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Law School Accreditation

By David G. Hallstrom

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Accreditation and what it means to you. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary the definition of accreditation is "to recognize (an educational institution) as maintaining standards that qualify the graduates for admission to higher or more specialized institutions or for professional practice." Law schools generally fall into three categories of accreditation, American Bar Association (ABA) accredited, state accredited or unaccredited.

ABA accreditation – According to the American Bar Association, "Law schools approved by the American Bar Association (ABA) provide a legal education which meets a minimum set of standards as promulgated by the ABA. Every jurisdiction in the United States has determined that graduates of ABA-approved law schools are able to sit for the bar in their respective jurisdictions. The role that the ABA plays as the national accrediting body has enabled accreditation to become unified and national in scope rather than fragmented, with the potential for inconsistency, among the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and other territories. The Council of the ABA Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar is the United States Department of Education recognized accrediting agency for programs that lead to the first professional degree in law. The law school approval process established by the Council is designed to provide a careful and comprehensive evaluation of a law school and its compliance with the Standards for Approval of Law Schools."

State accreditation – Most states have their own accreditation process and in most cases give accreditation status to ABA accredited schools. However, there are many law schools that for one reason or another do not meet all of the ABA accreditation requirements. Some of these schools, however, do meet the states requirements. Note: State requirements can vary by state. If a school meets state requirements it can apply to that state for state accreditation.

Unaccredited – According to the California Bar Association "An unaccredited law school is one operating as a law school in the State of California that is neither accredited nor approved by the Committee, but must be registered with the Committee and comply with the requirements contained in

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Rules XIX and XX of the Admission Rules, applicable provisions of the California Rules of Court and relevant sections of the California Business and Professions Code. A law school operating wholly outside of California is unaccredited unless it has applied for and received accreditation from the Committee or is provisionally or fully approved by the American Bar Association." Rules in many other states are the same.

Most states require that you meet certain requirements prior to being eligible to take their bar examination. The California Bar states "To be eligible to take the California Bar Examination, one must have completed at least two years of college before beginning the study of law or must have passed certain specified College Level Equivalency Program examinations before beginning law study and must have graduated from a law school approved by the American Bar Association or accredited by the Committee of Bar Examiners of The State Bar of California or have completed four years of law

study at an unaccredited or correspondence law school registered with the Committee or studied law in a law office or judge's chambers in accordance with the Rules Regulating Admission to Practice Law in California." Most states have similar requirements.

The foregoing suggests that many states will not allow, non ABA accredited out of state law school graduates to take their bar examination, unless they attended school in that state or a school that is certified by that state. Therefore students graduating from non ABA accredited law schools may not be allowed to practice in any state other than the state they attended school. Note: Some states have reciprocal agreements with other states allowing attorneys registered in one state to become a member of the bar in another state without taking a bar examination in the new state.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, there are many fine law schools in this country that are not ABA accredited. Additionally, many ABA accredited schools do not offer night time or part time classes. Finally, there are many more applicants than spaces available in ABA accredited schools, forcing many good students to attend other schools. Therefore, accreditation should not be your only criteria in choosing a law school or in deciding whether or not to hire a particular law school graduate.

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Virginia Schools Signs Agreement With SACS CASI For School Division Accreditations

By Patricia Hawke

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) was founded in 1895. It is a voluntary, nongovernmental agency with more than 13,000 accredited colleges, universities, secondary, middle and elementary schools. The Council on Accreditation and School Improvements (CASI) is a division of SACS and accredits pre-kindergarten, K-12 and vocational schools in 11 southern states, as well as several other countries.

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In the spring of 2006, the Virginia schools signed an agreement with SACS CASI. Under this agreement, Virginia schools divisions will be encouraged to pursue accreditation with the Council. The agreement complements Virginia schools already rigorous accreditation standards and will build strong foundations for continued growth in learning and achievement within each school and each school division.

Only Virginia schools divisions may be accredited by SACS CASI. To qualify, all schools within a division also must be fully accredited under the Commonwealth's Standards of Learning accountability program. This encourages and rewards the use of best practices at all levels of the school division.

Additionally, a joint steering committee will coordinate the:

- Division accrediting process, · Training and technical support, · Recognition for achieving accreditation, and · Will encourage all Virginia schools divisions to participate in the program.

Though the program is voluntary for the school divisions, the Virginia schools views the agreement as an incentive for its schools to accelerate their current efforts to improve instruction and increase scholastic achievement.

The SACS CASI accreditation process compares the Virginia schools' policies, practices and conditions with SACS CASI's standards. They look at several different best practice areas, such as governance, instruction, accountability, management, planning and sustained improvement.

Accredited Virginia schools demonstrate their commitment to best practices, quality instruction, and increased academic achievement. It is a way to implement a systematic approach to these goals at all levels within the school divisions.

An added benefit is to the state and local Virginia schools leaders, who share these promising best practices with other accredited schools across the nation.

At the time of this writing, both Hanover and Roanoke County school divisions have been accredited by SACS CASI. Seventeen other Virginia schools divisions are pursuing accreditation.

With encouragement from both SACS CASI and the Virginia schools, we should see many other school divisions with accreditation from the Council within the next few years.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school

issues. For more on Virginia schools visit



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