

# Defining Accreditation: AN EXPERT VIEW

**D**r. Sharon Goldsmith has helped accreditation programs all over the globe get off the ground, and has advised the Land Trust Accreditation Commission throughout the development of the program. We asked her to share her thoughts on land trust accreditation in the context of her broad range of experiences helping similar programs.

## Q. What is accreditation?


Accreditation measures organizations against consensus-based standards as defined by their industries, and publicly recognizes those organizations that achieve accreditation. Accreditation requires an evidence-based verification process in which applicants demonstrate how they comply with each defined standard. Applicants are sometimes surprised that the process feels investigative or is difficult. Accreditation differs from training programs in that its purpose is to measure and recognize performance, not to teach organizations how to implement the standards. However, the accreditation process itself often transforms how an organization works in beneficial ways.

## Q. What are some of the ways in which accreditation can benefit an organization?

Accreditation offers similar benefits across nonprofit and business sectors. Organizations preparing for accreditation focus on building the systems to be successful; self-improvement is often the most important benefit. [Land trusts are expected to meet the standards at the time they apply, and while some fine-tuning may occur through the review process, this is not the time to implement major changes.] Once a group has the evidence it is meeting the standards, another benefit of accreditation is that it is a

public way to promote the organization. For land trusts, the accreditation seal symbolizes the group's success in implementing *Land Trust Standards and Practices*.

## Q. How does the Land Trust Accreditation Commission compare to other organizations you've worked with?

These commissioners are some of the most committed people I have ever worked with. They have analyzed each option I've presented to them and thought long and hard about what will work best for the land trust community. They have incorporated internationally recognized best practices for how accreditation processes are to be conducted and how judgments are to be made. The Commission has a particularly tough challenge because the standards are not black and white and the community is diverse. They do an extraordinary job of allowing for flexibility while also ensuring consistency in the minimum thresholds accredited land trusts must meet. I have counseled commissioners that they need to curb their instincts to teach and mentor groups. The task of an accreditation commission is to cite the noncompliance, not explain how to fix it! 

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## OH, WHAT A FEELING!

I thought nothing could beat the satisfaction of getting the call that we'd been accredited. But walking across the stage at Rally last year, seeing a sea of 'ACCREDITED' pennants, and knowing that we were now among this distinct group, made me so proud of what our small, all-volunteer land trust had accomplished.

**LINDA SCHROEDER**, BOARD VICE PRESIDENT,  
 SALEM LAND TRUST (CT)

Is your land trust ready to walk across the stage and join the more than 100 land trusts that have earned the accreditation seal? Visit [www.landtrustaccreditation.org](http://www.landtrustaccreditation.org) to learn how.