

## **Section VI: Information for Adult Learners**

Every year, thousands of adults decide to improve their current skills or learn new ones by going back to school. In the United States there are many different types of schools which provide education after high school (post-secondary). These institutions can be public and private, two- and four-year schools, as well as private career institutions which provide specific occupational or technical training. In addition, some institutions are faith-based or single-purpose institutions, like distance learning colleges and universities.

The majority of post-secondary schools, colleges, and universities choose to go through a process of accreditation. It is a voluntary review conducted by a non-governmental group, usually a private, non-profit organization. The agency conducting the review looks at the school from top to bottom: its admissions requirements, services offered its resources, its degree programs, etc. The college's accreditation is then periodically reevaluated to make sure it continues to hold to the established standards. It is possible for an accredited college to lose its accreditation if the reviewing agency believes it no longer maintains the established standards. Institutions seek accredited status as a means of demonstrating their academic quality to students and the public and to become eligible for federal funds. Schools can be accredited by regional and national accrediting bodies.

In the workforce, more and more employers are looking for an education from an accredited college. If you attend an accredited college, you can be sure you will receive a level of education that meets or exceeds the established standards for education. The courses you take and degree you earn from an accredited university or college are generally more acceptable for transfer to other schools should you decide to pursue further education in the future.

To ensure that your school is accredited by a replicable accrediting agency, it should be recognized by either the U.S. Department of Education or the Council on Higher Education Accreditation. Information about accreditation and the organizations they recognized can be found on their websites: <http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditationpg4.html> or <http://www.chea.org>.

However, you can still receive a quality education from a non-accredited school. A number of educational institutions have legitimate reasons for not seeking accreditation. Colleges or schools focusing on vocational training programs may choose not to seek accreditation but still offer widely accepted certification. Their reputation and curriculum may be deemed superior by the community as well as the workforce. In the end, you must decide the value of the education the college is willing to provide you and the benefits you will receive from its program.

Private career institutions are yet another type of school offering post-secondary education mainly to the adult population. These schools comprise the large career training segment in the United States, accounting for over 50% of all post-secondary occupational/technical training. These schools have experienced a significant enrollment increase in the past decade due to major shifts in the economy and employment market, and currently produce the vast majority of computer technology graduates and electronics technicians in Virginia. Statewide, 69% of all electronics technicians and 86% of all computer technicians come from private career schools. Accredited private career institutions report that 78% of their graduates are placed in a job within six months of graduation. Over 90% of these students find employment in a field directly related to their training.

Private career schools are successful because they offer short-term, intensive, practical education. This approach enables students to prepare quickly for entry-level employment. Classes are small, student-centered, and involve hands-on experience with business and technical equipment. Students attending private career schools have the unique opportunity to complete relevant career training programs and enter the employment market quickly.

For a list of the private career schools certified to operate in the Commonwealth of Virginia by the State Council of Higher Education (SCHEV) please visit <http://www.schev.edu/Students/PrivateVocationalList.asp>.

### **Twelve Things to Consider Before Enrolling at a Private Postsecondary Institution**

To get the most out of your educational experience, do your homework and make an informed decision before making a commitment. The following list of enrollment tips is provided to assist students in determining what steps they may want to take when considering enrollment at a private postsecondary educational institution.

#### **1. Investigate the college yourself before enrolling.**

Prior to enrolling, interview students in the program or take a tour of the college. Ask if you can sit in or observe the class or course that you are interested in before enrolling. Contact potential employers in your field to see how they view graduates of the college's program.

#### **2. Contact SCHEV staff or check our web site to see if the college is certified to operate in Virginia and whether it has a record of discipline problems.**

Watch out for colleges that are not certified by SCHEV, colleges that have received an extreme number of complaints in a short amount of time, or have a record of discipline

problems (e.g., probation, suspension). If the college is not approved, you could end up with a diploma or degree that is not recognized. A college with a high number of complaints or a record of discipline problems may indicate that the school is not meeting minimum standards for instructional quality or institutional stability.

3. Get a copy of the student catalog.

A college's catalog contains important information that you will need to review prior to making a decision to enroll. Pay special attention to academic, attendance, leave-of-absence, and cancellation and refund policies. There should also be a grievance policy to facilitate the prompt and fair resolution of complaints. You can contact SCHEV staff as a last resort if you are unable to resolve the problem with the school.

4. Examine the enrollment agreement to review all binding terms, conditions, costs and student disclosures.

An enrollment agreement should reflect information about the college's total costs for the contracted-for course of instruction, a list of the charges that are non-refundable, the name and description of the program of instruction, the total number of classes or hours needed to complete the program, payment schedules, cancellation and refund policies, and other mandatory disclosures regarding your rights and responsibilities as a student at the institution.

5. Verify the college's claims of accreditation by contacting the accrediting agency directly.

To qualify for some state licensing examinations or for your degree to be recognized by certain employers, some educational programs and training must be obtained from a college that maintains "accreditation" from an accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Be sure to check with the licensing agency or employer where you wish your educational experience to be recognized and verify accreditation status with the accrediting agency before enrolling. For more information about accreditation and to obtain a list of regional and national accrediting agencies, visit the U.S. Department of Education website: <http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html>.

6. Review all advertising carefully and compare what is being advertised with what is disclosed in the college's catalog and course syllabus.

Make sure that the college is being truthful in what has been advertised. Watch out for hidden costs and promises that seem too good to be true.

### 7. Find out what the college needs from you.

If you are transferring from another college or enrolling for the first time at a postsecondary institution, make sure you inquire as to what documents you will need to submit when you enroll. This may include high school or college transcripts, evidence of citizenship, letters of recommendation and a personal statement on how you plan to benefit from the program of study.

### 8. Request to see the college's completion, job placement and cohort default rates.

Reviewing the completion and job placement rates enables you to check to see whether students are staying in the class and finishing the course, and whether the college is assisting students in finding jobs after they have completed the course. The cohort default rate lets you know if students complete the program with huge financial debt that is difficult to repay. This information should be readily available to you upon request.

### 9. Make sure you know the amount and types of financial aid you will need before you enroll.

There are several options in obtaining financial aid to attend college. Make sure you know whether you are going to receive or need federal student loans, Pell grants, work-study, private loans, or a combination of them all, and understand what the advantages and disadvantages are of obtaining each type of loan or grant. Make sure you know the total monetary amount of loans you are to receive. Match the amount of the loans against the total cost of tuition. *For more information on federal financial aid, visit the U.S. Department of Education's Student Portal at <http://studentaid.ed.gov/PORTALSWebApp/students/english/index.jsp> or SCHEV's financial aid webpage at <http://www.schev.edu/Students/PayForCollege.asp>.*

### 10. Keep a copy of your documents!

If you decide to enroll in a private postsecondary institution, be sure to keep a copy of all contracts, policies, catalogs, disciplinary actions, attendance records, letters you have written to the school, etc. In the future, you may need to verify your payment obligations, any refunds owed to you by the college, or the educational services that you contracted to receive from the school. If you decide to withdraw, be sure to put your notice in writing and keep a copy for your files.

### 11. Get everything in writing.

Never accept a promise to deliver a service verbally. Make sure all contracted-for services are in writing and signed by an institutional official before you sign the enrollment agreement.

### 12. Lastly - enjoy your educational experience!

Statistics show that getting training after high school will help you get a better-paying job doing work you will enjoy. But going to college is a big investment. You're investing your time. Chances are you'll also have to invest your own money or take out a student loan to go to school. So take the time to choose the school that's right for you.

### **Additional information for Adult Learners**

Another way in which adults learners can improve their skills or acquire new ones is through apprenticeships. With apprenticeships, most of the training is done on the job under the guidance of someone who is an expert or a master at the specific trade which is being learned. In addition, some theoretical materials are also studied. Apprenticeships programs can be offered by the unions in such trades as electrician, bricklayers, and others.

The **Virginia Department of Labor and Industry** has a Registered Apprenticeship Program, and there are approximately 2,000 employers who currently use this Registered Apprenticeship Program. For more information visit <http://www.doli.virginia.gov/index.html> and click on *DOLI in Espanol* on the left side of the screen.