

# PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

## PURPOSE OF THE ACCREDITATION HANDBOOK

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DEAC has prepared this *Accreditation Handbook* to assist institutions in understanding and preparing for evaluation by DEAC. The *Accreditation Handbook* is composed of Four Parts. Part One provides an introduction to the concept of accreditation, the history and current mission of DEAC, and the value of DEAC accreditation to educational institutions, students, and the public. Part Two sets forth the primary procedures and policies which govern the DEAC accreditation process. Part Three sets forth DEAC's twelve accreditation standards. Institutions must comply in full with each of these standards in order to earn accreditation from DEAC. Part Four includes certain specific forms and policies. Additional forms and policies which may be referenced in this *Accreditation Handbook* can be found on DEAC's website ([www.deac.org](http://www.deac.org)) or by request from DEAC. Please note: Institutions should always check the website for the most up-to-date versions of these documents.

Institutions interested in pursuing DEAC accreditation should use this *Accreditation Handbook* as they organize and conduct their self-evaluations, as they evaluate their readiness to meet the rigors inherent in voluntary accreditation, and as they work to maintain the standards of DEAC. The *Accreditation Handbook* also offers guidance to newly established distance education institutions seeking to build or refine their policies and practices, whether or not they apply for DEAC accreditation.

## ABOUT DEAC

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Accreditation in education began over a century ago. The movement started as a public reaction to the extreme differences between educational institutions that initially appeared to be similar. Accrediting bodies were voluntarily organized by educators to develop and implement common standards and procedures to measure educational quality. From its inception, accreditation has been a nongovernmental, completely voluntary, peer group method of identifying educational institutions or programs that meet published standards of quality. A variety of regional, national, and professional accrediting organizations came into being in the early 1900s in response to the public's demand for reliable indicators of institutional quality.

The federally recognized accrediting organization now known as Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC) has its roots in a non-profit organization of distance learning institutions founded in 1926 under the name "National Home Study Council" (NHSC) to promote education quality and ethical business practices for correspondence education programs. In 1955, NHSC established a standing committee, known as the Accrediting Commission, consisting of representatives from its member organizations, to create and implement written accreditation standards and procedures to examine and approve distance learning institutions. In 1959, DEAC received its first grant of federal recognition and was listed by the U.S. Commissioner (now Secretary) of Education as a recognized accreditor. In 1994, the National Home Study Council changed its name to the Distance Education and Training Council reflecting the expansion and increasing diversity of distance learning programs. In 2015, the organization's name was

rebranded as the Distance Education Accrediting Commission to reflect its primary function as an independent accrediting organization.

DEAC's Board of Directors, in addition to providing its traditional role of overseeing the business and corporate governance of DEAC, also serves as DEAC's accrediting commission (the "Commission"). In that capacity, it is responsible for making final decisions as to whether an institution should be granted accreditation or reaccreditation or should have its accreditation withdrawn. The Commission is also responsible for making all material decisions relating to an institution's accreditation, including, by way of example, (i) the implementation of enforcement actions with respect to institutions which appear to have fallen out of compliance with DEAC standards, and (ii) the approval or withholding of approval of substantive changes which may be requested by an institution. It applies its standards and policies in a manner that respects the mission of an institution, including those with faith-based or religious missions, to ensure and advance the aim of institutional improvement and effectiveness. The vision and mission of the DEAC are as follows:

#### VISION

The Distance Education Accrediting Commission is the preeminent accrediting organization for distance education delivered worldwide that sets high standards for academic quality, inspiring excellence in teaching, learning, and student outcomes through voluntary assessment and peer review.

#### MISSION

Assuring students high quality distance education through accreditation, peer review, and institutional improvement.

### WHAT IS DISTANCE EDUCATION?

Distance education, also known as online education, correspondence education, or Internet-based learning, is designed for learners who live at a distance from residential educational providers and/or institutions. Distance education has evolved in recent years to include an increasing number of adult learners who may be within reasonable proximity to a residential campus, but because of work and personal responsibilities, are unable to regularly attend a physical campus. Additionally, these adult learners consider themselves to be self-starters and more independent students who thrive in an environment that provides a balance between flexibility and structure.

Distance education has a rich history dating back to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century when its predominant medium of instruction was printed materials that were mailed to individual students and allowed for little to no interaction with faculty members. Distance education today has taken advantage of technological innovations and has become a multi-faceted avenue for providing instruction through various mediums to meet the learning needs of a diverse, growing student population. Educational institutions can reach across borders and extend globally to build strong learner communities through the use of technological tools such as social media outlets, podcasts, various forms of asynchronous and synchronous communication, and videoconferencing.

Advancements within the field of distance education have provided an increasing population of students the opportunity to earn degrees and gain knowledge and skills in various subject areas.

For institutions participating in Federal Student Assistance programs, the U.S. Department of Education defines distance education as education that uses one or more of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (4) of this definition to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor or instructors, and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor or instructors, either synchronously or asynchronously. The technologies that may be used to offer distance education include —

1. The internet;
2. One-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;
3. Audio conferencing; or
4. Other media used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (3) of this definition.

For purposes of this definition, an instructor is an individual responsible for delivering course content and who meets the qualifications for instruction established by the institution's accrediting agency.

Based on this definition by the U.S. Department of Education, institutions that deliver instruction through correspondence education are not eligible to participate in federal student aid.

Correspondence education, as defined by the U.S. Department of Education, “means:

- 1) Education provided through one or more courses by an institution under which the institution provides instructional materials, by mail or electronic transmission, including examinations on the materials, to students who are separated from the instructor;
- 2) Interaction between the instructor and the student is limited, is not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student;
- 3) Correspondence courses are typically self-paced; and
- 4) Correspondence education is not distance education.”

*DEAC limits eligibility to participate in Federal Student Assistance programs to institutions that demonstrate substantive interaction between the students and instructor/faculty. DEAC's scope of accreditation extends to both distance education and correspondence education institutions.*

For the purposes of the *DEAC Accreditation Handbook*, the term “distance education” is used throughout, whether the instructional model is correspondence, online, or direct assessment.

## WHY BECOME ACCREDITED?

Accreditation communicates quality to students, institutions, the public, government, and other industry professionals. Accreditation provides assurances that a program has met established standards necessary to produce graduates who have achieved stated learning outcomes and are ready to enter the global marketplace. Students who graduate from accredited institutions have greater opportunities for employment, continued education, and mobility.

Generally, accreditation in other countries is controlled by the government and is often required. By contrast, accreditation in the United States is a voluntary, peer review process and is carried out by nongovernmental, nonprofit organizations. The peer review process allows institutions to be evaluated by other education professionals working in the industry who understand the needs and demands from a shared perspective. Additionally, the peer-review process provides checks and balances from within the industry to allow institutions to have an opportunity to meet students' educational goals by using a variety of resources while ensuring quality programs.

## WHAT IS DEAC ACCREDITATION AND WHAT ARE ITS BENEFITS?

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DEAC's accreditation standards and accreditation evaluation and oversight process were specifically designed to meet the unique quality assurance needs of distance education institutions. The standards establish education quality expectations and assess an institution's ability to integrate technology to meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century graduates and employers. DEAC standards are designed to accommodate the need for institutions to explore learning resources and student support services beyond those of traditional campus-based institutions. Additionally, DEAC accreditation recognizes that, by meeting the unique needs of the distance learning student, course and program delivery can expand an institution's reach beyond a regional focus to a national and international presence. When accredited distance education institutions are successful, students can benefit, regardless of geographic location, and can organize their studies to fit within personal life commitments.

DEAC-accredited institutions are primarily degree-granting institutions offering programs that award credentials through the doctoral level. However, they also include high school programs, career training certificate programs, and a range of educational program supporting ongoing learning. Students can choose the institutions that best meet their needs while being provided assurances that the chosen program has been required to comply with the precise and rigorous standards mandated by this *Accreditation Handbook*.

## FOR STUDENTS, DEAC ACCREDITATION...

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- Provides students with confidence that the institution offering programs ranging from high school through the professional doctoral degree and non-degree certificates has been evaluated and meets rigorous standards established by education industry professionals.
- Increases and enhances employment opportunities for students who graduate from an accredited institution. Graduates want assurances that, upon completion of the program, they have the requisite knowledge and skills to meet their educational goals.
- Verifies that the unique methods for delivering curricula are consistent with educational best practices and provides students with assurances that the education they are paying for is valuable and worth their time, money, and effort.
- Allows institutions to prepare students, by supporting their achievement of knowledge, skills, and abilities, to be productive individuals who contribute to their community and continue lifelong learning.

## FOR INSTITUTIONS, DEAC ACCREDITATION...

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- Allows an institution to receive public recognition for the quality programs and services

offered to students.

- Promotes the integration and continuous improvement of “best practices” in support of student achievement and institutional growth.
- Documents that an institution is true to its mission, goals, and objectives by measuring the achievement of each for purposes of continuous self-assessment.
- Allows institutions to be eligible for and apply for various professional and programmatic accreditations.
- Allows institutions the option of participating in Federal Student Assistance and military programs to benefit students in need of financial assistance to realize their educational goals.
- Allows institutions to apply for approval in some states that only allow accredited institutions.

#### FOR THE PUBLIC, DEAC ACCREDITATION...

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- Provides a consistent and reliable indicator that institutions meet standards of quality and provides validation of credibility through a structured peer review process.
- Promotes accountability to other member institutions and various stakeholders.
- Supports and encourages the innovation and use of technology by emphasizing continuous improvement processes to ensure that institutions and graduates can compete in a global economy.

#### FOR GOVERNMENT AND INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS, DEAC ACCREDITATION...

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- Provides an opportunity for industry professionals to offer input and observations that reflect current and future employment needs in a changing global economy.
- Demonstrates to various federal and state regulators that accredited institutions are leaders in the field of distance education and strive to prepare a workforce equipped to contribute to the changing economic landscape.
- Provides the opportunity for member institutions to lead the change necessary in the field of education by offering students the chance to increase their knowledge and skills while meeting their personal and professional responsibilities.

#### DEAC TODAY

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The DEAC is recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) as an institutional accrediting organization for postsecondary distance education institutions that offer programs primarily by the distance education method at the levels of non-degree, high school, postsecondary, and higher education, including the professional doctoral degree.

DEAC’s goals are to assure a high standard of educational quality in the distance education institutions it accredits by requiring compliance with its published standards and procedures and by fostering continual self-improvement. DEAC is dedicated to ensuring a quality education for more than two million students who annually study at its accredited institutions.

## RECOGNITION BY THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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DEAC initially received federal recognition in 1959 and has continually held recognition by the United States Department of Education ever since. Federal recognition aims to ensure that accreditors meet expectations for institutional and program participation in federal activities, such as federal financial aid programs. Currently, the federal recognition process is largely carried out by the National Advisory Committee for Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI). The NACIQI provides recommendations to the United States Secretary of Education concerning whether accreditation standards are sufficiently rigorous and effective toward ensuring that a recognized accreditor is a reliable authority regarding the quality of the education provided by the institutions it accredits. In 2022, NACIQI recommended to the Secretary of Education that DEAC receive recognition through 2027. DEAC's scope of recognition by the Secretary of Education is:

*The accreditation of postsecondary institutions in the United States that offer degree and/or non-degree programs primarily by the distance or correspondence education method, including through direct assessment, up to and including the professional doctoral degree, including those institutions that are specifically certified by the agency as accredited for Federal Student Assistance program purposes.*

## RECOGNITION BY THE COUNCIL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION (CHEA)

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CHEA was formed in 1996 by presidents of United States colleges and universities to demonstrate higher education quality through strengthened accreditation processes. It promotes academic quality through formal recognition of higher education accrediting bodies and works to advance self-regulation in higher education through accreditation. Recognition by CHEA affirms that the standards and procedures of accrediting organizations meet the academic quality, institutional improvement, and accountability expectations CHEA has established. DEAC first received recognition by CHEA in 2001. It received its most recent grant of recognition from CHEA in 2013 through 2023. DEAC's scope of recognition by CHEA is:

*The accreditation of higher learning institutions in the United States and international locations that offer programs of study that are delivered primarily by distance (51 percent or more) and award credentials at the associate, baccalaureate, master's, first professional and professional doctoral degree level.*