

HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION IN THE UNITED STATES

What International Education Professionals Need to Know

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1. INTRODUCTORY CONCEPTS

1.1. What is “accreditation” in US education?

“**Accreditation**” is a voluntary process that aims to ensure enduring quality, accountability and improvement of educational institutions and programs of study, based on a continuous review process that is conducted by external evaluators from the higher education community.

- **Accreditation is not mandated**; it is voluntary. Institutions or programs choose to participate in the accreditation process.
- **Accreditation is** available to educational institutions at **all levels of education** – elementary/primary, middle/junior high, senior high, postsecondary. The U.S. has about 6,500 institutions that are accredited by approved accrediting associations.
- **Accreditation is** an indication that an institution meets the minimum standards set by the accrediting association that accredits it.
- **Accreditation is not** a measure of “ranking” or “relative quality” of institutions compared to each other.
- **Accreditation reviews are** carried out by accreditation review teams that are made up of instructors and administrators from accredited institutions. They are not paid for this work.
- **Accreditation is** granted for a specific period of time, and must be renewed, usually every 5-10 years, depending on the rules of the accrediting association.
- **Accreditation is** based in standards of good practice, not law.

1.2. The U.S. has no federal (national) governmental body that supervises higher education institutions or accrediting bodies.

- **Accreditation is not** governed by law. **Accreditation is not** a government activity.
- However, the federal government can and does make laws that effect how federal money is spent on higher education, and sometimes these laws effect the accreditation process.
 - A federal law called “The Higher Education Act”, passed in 1965, is “extended” periodically by Congress to include provisions that are relevant to the current state of higher education.
 - Within the last 10 years, “extensions” to the law have been added that have required specific actions on the part of accrediting associations:
 - early 1990’s – call for the tightening of accreditation standards related to student loan default rates
 - late 1990’s – call for the tightening of accreditation standards related to methods of assessing student learning outcomes
 - “Government control vs. institutional autonomy” is always an issue in the sphere of accreditation.
- The States may make laws governing the establishment and operation of educational institutions, and many do. The scope of higher education legislation varies from state to state.
- **Accreditation is** governed by commonly-developed and -accepted “standards of good practice”, not by law. But laws can and do effect the way standards are developed and reinforced.

1.3. Accreditation is governed by “standards of good practice”.

- **Accreditation is not** obligatory. No institution in the U.S. is required to be accredited. Accreditation is a voluntary process.
- Standards for quality assurance are set by the higher education community itself and monitored by the same community.
- **Accreditation is** a sign of commitment by the institution to continuous development and improvement in the context of the dynamic sphere of higher education. It is more than a one-time procedure that is “automatically” renewed. Commitment to accreditation sets the tone for the way an institution operates in its financial, organizational and academic affairs.

2. TYPES OF ACCREDITATION

2.1. The Scope of Accreditation

Institutional:	The institution <u>as a whole</u> is accredited. The accreditation review process focuses on evaluating the institution as an entity.
Program or professional:	A specific <u>program of study</u> offered by an institution is accredited. The accreditation review process focuses on just one department, program or curriculum.

2.2. Approval of Accreditation Bodies

Two organizations review accreditation bodies and approve them if they meet these organizations' criteria.

U.S. Department of Education (DOE)

- The U.S. Department of Education is the branch of the U.S. government that is responsible for supervising federal (national) programs and for distributing federal funding education.
- The DOE does not “accredit” or “recognize” institutions.
- The DOE does review accrediting agencies for purposes related to federal financial support for educational institutions and students.
- If an accrediting organization is “approved” by the DOE, the institutions that it accredits may be eligible for federal money and the students may be eligible for student financial assistance. See <http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html> for more information.

Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), formerly COPA and CORPA

- CHEA is a non-governmental, private, non-profit membership organization for higher education institutions in the U.S. It has about 3,000 member institutions. CHEA is not an accrediting organization.
- Members of CHEA help to define standards for the approval of accreditation associations, and recognizes accrediting associations that meet the criteria. For an accreditor to be affirmed by CHEA, it must demonstrate its commitment to advancing academic quality, accountability, purposeful change and improvement, appropriate and fair decision-making, and continuous reassessment of this commitment.
- For a list of accrediting organizations approved by CHEA, please see this CHEA Web page: http://www.chea.org/institutions/partic_recog_orgs_2003.htm
- CHEA also provides information to the public about accreditation and why accreditation is an important issue. See this CHEA Web page: http://www.chea.org/public_info/index.cfm

2.3. Unapproved and “Bogus” or “Fake” Accrediting Services:

- Accrediting agencies or services exist that are not approved by either the U.S. DOE or CHEA.
- There are also bogus accrediting services whose “accreditation” does not reflect any type of quality assessment or criteria related to academic standards. Some only charge a fee for their “accreditation”.
- Some “fake” accreditors are tied to degree mill operations. “Diploma mills” or “fake universities” sometimes create their own “fake” accreditation agencies to give the appearance that they and the “universities” are legitimate.
- A new book on degree mills includes a list of “More than 200 fake, unrecognized and dubious accreditation agencies”. Watch for “Degree Mills” by Allen Ezell and John Bear, to be published by Prometheus Books in Jan. 2005 - <http://www.prometheusbooks.com/>

3. REGIONAL ACCREDITATION

Regional accreditation is the **most common type of institutional accreditation among postsecondary academic institutions in the U.S.** There are about 2700 regionally-accredited institutions in the U.S.

There are **6 accrediting associations** whose role is to evaluate an institution as a whole.

They are **nonprofit, nongovernmental bodies organized by geographic regions.**

They accredit institutions according to the **level of education offered by the institution.**

- Elementary and secondary (high) schools
- Vocational / technical institutions
- Two-year institutions / junior colleges / community colleges
- Four-year institutions (give the bachelor's degree as the highest degree)
- Research or doctoral institutions (give the doctoral degree as the highest degree)

THE SIX REGIONAL ACCREDITING ASSOCIATIONS

By Organization

- Middle States** Association of Colleges and Schools (MSA) – <http://www.msache.org/>
 Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, *Puerto Rico, US Virgin Islands, Overseas*
- New England** Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASCSC) – <http://www.NEASCsc.org/>
 Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, *Overseas*
- North Central** Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) – <http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org/>
 Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming, institutions in the Navajo Nation
- Northwest** Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities (NW) – <http://www.nwccu.org/>
 Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington
- Southern** Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) – <http://www.sacscoc.org/>
 Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, *Extraterritorial*
- Western** Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) – <http://www.wascweb.org/>
 California, Hawaii, *US-affiliated Pacific islands, Pacific basin, east Asia*

By State

Alabama	SACS	Minnesota	NCA	Vermont	NEASC
Alaska	NW	Mississippi	SACS	Virginia	SACS
Arizona	NCA	Missouri	NCA	Washington	NW
Arkansas	NCA	Montana	NW	West Virginia	NCA
California	WASC	Nebraska	NCA	Wisconsin	NCA
Colorado	NCA	Nevada	NW	Wyoming	NCA
Connecticut	NEASC	New Hampshire	NEASC	Others:	
Delaware	MSA	New Jersey	MSA	Dist. of Columbia	MSA
Florida	SACS	New Mexico	NCA	Navajo Nation	NCA
Georgia	SACS	New York	MSA	Puerto Rico	MSA
Hawaii	WASC	North Carolina	SACS	U.S. Virgin Isl.	MSA
Idaho	NW	North Dakota	NCA	U.S.-affiliated Pacific Islands:	
Illinois	NCA	Ohio	NCA	Am. Samoa; Guam;	
Indiana	NCA	Oklahoma	NCA	Republic of Palau;	
Iowa	NCA	Oregon	NW	Federated States of	
Kansas	NCA	Pennsylvania	MSA	Micronesia; Common-	
Kentucky	SACS	Rhode Island	NEASC	wealth of the Northern	
Louisiana	SACS	South Carolina	SACS	Mariana Islands; Republic	
Maine	NEASC	South Dakota	NCA	of the Marshall	
Maryland	MSA	Tennessee	SACS	Islands	WASC
Massachusetts	NEASC	Texas	SACS		
Michigan	NCA	Utah	NW		

3.1. General Criteria for Regional Accreditation

- Each accrediting organization defines its own standards, based on the state of the higher education community and government activities through the Higher Education Act.
- The following standards for accreditation are common to all of the regional accreditors:
An institution must:
 - ✓ Have a stated mission and purpose that are appropriate to higher education.
 - ✓ Have stated goals that are based on the institutional mission and purpose.
 - ✓ Have clearly-defined, functioning systems and resources – fiscal, organizational, and academic - that support the mission and goals and enable them to be realized.
 - ✓ Have a system of continuous evaluation of progress toward the status mission and goals, and of planning for future progress.

For further details, visit the Web site of each regional accrediting association.

3.2. How the Regional Accreditation Process Works

- Step 1: Self-assessment** according to the standards of the accrediting organization: The institution works with the accrediting organization to conduct a self-study and writes a report documenting how it meets the accrediting standards. If the institution is applying for initial accreditation, during this period the institution is called a “*candidate*” for accreditation.
- Step 2: Peer review:** A team reviews the self-assessment. The team is usually made up of practicing educators and administrators at other higher education institutions, and may also include other members. Team members usually work on a volunteer basis; they do not get paid.
- Step 3: Site visit** based on self-assessment: The team visits the institution as a follow-up to the review of the self-assessment. The visit may include talks with administrators, instructors and students. A site visit is usually required for continuing accreditation as well as for the initial accreditation process.
- Step 4: Review of the team’s recommendations and follow-up:** After the site visit, the team may work with the institution on any areas that need clarification, additional work, or follow-up.
- Step 5: Accreditation organization’s decision:** The accrediting association makes a decision about the institution’s status - *approval* of initial accreditation; *reaffirmation* of existing accreditation; *probation* for an accredited institution that has not continued to meet standards; *denial* of initial accreditation or *revocation* of continuing accreditation to an institution that has been on probation - and may make recommendations for further improvement or development.
- Step 6: Ongoing review,** based on the accrediting organization’s timeline for accreditation review. The review process is usually repeated every five years.

3.3. The Importance of Regional Accreditation

Regional accreditation is the most commonly accepted type of accreditation of postsecondary academic institutions in the U.S. It provides

- a basis for government and private funding of the institution, its programs, and its students;
- public confidence in the authenticity of the value of the education offered;
- a basis of recognition of degrees for academic and employment purposes; student mobility and transfer of credit; etc.

Standard Practice among U.S. Postsecondary Academic Institutions:

Most regionally-accredited institutions recognize degrees and courses completed at other regionally-accredited institutions. But they might not accept degrees or courses completed at institutions that are not regionally accredited.

4. NATIONAL ACCREDITATION

- **“National” accreditation** refers to accrediting bodies that review and accredit specialized or special-interest institutions across the entire United States.

CHEA-Approved National Accreditors:

Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS)
Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE) Commission on Accreditation
Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools (AARTS)
Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS)
Distance Education and Training Council Accrediting Commission (DETC)
Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools Accreditation Commission (TRACS)

- **“National” accreditation has nothing to do with government activity.**
- Institutions with national accreditation generally will recognize degrees/credits from other similar institutions that are recognized by the same accrediting organization.
- **“National” accreditation is NOT synonymous with “regional” accreditation.** Sometimes “nationally-accredited” institutions are also “*regionally-accredited*”, but generally they are not. Regionally-accredited institutions generally will only accept degrees/credits from other regionally-accredited institutions.

5. PROGRAM or PROFESSIONAL ACCREDITATION

- **“Program”, “professional” or “specialized” accreditation** is available for specific programs of study within an institution.

Examples: Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET)
American Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)
American Library Association (ALA) for library science
American Psychological Association (APA)
Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE)
National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)

- In some professions, a degree from an “accredited program” is required to be eligible to be licensed or certified to practice the profession.
- An institution that is “*regionally accredited*” might offer several “**accredited programs**”.

Example 1: Alverno College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

http://www.alverno.edu/about_alverno/accreditation.html

Small (2,000) suburban private institution offering bachelor’s degrees in arts and sciences, music, nursing education, business communication, and master’s degrees in education. It is regionally-accredited by North Central Association and its programs are accredited by 6 accreditors.

Example 2: Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona

<http://www.asu.edu/aad/catalogs/personnel/accreditation.html>

Large (57,500 students) urban public comprehensive university with programs through the doctoral level. It is regionally-accredited by North Central Association. The list of programs of study and their accreditation is 9 Web pages long.

6. THE ROLES OF ACCREDITATION WITHIN THE UNITED STATES

In the United States, the evaluation of the accreditation status of a higher education institution plays an important role in the following scenarios, among others:

- Assessment of an individual student's educational background for:
 - Admission to postsecondary education
 - Admission to graduate study (master's or doctoral level)
 - Transfer of credit earned at one institution to another institution
 - Academic eligibility for various purposes, such as scholarships, athletic activity, research grants, internships, etc.
- Student eligibility for financial assistance from the US federal government and State governments
- Educational institution eligibility for financial assistance from the US federal government and State governments
- An individual's eligibility for licensure or certification in a profession that requires completion of an accredited program or a program at an accredited institution
- An individual's eligibility for employment in a position that requires completion of an accredited program or a program at an accredited institution

7. THE ROLE OF ACCREDITATION IN THE EVALUATION OF FOREIGN CREDENTIALS

7.1. Perspective from the U.S. Side

- **In the U.S., the analysis and recognition of educational achievements from other countries is not regulated by laws or governmental agreements.**
 - In the U.S., there is no process of "official" recognition of foreign universities or of educational credentials earned by an individual outside of the U.S.
 - There is no body in the U.S. that operates in an "official" capacity to make degree recognition agreements with other countries or credit transfer agreements for student exchange. There are information resources that are sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, such as the U.S. Network for Education Information, but those are *only* information resources. The DOE has no authority to make agreements or "guarantee" recognition of study.
 - Higher education institutions, employers, professional licensing boards, etc. are autonomous and can interpret foreign educational credentials as they deem appropriate.
 - Some States of the U.S. have laws regulating higher education institutions and the use of higher education credentials. For example, the State of Oregon has laws about the use of degrees from outside of Oregon for employment purposes. See the State of Oregon Office of Degree Authorization Web site for details: <http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/>
 - In the U.S., leadership, knowledge, training, support and *standards of good practice* in international education are developed and shared by the following, among others:
 - professional associations for international education that represent higher education institutions, such as AACRAO and NAFSA: Association of International Educators,
 - colleagues at higher education institutions,
 - private organizations such as reputable credential evaluation services and other organizations that support higher education,
 - and the National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Educational Credentials.

7.1. Perspective from the U.S. Side (continued)

- **Experienced and reputable foreign credential evaluators in the U.S. consider the status of “official recognition” of academic higher education institutions in other countries to be comparable to the status of “accredited” in the U.S.**
 - In most cases where there is a legitimate body in the foreign country that is responsible for educational administration and supervision, if the institution is recognized as a degree-granting institution by the appropriate legitimate educational authority in its own location, according to its legal and quality assessment systems for institutions offering *bonafide* academic awards, then an evaluator in the U.S. can consider this recognition as a status that is comparable to regional academic accreditation in the U.S. Denominational, technical, career training, or other specialized Institutions in other countries might be considered comparable to U.S. institutions that have national accreditation for a corresponding specialized area of study.
 - U.S. evaluators must keep abreast of the development of accreditation systems in other countries and learn what “accreditation” means in each country and how it compares to the status of “regional accreditation” in the U.S.

7.2. Perspective from the European Side

- **In the European region, the analysis and recognition of educational achievements from other countries is more or less regulated by laws, governmental agreements, conventions and European Community Directives (regulated professions).**
 - The main tradition is to have national systems of higher education. Institutions belonging to any system of higher education are *a priori* considered recognised/accredited.
 - The institutions are mainly state-owned or state-recognised denominational, but the private sector is increasing.
 - The degrees of state control with the activities of the institutions differ and have changed over time. The trend is increasing autonomy for the institutions.
 - Institutions are generally autonomous regarding recognition of degrees/courses from other institutions.
 - Systems of quality assurance and accreditation are a relatively new development in the region. The main driving force now is the Bologna Process. Quality assurance or accreditation is usually entrusted to one agency in each country. These agencies are often owned by - or at least approved by - the government in the country where they operate.
 - National states in Europe differ widely in tradition and governance. This has led to very different attitudes and practices on recognition of qualifications.
 - Recognition practises are harmonised through cooperation and information exchange, through ratification of the joint Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisboa, 1997), through initiatives in the Bologna Process and through bi-/multilateral agreements.

7.2. Perspective from the European Side (continued)

▪ Results of a “mini-survey” among European colleagues on European views and interpretation of U.S. accreditation:

There is some confusion or difference of opinion among European credential evaluators regarding accreditation in the U.S., but some trends are clear:

- An accredited institution in the U.S. is generally regarded as a recognised institution by European credential evaluators, provided the accrediting body is a member of CHEA. There are different opinions as to which category of accreditation (regional, national or professional) fulfils the requirements.
- Qualifications earned from an institution in the U.S. with *regional* accreditation from a member of CHEA will normally be recognised.
- Qualifications earned from an institution in the U.S. with *national* accreditation from a member of CHEA might be recognised by some.
- Qualifications earned from program of study in the U.S. with *professional* accreditation from a member of CHEA will normally be recognised.
- Institutions outside the U.S., but with accreditation from a member of CHEA, will normally be considered recognised. Opinions differ as to which category of accreditation (regional, national or professional) fulfils the requirements.
- European institutions of higher education always review the accreditation of US institutions before entering into exchange agreements/programmes.
- For Professional Licensing the competent authorities will normally require at least professional accreditation.
- Accreditation is seen as a means of protecting
 - employers from substandard employees
 - “our own” students from substandard competitors for admission or jobs
 - students from entering substandard institutions
 - institutions from substandard applicants
 - institutions from entering into cooperation with substandard institutions
 - (state) loan funds/ providers of grants by preventing students from spending taxpayers’ money on substandard (or fraudulent) institutions/study programmes.

It seems clear that there is a need among European Credential Evaluators for more information to gain a clearer understanding of the “ins and outs” of U.S. accreditation. With ever increasing mobility and an emerging European Higher Education Area as defined in the Bologna Process, this can be seen as a necessity.

8. Resources on the Topic of Accreditation in the United States

Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA):

An Overview of U.S. Accreditation by Judith S. Eaton, Council for Higher Education Accreditation – http://www.chea.org/pdf/overview_US_accred_8-03.pdf - prepared especially for the understanding of international educators.

The Fundamentals of Accreditation: What Do You Need to Know?, Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002 - http://www.chea.org/pdf/fund_accred_20ques_02.pdf - provides basic and essential information in a question and answer format.

Informing the Public About Accreditation by CHEA - http://www.chea.org/public_info/index.cfm

Directory of CHEA Participating and Recognized Organizations 2003-04 - <http://www.chea.org/pdf/CHEADirectory.pdf>

Important Facts about “Diploma Mills” and “Accreditation Mills” - http://www.chea.org/pdf/fact_sheet_6_diploma_mills.pdf

U.S. Department of Education:

Accreditation in the United States, U.S. Department of Education
<http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html>

Other Good, Reliable Resources:

The Web sites of the Regional Accrediting Associations – Each regional accrediting association has information about accreditation on its Web site, including information for the general public and institutions that wish to become accredited or maintain their accreditation.

AACRAO’s Transfer Credit Practices Online, American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. The “Joint Statement” signed by AACRAO, CHEA and the American Council on Education (ACE) gives a very good outline of the process of consideration of transfer credit, including the role of accreditation in that process. The main part of this publication is a database of transfer credit practices of the institutions in the United States that responded to the request for this information. Available to members of AACRAO on the AACRAO Web site at <http://www.aacrao.org/publications/index.htm>

All About Accreditation, Ten Speed Press. A thorough consumer-oriented tutorial on the issue of higher education accreditation presented by the publisher of the “Bear’s Guides”.
<http://www.degree.net/guides/accreditation.html>

The **Bears’ Guides** published by Ten Speed Press. The Bears – John and his daughter Mariah - have written many guides to non-traditional education over the past 30 years and their books list many “fake”, “substandard” and “dubious” institutions and their equally “fake”, “substandard” and “dubious” accreditors. Available from the publisher - <http://www.tenspeed.com> - and many commercial booksellers. Older editions are sometimes available through used book Web sites.

Degree Mills: The Billion-Dollar Industry that has Sold over a Million Fake Diplomas, new book by Alan Ezell and John Bear (expected in January 2005) will include a list of over 200 “fake, unrecognized, and dubious accreditation agencies”. To be published by Prometheus Books – <http://www.prometheusbooks.com>

The “accreditation officer” at regionally-accredited universities and colleges in the United States - Each regionally-accredited institution has at least one person designated as the “accreditation officer” who is responsible for coordinating the accreditation review process. Some larger institutions, which have many programs that are accredited, have a whole department just for accreditation review.