

# Entry on “Accreditation” for Dictionnaire de sociologie clinique

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## Abstract

This reprint presents a brief history and overview of the Commission on the Accreditation of Programs in Applied and Clinical Sociology (CAPACS), specifically in the context of global higher education accreditation; the increasing demand to accredit disciplinary and professional programs in the social and behavioral sciences as a process of external quality review; and the oversight of higher education accreditation commissions. Particular attention focuses on the creation of CAPACS in 1995 (originally known as the Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology or CACS), as a joint initiative of the Society for Applied Sociology (SAS) and the Sociological Practice Association (SPA), which merged in 2006, to form the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology (AACS); CAPACS accreditation standards; and the benefits of CAPACS Program accreditation in the discipline of Sociology and the profession of sociological practice. Reprint of “Accréditation,” in Vandeveld-Rougale Agnés & Pascal Fugier (eds.), *Dictionnaire de sociologie clinique*, Toulouse, ERES, to be published in 2018.

## Keywords

accreditation, higher education, applied sociology, clinical sociology, engaged public sociology, sociological practice

## Accreditation

Accreditation is a process of external quality review in higher education. Accreditation generally aims at improving the quality of the education and training of students, ensuring the allocation of needed resources to programs, increasing students’ opportunities for job and career placements, and enhancing the marketing of programs to prospective students, parents, nongovernmental organization agents and political leaders, and employers.

Across the world, and increasingly in the United States, sociologists pursue employment and career opportunities outside academia in interdisciplinary fields that are regulated by the State, including but not limited to behavioral health care, social service administration, criminal justice, forensic counseling, and public policy research (Fleischer 1997, 1998, 1999; cf. Fritz 2012; Perlstadt 1998). Since the mid-1980s, State legislatures in the United States have enacted laws sponsored by professional and occupational associations to regulate the entry of psychologists, social workers, marriage and family therapists, professional counselors, and others into these

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interdisciplinary fields, and restrict the entry of unregulated professionals, including sociologists. In the mid-1990s, an imperative arose in sociology to form a commission to accredit programs in applied and clinical sociociology (and later engaged public sociology), collectively known as sociological practice, in higher education for the purpose of educating and training students, and qualifying graduates for entry into these and other interdisciplinary fields, comparable with their counterparts in the social and behavioral sciences.

Standards were developed for programs in (1) *applied sociology* to address the “utilization of sociological theory, methods, and skills to collect and analyze data, and to communicate the findings to understand and resolve pragmatic problems of clients;” (2) *clinical sociology* to address “the application of a sociological perspective to the analysis and design of intervention for positive social change at any level of social organization;” (3) *engaged public sociology* to address any activity that “brings sociology, including applied and/or clinical sociology, into dialogue with audiences inside as well as outside of the academy;” and (4) *sociological practice*, generally understood as the “umbrella term that encompasses applied, clinical, and engaged public sociology.”

## **Oversight of Higher Education Accreditation and Accreditation Commissions**

The oversight of higher education accreditation and accreditation commissions varies internationally. In France, for instance, accreditation commissions fall under the purview of the Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research (MNEHER), and include, among other bodies, the Centre International d’Études Pédagogiques (CIEP), Commission des Titres d’Ingénieur (CTI), and the Evaluation Agency for Research and Higher Education (AERES), succeeded by the High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (HCERES) in 2014. In the United States, institutional and program accreditations are conducted by private, nonprofit organizations that are recognized by nongovernmental entities such as the Council on Higher Education Accreditation Education (CHEA) and the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA).<sup>1</sup> In Canada, Provincial legislation grants colleges and universities autonomy in academic matters and the authority to determine their own quality assurance standards and procedures. Generally, these institutions support the Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework, and most are members of the association Universités Canada. In some instances, Canadian colleges, universities, and programs may obtain accreditation from regional accreditation commissions in the United States, such as Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia, which is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU). A European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) in higher education was founded in 2003, with the primary aim of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions among its members. A useful directory of quality assurance bodies, accreditation commissions, and Ministries of Education in 175 countries, which operate either as private (nongovernmental) organizations, or as agencies of their respective governments, can be accessed on CHEA’s International Directory Web page.

## **Accreditation in the Social and Behavioral Sciences and Creation of CAPACS**

Accreditation commissions have developed in different countries in the field of social and behavioral sciences, inter alia in relation with social work as well as allied fields such as medical care, public affairs, economics, and law. Historically, in the United States, sociologists completed higher education and training programs accredited by psychologists, social workers, and others,

and often joined their ranks to meet state-sanctioned definitions of “title and practice,” “educational qualifications,” and “examination requirements” to find suitable work as qualified applied and clinical scientists and interventionists (Fleischer 1998; cf. Perlstadt 1998). By the mid-1990s, over two-thirds of North American sociology graduates at all degree levels were entering the nonacademic workplace and professional marketplace. In 1995, the Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology (CACS) was created as a joint initiative of the Society for Applied Sociology (SAS) and the Sociological Practice Association (SPA) to accredit programs in applied and clinical sociology at the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral levels of education in the United States. In 2005, the Commission extended its purview to include engaged public sociology, in recognition of the discipline’s growth in this area of education and practice. In 2006, SAS and SPA merged to form the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology (AACCS). In 2010, CACS changed its name to the Commission on the Accreditation of Programs in Applied and Clinical Sociology (CAPACS) to more accurately convey its focus and work on program accreditation in higher education (Fleischer 1998; cf. Fritz 2012; Perlstadt 1998).

Today, CAPACS continues as an independent, international accreditor of quality programs in sociological practice, mostly in North America, but accreditation also is open for programs worldwide. CAPACS disseminates program models and resources to sociology departments that are interested in developing programs in applied, clinical, and engaged public sociology, and sociological practice. CAPACS also advocates for sociologists in the areas of professional certification and licensing (Fleischer 1998; cf. Fritz 2012; Perlstadt 1998).

### **CAPACS Accreditation Standards**

CAPACS accreditation provides the standards against which quality, higher education programs in applied, clinical and engaged public sociology, and sociological practice are measured, and monitors accredited programs to ensure that they continue to meet the standards. CAPACS accreditation verifies that a program has a firm foundation in the substantive content and applications of sociology, ensuring that graduates are able to articulate the skills they bring to employers.

CAPACS’ standards are divided into five broad categories: (1) “Institution,” covering the resources of the university, college, and department that house and support the Program; (2) “Programmatic Structure,” covering the Program’s mission and goals, administrative structure, staffing, services to students, faculty characteristics and development, and public service; (3) “Practice Experience,” covering the Program’s internships, practica, field experiences, and experiential learning, and students’ involvement in the professional activities of sponsoring organizations; (4) “Student Learning Goals and Outcomes,” covering students’ integration of sociological knowledge and skills, acquisition of a professional identity and ethics as practicing sociologists, work with diverse populations in diverse settings, understanding of the limitations imposed by the social, political, and contextual factors of their employment, and dedication to their continued professional development; and (5) “Monitoring and Quality Control,” covering the Program’s use of appropriate mechanisms to monitor, evaluate, and document its administrative procedures and practices, and assessments of student learning and continuous quality improvement.

The benefits of CAPACS accreditation are manifold. CAPACS accreditation contributes to the mission of the professionalization of sociologists. It enhances and safeguards their academic training and accomplishment as qualified practitioners in interdisciplinary fields vis-à-vis their credentialed counterparts in the social and behavioral sciences, public health and administration, and civil service, as well as in allied occupations such as professional counseling, marriage and family therapy, and psychosocial rehabilitation. CAPACS accreditation cultivates a recognizable niche for sociologists in the academic and nonacademic workplace and professional marketplace. Accredited programs establish integral linkages and networks with

employers, community leaders, philanthropists, activists, sponsors, public and private sector foundations, and government agencies. CAPACS accreditation promotes alumni support, and inter alia institutional development and advancement in their colleges and universities. Finally, CAPACS accreditation adds to the spectrum of offerings in undergraduate and graduate curricula. Innovative practicum, workshops, fieldwork, internships, and experiential learning augment traditional course work, furthering society's recognition of sociology as an indispensable science, vital to the public welfare, health, and safety; and a view of sociologists as distinctively educated and trained practitioners, uniquely suited to administer the responsibilities of their profession (Fleischer 1998; cf. Perlstadt 1998).

CAPACS standards are sensitive to the evolving standards of practice in a variety of interdisciplinary fields. Applied, clinical, and engaged public sociologists' approaches will significantly add to the mix of existing approaches as they apply their perspectives and skills, assessments, and interventions to the complex set of interactions characterizing social relations between and among sundry beneficiary populations, providers, networks, payers, employers, and their institutional environments. These concerns and practices all too often have been overlooked or underutilized in the academic, commercial, and governmental workplace and professional marketplace (Fleischer 1997, 1998; cf. Fritz 2012; Perlstadt 1998). A well-known accreditation can contribute to their acknowledgment.

### Authors' Note

Michael S. Fleischer is currently affiliated to Organizational Dynamics, Morristown, NJ, USA.

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### Note

1. The U.S. Department of Education (USDE), however, is an exception. It is a governmental agency that determines whether an institution or program is of sufficient quality to qualify for federal funds for student financial aid and other federal programs such as Veteran's Programs. USDE also requires accreditors to maintain criteria or standards in areas that cover "student achievement, curricula, faculty, facilities (includes equipment and supplies), fiscal and administrative capacity, student support services, recruiting and admissions practices, measures of program length and objectives of degrees or credentials offered, record of student complaints and record of compliance with program responsibilities for student aid as required by the 1965 federal Higher Education Act (Title IV) as amended" (quoted in Eaton [2012] 2015:7).

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