Research Questions for Accreditation

Approved December 2013

Following the recommendations from the Exploring Accreditation project, the Public Health Accreditation Board is interested in encouraging research to develop the science base for accreditation and systems change in public health. The PHAB Research & Evaluation Committee developed and vetted a preliminary set of research questions, which were approved by the PHAB Board of Directors in 2011. More recently, the PHAB Research Advisory Council has revised the questions and prioritized them. This work complements the development and revision of the logic model for the public health accreditation system (http://www.phaboard.org/wp-content/uploads/AccreditationSystemLogicModel-Dec2013.pdf).

These questions should not be construed to assume that the Research Advisory Council, the PHAB Board of Directors, nor the PHAB staff has questions regarding the potential benefits of accreditation. Rather, this research agenda is being developed to form a framework around which research that does not currently exist can be focused as an effort to improve and strengthen the accreditation process.

The research agenda includes nine overarching questions, which are listed below. The questions in bold represent PHAB’s current priorities over the next several years.

1) What are the barriers and facilitators to seeking and obtaining accreditation?
2) Do the PHAB standards and the review process capture what is most meaningful for evaluating the performance of health departments? How could they be improved?
3) What are the best metrics to determine the impact of accreditation?
4) What are the benefits and outcomes associated with accreditation for the health departments that undergo the process?
5) What are the costs and benefits for health departments throughout the accreditation cycle?
6) How do accredited health departments differ from non-accredited health departments?
7) How does accreditation affect the broader public health system, including health departments that do not apply for accreditation?
8) What impact, if any, does health department accreditation have on health outcomes?
9) What factors affect the impact of accreditation and how does accreditation’s impact compare to the impact of other initiatives?
In determining which questions to prioritize first, PHAB considered the data that would likely be available in the short term, taking into account how many health departments have completed the accreditation process to date. PHAB also prioritized questions that have the potential to produce actionable findings. PHAB and the RAC will review this research agenda periodically to update the questions and priorities.

The remainder of this document includes more detailed questions for each of these overarching questions.

In addition to the research questions in this document, which are directly focused on accreditation, PHAB also encourages research that will help build the evidence base in support of the Standards and Measures.

Research Advisory Council Members

Dr. Les Beitsch
Dr. Betty Bekemeier
Dr. Paul Erwin
Dr. Kasuma Mademala
Dr. Glen Mays
Dr. Margaret Potter
Dr. Bill Riley

Organizational Representatives
Liza Corso (CDC)
Carolyn Leep (NACCHO)
Dr. Pamela Russo (RWJF)
Dr. Katie Sellers (ASTHO)
Dr. Naima Wang (RWJF)

PHAB Staff
Jessica Kronstadt
Detailed Research Questions

Questions that are Current Priorities

1) What are the barriers and facilitators to seeking and obtaining accreditation?
   a. Which incentives for health departments to participate in the voluntary national accreditation program are most effective for state, tribal, local, and territorial health departments?
   b. What are the barriers to health department participation in accreditation? Are the barriers to health department participation in accreditation real or perceived?
   c. What health department preparation activities improve readiness for accreditation and successfully achieving accreditation?
   d. What are the characteristics (knowledge/skills/background) of a successful accreditation coordinator and accreditation team at a health department?
   e. What supports do state, tribal, and local health departments, as well as other entities such as their governing bodies, need to prepare for accreditation?
   f. How can coordination of accreditation activities at the state and local levels be most effective (e.g., state and local participation at the same time; state participation before local or vice versa; full local statewide participation in a coordinated manner)? Does this differ based on governance structure/typology of the state?
   g. What are the costs of preparing for accreditation and participating in the accreditation assessment process?
   h. What impact does the existence of dedicated “core” or infrastructure funding have on the health department’s likelihood to achieve accreditation?
   i. What is the impact of grants targeted towards accreditation on health department operations and ability to obtain accreditation?
   j. What role do foundations and other non-governmental sources play in supporting accreditation efforts by health departments?

2) Do the PHAB standards and the review process capture what is most meaningful for evaluating the performance of health departments? How could they be improved?1
   a. Are there accreditation standards and measures that are missing?
   b. Are there accreditation standards and measures that could be omitted?
   c. What are appropriate metrics to study the criterion validity of the measures?
   d. How is the bar for determining whether accreditation has been achieved set most appropriately?
   e. Does the PHAB accreditation assessment and review process account sufficiently for contextual differences among health departments seeking accreditation (e.g. limited budget, different governance structures, or other factors outside health department control)?

---

1 PHAB is conducting evaluation activities that will address the specific processes involved in accreditation. PHAB is also investigating questions related to inter-rater reliability. To supplement those efforts, the research community could contribute to the understanding about the validity of the measures and the overall effectiveness of the measures and the review process in identifying high-performing health departments.
3) **What are the best metrics to determine the impact of accreditation?**
   a. What are the most appropriate metrics for assessing the proximate and intermediate outcomes listed in the logic model?
   b. How can researchers isolate the impact of accreditation from the selection effect?
   c. What are the best methods to determine if the national accreditation program demonstrated value to the public and policy makers?
   d. What are the most appropriate methods to determine the contributions of a high-performing health department to improved health outcomes and/or reduced health disparities?

4) **What are the benefits and outcomes associated with accreditation for the health departments that undergo the process?**
   a. Does accreditation enhance progress in achieving the health department strategic plan? The state/community health improvement plan?
   b. Does preparation for accreditation encourage the adoption of evidence-based and best practices?
   c. Does accreditation increase the engagement in quality improvement or enhance quality improvement culture? How?
   d. How does accreditation affect health department workforce? Does accreditation influence morale, productivity, workforce retention/satisfaction, achievement of competencies, and seeking advanced degrees?
   e. Do accredited health departments have greater accountability?
   f. Does accreditation influence the relationship between local health departments and other system partners, for example governing entities?
   g. Do accredited health departments have greater community visibility as a result of accreditation?
   h. Does accreditation result in greater political support for accredited health departments?
   i. What impact does accreditation have on tribal health departments?
   j. Do accredited health departments strengthen their financial status?
   k. Does accreditation influence or change how health departments use their resources?
   l. Does accreditation influence progress in achieving Healthy People objectives, GPRA, or other federal benchmarks?
   m. To what extent does accreditation have value for programmatic areas within the health department?
   n. Are some essential services more affected by accreditation than others, and if so, why?
   o. Does accreditation catalyze changes in health department activities, responsibilities, or structure at the state and local level (e.g. regionalization or shift of responsibilities)?
   p. What are the unintended consequences of health department accreditation? (For example, does accreditation divert attention away from important health department activities?)
Questions that are Not Current Priorities

These questions may be a higher priority in the future. Due to limited data and the amount of time that the accreditation program has been in place, these are not considered high priority by PHAB at the moment.

5) What are the costs and benefits for health departments throughout the accreditation cycle?
   a. What are the costs for improving performance after accreditation?
   b. What are the costs associated with maintaining accreditation?
   c. Does accreditation benefit exceed cost?
   d. Is performance maintained (or improved?) by accredited health departments between cycles of accreditation?
   e. Does maintenance of accreditation influence uptake of quality improvement within the health department?

6) How do accredited health departments differ from non-accredited health departments?²
   a. What factors are the strongest predictors for being nationally accredited? For example, do differences in leadership, governance, structure, budget and workforce influence accreditation?
   b. What characteristics of tribal health departments make them more or less likely to apply for or successfully achieve accreditation?
   c. Are jurisdictions that have engaged in broader systems initiatives (e.g. NPHPSP, MAPP, SHIP) better positioned to seek and attain accreditation?
   d. Are health departments that emphasize emergency preparedness and readiness (e.g. Project Public Health Ready) better positioned to seek and attain accreditation?
   e. Are health departments with well-developed quality improvement systems better prepared to seek and attain accreditation?
   f. Are local health departments more likely to seek accreditation if surrounding health departments are seeking it or have attained it?
   g. Are health departments that collaborate with schools of public health (e.g., Academic Health Department programs) more likely to achieve accreditation or meet certain standards?

7) How does accreditation affect the broader public health system, including health departments that do not apply for accreditation?
   a. Does accreditation help build the evidence base for quality improvement in public health departments?
   b. Does accreditation result in improved performance of health departments undertaking accreditation, or extend to all health departments in general?
   c. Does the adoption of national standards for accreditation result in funding changes for public health generally? Does this depend upon where the accreditation bar is set?

² This question encompasses both the differences between health departments that apply and those that do not apply and the differences between health departments that apply and are accredited and those that apply and are not accredited.
d. Does accreditation promote or hinder the role of a health department in building a public health system? Does accreditation reinforce that building the public health system is an important role, or does it cause health department leadership and staff to focus efforts internally, away from systems building?

e. Does accreditation increase the consistency of health departments’ activities nationally? Does consistency result in higher performing health departments?

f. To what extent does accreditation have value for federal programmatic initiatives?

8) What impact, if any, does health department accreditation have on health outcomes?

a. Are some health outcomes more readily influenced by health department accreditation?

b. Are the improvements in health from accreditation ethically distributed across the population served by accredited health departments?

c. If pursuit of accreditation leads to sharing of services between health departments in order to apply for accreditation, what is the impact on health outcomes and health services?

9) What factors affect the impact of accreditation and how does accreditation’s impact compare to the impact of other initiatives?

a. What roles do practitioners, partners, consumers, and others play in influencing the accreditation process and its effect on health department performance?

b. Is the impact of accreditation altered by whether it is voluntary or mandatory?

c. Is the impact of accreditation altered by whether it is pursued statewide, and whether the state and locals both/all seek accreditation in a coordinated fashion?

d. Are there any differences between outcomes achieved by accredited health departments versus health departments that do other types of performance improvement activities (e.g., National Public Health Performance Standards Program; Baldrige, etc.)?

e. Is health department accreditation more effective than public health system accreditation?