



# The Criteria for Accreditation

*On February 24, 2012, the HLC Board of Trustees adopted new Criteria for Accreditation, Assumed Practices, and Obligations of Affiliation. The final versions appear in this booklet. They are effective for all institutions as of January 1, 2013.*

*In the past the Criteria for Accreditation had been reviewed in their entirety every five years. Beginning this year, 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.*

*This document provides the first such update. It includes minor changes to Assumed Practices A.7.a, b, c, B.1.b, c, C.5, D.5, and D.6, and Institutional Obligation 13. In February 2013, the Board accepted the changes on first reading. The proposed changes were shared with institutions and comments invited. The Board took final action on the modifications on June 28, 2013. They are effective immediately.*

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## 1

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.”

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, includ-

ing 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

tion, 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



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 Assessment**

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**

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 mis-

sion 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. 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. Financial Soundness**

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



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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

## 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.

© 2013 Higher Learning Commission. All rights reserved. The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs as appropriate to its educational purposes.

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 mission and

istration, 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.<sup>1</sup>
  9. The governing board has the authority to approve the annual budget and to engage and dismiss the chief executive officer.<sup>1</sup>
  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.

## 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 high-

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.<sup>2</sup>

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:

<sup>1</sup> *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 signl*

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## In Obligation 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.

