**Application Due Dates and Extensions of Accredited Status**

The Spring 2008 *CACREP Connection* newsletter included an article entitled, “Be Careful What You Ask For (you might not get it).” In the article, CACREP President and CEO, Dr. Carol Bobby, articulated the challenges associated with a growing number of programs requesting extensions of accredited status and drew a sharp contrast between requests based on extraordinary circumstances and those based on “the dog ate my homework” explanations. The majority of the requests at the time fell into this latter category. As is often the case, history tends to repeat itself. CACREP is again experiencing an increasing number of requests for extensions of accredited status, and the majority of rationales presented are best classified as ordinary rather than extraordinary. The challenge of ordinary extension requests is complicated even further by the steadily increasing number of institutions in the CACREP accreditation review process at any given time.

A full CACREP accreditation cycle is eight years. As Dr. Bobby pointed out in 2008, when discussing the fact that some accreditors do not entertain any requests for extension of accredited status and proceed with accreditation reviews based purely on accreditation cycle:

*This approach is based on the idea that accredited programs deliver quality programs and quality education to their enrolled students even under stressful circumstances. This approach is also based on the idea that standards are continuing to be met, as contracted with the student and with the accrediting organization.*

CACREP, as an accrediting organization, recognizes that there may be extraordinary and unforeseeable circumstances, such as natural disasters, significantly impacting the operations of a home institution. CACREP naturally will work with and provide what support it can to programs encountering such extreme circumstances. But CACREP is also committed to the idea that accredited programs maintain the processes and procedures necessary to sustain quality programs and adhere with the accreditation standards throughout an accreditation cycle, and should be able to demonstrate this during a re-accreditation review at the conclusion of an accreditation cycle. With that being said, let’s consider the timeline for programs in preparing for a re-accreditation review and the request rationales that are best designated as of the ordinary versus extraordinary variety.

A standard re-accreditation review generally takes 12-18 months to complete from the time of the self-study submission to accreditation decision. The length of the review process can be influenced by a variety of factors including when the self-study is submitted, whether or not an addendum to the self-study is required, and when the CACREP Board of Directors is scheduled to meet.

The CACREP Board of Directors meets each January and July to make accreditation decisions. CACREP expiration dates are either March 31 or October 31. A program should plan to submit its self-study for re-accreditation a *minimum* of one year *prior to the Board meeting preceding the expiration date*. For example: if a program has a 3/31/2023 expiration date, initial planning is for the CACREP Board to make an accreditation decision for the program at its January 2023 Board meeting. Therefore, the self-study materials should be submitted no later than January 2022. Since, as noted, the accreditation review process takes 12-18 months, and CACREP is working with a large number of programs in the accreditation process at any given time, it is best to allow additional time for the review process and submit earlier, perhaps 15 months prior to the Board meeting.

The dates indicated above are for actual submission of the application and self-study. They do not take into account the preparation work that occurs at the institution to develop these materials for submission. A good rule of thumb is to allow at least a year for the preparation of these materials prior to submission. If the program is working to adopt new processes and procedures, such as making changes to align the program with a different set of CACREP standards, then additional time should be considered to allow for the full development, implementation and documentation of these processes.

This brings us to some examples of rationales programs sometimes present when requesting an extension of accredited status. These examples best fall under the designation of ordinary circumstances not warranting an extension. Sometimes programs will indicate that the person writing their self-study left the institution, or transitioned to a different role at the institution, such as into an administrative position. Preparing for an accreditation review is a full faculty activity. While an individual may coordinate the process, the process should not be so dependent on a single individual that someone else could not step in to take over the process should it become necessary. A related type of request involves faculty transitions. Perhaps a program may have one or two new faculty members coming on board so a request is made to allow time perhaps for the new faculty members to acclimate to the program or learn the assessment system. Faculty transitions are a normal part of the ebb and flow of academic programs, and the accreditation preparation or review process can continue during these transitions.

Sometimes programs request an extension because there may be other multiple reviews scheduled, such as an accreditation review for the college or school in which the program is housed or a state-level review of the institution. Similar to CACREP accreditation reviews, the dates and timelines for these events are known considerably in advance allowing for adequate preparation. Additionally, oftentimes there may be overlapping purposes and data points associated with the different reviews allowing for the preparation of reports that serve these multiple purposes.

An even more problematic type request is when a program requests an extension of accredited status because there have been processes that were supposed to be occurring, such as regular surveys of constituent groups for program evaluation purposes, that have not been occurring and now the program wants some additional time to get this process back on track. Again, a basis of accreditation is that accredited programs maintain adherence with accreditation standards throughout an accreditation cycle. Failure to maintain adherence to the standards is not a viable rationale for extending accredited status for a program. A related rationale could be that a program wants to transition an existing process to a new one that the program faculty feel will work better, such as perhaps changing the mechanisms by which constituent groups are surveyed. There is nothing wrong with doing this, but there is no reason for the accreditation timeline to be adjusted for it. The program can document both how it has maintained compliance with the standards over time with the current processes and how it is modifying the existing processes for the future.

With adequate planning and preparation, programs can submit an application and self-study in plenty of time to achieve re-accreditation prior to the cycle expiration date. Such adequate planning and preparation necessitates an understanding of the accreditation cycle and when reports are due, maintaining adherence to the CACREP Standards throughout an accreditation cycle, allowing adequate time for the development of the application and self-study materials, planning for transitions that may occur in a program over time, and submitting materials in a timely fashion to allow for the length of the re-accreditation review process. In the words of time management guru Alan Lakein, “[p]lanning is bringing the future into the present so you can do something about it now.” If you need any assistance with your planning for re-accreditation or have any questions about the timeline of your current accreditation cycle, please do not hesitate to contact the CACREP staff. We are happy to help, and the earlier this occurs, the less chance there is of an undesired lapse of accredited status for a program.