



Accreditation of Colleges and Universities in the United States

OVERVIEW:

The intent of this paper is to help agencies understand accreditation and to help comply with Clinger-Cohen training and education requirements. The basic purpose of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality. Accreditation in the United States is provided by non-governmental entities as well as governmental agencies.

The U.S. system of accreditation is somewhat different than accreditation processes in other countries. In many countries there is a ministry of education that accredits educational programs. In the United States, the Department of Education (USDE) recognizes private accrediting agencies for having appropriately high standards for awarding accreditation of their own programs. The accreditors are private, nongovernmental organizations created for the specific purpose of reviewing higher education institutions and programs for quality. In most other countries, accreditation (or quality assurance) is carried out by government organizations.

This does not mean all accrediting agencies recognized by USDE are identical. The USDE allows considerable autonomy in meeting recognition requirements and the specific details of accreditation vary from one accrediting agency to another. The intent of the USDE is to assure that the end product is reasonably equivalent and of high quality.

Additionally, the U.S. permits the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (a private voluntary association of educational institutions) to recognize accrediting associations in competition with the USDE. Therefore, some accrediting agencies are recognized by USDE, some are recognized by CHEA, and some by both.

Many times a degree may be issued under several accreditations. Degree programs are accredited by regional accrediting agencies, the national level Distance Education and Training Council, and/or a professionally sponsored accrediting agency. This involved and complex accreditation process that exists in the United States opens the door to fraud and confusion.

What is Accreditation

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation defines accreditation as a process of external review used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and educational programs for quality assurance and quality improvement. It is a process of recognizing educational institutions for performance, integrity, and quality. Accreditation also is a means of self-regulation and peer review adopted by the educational community to strengthen and sustain the quality and integrity of their programs. The extent to which each educational institution accepts and fulfills the responsibilities inherent in this process is a measure of its concern for freedom and quality in higher education and of its commitment to strive for and achieve excellence in its endeavors.

FAI – College & University Accreditation

Accreditation is a voluntary process and institutions choose to apply for accredited status. Once accredited, they agree to abide by the standards of their accrediting organization and to regulate themselves by taking responsibility for their own improvement. In addition, the federal government requires that an institution be accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting organization in order for its students to be eligible to participate in the Student Assistance Programs in Title IV of the Higher Education Act, as amended (HEA).

Within CHEA, based upon the results of an institutional review by a team of peers assigned by the governing body, accreditation attests to the judgment of the CHEA that an institution has met the following criteria:

- that it has a mission appropriate to higher education;
- that it is guided by well-defined and appropriate goals, including goals for student learning;
- that it has established conditions and procedures under which its mission and goals can be realized;
- that it assesses both institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes, and uses the results for improvement;
- that it is accomplishing its mission and goals substantially;
- that it is so organized, staffed, and supported that it can be expected to continue to accomplish its mission and goals; and

Diploma Mills

A dishonest person or organization can take advantage of the accreditation process in the U.S. by setting up an official sounding accrediting agency and using it to accredit their own degree programs. This allows the organization to say “Our programs are fully accredited.” But they are accredited by an unrecognized accrediting agency that has no real review process and standards. Therefore, the accreditation is worthless. This situation takes advantage of the educational consumer as well as the entire college and university system.

Not *every* unrecognized accrediting agency is fraudulent. Some are sincere efforts to find a viable alternative to traditionalist regional accrediting agencies for accrediting distance-only colleges. Some of these accrediting agencies clearly are seeking recognition from USDE or CHEA, but most unrecognized agencies are attempts to deceive the public and should be carefully scrutinized.

A **diploma mill** is defined as follows:

n. Informal

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An unaccredited institution of higher education that grants degrees without ensuring that students are properly qualified.

Source:

The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition

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NATIONAL RECOGNITION OF ACCREDITING AGENCIES BY THE U.S. SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

The U.S. Secretary of Education is required by statute to publish a list of nationally recognized accrediting agencies that the Secretary determines to be reliable authorities on the quality of education provided by the institutions of higher education. The Secretary only evaluates accrediting agencies that apply for recognition, and certain criteria for recognition that are unrelated to the quality of accrediting activities limit the scope of the Secretary's recognition activities.

There has been some type of nongovernmental coordinating agency for accreditation for more than 50 years. The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA), was established in 1974 and existed until December 1993, fostered and facilitated accrediting agencies in promoting and ensuring the quality and diversity of American postsecondary

The Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA) was established in January 1994, after COPA dissolved in 1993, to continue the recognition of accrediting agencies previously carried out by COPA until such time as a new national organization for accreditation could be established. CORPA was dissolved in April 1997 after the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) was created. CHEA is currently the entity that carries out a recognition function in the private, nongovernmental sector.

Types of Accreditation

According to USDE, there are two basic types of educational accreditation, one identified as "institutional" and one referred to as "specialized" or "programmatic."

Institutional accreditation normally applies to an entire institution, indicating that each of an institution's parts is contributing to the achievement of the institution's objectives, although not necessarily all at the same level of quality. The various commissions of the regional accrediting associations, for example, perform institutional accreditation, as do many national accrediting agencies.

Specialized or programmatic accreditation normally applies to programs, departments, or schools that are parts of an institution. The accredited unit may be as large as a college or

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school within a university or as small as a curriculum within a discipline. Most of the specialized or programmatic accrediting agencies review units within an institution of higher education that is accredited by one of the regional accrediting commissions. However, certain accrediting agencies also accredit professional schools and other specialized or vocational institutions of higher education that are free-standing in their operations. Thus, a "specialized " or "programmatic " accrediting agency may also function in the capacity of an "institutional " accrediting agency. In addition, a number of specialized accrediting agencies accredit educational programs within non-educational settings, such as hospitals.

Accrediting Bodies

Below is a list of the six accrediting bodies recognized by CHEA. Included is a brief synopsis along with website information.

The Higher Learning Commission

The Higher Learning Commission is part of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. The Association was founded in 1895 as a membership organization for educational institutions. It is committed to developing and maintaining high standards of excellence.

The Association is one of six regional institutional accrediting associations in the United States. Through its Commissions it accredits, and thereby grants membership to educational institutions in the nineteen-state North Central region: Arkansas, Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma, New Mexico, South Dakota, Wisconsin, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

The Higher Learning Commission is recognized by the Secretary of Education and the Committee on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA, now continued under the Council on Higher Education Accreditation, or CHEA).

<http://www.ncacihe.org/index.html>

Middle States Commission on Higher Education

The Middle Commission on Higher Education is a voluntary, non-governmental, peer-based membership association dedicated to educational excellence and improvement through peer-evaluation and accreditation. As a recognized leader in promoting and ensuring quality assurance and improvement in higher education, the Commission defines, maintains, and promotes educational excellence and responds creatively to a diverse, dynamic, global higher education community that is continually evolving.

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The Commission supports its members in their quest for excellence, and provides assurance to the general public that accredited member institutions meet its standards. The Commission achieves its purposes through assessment, peer evaluation, consultation, information gathering and sharing, cooperation, and appropriate educational activities. The Commission is committed to the principles of cooperation, flexibility, openness, and responsiveness to the needs of society and the higher education community.

MSA members are located in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and other locations overseas.

<http://www.msache.org/>

New England Association of Schools and Colleges

Founded in 1885, the New England Association of Schools & Colleges, Inc. (NEASC), is the nation's oldest regional accrediting association whose mission is the establishment and maintenance of high standards for all levels of education, from pre-K to the doctoral level.

NEASC serves some 1,866 public and independent schools, colleges and universities in the six states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont and 114 American/International schools around the globe.

<http://www.neasc.org/>

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools is the recognized regional accrediting body in the eleven U.S. Southern states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia) and in Latin America for those institutions of higher education that award associate, baccalaureate, master's or doctoral degrees. The Commission on Colleges is the representative body of the College Delegate Assembly and is charged with carrying out the accreditation process.

<http://www.sacscoc.org/>

Western Association of Schools and Colleges

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WASC – the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, is a non-profit corporation, encompassing three accrediting commissions:

- Accrediting Commission for Schools (2000+ K-12 and occupational schools in California, Hawaii, and the Pacific Basin, with offices in Burlingame, CA);
- Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (140 institutions in California, Hawaii, and the Pacific Basin, with offices in Santa Rosa, CA); and
- Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities (151 institutions in California, Hawaii, and the Pacific Basin, with offices in Alameda, CA).

Each of the three Commissions is reviewed periodically and recognized by the US Department of Education. In addition, the Junior and Senior College Commissions are reviewed periodically and recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

WASC was formed in 1962 to promote the welfare, interests, and development of education in the Western Region. Each Commission appropriates the name WASC and functions under one constitution. However, each Commission has separate bylaws, standards, policies, personnel procedures, and staff. Each Commission has a different number of Commissioners, and each has a different selection process for appointment to the Commission.

The WASC Corporate Board is comprised of nine members, 3 from each Commission, including the chairs from each. The WASC Board meets once a year to ratify the accrediting actions of the three Commissions, receive audits, and take action on whatever business is necessary.

<http://www.wascweb.org/>

In addition to the six governing bodies, the USDE also acknowledges National Institutional and Specialized Accrediting Bodies as meeting the Secretary's procedures and criteria for recognition as an accrediting agency. A comprehensive listing can be found at:

http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation_pg4.html#Nationally%20Recognized

Summary

Some very respectable schools are not members of professional accrediting agencies and are satisfied to stick with regional accreditation only. Some decline membership by choice because they want to offer courses differing in content and or methodology from those proscribed by accrediting agencies. Others say the ridiculous amount it costs for the accreditation process could better be used on academic priorities.

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For most situations, the most important thing is that the program is accredited by some accrediting agency recognized by U.S. Department of Education or by Council on Higher Education Accreditation. Which one is probably less important unless you intend to apply to very competitive positions directly after finishing school. Otherwise, after you have worked a few years, your work performance will count just as much or more than your degree.

Although the majority of degreed professionals possess a degree from a college or university meeting strict accreditation guidelines, professionals may possess a questionable degree. In these instances acknowledgement of such degree should be on a case-by-case basis.

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Sources

U. S. Department of Education - <http://www.ed.gov/index.jhtml?src=a>

University of Texas - <http://www.utexas.edu/world/univ/state/>