Accreditation
Of Higher Education Institutions
An Overview

The Higher Learning Commission
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An Overview

This pamphlet provides brief general information about the accreditation of higher education institutions by The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, identifies and responds to frequently asked questions about accreditation, and lists resources available from the Commission.

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INTRODUCTION

In the United States, accreditation is voluntarily sought by institutions and is conferred by non-governmental bodies. There are two types of educational accreditation: institutional and specialized.

An institutional accrediting agency evaluates an entire institution in terms of its mission and the agency's standards or criteria. It accredits the institution as a whole. It assesses the formal educational activities of the institution and also evaluates governance and administration, financial stability, admissions and student personnel services, institutional resources, student academic achievement, institutional effectiveness, and relationships with constituencies inside and outside the institution.

Institutional accreditation is provided by regional associations of schools and colleges (each named after the region in which it operates—Middle States, New England, North Central, Northwest, Southern, Western) and by several national associations that limit their scope to particular kinds of institutions. While independent of one another, the regional associations cooperate extensively and acknowledge one another's accreditation.

A specialized accrediting body evaluates particular units, schools, or programs within an institution. Specialized accreditation, also called program accreditation, is often associated with national professional associations such as those for engineering, medicine, and law, or with specific disciplines such as business, teacher education, psychology, or social work.

THE NORTH CENTRAL ASSOCIATION

The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools was founded in 1895 for the purpose of establishing close relations between the colleges and secondary schools of the region. Throughout its history the Association has been committed to the improvement of education at all levels through evaluation and accreditation.

Today, the Association is a membership organization of colleges and schools in 19 states—Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming—and Department of Defense schools and Navajo Nation schools.

Two independent corporations also hold membership in the Association:

- The Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement, with its office in Tempe, Arizona, accredits schools offering K-12 as well as non-degree granting
postsecondary institutions. This Commission works extensively through state committees throughout the region.

- The Higher Learning Commission, with its office in Chicago, accredits degree-granting institutions of higher education.

While the Association remains dedicated to fostering good relationships between colleges and schools, the two Commissions are legally empowered to conduct accrediting activities for educational institutions. The Association retains control over the use of the name, logo, and intellectual property of the Association.

**THE HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION**

In June of 2000, the Commission concluded a 14-month, highly participative process of examining its basic statements with the Board’s adoption of new statements of mission, vision, values, and strategic priorities. The new **mission statement** is succinct, yet directive:

*Serving the common good by assuring and advancing the quality of higher learning*

Guiding the Commission’s work into the future will be the **core values** of quality, integrity, innovation, diversity, inclusiveness, service, collaboration, and learning, each of which is of equal weight and importance. As stated in its **vision**, the Commission will be an organization known for its distinctive strengths of integrity, flexibility, creativity, responsiveness, and risk-taking, and for its commitment to work for the common good of society. Its transformed accreditation processes and its broadened range of services will support affiliated organizations in meeting new regional, national, and international expectations for higher learning. Four **strategic priorities** provide the opportunity to begin to rethink accreditation processes and services. Further details are available on the Commission's web site.

The change in mission was accompanied by an important corporate reorganization of the Association and its Commissions. In fall of 2000, institutional members approved new corporate bylaws for the Association that would allow each Commission to incorporate. The Commission filed in November for new corporate status as an independent corporation with clear legal responsibility for its accrediting activities. Concurrently, the Board changed the name from the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education to The Higher Learning Commission, a step that had been under consideration for some time. The Commission initiated a program to establish a new logo, corporate colors, and corporate identity in all of its communication tools and documents.

In spring 2001 the Commission initiated a major review of its requirements and criteria for accreditation and designed a
process to ensure broad stakeholder participation. The project, entitled “Restructuring Expectations: Accreditation 2004.” Check the web site or call the Commission office for further information about this project.

**COMMISSION PERSONNEL**

The Commission’s work is conducted by several groups:

- **A full-time staff** in the Commission office is responsible for implementing the Commission’s programs and policies and coordinating all of its activities.

- More than 900 educators, selected for their experience and expertise from all types of accredited institutions throughout the North Central region, serve on the Commission’s Consultant-Evaluator (C-E) Corps. C-Es serve as members of the evaluation teams that conduct site visits to institutions and participate in other Commission decision-making bodies.

- **The Accreditation Review Council (ARC)** includes at least 60 individuals who have been selected by the Board of Trustees to participate in the Commission’s review processes as readers and on review committees. ARC members come from the C-E Corps; some are representatives of the public.

- **The Institutional Actions Council** includes 26 members chosen by the Board of Trustees to review institutional evaluations referred by readers, review committees, evaluators panels, and staff, and to make accrediting decisions. Twenty members are experienced C-Es who come from accredited institutions; six are representatives of the public.

- **The Board of Trustees** includes 15 members elected by the member institutions to serve as the policy-making body of the Commission. Twelve are from accredited institutions; three represent the public. The work of Trustees focuses on seven major areas: to establish, clarify and continually articulate the mission, expected outcomes, and values of the Commission (including both service to and leadership of the membership); to establish the framework in which accomplishment of the mission will be measured; to evaluate overall accomplishment of the mission on a regular basis; to formulate policy and evaluate the effectiveness of both policies and processes; to envision and plan for the future; to be accountable for accrediting decisions; to assume fiscal responsibility for the organization and oversee financial matters; to connect with the organization’s stakeholders; and to appoint, support, and evaluate the Executive Director.

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The business meetings of the Board of Trustees are open to the public. Information about upcoming meetings is posted on the Commission’s web site.

**COMMISSION PROGRAMS AND SERVICES**

The Commission offers an extensive variety of programs and services to all its institutions. Each affiliated institution is assigned to a Commission staff liaison. These staff provide assistance to institutions and to evaluation teams during the self-study and evaluation processes, monitor institutions continuously through Annual Reports and institutional change processes, and offer other types of counsel.

The Commission’s publications and its Annual Meeting are a major part of the effort to assist institutions. To inform all its constituencies, the Commission publishes a variety of materials on self-study, evaluation, and institutional improvement, including the *Handbook of Accreditation*, describing the policies and procedures for the accreditation process; the *Exchanges* newsletter; and various other documents and articles. The Commission offers an extensive program on self-study, evaluation, and institutional improvement for institutions, C-Es, and others as a part of the Annual Meeting held each spring in Chicago. The annual volume of speaker papers from the meeting, *A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement*, is a rich resource on self-study, assessment, quality, and a wide variety of current higher education issues. The Commission’s web site provides information for institutions and the general public about the Commission, its staff, its policies, and its programs. (See pp. 20–22 for further information about Commission publications and web site.)

**FORMS OF STATUS**

Institutions of higher education may hold status with the Commission in either of two ways: by gaining and maintaining accredited status, which carries membership in the Commission and in the Association; or by gaining and maintaining candidacy, which is a limited-term, pre-accredited status. Currently, more than 990 institutions hold status with the Commission.

**THE EVALUATION PROCESS**

The Commission’s process of evaluation for both initial and continued accreditation is structured to determine whether an institution meets the General Institutional Requirements (GIRs) and the Criteria for Accreditation. Although some institutions may follow alternative patterns of self-study by

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written agreement with Commission staff, the evaluation process for most institutions can be summarized as follows:

- The institution undertakes a self-study aimed at examining how it meets the GIRs and the Criteria. The results of the self-examination are summarized in a Self-Study Report that forms the basis for the Commission’s evaluation. The completed Self-Study Report constitutes the institution’s formal application for initial or continued accreditation.

- The institution is visited by a team of Consultant-Evaluators appointed by the Commission. This team summarizes its findings in a written Team Report that assesses whether the institution satisfies the GIRs and the Criteria, offers advice and suggestions for improvement, and concludes with a formal recommendation for accreditation action.

- Through a multi-tiered process, ARC members and IAC members make accrediting decisions based on the Self-Study Report, the Team Report, an institutional response, and in some cases meetings with representatives of the institution and team. When these reviews result in suggested changes in the team recommendation, the institution and the team chair have an opportunity to respond in writing.

- All decisions made by the ARC and IAC processes are validated by the Board of Trustees. The Board itself reviews and acts on those cases involving sanctions, denial or withdrawal of affiliation, and/or disputed cases involving initial candidacy or initial accreditation.

The **Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP)** provides an alternative evaluation process for institutions accredited by the Commission. The process is structured around quality improvement principles and processes and involves a structured set of goal-setting, networking, and accountability activities. The Commission established AQIP in 1999 with grant support from the PEW Charitable Trust. For more information, visit the AQIP web site at [www.AQIP.org](http://www.AQIP.org).

### The General Institutional Requirements

An institution holding status with The Higher Learning Commission meets the following **General Institutional Requirements**:  
**Mission**  
1. It has a mission statement, formally adopted by the governing board and made public, declaring that it is an institution of higher education.  
2. It is a degree-granting institution.
Authorization

3. It has legal authorization to grant its degrees, and it meets all the legal requirements to operate as an institution of higher education wherever it conducts its activities.
4. It has legal documents to confirm its status: not-for-profit, for-profit, or public.

Governance

5. It has a governing board that possesses and exercises necessary legal power to establish and review basic policies that govern the institution.
6. Its governing board includes public members and is sufficiently autonomous from the administration and ownership to assure the integrity of the institution.
7. It has an executive officer designated by the governing board to provide administrative leadership for the institution.
8. Its governing board authorizes the institution's affiliation with the Commission.

Faculty

9. It employs a faculty that has earned from accredited institutions the degrees appropriate to the level of instruction offered by the institution.
10. A sufficient number of the faculty are full-time employees of the institution.
11. Its faculty has a significant role in developing and evaluating all of the institution's educational programs.

Educational Program

12. It confers degrees. (Note: for candidate institutions that have yet to graduate a student, it is sufficient to show that the institution has a plan and timetable ensuring that it will confer degrees within the candidacy period.)
13. It has degree programs in operation, with students enrolled in them.
14. Its degree programs are compatible with the institution's mission and are based on recognized fields of study at the higher education level.
15. Its degrees are appropriately named, following practices common to institutions of higher education in terms of both length and content of the programs.
16. Its undergraduate degree programs include a coherent general education requirement consistent with the institution's mission and designed to ensure breadth of knowledge and to promote intellectual inquiry.
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17. It has admission policies and practices that are consistent with the institution’s mission and appropriate to its educational programs.

18. It provides its students access to those learning resources and support services for its degree programs.

Finances

19. It has an external financial audit by a certified public accountant or a public audit agency at least every two years.

20. Its financial documents demonstrate the appropriate allocation and use of resources to support its educational programs.

21. Its financial practices, records, and reports demonstrate fiscal viability.

Public Information

22. Its catalog or other official documents include its mission statement along with accurate descriptions of its educational programs and degree requirements; its academic calendars; its learning resources; its admissions policies and practices; its academic and non-academic policies and procedures directly affecting students; its charges and refund policies; and the academic credentials of its faculty and administrators.

23. It accurately discloses its standing with accrediting bodies with which it is affiliated.

24. It makes available upon request information that accurately describes its financial condition.

The Commission provides a fuller explanation of its expectations for each GIR in the Handbook of Accreditation, published and available from the Commission office.

The Criteria for Accreditation

In addition to the General Institutional Requirements, an institution accredited by The Higher Learning Commission demonstrates that it satisfies five Criteria for Accreditation.

To assist those involved in making judgments about affiliation, the Commission provides a list of typical areas of institutional activity or concern that form a “Pattern of Evidence” related directly to the satisfaction of each of the five criteria. These indicators illustrate characteristic varieties of evidence that an institution might present in building its case and that the Commission’s processes weigh in making a decision.

These indicators are not “checklists,” nor are they exhaustive; they are broad descriptions of the kind of concerns and issues the Commission considers when making a holistic decision on each criterion. Not every indicator will be critical.
for every institution; many institutions include additional indicators of their success in fulfilling the criteria.

The five Criteria for Accreditation are:

**Criterion 1. The institution has clear and publicly stated purposes consistent with its mission and appropriate to an institution of higher education.**

*In determining appropriate patterns of evidence for this criterion, the Commission considers evidence such as:*

- long- and short-range institutional and educational goals;
- processes, involving its constituencies, through which the institution evaluates its purposes;
- decision-making processes that are appropriate to its stated mission and purposes;
- understanding of the stated purposes by institutional constituencies;
- efforts to keep the public informed of its institutional and educational goals through documents such as the catalog and program brochures;
- support for freedom of inquiry for faculty and students;
- institutional commitment to excellence, both in the teaching provided by faculty and the learning expected of students.

**Criterion 2. The institution has effectively organized the human, financial, and physical resources necessary to accomplish its purposes.**

*In determining appropriate patterns of evidence for this criterion, the Commission considers evidence such as:*

- governance by a board consisting of informed people who understand their responsibilities, function in accordance with stated board policies, and have the resolve necessary to preserve the institution's integrity;
- effective administration through well-defined and understood organizational structures, policies, and procedures;
- qualified and experienced administrative personnel who oversee institutional activities and exercise appropriate responsibility for them;
- systems of governance that provide dependable information to the institution’s constituencies and, as appropriate, involve them in the decision-making processes;
- faculty with educational credentials that testify to appropriate preparation for the courses they teach;
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- a sufficient number of students enrolled to meet the institution’s stated educational purposes;
- provision of services that afford all admitted students the opportunity to succeed;
- a physical plant that supports effective teaching and learning;
- conscientious efforts to provide students with a safe and healthy environment;
- academic resources and equipment (e.g., libraries, electronic services and products, learning resource centers, laboratories and studios, computers) adequate to support the institution's purposes;
- a pattern of financial expenditures that shows the commitment to provide both the environment and the human resources necessary for effective teaching and learning;
- management of financial resources to maximize the institution's capability to meet its purposes.

**Criterion 3. The institution is accomplishing its educational and other purposes.**

*In determining appropriate patterns of evidence for this criterion, the Commission considers evidence such as:*

- educational programs appropriate to an institution of higher education:
  - courses of study in the academic programs that are clearly defined, coherent, and intellectually rigorous;
  - programs that include courses and/or activities whose purpose is to stimulate the examination and understanding of personal, social, and civic values;
  - programs that require of the faculty and students (as appropriate to the level of the educational program) the use of scholarship and/or the participation in research as part of the programs;
  - programs that require intellectual interaction between student and faculty and encourage it between student and student.

- assessment* of appropriate student academic achievement in all its programs, documenting:
  - proficiency in skills and competencies essential for all college-educated adults;

* Significant additional information on assessment and graduate education is provided in the *Handbook of Accreditation*. Excerpts of these sections are available through the on-line version of the *Overview*. 

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• completion of an identifiable and coherent undergraduate level general education component;
• mastery of the level of knowledge appropriate to the degree granted; and
• control by the institution’s faculty of evaluation of student learning and granting of academic credit.

graduate programs* that:
• distinguish clearly graduate from undergraduate offerings;
• expect students and faculty to value and engage in research, scholarship, and creative activity;
• restrict graduate academic credit for prior learning to credit validated by examination, credit based on documented faculty evaluation of a portfolio of original work products, or credit awarded by an institution of higher education either affiliated with a recognized U.S. accrediting association or approved by an appropriate national ministry of education;
• are approved, taught, and evaluated by a graduate faculty that possesses appropriate credentials and experience; and
• use results of regular internal and external peer review processes to ensure quality.

faculty have and exercise responsibility for determining the institution’s award of academic credit;

effective teaching that characterizes its courses and academic programs;

ongoing support for professional development for faculty, staff, and administrators;

student services that effectively support the institution’s purposes;

staff and faculty service that contributes to the institution’s effectiveness;

if appropriate:
• evidence of support for the stated commitment to basic and applied research through provision of sufficient human, financial, and physical resources to produce effective research;
• evidence of support for the stated commitment to the fine and creative arts through provision of sufficient human, financial, and physical resources to produce creative endeavors and activities;
• evidence of effective delivery of educational and other services to its community;

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evidence of development and offering of effective courses and programs to meet the needs of its sponsoring organization and other special constituencies.

**Criterion 4. The institution can continue to accomplish its purposes and strengthen its educational effectiveness.**

*In determining appropriate patterns of evidence for this criterion, the Commission considers evidence such as:*

- a current resource base—financial, physical, and human—that positions the institution for the future;
- decision-making processes with tested capability of responding effectively to anticipated and unanticipated challenges to the institution;
- structured assessment processes that are continuous, that involve a variety of institutional constituencies, and that provide meaningful and useful information to the planning processes, as well as to students, faculty, and administration;
- plans as well as ongoing, effective planning processes necessary to the institution's continuance;
- clear identification of how the institution can strengthen its educational programs;
- resources organized and allocated to support its plans for strengthening both the institution and its programs.

**Criterion 5. The institution demonstrates integrity in its practices and relationships.**

*In determining appropriate patterns of evidence for this criterion, the Commission considers evidence such as:*

- student, faculty, and staff handbooks that describe various institutional relationships with those constituencies, including appropriate grievance procedures;
- policies and practices for the resolution of internal disputes within the institution's constituency;
- policies and practices consistent with its mission related to equity of treatment, nondiscrimination, affirmative action, and other means of enhancing access to education and the building of a diverse educational community;
- transcripts that follow commonly accepted practices and accurately reflect a student's academic experience;
- institutional publications, statements, and advertising that describe accurately and fairly the institution, its operations, and its programs;
- relationships with other institutions of higher education conducted ethically and responsibly;
appropriate support for resources shared with other institutions;

policies and procedures regarding institutional relationships with and responsibility for intercollegiate athletics, student associations, and subsidiary or related business enterprises;

oversight processes for monitoring contractual arrangements with government, industry, and other organizations.

While the Criteria are intentionally general, the judgments concerning them are founded on careful and detailed examination of the specifics of the institution. Their generality ensures that accreditation decisions focus on the particulars of each institution’s own purposes, rather than on trying to make institutions fit a preestablished mold. The widely different purposes and scopes of educational institutions demand that the criteria by which an institutional accrediting body makes its judgments be broad enough to encompass this diversity, and indeed support innovation, yet be clear enough to ensure acceptable quality.

The Candidacy Program

The Commission’s candidacy program, as described in the Handbook of Accreditation, makes explicit the following expectations for all candidate institutions:

An applying institution must demonstrate that it meets the General Institutional Requirements. In addition, it will be measured against the Criteria for Accreditation. An institution seeking candidacy will document, through its self-study, the degree to which it meets each of the five Criteria, and, through a carefully articulated plan and timetable, will show how it intends to meet fully each of them within the four-year period of candidacy.

To achieve candidacy, an institution will be expected to provide an emerging pattern of evidence for each criterion. Throughout the candidacy period Evaluation Teams evaluate and address in their reports whether the institution is progressively demonstrating the patterns of evidence needed to achieve accreditation before the end of the candidacy period.

Obligations of Affiliation

In addition to meeting the General Institutional Requirements and the Criteria for Accreditation or the candidacy program, all affiliated institutions voluntarily agree to meet obligations of affiliation, including hosting periodic reviews, payment of dues and fees, and submission of reports—including an Annual Report—as requested by the Commission.
Every institution must have its accreditation reaffirmed not later than five years after it has been initially granted and not later than ten years following each subsequent reaffirmation. Candidate institutions are evaluated biennially. Accreditation is not for a specific period of time but is a continuing relationship between the institution and the Commission that is subject to periodic review. Focused visits or reports may be required between comprehensive visits, and Annual Reports and other information from institutions are regularly examined to see whether changes have occurred (or are anticipated) that would necessitate a change in the timing of the next evaluation. In addition, an institution is required to notify the Commission in writing before initiating any change that might alter its relationship with the Commission and to obtain approval of the change before initiating it.

### Seeking Initial Status

An institution seeking initial status with the Commission participates in the Eligibility Process. The Eligibility Process is a multi-stage deliberative and consultative process involving Commission staff and Consultant-Evaluators aimed at determining whether the institution is sufficiently prepared for an on-site evaluation by the Commission (described on pages 4–5).

Non-affiliated institutions interested in seeking initial status may contact the Commission office to request an Eligibility Process Packet, which provides information on seeking affiliation, including costs and a sample timetable. The Commission offers special programming at its Annual Meeting for non-affiliated institutions.

### Information Available to the Public

The Commission maintains a Record of Status and Scope (RSS) for each affiliated institution. The RSS contains two sections: the Statement of Affiliation Status (SAS) and the Statement of Institutional Scope and Activities (SISA). The SAS contains, in summary format, language describing the institution’s official relationship with the Commission; this language is recommended by an Evaluation Team and officially adopted through the Commission’s processes. The SISA contains information on institutional characteristics. Information on the SISA is taken from the Annual Report provided by each institution to the Commission and is not officially reviewed or adopted by the Commission.

The Commission publishes the list of affiliated institutions on its web site. In certain situations the Commission may issue a Public Disclosure Notice to explain a particular relationship with an institution.
Complaints Against an Institution

The Commission receives complaints each year about accredited and affiliated institutions. A complaint occurs when a person has a concern about conditions at an institution or about an institution’s decision(s) and the person seeks to bring these concerns to the attention of the Commission. Often the facts of the complaint will indicate a dispute between a student and faculty member or a faculty member and members of the institution’s administration or even several students and administrators. Disputes often involve such issues as those regarding billing, grading, financial aid, termination of employment, and contract interpretation. The Commission considers such complaints to be individual disputes between the parties and will not become involved in resolving them. Such disputes are best resolved directly between the parties through such structures as a campus ombudsman or grievance process or, failing such resolution, through a private mediator or the legal system. A complainant is best served by bringing allegations of criminal conduct such as fraud or conspiracy to the attention of the Attorney General of the state or to the local U.S. attorney who has the legal authority to conduct an appropriate and thorough investigation.

In some cases the facts of the complaint may indicate problems in the aggregate with institutional behavior or policies. Where in the discretion of the Commission such problems appear to be related to its expectations of an accredited or affiliated institution as articulated in the Commission’s General Institutional Requirements or Criteria for Accreditation, the Commission will conduct an inquiry. The Commission will ask the CEO of the institution to respond to the broad issues the complaint raises and to explain its investigation of the problem(s) and remediation, if any, it has undertaken for the future benefit of the institution and its constituents.

The Commission encourages anyone considering filing a complaint to review the Commission’s web site for more information about the steps for filing a complaint and for some alternative strategies for resolving a dispute with an institution.

Complaints Against the Commission

The Commission encourages feedback on its work from all of its stakeholders. Such exchanges provide valuable information for the improvement of Commission requirements, policies, and processes. However, the Commission recognizes that there may be some circumstances in which individuals or groups may choose to provide their comments in the form of a complaint. Therefore, the Board has adopted a policy on
formal complaints against the Commission. To be considered as a formal complaint against the Commission, a complaint must involve issues broader than concern about a specific institutional action or a specific team. The document must state clearly the nature of the complaint, and it must be signed. The Executive Director, on behalf of the Commission, responds to each complaint made against the Commission within 30 days; reports regularly to the Executive Committee and the Board of Trustees on the nature and disposition of complaints; and compiles annually a list, available to the public on request, that summarizes the complaints and their dispositions. Upon advice of counsel, the Commission retains the right to withhold public disclosure of information if potential legal action is involved in the complaint.

The Commission office advises the complainant of the Commission’s disposition of the complaint.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is accreditation?
A. Accreditation by the Commission and by other nationally recognized agencies provides assurance to the public, in particular to prospective students, that an institution has been found to meet the agency’s clearly stated requirements and criteria and that there are reasonable grounds for believing that it will continue to meet them.

Q. What is the value of accreditation?
A. Accreditation provides both public certification of acceptable institutional quality as well as an opportunity and incentive for self-improvement in the institutions accredited. The Commission reaches the conclusion that an institution meets its requirements and criteria only after the institution opens itself to outside examination conducted by experienced evaluators familiar with accrediting requirements and with higher education. Moreover, for the accredited institution, the process of accreditation provides an opportunity for critical self-analysis leading to improvement in quality and for consultation and advice from persons from other institutions.

Q. What is the difference between regional accreditation and state licensure?
A. While many states have established regulations that must be met before an institution may operate, in most states such regulations represent a minimum basis for protection of students. State authorization should not be confused with institutional or specialized accredita-
tion. An institution may need state authorization to operate legally, but it may not necessarily be accredited by an institutional or specialized accrediting association. In fact, an institution must have the appropriate authorization by a state to operate before it can seek a status with the Commission.

Q. Why doesn’t the Commission rank colleges?
A. The purpose of accreditation is to provide public assurance of educational quality and institutional integrity. Various publications have begun institution ranking processes based on such factors as specific numerical details (e.g., size, tuition, and endowment); faculty selectivity; and public opinion. It is important to remember that colleges and universities differ from one another in significant ways, including mission, programs offered, and students served. Therefore, the important issue for each student is whether the college meets the student’s needs. Published rankings may be one source of information, but they should not be the only source.

Q. Why doesn’t the Commission recommend colleges to students?
A. Selection of a college to attend is a decision that must be made individually. There are so many different types of institutions (small, large, single-program, multiple-program, urban, rural, public, private, etc.) that matching the student’s interests and abilities to the characteristics of a college requires detailed information about the student and the institution. Information about colleges may be found in various books and directories (available in many libraries), and students are advised to consult with counselors or advisors in secondary schools. The admissions officers of colleges often are able to provide assistance, although they will have the most knowledge of the institution they represent. Increasingly, useful college information can be found through the Internet. The information available from the Commission is limited to that describing the institution’s status with the Commission.

Q. Does accreditation include distance education courses and programs?
A. Yes. The Commission accredits a number of institutions that offer courses and programs through various methods of distance delivery. Since the Commission accredits institutions rather than individual programs, it does not maintain listings of such programs. The Commission does provide a list of Internet resources on distance education on its web site. In addition, the regional associations have developed “Best Practices for Electroni-
The best practices are available on the Commission’s web site.

Q. Does accreditation guarantee that credits and degrees can be transferred to another institution?
A. No. Transferability of credits and degrees is a matter determined by the institution receiving the credits. Transferability depends on several factors. Among them are: the institution at which credits or degrees were earned; how well the credits offered for transfer mesh with the curriculum offered by the institution to which the student wishes to transfer; and how well the student did in the courses. Accreditation cannot by itself guarantee transfer of credits; however, many institutions may choose to consider the accredited status of the institution where the credit or degree was earned as one factor in the transfer decision. Some institutions have specific agreements with other institutions guaranteeing transfer of credits. Institutions should be prepared to explain to students, parents, and other constituencies institutional policies regarding transfer as well as the factors in an individual transfer decision. Students should be skeptical of any institution that makes unqualified assertions that its credits will transfer to all other institutions. Anyone planning to transfer credits should, at the earliest opportunity, consult the receiving institution about the transfer—before taking the courses for transfer, if possible.

Q. Does candidacy assure accreditation?
A. No. The Commission does not grant candidacy to an institution unless it has strong evidence that the institution can achieve accreditation within the candidacy period. However, attainment of candidacy does not automatically assure eventual accreditation. The maximum length of candidacy is four years.

Q. What is the difference between institutional accreditation and program accreditation?
A. Institutional accreditation speaks to the overall quality of the institution without making judgments about specific programs. Institutional accreditation is accreditation of the whole institution, including all programs, sites, and methods of delivery. The accreditation of individual programs, such as those preparing students to practice a profession, is different and is carried out by “specialized” or “program” accrediting bodies that apply specific standards for curriculum and course content.
The Commission does not maintain lists of programs offered by its accredited institutions. Each specialized accrediting body publishes a list of programs it accredits. This information also is shown in the annual directory, *Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education*, published by the American Council on Education, available in many libraries. The National Center for Education Statistics also provides an online tool, COOL (College Opportunities Online), that contains program and other information about institutions [<www.nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cool/>]. College catalogs usually note all the program accreditations.

Q. How can a regional agency accredit an educational site outside its regional borders?
A. It has been long-standing practice that institutions are accredited as a total unit, no matter where they operate. The regional associations share a definition of a separately accreditable site; in 2000 they initiated a trial collaborative evaluation process for institutions operating physical instructional sites in more than one region.

Q. Who evaluates the Commission?
A. The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a national, nongovernmental organization that provides recognition of accrediting bodies, as does the United States Department of Education.


The U.S. Secretary of Education maintains a list of accrediting bodies determined by the Secretary to be “reliable authorities as to the quality of training offered by educational institutions and programs.” The Secretary’s list serves as one of the bases for the federal government’s determination of institutional eligibility for participation in federally funded programs, including student financial aid. To appear on the list, an accrediting body must demonstrate its compliance with a series of criteria established by the Secretary in accordance with the Higher Education Act. The Secretary reviews the status of accrediting bodies on the list on a regular schedule. The Commission has been listed by the Secretary of Education (or a predecessor officer) since 1952 when the first list was published. Its most recent review was in 1997.
The Commission also has a variety of ways to evaluate its own processes:

- participants provide routine evaluation of accreditation processes
- C-Es and institutions evaluate team performance
- institutions and others respond to surveys on the quality of programs and services
- focus groups and task forces address specific issues and challenges
- stakeholders share comments through Commission listening posts

Recognition by CHEA and the U.S. Department of Education provides evaluation of the effectiveness of the Commission’s ongoing program of self-evaluation.

**For More Information**

For further information about accreditation in the North Central region, write or call the appropriate Commission office.

*For institutions of higher education:*

**The Higher Learning Commission**

30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400
Chicago, Illinois 60602-2504
(800) 621-7440 or (312) 263-0456
Fax: (312) 263-7462; Email: info@hlcommission.org
<www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org>

*For elementary and secondary schools:*

**Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement**

Arizona State University
P. O. Box 873011
Tempe, Arizona 85287-3011
(800) 525-9517 or (480) 965-8700
Fax: (408) 965-9423; Email: nca@nca.asu.edu
<www.ncacasi.org>

For further information about institutional and specialized accreditation (including names and addresses of accrediting bodies) write or call:

**Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)**

One Dupont Circle, Suite 510
Washington D.C. 20036-1136
(202) 955-6126; Fax: (202) 955-6129
Email: chea@chea.org; <www.chea.org>
Publications Available from the Commission

**A Handbook of Accreditation.** This document is addressed to institutions affiliated with the Commission, those seeking affiliation, and the Consultant-Evaluators involved in the various decision-making processes. It documents the policies and procedures related to the evaluation and accreditation processes of the Commission. $18.00. (Includes **2001 Addendum**; additional copies of the Addendum are $3.50 each).

**A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement.** This publication includes papers from the Commission’s Annual Meeting programs that provide advice and suggestions on self-study and address a wide variety of topics related to accreditation, assessment of student academic achievement, quality, and other current higher education issues. $23.00.

**Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions: An Overview.** This pamphlet provides general information about the accreditation of postsecondary institutions by The Higher Learning Commission. $1.50.

**Guidelines.** From time to time, the Commission adopts guidelines on specific areas, such as international education and distance education. Call the Commission office or visit our web site for information on current guidelines.

All prices are subject to change.

Check the Commission’s web site for a current list of publications:

[www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org](http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org)
ON THE COMMISSION’S WEB SITE

The Commission’s web site is designed to be accessible using any major web browser on any platform. Check the web site for the most current information as well as an increasing variety of resources.

Commission Information

- Statements of Commission Mission, Vision, Core Values, and Strategic Priorities
- Rosters of Trustees and Commission staff
- Announcement of upcoming meetings
- Online Policy Manual, including current policies and procedures, GIRs and Criteria, proposed policy changes, bylaws, and federal compliance information
- Information on how to become a Consultant-Evaluator
- Resources for Consultant-Evaluators
- Searchable directory of currently and historically accredited institutions
- Actions on Institutions and Public Disclosure Notices
- Forms for institutions (Basic Institutional Data Forms (BIDs), Annual Report, Sites and Distance Delivery Report, Readers Panel Form)
- Schedule of membership dues and fees

Commission Projects and Initiatives

- Link to the Commission’s Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) at <www.AQIP.org>
- Information about separate incorporation of the Commission and the Commission’s name change

Commission Publications

- Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions: An Overview, including:
  - review and decision-making processes
  - information about applying for affiliation
  - the Commission’s complaint procedures
  - frequently asked questions
- 2001 Addendum to the Handbook of Accreditation
- Price list of publications and gift items
- Online ordering

(continued on next page)
On the Commission’s Web Site (continued from previous page)

Annual Meeting
- Call for Proposals
- Business partner opportunities (exhibit hall, advertising, showcases, sponsorships)
- Schedule overview and program updates
- Feature page on corporate participants
- Online registration
- Selected papers from recent meetings

Resource Materials and Reports
- Information on distance learning programs for students and international education
- Assessment resources, including:
  - Assessment of Student Academic Achievement: Levels of Implementation (from 2001 Handbook Addendum)
  - Levels of Implementation and the Patterns of Characteristics Analysis Worksheet
- Statements of good practices, including:
  - Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs
  - Good Practices in Contractual Arrangements Involving Courses and Programs
  - Task Force Report: Adult Degree Completion Programs, including “Principles of Good Practice in Adult Degree Completion Programs” and “Assessing Prior Learning for Credit”
- Task Force Report: Baccalaureate Education in the Community College Setting
- Interregional protocols
- Third party comment information and form
- Links to other web sites related to accreditation

www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org