

IMIA Standardizes Medical Interpreter Training through Accreditation: What Does That Mean for Medical Interpreters?

Will employers value the certificate you have received in medical interpreting? Will the program you select provide a rigorous and worthwhile educational experience? In order to answer these questions, it is a good idea to become familiar with the concept of accreditation as well as the accreditation process. This article will provide you with the information you need to make wise and informed decisions when selecting a training program or course.

What is accreditation?

Accreditation is simply a validation process by which training institutions are evaluated against established standards to ensure a minimal level of educational quality. Accreditation is typically accomplished through a peer-review process in which individuals from the IMIA Accredited Program help to conduct evaluations of either new non-accredited institutions or accredited institutions seeking renewal. The standards used to conduct these evaluations vary but in general they assess: the institution's mission, goals and objectives, resources and resource allocation, student admission requirements, student support services and the quality of the faculty and educational offerings.

Who accredits medical interpreter educational programs?

This is a voluntary process that is implemented by the IMIA Accreditation Council, a division of the International Medical Interpreters Association. Any training organization worldwide that trains individuals to work as medical interpreters can apply for accreditation after one year in practice. Unlike in most other countries, in the United States accreditation of institutions of interpreter education is not conducted by the government. Although government entities have not specifically endorsed the IMIA Accreditation Council, the IMIA continues to be the only international body that accredits medical interpreter educational programs.

What about community interpreting educational programs?

In so much as the medical interpreter is a community interpreter, the IMIA Accreditation Council will also evaluate community interpreting programs that train individuals to work as medical interpreters in order to ensure a minimal level of educational quality in preparing an individual to pass national certification and work competently as a medical interpreter in a medical setting.

What is the purpose of the IMIA Accreditation Program?

The IMIA Accreditation Program will accredit only those medical and community interpreter training courses and programs that meet the established benchmarks. This accreditation will provide interpreter training courses and programs with a credential that will distinguish them from non-accredited training programs and courses, helping students to identify and select educational programs which will provide them with the basic knowledge and skills necessary to pass the National Certification exams and to pursue careers as medical interpreters. In addition, the Accreditation Program will promote best practices in interpreter education and standardize expectations for the quality and content of these programs by establishing a functional and applicable evaluation process.

Why should I care about accreditation?

Knowing something about a school's accreditation status can tell you a lot about the value of the course or program for which you are paying. If you obtain a certificate from a non-accredited institution you may find that the institution does not provide sufficient instruction to ensure that you develop the knowledge and skills necessary to pass national certification, for example. Understanding accreditation can also help you identify and avoid "diploma mills" (i.e. unaccredited institutions that grant certificates without ensuring students are properly qualified.)

To begin, it is important to understand that the term "accredited" is used rather loosely by some institutions. Therefore you must know what to look for when verifying a school's accreditation status. First, pay close attention to are the words used to describe the institution's accreditation status. The documentation should clearly state that the institution is "accredited" and should list the accrediting agency. Some unaccredited schools use terms that suggest accreditation when in fact none exists. Be wary of phrases such as; "pursuing accreditation," "chartered," "licensed or registered," "recognized," "authorized," or "approved." If these phrases are used without the term "IMIA Accredited" you should conduct a more detailed investigation into the value and quality of the program or course the unaccredited institution is offering. Institutions who are IMIA Accredited will have the IMIA Accredited Logo on their information materials and/or website.

How can you ensure that the training organization is IMIA Accredited?

In the future, you will be able to check whether a training program is recognized by the IMIA Accreditation Council by visiting the IMIA Training Registry listing accredited training programs at http://www2.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation_pg4.html.



What is the IMIA Classification?

The IMIA Classification is the system the IMIA uses to classify interpreter training programs. An institution's classification level describes the degree to which the institution is accredited to grant.

Non-Academic

Level 1 = Intensive Occupational Programs

Academic

Level 2 = Certificate Undergraduate Programs (does not grant university credits)

Level 2+= Certificate Undergraduate Programs (i.e. a minor within a bachelor program)

Level 3 = Certificate Graduate Program (i.e. post graduate, but less than a graduate degree)

Level 4 = Bachelors in Interpreting

Level 5 = Masters in Interpretation

Level 6 = Doctoral Programs in Interpretation

Some interpreter education programs offer academic credits, while others do not. Academic credits are required to earn a Bachelors, Masters, or Doctoral degree, and are required to be considered for some interpreter positions. Depending on your educational goals, you should also be aware that some programs do not provide any academic credits.

What about Continuing Education Workshops or Courses?

Continuing educational opportunities fall outside of the scope of the accreditation program. Instead, continuing educational courses may apply for approval to offer IMIA Continuing Education Units. Follow the link for more information about the IMIA CEU Program (<http://www.imiaweb.org/education/ceuprogram.asp>).

Are distance learning institutions accredited differently than "brick and mortar" institutions?

The answer is yes and no. The IMIA Accreditation Council is responsible for all accrediting all programs, including those offered at a distance. The IMIA Accreditation Council holds distance learning institutions to the same standards as other brick and mortar face to face programs. Hybrid programs may also be considered for accreditation. The Council recognizes the specific standards that are applied to "brick and mortar" institutions must be adapted when considering distance learning programs to ensure that they continue to promote high quality education. For example, one of the fundamental distance learning standards looks at faculty support and whether they have the resources, facilities and equipment needed to engage in effective instruction at a distance.

Is accreditation a "cut and dry" issue?

The short answer is no. First, just because an institution is accredited does not mean that you are guaranteed a high quality education. It simply means that the infrastructure and educational offerings present the potential for participants to gain the minimum knowledge and skills needed to work as an interpreter. What you get from these resources depends a lot on what you put in. However the long answer is yes. The accreditation process is a measurable process which is quite objective with measurable benchmarks for training organizations to report on. For example, accreditation auditors will be verifying easily verifiable information. For example, either the training being evaluated requires a textbook or not, or their instructors have interpreter training or not.

Is not having accreditation always a bad thing?

No. It is important to stress that just because a school is not accredited it does not mean that they are inferior or illegal. For example, there are innovative non-traditional schools that may have not sought accreditation for legitimate reasons. In addition, some types of institutions that offer only professional training or continuing education may not be eligible to seek accreditation from the organizations previously mentioned.

As a result, it is likely that your education plans will play a role in how important accreditation is to you. When making decisions about which online program is best for you, it is important to not only consider the institution's IMIA Accreditation status, but your educational goals and learning needs as well.

