

The competence of accrediting organizations is certified through a process known as “recognition.” Recognition of accrediting organizations is conducted both by a nongovernmental organization, CHEA, and by the federal government, through the USDE. In order to be recognized by either CHEA or USDE, an accrediting organization must meet requirements designed to assure that it is a reliable authority on educational quality.

In the United States, accrediting organizations are accountable to the institutions and programs they accredit. They are also accountable to the public and government that have invested heavily in higher education and expect quality. Accrediting organizations undertake a periodic self-review.

CHEA and USDE recognize many of the same accrediting organizations, but not all. A total of 88 accrediting organizations were recognized by either USDE or CHEA or both in 2022-2023.

CHEA Recognition of Accrediting Organizations

CHEA is a national, private, nonprofit higher education organization that was established in 1996. Several thousand degree-granting colleges and universities are members of CHEA. CHEA’s purpose is to coordinate institutional and programmatic accreditation in the United States. To realize this purpose, CHEA carries out three functions: representing the interests of accredited, degree-granting institutions to the federal government and the public; scrutiny (recognition process) of the quality of accrediting organizations based on standards established by CHEA for this purpose; and a range of membership activities that include meetings, research, policy analysis and publications that inform members about federal legislative and regulatory activities concerning accreditation.

CHEA recognition focuses on assuring that accrediting organizations contribute to maintaining and improving academic quality.

USDE recognition focuses on assuring that accrediting organizations contribute to maintaining the soundness of institutions and programs that receive federal funds.

CHEA Recognition Standards

CHEA’s three recognition standards with multiple substandards for accrediting organizations that accredit within the United States and four standards with multiple substandards for those that engage in international accreditation activities, are focused primarily on the accrediting organization’s ability to advance academic quality and continuous improvement. The accrediting organization bases accreditation decisions principally on the performance of institutions and programs in relation to student learning outcomes and achievement. Accrediting organizations seeking CHEA recognition must demonstrate the quality of their accreditation activities, their commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, and their value to higher education and the public interest.

An accrediting organization seeking CHEA recognition is required to provide evidence that the CHEA standards have been met. The nature of the evidence may vary, depending on the type of institutions or programs that the accrediting organization reviews. The maximum term of CHEA recognition is seven years.

CHEA Recognition Standards (2021)

To be recognized, an accreditor provides evidence that it...

1. Promotes academic quality and advances student achievement;
2. Demonstrates public accountability for performance and transparency; and
3. Sustains an effective accreditation structure and organization.
4. Maintains capacity and compliance for international accreditation.

The CHEA recognition policy places significant emphasis on public accountability as it calls on accrediting organizations to (1) require the institutions and programs they accredit to provide information to the public about their performance, especially student achievement, and (2) inform the public, in a timely manner, not only of the decisions that the accreditor makes about the accredited status of institution or programs, but also the reason(s) for the accreditation action(s). Both of these requirements are intended to enhance public confidence in accreditation and its role in assuring academic quality, accountability and transparency.

For details of the CHEA Recognition Standards, please visit the CHEA website (<https://www.chea.org/2019-cha-recognition-policy-and-procedures-3>).

Federal Recognition of Accrediting Organizations

The federal recognition process was initiated in 1952, shortly after passage of the GI Bill for Korean War veterans. The government sought some screening for higher education quality to be linked to the burgeoning federal student financial assistance program. Rather than create a quality assurance system of its own, the government chose to rely on accreditation. A recognition process was established in the Office of the U.S. Commissioner of Education as a way of regulating the accreditation enterprise and producing a list of federally recognized accrediting organizations.

Federal recognition is currently required for accrediting organizations that certify institutional eligibility for participation in federal student financial aid programs under Title IV of the 1965 Higher Education Act or certain other federal funding. Recognized accreditors appear on a regularly published list from the U.S. Secretary of Education. An accrediting organization that applies for federal recognition undergoes a review by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) staff who make recommendations that go to both the Senior Department Official and to the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI).

After the accrediting organization appears before NACIQI, the committee advises the U.S. Secretary of Education regarding recognition. The members of this committee are appointed by the Secretary of Education, the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate and are drawn from outside the government sector. Federal recognition is valid for a maximum of five years.

USDE has no direct statutory authority to establish standards or define quality for higher education institutions or programs. However, it does regulate accrediting organizations and, through them, affects the operations of institutions and programs. This regulatory function and the other oversight functions described below are all associated in one way or another with USDE’s responsibility for administering federal student financial assistance programs and other federal funds, as authorized by the Higher Education Act of 1965.

USDE Recognition Standards

Higher education institutions and programs wishing to participate in USDE student aid or other federal programs must be accredited by a federally recognized accrediting organization.

An accrediting organization that seeks USDE recognition must effectively address the quality of the institution or program in the following areas:

- Success with respect to student achievement in relation to the institution’s mission, which may include different standards for different institutions or programs, as established by the institution, including, as appropriate, consideration of course completion, state licensing examinations and job placement rates.
- Curricula.
- Faculty.
- Facilities, equipment and supplies.
- Fiscal and administrative capacity as appropriate to the specified scale of operations.
- Student support services.
- Recruiting and admission practices, academic calendars, catalogs, publications, grading and advertising.
- Measures of program length and the objectives of the degrees or credentials offered.
- Record of student complaints received by, or available to, the agency or association.
- Record of compliance with the institution’s program responsibilities under Title IV of the Act, based on the most recent student loan default rate data provided by the Secretary, the results of financial or compliance audits, program reviews and any other information that the Secretary may provide to the agency or association.

Although all federally recognized accreditors must have standards in these general areas, the way in which the standards are applied may vary, depending on the accrediting organization and the type of educational program or institution being evaluated. For example, a standard on student achievement would be interpreted differently by institutional and programmatic accreditors. An institutional accreditor evaluates the full range of institutional offerings, while the programmatic accreditor evaluates the preparation of students for a particular occupation. To learn more about how a specific accrediting organization interprets its criteria or standards, contact that organization directly.

Federal recognition is now accompanied by a considerable expansion of regulation affecting accreditors, institutions and programs. With the most recent reauthorization of the federal law and subsequent rulemakings, USDE has expanded its regulations regarding the work of accreditors in the academic areas of student achievement, general education and other curricular areas, faculty and academic standards. Officials have moved from holding accreditors accountable for these areas to stipulating how accreditors are to carry out this work. This has been part of an overall government expansion of regulation of all education.

Figure 30:

Total Numbers of Accrediting Organizations Recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation and by the U.S. Department of Education, 2022-2023

	Recognized by both CHEA and USDE	Recognized solely by CHEA	Recognized solely by USDE
Regional	7	0	0
National Faith-Related	4	0	1
National Career-Related	0	0	6
Institutional	1	0	0
Programmatic	13	38	19
Totals	25	38	26

Next: **State Quality Review of Higher Education**