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Accreditation for Registered Appren

by | **Patrick Rome**

Accreditation can be advantageous for apprenticeship programs when applying for funding and recruiting apprentices. ERISA training trust funds should make sure to weigh the benefits against the challenges when deciding whether to pursue accreditation.

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Registered apprenticeship programs (RAPs) already adhere to standards established by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). But some Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) training trust funds may want to consider taking an additional step to gain accreditation from an accrediting agency.

The time and administrative work required to become accredited can seem overwhelming, but the benefits to the fund and apprentices may be worth the effort.

This article will explain accreditation, identify the benefits and challenges of seeking accreditation, and describe the process.

What Is Accreditation?

To gain accreditation, organizations undergo a formal review by an accrediting agency. Accreditation provides an additional stamp of approval by signifying that postsecondary institutions, including apprenticeship training programs, meet an acceptable level of quality and engage in continuous improvement.

There are many forms of accreditation, but the most beneficial for ERISA/RAP institutions is likely through an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education (DOE). Institutional accreditation considers the entire institution whereas programmatic accreditation typically accredits specific programming within the institution. Institutional accreditation is widely

viewed as a better fit for ERISA/RAP institutions because its standards consider organizational structure, finances, human resources, student services, facilities, technical infrastructure, media resources and strategic planning.

For more details on accreditation and access to lists of accrediting agencies:

www2.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html



Accrediting organizations are typically formed into commissions with elected commissioners who apply DOE-approved standards to make accreditation decisions. Standards are reviewed annually for DOE updates. Changes in standards can also be proposed by member institutions to be reviewed by the agency standards review committee. These changes are approved by a vote of the membership or commission. Examples of standards can include that learning objectives meet industry needs, all instructors possess minimum educational credentials, learning resources are adequate, and facilities and technical infrastructure are sufficient for quality learning.

RAPs are known for having strong technical instruction in place to align with on-the-job learning. The DOL registered apprenticeship standards provide a great framework for individual programs but can lack overall school guidance toward quality and institutional improvement. For example, RAP standards typically do not require a mission statement or strategic plan, while institutional accreditation standards do. Accreditation standards measure outcomes by setting individual program benchmarks for program completion, employment placement and licensing pass rates.

The Pros of Pursuing Accreditation

Trustees have several considerations when making the decision to pursue accreditation. Following are some of the benefits of gaining accreditation.

Additional Sources of Funding

Many ERISA/RAP schools compete successfully for grant funding, but achieving accreditation can better position an institution to qualify for more funding opportunities. Several federal and state competitive grants require participation from an accredited education or training partner. While U.S.

takeaways

- Accreditation provides an additional stamp of approval that a registered apprenticeship program (RAP) has met an acceptable level of quality and engages in continuous improvement.
- The most beneficial form of accreditation for RAPs is likely through an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Institutional accreditation standards consider organizational structure, finances, human resources, student services, facilities, technical infrastructure, media resources and strategic planning.
- The benefits of accreditation include the ability to access a variety of additional sources of funding, including grants and state education dollars. Accreditation also can be a draw for apprentices.
- Initial accreditation costs can run from \$30,000 to \$80,000, and annual dues typically range from \$3,000 to \$10,000. The process requires significant staff time.

Department of Labor (DOL) grants frequently target unaccredited ERISA/RAP schools, grants from DOE, foundations, community organizations and other sponsors require applicants to be accredited. Accredited ERISA/RAP schools now compete for grant funding with public and nonprofit schools.

Accredited ERISA/RAP schools also may qualify for state education funding. In recent years, accredited ERISA/RAP schools have found success in partnering with public high schools for dual or concurrent enrollment programs. These programs provide funding to ERISA/RAP schools when they offer pre-apprenticeship training for high school students either on the ERISA/RAP school campus or at the high school. Some of this shared funding can originate through federal Perkins grants or other sources. Dual or concurrent enrollment can provide credit toward a high school student's diploma as well as toward completion of an apprenticeship program. Schools should make sure to confirm what state rules require since they vary.

Foundations are often more receptive to considering accredited ERISA/RAP schools as beneficiaries. In particular, foundations that target workforce development or underserved populations may see accredited ERISA/RAP schools as able to fulfill the objectives of their giving mission. Foundations' funding decisions are grounded in trusting their beneficiaries, and accreditation helps build that trust.

Promotion of Continuous Quality Improvement

Accreditation standards encourage planning and require all program operational components to be addressed, which helps to ensure continuous improvement. Programs must conduct periodic reviews and have policies and procedures in place for the following areas.

- Strategic planning
- Facilities
- Technical infrastructure
- Health and safety
- Apprentice retention
- Learning outcomes
- Instruction
- Student experience
- Budgeting and forecasting

These are important accreditation standards that assure viability and resources in place for continuous improvement. They also are crucial elements of overall institutional quality,

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and RAP standards don't necessarily address them in depth. Accreditation standards put the ERISA/RAP school on par with other postsecondary schools.

Enhanced Recruitment

Many ERISA/RAP schools have robust recruitment efforts in place, and the biggest draw to a RAP is the opportunity to be employed while going through the program and "earn while you learn." Accreditation may improve the ability of ERISA/RAP schools to compete with traditional colleges and universities for students. Marketing programs can tout that they meet the same institutional standards used by colleges and universities.

ERISA/RAP schools also can take their programming a step further by turning their apprenticeship programs into associate degree-level programs, which are important to many candidates. RAPs that add general studies courses can be formulated to create applied associate degrees. General studies in the areas of math, humanities, behavioral sciences, and natural and applied sciences can complement and enhance apprentices' technical learning and give them an extended career path.

Improved Employer Engagement and Learning Outcomes

Registered apprenticeship standards outline the responsibilities of joint apprenticeship and training committees (JATCs), which can sometimes get bogged down in administering these standards. In accredited programs, the administrative burden for policies and procedures is shifted to school administrators. When the program is accredited, JATCs can evolve into true advisory committees where the focus moves away from managing the apprentices to identifying essen-

tial knowledge, skills and competencies of the occupation. These evolved JATCs create an environment in which employers, subject matter experts and union representatives can collaborate to ensure that the curriculum is current with industry technology. The JATC can tailor learning outcomes to align with the employers' occupational needs.

Networking Benefits

One highly regarded accrediting agency has designed a unique "affinity" group for ERISA/RAP schools that enables members to work collaboratively on group concerns and propose standards changes. ERISA/RAP schools also have the opportunity to network with other types of postsecondary institutions including public, private, federal and Job Corps schools. Conferences and workshops provide a venue for schools to compare their operations and identify best practices at other schools to adopt.

Challenges of Accreditation

Costs

Depending on the size of the school, operational practices and documentation, total initial accreditation costs can run from \$30,000 to \$80,000. Annual dues vary depending on the size of the institution and accrediting agency, but they can range from roughly \$3,000 to \$10,000.

Costs include the following.

- **Accrediting agency charges:** Membership dues, application fees, stipends and travel costs for team visit evaluators who complete a virtual or on-site visit
- **Internal program costs:** Administrative and instructional staff

time to participate in the initial process, including time for developing new or reviewing existing policies; procedures, processes and plans adhering to accreditation standards. Staff time is also needed to prepare exhibits to document standards compliance to evaluators.

- **Consultants:** Consultants are available to guide schools through accreditation, or they can target specific areas where schools need help. Accrediting agencies provide guidance, but consultants can speed up the process and lighten the load for staff members.

Administration

The burdens of increased administrative work and additional documentation are part of accreditation. Schools must be vigilant in adhering to standards to ensure that they can provide evidence of compliance to accreditors at any point in time. Findings of noncompliance with standards are often related to a lack of documented evidence that a standard has been met.

Apprenticeship funds should conduct a cost-benefit analysis before pursuing accreditation. Future grant awards or other funding sources are not guaranteed, so schools should consider the multiyear investment costs of accreditation against this risk. Some schools have seen significant upsides to their accreditation investment with seven-figure returns. However, these returns have come after investing one to three years in establishing accreditation and setting up the infrastructure to pursue sources of funding.

Considerations for Pursuing Accreditation

- Access to additional sources of funding
- Promotion of continuous quality improvement
- Enhanced candidate recruitment
- Improved employer engagement and learning outcomes
- Administrative time
- Costs



Achieving and Maintaining Accreditation

Following are the steps included in a typical accreditation process.

Application

Some agencies require candidate applicants to attend a workshop before applying for candidate status. Depending on the accreditation agency, the school typically must:

- Have been in operation for at least one year
- Have graduates from at least one program
- Have a minimum enrollment level
- Demonstrate financial stability.

If the minimum criteria can be met, an application is submitted to the agency. Applications may also require additional information, including state approvals, enrollment and completion data, campuses, a mission statement, a strategic plan, a student handbook/school catalog, a certified financial audit report, staff rosters, an organizational chart, organizational documents, a trustee roster, and operating policy and procedures.

Self-Study and Site Visit

The accreditation process requires a self-study report and a site visit by a team of evaluators. The entire school staff must participate in the development of the self-study, which compares the operation of the school to the accreditation standards and identifies challenges and solutions. The school also must prepare exhibits to provide documentation of its adherence to standards. The self-study is submitted in advance of the site visit. A team evaluation visit can last from two to four days. The visiting team completes an evaluation report that is reviewed with the institution and submitted to the accrediting agency. Any findings of noncompliance, suggestions and commendations are included in the evaluation report.

Accreditation Approval

The commission makes an accreditation decision after a review of the team report. The type and number of findings of noncompliance and commendations are very influential for the decision to approve and assign the number of years of accreditation. Many accrediting agencies have accreditation approval periods of two to six years. The commission may defer its decision until the school provides documentation that it has addressed any findings of noncompliance.

Maintaining Accreditation

Once an institution has been awarded a set number of approval years, it is required to continuously meet the accrediting agency’s standards. Staff must understand those standards and monitor the operations of the school. Some accreditation agencies hold unannounced team visits to check on adherence to standards in between approval cycles. Along with reporting completion data annually, schools are expected to review those standards and attest to their institution’s compliance.

Reaffirmation of Accreditation

Schools should start working on reaffirmation of accreditation approval 12 to 18 months before the end of the current

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approval period. This includes developing another self-study report and hosting a site visit, which requires similar work and resources as the initial accreditation application. Consistently adhering to standards between cycles reduces the work required for reaffirmation.

Conclusion

ERISA apprenticeship fund trustees who decide to pursue accreditation should view the effort as a long-term strategic investment in the program. Trustees should be prepared to support the staff as they work through the process. Some of the outlined benefits can be recognized immediately, while others may take several years to materialize. Kirk Nooks, Ed.D., president and chief executive officer of the Council on Occupational Education (COE), offers valuable insight to leaders of ERISA/RAP schools that are considering accreditation: “The strategic decision to pursue the path of accreditation is a commitment to excellence. It requires an investment of resources, which will ultimately aid the organization to be among the best in terms of quality.”

Accreditation requires a trust board’s continued commitment, staff time and financial resources. Accreditation can seem overwhelming; however, the achievement of moving to the next level of quality and integrity and forming a culture of continuous improvement may be worth the venture. **■**