The Criteria for Accreditation

This booklet contains the Criteria for Accreditation, Assumed Practices, and Obligations of Affiliation.

In the past the Criteria for Accreditation had been reviewed in their entirety every five years. Beginning in 2013, the Board will consider clarifying modifications to the Criteria, including the Assumed Practices, annually, usually with first reading in February and second reading in June.

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The New Criteria: An Overview

In its review of institutions, the Higher Learning Commission seeks a culture of aspiration and continual improvement rather than satisfaction of minimum requirements. It also seeks to acknowledge the great diversity of its member institutions. For these reasons it uses the term "criteria" rather than "standards."

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Prior to admission to candidacy for accreditation and again in applying for initial accreditation, an institution demonstrates that it meets the Commission's Eligibility Requirements. The Eligibility Requirements and process for seeking status are available in a separate document.

The accreditation process is governed by the **Criteria for Accreditation.** Within the Criteria there are Criterion Statements and Core Components that ensure institutional effectiveness. Underlying the Criteria and Core Components is a set of assumptions shared by the community of practice within higher education and made explicit in the section on **Assumed Practices.**

Finally, the Commission articulates **Obligations of Affiliation,** which are behavioral requirements for its member and candidate institutions, including the requirement that they abide by Commission policies.

Guiding Values

The Criteria for Accreditation reflect a set of guiding values for institutional accreditation. The Commission articulates these guiding values so as to offer a better understanding of the Criteria and the intentions that underlie them. Institutions are not expected to address these values: they are offered as explanation.

The Criteria for Accreditation and Core Components

The Criteria are designed to seek evidence of continual improvement and aspiration on the part of member institutions rather than to define minimum qualifications. Each Criterion begins with a broad statement of Commission expectations related to the Criterion. The **Core Components** identify areas of particular focus within the Criterion. Some of these Core Components are further elaborated or explicated in sub-components. The sub-components are not comprehensive: they elaborate certain aspects of the Core Component that the Commission seeks to ensure are not overlooked, but they do not fully constitute the Component. Some of the Core Components do not have sub-components because such elaboration has not appeared necessary. An institution provides evidence with regard to those sub-components of the Core Components that apply to the institution. An institution has the opportunity in its documentation and a team has the option in its review to identify topics or issues related to a Core Component other than those specified in the sub-components.

In preparation for accreditation and reaffirmation of accreditation, an institution provides evidence that it meets all the Criteria and all the Core Components. The distinctiveness of an institution's mission may condition the strategies it adopts and the evidence it provides that it meets the Criteria.

The Commission reviews the institution against the Core Components and Criteria through its evaluation processes according to the following evaluative framework.

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The Core Components

The institution **meets** the Core Component if the Core Component:

a) is met without concerns, that is the institution meets or exceeds the expectations embodied in the Component; or

b) is met with concerns, that is the institution demonstrates the characteristics expected by the Component, but performance in relation to some aspect of the Component must be improved.

The institution **does not meet** the Core Component if the institution fails to meet the Component in its entirety or is so deficient in one or more aspects of the Component that the Component is judged not to be met.

The Criteria for Accreditation

The institution **meets** the Criterion if the Criterion:

a) is met without concerns, that is the institution meets or exceeds the expectations embodied in the Criterion; or

b) is met with concerns, that is the institution demonstrates the characteristics expected by the Criterion, but performance in relation to some Core Components of the Criterion must be improved.

The institution **does not meet** the Criterion if the institution fails to meet the Criterion in its entirety or is so deficient in one or more Core Components of the Criterion that the Criterion is judged not to be met.

The institution meets the Criterion only if all Core Components are met. The institution must be judged to meet all five Criteria for Accreditation to merit accreditation.

The Commission will grant or continue accreditation (with or without conditions or sanctions), deny accreditation, or withdraw accreditation based on the outcome of its review.

The Assumed Practices

Higher education functions within a community marked by shared practices among colleges and universities, practices that have developed out of shared experience, are basic to higher education in the United States, and have been tested over time. Institutional accreditation evolved within these shared practices and it relies upon the assumption that institutions follow them.

The Assumed Practices are foundational to the Criteria for Accreditation. Unlike the Criteria and Core Components, they are generally matters to be determined as facts, rather than matters requiring professional judgment, and they are unlikely to vary by institutional mission or context.

Because accredited institutions engage in these Assumed Practices as a matter of course, the Commission does not ask that an accredited institution explicitly address them in an evaluation process except where specifically required to do so to ensure continuing conformity. Such circumstances include when an institution is undergoing a Change of Control, Structure, or Organization, and when an institution is in the process of removal from probation or an order of show-cause.

When it discovers that an accredited institution is not following an Assumed Practice, the Commission initiates a review, in accordance with its policy and procedure, to determine whether the institution remains in compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation. The Commission also requires that the institution take action to bring its practice into conformity with the Assumed Practices. An accredited institution that finds through its own processes that its practice is departing from the Assumed Practices should take immediate steps to correct the deficiency; it is not required to disclose its finding to the Commission provided that it moves quickly to initiate a remedy.

An institution seeking Candidacy must explicitly demonstrate conformity with the Assumed Practices. An institution seeking initial accreditation must again explicitly demonstrate conformity with these Practices as it addresses the Criteria for Accreditation. Institutional conformity with the Assumed Practices is necessary but only partial evidence of fulfillment of the Criteria for Accreditation. Commission decisions regarding accreditation status, while considering conformity with the Assumed Practices, will ultimately be based on a finding of fulfillment of the requirements for Candidacy for an institution seeking Candidacy or the Criteria for Accreditation for an institution seeking accreditation.

Obligations of Affiliation and Commission Policies

The Institutional Obligations of Affiliation describe behavioral requirements on the part of member institutions, including the requirement to abide by Commission policies. Among those policies, the Obligations draw particular attention to the requirements for transparency as to specified outcomes of the Commission's reviews for accreditation. While the Commission makes information about these reviews public, this information concerns the accreditation relationship of institutions; hence institutions have an obligation to accept such publication and also have an obligation to represent this information accurately. The Institutional Obligations of Affiliation are absolute and the Commission may take immediate administrative action in the event that an institution fails to meet any of them.

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Policies Related to the Federal Requirements for Recognition of Accrediting Agencies

The Commission has a number of policies regarding the institutions it accredits that are mandated by virtue of its recognition by the U.S. Department of Education as a qualified accreditor for the purposes of eligibility for Title IV funds. While these requirements are outside the Criteria for Accreditation, the Commission will assure compliance with the requirements outlined in the Commission's Federal Compliance Program as part of all its comprehensive reviews.

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The Criteria for Accreditation: Guiding Values

The Higher Learning Commission's Criteria for Accreditation reflect a set of **guiding values.** The Commission articulates these guiding values so as to offer a better understanding of the Criteria and the intentions that underlie them.

The responsibility for assuring the quality of an institution rests first with the institution itself. Institutional accreditation assesses the capacity of an institution to assure its own quality and expects it to produce evidence that it does so.

Many of the Higher Learning Commission's Criteria for Accreditation should be understood in this light. The Commission expects the governing board to ensure quality through its governance structures, with appropriate degrees of involvement and delegation. The Commission emphasizes planning because planning is critical to sustaining quality. Assessment of student learning and focus on persistence and completion are ways in which the institution improves and thus assures the quality of its teaching and learning.

The Commission expects that institutions have the standards, the processes, and the will for quality assurance in depth and throughout its educational offerings.

1. Focus on student learning

For the purpose of accreditation, the Higher Learning Commission regards the teaching mission of any institution as primary. Institutions will have other missions, such as research, healthcare, and public service, and these other missions may have a shaping and highly valuable effect on the education that the institution provides. In the accreditation process, these missions should be recognized and considered in relation to the teaching mission.

A focus on student learning encompasses every aspect of students' experience at an institution: how they are recruited and admitted; costs they are charged and how they are supported by financial aid; how well they are informed and guided before and through their work at the institution; the breadth, depth, currency, and relevance of the learning they are offered; their education through co-curricular offerings; the effectiveness of their programs; what happens to them after they leave the institution.

2. Education as a public purpose

Every educational institution serves a public purpose. Public or state-supported institutions make that assumption readily. Not-for-profit institutions receive their tax-exempt status on the basis of an assumption that they serve a public purpose. And although it may appear that a for-profit institution does not require a public purpose, because education is a public good its provision serves a public purpose and entails societal obligations. Furthermore, the provision of higher education requires a more complex standard of care than, for instance, the provision of dry cleaning services. What the students buy, with money, time, and effort, is not merely a good, like a credential, but experiences that have the potential to transform lives, or to harm them. What institutions do constitutes a solemn responsibility for which they should hold themselves accountable.

3. Education for a diverse, technological, globally connected world

A contemporary education must recognize contemporary circumstances: the diversity of U.S. society, the diversity of the world in which students live, and the centrality of technology and the global dynamic to life in the 21st century. More than ever, students should be prepared for lifelong learning and for the likelihood that no job or occupation will last a lifetime. Even for the most technical qualification, students need the civic learning and broader intellectual capabilities that underlie success in the workforce. The Commission distinguishes higher education in part on the basis of its reach beyond narrow vocational training to a broader intellectual and social context.

4. A culture of continuous improvement

Continuous improvement is the alternative to stagnation. Minimum standards are necessary but far from sufficient to achieve acceptable quality in higher education, and the strongest institutions will stay strong through ongoing aspiration. The Commission includes improvement as one of two major strands in all its pathways, the other being assurance that member institutions meet the Criteria and the Federal Requirements.

A process of assessment is essential to continuous improvement and

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therefore a commitment to assessment should be deeply embedded in an institution's activities. Assessment applies not only to student learning and educational outcomes but to an institution's approach to improvement of institutional effectiveness.

For student learning, a commitment to assessment would mean assessment at the program level that proceeds from clear goals, involves faculty at all points in the process, and analyzes the assessment results; it would also mean that the institution improves its programs or ancillary services or other operations on the basis of those analyses. Institutions committed to improvement review their programs regularly and seek external judgment, advice, or benchmarks in their assessments. Because in recent years the issues of persistence and completion have become central to public concern about higher education, the current Criteria direct attention to them as possible indicators of quality and foci for improvement, without prescribing either the measures or outcomes.

Innovation is an aspect of improvement and essential in a time of rapid change and challenge; through its Criteria and processes the Commission seeks to support innovation for improvement in all facets of institutional practice.

5. Evidence-based institutional learning and self-presentation

Assessment and the processes an institution learns from should be well-grounded in evidence. Statements of belief and intention have important roles in an institution's presentation of itself, but for the quality assurance function of accreditation, evidence is critical. Institutions should be able to select evidence based on their particular purposes and circumstances. At the same time, many of the Assumed Practices within the Criteria require certain specified evidence.

6. Integrity, transparency, and ethical behavior or practice

The Commission understands integrity broadly, including wholeness and coherence at one end of the spectrum and ethical behavior at the other. Integrity means doing what the mission calls for and not doing what it does not call for; governance systems that are freely, independently, and rigorously focused on the welfare of the institution and its students; scrupulous avoidance of misleading statements or practices; full disclosure of information to students before students make any commitment to the institution, even a commitment to receive more information; clear, explicit requirements for ethical practice by all members of the institutional community in all its activities.

7. Governance for the well-being of the institution

The well-being of an institution requires that its governing board place that well-being above the interests of its own members and the interests of any other entity. Because the Commission accredits the educational institution itself, and not the state system, religious organization, corporation, medical center, or other entity that may own it, it holds the governing board of an institution accountable for the key aspects of the institution's operations. The governing board must have the independent authority for such accountability and must also hold itself independent of undue influence from individuals, be they donors, elected officials, supporters of athletics, shareholders, or others with personal or political interests.

Governance of a quality institution of higher education will include a significant role for faculty, in particular with regard to currency and sufficiency of the curriculum, expectations for student performance, qualifications of the instructional staff, and adequacy of resources for instructional support.

8. Planning and management of resources to ensure institutional sustainability

The Commission does not privilege wealth. Students do expect, however, that an institution will be in operation for the duration of their degree programs. Therefore, the Commission is obliged to seek information regarding an institution's sustainability and, to that end, wise management of its resources. The Commission also watches for signs that an institution's financial challenges are eroding the quality of its programs to the point of endangering the institution's ability to meet the Criteria for Accreditation. Careful mid- and long-range planning must undergird an institution's budgetary and financial decisions.

9. Mission-centered evaluation

The Commission understands and values deeply the diversity of its institutions, which begins from the diversity of their missions. Accordingly, mission in some degree governs each of the Criteria. The Commission holds many expectations for all institutions regardless of mission, but it expects that differences in mission will shape wide differences in how the expectations are addressed and met.

10. Accreditation through peer review

Peer review is the defining characteristic of accreditation and essential for a judgment-based process in a highly complex field. But self-regulation can be met with public skepticism. Therefore, peer review for accreditation must: (1) be collegial, in the sense of absolute openness in the relationship between an institution and the peer reviewers assigned to it as well as between the institution and the Commission; (2) be firm in maintaining high standards, not mistaking leniency for kindness or inclusiveness; and (3) be cognizant of the dual role of peer reviewers in both assuring and advancing institutional quality.

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The Criteria for Accreditation

The Criteria for Accreditation are the standards of quality by which the Commission determines whether an institution merits accreditation or reaffirmation of accreditation. They are as follows:

Criterion One.

Mission

The institution's mission is clear and articulated publicly; it guides the institution's operations.

Core Components

1.A. The institution's mission is broadly understood within the institution and guides its operations.

1. The mission statement is developed through a process suited to the nature and culture of the institution and is adopted by the governing board.

2. The institution's academic programs, student support services, and enrollment profile are consistent with its stated mission.

3. The institution's planning and budgeting priorities align with and support the mission. (This sub-component may be addressed by reference to the response to Criterion 5.C.1.)

1.B. The mission is articulated publicly.

1. The institution clearly articulates its mission through one or more public documents, such as statements of purpose, vision, values, goals, plans, or institutional priorities.

2. The mission document or documents are current and explain the extent of the institution's emphasis on the various aspects of its mission, such as instruction, scholarship, research, application of research, creative works, clinical service, public service, economic development, and religious or cultural purpose.

3. The mission document or documents identify the nature, scope, and intended constituents of the higher education programs and services the institution provides.

1.C. The institution understands the relationship between its mission and the diversity of society.

1. The institution addresses its role in a multicultural society.

2. The institution's processes and activities reflect attention to human diversity as appropriate within its mission and for the constituencies it serves.

1.D. The institution's mission demonstrates commitment to the public good.

1. Actions and decisions reflect an understanding that in its educational role the institution serves the public, not solely the institution, and thus entails a public obligation.

2. The institution's educational responsibilities take primacy over other purposes, such as generating financial returns for investors, contributing to a related or parent organization, or supporting external interests.

3. The institution engages with its identified external constituencies and communities of interest and responds to their needs as its mission and capacity allow.

Criterion Two.

Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

The institution acts with integrity; its conduct is ethical and responsible.

Core Components

2.A. The institution operates with integrity in its financial, academic, personnel, and auxiliary functions; it establishes and follows fair and ethical policies and processes for its governing board, administration, faculty, and staff.

2.B. The institution presents itself clearly and completely to its students and to the public with regard to its programs, requirements, faculty and staff, costs to students, control, and accreditation relationships.

2.C. The governing board of the institution is sufficiently autonomous to make decisions in the best interest of the institution and to assure its integrity.

1. The governing board's deliberations reflect priorities to preserve and enhance the institution.

2. The governing board reviews and considers the reasonable and relevant interests of the institution's internal and external constituencies during its decision-making deliberations.

3. The governing board preserves its independence from undue influence on the part of donors, elected officials, ownership interests, or other external parties when such influence would not be in the best interest of the institution.

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4. The governing board delegates day-to-day management of the institution to the administration and expects the faculty to oversee academic matters.

2.D. The institution is committed to freedom of expression and the pursuit of truth in teaching and learning.

2.E. The institution ensures that faculty, students, and staff acquire, discover, and apply knowledge responsibly.

1. The institution provides effective oversight and support services to ensure the integrity of research and scholarly practice conducted by its faculty, staff, and students.

2. Students are offered guidance in the ethical use of information resources.

3. The institution has and enforces policies on academic honesty and integrity.

Criterion Three.

Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support

The institution provides high quality education, wherever and however its offerings are delivered.

Core Components

3.A. The institution's degree programs are appropriate to higher education.

1. Courses and programs are current and require levels of performance by students appropriate to the degree or certificate awarded.

2. The institution articulates and differentiates learning goals for its undergraduate, graduate, post-baccalaureate, post-graduate, and certificate programs.

3. The institution's program quality and learning goals are consistent across all modes of delivery and all locations (on the main campus, at additional locations, by distance delivery, as dual credit, through contractual or consortial arrangements, or any other modality).

3.B. The institution demonstrates that the exercise of intellectual inquiry and the acquisition, application, and integration of broad learning and skills are integral to its educational programs.

1. The general education program is appropriate to the mission, educational offerings, and degree levels of the institution.

2. The institution articulates the purposes, content, and intended learning outcomes of its undergraduate general education requirements. The program of general education is grounded in a philosophy or framework developed by the institution or adopted from an established framework. It imparts broad knowledge and intellectual concepts to students and develops skills and attitudes that the institution believes every college-educated person should possess.

3. Every degree program offered by the institution engages students in collecting, analyzing, and communicating information; in mastering modes of inquiry or creative work; and in developing skills adaptable to changing environments.

4. The education offered by the institution recognizes the human and cultural diversity of the world in which students live and work.

5. The faculty and students contribute to scholarship, creative work, and the discovery of knowledge to the extent appropriate to their programs and the institution's mission.

3.C. The institution has the faculty and staff needed for effective, high-quality programs and student services.

1. The institution has sufficient numbers and continuity of faculty members to carry out both the classroom and the non-classroom roles of faculty, including oversight of the curriculum and expectations for student performance; establishment of academic credentials for instructional staff; involvement in assessment of student learning.

2. All instructors are appropriately credentialed, including those in dual credit, contractual, and consortial programs.

3. Instructors are evaluated regularly in accordance with established institutional policies and procedures.

4. The institution has processes and resources for assuring that instructors are current in their disciplines and adept in their teaching roles; it supports their professional development.

5. Instructors are accessible for student inquiry.

6. Staff members providing student support services, such as tutoring, financial aid advising, academic advising, and co-curricular activities, are appropriately qualified, trained, and supported in their professional development.

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3.D. The institution provides support for student learning and effective teaching.

1. The institution provides student support services suited to the needs of its student populations.
2. The institution provides for learning support and preparatory instruction to address the academic needs of its students. It has a process for directing entering students to courses and programs for which the students are adequately prepared.
3. The institution provides academic advising suited to its programs and the needs of its students.
4. The institution provides to students and instructors the infrastructure and resources necessary to support effective teaching and learning (technological infrastructure, scientific laboratories, libraries, performance spaces, clinical practice sites, museum collections, as appropriate to the institution's offerings).
5. The institution provides to students guidance in the effective use of research and information resources.

3.E. The institution fulfills the claims it makes for an enriched educational environment.

1. Co-curricular programs are suited to the institution's mission and contribute to the educational experience of its students.
2. The institution demonstrates any claims it makes about contributions to its students' educational experience by virtue of aspects of its mission, such as research, community engagement, service learning, religious or spiritual purpose, and economic development.

Criterion Four.

Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement

The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments, and support services, and it evaluates their effectiveness for student learning through processes designed to promote continuous improvement.

Core Components

4.A. The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs.

1. The institution maintains a practice of regular program reviews.
2. The institution evaluates all the credit that it transcripts, including what it awards for experiential learning or other forms of prior learning.
3. The institution has policies that assure the quality of the credit it accepts in transfer.
4. The institution maintains and exercises authority over the prerequisites for courses, rigor of courses, expectations for student learning, access to learning resources, and faculty qualifications for all its programs, including dual credit programs. It assures that its dual credit courses or programs for high school students are equivalent in learning outcomes and levels of achievement to its higher education curriculum.
5. The institution maintains specialized accreditation for its programs as appropriate to its educational purposes.
6. The institution evaluates the success of its graduates. The institution assures that the degree or certificate programs it represents as preparation for advanced study or employment accomplish these purposes. For all programs, the institution looks to indicators it deems appropriate to its mission, such as employment rates, admission rates to advanced degree programs, and participation rates in fellowships, internships, and special programs (e.g., Peace Corps and Americorps).

4.B. The institution demonstrates a commitment to educational achievement and improvement through ongoing assessment of student learning.

1. The institution has clearly stated goals for student learning and effective processes for assessment of student learning and achievement of learning goals.
2. The institution assesses achievement of the learning outcomes that it claims for its curricular and co-curricular programs.
3. The institution uses the information gained from assessment to improve student learning.
4. The institution's processes and methodologies to assess student learning reflect good practice, including the substantial participation of faculty and other instructional staff members.

4.C. The institution demonstrates a commitment to educational improvement through ongoing attention to retention, persistence, and completion rates in its degree and certificate programs.

1. The institution has defined goals for student retention,

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persistence, and completion that are ambitious but attainable and appropriate to its mission, student populations, and educational offerings.

2. The institution collects and analyzes information on student retention, persistence, and completion of its programs.

3. The institution uses information on student retention, persistence, and completion of programs to make improvements as warranted by the data.

4. The institution's processes and methodologies for collecting and analyzing information on student retention, persistence, and completion of programs reflect good practice. (Institutions are not required to use IPEDS definitions in their determination of persistence or completion rates. Institutions are encouraged to choose measures that are suitable to their student populations, but institutions are accountable for the validity of their measures.)

Criterion Five.

Resources, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness

The institution's resources, structures, and processes are sufficient to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its educational offerings, and respond to future challenges and opportunities. The institution plans for the future.

Core Components

5.A. The institution's resource base supports its current educational programs and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future.

1. The institution has the fiscal and human resources and physical and technological infrastructure sufficient to support its operations wherever and however programs are delivered.

2. The institution's resource allocation process ensures that its educational purposes are not adversely affected by elective resource allocations to other areas or disbursement of revenue to a superordinate entity.

3. The goals incorporated into mission statements or elaborations of mission statements are realistic in light of the institution's organization, resources, and opportunities.

4. The institution's staff in all areas are appropriately qualified and trained.

5. The institution has a well-developed process in place for budgeting and for monitoring expense.

5.B. The institution's governance and administrative structures promote effective leadership and support collaborative processes that enable the institution to fulfill its mission.

1. The institution has and employs policies and procedures to engage its internal constituencies—including its governing board, administration, faculty, staff, and students—in the institution's governance.

2. The governing board is knowledgeable about the institution; it provides oversight for the institution's financial and academic policies and practices and meets its legal and fiduciary responsibilities.

3. The institution enables the involvement of its administration, faculty, staff, and students in setting academic requirements, policy, and processes through effective structures for contribution and collaborative effort.

5.C. The institution engages in systematic and integrated planning.

1. The institution allocates its resources in alignment with its mission and priorities.

2. The institution links its processes for assessment of student learning, evaluation of operations, planning, and budgeting.

3. The planning process encompasses the institution as a whole and considers the perspectives of internal and external constituent groups.

4. The institution plans on the basis of a sound understanding of its current capacity. Institutional plans anticipate the possible impact of fluctuations in the institution's sources of revenue, such as enrollment, the economy, and state support.

5. Institutional planning anticipates emerging factors, such as technology, demographic shifts, and globalization.

5.D. The institution works systematically to improve its performance.

1. The institution develops and documents evidence of performance in its operations.

2. The institution learns from its operational experience and applies that learning to improve its institutional effectiveness, capabilities, and sustainability, overall and in its component parts.

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The Assumed Practices

Foundational to the Criteria and Core Components is a set of practices shared by institutions of higher education in the United States. Unlike Criteria and Core Components, these Assumed Practices are (1) generally matters to be determined as facts, rather than matters requiring professional judgment and (2) unlikely to vary by institutional mission or context.

A. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

1. The institution has a conflict of interest policy that ensures that the governing board and the senior administrative personnel act in the best interest of the institution.

2. The institution has ethics policies for faculty and staff regarding conflict of interest, nepotism, recruitment and admissions, financial aid, privacy of personal information, and contracting.

3. The institution provides its students, administrators, faculty, and staff with policies and procedures informing them of their rights and responsibilities within the institution.

4. The institution provides clear information regarding its procedures for receiving complaints and grievances from students and other constituencies, responds to them in a timely manner, and analyzes them to improve its processes.

5. The institution makes readily available to students and to the general public clear and complete information including:

a. statements of mission, vision, and values

b. full descriptions of the requirements for its programs, including all pre-requisite courses

c. requirements for admission both to the institution and to particular programs or majors

d. policies on acceptance of transfer credit, including how credit is applied to degree requirements. (Except for courses articulated through transfer policies or institutional agreements, the institution makes no promises to prospective students regarding the acceptance of credit awarded by examination, credit for prior learning, or credit for transfer until an evaluation has been conducted.)

e. all student costs, including tuition, fees, training, and incidentals; its financial aid policies, practices, and requirements; and its policy on refunds

f. policies regarding academic good standing, probation, and dismissal; residency or enrollment requirements (if any)

g. a full list of its instructors and their academic credentials

h. its relationship with any parent organization (corporation, hospital, church, or other entity that owns the institution) and any external providers of its instruction.

6. The institution assures that all data it makes public are accurate and complete, including those reporting on student achievement of learning and student persistence, retention, and completion.

7. The institution portrays clearly and accurately to the public its current status with the Higher Learning Commission and with specialized, national, and professional accreditation agencies.

a. An institution offering programs that require specialized accreditation or recognition by a state licensing board or other entity in order for its students to be certified or to sit for the licensing examination in states where its students reside either has the appropriate accreditation and recognition or discloses publicly and clearly the consequences to the students of the lack thereof. The institution makes clear to students the distinction between regional and specialized or program accreditation and the relationships between licensure and the various types of accreditation.

b. An institution offering programs eligible for specialized accreditation at multiple locations discloses the accreditation status and recognition of the program by state licensing boards at each location.

c. An institution that advertises a program as preparation for a licensure, certification, or other qualifying examination publicly discloses its pass rate on that examination, unless such information is not available to the institution.

8. The governing board and its executive committee, if it has one, include some "public" members. Public members have no significant administrative position or any ownership interest in any of the following: the institution itself; a company that does substantial business with the institution; a company or organization with which the institution has a substantial partnership; a parent, ultimate parent, affiliate, or subsidiary corporation; an investment group or firm substantially involved with one of the above organizations. All publicly-elected members or members appointed by publicly-elected individuals or bodies (governors, elected legislative bodies) are public members.[1]

9. The governing board has the authority to approve the annual budget and to engage and dismiss the chief executive officer.[1]

10. The institution documents outsourcing of all services in written agreements, including agreements with parent or affiliated organizations.

11. The institution takes responsibility for the ethical and responsible behavior of its contractual partners in relation to actions taken on its behalf.

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B. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support

1. Programs, Courses, and Credits

a. The institution conforms to commonly accepted minimum program length: 60 semester credits for associate's degrees, 120 semester credits for bachelor's degrees, and 30 semester credits beyond the bachelor's for master's degrees. Any variation from these minima must be explained and justified.

b. The institution maintains structures or practices that ensure the coherence and quality of the programs for which it awards a degree. Typically institutions will require that at minimum 30 of the 120 credits earned for the bachelor's degree and 15 of the 60 credits for the associate's degree be credits earned at the institution itself, through arrangements with other accredited institutions, or through contractual relationships approved by the Commission. Any variation from the typical minima must be explained and justified.

c. The institution's policy and practice assure that at least 50% of courses applied to a graduate program are courses designed for graduate work, rather than undergraduate courses credited toward a graduate degree. (Cf. Criterion 3.A.1 and 2.) (An institution may allow well-prepared advanced students to substitute its graduate courses for required or elective courses in an undergraduate degree program and then subsequently count those same courses as fulfilling graduate requirements in a related graduate program that the institution offers. In "4+1" or "2+3" programs, at least 50% of the credits allocated for the master's degree—usually 15 of 30—must be for courses designed for graduate work.)

d. The institution adheres to policies on student academic load per term that reflect reasonable expectations for successful learning and course completion.

e. Courses that carry academic credit toward college-level credentials have content and rigor appropriate to higher education.

f. The institution has a process for ensuring that all courses transferred and applied toward degree requirements demonstrate equivalence with its own courses required for that degree or are of equivalent rigor.

g. The institution has a clear policy on the maximum allowable credit for prior learning as a reasonable proportion of the credits required to complete the student's program. Credit awarded for prior learning is documented, evaluated, and appropriate for the level of degree awarded. (Note that this requirement does not apply to courses transferred from other institutions.)

h. The institution maintains a minimum requirement for general education for all of its undergraduate programs whether through a traditional practice of distributed curricula (15 semester credits for AAS degrees, 24 for AS or AA degrees, and 30 for bachelor's degrees) or through integrated, embedded, interdisciplinary, or other accepted models that demonstrate a minimum requirement equivalent to the distributed model. Any variation is explained and justified.

2. Faculty Roles and Qualifications

a. Instructors (excluding for this requirement teaching assistants enrolled in a graduate program and supervised by faculty) possess an academic degree relevant to what they are teaching and at least one level above the level at which they teach, except in programs for terminal degrees or when equivalent experience is established. In terminal degree programs, faculty members possess the same level of degree. When faculty members are employed based on equivalent experience, the institution defines a minimum threshold of experience and an evaluation process that is used in the appointment process.

b. Instructors teaching at the doctoral level have a record of recognized scholarship, creative endeavor, or achievement in practice commensurate with doctoral expectations.

c. Faculty participate substantially in:

1) oversight of the curriculum—its development and implementation, academic substance, currency, and relevance for internal and external constituencies;

2) assurance of consistency in the level and quality of instruction and in the expectations of student performance;

3) establishment of the academic qualifications for instructional personnel;

4) analysis of data and appropriate action on assessment of student learning and program completion.

3. Support Services

a. Financial aid advising clearly and comprehensively reviews students' eligibility for financial assistance and assists students in a full understanding of their debt and its consequences.

b. The institution maintains timely and accurate transcript and records services.

C. Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement

1. Instructors (excluding for this requirement teaching assistants enrolled in a graduate program and supervised by faculty) have the authority for the assignment of grades. (This requirement allows for collective responsibility, as when a faculty committee has the authority to override a grade on appeal.)

2. The institution refrains from the transcription of credit from other institutions or providers that it will not apply to its own programs.

3. The institution has formal and current written agreements for managing any internships and clinical placements included in its programs.

4. A predominantly or solely single-purpose institution in fields that require licensure for practice is also accredited by or is actively in the process of applying to a recognized specialized accred-

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iting agency for each field, if such agency exists.

5. Instructors communicate course requirements to students in writing and in a timely manner.

6. Institutional data on assessment of student learning are accurate and address the full range of students who enroll.

7. Institutional data on student retention, persistence, and completion are accurate and address the full range of students who enroll.

D. Resources, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness

1. The institution is able to meet its current financial obligations.

2. The institution has a prepared budget for the current year and the capacity to compare it with budgets and actual results of previous years.

3. The institution has future financial projections addressing its long-term financial sustainability.

4. The institution maintains effective systems for collecting, analyzing, and using institutional information.

5. The institution undergoes an external audit by a certified public accountant or a public audit agency that reports financial statements on the institution separately from any other related entity or parent corporation. For private institutions the audit is annual; for public institutions it is at least every two years.[2]

6. The institution's administrative structure includes a chief executive officer, chief financial officer, and chief academic officer (titles may vary) with appropriate credentials and experience and sufficient focus on the institution to ensure appropriate leadership and oversight. (An institution may outsource its financial functions but must have the capacity to assure the effectiveness of that arrangement.)

Notes:

[1] *Institutions operating under federal control and authorized by Congress are exempt from these requirements. These institutions must have a public board that includes representation by individuals who do not have a current or previous employment or other relationship with the federal government or any military entity. This public board has a significant role in setting policy, reviewing the institution's finances, reviewing and approving major institutional priorities, and overseeing the academic programs of the institution.*

[2] *Institutions under federal control are exempted provided that they have other reliable information to document the institution's fiscal resources and management.*

5

Institutional Obligations of Affiliation

While seeking and holding affiliation with the Commission, an institution voluntarily agrees to meet obligations set forth by the Commission as follows:

1. The institution meets obligations set forth by the Commission, including periodic evaluation through the structures and mechanisms set forth in Commission policies, submission of reports as requested by the Commission, filing of the Institutional Update, and any other requirements set forth in its policies.

2. The institution is candid, transparent, and forthcoming in its dealings with the Commission, including in its responses to any special inquiries or requests for information from the Commission. The institution agrees not to enter into any agreement that limits the nature or scope of its communications with the Commission or requires that a third party review and approve those communications prior to their transmission to the Commission.

3. The institution notifies the Commission of any condition or situation that has the potential to affect the institution's status with the Commission, such as a significant unanticipated reduction in program offerings or serious legal investigation. (A fuller list of such conditions or situations is included in the Commission's policy on special monitoring.)

4. The institution informs the Commission of its relationship with any related entity wherein institutional decision-making is controlled by that entity and of any changes in that relationship that may affect the institution's compliance with Commission accreditation requirements. (Definitions and process requirements are contained in the Commission's policy on institutions with related entities.)

5. The institution describes itself in identical terms to the Commission and to any other institutional accrediting body with which it holds or seeks affiliation with regard to purpose, governance, programs, locations, degrees, diplomas, certificates, personnel, finances, and constituents.

6. The institution notifies the Commission when it receives an adverse action from or has been placed on sanction by any other accrediting agency or if a state has issued a pending or final action that affects the institution's legal status or authority to grant degrees.

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7. The institution assures its employees and students that it will consider fairly all complaints and third-party comments and not engage in retaliatory action against any who have submitted such information.

8. The institution accepts that the Commission will, in the interest of transparency to the public, publish outcomes from its accreditation process.

9. The institution portrays its accreditation status with the Commission clearly to the public, including the status of its branch campuses and related entities. The institution posts the electronic version of the Commission's Mark of Affiliation in at least one place on its Web site, linking users directly to the institution's status on the Commission's Web site.

10. The institution communicates to its constituencies and applicants any Public Disclosure Notice it receives from the Higher Learning Commission.

11. The institution maintains prominently on its Web site a telephone number that includes an option for both current students and the public to speak with a representative of the institution.

12. The institution submits timely payment of dues and fees and accepts the fact of surcharges for late payment.

13. The institution agrees to accept binding arbitration in the event of an action by the Commission's Board of Trustees that the institution disputes and is not able to resolve through the Commission's processes. This agreement follows procedures developed and published by the Commission. The institution also agrees to grant immunity to the Commission from claims of civil liability related to judgments made by the Commission or its agents in the course of its work of accrediting institutions provided that it was acting in good faith and within the scope of its responsibilities.

6

Criteria for Accreditation: Glossary

There are a few words and phrases in the Criteria that require additional clarification, seemingly simple language that, in practice, may be used in different ways by different member institutions. This glossary explains how these words are used within the Criteria for Accreditation. Its intent is not to prescribe how institutions must use a particular word or phrase locally, but rather to offer a means to ensure a consistent reading of the meaning and expectations of the Criteria for Accreditation.

auxiliary denotes activities and services related to but not intrinsic to educational functions: dining services, student housing, faculty or staff housing, intercollegiate athletics, student stores, a Public Radio station, etc. In many institutions ***auxiliary*** simultaneously denotes a segregated budget and dedicated revenues.

assessment and ***evaluation*** are used as ordinary language synonyms. When a narrower referent is intended, the terms are modified, as in "assessment of student learning" or "evaluation of academic services."

control as used in the Criteria refers to the institution's status as a public, private-not-for-profit, or private-for-profit institution, and in the latter instances, to the institution's ownership and the board's power to direct its affairs.

dual credit refers to courses taught to high school students for which the students receive both high school credit and college credit. These courses or programs are offered under a variety of names; the Criteria on "dual credit" apply to all of them as they involve the accredited institution's responsibility for the quality of its offerings.

faculty and ***instructors*** refer to all those an institution employs or assigns to teach students. ***Faculty*** is used to refer to the group rather than to each individual instructional staff member, typically to distinguish faculty from administration.

goals and ***outcomes*** are used inconsistently by member institutions in the context of assessment of student learning, to the extent that one institution's ***goal*** may be another's ***outcome*** and vice versa. When they use either term, the Criteria indicate through context whether the term refers to the learning intended or to how much students actually learn.

public in phrases such as "makes available to the public" or "states publicly" refers to people *in general*, including current and potential students. In phrases such as "the public good," the Criteria refer to public, as opposed to private, good. The modifier ***public*** as used to describe governing board members is defined within the statement requiring such members.

wherever and however delivered is intended to encompass all modes of delivery and all locations, modalities, and venues, including but not limited to the main campus, additional locations, distance delivery, dual credit, contractual or consortial arrangements.

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