

The accreditation status of a college, university, or program can give you an indication of its general quality and reputation. In the US, authority over postsecondary education is decentralized: the US federal government has no oversight though there is a US Department of Education. Individual states have the authority to regulate educational institutions within their borders, and as a consequence, standards and quality vary considerably for state-approved schools. While many state-approved schools are not accredited; many are. So, in order to ensure a basic level of quality, the practice of accrediting institutions arose. These accrediting institutions are private, non-governmental educational agencies with a regional or national scope that have adopted standards to evaluate whether or not colleges and universities provide educational programs at basic levels of quality.

Institutional and specialized accreditation

There are two types of accreditation: institutional and specialized. Institutional accreditation is awarded by one of six regional accrediting agencies. These regional agencies play the largest role in institutional accreditation. If a college or university is regionally accredited, it means that the institution as a whole has met the agency's standards. Within the institution, particular programs and departments contribute to the institution's objectives at varying levels of quality.

However, specialized accreditation generally applies to a single department, program, or school that is part of a larger institution. The accredited unit may be as large as a college within a university or as small as a curriculum within a field of study or discipline. Most specialized accrediting agencies review units within institutions that are regionally accredited, although some also accredit freestanding institutions. There are specialized accrediting agencies in more than 50 fields.

How schools qualify

Institutions that seek accreditation conduct an in-depth, self-study to measure their performance against the standards. The accrediting agency then conducts an on-site evaluation and either awards accreditation or pre-accreditation status — or denies accreditation. Periodically, the agency reevaluates each institution. To that end, accreditation is not a one-shot deal: an institution *must maintain* high standards or it runs the risk of jeopardizing its status. **Seeking accreditation is entirely voluntary on the part of the institution.** The initial process takes a long time — as much as 5-10 years — and it costs money. For that reason, a very new school will not have been in operation long enough to be accredited. Of course, being awarded candidacy status does not ensure that an institution will eventually be fully accredited.

What does accreditation mean to you?

In some professional fields, you must have a degree or certificate from a program with specialized accreditation in order to take qualifying exams or practice. There are several benefits to enrolling in a program at a regionally accredited college or university:

- You are assured of a basic level of quality in education and services
- Credits are more likely to be transferable to other regionally accredited institutions
- Your certificate or degree is more likely to be recognized by colleges and employers as legitimate

The bottom line

Your education is an investment — in yourself and in your future. It's important to find out what role accreditation plays in your field, since it may affect your professional future, as well as the quality of your education.

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