

**New Standards In The Works For Postsecondary Programs**

**by Michelle Diament**| February 1, 2021

Work is underway to establish first-ever accreditation standards for the hundreds of postsecondary programs across the nation serving students with intellectual disabilities.

The programs at colleges and universities have proliferated in recent years to number more than 300, but they vary widely in their focus, length, level of campus integration and more. As a result, families have little baseline to judge the quality of different offerings, the cost of which can rival traditional college tuition.

Now, a panel of experts has finalized a set of [model standards](https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/ModelProgramAccreditationStandards_10-2020_F.pdf) that could eventually be the basis for accrediting these programs.

The plan is the culmination of nearly a decade of work spurred by a requirement in the federal Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008. The standards call for postsecondary programs to meet minimum expectations regarding their mission, curriculum, student achievement, faculty, fiscal capacity and in other areas.

“There is much anticipation in the field about accreditation taking place,” said Stephanie Smith Lee, chair of the National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup, which is responsible for the model standards. “Families are particularly excited about accreditation since it will provide an assurance that programs meet an acceptable level of quality.”

Several more steps are needed before accreditation might come to fruition. Lee’s workgroup is preparing a report to Congress with their recommendations. And a new iteration of the panel is expected to start work this month to establish a process for using the standards and creating an accreditation organization.

But in the interim, Lee said she expects postsecondary programs to start using the model standards to evaluate and improve their offerings.

Even if accreditation becomes a reality, programs won’t be required to comply, but many are expected to. In a 2019 survey of more than 100 postsecondary program directors, 82% said that if an accreditation process were created, they would be “highly likely” or “likely” to participate.