

CEA update

TERESA O'DONNELL, Executive Director of the Commission on English Language Programme Accreditation, answers our questions about the development of the only accreditation scheme in the USA specifically aimed at English language programmes.

Fact box



Full name: *The Commission on English Language Program Accreditation*

Year established: 1999

Number of members: 48 as of December 2002

Type of members: *Accredited English language programmes and institutions*

Membership criteria: *Accreditation*

Government recognition: *CEA will be reviewed by the US Department of Education in June this year*

Association's main role: *Accreditation of US English language programmes and institutions*

Code of practice: *CEA practices are detailed in the CEA Policies and Procedures*

Complaints procedure: *An appeals procedure is included in the CEA Policies and Procedures.*

Agent workshops/fam trips: *yes*

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Q Since we last spoke to you, the number of fully accredited institutions has almost doubled. Why?

A As of the December meeting of the Commission, 35 university intensive English programmes (IEPs), three community college IEPs, and eight independent language institutions are accredited. The reason that the numbers have doubled in the last year or so is that those programmes that began the process in 2000 and 2001 have now completed their self-studies and undergone the accreditation review by the Commission. An additional 14 programmes are now in process, and others are just beginning the process. Numbers of accredited sites will continue to grow as more and more schools realise the value of accreditation.

Q How has CEA worked to increase its reputation?

A CEA continues to keep in touch with the field, especially in the US. Updated information about CEA and all accreditation decisions are announced through various list serves, including AAIEP and UCIEP. Members of the commission give presentations at Tesol and Nafsa conferences. CEA staff also keep the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) informed about our activities and the commission has a very informative website. In terms of international exposure, we distribute information to embassies and overseas advisors and respond to requests for information by publications such as *Language Travel Magazine*. Also, there is ongoing interest in accreditation by schools outside the USA. A new ad-hoc committee of the commission is now focusing on international initiatives.

Q Please tell us about the "Friends of CEA" scheme.

A The "Friends of CEA" initiative was an attempt to raise some needed funds for CEA and to give supporters a means to donate. At the time CEA became independent [in 1999], the Tesol association gave CEA a grant to help during the start-up years. CEA continues to need some supplemental funds in order to keep fees at the current level. So far, the number of contributors is small, but we hope that other friends will donate in the future.

Q You also have a provisional accreditation category – is this useful for allowing institutions to work towards full accreditation?

A The "provisional accreditation" category is the first year of a five-year accreditation period. It allows basically strong programmes with minor standards-related deficiencies to make additional improvements. The category has worked well.

Q Do you think more US institutions will continue to apply for CEA accreditation?

A As more sites become accredited, the perceived value of accreditation is growing. Accreditation in the US is theoretically a voluntary activity, and both university programmes and independent schools are continuing to start the process. However, the INS has implemented a new Sevis system to track international students under an interim certification rule. Indications are that when the final rule is written, accreditation may be required for language schools to be [INS approved].

Q Do you have any direct contact with agents around the world?

A CEA has no direct contact with agents. We continue to be interested in the development of the Federation of Education and Language Consultant Associations (Felca) and the Global Alliance of Education and Language Associations (Gaela) and provide information to those members on occasion.

Q Do you have any guidelines that encompass working with agents?

A There are 52 individual standards in 10 areas, one of which is recruiting. Recruiting Standard #4 states: "If there are agreements between a programme or institution and a recruiting agent, the programme or institution ensures that it has complete information about the agent and assumes the responsibility for monitoring the agent and terminating the agreement if necessary." This standard requires that a school monitor the professional conduct of its agents to ensure that students receive accurate information.

Q How do you ensure that CEA guidelines evolve and are kept current?

A CEA has several mechanisms for ongoing review and revision of standards and standards-related materials. The formal review process includes a two-year review of the standards in terms of validity and reliability. In 2002, for example, CEA conducted a wide ranging survey on the validity and clarity of the standards, which resulted in four being revised. CEA also seeks feedback from programmes after each site visit and also has a mechanism for feedback on its website.