

## Accreditation and the Transfer of Credits and Degrees

by Rich Douglas

“Is it accredited?” This is likely the most asked – and most misunderstood – question regarding distance education. Even if the asker can’t define accreditation, he knows, in some vague sense, that it relates to the usefulness of a degree. Education is an investment; if someone puts time and money into earning a degree, he wants it to be recognized, to help him reach his goals: in a word, to be useful. Unfortunately, because of the way the system works in the U.S., “accredited” and “useful” do not mean the same thing.

Part of what is misleading about accreditation is the word itself. It sounds so formal, official, definite. It’s not. Unlike almost every other country in the world, where it is the government that decides what is and isn’t a legitimate institution of higher education, the U.S. does not govern who is and isn’t accredited, nor prescribe what degrees are or are not legitimate. So, if not the government, who decides? Who passes judgment on the legitimacy of a degree? Quite simply, they are the gatekeepers of institutions that you compete to be a part of: namely, employers and people who make admissions or transfer decisions at universities.

Of course, employers and universities don’t have the time and resources to monitor the quality of thousands of degree-granting institutions all over the world. And so accreditation has emerged as a tool to help human resource directors, admissions officers, and college registrars to make these decisions. They have come to trust certain accrediting agencies to tell them which schools meet an expected level of academic quality.

What makes this all so complicated is that there are dozens of accrediting agencies out there whose judgment is not trusted or recognized by most employers and universities. Anyone can set up an accrediting agency; any school can call themselves accredited. So rather than “Is it accredited?”, a prospective student should be asking “Is this school accredited by an accrediting agency that is recognized and trusted by the people I need to recognize and trust it?”

Over time, the practices of employers and universities have become consistent enough where it is safe to make generalizations about accreditation standards. Guidelines such as GAAP, or Generally Accepted Accreditation Principles, are an attempt to describe the accreditation standards practiced by the academic and business communities in the U.S. Every once in a while, though, it is important to check in with the arbiters of accreditation standards, to make sure that our generalized guidelines indeed reflect what’s going on in human resource departments and registrar offices. So I recently interviewed officials at several respected distance-learning schools to get a feel for how they’re responding to different kinds of accreditation.

I talked to Capella University, The Union Institute, Walden University, Thomas Edison State College, Excelsior College, Charter Oak State College, and Strayer University. I asked them about regional accreditation and national accreditation. While I was at it I asked them how they treat degrees from foreign schools and unaccredited domestic schools.

### Regional Accreditation

Not surprisingly, all the schools I talked to (all of whom are regionally accredited) accept credits and degrees from other regionally accredited schools. Regional accreditation is both the minimum and maximum standard in most cases. While they generally don’t make distinctions between the quality of one regionally accredited school over another, some schools place qualifications and limits on the kinds and amounts of credit they will accept. Schools that offer “menu” associate’s and bachelor’s programs – where students are assessed on their progress towards a degree but earn their credits elsewhere – have no limits on the amount of transfer credit. This is the case for the “big three” schools of this type: Excelsior College, Thomas Edison State College, and Charter Oak State College. But distance-learning schools that offer instruction towards their degrees almost always impose limits on the amount of transfer credit allowed, requiring students to earn (and pay tuition for) a minimum number of credits at the degree-awarding school.

Some schools put a limit on how old credits may be. Excelsior, for example, requires credits transferred into its business programs to be less than 20 years old. Walden University requires credits transferred into their graduate programs to be less than 6 years old. But this isn’t always the case. “Unlike Excelsior, we transfer credits no matter how old they are,” said Graham Irwin of The Union Institute. This can be an important consideration for the returning student who’s been out of school for a long period of time.

### National Accreditation

Twenty-five years ago, the six regional accreditors were the only agencies that accredited degree-granting institutions. Since then, other recognized accrediting agencies, often specializing in specific fields or certain kinds of education, have gotten into the business. Not having a regional focus, they are known as “national accreditors.” (The fact that “national” denotes a level below “regional” is another confusing and counter-intuitive aspect of accreditation.) Relevant to our discussion is the Distance Education

and Training Council, or DETC.

DETC began in the 1950s as the National Home Study Council. Its original purpose was to establish industry standards for correspondence schools offering primarily trade and vocational courses. As time went by, some of its members began offering specialized associate's degrees. By 1980, the agency accredited two bachelor's-granting programs. Today, DETC accredits dozens of schools that grant degrees, including a few offering professional doctorates.

Because DETC is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, it satisfies the conditions of GAAP. Despite this, DETC accreditation has always been controversial and has never gained the wide acceptance of regional accreditation. Still, when I asked seven schools if they accept DETC-accredited degrees or credits, I was surprised that the response was so uncontroversial: almost unanimously, they do not.

For six of them – The Union Institute, Walden University, Strayer University, and the “big three” (Excelsior, Thomas Edison, and Charter Oak) – dismissal of DETC accreditation is unqualified. Only Capella University indicated it would accept DETC credits or degrees on a case-by-case basis. However, several schools indicated they would accept courses from DETC-accredited schools that had been separately evaluated for credit by the American Council on Education (ACE). (ACE evaluates non-collegiate courses offered by schools, private industry, the military, and others.) In that case, they would accept the ACE recommendations for awarding credits for these courses. Some DETC-accredited schools have submitted some of their courses for ACE evaluation, but not all schools have done so, and even schools that have may not have submitted all their courses for evaluation. It would be wise to check.

Why the dismissal of DETC accreditation? One can only speculate, but a likely reason is that DETC-accredited – and other nationally accredited – schools are outside the “club.” (The regional associations were created and are made up of their member institutions.) Another might be the legacy of the DETC: accrediting trade school correspondence courses. But another might be that DETC-accredited schools – taken as a whole – are simply not comparable to regionally accredited schools. It is interesting to note that no DETC-accredited school has ever gone on to regional accreditation in the more than two decades DETC has been accrediting schools awarding bachelor's and higher degrees.

### **Foreign Schools**

It is clear that credits and degrees earned from foreign schools are routinely accepted – provided they are evaluated as comparable to regionally accredited credits and degrees earned in the U.S. Every school contacted indicated their willingness to accept such degrees and credits. Most required the credits/degrees to be evaluated by a foreign credential evaluation agency. One school did its own evaluations; another worked directly with an evaluation agency. But most required the students to get this evaluation done on their own. It is interesting to note that every school contacted was receptive to foreign credits and degrees, but just the opposite was true of those issued by nationally accredited schools in the U.S.!

### **Unaccredited Schools**

No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. Not a single school said it would accept credits and/or degrees from unaccredited schools. This included schools accredited by agencies not recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, as well as schools approved by their respective state agencies. It didn't matter, for example, whether or not the state had a relatively thorough system (like California) or almost no standards at all (like Wyoming). Degrees and credits from unaccredited schools were simply not accepted.

### **Advice**

Our recommendations are for those who fall into two groups: First, those who are considering study at a school with an eye on transferring later to a regionally accredited school (either in the middle of a degree program or by going on to a higher degree). Second, those that have already attended a school and have credits that are unacceptable for transfer.

If you're considering pursuing college credits and/or a degree by distance learning, your safest option is to do so with a regionally accredited school. Schools accredited by DETC are often more flexible, less time consuming, and less expensive, and if you are sure a degree from such a school will meet your present and future needs (it is very hard to be so sure), then a degree from one of these schools may be a good option. But if you intend to pursue further studies at a regionally accredited school, you might find your credits/degrees unacceptable and yourself out of luck.

The same advice applies to those considering study at unaccredited schools, only more so. Students and graduates from unaccredited schools can expect a chilly reception from the admissions offices at regionally accredited schools. Under almost no circumstances will they find their credits and/or degrees acceptable.

Students considering study at foreign schools may find better luck; every school contacted accepted credits and degrees from foreign schools. But expect to go through some extra evaluation of your credentials before they are accepted. (Increasingly, degree programs are available to people living in the U.S. from universities as far flung as Australia and South Africa.)

And if you've already earned credits or degrees, only to find them turned away? Well, you have a couple of options. First, you can take examinations for credit, based on the knowledge you gained from your courses. Thousands of regionally accredited schools will accept these examinations. Second, you can prepare a life-experience portfolio for credit; again, based on the knowledge you gained from your courses (and anywhere else in your life!). You could even do the portfolio and have the credits awarded by one school, then transfer those credits to your school of choice. Finally, you can stay with your school (or a similar one), and accept the limitations that come with it.

## **Conclusions**

When it comes to transferring credits and degrees, regional accreditation has been referred to as the "gold standard." While accreditation doesn't necessarily signify excellence in a school, it almost assuredly means your credits and degrees will be accepted by other accredited schools. But if you stray off the path a bit, the situation gets murkier. Foreign schools seem acceptable, nationally accredited schools much less so. And unaccredited schools – whose degrees may have some utility in the workplace – have almost none at all.

Consumers need to choose wisely, not only for their present situations, but for future ones as well. The choices they make, either good or bad, will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

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