

A Quick Reference Guide to Accreditation

**The Two Basic Types of Educational Accreditation:
A Comparison of Institutional and Programmatic/Specialized Accreditation***

	Institutional Accreditation	Programmatic Accreditation
<i>Type of accrediting body</i>	Regional accreditors National accreditors (Some) specialized accreditors, typically free-standing institutions (e.g. Nursing, Rabbinical)	Specialized accreditors
<i>Unit of analysis</i>	Institution as a whole. The review provides an analysis of how the parts of the institution contribute to the achievement of the institution's objectives. The review addresses academic and organizational structures, systems, and expectations on an institution-wide basis.	Specialized or programmatic accreditation generally applies disciplinary and professional standards to a unit smaller than the whole institution, such as programs, departments, or schools that are subsets of an institution. The accredited unit may be as large as a college or school within a university or as small as a program within a specific discipline or professional field. Thus, this includes accreditation of programs required for professional licensure (e.g., dentistry, physical therapy) as well as specialized focused studies (e.g., music, art). Many specialized or programmatic units are within an institution of higher education that is accredited by a regional or national institutional accrediting commission. Some specialized accreditors may also accredit free-standing single-purpose professional schools or institutions.
<i>Standards are:</i>	Institution-wide that have been developed in consultations with multiple constituencies	In-depth for a focused area of study that have been developed in consultation with experts in the specific field and with other constituencies

	Institutional Accreditation	Programmatic Accreditation
<i>Primary focus is on:</i>	Broad overview indicators of quality that can be used across multiple disciplines and degree levels. These include such issues as the overall capacity of institution; general educational quality and educational foundations; and general metrics that may include indices of graduation and attrition.	Depth of quality assurance – discipline-specific. Specialized accrediting bodies focus on measures of student learning or competence that are fundamental to the discipline. The manner used to assess and review student learning is consistent with the specific discipline. Specialized accrediting bodies may also include general performance indicators similar to those of institutional accreditors.
<i>Reviewers are:</i>	Primarily academics who represent the breadth of education at the levels provided by the institution and experts in institutional management.	A mix of practitioners and academics who represent peers (i.e., those with expert knowledge) in the specialized area being reviewed.
<i>Review ensures that:</i>	Key structural elements and financial sustainability of the institution support the mission and that required institutional policies and procedures are in place.	The program(s) of study meet(s) content standards and has adequate, qualified faculty and other resources which enable the program to meet the discipline-specific accreditation standards in a way that is consistent with the larger institution's mission. Defers to institutional accreditors for broader institutional concerns, as well as policies and procedures that extend beyond the specific program of study to impact the whole institution.
<i>Adverse actions:</i>	(Against the institution) are tracked and monitored by the programmatic accrediting bodies that accredit programs within the institution.	(Against a program) are reviewed as information by the institutional accrediting body that accredits the institution as a whole.

Recognition of Accrediting Bodies

Institutional and specialized/programmatic accrediting bodies that provide links to federal funding are eligible for recognition by the USDE. Accrediting bodies seeking USDE recognition need to identify whether or not their accreditation is required for access to Title IV or other federal funds (a function commonly referred to as gatekeeping). Most institutional accrediting bodies are Title IV gatekeepers. Accrediting bodies that accredit at the institutional or programmatic level may serve as gatekeepers for other federal funds. Accrediting bodies that are not functioning in a gatekeeper role or are not linked to funded federal programs are not eligible for USDE recognition.

*This briefing paper is posted on the ASPA website.