

Educational accreditation in the United States

When discussing accreditation in the [United States](#), it is important that the concept of accreditation not be confused with the authority to operate. The authority to operate an educational entity in the U.S. is granted by each of the states individually. The U.S. is a federal republic, and the federal government possesses only specific limited powers, with all others reserved to the states (pursuant to the [Tenth Amendment to the United States Constitution](#)). Therefore, the authority of the [U.S. Department of Education](#) does not extend to authorizing schools to operate, to enroll students, or to award degrees. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) is not responsible for accreditation of institutions, nor is the [Council for Higher Education Accreditation](#) (CHEA), a [non-governmental organization](#). However, both recognize reputable accrediting agencies for institutions of [higher education](#) and provide guidelines as well as resources and relevant data.

In the United States, educational accreditation has long been established as a [peer review](#) process coordinated by accreditation commissions and the members. The federal government began to take a limited role in accreditation in 1952 with reauthorization of the [GI Bill](#) for [Korean War veterans](#). The original GI Bill legislation had stimulated establishment of new colleges and universities, including some of dubious quality, creating a perceived need for a federal quality review process for higher education institutions. Instead, the 1952 legislation designated the existing peer review process as the basis for measuring institutional quality; GI Bill eligibility was limited to students enrolled at accredited institutions included on a list of federally recognized accredited institutions published by the U.S. Commissioner of Education.

Over time federal recognition criteria became more elaborate and the government assumed an increasing role in the process, but the process still relies on private accreditation organizations. As the U.S. Department of Education officially states, it does not accredit schools. Instead, accreditation commissions are formed, funded, and operated by their members to create an academic community that is self-regulating.

With the advent of the U.S. Department of Education and under the terms of the [Higher Education Act of 1965](#), as amended, the [U.S. 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 they accredit. The federal government makes no distinction between accreditation bodies, giving all equal standing. There is no similar federal government list of recognized accreditation agencies for primary and secondary schools. There is wide variation among the individual states in the requirements applied to non-public primary and secondary schools.

Regional accreditors

Main article: [Regional accreditation](#)

There are six [regional accreditors](#). They accredit (and therefore include among their membership) nearly all [elementary schools](#), [junior high schools](#), [middle schools](#), [high schools](#), and public and private institutions of [higher education](#) that are academic in nature.

National accreditors

Main article: [List of recognized accreditation associations of higher learning#National accreditation](#)

There are 52 recognized national accrediting bodies.^[7] National accreditors get their name from their common policy of accrediting schools nationwide or even worldwide. Requirements for accreditation vary from each national accreditor according to the specialty. In general terms, the national accreditors accredit post-secondary programs that are vocational, technical and career in nature. Some of these programs offer degrees and some only certificates.

Five of these bodies are listed by the Department of Education as general in nature and national in scope. These are

- [Distance Education and Training Council](#) (DETC)
- [Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools](#)(ACICS)
- [Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology](#)(ACCSCT)
- [Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training](#)(ACCET)
- [Council on Occupational Education](#)(COE)

Specialized and professional accreditors

Specialized and professional accreditors can attain legitimacy through U.S. Department of Education recognition, CHEA membership, or membership in the [Association of Professional and Specialized Accreditors](#).^[9] Of the specialized and professional accreditors, the more visible include the [American Dental Association](#)

Commission on Dental Accreditation, the [American Bar Association](#) (whose accreditation is a prerequisite to sitting for the bar exam in the vast majority of states, the most notable exception being [California](#)), the [Association of American Medical Colleges](#) for medical schools, [The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business](#) for business schools, the [American Veterinary Medical Association](#) for schools of [veterinary medicine](#), the [Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology](#) for engineering schools, the National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation automotive schools, and HVAC Excellence for Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration (HVACR) programs.

Religious accreditors

Religious schools may seek regional accreditation or a secular national accreditation, or they have the option of four different specialized agencies, which include

- [Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools](#) (AARTS),
- [Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada](#) (ATS),
- [Association for Biblical Higher Education](#) (ABHE), and
- [Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools](#) (TRACS).

These groups specialize in accrediting theological and religious schools including [seminaries](#) and graduate schools of theology, as well as broader-scope universities that teach from a religious viewpoint and may require students and/or faculty to subscribe to a Statement of Faith.

The remainder of the accrediting organizations are formed by groups of professional, vocational, or trade schools whose programs are industry/profession specific and at times can require technical oversight not provided by the broader accrediting organizations (i.e. the [Commission on Opticianry Accreditation](#), the [Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education](#)).

Former [Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary](#) President Kenneth Hemphill explained to [Christianity Today](#) in 2001 that "We are a conservative, confessional institution, and we have not found that our accreditation has caused us to compromise our biblical convictions." Furthermore, "We have found accreditation valuable in that it provides accountability for the institution and credibility for those looking for graduate theological work. It is important to have standards of quality."

Regional versus national accreditation

Regionally accredited schools are predominantly academically oriented, non-profit institutions.^{[11][12]} Nationally accredited schools are predominantly for-profit and offer vocational, career or technical programs.^{[11][12]} Every college has the right to set standards and refuse to accept [transfer credits](#). However, if a student has gone to a nationally accredited school it may be particularly difficult to transfer credits (or even credit for a degree earned) if he or she then applies to a regionally accredited college. Some regionally accredited colleges have general policies against accepting any credits from nationally accredited schools, others are reluctant to because regional schools feel that national schools' academic standards are lower than their own or they are unfamiliar with the particular school. The student who is planning to [transfer](#) to a regionally accredited school after studying at a nationally accredited one should ensure that they will be able to transfer the credits before attending the nationally accredited school. There have been lawsuits regarding nationally accredited schools who led prospective students to believe that they would have no problem transferring their credits to regionally accredited schools, most notably [Florida Metropolitan University](#) and [Crown College, Tacoma, Washington](#).^{[15][16][17]} The [U.S. Department of Education](#) has stated, however, that its criteria for recognition of accreditors "do not differentiate between types of accrediting agencies, so the recognition granted to all types of accrediting agencies — regional, institutional, specialized, and programmatic — is identical." However the same letter states that "the specific scope of recognition varies according to the type of agency recognized."

Unaccredited institutions

Despite the widely recognized benefits and accountability of accreditation, some institutions choose, for various reasons, not to participate in an accreditation process. According to the United States Department of Education, it is possible for postsecondary educational institutions and programs to elect not to seek accreditation but nevertheless provide a quality postsecondary education. Yet, other unaccredited schools simply award degrees and diploma without merit for a price.

Some religious schools claim that accreditation could interfere with their mission or philosophy even though organizations do exist specifically to accredit religious institutions without compromising their doctrinal statements. Meanwhile, institutions such as [Strassford University](#), claim "none of the recognized regional accrediting organizations accept as members institutions that are not dedicated to

traditional education," and thus, Strassford does not "desire" traditional accreditation. The Strassford University is listed by the [Oregon State Office of Degree Authorization](#) as part of a [diploma mill](#) operation. Furthermore, other schools simply do not have the means or organizational structure to meet accreditation standards and others have had their accreditation status revoked after failing to meet minimum requirements.

An ongoing problem within higher education accreditation is the existence of [diploma mills](#) and [accreditation mills](#). These organizations exist to grant apparent degrees without academic course work to give a willing buyer a degree for money. Sometimes both the buyer and seller know this or a potential student is not aware of the fraud. In some cases a diploma mills and/or its "accreditor" is [unrecognized](#) and exists only at a [post office box](#) or [website](#) owned by the proprietor of the school.

The use of unaccredited degree titles is legally restricted or illegal in some jurisdictions.^[23] Jurisdictions that have restricted or made illegal the use of credentials from unaccredited schools include [Oregon](#), [Michigan](#), [Maine](#), [North Dakota](#), [New Jersey](#), [Washington](#), [Nevada](#),^[24] [Illinois](#),^[24] [Indiana](#),^[24] and [Texas](#). Many other states are also considering restrictions on unaccredited degree use in order to help prevent fraud.

Religious-exempt degrees

Twenty-one jurisdictions in the USA, such as Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, Washington and Louisiana, allow exemption from accreditation for certain religious schools. This means that religious schools can grant legal [degrees](#) ([doctoral degrees](#), [bachelor's degrees](#) etc.) to students, without government oversight. The law in the state of Oregon requires religious exempt colleges to meet certain standards, so there is not a full exemption. According to an article in the *Oregon Daily Emerald* "[d]egrees from religious exempt schools were used primarily to attain [church](#)-related employment", and "employers often did not regard degrees from unaccredited religious exempt colleges on the same level as degrees from accredited institutions". In Virginia an "exempt school must clearly state in its catalogs and promotional materials that it is exempt from the requirements of state regulations and oversight". In Florida, a religious exempt-school has to include "a religious modifier or the name of a religious [patriarch](#), [saint](#), person, or symbol of the church" in the name of the institution, and the institution has to only offer "educational programs that prepare students for religious vocations as ministers, professionals, or laypersons in the categories of

ministry, counseling, theology, education, administration, music, fine arts, media communications, or social work" and "each degree title must include a religious modifier that immediately precedes, or is included within, any of the following degrees: [Associate of Arts](#), [Associate of Science](#), [Bachelor of Arts](#), [Bachelor of Science](#), [Master of Arts](#), [Master of Science](#), [Doctor of Philosophy](#), and [Doctor of Education](#)". The *Employer's Guide* of South Carolina makes a difference between religious-exempt degrees and degree mills, but occasionally [diploma mills](#) have been said to operate as religious universities to avoid laws against diploma mills. Religious exempt degrees are often used in a religious, and not a secular, context. In certain US states - North Dakota, Nevada, Texas, Washington, Maine and New Jersey - it is illegal to include religious-exempt degrees on [resumes](#), letterheads, business cards, advertisements and announcements, while this is legal in other states. In the state of Indiana it is an "incurable deceptive act" for someone to "claim, either orally or in writing, to possess a doctorate degree or use a title, a word, letters, an insignia, or an abbreviation associated with a doctorate degree, unless the individual" has been awarded a doctorate degree from an institution which is accredited by a professional accrediting agency which is recognized, *or* "a religious seminary, institute, college, or university whose certificates, diplomas, or degrees clearly identify the religious character of the educational program". Accordingly, religious-exempt titles are valid to use in Indiana. Religious modifiers to a [Ph.D.](#) could be *in Religion* or *in Metaphysics*. Other religious degrees are, for example, *Master of Apologetics*, *Master of Theological Studies*, *Bachelor of Religion*, [Doctor of Theology](#), [Doctor of Ministry](#), *Doctor of Biblical Studies*, *Doctor of Christian Counseling*, *Doctor of Christian Philosophy*, and *Doctor of Metaphysical Theology*. In September 2005 there were in the state of Washington "48 schools currently offering programs that are religious in nature" and "exempt from authorization under the Degree-granting Institutions Act". Some religious-exempt-schools offer distant, and even online, education, and others offer lengthy degree programs and classes on campus. Rick Walston states in *Walston's Guide to Christian Distance Learning* that "some very good, legitimate, and well-recognized schools are not accredited."