

## Accreditation in the United States

Higher education in America is unique in the world because of its reliance on accreditation to ensure quality and to foster a culture of continued improvement. The United States has no Federal Ministry of Education or other centralized authority exercising single national control over postsecondary educational institutions in this country. The States assume varying degrees of control over education, but, in general, institutions of higher education are permitted to operate with considerable independence and autonomy.

The goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by programs and institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality. Accrediting agencies, develop evaluation criteria and conduct evaluations to assess whether or not those criteria are met. Institutions and/or programs that request an agency's evaluation and that meet an agency's criteria are then "accredited" by that agency.

## Specialized Accreditation

The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors - ASPA - is the only voice that solely represents specialized accrediting bodies in the United States. These accrediting bodies operate to ensure that students in educational programs receive an education consistent with standards for entry into practice or advanced practice in each of their respective fields or disciplines. With approximately 50 member agencies, the ASPA contributes to a unified, national voice for, and supports the importance of, specialized accreditation. All accrediting agencies holding membership in ASPA abide by the ASPA-Member Code of Good Practice.

## The Value of Accreditation to Stakeholders

**Students** – accreditation provides a measure of educational quality and in many cases, helps facilitate a student's academic progression, including transfer credit from one institution to another.

**Lawmakers** – accreditation provides assurance that education programs are evaluated against nationally accepted standards and that program graduates are competent for entry into the workplace or for advanced practice.

**Educators and Practitioners** – accreditation provides validation of the education program, as well as the opportunity for academic administrators, faculty and practitioners to build consensus on expected learning outcomes and graduate competencies.

**Employers** – accreditation assures prospective employers that graduates come from a program or school where the content and quality satisfy established standards.

## Functions of Accreditation

1. Verifies that an institution or program meets established standards;
2. Assists prospective students in identifying acceptable institutions;
3. Assists institutions in determining the acceptability of transfer credits;
4. Helps to identify institutions and programs for the investment of public and private funds;

5. Protects an institution against harmful internal and external pressure;
6. Fosters continuous improvement by measuring programs against national standards and their own stated missions and goals;
7. Involves the institution's stakeholders or communities of interest in institutional evaluation and planning;
8. Sets a competency threshold for regulators to use when establishing criteria for entry into practice, including eligibility for professional certification and/or licensure; and
9. Provides a sound basis for determining eligibility for Federal assistance.

## **The Accrediting Procedure**

1. **Standards:** The accrediting agency, in collaboration with educational institutions, licensing agencies, practitioners, and the public establishes standards.
2. **Self-study:** The institution or program seeking accreditation prepares an in-depth self-evaluation study that measures its performance against the standards established by the accrediting agency.
3. **On-site Evaluation:** A team selected by the accrediting agency visits the institution or program to determine first-hand if the applicant meets the established standards.
4. **Publication:** Upon being satisfied that the applicant meets its standards, the accrediting agency grants accreditation or preaccreditation status and lists the institution or program in an official publication with other similarly accredited or preaccredited institutions or programs. Many accrediting agencies include their lists on their web sites.
5. **Monitoring:** The accrediting agency monitors each accredited institution or program throughout the period of accreditation granted to verify that it continues to meet the agency's standards.
6. **Reevaluation:** The accrediting agency periodically reevaluates each institution or program that it lists to ascertain whether continuation of its accredited or preaccredited status is warranted.

## **Agencies Recognized by the US Department of Education**

The U.S. Department of Education does not accredit educational institutions and/or programs. However, the Secretary of Education is required by law to publish a list of nationally *recognized* accrediting agencies that the Secretary determines to be reliable authorities as to the quality of education or training provided by the institutions of higher education and the higher education programs.

The recognition process is defined within the Higher Education Act, scheduled for reauthorization in 2003. See Part H of the 1998 amendments to the HEA for requirements that affect the recognition of accrediting agencies. The listing of nationally recognized accrediting agencies is found on the Office of Postsecondary Education's website.

In 1992, the law was changed to limit recognition by the U.S. Department of Education's process to accrediting agencies that perform a federal function. (The function, usually referred to as "gatekeeping," most often ensures access to Title IV or some other kind of federal funds.) Because of this change, since 1994 some previously-recognized quality accrediting agencies are omitted from the Secretary's list for functional, not quality, considerations.