



Higher education in the United States relies on accreditation to ensure quality and foster a culture of continuous improvement. There are two distinct types of accreditation:

Programmatic accreditation conducts an in-depth assessment of specialized or professional programs at a college, university or independent institution.

Institutional accreditation reviews academic and organizational structures of a college or university as a whole.

Accreditation offers a mark of distinction for academic programs and institutions, signaling high quality and a commitment to excellence. Similarities and differences in the two types of accreditation are detailed below.

The goal of accreditation, whether at the programmatic or institutional level, is to ensure that students receive a quality education.

	Programmatic Accreditation	Institutional Accreditation
<i>Type of Accreditation Organization</i>	Specialized and professional accreditors	Regional and national accreditors. (Some programmatic accreditors accredit free-standing, single-purpose professional schools or institutions)
<i>Entity Accredited</i>	A college or school within a university or a program in a specific discipline (e.g., religion) or professional field (e.g., dentistry)	The institution (university, college, school) as a whole
<i>Standards</i>	Generally in-depth for a profession or focused area of study Developed in consultation with experts in the specific field and with other communities of interest	Institution-wide Developed in consultation with multiple communities of interest

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	Programmatic Accreditation	Institutional Accreditation
<i>Primary Focus of Review</i>	<p>Discipline-specific quality assurance, such as measures of student learning or competence that are essential to the profession are reviewed</p> <p>The method to assess and review student learning is consistent with the specific discipline. General metrics such as graduation rates and attrition may be included</p>	<p>Academic and organizational structures and systems are reviewed to determine how the parts of the institution contribute to achievement of institutional objectives</p> <p>Broad overview indicators of quality are used across multiple disciplines and degree levels. These include overall capacity of the institution; general educational quality and educational foundations; and general metrics that may include rates of graduation and attrition</p>
<i>What Review Ensures</i>	<p>Program has appropriate content, qualified faculty and adequate resources to meet discipline-specific accreditation standards</p> <p>Programmatic policies and procedures are in place for the protection of students and the public</p>	<p>Institution has key structural elements and finances that support the mission of the institution</p> <p>Required institutional policies and procedures are in place for the protection of students and the public</p>
<i>Who Does the Reviewing (Site Visitors)</i>	<p>Primarily practitioners and academics who are peers (i.e., those with expert knowledge) in the programmatic area or discipline being reviewed</p>	<p>Primarily academics and academic administrators who represent the breadth of education at the levels provided by the institution</p>

Recognition

Both programmatic and institutional accreditors may be “recognized” by the U.S. Secretary of Education to indicate that they are reliable authorities on the quality of education or training provided by the programs and institutions they accredit. There are federal links (laws) that require recognition in order to participate in federal programs such as Title IV student loans and scholarships. Additional federal links include Veterans Affairs and Homeland Security laws, among others. Accreditors may also choose to be recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), which is a non-governmental organization.

A Note About ASPA

This Quick Reference was developed by the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA)—an advocate for quality in higher education through specialized and professional accreditation.



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