WHAT ACCREDITATION MEANS TO THE JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY
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COLLEAGUES: For almost a decade we have considered making the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) an accredited institution. Prior to our relocation to Tampa, we petitioned for and received our first formal accreditation from an agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education & Training (ACCET). ACCET is one of seven national career-related accrediting agencies that review institutions whose mission focuses primarily on non-degree programs designed to meet the needs of the job market. The standards of this national accrediting agency were ideal for our continuing education focus and put us on par with an associate degree institution. During the ACCET site visit in 2015, JSOU received the maximum five-year reaccreditation which positively reflects on our very high educational standards.

After the success with ACCET, the university began the process of an international accreditation through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to become both a member of the Partnership for Training and Education Centre (PTEC) cooperation and acquire their quality assurance (QA) certification. After the PTEC self-study and site visit, JSOU became a PTEC member with 30 other international institutions. This QA certification was our second formal evaluation by a peer institution. We were not only successful in this evaluation, but we have been asked to provide support to other PTECs as they progress through the QA certification process.

Soon after the move to MacDill Air Force Base (AFB), the university’s impact on the SOF community visibly accelerated. Joint Special Operations Forces Senior Enlisted Academy (JSOFSEA) took off, and other courses aimed at noncommissioned officer (NCO) development were being rapidly designed. Attendance grew steadily, as did a growing demand for special operations specific courses and programs. Academic year (AY) 2014 was the turning point as JSOU first invested in accredited curricula. Our first postgraduate-level certificate in advanced special operations studies was piloted, then several existing continuing education courses were converted while new courses were planned and developed as accredited electives.

The process for postgraduate-level accreditation had begun and continues today as a high priority although slightly behind the anticipated pace. In August 2015, the Special Operations Command Requirements Board (SOCREB) approved the JSOU 2.6 concept, which authorized the transformation of JSOU into a postgraduate accredited institution. This was further endorsed at a later SOCREB that approved the manpower growth required to maintain higher-level accreditation, develop the corresponding postgraduate curricula, and provide the support functions necessary to operate effectively in the new facility. Today we are in the final steps of this process, and all signs point to success.

Brian A. Maher, SES
President
WHAT EXACTLY IS ACCREDITATION?
Accreditation is the process where a nationally recognized agency grants accreditation to an educational organization indicating that it meets established standards of quality as determined through initial and periodic self-study and evaluation by peers. The purpose of the accreditation process is to provide a professional judgment as to the quality of the educational institution or program offered and to encourage continual improvement. When an institution is accredited, it provides peace of mind to the public that the academic standards are educationally sound.

Accreditation is both a process and a status. It is the process of reviewing colleges, universities, institutions, and programs to evaluate their educational quality – how well they serve students and society. The result of the process, if successful, is the award of “accredited status.” This means that students and the public can expect that a school or program lives up to its promises, have confidence that a degree or credential has value, and that the institution or program meets the high standards of the accrediting organization. Accredited status indicates to institutions evaluating requests for credit transfer or applications for graduate school admission that the sending institution or program has met the threshold expectations of quality.

Accreditation is carried out through nongovernmental organizations created in whole or in part by the higher education community. Some accrediting organizations review colleges and universities while others review specific programs, e.g., law, medicine, engineering, etc. Membership is always voluntary, and it is the expertise of the peer member schools that provide the real power to each accrediting agency.

All accrediting organizations create and use specific standards both to assure that institutions and programs meet the threshold of expectations for quality and to assure that they improve over time. These standards address key areas such as faculty, student support services, finance, facilities, curricula, and student learning outcomes.

All accrediting organizations use common practices, including a self-study by the institution or program, an on-site visit by an evaluation team of peer experts, and a subsequent review and decision by the accrediting body or commission about accredited status. This review is repeated every three to ten years if the institution or program is to sustain its accreditation.

(Extracted from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation paper, The Value of Accreditation, 2010)

TYPES OF ACCREDITATION
All types of accreditation place an emphasis on the quality of content and the instruction to students based on the standards determined by the Department of Education. There are two types of accreditation: institutional and programmatic accreditation. JSOU currently has two institutional accreditations: ACCET and PTEC QA. These accreditations recognize the entire institution rather than by program or course. An example of a programmatic accreditation is a traditional school’s nursing program or in the military world, a combat medic training program. These programs are part of an institution and exclusive to the rest of the school.

There are multiple categories of institutional accreditations. Regional and national accreditations are categories of U.S.-based institutional accreditations. Regional accreditation is limited to institutions that grant degrees. National accreditations are designed for institutions who are both degree and non-degree granting with a focus toward non-degree, vocational, and/or career enhancing institutions. JSOU qualifies under the auspices of national as the current mission is focused on career enhancement for students where credits are put toward a degree rather than part and parcel of a degree.

JSOU AND SOF BENEFITS
SOF is defined by excellence, and JSOU strives for academic excellence; accreditation is the vehicle to achieve public recognition of academic excellence. While our courses are of quality, the peer review by other institutions accelerates and reaffirms our academic standing. Many of the university's academic part-
nners have a level of accreditation that equals or exceeds our own. JSOU will join partner institutions in the area of excellence. The primary benefit for students is the flexibility to build and/or complete their degrees. Faculty and staff will have the benefit of working within an accredited institution demonstrating a commitment to quality at the course level, program level, and institutional level.

THE JSOU PHILOSOPHY OF ACCREDITATION
Accreditation represents the investment in the intellectual preparation of the special operations force. Today’s well-educated force must possess increased strategic vision, intellectual agility, confidence to engage at multiple levels, and a fundamental understanding of key issues that transcend military paradigms and models. These attributes result from a wide range of educational options available through JSOU. As the university charter states, JSOU is an educational institution that serves as the United States Special Operations Command’s (USSOCOM) academic center of excellence for special operations studies and research and is designed to create, promote, and sustain postsecondary scholarship through teaching, research, and outreach in the strategic and operational art of joint special operations.

Accreditation validates that the faculty, curricula, instructional methods, and learning outcomes of the students are world class and able to compete with nationally ranked civilian universities and the Department of Defense (DoD) professional military education (PME) institutions. Accreditation assures commanders and leaders throughout the force that the time their people spend in JSOU programs is time well spent. It assures interagency and international partners that the accuracy and relevance of our curriculum is the best they will find in the U.S. government. Also, it assures our civilian partner colleges and universities that JSOU embodies standards comparable to their accreditation and gives them the confidence to readily accept credit for JSOU courses.

THE ROLE OF POLICIES AND HANDBOOKS
Everyone does not need to read the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges’ (ACCSC) Standards of Accreditation Handbook. The JSOU accreditation team has reviewed this thoroughly and condensed the applicable rules and processes into a variety of JSOU documents. These documents are the newly revised JSOU policies, handbooks, and the curriculum management and faculty development operational instructions. Faculty and staff should be familiar with these documents. Therefore, as you read these documents and then apply those applicable standards to your course, situation, or program, you will be following the ACCSC handbook. Naturally, if in doubt, or if further detail is necessary, please do not hesitate to review the actual standards themselves or talk to the team. The handbook, as well as many topical ACCSC webinars, can be found at the ACCSC website at: www.accsc.org/Accreditation/Standards-of-Accreditation.aspx

EXPECTED TIMELINE
ACCSC accreditation has three distinct phases: the application phase, the self-study phase, and the preparation phase. Two ACCSC sponsored visits are part of this timeline and include the orientation visit. The orientation visit is the opportunity to “test” how the documentation we have submitted represents the actual day-to-day operations. The second visit, the site visit, is a multiday formal evaluation of the entire university by skilled evaluators, some of whom will have a background matched to our environment. Each phase is marked by distinct deliverables to include publications, student records, faculty folders, and the strategic plan to name a few. The goal is to formally apply in October after the completion of the first Program Advisory Committee (PAC). The self-study phase will occur during the fall and conclude in December. The final phase, the preparation for the site visit, will be completed in January.

FACULTY ALIGNMENT AND THE “INSTRUCTOR OF RECORD”
Accreditation is based on three major tenets: resources, student learning, and qualified faculty. Our faculty alignment project has allowed the university to demonstrate at the instructor level their documented ability to perform the teaching duties of the course. As a major tenet of
accreditation, this is an important evaluation to make. Many of the faculty are qualified to teach courses based on either experience or education. For those who act as “course coordinators,” we have created labels to support the different course styles and teaching techniques to include a type with multiple subject matter experts.

Specifically, an instructor of record is the person who takes responsibility for assessing the students and has the experience and/or education to lead the course. This alignment of qualified individuals demonstrates the university's commitment to student learning and assessment but also showcases the depth and breadth of education and experience.

**IMPORTANCE OF DOCUMENTATION**

Demonstrating our level of excellence is a paperwork process. The demonstration of resources, student learning, and faculty qualifications can be completed through documentation. Without documentation of the above, the accreditation process will fail as the evidence is what provides the fodder for review, evaluation, and confirmation of quality student outcomes. Planning, implementing, and executing a PAC without meeting minutes adds to the oral history but does not provide evidence to an evaluator to support our activities.

**CRITICALITY OF ASSESSMENT**

Institutions of higher learning must be accountable to students and stakeholders alike to assure that the promised education is delivered. A strong assessment program provides the foundation of this requirement by measuring student learning and determining the effectiveness of instruction. A primary way to accomplish this is in the classroom by focusing students on the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to achieve the course objective and the level to which each individual meets performance criteria expressed in rubrics, scoring guides, and other measures. All courses in JSOU should maintain effective student assessments that start with the overall course objective, and determine if the published student learning outcomes were successfully achieved. Assessments should be tailored to the specific course type, the stated level of learning, may come in different forms, and do not have to be graded. They must be valid, reliable, fair, and must clearly indicate the effectiveness of the instruction.

However, assessment does not end in the classroom and must include all aspects of the university's commitment to the students. As we prepare for postgraduate-level accreditation, we are adding both internal and external assessments that improve the overall quality of programs and the betterment of the institution. PACs, an enhanced annual Factbook, a detailed Playbook that specifies short-term goals, the annual Financial Plan and associated quarterly reviews, a revised Senior Decision Workshop format, and an overarching Five-Year Strategic Plan are just a few of these initiatives. Taken together with classroom assessment, these form the very basis for a robust and ongoing Institutional Assessment and Improvement Plan that will help JSOU thrive and improve.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF PROGRAM ADVISORY COMMITTEES**

Accreditation invites peer institutions to review processes, resources, faculty, and student learning. However, this evaluation does not provide sufficient insight into the success, growth, and improvement of programs. To achieve a successful review of programs, it is necessary that the external stakeholders review the curriculum and program-level content, viewing all with a lens toward student outcomes specifically related to workplace or downrange performance. Those directly involved with the community are qualified experts on the content and are encouraged to make informed commentary on each specific program area.

These individuals can assist in the future with program development.

For those newly established programs with subject matter expertise from the outset, they can return and evaluate the progress made on each course and program, constantly bringing their expertise back to the program.
TITLE 10 CIVILIAN FACULTY
A major tenet of postgraduate-level accreditation is the acquisition of academically and experientially qualified faculty. The United States Code Title 10 Civilian Faculty Hiring Authority ensures the employment of civilian faculty with accreditation required qualifications to deliver specific curricula in the required areas of expertise. This authority shortens the hiring process, and the expected cost is neutral (possibly lower). JSOU has submitted a legislative proposal each year to gain congressional approval for this authority since 2015.

The proposal requests that JSOU receives equivalent flexibility that the Service/joint PME institutions and DoD regional centers have to rapidly hire faculty with expertise in selected disciplines not normally found within the military or civil service communities. This hiring authority is crucial for a military education institution to maintain graduate-level accreditation by ensuring they have the academic expertise to teach at the graduate level. Title 10 would enable the Secretary of Defense to employ as many civilians in professors, instructors, and lecturers positions at JSOU as necessary.

Under this authority, JSOU (not the Air Force Personnel Center) would have the responsibility for establishing civilian personnel policy, programs, and rates of pay for civilian members as approved by the appropriate secretary within the DoD (likely ASD-SO/LIC). This authority applies to civilian faculty members, administrative faculty, senior managers, librarians, and selected other positions. The flexible Title 10 civilian faculty appointment length provides incentives to top performers to receive longer term employment while those requiring developmental actions can be limited. Best of all, Title 10 employees are considered U.S. government employees and have the authority to execute inherently governmental responsibilities. Benefits are similar to the same non-pay benefits as GS (Title 5) employees in such areas as awards, health and life insurance, leave, and retirement benefits.

CONCLUSION
The JSOU accreditation team alone cannot achieve the goal of postgraduate accreditation. It requires the understanding, commitment, and constant implementation by all JSOU faculty and staff. We should not just meet standards but rather launch a continual process of improvement and self-assessment as we seek to achieve the highest levels of academic excellence. It means that the learning of our students must come first and ensure that the academic programs are delivered with clarity, integrity, and the absolute best instructional methods available. By maintaining the high academic standards of ACCSC, JSOU will become a better educational institution, on par with the best colleges and universities in the world. We do this for our students, our special operations community, and for the advancement of our national security.
JSOU IS ACCREDITED BY ACCET, A NATIONAL ACCREDITING AGENCY RECOGNIZED BY THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION.

PARTNERSHIP TRAINING AND EDUCATION CENTRES (PTECs) ARE ENDORSED BY THE NORTH ATLANTIC COUNCIL AND RECOGNIZED BY NATO.