

Accreditation Committee Process

Framework Summary

The Corps Network's Advisory Committee is dedicated to the promotion of high quality programming and standards for conservation corps across America. The Advisory Committee ensures that programs have the capacity to meet the desired outcomes for participants as well as meet the high quality and production requirements of resource management partners.

The TCN Full Accreditation Process involves an in-depth review of general operations, financial management, risk management, governance standards, and Corps operations. By completing the accreditation process, Corps will demonstrate their accountability to both Corpsmembers and their communities. Independent accreditation provides the assurance of quality that partners, particularly publically-funded government agencies, donors look for and recognizes a Corps ability provide safe, appropriate, meaningful experiences completing service meeting community and conservation needs.

Full Accreditation, if granted, will last for 5 years with annual updates. Newly formed Corps will need two years of operations and experience before beginning TCN Full Accreditation process. Newly formed Corps can gain provisional status and can work with TCN to review Corps models, capacities, and experiences they possess.

Part 1 – Required Accreditation Elements

Applicants must have two years of experience operating a Corps program and must present evidence of substantial compliance with all of the standards in both sections below:

- A. General Operational and Governance Standards. All Organizations demonstrate compliance with Organizational and Governance standards. These are standards which can be applied to any public or private organization, including those programs embedded in universities, community action agencies or larger non-profit agencies. [Includes relevant 21CSC universal standards along with TCN Excellence in Corps Operations (ECO) sections Purpose & Activities (PA) and Organization and Management (OM).]
- B. Corps Operational Standards. Organization demonstrates compliance with (meets definitions of) general Service and Conservation Corps program standards. [Includes relevant 21CSC universal standards along with ECO sections Program Design (PD), Corpsmember Development (CD), Work Experience & Service Projects (WS) and Evidence of Success (ES).]

Outcome of Part 1A&B: Corps is accredited by The Corps Network.

Part 2 – Optional Specific Capacity/Experience

Applicants can choose as many optional specific verifiable competencies.

- A. Corps Models.
- B. Specific Capacity/Experience.

Successful applicants will be 'generally accredited' and then have additional 'designations' listed for any sections of Part 2 where they are approved as meeting those Part 2 standards.

Outcome of Part 2: Corps is accredited in specific designations in addition to the general accreditation.

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Process

5 Step Process

- **Pre-Step: Mentor Program.** Corps not yet ready for accreditation could request a volunteer mentor. Mentors, who would volunteer their time as consultants, would have significant corps experience and would understand the accreditation program. They would provide support and assistance to help the Corps prepare for accreditation and develop a strong Corps program.
- **Step 1: Notice of Intent.** Corps submits a notice of intent (along with a partial payment of accreditation fee) to The Corps Network indicating their intent to apply for accreditation. TCN accepts first TBD applications received after January 1 for that year's accreditation process. (In the first year, TCN will accept 15 applicants and Provisionally Accredited organizations have first priority as long as they send a notice of intent by January 15.)
 - a. The Advisory Committee assigns a Lead Reviewer to the application. The Lead Reviewer has significant experience as a reviewer and has experience in the particular model program operated by the applicant. The Lead Reviewer participates in the written review and the on-site review. Other reviewers, who are assigned later, could participate in just the written review or just the site visit.
- **Step 2: Written Application.** Corps submits a written application along with supporting materials (all electronically). The Corps must identify a multi-disciplinary accreditation team (e.g. Board member, line staff, community member, etc.), indicate availability for a site visit, confirm in writing agreement with all of the accreditation requirements (including reporting), and pay the remainder of the accreditation fee.
 - a. The Advisory Committee staff review the materials for completeness, but not for quality, and then send completed applications to reviewers.
 - b. Two volunteer peer reviewers (including the Lead Reviewer) complete a comprehensive review of the written application.
 - c. Peer reviewers and the Advisory Committee staff conduct a two hour conference call with applicant to answer questions and request follow-up information.
 - d. Peer reviewers and the Advisory Committee staff make a determination about whether to move forward with a site visit based upon the quality of work submitted and whether it is of such a nature that provides confidence that the corps will be accredited. The intent is to have a checkpoint so that reviewers and applicant don't waste money and effort on continuing a process if it is likely that it would not result in accreditation. In those cases, the Advisory Committee would redirect those applicants to a technical assistance process (or a mentorship) to help correct identified deficiencies.
- **Step 3: Site Visit.** Two-three peer reviewers (including the Lead Reviewer) participate in a two-three day site visit. The applicant pays for the on-site expenses while the peer visitors pay their own travel. The Advisory Committee maintains a fund to support travel from visitors who do not work for a corps or are unable to pay their own travel.
 - a. There is a final review at the end of the site visit that includes the corps' accreditation team, the site reviewers and the written reviewers (via speaker phone) to discuss any issues and answer remaining questions.
- **Step 4: Report and Decision.** The Lead Reviewer prepares a summary report using a standard format with assistance from the Advisory Committee staff and the other reviewers. The Advisory

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Committee shares the report in draft with the applicant and provides the applicant with an opportunity to respond to remaining issues. If there is a disagreement, the final report will include a statement from the applicant indicating their reasons for disagreement. The report includes not just “met, not met” but suggestions and recommendations for continuous improvement.

- a. The Corps Network Advisory Committee reviews the report, asks questions of the Lead Reviewer (who participates on a portion of the Advisory Committee meeting) and make a decision on accreditation.
 - b. The applicant has 60 days after receiving the official decision to submit an appeal the overall accreditation decision to the Advisory Committee if the applicant is not satisfied with the decision.
 - c. The accreditation is valid for 5 years. Corps needs to notify the Committee if there are major changes in the organization, such as changes in executive leadership or major programmatic or funding changes.
- **Step 5: Annual Responsibilities.** As part of being accredited, Corps agrees to:
 - a. Provide annual data (profiles information) as well as updates on any major changes to Corps operations, key staff or funding.
 - b. Provide reviewers, preferably someone who was involved in the accreditation process, to assist with reviews of other Corps.

Accreditation Policy

The Accreditation consultant will make a preliminary determination that an applicant is indeed a Corps and eligible for accreditation within criteria set by the standards.

Corps will be accredited if the Corps is in substantial compliance with published accreditation standards. "Substantial Compliance" means that the Corps has addressed each of the standards and meets the larger intent of each standard. A "minor deficit" is defined as a Corps practice not fully meeting the standard but does not impede the ability of the Corps to provide a quality service. Corps will be given a reasonable amount of time to correct minor deficits identified by the reviewers. The reviewers will determine when a Corps' "substantial non-compliance" with a significant standard threatens the integrity of the Corps and its ability to provide a quality service to the Corpsmember, the community and their funders. "Substantial non-compliance" with a significant standard(s) is a basis for denying accreditation until the applicant brings the Corps into substantial compliance.

The judgment of the reviewers and the Advisory Committee will prevail when deciding whether non-compliance is a substantial or minor deficit. It is the intent of the accreditation process to ensure that a Corps substantially meets the standards or has a plan to correct all significant and minor deficits prior to an onsite review. Pre-visit reviewer desk reviews, telephone calls with the Accreditation Consultant, and contact with mentors are all designed to assist a Corps to comply with all standards prior to a visit by the reviewers. Corrective action can be on-going prior to the reviewers' visit.

Fee Schedule

- \$8,750 (\$10M or larger budget)
- \$5,500 (\$5M - \$10M budget)
- \$4,300 (\$3M - \$5M budget)
- \$2,800 (\$1M to \$3M budget)
- \$1,800 (less than \$1M budget)
- Discounts for Provisionally Accredited Corps

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Benefits of Accreditation

Current Benefits

- **Continuous Improvement.** Accreditation is an audit of best practices comparing every aspect of a Corps to peer-based standards and best practices. The process provides an opportunity for a Corps to strengthen its operations and ensure that every component of the organization meets high quality standards and each is based on proven practices.
- **External Validation.** Accreditation provides external, objective and independent validation that it meets high level standards and is being monitored externally. Furthermore, it can help Corps measure, document and communicate meaningful results.
- **Board of Directors.** The Board or governing body can have comfort that they are overseeing a corps that is operating at a professional and high level. Accreditation provides confidence to a Board that it has with a professionally managed corps.
- **Professional Relationships.** Accreditation builds confidence and trust among all stakeholders (Board, funders, partners, staff, participants, families of participants, community members, tax payers) that they are involved with a high quality corps.
- **Benefit to Corpsmembers.** Corpsmembers will have the experience of participating in a high-quality corps.
- **Mentorship and Technical Assistance.** The Advisory Committee offers mentorship to assist Corps in working through the accreditation process. In addition, the process helps a corps identify areas where special focus is needed or where technical assistance could be provided. Essentially, accreditation is a roadmap to increased Corps capacity and quality.
- **The Value of Self-Assessment.** The standards offer a comprehensive framework with which to guide discussion about a Corps' current state and future. The knowledge and experience of Corps staff are tapped during participation in the accreditation process.
- **Experienced Peer Reviewers.** Three accreditation reviewers are chosen from the Advisory Committee community. These reviewers are selected for the fit of their experience and expertise to the Corps' self-identified needs. Reviewers will ask questions a Corps had not thought to ask itself and offer recommendations of effective practices tested at their own Corps.
- **Cost-Effective Assessment.** The accreditation is also one of the most valuable – and least expensive assessments around.
- **A Forum to Gather Partners.** The accreditation process is an ideal opportunity to engage partners—funding, community, project—in the discussion. Corps often involve partners in the process to provide accreditation visitors with their vital perspective and, in turn, further invest them in the Corps. A partners' participation in the process demonstrates the value the Corps places on that relationship.
- **Access to the Knowledge of the Corps Community.** Corps that have participated in accreditation have continuing access to effective practices through the Advisory Committee. Accreditation also facilitates Corps to Corps communication and contact with reviewers based on the common ground of the standards. Connecting through accreditation and its standards allows Corps references and resources to facilitate continuous improvement.
- **Improving Quality of the Entire Corps Movement.** Accreditation builds the quality of the entire corps movement by strengthening and accrediting Corps one at a time.

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Potential Future Benefits

- **Leveraging Funding.** Accredited Corps can use accreditation to gain additional funding from project partners and other funders as accreditation is a ‘stamp of approval’ of a high quality Corps. Accreditation may also help open doors to new partners and funders as it provides the Corps with instant credibility (the Advisory Committee will also work nationally to generate support for accreditation with land/water management agencies and national funders). In seeking funding, Corps may highlight their accreditation into the narrative of proposals in order to demonstrate their commitment to quality programming and governance. Corps also use the accreditation in reporting to funding sources as proof of outside evaluation.
- **Marketing.** A description of the comprehensive accreditation process and the accreditation logo can be used in websites and marketing materials to demonstrate credibility and a commitment to continuous improvement. Accreditation is also an important way to communicate the quality of the Corps to Corpsmembers, parents, project sponsors, donors, and other stakeholders. Accreditation can provide added value to Corps when mentioned in PR/press and marketing materials.
- **Stepping Stone to Additional Assessments and Certifications.** Knowing that a Corps may have to undertake numerous assessments from year to year, the transferability of the accreditation to other certifications is a valuable benefit.
- **Strategic Planning.** Accreditation can become an essential component of a strategic planning process to guide the future direction of the corps.
- **Funding Preference or Requirement.** At some point, accreditation could become a preference or added value or even requirement for certain types of funding, either from a government agency, foundation or through an intermediary such as The Corps Network. Improves funder confidence in a competitive process.
- **Legislation.** PLSC, TCN and/or local/state corps entities can actively work (over time as more Corps are accredited) to include accredited Corps in Corps-friendly legislation on local, state and federal level.
- **Federal Recognition.** The PLSC and TCN are advocating that the federal government formally recognize this accreditation.
- **Other Benefits to CMs including Federal Hiring Benefits.** Individual Corpsmembers may receive benefits from graduating from an accredited corps; such benefits could include access to federal hiring benefits, documenting achievement, and certifications.
- **AmeriCorps.** CNCS approved ECO as meeting AmeriCorps evaluation requirements. TCN will work with CNCS to get the accreditation approved as well.
- **Insurance Cost Savings.** Accredited Corps could negotiate with their insurance companies for lower premiums due to an accredited corps being a lower risk and therefore deserving of a premium discount.

TCN Structure

The Advisory Committee is a committee of The Corps Network (TCN). The accreditation committee will operate as a semi-independent arm of TCN. The Advisory Committee will be responsible for non-monetary policies and implementation of accreditation procedures. TCN will maintain fiscal management of all accreditation activity and will supervise the accreditation consultant (or staff). The Advisory Committee will not make any decision that encumbers TCN without TCN's express permission. TCN will continue to raise funds to supplement the accreditation budget. The current committee could continue without major changes.