

What Does Accreditation Mean to You, the Student?



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If someone asked you if the institution you are taking a distance study course from is accredited, what would you say? What does accreditation mean to you as a student?

Accreditation is a process that gives public recognition to institutions that meet certain standards. It is a promise that an institution will provide the quality of education it claims to offer. Accreditation assures the student that the institution operates on a sound financial basis, has an approved program of study, qualified instructors, adequate facilities and equipment, and approved recruitment and admissions policies.

There are two basic types of accreditation—institutional and

specialized. *Institutional* accreditation is granted by the regional and national accrediting agencies, which collectively serve most of the institutions chartered or licensed in the United States. These agencies only accredit total operating units. *Specialized* accreditation of professional or occupational institutions and programs is granted by national professional organizations in such fields as journalism, health sciences, engineering and law. Each group has its criteria for accreditation, however all have undertaken accreditation activities primarily to provide quality assurance concerning the educational preparation of members of the profession or occupation. Many specialized accrediting bodies will

consider requests for accreditation reviews only from programs affiliated with institutions holding comprehensive accreditation.

There are two separate entities in the United States that recognize accrediting agencies. The U.S. Department of Education (governmental) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (non-governmental). DETC is proud to say that its Accrediting Commission has enjoyed the official recognition of the U.S. Department of Education since 1959, and since 1975, DETC has been formally recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) or its predecessor organizations.

For institutions accredited by the DETC's Accrediting Commission, the road to accreditation is not an easy one. It requires a lot of hard work and hours of preparation. Application for accreditation is voluntary. However, only *bona fide* distance study institutions with two years operating experience may apply.

Once application is made, the institution must write a Self-Evaluation Report (SER). This report includes the analysis of pertinent data on all aspects of the institution and its operation. A draft of the SER is sent to the Commission and a Readiness Visit is scheduled. Courses offered by the institution are submitted to the Commission,

which in turn sends them to subject specialist experts for review. After the Readiness Visit, if the evaluator deems that the institution is ready for a full on-site examination, an examining committee is assigned to visit the institution. The committee studies the entire operation of the institution and verifies the information in the Self-Evaluation Report. State Departments of Education, federal agencies, Better Business Bureaus, and other official bodies are surveyed to obtain pertinent information about the institution's overall reputation. A confidential survey of students selected at random also provides helpful information for the Accrediting Commission in making its decision.

After all reports and surveys are in, the nine-member Accrediting Commission reviews them in terms of the published standards and determines whether or not to accredit the institution. If an institution is accredited, it must conform to all educational and business standards of the DETC's Accrediting Commission, submit annual reports, and be re-examined every five years. The Commission may also call for special reports or examinations when changes at the institution make them necessary.

So, as you can see, when it comes to looking for a quality in-
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stitution, accreditation is the student's best friend. It would be virtually impossible for anyone to duplicate or "second guess" the extensive investigation done by recognized accrediting agencies.

After all is said and done, an accredited institution is one that delivers on its promises to its students everyday.

If you would like more information about distance study accreditation or a free listing of accredited institutions, please write to the Distance Education and Training Council, 1601 18th

Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009-2529, (Phone: 202-234-5100; Web site: www.detc.org; e-mail: detc@detc.org.)

For more information, you may also contact: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, Accreditation and State Liaison Division, 1900 K Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006 (Phone: 202-219-7011; Web site: www.ed.gov/offices/ope); and Council for Higher Education Accreditation, One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 510, Washington, DC 20036 (Phone: 202-955-6126; Web site: www.chea.org.)



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