

Building a Strong Clinical Sociology Program through Accreditation

Amitra Wall

SUNY Buffalo State University; USA

Norma Winston

University of Tampa; USA

Abstract

This article focuses on the work of the Commission on the Accreditation of Programs in Applied and Clinical Sociology (CAPACS). The authors describe the reasons why graduate and undergraduate sociology programs as well as programs in related fields that have a clinical sociology concentration or track should consider accreditation of their clinical programs. Accreditation by the Commission of programs in the United States and other countries can increase the marketability of graduating sociology students.

Keywords: program accreditation, clinical sociology, Commission on the Accreditation of Programs in Applied and Clinical Sociology

1. Introduction

Characteristics of quality higher education institutions and programs include a clear and shared mission; high standards and expectations for all students; effective school leadership that monitors student progress and needs; as well as the alignment of curriculum, teaching, learning, and instruction with standards of quality control. Accreditation, the process to measure quality control in higher education, can be at the level of the institution and at the program level. At the core is the maintenance of high educational standards.

This article will focus on the work of the Commission on the Accreditation of Programs in Applied and Clinical Sociology (CAPACS), an accrediting body based in the United States. Specifically, the authors describe the reasons why domestic and international sociology programs should consider accreditation of their programs

through CAPACS. The need for agreed-upon standards is due to the recognition that increasing numbers of sociology graduates are pursuing professional jobs. Overall, sociology students are deemed to be at a disadvantage when compared to students graduating in such areas as psychology, social work, and marriage and family therapy; because these fields are often regulated by professional groups and occupational associations, and not open to sociologists. Hence CAPACS is an important solution for increasing the marketability of sociology students in clinical and applied programs.

1. The Commission on the Accreditation of Programs in Applied and Clinical Sociology (CAPACS)

Formerly known as the Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology (CACS), CAPACS was established in 1995 as a joint initiative of the Society for Applied Sociology (SAS) and the Sociological Practice Association (SPA). Its purpose is to develop, promote, and support quality sociological education and practice through the accreditation of programs in sociological practice (e.g., clinical sociology, applied sociology, engaged public sociology, translational sociology, forensic sociology, and rural sociology).

The Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology (CACS) changed its name to the Commission on the Accreditation of Programs in Applied and Clinical Programs (CAPACS) in 2010 to convey its focus and work more accurately, which is to train students and qualify them to be competitive in the nonacademic and professional marketplace. Programs are accredited in the United States and internationally at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels. In addition to accreditation, CAPACS acts in an advisory capacity and as a resource provider to sociology departments interested in developing programs in sociological practice, and also advocates for sociologists in areas of professional certification and licensing (Fleischer 1998, cf. Fritz 2012, Perlstadt 1998).

1. CAPACS Accreditation Standards

CAPACS accreditation provides both the standards against which quality higher educational programs in sociological practice are measured and a monitoring system to ensure that accredited programs continue to meet the standards. The result is highly trained graduates in the substantive content and applications of sociology, auguring well for their future employment.

CAPACS developed standards for clinical sociology; the standards highlight the application of the sociological perspective to the analysis and design and intervention for positive social change at all levels of social organization. CAPACS standards are based on learning outcomes that specify what students can do upon completion of a program. The standards cover the use of sociological theory, research methods, professional orientation, and ethics. In addition, students must complete a meaningful practice experience, such as an internship, for a program to be accredited.

After programs demonstrate and explain how preconditions are met, CAPACS Commissioners review programs for full compliance, partial compliance, or non-compliance. CAPACS standards are divided into five broad categories:

- Institution: the resources of the university, college and department that house and support the program;
- Programmatic Structure: the program's mission and goals; administrative structure; services to students; faculty characteristics and development; and public service;
- Practice Experience: the program's internships, practicum, field experiences and/or experiential learning, as well as student's involvement in the professional activities of sponsoring organizations;
- Student Learning Goals and Outcomes: student 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

- Monitoring and Quality Control: the program's use of appropriate mechanisms to monitor, evaluate and document its administrative procedures and practices, and assessments of student learning as well as continuous quality improvement.

Sociology programs that have a specialization or concentration in clinical sociology must (1) identify student learning goals and outcomes for each area of specialization or concentration; (2) provide evidence that there are faculty members with special qualifications in the area of specialization or concentration; and (3) provide a practice experience that is directly related to clinical sociology.

The goal is to provide opportunities for students to integrate sociological knowledge and skills. Doing so, these students will develop a professional identity, demonstrate a capacity for leadership, and adhere to a set of ethical standards in their practice endeavors. Students will learn about the field and engage in critical analysis and application. CAPACS relies on outcome-based assessment and the creation of learning environments. Adequate training in sociological theory, sociological methods, skills, practice experience, and ethics are the key to the accreditation of clinical sociological programs.

Students graduating from an accredited clinical sociology program will be able to engage in activities in which they can make written, oral, and graphic presentations to appropriate audiences; understand group processes and decision-making; identify, locate, and retrieve information relevant to the practice of sociology; and link these skills with their area of specialization or concentration. A clinical sociology program integrates academic studies with occupational realities through a practice experience. Sociology students become competitive in the market as their experience enables them to:

- demonstrate the ability to utilize theory, methods, and skills in their practice experience;
- recognize the individual, group, and/or organizational processes within a specific practice setting;

- adhere to professional norms and demonstrate appropriate behavior regarding work assignments;
- realize the influence of their personal values and perceptions as related to other individuals and groups in practice settings;
- function as an effective member of a work team or group in a specific practice setting; and
- demonstrate additional learning outcomes in their area of specialization or concentration relevant to their practice experience, if appropriate.

It is important for clinical sociology programs to emphasize ethics as well as the standards and values that guide sociological practitioners in their work. Students in an accredited program would have the opportunity to:

- acquire and maintain a professional identity as a sociological practitioner;
- comply with the codes of ethics of the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology, the American Sociological Association, and/or another relevant professional association;
- recognize the social, political, and ethical constraints on sociological practice;
- understand the procedures for the protection of research subjects and the privacy of client records; and
- demonstrate a professional and ethical orientation in their area of specialization or concentration.

1. The “How To” of Accreditation

The key to accreditation is the preparation of a program self-study that shows how the program meets the accreditation standards (see <https://www.capacs.net> for standards for programs in clinical and applied sociology and Guidelines for Completing the Self-Study Report). While the self-study does take some time because of the “back and forth” between the program and the commission, the feedback and support provided assists programs so that the commission standards for accreditation are satisfactorily met. After

the self-study has been accepted, two members of the commission (so called “site visitors”) will visit the program on campus to verify information and prepare a recommendation for accreditation. The time needed to complete this process ranges from approximately six months to considerably longer (see <https://www.capacs.net> for Accreditation and Reaccreditation Process: Suggested Timeline).

1. The Advantages of Accreditation

CAPACS accreditation contributes to the professionalization of sociologists by preparing them to compete in interdisciplinary fields such as public health and administration; the civil service; organizational and community development; research; dispute and conflict intervention; as well as in occupations such as marriage and family therapy and professional counseling. Hence it serves to broaden students’ opportunities for job and career placement.

CAPACS accreditation unites faculty around a common set of standards and goals, thereby improving the quality of sociological education for students. Furthermore, since the maintenance of high standards requires needed resources, CAPACS accreditation ensures the allocation of needed college and/or university resources to the program.

CAPACS accreditation of programs in sociological practice affirms that the program is committed to the highest standards of postsecondary education and training in sociology as well as peer review of the program. As such, it enhances the marketing of the program by bringing status and recognition to the program and, if the program is in a public college or university, can help the college or university attract government funding.

1. Conclusion

CAPACS works collaboratively with interested program faculty and staff in different countries to professionalize the discipline. A clinical sociology course or program that is being developed should consider reviewing the CAPACS standards. An existing clinical sociology program, whether it is the department’s only program or

is a track within a department's program, should consider applying for accreditation. For additional information, please consult the CAPACS website <https://www.capacs.net> and/or contact Dr. Michael Fleischer, CAPACS Chair, at mfleischer@capacs.net.

References

- Fleischer, M. (1997). From the Editors. An Essay on the Value of Sociological Program Accreditation and Association and State Professional Credentials in an Era of Legislated Professionalism and Jurisdictional Closure. *Social Insight: Knowledge at Work*. 2(1), 3-4.
- Fleischer, M. & Winston, N. (2018, March). Entry on Accreditation for the Dictionary of Clinical Sociology. *Journal of Applied Social Sciences*. 12(1), 12-16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1936724418755422>
- Fritz, J. M. (2012). Including Sociological Practice: A Global Perspective and the U.S. Case. In D. Kalekin-Fishman & A. Denis (Eds.). *The Shape of Sociology for the Twenty-first Century: Tradition and Renewal* (241-253). London, England: Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446288641.n15>
- Perlstadt, H. (1998). Accreditation of Sociology Programs: A Bridge to a Broader Audience. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*. 23(2/3), 195-207. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3341964>

About the Authors

Amitra A. Wall is a professor in the Department of Sociology and has served, since 2018, as Associate at SUNY Buffalo State University (USA). She is a certified applied sociologist and is a member of the Association of Applied and Clinical Sociology as well as the International Sociological Association; she serves as a Commissioner for the Commission on the Accreditation of Programs in Applied and Clinical Sociology and as a Middle States peer reviewer. Her email is hodgeaa@buffalostate.edu.

Norma A. Winston retired from her position as Professor of Sociology at the University of Tampa (USA) in 2018. She holds current memberships in the Association of Clinical and Applied Sociology as well as the International Sociological Association; she is Vice-

Chair of the Commission on Accreditation of Programs in Applied and Clinical Sociology. Her email is winston.norma6@gmail.com.

Creative Commons License terms: You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. You may not use the material for commercial purposes.