

CAAHEP Adopts Quality Framework for Health Professions Education

Outcomes Task Force

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The CAAHEP Outcomes Task Force was established in accordance with CAAHEP's 2023-2025 strategic plan to ensure that the outcomes used to evaluate program effectiveness are relevant, meaningful, and aligned with contemporary educational practices. The work of the Outcomes Task Force is data-driven and research-based, incorporating extensive reviews of accreditation practices across health professions education.

CAAHEP Strategic Plan 2023-2025, Goal and Objective

Strategic Plan Goal 1.B. Assess the CAAHEP outcomes-based accreditation model to validate relevancy and update requirements.

The importance of accreditation in preparing competent healthcare providers who serve society at large is often overlooked, but recent work by Frank et al. (2020) emphasizes that it warrants recognition as a critical component of supplying the healthcare workforce. While compliance with standards is an essential component of accreditation, the ultimate purpose of outcomes assessment extends beyond compliance to ensure and enhance program quality that directly impacts graduate preparation for professional practice. To that end, the Task Force aimed to develop a revised CAAHEP quality framework that promotes innovation, supports institutional autonomy, and provides stakeholders with meaningful evaluation of health professions program quality.

At its July 2025 meeting, the CAAHEP Board of Directors endorsed a position paper from the Outcomes Task Force and, in October, approved publication of the Quality Framework and communication plan to stakeholders. The Quality Framework is only the beginning of a multiphase implementation and education plan to restructure CAAHEP outcomes-based accreditation.

The Quality Framework represents a meaningful improvement in describing and defining CAAHEP’s accreditation philosophy by linking four quality attributes to core outcome measures

and quality enhancement measures. The framework calls for program assessment to be organized around four dimensions: Graduate Preparation, Educational Process Effectiveness, Profession and Workforce Alignment, and Continuous Improvement. The framework reinforces CAAHEP's focus on objective outcomes and evaluations of professional competence while allowing innovation in educational programs.

The CAAHEP Quality Framework not only articulates a structured methodology for assessing quality education but also emphasizes the importance of adaptability and responsiveness in accreditation processes. The revision focuses on outcomes assessment to meet the evolving needs of the workforce while providing students with relevant skills and knowledge. This stakeholder-centric approach is designed to enhance accountability and prepare individuals for professional success.

Current State of Outcomes Assessment in CAAHEP

The Task Force met over the course of a year, researching accreditation models, conducting a scan of the current programmatic accreditation landscape, and reviewing relevant research. The Board has endorsed a two-phase approach to enhancing CAAHEP's outcomes-based accreditation model pursuant to the new Quality Framework.

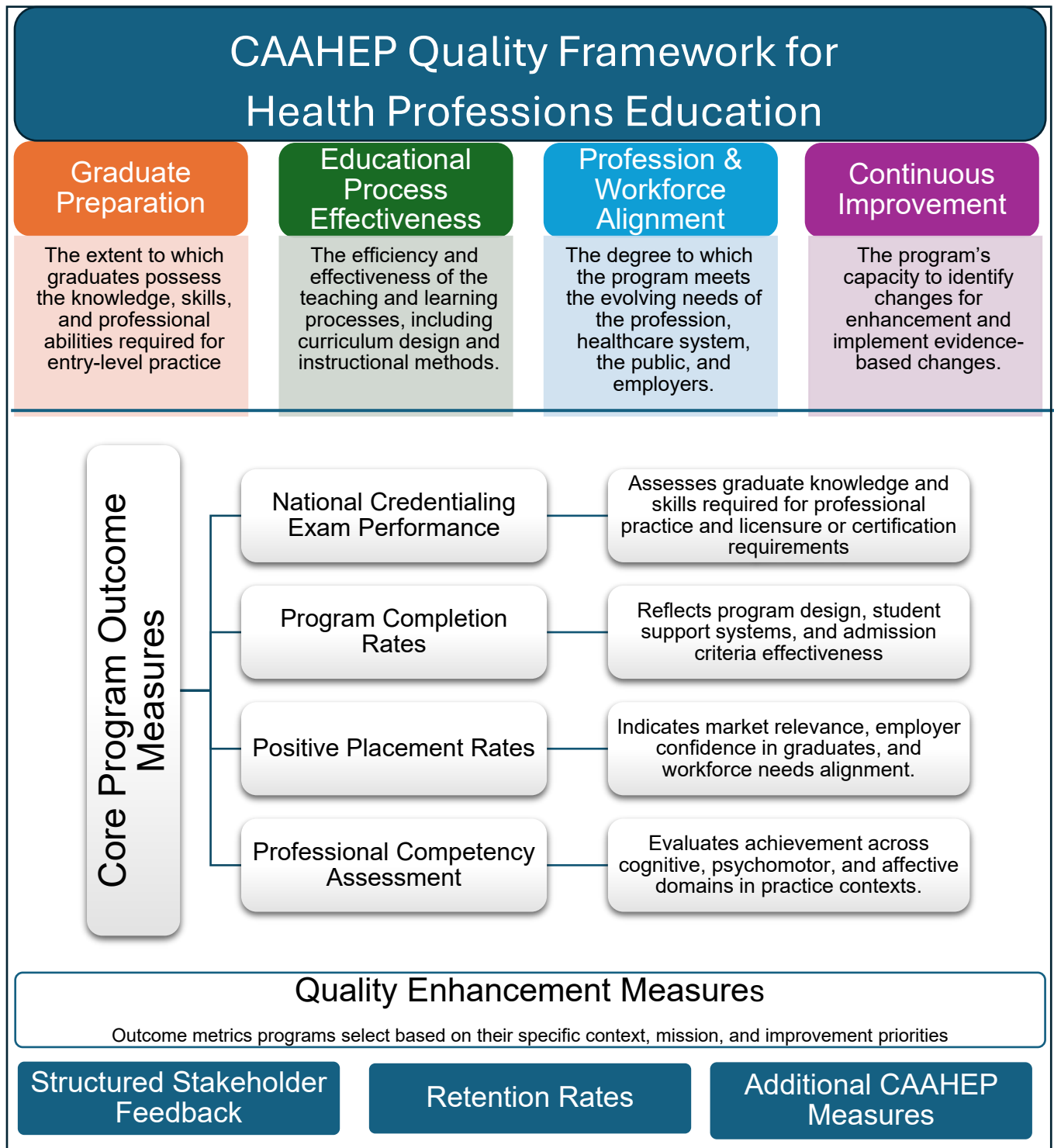
Phase one includes adopting the framework, communicating it to stakeholders, and gathering feedback on the CAAHEP outcomes realignment. Phase two includes expansion of the Quality Enhancement Measure toolbox, creation of standardized definitions for core outcomes, revision of the Standards and accreditation policies, development of resources such as implementation tools and educational materials to support Committees on Accreditation and programs, a phased rollout of changes with feedback collection, and continuous evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the framework.

Purpose-Driven Assessment

The Task Force's approach repositions outcomes assessment as both an accountability mechanism and a catalyst for advancement. The quality framework is an evolution from viewing outcomes as compliance metrics to recognizing them as essential tools for program improvement (Jankowski et al., 2018). By connecting specific measures to dimensions of educational excellence, the framework provides programs with actionable insights that drive meaningful progress while maintaining consistent educational quality.

As illustrated in Figure 1, quality in health professions education can be understood through several interconnected dimensions: Graduate Preparation, Educational Process Effectiveness, Profession & Workforce Alignment, and Continuous Improvement. These dimensions are assessed through two categories of outcome measures: Core Outcome Measures, which are required, and Quality Enhancement Measures, which allow programs to use additional assessment methods to demonstrate continuous improvement.

Figure 1. The CAAHEP Quality Framework shows the relationship between the four quality dimensions, Core Outcome Measures, and Quality Enhancement Measures.



Core Outcome Measures

The Task Force identified four core outcome measures to be incorporated into CAAHEP standards for all accredited programs. Each measure contributes uniquely to understanding different dimensions of program quality.

National Credentialing Examination Performance

Credentialing examination performance directly assesses graduate knowledge and skills required for professional practice (Davis-Becker & Buckendahl, 2017). Performance patterns across cohorts can indicate curriculum effectiveness, while alignment with current practice requirements demonstrates workforce relevance. Analysis of performance in specific domains helps programs identify targeted curricular improvements (Chin & Agarwala, 2020).

Exam results used as a measure of program quality should be based on occupational/job analysis associated with the profession and the competencies specified in the standards. Where national credentialing examinations are not available or not fully aligned with program competencies, CAAHEP will establish policies or allow variations when each Committee on Accreditation adapts the Standards template.

Program Completion Rates

This measure reflects the effectiveness of the educational process from admission into the professional phase of the educational program through graduation. CAAHEP will establish standardized definitions that account for program structure and student progression patterns to enable accurate assessment and meaningful comparison.

Completion rates and their patterns over time, when properly interpreted, can help programs identify specific quality improvement opportunities in areas such as instruction, curriculum sequencing, and student support services (Roberts, 2018). York et al. (2015) emphasize that graduation is not only the primary goal of students but a key factor in academic success. Programs that effectively use completion data can implement targeted interventions to improve student success (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017).

Positive Placement Rates

Positive placement rates are used as indicators of employability and competency (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019), signifying market relevance, stakeholder confidence in graduate preparation, and alignment with the needs of the workforce and society. Consistent positive placement success validates graduate preparation effectiveness, while placement trends can inform continuous improvement efforts.

Positive placement encompasses multiple successful graduate outcomes, including:

- Employment in the field or related professional areas
- Enrollment in additional education or advanced training programs
- Military service

This broader definition acknowledges diverse pathways to career success and recognizes that graduates may contribute to society and their profession through various avenues beyond traditional employment. Programs can utilize positive placement data to assess their effectiveness in preparing graduates for multiple career pathways while maintaining a focus on professional preparation.

Professional Competency Assessment

Direct assessment of graduate competence using validated methods provides the most authentic measure of educational quality for allied health educational programs. The Task Force identified the critical importance of incorporating evidence-based assessments of professional competency as a core component of program evaluation. These assessments provide a direct evaluation of whether graduates possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for safe and effective practice across the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains.

Competency assessment approaches bridge the gap between classroom learning and clinical practice, providing programs with actionable data on graduate readiness for professional practice.

Relationships Between Outcome Measures and Quality Dimensions

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the four dimensions of program educational quality and core outcome measures from the Quality Framework. These relationships are not merely theoretical but are grounded in research evidence. For example, studies suggest a correlation between credentialing examination performance and graduate readiness for practice (Cuddy et al., 2017).

Figure 2. Relationships between outcome measures and quality dimensions.

| | | Dimensions of Program Educational Quality | | | |
|-------------------------------|---|---|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| | | Graduate Preparation | Educational Process Effectiveness | Profession & Workforce Alignment | Continuous Improvement |
| Core Program Outcome Measures | National Credentialing Exam Performance | Strong | Moderate | Moderate | Limited |
| | Program Completion Rates | Limited | Strong | Limited | Moderate |
| | Positive Placement Rates | Moderate | Limited | Strong | Limited |
| | Professional Competency Assessment | Strong | Moderate | Moderate | Strong |

Quality Enhancement Measures

Quality Enhancement Measures are supplemental outcome metrics that programs will submit based on their discipline-specific context, mission, and improvement priorities. Unlike Core Outcome Measures, which are uniformly required across all programs, Quality Enhancement Measures provide programs with flexibility to tailor their assessment approach while maintaining a focus on continuous improvement. These measures enable programs to collect data that addresses their unique educational model, student population, or institutional priorities, while still aligning with CAAHEP's Quality Framework. Quality Enhancement Measures complement the Core Outcome Measures by providing deeper insights into specific aspects of program quality and supporting targeted improvement efforts. The proposed list of Quality Enhancement Measures in the framework is based on the task force's initial suggestions, with the expectation that this section will be expanded during the implementation phase.

Implementation Considerations

Student Learning Outcomes vs. Program Outcomes

The Quality Framework clarifies the relationship between student learning outcomes and program outcomes. While both types of assessment provide valuable information about program quality, they serve distinct purposes and occur at various stages of the educational process.

Student learning outcomes assess what students know and can do during the educational program. They provide formative information that helps programs monitor student progress, identify learning gaps, and make real-time adjustments to teaching methods or curriculum sequencing. These assessments primarily serve the Educational Process Effectiveness dimension of quality.

Program outcomes, in contrast, assess the end results of the educational process. They provide summative information about how well the program has prepared completers for professional practice and how graduates perform in real-world contexts. These assessments primarily serve the Graduate Preparation and Profession & Workforce Alignment dimensions of quality.

While student learning outcomes and graduate outcomes are related, CAAHEP's outcomes assessment primarily focuses on the graduate outcomes as indicators of program quality. This focus aligns with CAAHEP's mission to ensure that graduates are competent to enter the profession and meet the needs of employers and the healthcare system.

Programs should maintain robust systems for assessing both student learning outcomes and graduate outcomes, recognizing their complementary roles in a comprehensive quality assurance framework. Student learning assessment provides critical information for ongoing program improvement, while graduate outcome assessment demonstrates the overall effectiveness of the educational process.

Conclusion

The Quality Framework represents an evolution in CAAHEP's outcomes-based accreditation approach. By adopting a multidimensional quality framework and implementing standardized, evidence-based outcome measures, CAAHEP aims to enhance the value of accreditation for programs, students, employers, and, ultimately, the public. The framework's integration of Core Outcome Measures and Quality Enhancement Measures is grounded in research evidence demonstrating how specific measures inform distinct aspects of program quality.

The framework strikes a balance between the need for standardization to ensure consistency and opportunities for authentic evaluation of professional competency that fosters innovation. It emphasizes both quality assurance and continuous quality improvement, recognizing that the ultimate purpose of outcomes assessment is to enhance the quality of health professions education for all stakeholders.

CAAHEP encourages all stakeholders in health professions education - educators, program directors, employers, and accreditation committees - to adopt this new vision of a transformative accreditation model. By collaborating to implement these recommendations and exchanging insights, we can elevate educational quality, empower future professionals, and improve patient outcomes.

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