

UNDERSTANDING COLLEGE ACCREDITATION

Regional Accreditation vs. National Accreditation

Before you begin your online degree, you'll want to select a college or university that is accredited. Accreditation means that a school has been evaluated by education authorities, to ensure it is offering high quality learning opportunities.

Accreditation is not a "one size fits all" concept. There are different types of accreditation - including regional accreditation and national accreditation. Colleges and universities voluntarily apply to receive their accreditation from different bodies, or different accrediting agencies. The following information outlines why some schools are regionally accredited, while others are nationally accredited, while others may have a "specialized" accreditation.

Once you understand the different classifications, you'll be better equipped to make the college choice that's right for you.

Regional Accreditation

In the United States, there are 6 regional accrediting agencies. Each agency covers a different section of the country. For example, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges accredits schools that are located in New England (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont.) The other 5 agencies evaluate schools that are based in other states.

The 6 regional accreditation agencies are:

- Middle State Association of Colleges and Schools (Commission on Higher Education)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges (Commission on Technical and Career Institutions and Commission on Institutions of Higher Education)
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (The Higher Learning Commission)
- Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (Commission on Colleges)
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges (Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges and Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities)

If an online college chooses to apply for regional accreditation, it is evaluated by the regional agency that presides over its home state. These are the only 6 bodies that can award regional accreditation. They are all recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). You can learn more about these regional accrediting agencies, including which schools they accredit, by visiting their individual Web sites.

National Accreditation

National accreditation is not based on geography. National accreditation was designed to evaluate specific types of schools and colleges. For example, the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology (ACCSCCT) evaluates career schools and technology programs. The Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) accredits colleges that offer distance education.

Often, schools apply for national accreditation when their model of instruction or their course content is different from most "traditional" degree programs. Regional accrediting agencies may not be able to compare a career school with a liberal arts college, because the modes of study are so dissimilar. To use an old expression, it would be like comparing apples and oranges. National accreditation allows nontraditional colleges (trade schools, religious schools, certain online schools) to be compared against similarly designed institutions. Different standards and categories are measured, depending on the type of school in question.

Issues to Consider

When deciding which type of accreditation is right for you, there are several issues you may wish to consider.

The main issue is the transferability of credits from one school to another. While nationally accredited institutions will usually accept credit from regionally or nationally accredited institutions, regionally accredited schools often do not accept credit from nationally accredited institutions.

This also means that if you hold an associate's degree from a nationally accredited school, you may have to start over if you later decide to pursue a bachelor's degree from a regionally accredited school. Similarly, if you hold a nationally accredited bachelor's degree, you may not be eligible to enter a master's program at some regionally accredited institutions. Considering that state colleges and universities are all regionally accredited, and that state schools are an inexpensive local option for many students, this is definitely something to keep in mind.

Another important issue is cost. There are a few nationally accredited schools that are extremely inexpensive, and that low tuition rate can be enticing. However, with financial aid and scholarships, you can often minimize the cost difference that comes with a regionally accredited school.

The final issue to consider is acceptability by prospective employers. To be frank, most employers don't know the difference between the two types of accreditation. Very few employers will question the name of the college you attended, let alone its accreditation status. If you do run into concerns about your school or its accreditation, you may want to direct your employer to the U.S. Department of Education's Web page on accreditation issues. An explanation from this government authority will confirm that both types of accreditation are valid.

If you have a specific employer in mind, or if you hope that your degree will lead to a promotion at your current job, you might want to ask a Human Resources employee about the school(s) you are considering.

To look up a college: <http://www2.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html>