

Executive Summary: From Audit to Inquiry

Navigating the Cultural Shift Toward Consistency and Context

Research & Evaluation Committee—AAQEP

May 14, 2026

Overview

The credibility of any accreditation body rests on a vital question: *Is the process fair, consistent, and reliable across diverse institutional types?* This study investigates how AAQEP's "Living Definition of Consistency" functions on the ground. By triangulating longitudinal outcome data from **77+ institutions** with in-depth interviews of **Institutional Representatives** and **Team Leads**, this research explores the transition from a legacy of "compliance-based audits" to a modern model of **partnership-based inquiry**.

Key Findings: Affirming the Model

- **The Fair Yardstick:** Statistical analysis confirms that institutional type, including size, mission (public/private), and location, does *not* correlate with accreditation outcomes. This affirms that the standards are being applied equitably across the diverse landscape of educator preparation.
- **Consistency as Culture:** Stakeholders do not experience consistency as a rigid, "one-size-fits-all" format. Instead, it is experienced as a *supportive professional culture* characterized by transparency, high-touch communication, and a shared commitment to program improvement.
- **The Human Anchor:** The research highlights that consistency is currently anchored by the *AAQEP professional staff*. Both reviewers and providers identified the staff as the "stabilizing force" that bridges the gap between varying volunteer lenses and the standards.

Friction Points: Navigating the Tensions

While the model is highly effective, the study identified specific "friction points" that *may* occur during the review process, although none of these points appeared across all interviews:

- **"Accreditation Trauma" & Defensive Reporting:** Many institutions enter the process carrying a legacy of anxiety from previous compliance-heavy systems. This historical "trauma" can lead to defensive reporting, where providers spend excessive energy trying to guess the "right" answer rather than engaging in authentic inquiry.
- **The Paradox of Flexibility (The Labor of Contextual Mapping):** AAQEP's hallmark is its respect for institutional context, yet this very flexibility creates an inherent "mapping burden." Because the model avoids rigid prescriptions, providers—particularly those with innovative or non-traditional programs—must perform "pedagogical gymnastics" to translate their mission-specific evidence into the language of universal

standards. This effort to "over-explain" context is an unintended consequence of the freedom to innovate, representing a significant administrative load that requires intentional scaffolding to mitigate.

- **The Volunteer Lens Variable:** While the staff provides a consistent anchor, volunteer reviewers occasionally default to their own "home-institution" biases or accreditation experiences. This creates moments of tension where a host institution's unique mission is measured against a reviewer's personal professional experience rather than the AAQEP standards.

Points for Future Investigation

- **The Scaffolding Paradox:** Collectively, the participants asked: How can AAQEP provide enough structure (templates/exemplars) to reduce the mapping burden without signaling a return to a rigid "audit" mentality?
- **Scaling the Culture:** With appreciation and naming a culture of collegiality, the participants asked: As the organization grows, how can the high-touch, staff-centric model of consistency be maintained without leading to staff burnout or a dilution of the "partnership-based" experience?

Action Items & Strategic Roadmap

The following items are recommended to refine the process. It is noted that several of these initiatives are already *underway or in the completion phase by AAQEP*, which affirms the organization's commitment to continuous improvement.

1. **Develop Administrative Scaffolding:** Create optional templates, evidence question pools, and model reports to assist lead writers in "mapping" their data.
2. **Enhance Reviewer Calibration:** Refine Team Lead and reviewer training to specifically address "Institutional Bias," ensuring reviewers honor local context while maintaining technical rigor.
3. **Address the "Audit Legacy":** Integrate intentional "on-ramping" for new institutions to explicitly address and mitigate "Accreditation Trauma," pivoting them toward an inquiry mindset early in the cycle.
4. **Succession & Sustainability Planning:** Proactively document the "implicit knowledge" and collegiality held by staff to ensure the culture of consistency remains stable as the organization scales and personnel change over time.

Conclusion

The AAQEP model represents a significant evolution in quality assurance. This study affirms that **partnership-based inquiry** is not only a more collegial way to operate but a technically reliable method for institutional strengthening. By addressing the identified friction points through purposeful scaffolding and training, AAQEP continues to lead the field in mission-driven, contextually responsive accreditation.

Committee Contact: John Watzke watzke@up.edu

An Investigation of Consistency in the Quality Assurance Process

05-14-26

Consistency Subcommittee of the Research and Evaluation Committee

John Watzke, Chair, University of Portland

Sarah-Kate LaVan, Grand Valley State University

Chris Godwin, Campbell University

Rodrick Lucero, Texas A & M University

Introduction

In any system of educational quality assurance, consistency stands as the measure of both credibility and fairness. Accrediting agencies occupy a unique position of trust, responsible for validating the quality of programs through rigorous yet contextually sensitive review processes. The enduring challenge is not merely to apply standards uniformly, but to uphold shared expectations of quality across diverse institutional missions, sizes, and communities without constraining innovation. The Association for Advancing Quality in Educator Preparation (AAQEP) addresses this challenge through its *Living Definition of Consistency in Quality Assurance*, which conceptualizes consistency not as mechanical uniformity but as a dynamic balance among clarity, equity, and contextual understanding (see Appendix A).

In practice, however, maintaining such equilibrium between consistency and contextual flexibility demands ongoing examination. Accrediting bodies have long faced scrutiny for perceived variability in reviewer judgment, interpretation of standards, and institutional experience (Eaton, 2012; Brittingham, 2009). While AAQEP's model explicitly emphasizes improvement and collaboration over compliance, the organization recognizes that consistent application of its standards—through calibration, communication, and shared understanding—is essential to its legitimacy and effectiveness. This study, *An Investigation of Consistency in the Quality Assurance Process*, emerges from that recognition.

The study explores how consistency is experienced and interpreted by two critical groups within the AAQEP ecosystem: institutional representatives (lead report writers) and peer review team leads. These groups occupy complementary positions within the accreditation process—one responsible for articulating institutional evidence and claims, the other charged with evaluating those claims against shared standards. By analyzing perspectives from both sides of the accreditation process, this research provides a comprehensive,

evidence-based understanding of how consistency functions in practice: where it succeeds, where it diverges, and how it might be refined to better serve AAQEP's mission and member institutions.

Background and Rationale

Accreditation in teacher education has historically served a dual purpose: providing a yardstick of quality for the public while fostering a culture of continuous improvement within educator preparation programs (EPPs) (Darling-Hammond, 2016; Walden University, 2024). Over the last two decades, the field has undergone a seismic shift from focusing on "inputs"—such as faculty credentials and resource allocation—to a rigorous focus on "demonstrable outcomes," specifically candidate performance and K-12 student learning growth (CAEP, 2022). While some in the field describe this shift as a professionalization of the field and with a more robust data-driven culture (Melkote & Finney, 2023), it has also introduced significant administrative and philosophical challenges.

The Accountability vs. Improvement Tension

A persistent tension in the literature concerns the balance between accountability and improvement. The “cumbersome and expensive” nature of traditional national accreditation often leads to a culture of symbolic compliance rather than genuine pedagogical innovation (McMurtrie, 1999; Romanowski & Alkhateeb, 2022). Scholars such as Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2018) have raised concerns that high-stakes accountability models often operate from a thin equity perspective. This perspective tends to view teachers as the sole variable in student achievement, often ignoring the systemic societal inequalities that influence classroom outcomes. Furthermore, rigid entry requirements (e.g., standardized test benchmarks) have been criticized for creating barriers to entry for candidates from marginalized backgrounds, potentially hindering efforts to diversify the teacher workforce (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018).

The "One-Size-Fits-All" Pitfall

Concerns about “one-size-fits-all” standards remain central to accreditation discourse. Wojcikiewicz and Patrick (2022) argue that traditional accreditation standards are often applied indiscriminately, regardless of the size, mission, or local context of the EPP. This lack of flexibility can create a "gotcha" environment, particularly for small, rural, or minority-serving institutions that may have unique data limitations (e.g., very small "N" sizes) or specialized missions that do not align perfectly with national benchmarks (Hitz, 2013).

The Emergence of Inquiry-Based Models

In response to these pitfalls, a more collaborative, "inquiry-based" philosophy has gained traction. Originally championed by Frank Murray through the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC), this approach views accreditation not as a top-down inspection, but as a scholarly inquiry into an institution's own claims about its quality (Murray, 2005). This model prioritizes the "human reliability" of the process—emphasizing supportive partnerships, dedicated staff liaisons, and a focus on how programs adapt to their specific contexts (AAQEP, 2023).

AAQEP's Quality Assurance

Accreditation in educator preparation operates within an evolving landscape that values both innovation and accountability. Historically, critiques of accreditation have focused on perceived inconsistencies in site reviews and report evaluations, which can undermine confidence in the system (Ewell, 2008; El-Khawas, 2001). AAQEP's model represents a deliberate shift away from checklist compliance toward a model of trust, evidence, and professional judgment as articulated in the *Guide to AAQEP Accreditation* (AAQEP, 2025). Within this model, consistency is not synonymous with uniformity but is instead understood as a dynamic interplay among rigor, fairness, and contextual sensitivity—a view that positions accreditation as a learning process for both reviewers and institutions.

This investigation aligns with AAQEP's sixth principle—Consistent Reviews—as articulated in the *AAQEP Guide to Accreditation* (AAQEP, 2025). This principle commits the organization to “the preparation of reviewers and the calibration of reviews to ensure equitable, fair, and reliable outcomes.” With AAQEP's rapid growth, maintaining its hallmark contextual responsiveness is essential to ensuring that the quality review process remains a partnership for improvement—rather than a rigid compliance check—for the diverse institutions it serves. This paper responds to that need by analyzing stakeholder perceptions of consistency and by identifying affirmations (areas of effective practice) and revisions (areas where improvement may enhance reliability and consistency).

Moreover, the investigation represents one of the first formal research studies undertaken under the auspices of AAQEP-affiliated researchers to directly examine the organization's internal processes. The organization established the Research and Evaluation (R & E) Committee to “conduct... reviews of AAQEP's quality assurance process, including its accreditation system.” By systematically examining its own processes, AAQEP advances a model of reflective quality assurance, grounded in transparency, shared responsibility, and continuous improvement. In doing so, this study reinforces the proposition that credible accreditation depends not only on standards of quality, but on the integrity and coherence of the systems that apply them.

Preliminary Research: The 2024 Outcomes and Consistency Study

In the fall of 2023, a subcommittee began focused work on confirming and defining consistency in the quality assurance process and reviews, with a focus on the backgrounds of institutions, their experience of quality assurance, and the outcomes of accreditation decisions. A primary objective of this study was to determine if the accreditation process was equitable across the diverse landscape of educator preparation. Additionally, objectives were to operationalize and identify practices and commitments to consistency with a focus on fairness, strengthening, and improving intuitional and organizational quality assurance in service to the profession. The subcommittee established an initial Definition of Consistency and associated principles and revised it in 2024 based this research (see Appendix A). As such, this research examined the validity and efficacy of these working principles and contributed to the broader discourse within the organization and its constituents on meta-accreditation—the study of how accrediting bodies ensure the integrity of their own review mechanisms (Lejeune, 2011; Dill, 2010). In doing so, it advanced institutional and practical understanding of consistency as a cornerstone of credible quality assurance.

This initial research acted as a quantitative and qualitative baseline, analyzing outcomes data and completer surveys from 77 member institutions collected between Spring 2019 and Spring 2022 (AAQEP Consistency Sub-Committee, 2024). A critical finding of this analysis was that accreditation outcomes and evaluation decisions were not a product of institutional type. The data demonstrated that an institution's status (private vs. public), size (small vs. large), or geographic location did not correlate with specific accreditation results. This finding provided empirical evidence that the AAQEP standards and review processes function as a fair and reliable yardstick, regardless of the provider's organizational structure.

While outcomes remained consistent across institutions, the study identified three pervasive themes in written survey data institutions provided at the conclusion of their quality assurance outcome:

- **Contextual Responsiveness:** Participants affirmed that the process honored their unique mission and local traditions. This reinforced the "Consistency Definition" claim that consistency is achieved through the sensitive application of standards to specific contexts rather than the enforcement of rigid uniformity.
- **Support and Collegiality:** A significant theme emerged regarding the collegial nature of the review. Unlike traditional "audit-style" accreditations, institutions reported feeling "validated" and "supported." The 2024 study highlighted that the

relationship between AAQEP staff, peer reviewers, and the institution was defined by professional respect and a shared commitment to the field, rather than a punitive oversight dynamic.

- **Continuous Improvement:** Institutions noted that the process acted as a catalyst for internal reflection, helping them move beyond compliance to identify systematic improvements in candidate and alumni engagement.

The 2024 report concluded that while the Definition of Consistency was effectively mitigating institutional bias and fostering a collegial environment, further research was needed to understand the "human reliability" of the process. Specifically, the subcommittee recommended deeper inquiry into how this sense of collegiality and contextual flexibility is maintained during the site visit itself. Consequently, the current interview-based study was launched to move beyond the survey data of the 2024 report and capture the nuanced interactions between Team Leads and Institutional Representatives that sustain this culture of consistency.

Purpose of the Present Study

This study investigated the perceptions and experiences of institutional representatives and peer review team leads concerning the consistency of the AAQEP quality assurance and accreditation process. Specifically, it sought to:

1. Examine how the six commitments of AAQEP's living Definition of Consistency are perceived and enacted by different stakeholder groups.
2. Identify affirmations of existing strengths and areas where inconsistencies or ambiguities may arise.
3. Provide evidence-based recommendations for refining AAQEP's practices to strengthen the reliability, transparency, and contextual responsiveness of its accreditation system.

Through this analysis, the study aimed to inform AAQEP's ongoing efforts to define, demonstrate, and continuously improve the fairness and dependability of its review processes.

Significance

This investigation arrives at a pivotal moment for accreditation reform. As educator preparation programs face increasing demands for accountability and measurable impact, the credibility of the accrediting process itself is under greater scrutiny. A system that is

both consistent and contextually responsive offers a model for sustainable improvement in the field—one that other professional accreditors may look to emulate.

The findings of this study are expected to serve several purposes:

- For AAQEP leadership, they provide empirical grounding for refining definitions, training materials, and calibration protocols.
- For member institutions, they clarify expectations and illuminate practices that contribute to positive accreditation experiences.
- For the broader field, they offer a case study in how a mission-driven accreditor can operationalize consistency without compromising innovation or contextual sensitivity.

By aligning its inquiry with the principles of transparency, fairness, and continuous improvement, this study extends AAQEP's foundational vision: that accreditation should be a shared enterprise rooted in mutual trust and professional respect.

Methodology

Research Design and Rationale

This study examined how consistency in AAQEP's accreditation is experienced and enacted by two key groups—Institutional Representatives (lead report writers) and peer review Team Leads. The design reflects AAQEP's interest in verifying where its stated commitments to consistency function as intended and where clarification or refinement may be warranted. We employed Thematic Analysis (TA) precisely because our aim is verification, affirmation, and revision of practices and frameworks rather than theory building. TA provides a straightforward way to discern what matters most in participants' words, develop themes with frequency information and representative quotations, and then compare those findings directly to AAQEP's Working Definition of Consistency as an a priori framework to identify strengths and concrete areas for revision based on the lived experiences of providers and evaluators (Braun & Clarke, 2006; AAQEP, 2025).

Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited from two stakeholder groups within AAQEP's ecosystem:

1. Institutional Representatives (Lead Report Writers) who coordinated self-studies and accreditation submissions; and
2. Peer Review Team Leads with recent leadership experience on site reviews.

Purposive sampling, conducted with the assistance of AAQEP staff ensured representation across institutional types and contexts (e.g., size, governance, delivery models) among providers that had undergone the AAQEP process within the prior three years.

The original design called for paired interviews (institutional lead + corresponding team lead) to enable pair comparisons. Due of retirements, job transitions, and scheduling constraints, final participation did not yield consistent pairs. We completed 16 total interviews—7 AAQEP Team Leads and 9 Institutional Lead Writers—and therefore collapsed the analysis into two cohorts (Team Leads vs. Institutional Representatives) for clarity and comparability. Table 1 presents EPP information for the Institutional Representatives and indicates whether an interview could be completed with the paired Team Lead.

Table 1. Institutional background information of interviewed Representative and associated AAQEP Team Lead.

Academic Year of Accreditation	Carnegie Classification	Program Size (total enrollment)	Regional Location AAQEP LEAD?	Paired AAQEP Team Lead Interviewed?
2023-24	Private not-for-profit	15	East	Yes
2023-24	Private not-for-profit	22	Midwest	Yes
2023-24	Private not-for-profit	32	East	Yes
2022-23	Public	82	West	No
2022-23	Private not for-profit	169	East	No
2022-23	Private not-for-profit	227	East	Yes
2022-23	Private not-for-profit	253	Midwest	Yes

2023-24	Public	447	East	Yes
2022-23	Public	1,094	East	Yes

Ethical Review and Protections

All procedures were reviewed and approved by the University of Portland IRB; informed consent was obtained from all participants.

- Confidentiality and (Non-)Anonymity. Participants were not anonymous to the research team (contact information was retained for scheduling and follow-up). However, all interview data were de-identified prior to analysis and reporting. Identifying details were removed from transcripts; coded study identifiers were used in all analyses and write-ups; and no personally identifiable information was shared in presentations or publications.
- Access controls and data security. While AAQEP staff helped identify and recruit a diverse pool, AAQEP staff had no access to raw interview data. All recordings, transcripts, and codebooks were stored in a restricted, password-protected folder accessible only to the research team; audio files were deleted following transcription and verification; and de-identified materials will be retained for three years and then securely destroyed.

Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured of approximately 30-minutes via secure video conference (February–May 2025). Prior to the interview, participants received AAQEP’s Living Definition of Consistency in Quality Assurance (September 2024) to establish a shared baseline. The protocol prompted: (a) experiences aligned to AAQEP’s six commitments to consistency, (b) reflection on where assumptions might shape perceptions, and (c) open recommendations. Interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and de-identified before analysis (see Appendix B).

Analytic Procedures

Our analysis proceeded in two practical phases within the umbrella of Thematic Analysis:

Phase 1 — Thematic Analysis (group-specific summaries).

We developed descriptive themes from transcripts to capture what participants are saying, what they identify as important, and how frequently those points occur. We present themes separately for each cohort (Institutional Representatives and Team Leads), with frequency

counts (numerical and percentage) and representative quotations to preserve participants' language and salience (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 2 — A Priori Framework Comparison (verification for affirmation and revision). We then examined the Phase-1 themes alongside AAQEP's Working Definition of Consistency to determine where participants' words affirm current commitments and where their experiences and recommendations indicate revisions or clarifications. This phase is expressly designed to verify alignment, affirm strengths, and identify revision opportunities to strengthen the definition and associated practices around consistency (AAQEP, 2025).

The inclusion of two stakeholder cohorts enabled cross-perspective checks. Peer debriefing among investigators reduced interpretive bias and stabilized themes. Representative quotations and frequency information make the evidentiary basis transparent and replicable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Institutional Representative: Affirmations and Suggestions for Revisions

This section analyzes qualitative data from Institutional Representatives (N=9) representing a diverse range of educator preparation programs (EPPs). The analysis focuses on how these institutions experience AAQEP's "Living Definition" of consistency, how it is operationalized, and the balance between standardized quality assurance and contextual flexibility.

The institutional perspective reveals a concept of consistency that is rooted less in the rigid adherence to a singular 'look' or 'format' and more in the cultivation of a predictable, supportive professional culture. Within this framework, the data highlights a pivotal shift in the participant mindset—a transition from the 'compliance-based' expectations often inherited from prior accreditation experiences toward a more nuanced, 'partnership-based' inquiry that prioritizes institutional mission.

Key Strength: Contextual Responsiveness as the Anchor of Consistency. A unanimous finding (100% frequency) was that consistency at AAQEP is anchored in *Flexibility and Contextual Responsiveness*. Representatives reported that the agency's ability to allow institutions to "tell their own story" while demonstrating alignment with high standards was the most effective part of the process. This was closely supported by *Clear Communication and Staff Support* (89%), with participants noting that they received uniform, prompt, and collegial messaging across all levels of the AAQEP staff (see Table 2).

The Shift from "Accreditation Trauma" to Improvement. A significant secondary theme emerged regarding the *Dismantling of "Gotcha" Mentalities* (56%). Many participants entered the process with "accidental baggage" or "prior trauma" from previous high-stakes accreditation models. The results indicate that AAQEP's consistency in messaging and support effectively neutralized these fears, shifting the institutional focus toward *Continuous Improvement* (67%) rather than simple checklist compliance.

Opportunities for Procedural Refinement. While staff-level consistency was widely affirmed, participants identified areas where procedural variability could be strengthened, particularly about the peer site visit team. Twenty-two percent of participants noted *Reviewer Training Inconsistencies*, specifically citing instances where peer reviewers struggled to map unique institutional evidence to the standards or inappropriately compared the host site to their own home institutions. Additionally, 33% of representatives expressed a desire for more *Administrative Scaffolding*, such as optional templates and model reports, to reduce the cognitive and administrative burden of interpreting the standards from scratch.

The following tables synthesizes these themes, providing definitions, frequency counts, and exemplar quotes that capture the narrative voice of the participating institutions.

Table 2. Themes, frequencies, and percentage of institutional representative respondents by interview protocol section.

Themes by Interview Sections	Frequency by Respondents N=9	Percentage of Respondents
Confirmation of Consistency Definition (Q1 & Q2)		
Flexibility & Contextual Responsiveness	9	100
Clear Communication and Staff Support	8	89
Commitment to Improvement vs. Compliance	6	67
Additional Consistency Practices (Q3 & Q4)		
Cohort Meetings and Peer Collaboration	5	56
Challenges of Small Program Size	5	56
Identifying Confirmation Bias & Assumptions (Q5 & Q6)		
Assumption of "Gotcha" Mentalities (Fear vs. Reality)	5	56
Reviewer/Team Training Inconsistencies	2	22
Improvements and Enhancements (Q7)		

Need for More Templates, Examples, and Structure	3	33
Logistical and Training Refinements	3	33
Other/Final Reflections (Q8 & Q9)		
Positive Experience	9	100
Succession Planning and Sustainability	1	11

Table 3. Institutional representatives' themes and descriptions by interview protocol section.

Themes and Descriptions

Confirmation of Consistency Definition (Q1 & Q2)

Flexibility & Contextual Responsiveness—Participants highlighted AAQEP's ability to maintain high standards while allowing institutions to meet them within their unique local contexts, contrasting this with rigid, "cookie-cutter" accreditation models.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "Flexibility and contextual responsiveness was one of my favorite aspects of this experience. I feel like there was a lot of space provided... to really tell the story of how we meet the standards and the unique aspects of our program."
2. "The flexibility... allows for us to still be responsive to these quality assurance principles... not necessarily a uniqueness for High Point... but I think that's just a private versus public."
3. "And what I felt from AAQEP was frankly, different from previous experiences with other accreditation bodies was that they were not only, sort of open about that, open to that, but curious about why things are as they are."

Clear Communication and Staff Support—Consistency was observed through the uniform messaging, promptness, and supportive attitude of AAQEP staff, with participants receiving consistent answers across different contacts.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "I mean, I'm on the phone one-on-one with Christine, saying, I don't know how to do a Google Form... Just amazing people, and so positive."
2. "Every member of the AAQEP team that I interacted with had the same or a similar response... I always felt supported in that consistency."

3. "There was a great deal of consistency, through the various monthly cohort meetings and the materials that we received from AAQEP... it was really helpful to hear answers to questions, and have it be consistent."

Commitment to Improvement vs. Compliance—The process was characterized as a partnership focused on improvement and self-reflection, rather than a punitive "gotcha" compliance check.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "We're here to help you, unveil, or discover what's going on in your program, and identify areas that you want to work on."

2. "It was very clear to me that AAQEP's... purpose wasn't to slam any institution... their approach was: we're not going to deny you accreditation because you may not have looked at it... let's discuss the data and ways you need to be looking at it... this was important the 1st time through."

Additional Consistency Practices (Q3 & Q4)

Cohort Meetings and Peer Collaboration—Monthly cohort meetings served as a critical tool for consistency, helping institutions calibrate

Exemplar Quotes

1. "One of the pieces, I think, practices that helped to establish That consistency is the cohort meetings... And so, the process of helping Each of members of our cohort understand The standards, I think Helped establish that consistency as well."

2. "So... the monthly meetings... Very helpful... People were always willing to share, here's something we used, here's something we used."

Challenges of Small Program Size—Representatives from smaller programs noted unique data challenges but felt AAQEP understood and accepted limitations like low completer numbers.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "Since I have been there, we have not reached 10 completers in a year. Which, meaning, even our state data is unavailable to me because we're not statistically significant... AAQEP didn't see less than 10 Completers is an issue."

2. "We're pretty small... So sometimes, I think it can skew our numbers a bit and make it look like we're not doing something... As well as we could or should, you know, if you've got 14 students in a specific degree, and... One of them fails, that's gonna drop your percentage."

Identifying Confirmation Bias & Assumptions (Q5 & Q6)

Assumption of "Gotcha" Mentalities (Fear vs. Reality)—Pre-existing negative assumptions based on prior accreditation experiences were dispelled by AAQEP's consistently supportive approach.

Exemplar Quotes

"I hated every minute of it [previous training]... I came back thinking, no, I think I'm just gonna retire... But... I met them [AAQEP]... and that's exactly how I felt, was that, wow... this AAQEP team is coming alongside of me."

"I think coming from a [previous accreditor] background, we were... nervous, hesitant, under that group, it always kind of felt like they were trying to... oh, gotcha! So I think there's a little bit of nerves prior to that."

Reviewer/Team Training Inconsistencies—Some participants noted a lack of consistency among volunteer reviewers, specifically regarding institutional bias or difficulty mapping evidence to standards.

Exemplar Quotes

"One of my team members really had a hard time identifying evidence and matching it to the standards... We basically had to redo their work... I think that's a big issue for consistency."

"One challenge: one reviewer repeatedly compared things to their own university during interviews. Training advises against that... It was a minor issue but noticeable."

Improvements and Enhancements (Q7)

Need for More Templates, Examples, and Structure—While valuing flexibility, participants requested more optional concrete tools and exemplars to reduce the administrative burden of interpreting requirements.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "I think it would be nice if, you know... here's 3 different tables you could use for aspect 1E... where there were just tools available, examples, formatting."

2. "I wonder if a guideline to keep consistency would be helpful... maybe some... questions for the team like you know."

Logistical and Training Refinements—Feedback included tactical suggestions such as better guidance on report structures (single vs. multiple reports) and more flexible site visit scheduling.

Exemplar Quotes

"I think if AAQEP could gather feedback from people who do have two different reports and see what worked best for them and make a strong recommendation... we would recommend that you write one report."

"I'm wondering if there might be some way of... Reviewing people's... Capacity or ability to... Map to evidence."

Other/Final Reflections (Q8 & Q9)

Positive Experience—Participants gave unsolicited praise for the organization and staff, reinforcing that consistency was experienced as support and collegiality.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "I could not say more positive things about the team at AAQEP. I mean, they're just... Awesome."
2. "I just love that. I just love these people... I love the people more than the work."

Succession Planning and Sustainability—A concern was raised regarding whether AAQEP's current high-touch culture can be sustained as the organization grows and leadership changes.

Exemplar Quotes

"Is there succession planning? ...I have been part of organizations that do amazing work, and it becomes person-dependent... What is AAQEP's vision for continuing this work beyond the... Current leadership."

"I would ask... The leadership and the organization... To really be thoughtful and intentional about... Putting processes, procedures... In place for succession planning."

AAQEP Team Leads Affirmations and Suggestions for Revisions

To examine how AAQEP's quality assurance mechanisms are implemented during the review process, we analyzed qualitative data from AAQEP Team Leads (N=7). As primary facilitators of the site visit and the bridge between the association's standards and the provider's evidence, Team Leads offer a critical "insider" perspective on where consistency is most robust and where the process requires further calibration.

Across interviews, Team Leads view consistency as a structural achievement facilitated by standardized frameworks, yet one that relies heavily on human variables. Leads highlighted a "triad of consistency" composed of established standards, transparent communication from AAQEP staff, and a shared commitment to institutional context.

Core Strengths: Structural Integrity and Communication. The data shows a high level of agreement (86% frequency) regarding the role of *Adherence to Standards and Templates* as

the "linchpin" of the process. Leads reported that the standardized templates provide a necessary "anchor" that prevents evaluations from drifting into subjective territory. Parallel to this is the theme of *Clear Communication and Staff Support* (86%), with leads noting that the transparency and availability of AAQEP liaisons ensure that both the review team and the provider remain aligned throughout the accreditation cycle. Furthermore, 71% of leads affirmed that this consistency does not come at the expense of *Flexibility*, noting that the framework allows them to apply the same rigorous standards across diverse institutional missions (see Table 4).

Procedural Challenges: Calibration and Complexity. Despite strong affirmation of the framework, participants identified systemic pressures that can challenge consistent implementation. Many leads (57%) identified *Reviewer Training and Calibration* as a primary concern, noting that inconsistencies often arise when individual team members lack the experience to map evidence accurately or default to personal biases. Additionally, *Institutional Complexity* (57%)—specifically regarding advanced programs or non-traditional pathways—was cited as a factor that requires "pedagogical gymnastics" to maintain a consistent evaluation.

Strategic Recommendations for Enhancing Efficacy

Team Leads offered several recommendations aimed at reinforcing consistency as AAQEP evolves. First, leads identified a need for increased *Data Quality and Validity* (43%), arguing that consistency should focus not just on the *presence* of data, but on its technical rigor. To support this, 43% of leads requested more *Physical Examples and Models* (such as model reports or question pools) to help calibrate teams more effectively. Finally, echoing the concerns of institutional partners, leads raised questions regarding *Growth and Scale*, emphasizing the need for robust succession planning to preserve AAQEP's unique culture as it expands (see Table 4). Tables 4 and 5 summarize these themes, detailing the frequency of mention and providing verbatim evidence of the Team Lead experience.

Table 4. Themes, frequencies, and percentage of AAQEP team lead respondents by interview protocol section.

Themes by Interview Sections	Frequency by Respondents N=7	Percentage of Respondents
Confirmation of Consistency Definition (Q1 & Q2)		
Clear Communication, Transparency, and Staff Support	6	86

Adherence to Established Standards and Templates	6	86
Contextual Responsiveness and Flexibility	4	57
Additional Consistency Practices (Q3 & Q4)		
Standardized Forms, Templates, and Document Flow	4	57
Resource Levels and Institutional Size (Small vs. Large)	4	57
Program Type (Initial vs. Advanced / Traditional vs. Non-Traditional)	4	57
The "Human Element" and Liaison Reliability	3	43
Identifying Confirmation Bias & Assumptions (Q5 & Q6)		
Specific AAQEP Documentation (Capacity Tables, Checklists)	4	57
Fear of "Gotcha" vs. Improvement Mindset	4	57
Assumptions of Competence (Team or Institution)	3	43
Team Norming and Diverse Composition	2	29
Improvements and Enhancements (Q7)		
Enhanced Training, Vetting, and Mentoring for Reviewers/Leads	4	57
Providing More Concrete Examples and Models	3	43
Other/Final Reflections (Q8 & Q9)		
Focus on Data Quality and Validity	3	43
Managing Growth and Scale	2	27

Table 5. AAQEP team leads themes and descriptions by interview protocol section.

Themes and Descriptions
Confirmation of Consistency Definition (Q1 & Q2)
Clear Communication, Transparency, and Staff Support —The majority of leads identified the responsiveness of AAQEP staff (liaisons) and the transparency of the process as the primary driver of consistency. They noted that communication was clear from training through to the site visit.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "The commitment to clear. Communication and transparency. I think that's definitely an asset... My contact person at AAQEP was very good about communicating with me, um, and with my team."
2. "And clear communication is one of my high priorities as a team Lead to make sure that the provider knows what to expect."

Adherence to Established Standards and Templates—Leads frequently cited the standards themselves and the standardized templates/documents provided by AAQEP as the "linchpin" for consistency, ensuring that regardless of the institution, the evaluation criteria remained static.

Exemplar Quotes

1. First and foremost, is that. The evidence provided, or at least the... analysis given... is based on the AAQEP standards. Um, there's no... writing or organization that takes place out of alignment with those standards."
- "2. Certainly adherence to established standards, the AAQEP standards and the various aspects are the ones on which we base our evaluation and our feedback and review."

Contextual Responsiveness and Flexibility—Several leads highlighted AAQEP's ability to be consistent *in its flexibility*, allowing different types of institutions to tell their story without being penalized for their specific context.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "I'd say it is sometimes hard to know so... understanding that the way folks approach their data collection is contextual... and so to honor that that may be different but yet that that we have an understanding of how folks tell their story matters."
2. "To me, the thing that separates AAQEP from [other accreditor]... is the contextual responsiveness. They understand that because of who we are as, as, as EPPs, that things will be different."

Additional Consistency Practices (Q3 & Q4)

Standardized Forms, Templates, and Document Flow—Leads emphasized that the physical tools—specifically the forms that build upon one another from the proposal to the final report—force a consistent workflow.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "The way the forms build on each other... your notes in column A become the base for the final report... The forms guide the flow... Everything builds on itself—no wasted work. That creates consistency."

2. "Examples of consistency I would say that are helpful having templates to work from are extremely helpful."

Resource Levels and Institutional Size (Small vs. Large)—Leads noted that small institutions often had better internal consistency (everyone knew the data) but fewer resources, whereas large institutions had more resources but struggled with siloed information, affecting the consistency of the review experience.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "The availability of resources in terms of professional support for assessment data quality, for example, will vary... especially the non traditional pathway where people are doing that with very skim human resources."
2. "A small institution where everybody sort of knew what was going on, and a large institution that even had people designated to drive the process had not been communicated with... I think that probably creates some inconsistencies in the evidence."

Program Type (Initial vs. Advanced / Traditional vs. Non-Traditional)—A recurring theme was that "Advanced" programs or non-traditional pathways often struggled to fit into the standard consistency molds compared to initial licensure programs.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "Folks who are doing uh initial licensure or what have you seem to be able to better address the aspects advanced programs... seemed to have to do a little bit of gymnastics."
2. "My experiences lean toward a traditional higher education approach... and so I had a more skeptical Opinion going into. Other kinds of preparation programs."

The "Human Element" and Liaison Reliability)—Beyond the written rules, the consistent behavior and availability of the AAQEP liaisons provided a safety net that ensured consistency when questions arose.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "How the humans are consistent, to use that word, in all of their responses to you. Like, you know it's okay to call Mark, or it's okay to ask Sara... so the human responses are also very consistent."
2. "The communications or questions that I had... When you have to follow up with a member of the AAQEP staff, their responses were also... consistent with the spirit of... the process."

Identifying Confirmation Bias & Assumptions (Q5 & Q6)

Specific AAQEP Documentation (Capacity Tables, Checklists)—Leads pointed to specific granular tools, such as the capacity tables or "form-fillable" documents, as behavioral guides that kept the team aligned.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "The capacity table at the very end of the QRT report... those kinds of structured forms help yield some level of consistency in terms of the substance of the aspects that we look at."
2. "Just the way in which the documents and processes are structured. You know, for lack of a better example, it's somewhat form-fillable."

Fear of "Gotcha" vs. Improvement Mindset—A major assumption leads had to combat was the institution's belief that accreditation was punitive (a "power" dynamic) rather than collegial.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "Many institutions assume accreditation carries more "power" than it does—they get nervous, see it as a heavy hat... I see it as collegial."
2. "It took a lot of conversation and convincing to. Help faculty and staff understand that AAQEP really wasn't compliance-based... It really values innovation."

Assumptions of Competence (Team or Institution)— Leads sometimes assumed team members would know how to map evidence or that institutions would interpret their role correctly, which led to consistency challenges when those assumptions failed.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "The assumption that everyone on your team would thoroughly understand how to map evidence back to the standards... I think that that was my assumption going in."
2. "The leader of our team... I felt like the lead on our team didn't understand the philosophy... I felt there was some overreaching."

Team Norming and Diverse Composition—Some leads mentioned that having a diverse team (different regions/roles) or conducting "norming" conversations early on was a behavioral tool to ensure consistency.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "Norming conversations, not necessarily formal norming conversations, but... just conversations around the intent... is probably incredibly helpful."
2. "Our team came from very different, positions. We had somebody from the West Coast, we had a middle-of-the-country person... So we had, we had a very strong team."

Improvements and Enhancements (Q7)

Enhanced Training, Vetting, and Mentoring for Reviewers/Leads—The most frequent suggestion was to improve the preparation of the people involved—specifically vetting team leads for facilitation skills and providing performance tasks or mentoring.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "It might be helpful to have a mentor beyond the liaison... somebody who could call if you have questions."
2. "I'm wondering if there's some kind of performance task... Reviewing people's... Capacity or ability to map to evidence."

Providing More Concrete Examples and Models—Leads requested repositories of examples (e.g., question pools, model reports for different institution types) to help teams visualize what "consistent" looks like in diverse contexts.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "I think having some models more examples than just you know here's the aspect... but rather an example maybe more examples of how this is how it might look in this with this type of program."
2. "I think question pools would probably be good... getting a pool of those questions... associated with each of the standards would probably be helpful."

Other/Final Reflections (Q8 & Q9)

Focus on Data Quality and Validity—A recurring final insight was the need to focus more on the validity and reliability of the data being presented, rather than just the presence of data.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "My pet peeve is data quality and making sure that we're consistent in applying data quality, which I think is a hidden danger if people aren't paying attention to that."
2. "I think reliability and validity should be tied more directly into them—maybe as columns in the chart, instead of being separate in an appendix. That would improve consistency."

Managing Growth and Scale—Leads expressed concern about maintaining the high-touch, relationship-based consistency as AAQEP grows into a larger organization.

Exemplar Quotes

1. "How do we assure consistency within their organization? As it grows... because it's almost like, you know, what's the succession plan?"
-

2. "I think they're under the bind of growing so... of becoming so big so fast. I mean, that's their hugest problem."

Discussion and Recommendations

This study set out to examine how two key stakeholder groups—AAQEP Quality Review Team (QRT) Team Leads and Institutional Lead Writers—understand and experience “consistency in quality assurance,” and how their feedback can refine AAQEP’s Living Definition (September 2024) into more explicit commitments and actionable best practices. Across both groups, the results affirm that the current definition accurately captures the *spirit* of AAQEP’s approach (standards-anchored, collegial, contextual, improvement-oriented), while also identifying specific “pressure points” where consistency can erode in practice—most notably through uneven reviewer calibration, variable data-quality judgments, limited practical exemplars, and organizational scaling/succession risks.

Consistency is Not Sameness: Team Leads and Institutional Lead Writers Converge

Across both datasets, participants repeatedly returned to a shared core claim: *consistency is not sameness*. Instead, it is achieved when AAQEP holds stable expectations (standards, process markers, transparent communication) while enabling legitimate variation in how institutions demonstrate quality within their mission and context. This convergence is visible in three high-agreement areas.

Agreement 1. Standards as the “anchor” for consistency. Team Leads emphasized adherence to AAQEP standards and templates as the primary mechanism that prevents drift across reviews (86% frequency). They framed standards as the common language that holds evaluations steady across institution types. Institutional Lead Writers also implicitly affirmed this anchoring function, especially when describing how AAQEP helped them “tell the story” of meeting standards in context rather than forcing uniform forms of evidence.

Agreement 2. Clear communication as the operational center of consistency. Both groups singled out AAQEP staff communication and transparency as a decisive driver of a consistent experience. Team Leads reported clear communication and staff support at 86% frequency; Institutional Lead Writers similarly emphasized consistent messaging and feeling supported (89% frequency). This alignment mirrors the preliminary 2024 subcommittee findings, where AAQEP staff communication emerged as the most frequent theme across post-review surveys and was repeatedly linked to perceptions of fidelity and fairness (AAQEP Consistency Sub-Committee, 2024).

Agreement 3. A formative, improvement-oriented stance, often named as

“collegiality.” Both groups described AAQEP’s consistency as grounded in how reviewers pose questions and frame judgments—challenging but developmental rather than punitive. Institutional participants reported “overwhelming positive experience” (100%) and explicitly contrasted AAQEP with “gotcha” models; Team Leads similarly described the process as “streamlined” and improvement-centered (57%). The 2024 preliminary report reinforces this identifying “supportive and collegial teams” and “developmental approach” as recurring positive themes and recommending “collegiality” as a central, measurable feature of consistency (AAQEP Consistency Sub-Committee, 2024).

Where perspectives diverged and Why It Matters

Although both groups affirmed the definition, their vantage points produced distinct emphases that help pinpoint where revisions should be targeted.

Divergence 1. Institutional Lead Writers foregrounded consistency as an *experience of trust*, especially around context, bias, and “accreditation trauma.” Institutions most strongly affirmed “flexibility and contextual responsiveness” (100% frequency), often describing AAQEP’s curiosity about mission, size, and local conditions as the signature feature that differentiates AAQEP from prior accreditors. They also raised issues that are experiential and relational: when a reviewer compares an institution to their own university, or struggles to match evidence to standards, institutions experience this as bias or inconsistency—regardless of whether the overall process is sound. Institutional participants also elevated sustainability concerns (succession planning) because their experience of consistency appeared (to them) partly “person-dependent” on current leadership and culture.

Divergence 2. Team Leads foregrounded consistency as an *implementation problem*, especially around calibration and data-quality judgments. Team Leads were more likely to locate inconsistency in the mechanics of review: uneven preparation among team members, variation in interpreting evidence strength, and the need for explicit attention to reliability/validity in evaluating data. They also raised organizational scaling risks (growth and capacity) as a systems-level threat to consistency—echoing institutional concerns, but from the operational side of managing volunteer teams and increasing caseloads.

Divergence 3. A productive tension: practical tools and exemplars. Both groups asked for more tools, but for slightly different reasons. Institutions wanted optional templates and examples to reduce guesswork and promote consistent interpretation; Team Leads wanted model reports, exemplars, and “question pools” to reduce variation across teams and ensure comparable lines of inquiry. Together, these requests indicate that the

definition's principles are widely accepted, but the field still needs more *shared artifacts* to translate principles into consistent practice.

Refinements to the Living Definition of Consistency: Commitments and Best Practices

The living definition (AAQEP Consistency Sub-Committee, 2024) is well aligned with stakeholder experience, but the results suggest that AAQEP can strengthen it by making several “implicit expectations” explicit—especially where stakeholder feedback repeatedly points to practice-level vulnerabilities. This discussion synthesizes how Team Leads and Institutional Lead Writers jointly contribute to refining each point into more actionable commitments.

Adherence to Established Standards.

Refinement implied by the data: Consistency requires not only *standards* but also *shared interpretive supports* that help both institutions and teams apply standards similarly across contexts.

- **Institutional contribution:** Institutions asked for optional tools, exemplars, and formatting models (e.g., sample tables or ways to display evidence) to support consistent interpretation and reduce uncertainty.
- **Team Lead contribution:** Leads asked for model reports and question pools aligned to standards so teams can probe evidence with comparable rigor and reduce idiosyncratic questioning.
- **Best-practice implication:** Develop a voluntary “evidence and reporting playbook” (exemplar packages, annotated model excerpts, and common question banks) that supports consistency without prescribing a single format.

Flexibility and Contextual Responsiveness.

Refinement implied by the data: Contextual responsiveness is the most celebrated feature of AAQEP's approach, but it must be protected through explicit anti-bias norms and calibrated reviewer behaviors.

- **Institutional contribution:** Institutions affirmed context-responsiveness at 100% frequency and also described how prior accreditation “trauma” can prime negative assumptions, making transparency and tone essential to consistent experience.
- **Team Lead contribution:** Leads reinforced that standards can remain static while evidence pathways vary; they also flagged that lack of team member calibration is the most common source of inconsistency.

- **Best-practice implication:** Embed a clear commitment that consistency includes **protecting institutions from reviewer “home institution” comparisons** and ensuring reviewers can articulate how context informs (rather than excuses) evidence.

Recognition of Innovation and Diverse Approaches.

Refinement implied by the data: Stakeholders experience consistency when AAQEP consistently *invites* innovation narratives and consistently recognizes improvement—not when innovation is treated as an “extra” or only appears in isolated places within templates.

- **Institutional contribution:** Institutions repeatedly described AAQEP as improvement-focused rather than compliance-focused, and valued being able to highlight distinctive program strengths.
- **System contribution (AAQEP Consistency Sub-Committee, 2024):** Survey data reflects a persistent tension between holistic quality review and checklist drift, suggesting the need to protect innovation recognition as a structural feature of review.
- **Best-practice implication:** Clarify how innovation evidence can be surfaced across standards (not only in a single “innovation” section), and train teams to name innovation with consistent criteria.

Balanced Evaluation Methods.

Refinement implied by the data: Balance is not only about using qualitative and quantitative data—it also requires consistent judgments about data quality (validity, reliability, and fitness-for-purpose), especially in small-N contexts.

- **Institutional contribution:** Institutions appreciated AAQEP’s understanding of small program realities (e.g., “N of 1” challenges) and affirmed that AAQEP did not treat low completer counts as automatic deficiencies when context and evidence warranted.
- **Team Lead contribution:** Leads explicitly requested stronger language about evaluating data quality, validity, and reliability consistently, warning this is a “hidden danger” if not made explicit.
- **Best-practice implication:** Add an explicit clause that balanced methods include *consistent attention to data credibility* and interpretive proportionality (e.g., how to weigh small-N, mixed-method, or developmental evidence).

Commitment to Clear Communication and Transparency

Refinement implied by the data: Communication is the most consistent predictor of perceived fidelity; therefore, communication consistency should be framed as an auditable practice, not just a value.

- **Institutional contribution:** Consistent messaging from AAQEP staff across interactions was repeatedly cited as a stabilizing force; when inconsistencies occurred (e.g., unclear reviewer behavior), institutions interpreted them through the lens of communication breakdown.
- **System contribution (AAQEP Consistency Sub-Committee, 2024):** The subcommittee identified communication and scheduling transparency as recurring improvement targets, especially around off-site meetings, report timelines, and commission meeting preparation.
- **Best-practice implication:** Treat communication as part of the consistency “infrastructure”: publish clearer milestones, normalize provider inclusion in scheduling, and standardize commission meeting preparation steps.

Ongoing Organizational Commitment to Improvement

Refinement implied by the data: Stakeholders want assurance that consistency is not dependent on individuals; it must be sustained through training systems, succession planning, and growth management.

- **Institutional contribution:** Institutions explicitly asked about succession planning and the risk of person-dependent culture.
- **Team Lead contribution:** Leads echoed growth/scale concerns and called for stronger lead calibration and reviewer training to prevent “individual” inconsistency from undermining the definition.
- **Best-practice implication:** Make reviewer calibration, onboarding, and succession planning explicit components of AAQEP’s “organizational learning” commitment—i.e., consistency depends on a replicable training-and-support system.

Synthesis: Revisions to the Living Definition of Consistency in Quality Review

Taken together, Team Leads and Institutional Lead Writers describe the same underlying model, from different angles:

- **Principled stability** is provided by standards, transparent process, reliable communication, and clear milestones.

- **Calibrated discretion** is the trained, evidence-literate judgment that allows context, innovation, and mixed methods to be interpreted fairly without drifting into idiosyncrasy or bias.

Institutions experience consistency when calibrated discretion feels like respect and curiosity rather than comparison and suspicion. Team Leads experience consistency when calibrated discretion is supported by training, shared tools, and explicit attention to data quality. The definition already gestures toward this model; the results indicate that AAQEP can strengthen it by explicitly naming the enabling conditions that make calibrated discretion reliable at scale: exemplars, question banks, data-quality guidance, reviewer calibration, and organizational sustainability.

Implications for practice and policy

Because the strongest affirmations (communication, context-responsiveness, improvement orientation) are also the areas most vulnerable to reviewer inconsistency and organizational growth, the practical implication is clear: AAQEP's consistency advantage is cultural—and therefore must be operationalized. The data suggest several revisions to organizational commitments to consistency. Following is our proposed revised living definition, with refinements and enhancements underlined.

In practice, this points to a “lightweight infrastructure” for consistency:

- Optional exemplars and templates for institutions (reduce uncertainty without mandating uniformity).
- Model report components and question pools for teams (reduce team-to-team variation).
- Explicit data-quality guidance and calibration activities (increase fairness of evidence judgments).
- Standardized commission meeting preparation and schedule contingency norms (reduce process volatility).
- Documented succession planning and growth management (reduce person-dependency risk).

2026 Proposed Revision: Consistency in Quality Assurance Living Definition

Based on these results, we propose the enhanced living definition of consistency and commitments, portions underlined to mark changes:

Consistency refers to an approach to quality assurance that upholds the highest standards of professional rigor while embracing flexibility, transparency, and responsiveness to institutional contexts. It is a dynamic interplay that seeks to provide a predictable, supportive experience for all stakeholders. It is characterized by the following practices:

1. **Adherence to Established Standards and Frameworks:** Consistency involves maintaining the highest standards framed by AAQEP principles, providing a common framework and language for evaluating outcomes and decisions. This is operationalized through the consistent use of standardized templates and reporting tools that serve as the "linchpin" of the evaluation process, ensuring that criteria remain static regardless of institutional type. This includes ensuring clear and timely communication, adhering to agreed-upon schedules, and proactively planning for unforeseen circumstances to uphold a reliable evaluation process.
2. **Flexibility and Contextual Responsiveness as a Core Anchor:** A consistent approach recognizes and prioritizes the need for flexibility in response to dynamic and unforeseen circumstances. Consistency is defined not by uniformity of program design, but by the uniform application of standards to a provider's specific mission. It emphasizes mutual negotiation of schedules and processes while considering institutional characteristics such as size, mission, tradition, and local context—particularly for small programs or complex advanced pathways—as strengths that shape decisions and outcomes.
3. **Recognition of Innovation and Dismantling of "Gotcha" Mentalities:** Consistency acknowledges that there is no single correct way to meet standards. The process is intentionally designed to dismantle pre-existing "accreditation trauma" and negative assumptions by replacing a punitive, compliance-based mindset with a partnership-based scholarly inquiry. It values diverse, innovative, and context-specific approaches to addressing professional challenges, encouraging institutions to find unique solutions that align with their specific contexts while meeting accreditation requirements.
4. **Balanced Evaluation and Technical Data Rigor:** Consistency is achieved through a balanced use of both objective and subjective evaluation methods, incorporating qualitative and quantitative data. Consistency in this domain requires a focus on data quality, including the technical reliability and validity of evidence presented, ensuring a fair, comprehensive, and context-sensitive assessment of institutional performance rather than a mere confirmation of data presence.

5. **Commitment to Clear Communication, Staff Support, and Scaffolding:**

Consistent practices include a commitment to clear, timely, and transparent communication throughout the accreditation process. This is anchored by high-touch staff support and dedicated liaisons who provide uniform guidance. To ensure efficacy, AAQEP provides administrative scaffolding—including optional templates, exemplars, and model reports—to reduce the administrative burden on institutions and ensure a shared understanding of expectations.

6. **Calibrated Peer Review and Professional Judgment:** Consistency relies upon the preparation and ongoing calibration of volunteer reviewers to ensure equitable and reliable outcomes. This involves rigorous training to mitigate institutional bias and ensure that peer reviewers can accurately map diverse institutional evidence to universal standards without imposing personal or "home-institution" preferences on the host site.

7. **Ongoing Organizational Commitment to Sustainability and Scale:** Consistency reflects a continuous commitment to organizational learning and quality improvement. As the organization grows, this includes a commitment to intentional succession planning and the standardization of internal processes to ensure that AAQEP's high-touch, supportive culture remains sustainable and is not dependent solely on individual leadership, but is embedded in the organizational fabric.

Conclusions

This study sought to move beyond a theoretical understanding of consistency to examine its lived reality within the AAQEP accreditation ecosystem. By triangulating the perspectives of institutional representatives and peer review team leads against the a priori framework of the "Living Definition," this research provides a comprehensive roadmap for balancing high-stakes accountability with a profound respect for institutional mission, quality assurance, and improvement.

Summary of Findings: From Compliance to Partnership

The most significant conclusion of this research is that consistency at AAQEP is not perceived as a mechanical adherence to a singular format, but rather as a predictable and supportive professional culture. The study confirms that the "Living Definition" is operationalized through a deliberate shift away from "gotcha" mentalities toward a model of partnership-based inquiry. For institutional representatives, this transition was transformative, successfully dismantling the "accreditation trauma" associated with prior, compliance-heavy models. For Team Leads, consistency was anchored in the "linchpin" of established standards and the high-touch communication facilitated by AAQEP staff.

Furthermore, these results explain the "how" behind the foundational 2024 study. While the previous research proved that accreditation outcomes are not a product of institutional size or type, this current study reveals that this equity is achieved through contextual responsiveness. By allowing institutions to "tell their story" within the framework of universal standards, AAQEP ensures that the bar for quality remains high without becoming a barrier to innovation or local mission.

Refining the Framework: Calibration and Scaffolding

Despite the high levels of satisfaction, the findings identify specific procedural "friction points" that offer opportunities for organizational refinement. The data suggests that while the permanent staff provides a consistent anchor, the calibration of volunteer peer reviewers remains a critical variable. Ensuring that reviewers do not default to personal institutional biases or struggle to map non-traditional evidence is essential to maintaining the integrity of the site visit.

Additionally, the study highlights a productive tension between flexibility and structure. While both stakeholders value the freedom to innovate, there is a clear and pressing call for increased administrative scaffolding. Providing optional templates, model reports, and pools of evidence-based questions would not diminish the flexibility of the process; rather, it would reduce the cognitive and administrative burden on institutions, allowing them to focus more on program improvement and less on the "gymnastics" of reporting.

Final Statements

As AAQEP continues to scale its operations nationally, the sustainability of its unique culture of professional partnership in quality assurance will depend on its ability to institutionalize these findings. Consistency must remain a dynamic commitment—one that values the technical rigor of data validity just as much as the collegial support of the cohort model.

Ultimately, this investigation affirms that when consistency is framed as a shared commitment to quality and professional respect, accreditation ceases to be a burden of proof and becomes a catalyst for institutional excellence. By embracing a definition of consistency that is both fair and flexible, AAQEP offers a sustainable model for the future of educator preparation—one where rigor and context are not competing interests, but mutual reinforcements of professional quality.

References

AAQEP. (2023). *Guide to AAQEP Accreditation*. Association for Advancing Quality in Educator Preparation.

AAQEP Consistency Sub-Committee. (2024). *Spring 2024 consistency sub-committee annual report: A review of outcomes and institutional experiences (2019–2022)*. Association for Advancing Quality in Educator Preparation.

AAQEP. (2025). *Guide to AAQEP Accreditation* (2025 ed.). Association for Advancing Quality in Educator Preparation. <https://aaqep.org>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

Brittingham, B. (2009). Accreditation in the United States: How did we get to where we are? *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2009(145), 7–27.

CAEP. (2022). *2022 CAEP Standards*. Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation.

Cochran-Smith, M., et al. (2018). *Reclaiming Accountability in Teacher Education*. Teachers College Press.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2016). *A National Agenda for Teacher Quality*. National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

Dill, D. D. (2010). We can't go home again: Insights from a quarter century of experiments in external academic quality assurance. *Quality in Higher Education*, 16(2), 159–161.

Eaton, J. S. (2012). *An overview of U.S. accreditation*. Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

El-Khawas, E. (2001). Accreditation in the USA: Origins, developments and future prospects. *Quality in Higher Education*, 7(3), 257–267.

Ewell, P. T. (2008). U.S. Accreditation and the Future of Quality Assurance. *CHEA Occasional Paper*.

Lejeune, C. (2011). Is continuous improvement through accreditation sustainable? A comparative study of business schools working for their first accreditation. *Management Learning*, 42(5), 507–517.

Hitz, R. (2013). *Can the Teaching Profession be Trusted?* Kappan Online.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

McMurtrie, B. (1999). *Accreditation: Cumbersome and Outdated?* The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Melkote, S., & Finney, S. J. (2023). *The Effectiveness of Evidence-Based Shifts in Educator Preparation*. Journal of Higher Education Quality.

Murray, F. B. (2005). *The Role of Accreditation Reform in Teacher Education*. Educational Policy.

Romanowski, M. H., & Alkhateeb, H. (2022). *Problematizing Accreditation for Teacher Education*. ResearchGate.

Wojcikiewicz, S. K., & Patrick, S. (2022). *The Evolution of Accreditation as Professional Quality Assurance in Teacher Preparation*. National Academy of Education.

University of Portland IRB. (2025). *IRB Request for Review: An Investigation of Consistency in the Quality Assurance Process* (Approval date: Jan. 30, 2025; IRB Protocol #2025093

Appendices

AAQEP Consistency in Quality Assurance (Living Definition September 2024)

Consistency in outcomes and decisions refers to an approach to quality assurance that upholds the highest standards of quality assurance while embracing flexibility, transparency, and responsiveness to institutional contexts. It is characterized by the following practices:

1. Adherence to Established Standards: Consistency involves maintaining the highest standards framed by AAQEP principles, providing a common framework and language for evaluating outcomes and decisions. This includes ensuring clear and timely communication, adhering to agreed-upon schedules, and proactively planning for unforeseen circumstances to uphold a reliable evaluation process.

2. Flexibility and Contextual Responsiveness: A consistent approach recognizes the need for flexibility in response to dynamic and unforeseen circumstances. It emphasizes mutual negotiation of schedules and processes while considering institutional characteristics such as size, mission, tradition, and local context as strengths that shape decisions and outcomes.

3. Recognition of Innovation and Diverse Approaches: Consistency acknowledges that there is no single correct way to meet standards. It values diverse, innovative, and context-specific approaches to addressing professional challenges, encouraging institutions to find

unique solutions that align with their specific contexts while meeting accreditation requirements.

4. Balanced Evaluation Methods: Consistency is achieved through a balanced use of both objective and subjective evaluation methods, incorporating qualitative and quantitative data to ensure a fair, comprehensive, and context-sensitive assessment of institutional performance.

5. Commitment to Clear Communication and Transparency: Consistent practices include a commitment to clear, timely, and transparent communication throughout the accreditation process. This involves providing institutions with detailed information about procedures, expectations, and participation in meetings, and ensuring that all stakeholders are prepared and informed at each step.

6. Ongoing Organizational Commitment to Improvement: Consistency reflects a continuous commitment to organizational learning and quality improvement, regularly integrating feedback to refine processes and ensure decisions and outcomes are contextually relevant, innovative, and aligned with the evolving needs of the profession.

Appendix A.

2024 Living Definition of Consistency in Quality Assurance (revised September 2024)

Consistency in outcomes and decisions refers to an approach to quality assurance that upholds the highest standards of quality assurance while embracing flexibility, transparency, and responsiveness to institutional contexts. It is characterized by the following practices:

1. Adherence to Established Standards: Consistency involves maintaining the highest standards framed by AAQEP principles, providing a common framework and language for evaluating outcomes and decisions. This includes ensuring clear and timely communication, adhering to agreed-upon schedules, and proactively planning for unforeseen circumstances to uphold a reliable evaluation process.

2. Flexibility and Contextual Responsiveness: A consistent approach recognizes the need for flexibility in response to dynamic and unforeseen circumstances. It emphasizes mutual negotiation of schedules and processes while considering institutional characteristics such as size, mission, tradition, and local context as strengths that shape decisions and outcomes.

3. Recognition of Innovation and Diverse Approaches: Consistency acknowledges that there is no single correct way to meet standards. It values diverse, innovative, and context-specific approaches to addressing professional challenges, encouraging institutions to find unique solutions that align with their specific contexts while meeting accreditation requirements.

4. Balanced Evaluation Methods: Consistency is achieved through a balanced use of both objective and subjective evaluation methods, incorporating qualitative and quantitative data to ensure a fair, comprehensive, and context-sensitive assessment of institutional performance.

5. Commitment to Clear Communication and Transparency: Consistent practices include a commitment to clear, timely, and transparent communication throughout the accreditation process. This involves providing institutions with detailed information about procedures, expectations, and participation in meetings, and ensuring that all stakeholders are prepared and informed at each step.

6. Ongoing Organizational Commitment to Improvement: Consistency reflects a continuous commitment to organizational learning and quality improvement, regularly integrating feedback to refine processes and ensure decisions and outcomes are contextually relevant, innovative, and aligned with the evolving needs of the profession.

Appendix B.
Interview Protocol.

Section 1: Confirmation of Consistency

Q1: In what ways did you observe AAQEP applying consistency across different types of institutions during your [review/work on the review team]? Please reflect on how the six commitments were upheld.

Q2: If mentioned: You mentioned --- Can you provide more details and concrete examples of this consistency?

Can you identify any of the six commitments to consistency that stood out to you during the process? Please share any concrete examples.

Q3: Beyond the six commitments, were there other moments or practices that made the process feel consistent [for your institution/across institutions]?

Q4: Are there unique aspects of [your institution/the institution you reviewed] (e.g., size, program types, resources) that impacted how consistency was experienced during the quality assurance process?

Section 2: Identifying Confirmation Bias

Q5: Were there tools, procedures, or team behaviors—outside the formal commitments—that contributed to consistency in your experience?

Q6: Were there any assumptions about the review process or visit—either yours, your team's, or AAQEP's—that shaped how the process unfolded? How did those assumptions impact consistency?

Q7: Based on your experience, how might AAQEP improve its processes to support a more consistent experience across institutions [/like yours]?

Section 3: Open-Ended Reflection

Q8: Are there other ways AAQEP could refine or enhance the quality review process overall—especially aspects that would support institutions and teams more effectively?

Q9: Was there anything you anticipated discussing that we didn't cover? Or any insights you'd like to share that came up during or after this interview?