

WHAT ART-SCHOOL ACCREDITATION MEANS TO STUDENTS

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In the state of Maine, there are two schools from which an artist can earn a Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) in a low-residency program (in which students pursue courses and studio work at home, only needing to be on campus a few weeks per year): Maine College of Art, in

Although many art schools use accreditation as a marketing tool, students generally are better off choosing a school based on the curriculum and other important aspects of the program rather than on whether or not the school is accredited.

Portland, and Heartwood College of Art, in Kennebunk. However, Maine College of Art has been accredited by the nonprofit National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD), based in Reston, Virginia, and Heartwood has not. Does this mean Heartwood's program isn't as good? Not necessarily.

NASAD requires a private art school or university art department seeking accreditation to describe the goals and standards of its program. Then the organization sends evaluators to the

school to inspect its facilities, faculty, administration, recruitment efforts, program flexibility, and course content, as well as its ability to offer financial aid, in order to determine whether or not the school described itself accurately and is performing at an acceptable level. The evaluators issue a report, finding the school to be either worthy of accreditation or in need of improvements; follow-up reviews may take place. The entire process may take two or more years, and it is expensive, costing \$500 for the application fee, \$500 for a site visit, and travel and lodging expenses for the evaluators. Once a school has been accredited, it will be re-reviewed in five years.

Accreditation gives a school more than just bragging rights; it makes the school's students eligible for federal grant and loan programs. An unaccredited school risks losing student applicants who don't have the financial resources to pay full fare. Accreditation also tells prospective students (and their parents) that the school adheres to certain educational standards and isn't some fly-by-night operation whose degree is not recognized elsewhere.

The Heartwood College of Art is not accredited by NASAD, but most art schools and universities that award M.F.A.s and Bachelor of Fine Arts (B.F.A.) degrees aren't either. However, Heartwood

is licensed by the Department of Education of the state of Maine, which made its own determination of the college's financial health and educational standards, allowing the school to award the B.F.A. and M.F.A. to art students. The fact (or lack) of accreditation by NASAD doesn't tell prospective students anything about differences between the two Maine colleges in terms of the overall teaching style, the makeup of the student body, the curriculum, or the placement rates of graduates. Furthermore, schools that are accredited are more expensive than institutions that are merely licensed. The price of obtaining a degree from Maine College of Art, for instance, is more than twice the cost of obtaining a degree from Heartwood.

Every reputable college and university in the country describes in its brochures, catalogues, and website the public or private agencies that have evaluated its programs and deemed them acceptable. State education departments license, whereas private organizations accredit. The accrediting organizations comprise six regional groups and a series of specialized-field organizations such as NASAD. The regional groups—the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, for example—look at a college or university and evaluate the entire institution, offering a blanket accreditation to all of its programs.

Because accreditation enables students to apply for federal grants and loans, in effect that means every accrediting organization has similar standards that are set by the federal government. Also, since accrediting organizations evaluate a wide range of colleges from two-year schools to doctorate-awarding universities, the standards are broadly defined. There is no

hierarchy among these agencies, so one college cannot be presumed superior to another based on which organization accredited it.

Some colleges are both licensed and accredited (some accredited by more than one organization) and others only licensed. Accreditation is critical in some fields, such as medicine, architecture, and engineering, in which licensing is required in order to work in the profession. In unlicensed fields, such as art and music, expertise is not as objectively demonstrated, and accreditation is not as important.

The difference between a college that is only licensed and one that is accredited may become important if a student seeks to transfer from a licensed school to an accredited one, in which case the accredited institution will evaluate not only the student's grades and portfolio but also the content of the courses offered at the licensed college and the rigor of the curriculum. Similarly, graduates of art programs at unaccredited schools may find that their applications to master's programs at accredited schools draw some greater-than-ordinary scrutiny. "We would want to know something about the sending organization," says Doug Sears, the associate provost at Boston University. That sentiment is echoed by Joseph Hoey, the vice president for institutional effectiveness at the Savannah College of Art and Design, in Georgia. "When students are applying from unaccredited schools we look quite closely at the undergraduate program, at the content of the courses, and at the students' portfolios," Hoey says. "When international students apply we also look for evidence of fluency in English." ■