

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 551

CE 073 983

TITLE DETC Accreditation Overview.
INSTITUTION Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Oct 96
NOTE 19p.
AVAILABLE FROM Distance Education and Training Council, 1601 18th Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20009-2529; <http://www.detc.org>.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Standards; *Accreditation (Institutions); Accrediting Agencies; Adult Education; *Distance Education; Eligibility; *Institutional Evaluation; Quality Control; Standards

ABSTRACT

This guide is designed to help prospective students, counselors, public agencies, and institutions better understand distance school accreditation and how the accreditation procedures of the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) work. The guide defines distance education, discusses who the accrediting commissioners are, describes the purposes and functions of accreditation, lists DETC standards for accreditation, and addresses which schools are eligible for accreditation. The booklet then describes the steps in the accrediting process: application, submission of a self-evaluation report, subject specialist review, examining committee, student and agency surveys, commission actions, periodic reviews, and special policies. Other topics addressed include the following: DETC membership, acceptance of distance study credits and degrees, and the benefits of accreditation. A list of often-asked questions on DETC accreditation with answers follows. Information for requesting a list of accredited institutions is provided. (YLB)

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DETC

Accreditation Overview

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Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council

Message from the Accrediting Commission Chairman

Dear Colleague:

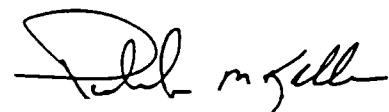
On behalf of the members and staff of the Accrediting Commission, we welcome your interest in the nationally recognized work of the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council (formerly the National Home Study Council).

Since 1955, the Accrediting Commission has established and monitored high standards of educational and administrative excellence in the distance/correspondence study community.

All of us on the Accrediting Commission take our work seriously. We are anxious to assure all prospective institutional applicants, distance study students, governmental bodies and the public, that our goal is to conduct the finest accrediting program in the world.

After reading this brochure, if you desire to have complete information on how to apply for accreditation, please order the book, *DETC Accreditation Handbook*. An order form is bound into the back of this brochure for your convenience.

We welcome your questions on our program, and we invite you to write or call the Commission's staff for further information.



Patrick M. Keller
Chairman

DETC Accreditation Overview

Each year an estimated 3 million Americans pursue education or training through what is known as distance education. Distance education, which is also known as distance study, correspondence study, home study, independent study, and by a variety of other terms, has existed in America for over a century. Yet, few teachers, counselors, students and prospective students have more than a vague idea about distance study. Even fewer people understand the meaning and purpose of accreditation.

Today an estimated 300 or more institutions offer distance education programs, and while many programs are worthwhile, some are not. This booklet is designed to help prospective students, counselors, public agencies and institutions better understand distance education school accreditation and how the accreditation procedures of the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) work. This booklet will answer many of the questions raised about distance study school accreditation.

What is Distance Education?

Distance education is enrollment and study with an educational institution which provides lesson materials prepared in a sequential and logical order for study by a student on his or her own. When each lesson or segment is completed, the student mails or otherwise makes available to the school the assigned work for correction, grading, comment, and subject matter guidance

by qualified teachers. Corrected assignments are returned immediately to the student. This exchange provides for a personalized student-teacher relationship.

Distance education courses vary greatly in scope, level and length. Some have a few lessons and require only weeks to complete while others have a hundred or more assignments requiring three or four years of conscientious study. Accredited courses of study lead to credentials ranging from certificates of completion and certification of skills to academic degrees.

In recent years, electronic technology has played a significant role in transforming the "traditional" distance education school into a dynamic, interactive distance learning method using toll-free telephone lines, as well as a diverse array of home microcomputers, video devices and other modern technological innovations. The future for distance study promises to be exciting!

A student planning to enroll in an educational institution wants to know something of the quality of that institution. Most schools do just what their advertising and promotional literature claim they can do. A few do not.

How can a serious student tell which is which? The United States has rejected the idea of centralized governmental control over educational systems and has instead adopted a system of *voluntary accreditation*.

Well over half a century ago, both educators and the public began to realize that significant differences existed within the same general class of

educational institutions. This realization resulted in the growth of accrediting bodies which used the judgment of peers as a measure of educational quality.

During the early part of this century, several of the leading figures in distance education realized that problems existed in the field. After a special Carnegie Corporation study in the 1920's verified their analysis, they decided that the time had come for establishing standards for ethical schools to follow.

DETC, then the National Home Study Council, was organized in 1926 as a voluntary association of correspondence schools to promote "sound educational standards and ethical business practices within the distance education field." In 1952, the Council decided further improvements should be made in the procedures used to examine and approve distance education schools. A system of accreditation seemed the best solution. As the planning progressed, the Council was assisted by individuals in the U.S. Department of Education, the National Commission on Accrediting, and other accrediting associations.

The DETC's independent Accrediting Commission was established in 1955. Four years later the Commission was listed by the U.S. Department of Education as a "nationally recognized accrediting agency" under the terms of Public Law. The procedures and standards have been continuously refined and improved.

The official recognition of the Commission by the U.S. Department of Education has been reviewed periodically since 1955 following extensive re-evaluations of its activities and procedures.

In 1973, the Commission received the recognition of the National Com-

mission on Accrediting and became the first agency accrediting private schools—most of them proprietary—to receive such recognition. In 1975, the Accrediting Commission became a charter member of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, (COPA), which in 1994 became the Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA), and in 1997 became the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a non-governmental body recognizing and coordinating the activities of accrediting agencies throughout the United States.

The procedures and standards have been continuously refined and improved over the past four decades.

In 1994, the National Home Study Council changed its name to the Distance Education and Training Council. Today, the Accrediting Commission is recognized as the accrediting body for both private and non-private distance education institutions and accredits both non-degree and academic degree programs from the Associates through the Masters degree levels.

Who are the Accrediting Commissioners?

Instruction through distance study is a vastly different art than instruction

via the "traditional" classroom method. Because of this, it is important that some members of the Accrediting Commission have an in-depth knowledge of distance education schools. On the other hand, because accreditation is a public trust, it is vital that public members provide the objectivity and impartiality that such a trust demands. The membership of the DETC Accrediting Commission consists of three senior executives of accredited distance education schools and four Commissioners who represent the public. *In fact, the Accrediting Commission is the only nationally recognized accrediting agency which has a majority of public members.*

What are the Purposes and Functions of Accreditation?

The word accreditation has acquired many shades of meaning over the years. *Simply stated, distance education school accreditation is certification by a recognized body that a school has voluntarily undergone a comprehensive study and examination which has demonstrated that the school does in fact perform the functions that it claims: that the school has set educational goals for students who enroll, and furnishes materials and services that enable students to meet these stated goals.*

Distance study accreditation is an institution-wide source of national accreditation which covers all distance study courses offered by a school. It is unique in American accreditation because it is one based upon a method of instruction rather than educational level or subject matter discipline. It covers all programs, courses, and endeavors of a

school, including degree, non-degree, vocational and avocational programs. Unlike regional or specialized accrediting agencies, the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council provides distance education institutions with a single source of national recognition.

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Most experts agree that accreditation is a "process whereby an association or agency grants public recognition to an institution or program as having met certain established qualifications or standards as determined through initial and periodic evaluations. Increasingly, accreditation also implies stimulation toward improvement beyond the minimum standards specified by the accrediting body."

Historically and currently, accreditation may be said to:

- foster excellence in education through the development of stan-

(continued on page 6)

Public Members of the Commission



**Patrick M. Keller, Commission
Chairman, Partner, Price Waterhouse**

**William B. Cottingham, President
Emeritus, GMI Engineering &
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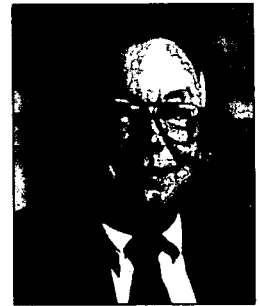
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Staff Members of the Commission



Michael P. Lambert
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named Assistant Sec-
retary in 1977 and Ex-
ecutive Secretary in
1992.



Sally R. Welch, As-
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Commission, joined
the Commission staff
in 1974 and in 1992
was named Assistant
Secretary.



Susan M. Reilly joined
the Commission staff
as the Accrediting Co-
ordinator in 1996.

dards for assessing educational effectiveness;

- encourage improvement through continuous self evaluation and planning;
- assure the educational community, the general public, and other agencies or organizations that an institution has both clearly defined and appropriate objectives, maintains conditions under which their achievement can be reasonably expected, appears in fact to be accomplishing them, and can be expected to continue to do so.

What are DETC Standards for Accreditation?

The fact that a distance study school is accredited means that the DETC's independent Accrediting Commission has determined that the school offers quality instruction and meets the standards established by the Commission.

The standards require that a school:

- state its educational objectives clearly;
- offer sufficiently comprehensive, accurate, up-to-date, educationally sound instructional materials and methods to meet these announced objectives;
- provide adequate examination services and attention to individual differences;
- have a qualified faculty;
- enroll only students who can be expected to benefit from the instruction;

- maintain adequate student services;
- have students who express satisfaction with the instruction received;
- be honest in its advertising and promotional materials;
- carefully select, train, and supervise its field representatives;
- show financial resources adequate to carry out all obligations to students;
- use a satisfactory tuition refund policy;
- maintain student records properly;
- demonstrate two consecutive years of sound and ethical operation as a distance study institution.

Furthermore, the accreditation process must be repeated at intervals of not more than five years.

Which Schools are Eligible for Accreditation?

Application for accreditation from the DETC Accrediting Commission may be made at any time by any private or non-private *bona fide* correspondence/distance education institution with two consecutive years of sound and ethical operating experience.

The Accrediting Commission is aided in its decisions by the extensive work done before a Commission meeting. The process of accreditation begins when a school submits an application to the Commission's Washington, D.C. office. Here a determination is made of the school's eligibility on two points: (1) whether it has been in actual operation for a period of at least two consecu-

tive years immediately prior to accreditation (the two year period begins with the date of the first enrollment); and, (2) whether the applicant is in fact a "bona fide correspondence institution," defined by the Accrediting Commission as an educational institution which:

- A. formally enrolls students and maintains student records;
- B. retains a qualified faculty to service students;
- C. transmits to students organized instructional materials;
- D. provides continuous two-way communication on student work, e.g., evaluating students' examinations, projects or answering queries, with prompt feedback given to students;
- E. offers courses of instruction which must be studied predominantly at a distance from the institution.

The Accrediting Commission does not accept applications from institutions which offer distance study academic degree programs beyond the Masters degree level.

How Does Accreditation Work?

The steps in the accrediting process are the following:

Application

Since accreditation is a voluntary process, each school must decide whether to seek accreditation or not. If the school desires to become accredited, this desire must be shown by formal application to the Accrediting

Commission. Application is the beginning of the chain of events that is required to bring about a total analysis and evaluation of the school: its policies, procedures, philosophies, objectives, functions and accomplishments.

The school begins the process by obtaining and studying the book, *DETC Accreditation Handbook*. It provides complete guidance on how to undergo the accreditation process.

Submission of a Self-Evaluation Report

The application is acknowledged and the school begins preparation of a Self-Evaluation Report. The preparation of this report may take from two to four months in a small institution and three to nine months in a large, complex one.

During the self-evaluation, the school studies itself. The study includes the gathering and analysis of pertinent data on all aspects of the school.

The thorough going-over a school must give itself is reflected in the titles of the Self-Evaluation Report's subdivisions: "educational objectives," "educational materials," "educational services," "student services," "student success and satisfaction," "qualifications of faculty and staff," "admission practices and enrollment agreements," "advertising and promotional literature/control of field staff," "financial responsibility," "tuition policies, collection procedures and refunds," "plant and equipment," and "research and self-improvement."

After the questions in all subdivisions are answered, the report should reveal the school's philosophy, organizational structure, specific practices and procedures, as well as success of its

The self-evaluation process not only provides data on current operations, but also provides the opportunity for self-improvement.

different operations and the degree to which it is accomplishing its stated objectives.

The self-evaluation process not only provides data on current operations, but also provides the opportunity for self-improvement. When the Self-Evaluation Report is completed, at least ten copies are forwarded to DETC's Accrediting Commission.

The Subject Specialist Review

With the Self-Evaluation Report, the Commission requires copies of each of the courses offered by the school. New applicants must submit two complete sets of each course for review, applications for re-accreditation must submit one complete set. These are given to qualified subject matter specialists. As highly qualified professionals, these individuals are usually practitioners in their fields or instructors in institutions of higher education. These specialists review the courses and evaluate them to determine whether the objectives announced by the school can be accomplished by the course. The instructional materials and study guides are checked to make certain that they are complete,

up-to-date, and accurate in content. Any instructional aids, including visuals, tools, laboratory equipment and devices, and "kits," are evaluated to determine if they are relevant and worthwhile learning experiences.

Each subject specialist submits to the Accrediting Commission a confidential and comprehensive report on the course reviewed.

The Examining Committee

In addition to requiring submission of the Self-Evaluation Report and the review of the courses, an examining committee is assigned to visit the school. A mutually convenient date is selected for the visit. The examining committee is not limited in size, but always includes a chairman, a distance education specialist, a distance study business management specialist, subject specialists for each course area (who may or may not visit the school) and an observer for the Accrediting Commission.

This committee visits the school and studies its entire operation in order to verify the information in the Self-Evaluation Report and to gather additional facts for the Accrediting Commission. Although designed as a fact finding process, the visit may also stimulate ideas for improvement of the applicant school.

In those cases where resident training is provided as a required or an optional part of a distance education course, the training facilities are examined to make sure that resident training outcomes contribute to the total course objectives.

Following the visit of the examining committee, the committee members

report their findings to the chairman. These individual reports are confidential, objective, and factual. From them the chairman develops a Chairman's Report to describe the findings of the committee. This report includes the applicant school's areas of strength and weakness and its degree of compliance with the standards. It is confined to presentation of findings; no recommendation of action to the Accrediting Commission is included. The school is then given the opportunity to review the Chairman's Report and respond to the factual elements in it.

Student and Agency Surveys

To obtain further information not covered in the factual material furnished by the school and submitted by the examiners, the Commission conducts a wide-ranging survey to demonstrate the reliability, integrity, and reputation of each school. This is done through contacting literally hundreds of agencies, including state departments of education, federal agencies such as the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Federal Trade Commission, and the U.S. Department of Education, state attorneys general, Better Business Bureaus, and other official bodies to discover whether public needs are being served fairly.

In addition, students whose names are randomly selected are surveyed by the Accrediting Commission by mail to get their opinions as well.

Commission Actions

The Accrediting Commission meets at least twice each year to review the information assembled on applicant

schools. The Commission has four courses of action which it may take on each application:

- accredit a new applicant school or continue an institution's accredited status;
- accredit or continue accreditation with stipulations that must be met within a stated time period;
- defer a decision pending progress reports, additional evidence, or a statement of the school's plan for improvement, any of which may require a follow-up visit;
- deny accreditation to an applicant or withdraw accreditation from an institution. If accreditation is withdrawn or denied, the Commission advises the institution and it may elect to appeal the action to a third party panel or have it reconsidered by the Commission itself.

Decisions of the Accrediting Commission are not subject to review or veto by the Distance Education and Training Council's members, officers, or Board of Trustees..

Periodic Reviews

An accredited school must conform to all educational and business standards, must submit requested reports to the Accrediting Commission, and must be re-examined completely at least every five years. However, the Commission may call for periodic or special reports from any accredited school and may call for a re-examination in fewer than five years if there is a change in ownership or management or if there is

evidence of serious problems in the school.

The Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council regularly meets in January and June of each year.

A time schedule of actions is provided to each applicant institution. As a guideline, institutions desiring accreditation should allow 12 months for completing the application process.

Special Policies

The Accrediting Commission, in carrying out its work, has from time to time developed special policies to cover recurring situations or unique institutions. These policies supplement the formal Commission standards.

Examples of special policies include:

- Combination Distance Study-Resident Programs
- Subject Specialist Procedures for New Courses
- Academic Degrees by Distance Study
- New Training Site Approvals
- Non-U.S. Distance Study Institutions

Applicants for accreditation need to describe to the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council the specific nature of their institution and programs.

DETC Membership

Having attained accreditation, an institution is automatically eligible to become a member of the Distance Edu-

cation and Training Council, the national association of accredited distance education schools founded in 1926.

The Accrediting Commission sets fees for on-site review visits as well as a modest annual accreditation fee to help sustain the accreditation process.

DETC charges each member institution annual dues. The dues are based on annual tuition receipts. These dues support the research and professional activities of the Council.

The Accrediting Commission operates completely independently from the Distance Education and Training Council. No Commission action is subject to subsequent modification by the Council, and an accredited institution may not have a staff member serving on the Commission and on the DETC Board of Trustees at the same time.

Acceptance of Distance Study Credits and Degrees

Some DETC member institutions offer academic degree programs accredited by the Accrediting Commission. The degree programs are in engineering technology, business, health, travel, theology, and other areas.

Acceptance of correspondence/distance education degrees, or of distance study credits from college level courses, are largely determined by the policy of the "receiving organization," e.g., an employer, a college registrar, etc. DETC accreditation is *not* a guarantee that credit will be granted to any credit-seeking distance study graduate. Accreditation granted by any group does not mean "credit transferability." Students seeking acceptance

DETC accreditation is not a guarantee that credit will be granted to any credit-seeking distance study graduate.

of their distance education work are best advised to learn what the specific policies of acceptance are at the receiving organization or institution.

The Benefits of Accreditation

Throughout the past seven decades, accredited distance education schools have been the leaders in the field of correspondence/distance study. Some of the major benefits of accreditation:

- Reliance by counselors, employers, educators, governmental officials, and the public on the accredited status of a school as a reliable index of quality.
- An expression of confidence in the policies and procedures of the school by its peers—a lasting source of pride to the school.
- An external source of stimulation to improve services, programs, and staff through periodic evaluations by an outside agency and by self-study.
- Assurance of high standards and educational quality through the ad-

herence to established criteria, policies and standards.

- Recognition of status by certain states under legislation and regulation as well as recognition given by federal, state and local agencies in referring students to accredited schools.
- Eligibility for the benefits and opportunities given to accredited schools by federal law. **Only** accredited schools may participate in the Montgomery G.I. Bill.
- The listing of the school and its courses in the *Directory of Accredited Institutions*.
- The listing of the school along with other higher education institutions in the Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation directory, *Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education*, distributed by the American Council on Education.
- The use of the DETC seal and reference to accreditation by the Accrediting Commission.
- Student qualification for tuition reimbursement under several industry and military plans requiring enrollment with accredited schools. **Only** accredited schools may participate in the DANTES' tuition assistance program for military personnel.
- Eligibility for participation in the academic credit evaluation procedure conducted by the American Council on Education.

- Expedited acceptance of school advertising by newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations and other advertising media.

Often Asked Questions on DETC Accreditation

Q. *How long does the accreditation process take?*

A. Generally, it can take 6 to 12 months for the entire procedure. A smaller school may be able to prepare for accreditation in as few as 3 or 4 months. The Accrediting Commission meets in January and June, so prospective applicants are advised to initiate the process at least 12 months before the meeting they wish to have their application considered.

Q. *From whom may one seek advice in preparing to undergo an accreditation review?*

A. The Accrediting Commission staff in Washington is available for consultation by mail, phone or personal visit regarding any questions about the accrediting process, procedures or standards. Please call the Commission offices at 202-234-5100 for assistance.

Q. *What other publications are useful to study as an institution prepares for an accreditation review?*

A. *DETC Accreditation Handbook* (see order form in this booklet) is an absolute must. One may also

wish to read the *DETC Business Standards Course* which explains the business standards in detail. The *Home Study Course Development Handbook* is also a useful publication describing educational practices in the field.

Q. *Does the Commission conduct meetings which explain in more detail the accreditation process?*

A. Yes. The Accrediting Commission frequently conducts Training Seminars for Accrediting Commission Evaluators at which the staff of applicant institutions are strongly encouraged to attend. There are also sessions on accreditation at virtually every DETC Conference or Workshop.

Q. *Must a distance study school be located in the United States to qualify?*

A. No. Distance study institutions outside of the U.S. may apply for accreditation. A special Commission policy on non-U.S. institutions is available upon request.

Q. *If an institution offers a Doctoral-level degree program, may it apply for accreditation?*

A. No. The institution's programs and degrees must **all** qualify to apply. The Commission does not accredit degrees which are beyond the Masters degree level.

Q. *Must the school be in operation two*

years before it may apply for accreditation?

A. The institution must have 24 months of operation as a distance study institution before it may be accredited. The Accrediting Commission will not accredit an institution with fewer than 2 years of distance study operation, although a school may initiate an application near the end of its first 24 month period of existence.

Q. *Can an accredited school transfer its accreditation or the benefits of its accreditation to another institution or individual by sale, contract, franchise or other arrangement?*

A. No. Accreditation by the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council is institutional and is extended only to the accredited institution and its approved programs. Accreditation cannot be transferred in any way to an entity not under the ownership, management, and control of the accredited institution. All distance study programs and distance study related activities under the ownership, management and control of the accredited institution must be included in the accreditation, or none can be accredited. When an accredited institution undergoes a change in ownership, management or control, the institution must undergo a complete accreditation review.

Q. *How long is an application for accreditation valid?*

A. An application for accreditation is valid for one year from the date it is received by the Commission.

Q. *What are the dues and fees for accreditation?*

A. There are actually three types of fees: (1) on-site review fees; (2) annual accreditation fees, (3) and DETC annual dues, based on annual tuition receipts. Consult the book, *DETC Accreditation Handbook*, for the current fee schedule.

Q. *Are accrediting reports and documents made public?*

A. No. The process of accreditation is regarded as a confidential one, and accreditation reports and documents are treated in a confidential manner. The public is notified of final Accrediting Commission decisions, but individual reports, school documents, etc., are not released to the public.

Q. *Must all courses, including kits, tools, textbooks, hardware, etc., be sent to the Accrediting Commission for review?*

A. Yes. However, for applicants with an extremely large number of courses, subject specialist evaluators may be appointed to accompany the examining committee visiting the applicant institution.

Q. *Will course material be returned to the institution after the material is reviewed by subject specialists?*

A. No. All course material, including kits, tools, textbooks, and hardware, is consumed in the course review process and is not returned to the applicant institution.

Q. *Do outside observers serve on visiting Examining Committees?*

A. The Commission routinely extends an invitation to the appropriate state licensing agency to have someone serve on the Examining Committee as an Observer. On occasion, federal officials are also invited to serve as observers. The institution pays no examination fees for such observers.

Q. *Do "competitors" serve on visiting Examining Committees?*

A. No. Evaluators known to have competing interests with the applicant institution are not appointed to serve on a committee. DETC accreditation is, however, a "peer review" process. Committees are made up of executive officers of other accredited institutions.

Q. *Must the travel expenses for visiting Examining Committees be paid in addition to the on-site examination fees?*

A. No. The on-site examination fee is a flat fee which includes the cost of travel for the examining committee.

Q. *How much does the accreditation visit cost?*

A. The fees for an on-site review vary according to the size of the institution and number of its courses and site locations. A school with one course seeking initial accreditation can expect the fee to range between \$4,000 and \$5,000. Larger institutions with many courses can expect a higher fee.

Q. *How long does an accreditation examination visit take?*

A. Generally, most visits take one day, starting about 9:30 a.m. until the Committee feels it has completed its task. Visitation dates are set for a mutually agreed upon time. In very large institutions, visits can take two or more days.

How Can One Get a List of Accredited Institutions?

A *Directory of Accredited Institutions* is published by the Accrediting Commission and distributed to the public. Copies of the Directory are available without charge by sending a postcard to:

Accrediting Commission
of the
Distance Education and Training
Council
1601 18th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20009-2529

or print the order form found on DETC's Home page at <http://www.detc.org>

Order Form for DETC Publications

Quantity Requested	Publication	Price	Amount
_____	<i>DETC Accreditation Handbook</i> A handbook on accreditation.	\$20.00	_____
_____	<i>Directory of Accredited Institutions</i> Lists all accredited schools.	No Charge	
_____	<i>Home Study Advertising Handbook</i> Advice on how to create effective ads for distance study courses.	\$25.00	_____
_____	<i>Home Study Course Development Handbook</i> A step-by-step guide to writing courses.	\$25.00	_____
_____	<i>DETC Student Services Handbook</i> A step-by-step guide on developing student services.	\$25.00	_____
_____	All 3 Handbooks (save \$10!)	\$65.00	_____
_____	<i>Business Standards Course</i> A four lesson home study course on DETC ethical standards. Ideal for preparing for an accreditation examination.	\$25.00	_____
_____		\$67.00 (with exams)	_____
_____	<i>Accredited Distance Study Degrees</i> Graduates and employers evaluate their worth.	\$5.00	_____
_____	<i>The Effectiveness of the Home Study Method</i> DETC Occasional Paper Number 9	No Charge	
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Please provide mailing instructions on the reverse side.



Published by the
Accrediting Commission
of the
Distance Education and Training Council
1601 18th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20009-2529
(202) 234-5100

October 1996