

New Department of Education Accreditation Database: A Promising Start, But Clearly a Work in Progress

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While a review of the data for a variety of institutions has identified apparent inaccuracies, the system does meet the primary objective of flagging schools against whom an institutional accrediting agency has taken an action that could ultimately result in a loss of accreditation and therefore access to federal grants and loans. It is where ED seeks to go beyond this limited purpose that the reliability and completeness of the information falters.

The [database website](#) allows users to search for or download information including the institution's accreditor(s), accredited status, accredited date, current action and date of current action, justification for action, and next review date.

In a warning posted on the webpage, ED does caution users that it cannot guarantee that the information provided is accurate, current or complete. The warning is justified. A particular weakness appears to relate to the timeliness of the reported information. In one case a "next review date" is listed as 2015, even though the accreditor's website reveals that the review had been conducted, accreditation had been reaffirmed five months ago and the actual date of the next review is 2020. Basic information such as institutions' addresses also appear to be error prone, although users can click through to go directly to a school's homepage.

More serious is the reporting of two elements of the database that are not subject to direct reporting by accreditors: specialized and programmatic accreditation and accredited internships, an especially important feature for programs in professions such as psychology and other health-related fields. While institutional accreditors that are recognized by ED are required to "promptly" report actions they take against accredited institutions, professional and programmatic accreditors that are not federally recognized (which subsumes virtually all such agencies) are under no such obligation. Nor do they have any obligation to report on accredited internship sites, such as are common in the field of psychology. The manner through which ED has sourced such information is unclear, and our review indicates that omissions and inaccuracies are common. These are serious issues for a database intended to protect the interests of prospective students, since professional and programmatic accreditation, as well as the availability of accredited internships, are important factors in selecting institutions. While a visit to an institution's website will almost certainly provide such information, the purpose of the database as a one-stop source of accurate accreditation appears undermined. How the Department intends to update and validate this information is at present unclear.

Complicating the usefulness of the database are the often confusing labels assigned to some of the information categories. For example, a reader might reasonably assume that a school's listed "accreditation date" refers to the institution's most recent grant or reaffirmation of accreditation; in fact, the date denotes when a school was initially accredited, which is often in the distant past. Nor is there clear explanation of what is meant by the "next review date," which is often important to enable a user to understand the consequences of an accreditation action and, importantly, when the action is likely to be resolved. In one case of an institution placed on Warning by its accreditor, the "next review date" listed is 2021, which a user reading that listing would reasonably assume by when the Warning must be resolved. However, 2021 is when the school is scheduled for its next regular comprehensive review; an examination of the accreditor's website shows that the Warning follow-up review is scheduled later this year. Finally, the "current action" category is left blank for most of the institutions examined during our review; it is not clear if ED's intent is to use this data field only when an institution has been placed on sanction. While a glossary is provided, a user without prior knowledge of this complicated area may find it lacking in terms of bringing clarity to the nuances inherent in accreditation terminology.

While these issues may well be addressed as the ED accreditation database is refined and enhanced, it is at present far from the one-stop resource promised when this idea was announced last fall. Potential users still need to verify the information currently contained on ED's accreditation database by going to the institutions' own websites to verify their accrediting agencies and then checking the data provided by the listed accrediting agencies. All in all, it is a modest step forward in the promised transparency initiative.

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