

The HR Advisor

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DoDEA
Human Resources
Regional Service Center

DoDEA Accreditation

Have you ever wondered why DoDEA stresses the importance that degrees or courses (as verified by official transcripts) be earned from U.S. accredited colleges or universities?

First, it's important to visit the goal of accreditation at its highest level, which is to ensure that education provided by institutions of higher learning (colleges and universities) meets acceptable levels of quality. Accrediting agencies, which are private educational associations of regional or national scope, have the job of developing evaluation criteria and conducting peer evaluations to assess whether or not those criteria are further met in a public or Federal school system. At this level, we find DoDEA accountable to The North Central Association (NCA) of Colleges and Schools, The Higher Learning Commission.

The NCA compels DoDEA to insure the public that only properly trained individuals are allowed to administer and instruct DoDEA's academic programs. Consequently, DoDEA requires its temporary and permanent educators to earn degrees or course work from U.S. accredited colleges and universities. This also holds true for employees across the Federal Government.

Although DoDEA has a provision to accept degrees or credits earned from foreign universities and colleges, such degrees or courses must be evaluated at the point of consideration for initial hire. These prospective educators are required to have their foreign credentials evaluated by a pre-approved U.S. professional credential evaluation service acceptable to DoDEA. After hire, educators are encouraged to earn continuing education credits for pay lane changes (graduate level only) and certification and recertification (undergraduate or graduate level), again, from U.S. accredited colleges or universities.

To help determine if a college or university is non-accredited, here's a great website to view a list of non-accredited colleges or universities: http://www.michigan.gov/documents/Non-accreditedSchools_78090_7.pdf. Although the list is not all-inclusive, it's a great start for the process of elimination.

Caveat emptor--buyer beware. Educators can be victims of diploma mills if they are not careful. A diploma mill is actually a business that makes a profit by disguising itself as a legitimate college, university, or school. The diploma mill or "degree mill" will pose as a real university and awards degrees with little or no evaluation of academic work from its "students." They make money by selling printed degrees and providing academic references and falsified transcripts to individuals who purchase bachelor to doctoral degrees from them, to include the purchase of academic honors such as summa cum laude. The cost of these diplomas makes it an attractive option in many cases, but pursuit of these degrees will not be beneficial for academic credit for higher learning or for employment.

Finally, in this ever-changing technology age, degrees can be quickly earned online in little or no time at all. Again, we ask that our educators earn course work only from U.S. accredited colleges or universities on these distance learning sites.

Official transcripts generated from a U.S. College or University Registrar Office is the valid instrument accepted by DoDEA to verify successful completion of any course work or degree earned.

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Did You Know:

Open Season runs from November 10, 2008 thru December 8, 2008.

A new revamped website will be available November 3, 2008 with 2009 plan information at:

<http://www.opm.gov/insure/>



Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) Elections

Section 402, of the Internal Revenue Tax Code limits the amount of income that you may elect to defer under all cash or deferred arrangements during a tax year. The total amount of the employees 2008 contribution to the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP), cannot exceed the elective deferral limit of \$15,500. When the elective deferral limit is reached, your employee contributions must be suspended for the remainder of the year. The TSP will not accept any contributions that exceed this limit unless you are over age 50, in which case your contributions cannot exceed the sum of the Internal Revenue Code elective deferral limit plus the "catch-up" contribution limit for that year. The catch-up contribution limit for 2008 is \$5,000. Employees wanting to ensure their TSP elections reach the maximum contributions for 2008 are reminded there are only a few pay periods left for calendar year 2008 in which you can make TSP contributions and they will be credited to the 2008 tax year. TSP contributions are credited to the tax year in which TSP receives the contribution; therefore any contributions received by the TSP in 2009; even if the pay period ended in December 2008, will be credited toward the 2009 tax year. Employees should monitor their Leave and Earnings Statement to ensure the proper deductions are being withheld and to determine whether or not you will reach the maximum elective deferral limit within the timeframe that you wish to do so.

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has released the elective deferral limits for 2009. The annual maximum contribution to a regular TSP account is \$16,500, a \$1,000 increase from 2008 and the limit on Catch-up Contributions for 2009 is \$5,500; increased by \$500.

To be eligible to make catch-up contributions, you must be:

- Age 50 or older during the calendar year in which the catch-up contributions are made
- Currently employed and in pay status; and
- Making regular contributions to a civilian or uniformed services TSP account, and/or an equivalent employer plan, that will equal the maximum allowed by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), which is \$15,500 in 2008.

Catch-up contributions are separate from regular TSP contributions; therefore, employees must submit a separate enrollment for catch-up contributions. The automated system will check that you are age 50 or older in the year the deductions begin; and that you are covered under the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) or the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS). However, it is the responsibility of each employee to self-certify they are contributing the maximum employee contribution to a regular TSP or an amount that will result in reaching the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) annual elective deferral limit by the end of the year. Employees who falsely certify they meet this requirement are subject to any penalties imposed by the IRS at the end of the year. Deductions for catch-up contributions automatically stop once you reach the maximum amount, or as of the last pay date of the calendar year, whichever comes first. Employees must make a positive election each year for TSP Catch-Up Contributions if they wish to participate. Catch-up contributions stop while you are in a non-pay status and resume upon return to pay status. Generally, you cannot make-up catch-up contributions missed while in a non-pay status, but you can submit a change increasing the amount withheld each pay period and thus contribute the maximum catch-up amount allowed by law for that year. Catch-up contributions are not eligible for agency matching contributions, regardless of your retirement system.

TSP elections can be made at any time with no percentage or dollar limits on employee contributions. The only limits are those imposed by the Internal Revenue Code for elective deferral limits. Employees should access EBIS at <https://hqw3.dodea.edu/> to make their elections. To determine the maximum amount you should contribute each pay period use the online calculator available on the TSP website <http://www.tsp.gov/calc/contributions/index.html>.

Employees may elect TSP contributions for calendar year 2009 through the Employee Benefits Information System (EBIS) beginning December 7, 2008.

If you need further assistance with making your election through EBIS, please contact your local HR Representative, email the Benefits Unit at Benefits@hq.dodea.edu or call the Benefits Unit directly at 703-588-3981 or DSN 425-3981. For additional information on the Thrift Savings Plan visit the TSP website at www.tsp.gov.



Disaster Preparedness

Are you prepared?

Your response to a disaster or emergency situation will depend on how you prepare. Your well-being and possibly the lives of others may rely on whether or not you are ready. Evacuation may be necessary to avoid confinement to a specific area. The procedures and reactions vary according to the type of disaster.

Disasters can happen, locally, regionally, nationally and globally and can come in the following forms:

- Biological
- Chemical
- Explosions
- Nuclear Blast
- Radiation
- Natural Disasters

When planning consider all possibilities. Consider the supplies you may need on hand and add them to your "Emergency Supply Kit."

Your "Emergency Supply Kit" should include:

- Water and non-perishable food
- Battery operated radio and extra batteries
- First aid kit
- Flashlight
- Maps
- Important documents such as proof of residence, pictures of your family including pets, insurance policies, and tax records
- Comfortable clothing and blankets
- Unique family needs such as prescription medications, pet supplies, and infant supplies

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has compiled tips to assist you in preparing for an emergency. For additional information, go to: <http://www.ready.gov/>



Excused Absence For Voting



The Federal Government has a long-standing policy of granting employees limited time off from work (i.e., excused absence) to vote in the Federal, State, or Local elections. Polling sites are open throughout the United States for extended periods of time to accommodate voters who work during normal polling hours.

The following guidelines are used in approving excused absence to vote in the election on Tuesday, November 4, 2008. In cases, where the polls are not open at least three hours before or after an employee's regular work hours, an agency may grant a limited amount of excused absence that will permit the employee to report for work three hours after the polls open, or leave work three hours before the polls are to close, whichever requires the lesser amount of time off. Regular work hours are considered to be the times that the employee is normally scheduled to arrive at and depart from work. If you have questions regarding excused absence for voting purposes, please contact your servicing Human Resources Specialist or the Labor Management and Employee Relations Section at (703) 588-3990.

The 2008 Federal Benefits Open Season is Coming!

This is the time for you to think about your health, dental, vision, and tax-saving needs and make changes to your current enrollments or enroll in one of the programs.

The programs that participate in the annual Open Season are the:

- Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (FEHBP)
- Federal Employees Dental and Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP)
- Federal flexible Spending Account Program (FSAFEDS)

Open Season is the only time you will be able to make changes to your enrollments during the calendar year. All health, dental, and vision plans are not alike. Open season is about exercising your right to choose the plan that best suits your health needs. Failure to consider your health plan choice could leave you without the services or supplies needed or a premium you cannot afford.

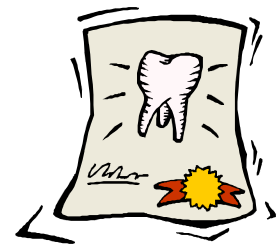
If you are currently enrolled in FEHBP and FEDVIP, those enrollments will continue automatically but the benefits and premiums may change. If you have a FSAFEDS account, you will need to reenroll each year; this program does not continue automatically.

For more details on what is covered under your benefits plan visit the following links:

FEHBP go to www.opm.gov/insure/health

FEDVIP go to www.opm.gov/insure/dental/index.asp or www.opm.gov/insure/vision/index.asp,

FSAFEDS go to www.FSAFEDS.com, or call 1-877-372-3337,



Training Tidbits

Continued Service Agreement (CSA)

Have you seen the Continued Service Agreement (CSA) form on page 4 of the SF-182, Authorization, Agreement and Certification of Training, and wondered when you should use it? It is to be used when you attend Government approved training that exceeds 80 hours. In accordance with Title 5 USC 4108 and 5 CFR 410.308, when training expenses are paid by the Government, an employee is required to sign the CSA and thereby agrees to:

- Serve in the agency three times the length of the training period,
- To reimburse the agency for fees, i.e., tuition, if they voluntarily leave the agency before completing the period of service agreed upon,
- To give the agency a written notice of at least ten working days if they voluntarily leave early; time will be used to determine amount of reimbursement,
- Acknowledge that any amount of money due to the agency will be withheld from government owed to employee money, i.e., pay check, and
- Acknowledge that this agreement does not commit the government to continue their employment.

If you have any questions about the CSA, contact your Human Resource Development Specialists at 703-588-3801.

