

Council for Higher Education Accreditation

The Value of Accreditation

Developed by regional, national and programmatic
accrediting organizations and the Council for Higher
Education Accreditation

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CHEA

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The Value of Accreditation

Accreditation in the United States is a means to assure and improve higher education quality, assisting institutions and programs using a set of standards developed by peers. An institution or program that has successfully completed an accreditation review has in place the needed instructional, student support and other services to assist students to achieve their educational goals. Accreditation has helped to provide the conditions necessary for the United States to develop diverse, flexible, robust and often admired higher education.

ACCREDITATION: A PROCESS AND A STATUS

Accreditation is both a process and a status. It is the process of reviewing colleges, universities, institutions and programs to judge their educational quality – how well they serve students and society. The result of the process, if successful, is the award of “accredited status.”

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. Others review specific programs, e.g., law, medicine, engineering. In a number of fields, especially the health professions, graduation from an accredited program is a requirement for receiving a license to practice. At present, 80 recognized organizations accredit more than 7,000 institutions and 19,000 programs serving more than 24 million students.*

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

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

*Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2008.

Established accrediting organizations themselves are usually subject to external review, a process called “recognition.” This involves periodic examination of the organizations based on a set of standards. The external examination is carried out by the U.S. Department of Education or, in the private sector, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

ACCREDITATION BENEFITS STUDENTS AND THE PUBLIC

“Accredited status” means that students and the public can expect that a school or program lives up to its promises. It means that a student can have confidence that a degree or credential has value. Accreditation signals that the public can have confidence in the worth of an institution or program.

For students, accreditation provides value related to not only judging quality, but also obtaining employment, receiving student aid and transferring credits.

Accreditation:

- Encourages confidence that the educational activities of an accredited institution or program have been found to be satisfactory.
- Assists with student mobility: Accredited status indicates to institutions judging requests for transfer or applications for graduate school that the sending institution or program has met threshold expectations of quality.
- Signals to prospective employers that a student’s educational program has met widely accepted standards, with graduation from an accredited program, in some cases, a prerequisite for entering a profession.
- Provides access to federal and sometimes state financial aid, available to qualified students who attend institutions accredited by recognized accrediting organizations.

To the public, the accreditation process provides value not only through judging quality, but also assuring reliable information about institutions and programs, promoting accountability and identifying successful improvement efforts.

Accreditation:

- Confirms that the public presentation of an educational program, student services and graduate accomplishments is fair and accurate.
- Promotes accountability through ongoing external evaluation of the institution or program, with a finding that there is compliance with general expectations in higher education or a professional field as reflected in the accreditation standards.
- Identifies institutions and programs that have voluntarily undertaken explicit activities directed at improving the quality of the institution and its professional programs and are carrying them out successfully.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is the Value of Accreditation?

Accreditation:

- Encourages confidence that an institution's or program's presentation of the education it provides is fair and accurate, including the description of services available to students and the accomplishments of its graduates.
- Assures that a neutral, external party (the accrediting organization) has reviewed the quality of education provided and has found it to be satisfactory, based upon appropriate peer expertise.
- Confirms that institutions and programs have processes in place to meet changes in thinking within the academy and in the public's expectations;
- Provides for eligible students to have access to federal financial aid if they attend institutions accredited by accreditors that are "recognized" or scrutinized for quality by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE).
- Assists with transfer of credits among institutions or admission to graduate school, with student mobility more likely to be successful among accredited institutions as compared to unaccredited institutions.
- Aids with entrance to a profession, when a particular field may require graduation from an accredited program or institution.
- Signals prospective employers that an educational program has met widely accepted educational standards.

Why is the Accredited Status of an Institution or Program Important to Students?

Accredited status is a reliable indication of the value and quality of educational institutions and programs to students and the public. Without accredited status, it is hard to be sure about the quality of the education or to be confident that an institution or program can deliver on its promises. Similarly, employers or graduate programs cannot be confident that

graduates of an unaccredited institution or program will be appropriately prepared. Remember that accreditation of an institution may not mean that a specific program is accredited, particularly a professional program leading to licensure.

What Does the Fact That the Institution or Program is Accredited Mean to Students?

It means that students can have confidence in an institution or program because those who went before had access to a quality education. Through accreditation, peer experts have reviewed the quality of the education provided, the processes by which students are educated and the processes that the institution or program uses to maintain an acceptable level of quality over time.

How Do Students Know That an Accredited Institution or Program Will Keep Its Word in Providing the Education Described in Its Public Materials?

As part of the accreditation process, institutions and programs must demonstrate that they meet the accreditation standards requiring that they provide quality education. And, they have to demonstrate truth in advertising – that the information presented about the education they offer is accurate.

Can Every Accreditor be Trusted?

Not all accreditors are the same. Recognition of an accreditor by USDE or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) means that the accreditor has been reviewed by an outside organization to determine that the accreditor is trustworthy. Both of these organizations provide periodic external reviews of accrediting organizations and have high standards, checking, e.g., every five to ten years to see if the accreditors they have recognized continue to meet these standards. Some established accrediting organizations are not eligible to address either USDE or CHEA recognition standards. Others may deserve special scrutiny because they may be rogue providers of accreditation or "accreditation mills."

What is a “Recognized” Accrediting Organization?

Just as institutions and programs are accredited, accrediting organizations are reviewed to make sure that have processes and outcomes in place to protect students and the public. An accrediting organization that has been reviewed and determined to meet the standards of an external body, such as USDE or CHEA, is “recognized.”

How Does the Accrediting Organization Review Educational Outcomes?

Accrediting organizations require institutions and programs to set standards for student learning outcomes and provide evidence that the learning outcomes are achieved. The expected outcomes and the evidence vary, depending on the level of education provided and the different skills or competencies required of graduates in different fields.

What Are Some of the Differences Between Accredited and Unaccredited Institutions and Programs?

All accredited institutions and programs must provide resources to assist students toward successful completion of their courses of study. Although similar resources may be available in institutions or programs that are not accredited, accreditation provides external assurance that those resources are in place.

Where is Information About Accredited Institutions and Programs Available?

All accrediting organizations provide information to the public about the institutions and programs they accredit, when they are reviewed and the general results of the most recent accreditation review. This is readily available on the accreditor’s Website.

For a complete list of accrediting organizations and access to their accredited institutions or programs, go to:

CHEA: http://www.chea.org/pdf/2009_2010_Directory_of_CHEA_Recognized_Organizations.pdf

USDE: <http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/>

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a private, nonprofit national organization that coordinates accreditation activity in the United States. CHEA represents more than 3,000 colleges and universities and 60 national, regional and specialized accreditors.

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