

## **Unraveling the Mystery of College Accreditation**

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Some misconceptions exist about higher education accreditation and the types of accreditation that are available for colleges and universities. If you are planning to pursue your college degree, it is important to understand accreditation and what makes an accrediting agency legitimate.

### **What does accreditation mean?**

Accreditation is like a stamp of approval. It indicates that a school is reputable and has met certain quality standards. This recognition assures you, the student, that the institution operates on a sound financial basis, has an approved program of study, has qualified instructors, adequate facilities and equipment, and approved recruitment and admissions policies.

### **What is the difference between national, regional and programmatic accreditation?**

There are two types of institutional accreditation recognized by the U.S. Department of Education: regional and national. Obtaining regional and/or national accreditation is a voluntary process through which a school's programs and educational delivery methods are evaluated by an accrediting agency.

One difference between these two types of accreditation lies in their name. Regional accrediting agencies accredit schools in a specific area of the United States, whereas national accreditation is available to any institution, regardless of their location. For example, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities accredits schools located in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. A second difference is that national accrediting agencies can opt to serve institutions that have a common theme. For instance, the Distance Education and Training Council, Grantham University's accrediting agency, specializes in accrediting distance learning institutions. The differences between national and regional accreditation are slight; what matters is that both types of accreditation are approved by The U.S. Department of Education (ED) ([www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation ([www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org)) (CHEA).

Programmatic accreditation applies to specific programs or departments within an institution. As such, a university's engineering program may be accredited by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), while the school as a whole could be accredited by a regional or national agency.

### **Who are the approved accrediting agencies?**

There are a variety of accrediting organizations, including some that aren't genuine, so you should look for a school that has been accredited by agencies that are recognized by ED and CHEA. To ensure that a school is accredited by an approved accrediting body, you should always check the CHEA database of accredited institutions.

Most commonly recognized accrediting agencies\*:

- Distance Education and Training Council
- Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges

- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges

*\*The list above is not comprehensive. For a complete list, visit: <http://www.ope.ed.gov/accreditation/Search.asp>.*

Accreditation is important. Not only does it keep institutions accountable, but it holds them to high standards while letting you know that you are earning your degree from a reputable organization.