

Chapter II

Accreditation by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education

Overview

In the six New England states and designated overseas areas, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, a constituent unit of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, undertakes the evaluation of the region's colleges and universities. Accreditation means specifically that an institution of higher education fulfills the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. Approximately 225 institutions of higher education have achieved this distinction.

The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education evaluates institutions against eleven standards, each of which encompasses a principal area of institutional activity or responsibility. Each standard, in addition to containing specific criteria by which to measure institutional quality, requires that the institution assess its degree of effectiveness in each area covered by the standard and use the results of that assessment to improve and enhance the institution's ability to meet its mission. Commission standards also require that the institution carry on each aspect of its activities with integrity. Accreditation by an institutional accrediting body indicates that the institution has appropriate purposes; has the resources necessary to accomplish its purposes; can demonstrate that it is accomplishing its purposes; and gives reason to believe that it will continue to accomplish its purposes.

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges

The evaluation activities of the Association are carried out by six commissions, each being responsible for a separate institutional constituency: the Commission on Public Elementary Schools, the Commission on Independent Schools, the Commission on Public Secondary Schools, the Commission on Technical and Career Institutions, Commission on American and International Schools Abroad, and the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education. Each has been delegated the authority to formulate and maintain standards of

accreditation for its own group of institutions within the Association. An institution becomes accredited by a majority vote of the Board of Trustees of the Association upon recommendation by the appropriate Commission. In addition to accrediting institutions and seeking their improvement, the Association works for the development of more effective working relationships among schools and postsecondary institutions.

The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education

The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education is responsible for the evaluation of institutions which award the associate's, bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degrees.

Recognizing the importance of clearly stated and understood purposes as a guide to the effective conduct of its affairs, the Commission has adopted the following statement affirming its mission:

The Commission develops, makes public and applies criteria for the assessment of educational effectiveness among institutions of higher education leading to actions on their institutional accreditation. By this means, the Commission assures the educational community, the public and interested agencies that accredited institutions have clearly defined objectives which meet criteria published by the Commission; that they have the organization, staffing, and resources to accomplish, are accomplishing, and can continue to accomplish these objectives. In addition, through its process of assessment, the Commission encourages and assists in the improvement, effectiveness, and excellence of affiliated institutions.

The Commission consists of twenty members, who are elected at the annual meeting of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges for staggered three-year terms. Membership on the Commission is drawn from different types of institutions and the general public. The Commissioners serve without compensation, and those who are institutional representatives must, to be elected, be currently active on the faculties or staffs of institutions accredited through the Commission. The Commission normally meets four times a year, but various committees may meet more frequently to facilitate the Commission's work.

The day-to-day activities of the Commission are conducted by a Director of the Commission, professional staff, and support staff. The Director and professional staff oversee and direct the work of the Commission's evaluation program, including the self-study and on-site evaluation processes. In addition to representing the Commission to its affiliated colleges and universities, they also work closely with the various state offices of higher education and promote the work of the Commission through participation in appropriate local, state, regional, national and international meetings.

Standards for Accreditation

Institutions of higher education achieve and maintain accreditation through the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education by demonstrating that they meet at least minimally the Commission *Standards for Accreditation*, adopted in 2005. Eleven in number, each of these criteria encompasses a principle area of institutional activity and responsibility:

- Mission and Purposes
- Planning and Evaluation
- Organization and Governance
- The Academic Program
- Faculty
- Students
- Library and Other Information Resources
- Physical and Technological Resources
- Financial Resources
- Public Disclosure
- Integrity

While the individual standards express those essential characteristics and conditions specific to the various institutional components encompassed by each, throughout there is an emphasis on institutional effectiveness and integrity.

The *Standards for Accreditation* define quality and provide a framework for evaluation in terms of institutional mission. Thus, they have been developed to include a wide range of collegiate institutions as evidenced by their differences in purposes, size, organization, scope, clientele served, support, and control. By design, the standards do not preclude perceptive and imaginative experimentation that aims at intensifying the effectiveness of higher education. In evaluating an institution against its standards, the Commission

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assesses and makes a determination about the effectiveness of the institution as a whole. The institution which is found to meet the standards collectively is one which:

- *has clearly defined purposes appropriate to an institution of higher learning;*
- *has assembled and organized those resources necessary to achieve its purposes;*
- *is achieving its purposes;*
- *has the ability to continue to achieve its purposes.*

While specific programs or courses may be reviewed as a part of the evaluative process, they are not accredited in and of themselves. Some aspects of an institution are always stronger than others. Accreditation does not guarantee the quality of individual programs, courses, or graduates. However, serious weaknesses in some areas may threaten an institution's accreditation.

In addition to the *Standards for Accreditation*, the Commission has adopted a series of policy statements to which institutions are expected to adhere. The *Standards for Accreditation* establish minimum criteria for institutional quality; Commission policies elucidate the standards and relate to their application.

Accreditation implies more than that an institution meets minimum criteria, however. As part of their fulfillment of Commission standards, affiliated institutions are expected to work toward improving their quality, increasing their effectiveness, and continually striving toward excellence. The Commission's evaluative processes are designed to encourage such improvement. In addition, the Commission, through its emphasis in each of its standards, requires that an institution conduct all its operations with integrity.

When granted, accreditation is never partial. It applies to the entire institution and must be reviewed periodically through an on-site evaluation. Each accredited institution is required annually to update its description and data summary on file with the Commission. Substantive changes initiated subsequent to the most recent evaluation which significantly alter the objectives, scope, or control of the institution, or which establish instruction at a

new geographic location, are not automatically included in the institution's accreditation.

Accreditation is viewed by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education as a continuing status that, once confirmed, is removed only for cause. The nature and timing of evaluative reviews vary in accordance with the circumstances at a given institution and with the Commission's judgment as to how it can best serve the institution's needs while simultaneously fulfilling its responsibility to the broader academic community and the public. In any case, at intervals not to exceed ten years member institutions are evaluated comprehensively against the standards through on-site visits. In addition, at more frequent intervals an institution may, at the Commission's discretion, undergo reviews which are less than comprehensive. All evaluations review not only the degree to which an institution fulfills the Commission's standards but also its progress in self-improvement through an on-going process of planning and self-evaluation.

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