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Substantive Change: The Accreditation Risk Universities Often Underestimate

Growth is a natural goal for many health professions programs.

Universities seek to expand enrollment, introduce hybrid delivery models, or increase program capacity to meet workforce demand. But these changes often trigger an important accreditation process known as **substantive change**.

For programs accredited by bodies such as CAPTE, substantive change requests may be required when institutions:

- increase cohort size
- modify program delivery models
- introduce distance or hybrid learning formats
- change program locations
- expand clinical education structures

These changes can have significant accreditation implications.

Why Substantive Change Requests Are Challenging

Substantive change reviews evaluate whether the program can sustain quality under the proposed modifications. Accrediting bodies assess whether the institution can demonstrate sufficient:

- faculty resources
- clinical education capacity
- program assessment infrastructure
- operational support

Unlike full accreditation cycles, substantive change requests often occur under tighter timelines.

For example, expansion approvals may be reviewed only twice per year, making planning and documentation critical.

Enrollment Expansion Is a Common Trigger

One of the most frequent substantive change scenarios involves increasing class size.

Programs may see strong demand from applicants and wish to expand enrollment. But accrediting bodies require clear evidence that increased enrollment will not compromise program quality.

This requires institutions to demonstrate:

- adequate faculty-to-student ratios
- expanded clinical placement opportunities
- sufficient facilities and learning resources
- appropriate administrative support

Programs that plan these elements early can pursue expansion confidently.

Delivery Model Changes Introduce Additional Complexity

As more institutions explore hybrid and digitally enabled learning models, accreditation considerations become even more important.

Delivery models must align with accreditation standards governing:

- instructional oversight
- student assessment
- faculty engagement
- clinical education requirements

Programs that design delivery models without considering these standards early may find themselves revising plans later in the process.

Accreditation Strategy Supports Institutional Goals

When institutions treat accreditation as a strategic input rather than a compliance checkpoint, several benefits emerge.

Program timelines become more predictable

Leadership gains a clearer understanding of what is required for candidacy, site visits, and ongoing compliance.

Faculty planning improves

Roles, responsibilities, and development needs are defined earlier, reducing strain on faculty teams.

Program design becomes more resilient

Delivery models, enrollment strategies, and operational workflows are built to support both accreditation and long-term program growth.

Institutional risk decreases

Accreditation readiness is embedded into the program structure rather than addressed reactively.

In other words, accreditation-informed strategy strengthens both compliance outcomes and institutional performance.

A Different Starting Point for Program Development

Universities considering new program launches, expansions, or major modernization initiatives should begin with a different sequence of questions.

Instead of asking: How quickly can we launch? Leadership teams benefit from asking:

- How will accreditation expectations influence program design?
- What faculty capacity and expertise will be required?

- How will assessment and outcomes measurement be structured from the outset?
- What clinical partnerships are necessary to support enrollment targets?
- How will the program operate sustainably once it is fully launched?

Answering these questions early provides a clearer foundation for program development.

Substantive Change Planning Should Begin Before the Decision

A common mistake is treating substantive change as an administrative step after an institutional decision has already been made.

Successful programs approach it differently. They evaluate accreditation implications **before committing to expansion or delivery model changes**. This allows leadership to align faculty planning, clinical partnerships, and program resources with the proposed changes.



A Final Reflection

Substantive change approvals exist to ensure that program quality remains consistent as programs evolve. Institutions that approach growth with careful accreditation planning find that substantive change becomes a manageable process. Those that do not often discover that growth introduces challenges they did not anticipate. Universities navigating accreditation decisions often benefit from specialized expertise that bridges academic strategy, program design, and accreditation readiness.

Rehab Essentials partners with university leadership teams to support program development, accreditation preparation, reaccreditation strategy, and expansion planning for professional health education programs. Our experienced group of advisors work alongside institutions to translate strategic goals into executable program plans aligned with accreditation expectations.



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