

Higher education in the United States relies on accreditation to ensure quality and foster a culture of continuous improvement. Accreditation offers a mark of distinction for academic programs and institutions, signaling high quality and a commitment to excellence. There are two distinct types of accreditation:

Accreditation assures that students who complete higher education programs have essential skills for professional practice.

	Programmatic Accreditation	Institutional Accreditation
Type of accreditor	Specialized and professional accreditors (Some programmatic accreditors accredit free-standing, single-purpose professional schools / institutions.)	Regional and national accreditors
What the accreditor does	Conducts an in-depth review of specialized (e.g. religion) or professional (e.g. nursing) programs at a college, university or independent institution.	Reviews academic and organizational structures of a college or university as a whole.
Primary focus of review	Discipline-specific quality assurance, such as measures of student learning or competence that are essential to the profession are reviewed. The method to assess and review student learning is consistent with the specific discipline.	Academic and organizational structures and systems are reviewed to determine how the parts of the institution contribute to the overall capacity for achievement of institutional objectives.
What the review ensures	Program has appropriate content, qualified faculty and adequate resources to meet discipline-specific accreditation standards. Programmatic policies and procedures are in place for the protection of students and the public.	Institution has key structural elements and finances that support the mission of the institution. Institutional policies and procedures are in place for the protection of students and the public.
Standard development	Standards apply to the specific profession and are developed in consultation with experts in the field and communities of interest.	Standards apply to the whole institution and are developed in consultation with multiple communities of interest.
Who does the review? (site visitors)	Primarily practitioners and academics who are subject matter experts in the profession or discipline being reviewed.	Primarily academics and academic administrators who represent the breadth of education provided by the institution.
Recognition	Both programmatic and institutional accreditors may undergo reviews by external agencies against established standards in order to be “recognized”. There are federal links (laws) that require accreditors to be recognized by the US Secretary of Education so that institutions/programs can participate in federal programs, such as Title IV student loans and scholarships, Veterans Affairs employment requirements and Homeland Security laws, among others. Accreditors may also choose to be recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), which is a voluntary process conducted by a non-governmental organization.	