



Ask Before You Decide: Accreditation Matters

*Developed by national and programmatic
accrediting organizations and the Council for
Higher Education Accreditation*

CHEA[®]

Ask Before You Decide tells students, prospective students and the general public how accreditation can help with decisions about going to a vocational school, college or graduate or professional school:

- What place to attend.
- How to finance an education.
- How to choose a major or career field.
- What to expect about continuing an education after earning a credential or degree.

It answers: What is accreditation? How does accreditation help me to make smart choices? What questions do accreditors think I need to ask to make smart choices?

What is Accreditation?

Accreditation is like a very hard test. It requires every part of a school or program to be examined and judged by experts. If the school or program passes the test, this means that it lives up to its promises to students. You can trust what the school or program tells you about its courses, its teachers, the services it provides and what you will need to pay (tuition and fees).

When a school or program says “We are accredited,” it is saying it has a seal of approval or a good rating. To keep the seal or rating, the test has to be re-taken at least every several years.

How Does Accreditation Help Me Make Smart Choices?

Accreditation is your friend. It protects you because it requires that schools and programs tell the truth about everything that you need to know about your education.

Before you even get to a college or university, accreditation has done an extensive background investigation and evaluation of the school you plan to attend. You cannot do all this work on your own, so accreditors have made sure that you have reliable information about:

1. Admission requirements.
2. Whether you will be prepared for the career you are choosing – can you get a license, for example, to practice your chosen profession.
3. How to make sure that the school you are attending is accredited by a reliable accreditor.
4. How to make sure that the program you pick is accredited by a reliable accreditor and whether accreditation of the program is required to get a job or a license. Remember that the **institution’s** accreditation does not mean that a **program** is accredited! You have to check about the **program itself**.
5. How much you will pay – the total costs – to attend and earn a credential.
6. The odds of getting a job in your area when you finish school.
7. The likely salary the school’s own graduates earn.
8. Whether the teachers are qualified to teach your courses.
9. Whether your courses will transfer to other schools or colleges.
10. Whether your courses are eligible for federal or state grants or loans.
11. What scholarships or other financial assistance is available.
12. What help is available to you from the school when things go wrong or when you have been unfairly treated.

What Questions do Accreditors Think I Need to Ask to Make Smart Choices?

Accreditors suggest that you ask questions in four areas: (1) when starting to make a decision to go to school, (2) learning about how to pay for school, (3) knowing if a school or program is right for you and (4) when finishing school.

Starting out

1. Why do I want to go to school?
2. How do I want to study: in a class, online or a mix of both?
3. What areas/disciplines/career fields am I interested in?
4. What should I ask people I trust about what to do – a parent, a counselor or a supervisor?
5. Will my certificate or degree help me get a license or a job?

Paying for school

6. How do I get my employer to help me pay my tuition?
7. Can I afford to go to school?
8. What are the total costs: tuition, books, fees, commuting costs, living expenses?
9. How can I be sure that my funds will be enough?

Knowing if the school or program is right for me

10. How do I determine my fit with the institution or program?
11. How can I tell if the institution or program is any good?

12. How do I know whether the institution or program will deliver what it promises?
13. How do I know whether I have the prerequisites/preparation/background required for a career field?
14. What about transfer of credit coming into a program – can I bring my prior coursework or credits with me from other schools?
15. Will my credits transfer, both in-state and out-of-state?
16. What is the likelihood that I will finish?
17. What if I want to go to graduate school?
18. Will there be program licensure or certification requirements that I have to meet after I finish?
19. Will I need more schooling after I finish this credential or degree to keep the job I want?

When finishing school

20. Will my employer accept my degree or credential?
21. Are graduates of this program or institution finding employment?

You need to know what questions to ask and who to ask. You need to know that a school is accredited to have confidence in the answers it gives to your questions. Accreditation is there – to protect you before you enroll, while you are in school and after you complete your studies.

Where do I find out which schools and programs are accredited?

To learn more about accreditation and to find out which schools and programs are accredited, go to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) *Database of Institutions and Programs Accredited by Recognized U.S. Accrediting Organizations* at www.chea.org/search/default.asp. Or, go to the U.S. Department of Education *Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs* at <http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/>. The CHEA database also links to all accreditors of institutions or programs.

CHEA and USDE are important to you, too. You want to be sure that the organization that accredits your school or program is reliable. CHEA and USDE provide this assurance. They “accredit the accreditors,” examining and giving accreditors a seal of approval or good rating. Only accreditors that have passed this test will be in the databases.

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