



Exploding the Myths

about DETC Accreditation

A Primer for Students

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Prospective distance education students are faced with a bewildering number of choices in selecting an institution that is best suited to achieving their educational goals. They also face a confusing forest of institutions' promotional claims of being the best or most respected school.

This primer is intended to help the prospective student of an online or distance education school or college sort out the confusing claims made about accreditation and about different accrediting agencies. This guide will help dispel some common myths, and will help provide students with a basic understanding of what DETC accreditation is and how it can help them make a good choice of where to study.

In their quest for information on online institutions, would-be students often consult a number of sources, primarily from Web site searches. These searches may produce equally bewildering, and at times, unreliable and inaccurate information.

What is accreditation?

Accreditation assures students that an institution or program has met certain academic and ethical standards of quality. To gain wide acceptance in the United States, all accrediting associations need to be recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and/or to be recognized members of the Council on Higher Education Accreditation. A visit to either the Department of Education or the CHEA Web site listings of nationally recognized accrediting groups, one will see that the groups are divided according to their scope of accrediting activity, geographic region or subject areas.

How can I tell if an institution is accredited?

"Recognized" accrediting organizations provide public lists of the institutions they accredit. For a complete list of recognized accrediting organizations and access to their accredited institutions or programs, view the [CHEA Directory of Recognized Organizations](#) or visit the U.S. Department of Education's [Office of Postsecondary Education](#) Web site.

DETC, the other national accrediting bodies and the six regional accrediting associations share a common philosophy in regard to assessing institutional quality and effectiveness. They espouse, generally speaking, the same bedrock principles and use largely the same kind of qualitative standards to evaluate institutions and protect students. They each believe in peer review and in the philosophy that the two major goals of accreditation are to help students and the public make informed choices, and to help institutions improve. While they naturally are not all the same and do not all have the same level of experience or expertise in evaluating online learning, they all have a goal of helping students.

This guide is written to help the prospective online and distance student make sound choices that are well suited to their interests and needs.

Myth 1: DETC's accreditation process is not as rigorous as regional accreditation.

The reality is, DETC has specific, relevant, comprehensive standards and policies—crafted and perfected for more than a half century—aimed *solely* at the distance education enterprise. DETC evaluators gain access to online courses to validate that sound instructional practice is being consistently followed.

DETC reviews begin with submission of curricula, which is sent to multiple reviewers. In addition to the materials, reviewers evaluate online components of the courses to ensure sound instructional practice is being consistently followed. Their evaluation reports become part of the on-site review team's process, which allows the team to focus on verifying the reams of data provided in an institution's Self-Evaluation Report. While this process compresses the institution's site visit to a few days, the overall process takes many months.

DETC emphasizes the quality of the programs and the demonstration of **student learning**. DETC requires of each institution annual reporting on student satisfaction rates, course completion, program graduation rates and, when relevant, third-party test pass rates as part of a metrics-based outcomes assessment process.

DETC does a comprehensive review of its standards annually, and changes are issued every year. For example, in the last few years, DETC has implemented a new process for outcomes assessment, added a new readiness assessment process for applicants, and added new standards on the reputation of school owners, the use of accreditation from unrecognized accrediting agencies by applicant institutions, and the qualifications of faculty teaching general education.

Myth 2: Credits from DETC academic degree programs are not transferable to traditional colleges.

In reality, the standard principles of good practice, as published by CHEA and as endorsed by higher education groups like the American Council on Education and the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, state that acceptance of transfer credit from one institution to another is always left to the discretion of the receiving institution, and that transfer of credit is not guaranteed by any reputable institution.

These principles also hold that credits **should not be denied solely on the basis of the source of accreditation of the sending institution**. When receiving institutions follow these generally accepted principles of good practice in credit transfer, the acceptance of DETC institutions' academic credit is high. Some 70% of DETC graduates who attempted to transfer their credits report that they were successful.

Myth 3: Online programs offered by DETC institutions are of lesser quality than programs from regionally accredited institutions.

When compared to regional institutions, many DETC institutions use the same learning management platforms, the same textbooks, and have faculty with equivalent credentials. The criteria for evaluating faculty are the same, and in fact some faculty at DETC institutions contemporaneously teach at regionally accredited institutions.

Some universities accredited by DETC also hold dual accreditation with a regional body, and over the years they have reported DETC's process was *far more* thorough and stringent than the regional process in areas related to program review, consumer protection, business standards, succession planning and distance education.

DETC recognizes and appreciates the body of expertise and distinguished history of regional accrediting associations, and as such has chosen to compare academic degree programs offered by DETC institutions to similar degree programs offered by regionally accredited universities.

Before an institution can offer a new course, DETC requires an in-depth, content-focused review by a subject specialist—always a qualified faculty member at a regionally accredited institution (to ensure alignment with the curriculum standards at regionally accredited universities). Using a form that involves more than 250 questions, the subject specialist is able to make fair and precise judgments on the comparability of programs to regionally accredited institutions' curricula.

DETC institutions report annually on their student satisfaction rates. Some 97% of all students in **all DETC institutions** in the 2009 survey said **Yes** to the following survey question: “*Did you achieve, or will you have achieved upon completing your studies, the goals you had when you started the course or program?*”

Myth 4: Regional accrediting groups have more experience in evaluating distance learning than DETC, and have “greater recognition” from the government.

DETC enjoys the same national recognition from the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) as the regional associations. The criteria for recognition are identical for DETC as for the regional bodies. Neither the Secretary nor CHEA makes any distinction between the types of agencies being recognized.

The council's *sole function* is the evaluation of distance education, and DETC has been perfecting its standards and procedures for evaluating distance institutions for more than a half-century. DETC has conducted more than 1,500 on site accrediting reviews to **distance learning** institutions during the past 55 years, including several of the very largest distance institutions in the world.

Regional bodies, meanwhile, only recently have entered the field of distance accreditation.

Myth 5: Regional accrediting groups have stronger consumer protection standards than DETC.

DETC mandates a student-friendly, national, minimum tuition-refund policy for its members, as a part of its extensive consumer protection standards, found within in the *DETC Business Standards*. Regional bodies have no such minimum targeted for distance learning programs.

To protect the taxpayer, DETC institutions electing to participate in Title IV Federal Student Aid programs must follow, in addition to the *DETC Business Standards*, a separate set of **additional** standards—above and beyond what the Federal regulations require (e.g., the maximum annual revenues an institution may derive from Title IV is capped at 75% of their total revenues, not the 90% Federal law permits).

Of any accrediting association today, DETC has some of the most precise, prescriptive and comprehensive standards addressing advertising and promotional practices, targeted specifically toward distance learning. The *DETC Business Standards* address all aspects of promotional tactics, from honesty in advertising to prescribed language for enrollment forms and disclaimers for credit transfer.

Myth 6: All accrediting bodies are the same.

One only needs to do a cursory review of the Web site of each of the more than 20 recognized *institutional* accrediting organizations to ascertain the wide variety of approaches, standards and practices used.

The diversity of American higher education is attributable in part to the different evaluation approaches taken by each of the different accrediting associations. What sets DETC apart, and makes it unique, is the fact DETC is the *sole accrediting organization* staffed, organized and equipped to focus entirely on distance education as a method of teaching and learning. Distance education accreditation is not a sideline at DETC; distance education is the reason we exist.

Conclusion

We hope this guide has been helpful in giving some background on what distinguishes DETC from other accrediting organizations, and why DETC accreditation is an online student's best friend when it comes to making the right choice in where to study. So if you are trying to decide on an on-line or distance school, be sure to consider the advantages and protection you will get from enrolling with a DETC accredited institution:

- DETC accredited institutions **must** deliver on their promises to students to maintain their accreditation.
- Accredited status with DETC means students, parents, and members of the public can trust that knowledgeable educators and potential employers have reviewed the institution to ensure its programs offer students a quality education that will fulfill their goals.
- DETC has a rich and distinguished history dating back nearly 85 years. It has helped countless hundreds of institutions to become better, and has aided millions of students. It has helped protect the public from being misled by diploma mills.

At the end of the day, what DETC is trying to do is help people like you gain a good education from a reputable distance education institution, and ensure you're treated fairly while doing so.

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