

The Value of National Accreditation

2015



ACCREDITED

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What is Accreditation?

Accreditation of higher educational institutions is a uniquely American phenomenon; because it relies on peer review to ensure quality and foster a culture of continuing institutional improvement. Many countries have a federal Ministry of Education. However, while the United States has a Federal Department of Education, this department has no direct centralized authority or control over institutions of higher education. Most individual states assume some degree of control over institutions of higher education located in their state but, in general, this is limited to issuing permission to operate or authority to grant degrees with these institutions allowed considerable independence and autonomy.

Accreditation is the recognition that an institution maintains standards required for its graduates to gain admission to other reputable institutions of higher learning or to achieve credentials for professional practice. The focus of accreditation is the assurance that education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality.

The two major goals of accreditation are verification that the education provided by institutions meets acceptable levels of quality and that the process of accreditation leads to continued institutional improvement. While these are the major goals, there exist other functions served by the accrediting process.

Functions of Accreditation

1. Serves as a measure of quality to institutions in determining the acceptability of transfer credits;
2. Directs the activities of an institution toward the accomplishment of its mission and goals;
3. Focuses on improvement throughout the institution by measuring programs against national standards and norms;
4. Involves the institution's various communities in institutional evaluation and planning;
5. Identifies institutions and programs for the investment of public and private funds;
6. Acts as a resource to prospective students in identifying acceptable institutions;
7. Involves employers in the development of curriculum which meets the needs of the industry, including eligibility for professional certification and/or licensure; and
8. Provides a sound basis for determining eligibility for Federal assistance.

In order to accomplish these goals, accrediting agencies develop evaluation criteria (Standards) and conduct peer evaluation team visits to an institution to assess whether or not those standards are being met. Institutions and/or programs which request an agency's evaluation and meet that agency's standards are then *accredited* by that agency.

Types of Accrediting Agencies

Higher Education accrediting agencies basically fall into two main categories; *specialized (or programmatic)* accreditors and *institutional* accreditors.

Programmatic or Specialized Accrediting Agencies

Programmatic or Specialized accrediting agencies normally focus on the evaluation of programs, departments, or schools which usually are parts of an undergraduate and/or graduate institution. The program accredited may be as large as a college or a school within a university or as small as a concentration within a discipline. Most programmatic or specialized accrediting agencies review units within an institution of higher education which is accredited by one of the recognized *institutional* accrediting agencies. However, a number of these programmatic agencies may accredit institutions which are free-standing in their operations. Thus, a programmatic or specialized accrediting agency may also function in the capacity of an institutional accrediting agency for an institution with a single program focus.

Institutional Accrediting Agencies

Institutional accrediting agencies review the entire institution, acknowledging that each of an institution's parts contributes to the achievement of the institution's objectives including such areas as governance, finances administration, curriculum, faculty qualifications support services, facilities, institutional effectiveness, planning, policies, and publications. All institutional accreditors require that institutions meet national norms in the areas of curriculum, programs, and faculty credentials; and measure student learning outcomes at the course, program and institutional levels.

All institutional accrediting agencies have a limited scope for their accreditation activities. Some accrediting agencies limit their scope to a certain type of institution, such as continuing education institutions; distance education institutions; faith-based institutions; those institutions located in a specific region of the country; or those offering career, technical, professional, or occupational training.

What Does it Mean to be a Recognized Accrediting Agency?

In order to provide some assurance that an accrediting agency is a reliable source for reviewing the quality of an institution, there are various roles performed by a number of government agencies and professional organizations which are critical to the process.

The first of these is the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE). The DOE provides the following definition of an accrediting agency:

Accrediting agency or agency means a legal entity, or that part of a legal entity, that conducts accrediting activities through voluntary, non-Federal peer review and makes decisions concerning the accreditation or preaccreditation status of institutions, programs, or both.

DOE authorization of an accrediting agency is for the primary purpose of that agency serving as a gatekeeper for the eligibility of approved institutions for Federal financial aid programs. However, even though the purpose is limited, the level of scrutiny is extensive and assures that all agencies with DOE approval serve as reliable authorities of the quality of education or training provided by the institutions of higher education and the higher education programs they accredit.

The requirements for recognition as a DOE authorized agency are contained in Federal Regulations §602.10-§602.28 with these 18 Sections containing 71 subsections (made up of 171 additional subsections) all of which an agency must meet. DOE approves both programmatic accrediting agencies and institutional accrediting agencies. Following is a list of all the DOE recognized institutional accreditors (along with their approved scope), all of which have met these rigorous Federal Regulations:

Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges - Scope of recognition: the accreditation of postsecondary, non-degree-granting institutions and degree-granting institutions in the United States, including those granting associate, baccalaureate and master's degrees, that are predominantly organized to educate students for occupational, trade and technical careers, and including institutions that offer programs via distance education.

Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training - Scope of recognition: the accreditation throughout the United States of institutions of higher education that offer continuing education and vocational programs that confer certificates or occupational associate degrees, including those programs offered via distance education.

Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools - Scope of recognition: the accreditation of private postsecondary institutions offering certificates or diplomas, and postsecondary institutions offering associate, bachelor's, or master's degrees in programs designed to educate students for professional, technical, or occupational careers, including those that offer those programs via distance education.

Council on Occupational Education - Scope of recognition: the accreditation and preaccreditation (“Candidacy Status”) throughout the United States of postsecondary occupational education institutions offering non-degree and applied associate degree programs in specific career and technical education fields including institutions that offer programs via distance education.

Distance Education Accrediting Commission - Scope of recognition: the accreditation of postsecondary institutions in the United States that offer degree and/or non-degree programs primarily by the distance or correspondence education method up to and including the professional doctoral degree, including those institutions that are specifically certified by the agency as accredited for Title IV purposes.

Middle States Commission on Higher Education - Scope of recognition: the accreditation and preaccreditation (“Candidacy status”) of institutions of higher education in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, including distance and correspondence education programs offered at those institutions.

Middle States Commission on Secondary Schools - Scope of recognition: the accreditation of institutions with postsecondary, non-degree granting career and technology programs in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands to include the accreditation of postsecondary, non-degree granting institutions that offer all or part of their educational programs via distance education modalities.

New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education - Scope of recognition: the accreditation and pre-accreditation (“Candidacy status”) of institutions of higher education in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont that award bachelor’s, master’s, and/or doctoral degrees and associate degree-granting institutions in those states that include degrees in liberal arts or general studies among their offerings, including the accreditation of programs offered via distance education within these institutions.

New York State Board of Regents, and the Commissioner of Education - Scope of recognition: the accreditation of those degree-granting institutions of higher education in New York, including distance education offered by those institutions that designate the agency as their sole or primary nationally recognized accrediting agency for purposes of establishing eligibility to participate in HEA programs.

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, The Higher Learning Commission

- Scope of recognition: the accreditation and preaccreditation (“Candidate for Accreditation”) of degree-granting institutions of higher education in Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming, including the tribal institutions and the accreditation of programs offered via distance education and correspondence education within these institutions. This recognition extends to the Institutional Actions Council jointly with the Board of Trustees of the Commission for decisions on cases for continued accreditation or reaffirmation and continued candidacy, and to the Appeals Body jointly with the Board of Trustees of the Commission for decisions.

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities - Scope of recognition: the accreditation and pre-accreditation (“Candidacy status”) of postsecondary degree-granting educational institutions in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington, and the accreditation of programs offered via distance education within these institutions.

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges - Scope of recognition: the accreditation and preaccreditation (“Candidate for Accreditation”) of degree-granting institutions of higher education in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia, including the accreditation of programs offered via distance and correspondence education within these institutions. This recognition extends to the SACSCOC Board of Trustees and the Appeals Committee of the College Delegate Assembly on cases of initial candidacy or initial accreditation and for continued accreditation or candidacy.

Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools, Accreditation Commission - Scope of recognition: the accreditation and preaccreditation (“Candidate” status) of Christian postsecondary institutions in the United States that offer certificates diplomas, and associate, baccalaureate, and graduate degrees, including institutions that offer distance education.

Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges - Scope of recognition: the accreditation and preaccreditation (“Candidate for Accreditation”) of community and other colleges with a primarily pre-baccalaureate mission located in California, Hawaii, the United States territories of Guam and American Samoa, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, which offer certificates, associate degrees, and the first baccalaureate degree by means of a substantive change review offered by institutions that are already accredited by the agency, and such programs offered via distance education and correspondence education at these colleges. This recognition also extends to the Committee on Substantive Change of the Commission, for decisions on substantive changes, and the Appeals Panel.

Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Senior Colleges and University Commission - Scope of recognition: the accreditation and preaccreditation (“Candidate for Accreditation”) of senior colleges and universities in California, Hawaii, the United States territories of Guam and American Samoa, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, including distance education programs offered at those institutions.

A second organization which is an important approval agency for accrediting agencies is the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). CHEA was formed in 1996 by presidents of colleges and universities to strengthen higher education through a strengthened the accreditation processes. It promotes academic quality through formal recognition of higher education accrediting agencies and works to advance self-regulation in higher education through accreditation. Recognition by CHEA affirms that the standards, policies and procedures of accrediting agencies meet the academic quality, institutional improvement and accountability expectations CHEA has established. CHEA approves both *programmatic* accrediting agencies and *institutional* accrediting agencies.

CHEA has a substantial set of Standards which serves as the basis for recognizing accrediting agencies. These Standards are broken into two main categories, Eligibility Standards and Recognition Standards. In addition, CHEA reviews and approves the Scope of each agency.

Following is a list of all the CHEA recognized institutional accreditors (including the approved scope), all of which have met the CHEA Eligibility and Recognition Standards:

Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools - Recognized Scope of Accreditation: Accreditation of private postsecondary institutions offering certificates or diplomas, and post-secondary institutions offering associate’s, bachelor’s and master’s degrees in programs designed to educate students for professional, technical, or occupational careers including those that offer those programs via distance education or internationally.

Association for Biblical Higher Education - Commission on Accreditation - Recognized Scope of Accreditation: Institutions and programs in the United States, Canada and related territories that offer certificates, diplomas, associate, baccalaureate or graduate degrees aimed at preparing students for Christian ministries through Biblical, church-vocational and general studies.

Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools - Accreditation Commission - Recognized Scope of Accreditation: Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic institutions in the United States and Canada which meet its standards, and which grant postsecondary degrees such as the baccalaureate, master’s, doctorate, and First Rabbinic and First Talmudic degrees.

Association of Theological Schools - The Commission on Accrediting - Recognized Scope of Accreditation: Accredits free-standing seminaries and academic units of larger institutions in the United States and Canada that engage in graduate professional and graduate academic theological education.

Distance Education Accrediting Commission - Recognized Scope of Accreditation: The accreditation of higher learning institutions in the United States and international locations that offer programs of study that are delivered primarily by distance (51 percent or more) and award credentials at the associate, baccalaureate, master's, fi professional and professional doctoral degree level.

Middle States Commission on Higher Education - Recognized Scope of Accreditation: Degree-granting institutions which offer one or more postsecondary educational programs, including those offered via distance education, of at least one academic year in length in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and other geographical areas in which the Commission conducts accrediting activities, including outside the United States.

New England Association of Schools and Colleges - Recognized Scope of Accreditation: The accreditation of institutions that award the bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees and associate's degree-granting institutions that include in their offerings at least one program in liberal studies or another area of study widely available at the baccalaureate level of regionally accredited colleges and universities in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont and internationally.

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Higher Learning Commission - Recognized Scope of Accreditation: Degree granting institutions incorporated in Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming or federally authorized sovereign nations that are authorized (licensed) by the same state or nation to award higher degrees (associate, baccalaureate, master's or doctoral degrees (both research and professional)

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges - Recognized Scope of Accreditation: Regional accrediting body for degree-granting institutions in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and in Latin America.

Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools - Accreditation Commission - Recognized Scope of Accreditation: Accreditation and preaccreditation of Christian postsecondary institutions in the United States, U.S. territories and other locations determined by the Accrediting Commission that offer certificates diplomas, and associate, baccalaureate, and graduate degrees.

Western Association of Schools and Colleges - Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges - Recognized Scope of Accreditation: Associate degree-granting institutions in California, Hawaii, the Territories of Guam and American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

Western Association of Schools and Colleges - Senior College and University Commission - Recognized Scope of Accreditation: Baccalaureate degree or higher institutions in California, Hawaii, and the Pacific Basin; institutions that offer programs outside the U.S. when such institutions are capable of being reviewed effectively by WASC processes.

A third organization which is important to the issue of accreditation is the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). INQAAHE is a world-wide association of over 200 organizations active in the theory and practice of quality assurance in higher education. The great majority of its members are quality assurance agencies that operate in many different ways, although the Network also welcomes (as associate members) other organizations that have an interest in quality assurance in higher education. Following is a list of the institutional accrediting agencies which are recognized with full membership by INQAAHE:

Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges

Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business

Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education

Middle States Commission on Higher Education

New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, The Higher Learning Commission

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities of Schools and Colleges

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges

Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools

Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges

Western Association of Schools and Colleges - Senior Colleges and University Commission

A fourth organization which is important to the issue of accreditation (while not being an approval granting organization) is the American Council on Education (ACE). ACE has over 1,700 organizations that collectively promote, protect, and advocate for students, faculty and administrators in higher education. ACE is the most visible and influential higher education association in the nation and is at the center of federal policy debates concerning issues related to higher education legislation across the country. ACE offers some of the best leadership development programs, policy analysis, research briefs and peer-to-peer seminars and meetings. Membership includes accredited, degree-granting institutions and systems and national and regional associations whose primary mission is higher education. Following is a list of the DOE approved institutional accrediting agencies which are listed as members of ACE:

- Accrediting Commission for Continuing Education and Training***
- Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools***
- Distance Education Accrediting Commission***
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education***
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges***
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, The Higher Learning Commission***
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities***
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges***
- Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools***
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges***
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Senior Colleges and University Commission***

Finally, some states may have an approval process for agencies recognized in their state. The State of Texas is an example of one which has an extensive approval process for recognizing accrediting agencies operating in the state. Following is a list of the DOE approved institutional accrediting agencies which have met the requirements for recognition in the State of Texas:

- Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges***
- Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training***
- Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools***
- Council on Occupational Education***
- Distance Education Accrediting Commission***
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education***
- Middle States Commission on Secondary Schools***

New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education

New York State Board of Regents, and the Commissioner of Education

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools - The Higher Learning Commission Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges

Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools, Accreditation Commission

Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior

Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Senior Colleges and University Commission

Other states, such as the California example below, have passed legislation which defines those accrediting agencies which are recognized in the state.

The approval by means of accreditation process may only be utilized if the institution holds an accreditation from an accrediting agency recognized by the United States Department of Education that accredits the institution as a whole (CEC §94813, §94890)

Myths Regarding Regional and National Accreditation

AS STATED ABOVE:

Higher Education accrediting agencies basically fall into two main categories; specialized or programmatic accreditors and institutional accreditors.

All institutional accrediting agencies have a limited scope for their accreditation activities. Some accrediting agencies limit their scope to a certain type of institution, such as continuing education institutions; distance education institutions; faith-based institutions; those institutions located in a specific region of the country; or those offering career, technical, professional, or occupational training.

1 MYTH

The varying scopes of institutional accrediting agencies causes a difference in the level of rigor of their processes for accreditation.

FACT – Each DOE and/or CHEA authorized accrediting agency is required to follow national norms. This requires that all institutional accrediting agencies must keep current on national accreditation issues through review of changes to Federal Regulations, review of national publications involved in accreditation; membership in professional organizations involved in accreditation related matters; and constantly review their own standards, policies, procedures, and practices against those of all other institutional accrediting agencies.

2 MYTH

There is a difference between those institutional accrediting agencies which are national in scope and those which are regional in scope in the level of rigor required in the accreditation process.

FACT – While all institutional accrediting agencies have the freedom to develop their own standards, policies, procedures, and practices; they all pass through the same rigorous approval processes by both DOE and CHEA and have the same accountability to the Federal Regulations and CHEA Standards for quality. Since all institutional accrediting agencies have a limited scope for their accreditation activities, the issue of the geographical area served by an agency has no impact on the level of rigor of the accreditation process.

3
MYTH

Because some institutional accrediting agencies accredit institutions with only specific types of programs or only at the associate or bachelor level, their accreditation process is of lesser quality.

FACT – Just as the limit of the scope of an institutional accrediting agency to a specific geographical service area is not a measure of the quality of the accreditation process of that agency; neither is the limit of the scope of an institutional accrediting agency to specific programs or to the undergraduate, graduate, or post-graduate level. The limited scope of any institutional accrediting agency is determined by their mission and then justified in their approval process by such agencies as DOE or CHEA.

4
MYTH

Regional accrediting agencies have a uniform set of standards for the process of accreditation which are utilized by all regions.

FACT – Since all institutional accrediting agencies are independent of each other, each is free to develop their own standards, policies, procedures, and practices, as long as they meet the requirements of their approvals by DOE and/or CHEA. There is a wide variation between the standards, policies, procedures, and practices of all institutional accrediting agencies.

5
MYTH

Credits from those institutions accredited by an institutional accrediting agencies which are national in scope are not transferable to other institutions.

FACT - It is often heard that institutions accredited by agencies which have a national geographical scope will accept transfer credits from both other nationally accredited institutions and institutions accredited by those agencies which have a regional geographical scope; while those institutions accredited by agencies which have a regional geographical scope do not accept transfer credits from nationally accredited institutions. This is incorrect and based on assumptions which are often untrue. The standard principles of good practice for transfer credits maintain that the transfer of credit from one institution to another is always left up to the discretion of the receiving institution—transfer of credit is never guaranteed by any reputable institution and many institutions accredited by agencies which have a regional geographical scope accept transfer credits from nationally accredited institutions. This principle is embodied in the CHEA *Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit* which is available at: http://www.chea.org/pdf/2001_joint_statement.pdf This joint statement has been endorsed by all CHEA authorized institutional accrediting agencies (both those with national scope and those with regional scope) and is presented as the Best Practices for Transfer of Credit by nearly all institutional accrediting agencies.

6
MYTH

Some accrediting agencies are better at the accreditation process because they have been in existence for a longer period of time.

FACT – All DOE and/or CHEA approved institutional accrediting agencies have been in existence for at least twenty years.

7
MYTH

The quality of the academic programs is lower at those institutions which are accredited by agencies which have a geographical scope which is national than at those institutions accredited by agencies which have a geographical scope which is

FACT – Those institutions which are accredited by agencies which have a geographical scope which is national use the same textbooks, faculty credentials requirements, learning management platforms, and bench marks against the same national norms for curriculum as those institutions accredited by agencies which have a regional geographical scope.

Conclusions

Higher Education accrediting agencies basically fall into two main categories; specialized or programmatic accreditors and institutional accreditors.

In order to provide some assurance that an institutional accrediting agency is a reliable source for reviewing the quality of an institution, there are various roles performed by a number of government agencies and professional organizations which are critical to the process. Following is a listing of the government agencies and professional organizations which either certify through significant regulations or standards and/or only admit those accrediting agencies which are legitimate:

- U.S. Department of Education
- The Council for Higher Education Accreditation
- The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
- The American Council on Education
- Individual states which approve either through an extensive process or by state law.

Only the following institutional accrediting agencies meet the criteria for or hold membership in all of the government agencies or organizations above:

- Middle States Commission on Higher Education
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges
- Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools, Accreditation Commission
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Senior Colleges and University Commission