How do you know if a college or university is legitimate?

Accreditation is a review process of the quality of higher education institutions and programs. Accreditation is a major way that students, families, government officials, employers and the press know that an institution or program provides a quality education.

Who are the accreditors?

Accreditors are private, nongovernmental organizations. In the US, colleges and universities are accredited by one of 19 recognized institutional accrediting organizations. Programs are accredited by one of approximately 60 recognized organizations. Recognized organizations have been reviewed by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation or the US Department of Education.

Why is accreditation necessary?

The purpose of accreditation is to:
Assure academic quality of institutions and programs
Allow enrolled students access to federal funds such as student grants and loans. Only accredited schools can offer federal aid money to students and families.
Facilitate transfer of courses among colleges and universities
Build private sector confidence so employers can confidently evaluate credentials of applicants and provide financial support to current employees seeking further education. Degrees from non-accredited institutions are not recognized as academically valuable—non-accredited degrees are a waste of time and tuition.

How does US accreditation work?

Accrediting organizations require institutions and programs to define learning outcomes and then provide evidence that these outcomes in key areas like faculty, student support services, finance, facilities, curricula and student success have been met. Accrediting organizations ask that institutions perform a self-review, accrediting staff then perform an on-site visit, and finally the accrediting organization decides whether or not the sufficient outcomes were demonstrated.

When are institutions and programs accredited?

Accreditation reviews are repeated every three to ten years.

For more information...
The Council for Higher Education Accreditation
The US Department of Education
NACAC