Master’s Programs in I-O: Should They Be Accredited?¹

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Program accreditation is usually a voluntary process in which an educational unit prepares a self-study and undergoes external review with respect to standards of quality. In psychology, accreditation of doctoral programs and internships is available through the Committee on Accreditation (CoA); this is commonly referred to as “APA accreditation,” though it is actually operated by a group of organizations including the Council of Graduate Departments of Psychology (COGDOP). This accreditation is available in doctoral education in clinical, counseling, and school psychology, but not in I-O (APA, 2002). In general, I-O doctoral programs have not been supportive of participating in the accreditation process, in part, because it has been perceived as a mechanism for enforcing an unwelcome level of uniformity across programs.

Faculty in master’s programs may be unfamiliar with the accreditation process because until recently there has been no mechanism for such review at the master’s level. A session on this topic at the 2003 SIOP conference provided attendees an opportunity to learn about accreditation of applied programs through the Master’s in Psychology Accreditation Council (MPAC) and to discuss advantages and disadvantages of accrediting programs granting terminal master’s degrees in I-O psychology. Accreditation of such programs by MPAC is relatively new and not widely understood.

The accreditation of master’s programs developed from discussions in the early 1990s between the Council of Applied Master’s Programs in Psychology (CAMPP) and the North American Association for Master’s in Psychology (NAMP). CAMPP’s membership consists of departments of psychology, and its mission is to increase the confidence of the professional psychology community and the public in the education and training of applied master’s level psychologists by:

1. Establishing general standards of education and training;
2. Encouraging and helping training programs to meet these standards;

¹The authors held an Education, Teaching, and Learning Forum on this topic at the 18th Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Orlando, FL, April 11–13, 2003, and provide this report based on the discussion.
3. Certifying compliance with the standards;
4. Communicating with the public about these standards;
5. Advocating for CAMPP programs to the professional psychology community (CAMPP, 2002, p. 1).

CAMPP has developed standards for education and training, holds an annual meeting, and has sponsored three national conferences to consider issues in master’s psychology education. NAMP is a membership organization for individual master’s level psychologists and focuses on issues related to employment of these graduates. It holds an annual convention and publishes the Journal of Psychological Practice and a newspaper called The Master’s Advocate.

In 1995, discussions within CAMPP and NAMP led to the formation of the organization that became MPAC. In 1997 the clinical master’s program at Pittsburg State University became the first program accredited by MPAC (then known as the Interorganizational Board for the Accreditation of Master’s Psychology Programs, IBAMPP). To date, 12 master’s programs have been accredited, one has applied, and approximately 10 are in the process. MPAC is currently seeking official recognition as the accrediting body for applied master’s psychology.

SIOP (2002) lists 88 master’s programs on its Web page for Graduate Training Programs in Industrial-Organizational Psychology and Related Fields. At this time the only I-O program accredited by MPAC is the University of West Florida.

**Major Issues**

Several advantages and disadvantages of accreditation from a program’s perspective are presented in Table 1. In addition, several other issues are relevant for an understanding of the issue of accreditation.

**Licensing.** Accreditation has generally been developed in areas where licensure for practice is available or required. Licensing boards often look to an applicant’s preparation in an accredited program as an efficient way of determining if the applicant has been appropriately educated. Thus accreditation has been less relevant to I-O than to other applied fields because of the ambiguity surrounding licensure for those practicing in I-O psychology.

At the master’s level, accreditation for counseling-clinical programs is available through the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs (CACREP). Although some clinical master’s programs can meet CACREP standards, the model on which they are based is a counseling, not a psychology training model. Unfortunately, it appears that in many states master’s psychology curricula are being shaped by the counseling accreditation because of the availability of licensure in counseling and the lack, until recently, of an accreditation process in psychology (Duer & Hays-Thomas, 2003).
**Table 1**  
*Advantages and Disadvantages of Seeking Accreditation: From the Program’s Perspective*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gain in prestige—some schools mandate accreditation when possible</td>
<td>Cost. Process is paperwork intensive, long, and time consuming</td>
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<td>Programs can use results to press for more resources</td>
<td>Some administrators see it as a ploy to get more resources</td>
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<td>Few programs are accredited—can be one of a “select few”</td>
<td>Few programs are accredited—no stigma in being “left out,” I-O programs not accredited at doctoral level</td>
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<td>Forces a program review: Programs can improve operation, content, practices</td>
<td>Forces programs to confront basic issues that are not clearly resolved</td>
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<td>“New set of eyes” can bring fresh perspective</td>
<td>Program weaknesses become public</td>
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<td>Self-assessment not only improves program, but models an effective organizational process</td>
<td>Faculty aren’t rewarded for improving organizational processes! Who is going to write the report and lead the review? Takes time away from other (more) valued activity. Takes an advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program can determine if they are consistent with accepted standards and practices of training</td>
<td>Meeting university guidelines and standards is the most important requirement</td>
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One reason for developing the MPAC process was to provide licensing boards with a psychology-based alternative to CACREP accreditation for determining the quality of a graduate’s training. The U. S. Navy and several states have included MPAC accreditation as part of their credentialing or licensure statutes (MPAC, 2002).

I-O faculty may decide to seek accreditation because their department’s clinical or counseling programs are undergoing the review. Departments may also decide to seek accreditation in order to support the developing mechanisms for improving and assuring quality in the preparation of applied psychology master’s students.
Standards and guidelines for curriculum.  The accreditation standards adopted by MPAC (1999) are very similar to CAMPP’s standards for membership (CAMPP, 1994) and deal with the psychological foundation of applied training.  For example, the standards include education in ethics, the several bases of behavior, multicultural influences, research methods and statistics, and sufficient supervised applied experience.  The accreditation standards are intended to apply to any area of applied psychology and thus do not mention substantive I-O topics.  However, they are consistent with the guidelines published by SIOP for graduate training at the master’s level (SIOP, 1994).

CAMPP’s standards and SIOP’s guidelines are offered as an aid to faculty and curriculum planners in the design of graduate I-O programs.  The fact that professional organizations have published standards, however, does not assure consumers or the public of the quality of training in a particular program.  Some argue that accreditation will ensure more uniformity and higher quality across master’s programs and that this will benefit students.  It has also been suggested that accreditation standards should be based on a competency model rather than curriculum goals.  Others stress that a program’s decision to seek accreditation should be driven by student needs: “What does accreditation mean for the student?” One answer to this question is that it can serve a quality assurance function, fostering development and maintenance of standards of quality (personal communication, Gary Hanson, April 2003).

CAMPP is in the process of reviewing its standards and has considered moving toward a competency model like SIOP’s.  How any revision in CAMPP standards might impact MPAC’s accreditation standards is not known at this time.

The accreditation process.  A program first submits a preapplication and is reviewed to assure that it is the type of program for which the accreditation process was intended.  After approval, the program conducts a self-study and addresses whatever issues it identifies in this review.  A team of two volunteers conducts a site visit and prepares a report and recommendation to the MPAC Board, which determines whether the program meets accreditation standards.  Site visits are conducted economically and the fees are modest (currently $500 for the first program in a department and $100 for each additional program; an interim update fee of $150 is due with each triannual interim report).  Programs are accredited for a 10-year period, with three interim updates.

Conclusion.  There are arguments both for and against the process of accreditation of I-O master’s programs.  This article has provided information about the process and has reviewed the main arguments on both sides.  Thus it should help individual programs to determine whether accreditation is an appropriate choice for them.
References


