preferences. "It's a very big advantage on the job market."