



TREND OFFSET PRINTING

## Educ Insert



Change Language:


 Text Size [A](#) | [A](#) | [A](#)

## Accredited Where Its Due

Accreditation Can impact Your Education And Career

We've all seen the little "accredited by ..." footnote on college websites and advertisements, but how many prospective students really know what this means and what the implications of accreditation (or lack thereof) might be? Well, read on, because an understanding of this complex, rather cloudy subject can have a dramatic impact not only on the quality of higher education you might receive, but also on your chances of receiving financial aid, your ability to transfer credits (and even degrees) from one school to another, and the real-world value of any qualifications you receive at the end of it.

In short, accreditation is a quality assurance process under which an educational facility's services and operations are monitored by a third-party accrediting agency to determine if applicable standards are met. Assuming the school meets the standards of the accrediting agency, appropriate accreditation status will duly be bestowed. In most countries educational accreditation is function of the government's ministry of education, but not so here: in the United States it's performed by a plethora of private organizations, and that's where matters start getting complicated and somewhat subjective. Furthermore, while a school with reputable and recognized accreditation is generally a good thing for the student, there are careers, specialties and areas of learning where its desirability isn't so clear-cut.

"Accreditation is vital," stresses Brenda Johnson Benson, Dean of Counseling and Retention at Santa Monica College (itself accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, or WASC). "It ensures that certain standards of education are being met. In most arenas degrees from accredited institutions are seen in a completely different light than degrees from non-accredited institutions."

"Adult, professional, fully employed students often are very concerned about convenience, flexibility and cost and may think PHOTO: JOE RUBINO accreditation has less importance. However, I think accreditation provides important signals of quality in a crowded, confusing marketplace," says Deborah Cours, Director of Graduate and Evening Programs at the College of Business and Economics at California State University, Northridge (CSUN). "If the student is seeking a degree, not just continuing professional development, accreditation indicates that the degree has been evaluated by outside auditors and deemed of significant quality." CSUN is accredited by WASC, with business degrees and MBA in the College of Business and Economics accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

### CRITERIA AND ACCOUNTABILITY

"Most students who I see, they know nothing," laments Steve Arthur, Vice President of Administration at Ryokan College, a Los Angeles school of psychology. "They've learned nothing from a lot of schools. It's very hard for a student to get the proper information about the different programs as it relates to what their career choices are."

The American accreditation maze includes 6 national accreditors and at least 52 national accrediting bodies. Regionally accredited schools are predominantly academically-oriented, non-profit institutions; nationally accredited schools are mostly for-profit facilities offering vocational, career or technical programs. Accreditation criteria varies depending on the accreditation body and academic or vocational area, but in general terms might include the courses a school provides; the number of hours students spend attending that school or program; the qualifications of the instructors; library and computer facilities; provision of dedicated counselors etc.

"[The criteria] can be quite involved," says Karim Cherif, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at UCLA Extension in Los Angeles (UCLA is accredited by WASC). "And there's usually a 3 to 5-year period between program reviews ... [With accreditation] we are proving that students, when they enroll in a certificate program ... that the material we're going to be teaching them is going to be relevant when they complete the program – that it's not material that was static; that was developed by an instructor and has been delivered quarter-after-quarter."

"We're telling students that we are keeping up on the changes that are happening in their field and that are going

to be reflected on the examinations ... we are assuring them that their certificate is not going to be outdated when they complete it. And that is a concern, because the half-life of the knowledge in education is getting shorter and shorter – in technical fields it can be very quick.”

#### EXCEPTIONS AND LOOPHOLES

Now, while the value of accreditation in general terms is not in doubt, the system is not without loopholes. For example, UCLA Extension, despite its 10,000-strong student body and world-class reputation for excellence, can only offer certificate courses (rather than degree programs) because – being an evening and online school aimed at working adults – it doesn't meet certain “traditional” accreditation criteria regarding the hours students spend in class etc. On the other hand, a school like Ryokan, which offers flexible degree programs to working adults, cannot get accredited – as much as they'd like to - under current conditions, partly because their students are part-time. Yet it's widely accepted, both within the education community and by the Department of Education, that unaccredited institutions can nonetheless provide a quality postsecondary education and the bulk of these should not in any way be associated with so-called “diploma mills” (organizations that basically sell unaccredited degrees and certificates based on substandard academic study – or no study at all).

“We fit a niche of students that the big universities ignore,” says Ryokan's Arthur. “Big universities and accredited schools are geared for the 18 to 25-year old, full-time student – and the emphasis is on full-time student. Our niche of students, they have a life, they have a career and they're looking for a part-time program ... the average age of our students is 44.”

Online schools and programs, which have exploded in popularity over recent years, have also struggled to earn credible accreditation, even though it's broadly recognized that such “distance learning” can often match the standards of classroom learning.

There were some naysayers in the beginning who thought that the quality of the [online] programs could not equal what is offered in the classroom,” explains Cherif at UCLA Extension (who were pioneers in distance learning, offering online programs as early as 1994). “Many of the [online] programs were fully accepted by those accreditation boards – accounting, real estate, financial planning – once the first few years passed and they realized it was the same material being taught, many times the same textbook, the same requirements for participation in the ‘classroom’, and ‘attendance’, testing and evaluation. I don't think it will be long before they're universally accepted everywhere.”

The accreditation agencies with which I'm most familiar have gotten away from the mere counting of time that ‘butts are in seats’ to focus on actual learning outcomes,” explains Cours. Accreditation processes focus a great deal on the analysis of assessment processes – that the school or program assesses the quality of learning that occurs and then uses those assessment data to improve education to achieve even better learning outcomes. There probably was some early concern about how to validate learning in online and distance programs, but I think accreditors now are focused on assuring that students are engaged in learning and achieving meaningful outcomes, regardless of the delivery system ... There was a skepticism early on of the online programs, but now I think most people accept that learning online can be very successful.”

“Right now it's the biggest mess because nobody wants to recognize the elephant in the room – which is distance education,” says Arthur. “There is movement; it's just going to take a while.”

#### FALL-OUT FOR FINANCIAL AID

Be aware that attending an unaccredited institution may well rule-out financial aid, period. So, while an unaccredited school or program may be cheaper than an accredited one, without financial aid it may still prove out of reach.

“In order for an educational institution to be able to accept financial aid they must be accredited by an approved (by the US Department of Education) accrediting agency,” explains Sarah Peck, Director of Institutional Effectiveness at the Art Institute of California, Hollywood, which is accredited by the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS). “So, accreditation is extremely important for this reason, as most students need financial aid to complete their education.”

“Accreditation of the college or university certainly does impact financial aid,” Cours confirms. “Some employers require specialized accreditations, such as AACSB, for tuition reimbursement.”

#### TRANSFER TROUBLES

Just to make things even more interesting, regionally accredited colleges sometimes don't accept credits (or even degrees) from nationally accredited schools, as the former may view the latter's academic standards to be lower than their own (or they may simply be unfamiliar with the particular school or its accrediting body). Even though the Department of Education doesn't formally differentiate between types of accrediting agencies – national, regional, institutional, specialized, religious, programmatic – the on-the-ground reality is very different. Misunderstanding this can mean a student potentially wasting thousands of dollars and years of study in

programs which may prove irrelevant to their career goals.

People today move around a lot more than they used to," says Cherif. "People are going from university to university and it's always up to the receiving university if they're willing to accept the credits from another."

Most universities when evaluating prior coursework require it to have been completed at an accredited institution," says Cours.

"For example, students applying for their MBA at CSUN must have an undergraduate degree that is regionally accredited ... and when evaluating whether an MBA applicant requires our business foundation courses we consider coursework taken at AACSB accredited schools to fulfill that requirement ... A student never knows when she might decide to make another career change or pursue a higher degree, and accreditation helps ensure that prior coursework will count toward that new pursuit."

I've seen a lot of students coming in here wanting to get their doctoral [degree] and they have the wrong masters [degree] program and nobody told them that – because the Board of Psychology recognizes only 3 masters programs," says Arthur.

## REAL WORLD RELEVANCE

"Depending on the area or industry, [accreditation] can be extremely important," says Cherif. "One example is personal financial planning. There are about 300 programs that are accredited by the Certified Financial Planner Board – that's the board that registers all the university programs that meet their educational requirements. If you attend a program at a school that is not registered with that board, you can study all you want and complete the program, but you will never be able to call yourself a Certified Financial Planner, because those marques are owned by that board. So it can make a very big difference in your career regardless of what employers think – and, yes, different employers are going to weigh that benefit differently."

Also, for something that's really specialized, like architecture, it's important that your school has that accreditation because it will connect you with the right people that you need to succeed," says Ginny Mies, Web Content Writer at San Francisco's Academy of Art University (AAU), the largest private art and design university in the United States. AAU is accredited as a school by WASC and offers degree programs accredited by the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) and online programs accredited by WASC and the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD).

Be aware that unaccredited degrees may not be acceptable for civil service positions. Criminal penalties can even apply if such a degree is presented in place of a recognized qualification. In some fields though - newer disciplines, hi-tech areas and more obscure fields of study - formally accredited qualifications are less important than hands-on skills and experience.

"Accreditation demonstrates that an institution operates within basic administration and policy guidelines set by national accreditation organizations ... What is questionable is the validity of the degree," says Darrin Krumweide, Chief Administrative Officer and Associate Director at The Gnomon School of Visual Effects in Hollywood (which is accredited by the Council on Occupational Education, a national accrediting organization). "In the computer-generated visual arts world, more specifically the visual effects and game artists arena, the student's skill is the qualifier and the quantity and quality of students is the foundation of a school's reputation. This is demonstrated by the student's demo reel, communication skills and ability to work collaboratively."

"[Ryokan's lack of accreditation] is not a big problem," says Arthur. "Most of the students who come here get licensed by the board of psychology ... and most of them want to go into private practice. So once they're licensed they're pretty much in."

But the ever-frank Arthur acknowledges that there can be employment restrictions for graduates from non-accredited schools: "They might be able to teach at, like, a University of California school, but they'd never get tenure because that goes against the accrediting board rules."

Prospective students should always be long-sighted too: while accreditation may not be so vital in a newer or more vocational field right now, that may change over time.

"You're putting a lot of money into your education ... you want to give yourself the best shot," says Cherif. "So if you're looking at a program that's accredited versus one that's not, it may be OK today – but what if in 10 years time that accreditation is important?"

## RESOURCES

While it's vital that prospective students have a grasp of the implications of the accreditation status of the schools they're considering, unfortunately there's no "one-stop" resource to do the necessary research.

"They should try to find out as much as they can. They can go online to the actual school and usually websites

will tell you what accreditation means or if the program is registered or licensed with an outside board," says UCLA Extension's Cherif. "Go in [to the school] and ask questions. Ask to see a counselor or an advisor – any accredited school is going to have someone you can go in and talk to personally or over the phone. We even have virtual open houses where we answer these questions online. Go visit instructors and classrooms: we allow that during the first week of classes – you don't even have to pay or be registered."

But of course individual schools may not be the most unbiased sources of information about their own accreditation, so "school shoppers" should be prepared to do some research elsewhere too.

"I don't know why schools make it such a mystery and not give enough information to students," says Ryokan's Arthur. "Even at the community college level – and I know this from my own son going there - some of the information was just atrocious ... and he wasted a whole year of school."

I would look up the accreditation for some of the biggest colleges in the United States – like Harvard or any of the UC [University of California] schools – and see what their accreditation is," says Mies at Academy of Art University.

In conclusion, your homework needs to begin before you even enroll in classes. Don't assume accreditation is just some dull, acronym-littered footnote in a school's promotional materials: yes, it isn't the world's most invigorating topic, but it can make the difference between being on a career fast-track or wasting valuable years and dollars in educational dead ends.

[View All Articles](#)

---

## Comments

» [Leave Comment & Rate Article](#)