THE COMMISSION
ON COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Proposed
Principles of Accreditation

The Standards for Accreditation and Reaffirmation

Standards | Accreditation Attestations

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Preamble

In developing the revisions to the Commission's Standards, the Principles Review Committee approached its work with deliberate discipline. Every proposed standard was weighed against a set of values. The standards should:

- Enable innovation,
- Honor institutional mission diversity,
- Reduce administrative burden, and
- Preserve The Commission as the "Gold Standard."

Additionally, the Committee weighed the standards under consideration against the following set of questions:

- Does this requirement genuinely promote student achievement?
- Does it advance quality and continuous improvement while maintaining transparency?
- Does it improve transparency and accountability while reducing unnecessary burden?
- Does it keep focus on outcomes and results, not process for its own sake?

Together, the guiding questions and values served as a consistent test for each standard. A requirement remained only if it demonstrably served students, supported institutional improvement, and upheld the integrity and credibility of accreditation, without adding burden that did not contribute to those ends. Prior to each Standard is a "framing" statement (in italics) that indicates why each standard was valued and included.

While the standards represent the federal criteria for recognition by the United States Department of Education, they also represent a rounded view of what makes a quality institution. As a recognized accreditor and a component of the higher education regulatory triad, it is our responsibility to ensure students have access to high-quality higher education experiences that prepare them for the future and the workforce and to meet federal requirements. The Principles Review Committee recommends these standards to the membership with the previously stated values and a "Students First, Always" approach.

Principles of Accreditation

INSTITUTIONAL STABILITY

1. Integrity

> *Integrity reflects an institution's commitment to honesty, transparency, ethical conduct, and accountability.*

The institution operates with integrity in all matters.

2. Governance

2.1 Governing Authority

> *The institution has a governing authority (for example, a governing board) responsible for the quality, integrity, and financial stability of the institution, to support the fulfillment of its mission.*

The institution demonstrates that the governing authority (a) exercises appropriate oversight, including mission review and fiduciary duties; (b) hires and evaluates the institution's CEO; (c) focuses on creating and approving governing policies; (d) protects institutional autonomy from undue influence; and (e) adheres to ethical standards.

2.2 Shared Governance

> *Shared governance strengthens institutional decision-making by ensuring appropriate participation of administrators, faculty, and other key constituencies.*

The institution publishes and implements shared governance policies that (a) are clearly articulated, effectively communicated, and consistently followed, and (b) ensure a clear and appropriate distinction between the function of the board and the respective responsibilities of the administration and faculty to administer and implement policy.

3. Executive Leadership

> *Executive leadership provides strategic direction and organizational stewardship that guides the institution toward sustained success.*

The institution's CEO and administrative leadership team (a) possess the qualifications and authority necessary to execute institutional responsibilities effectively, and (b) have clearly defined roles and responsibilities that support mission fulfillment and student achievement.

4. Sound Institutional Planning

> *The institution engages in systematic, integrated, and data-informed multi-year planning to enhance institutional effectiveness and ensure long-term sustainability and fulfill its mission.*

The institution demonstrates the plan (a) is approved by the governing authority; (b) has clearly articulated goals consistent with the institution's mission; (c) is reviewed regularly to determine the institution's progress toward attainment of its goals; (d) aligns deliberately to the institutional financial plan with realistic and clearly documented revenue and expenditure assumptions; and (e) is developed with the engagement of appropriate stakeholders.

5. Financial Stability

> *Financial stability ensures the institution can fulfill its mission and meet its commitments to students.*

The institution (a) demonstrates financial stability and sufficient operational resources by providing multiple years of audited financial reports or Standard Review Reports, and additional supplementary documentation, if necessary; (b) demonstrates that it utilizes sound budgeting practices; and (c) operates with appropriate financial controls to ensure accurate and reliable financial management.

6. Control and Oversight of External Funds and Regulatory Compliance

> *Responsible stewardship of external funding and compliance with program responsibilities protect the institution's fiscal integrity and regulatory standing.*

The institution demonstrates that it (a) exercises appropriate financial control and oversight of externally funded and sponsored programs; (b) complies with all applicable federal and state program responsibilities; and (c) is in compliance with its program responsibilities under Title IV of the most recent Higher Education Act as amended, including required audits of Title IV and other financial aid programs.

7. Facilities, Infrastructure, and Safety

> *Adequate facilities and a safe, secure campus environment support learning, well-being, and institutional effectiveness.*

The institution demonstrates that it (a) provides adequate physical facilities and infrastructure to support its mission; (b) takes reasonable steps to ensure a healthy, safe, and secure environment for all members of the campus community; and (c) provides information on investigations by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, for violations alleging sexual violence.

QUALITY EDUCATION

8. Undergraduate Curriculum (General Education)

> *The institution's educational programs include a general education component that addresses foundational knowledge, skills, and competencies to support lifelong learning, informed citizenship, and preparation for future employment and career adaptability.*

The institution demonstrates that the general education curriculum (a) is based on a coherent rationale; (b) constitutes a substantial component of required credit hours for the undergraduate degree; and (c) comprises a breadth of knowledge across multiple disciplines beyond what is required in the major.

9. Academic Program Content

> *Academic programs provide students with a defined and purposeful course of study that leads to meaningful outcomes.*

The institution demonstrates that, at all credential levels, its academic programs (a) are compatible with the institutional mission; (b) are based upon fields of study appropriate to higher education; (c) embody a coherent course of study; (d) demonstrate a logical progression of higher order thinking, including progressively more advanced academic content and skills development for graduate and post-baccalaureate professional programs; and (e) are designed and revised with faculty input.

10. Alignment for Workplace Success

> *Strengthening the connection between education and employment ensures that higher education remains relevant and prepares students for future careers.*

The institution (a) has a process to review its educational programs and transferable career competencies to strengthen their alignment with employment, workforce needs and/or industry standards, and (b) uses that review to inform the curriculum.

11. Definition of Credit Hour and Alternative Approaches

> *Defined and consistently applied measures of academic work ensure student and public confidence in the value of the credits and credentials awarded by the institution.*

The institution (a) makes public its definition of a "credit hour" and implements policies for the amount and level of credit awarded for its courses, regardless of format or mode of delivery, and (b) provides a clear rationale for the equivalencies to measure educational programs not based on credit hours.

12. Program Length

> *Credit hour requirements give a degree meaning by setting a consistent, recognizable measure of the learning and academic work a student must complete, which protects the value of the credential.*

At all credential levels, the institution demonstrates that its educational programs are of a length to ensure (a) achievement of the programs' student-learning outcomes, and (b) conformity to commonly accepted standards for the granting of the credentials, or an explanation of the changes made to the norm. Additionally, the institution (c) demonstrates that combined degree programs or reduced credit-hour programs are based upon the assessment of clear and evidence-based competencies.

13. Transfer Credits

> *Clear transfer-credit policies promote student mobility while maintaining academic quality and integrity.*

The institution (a) publishes and implements policies for evaluating and accepting credit not originating from the institution; (b) has processes designed to facilitate transfer to and from other institutions; and (c) has an approval process with involvement from those qualified to make necessary judgements, including determining academic quality. Additionally, the institution ensures (d) the credit awarded is comparable to a defined credit experience and is consistent with the institution's mission, and (e) that policies address credit awarded based on prior academic learning, experiential learning, competency-based assessments, and other alternative learning approaches.

14. Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

> *Assessment of student learning is a systematic process for evaluating educational effectiveness and supports continuous program improvement.*

For each of its educational programs, including General Education, the institution (a) identifies specific, measurable student-learning outcomes which describe the knowledge, skills, and/or competencies students are expected to achieve upon successful completion. Additionally, the institution (b) periodically reviews program-level student-learning outcomes to ensure they remain current, relevant, and, where applicable, aligned with professional standards, licensure or certification student learning outcomes, and (c) provides examples of program improvements driven by the institution's assessment process.

15. Distance, Correspondence, Off-Campus Sites, and Direct Assessment

> *An institution that possesses off-campus instructional sites, branch campuses, or provides instruction at additional locations beyond the main campus, and/or institutions*

> *that provide distance, correspondence, or direct assessment must include quality assurance information about those sites and modes of delivery.*

Institutions must demonstrate (a) the quality and integrity of all offerings and all locations, and (b) include information on all sites and all delivery methods under all appropriate standards and policies. Furthermore, the institution demonstrates (c) that safeguards are in place to ensure that the student who registers in a distance or correspondence course is the same student who participates in and receives credit for the course, and (d) that students are notified at the time of registration or enrollment of any projected additional expenses associated with verification of their identity.

16. Research Integrity

> *Research conducted with integrity strengthens both the credibility of an institution and the knowledge it contributes to the disciplines.*

The institution demonstrates, as appropriate to its mission, that it (a) promotes sound research practices among faculty, staff, and students engaged in research activity, and (b) monitors and addresses the ethical quality of research practices.

17. Sufficient Faculty to Deliver Quality Programs

> *Faculty expertise and adequate faculty staffing are foundational to the strength and effectiveness of educational programs.*

The institution demonstrates that its educational programs are supported by a sufficient number of qualified faculty to assure program quality, content currency, and assessment of learning effectiveness.

18. Faculty Qualifications and Evaluation

> *Faculty expertise and effectiveness are fundamental to the quality of the student learning experience.*

The institution demonstrates that it implements policies and documents procedures for approval of faculty qualifications that support (a) quality learning experience for students at all credential levels. In instances where an exception to policy is made, the institution (b) provides a clear rationale for each exception, including documenting the decision-making process. Additionally, (c) the faculty are regularly evaluated on the performance of their roles and/or defined performance criteria as established by the institution.

19. Academic Freedom

> *Academic freedom enables faculty and students to pursue, examine, and communicate ideas essential to teaching, scholarship, and intellectual inquiry.*

The institution publishes and implements clearly articulated policies and procedures for preserving and protecting academic freedom.

STUDENT SUCCESS

20. Student Success and Achievement for Institutions and Educational Programs

> *Institutions use student success and achievement data to identify barriers and improve success outcomes.*

The institution and each educational program, regardless of mode of delivery or location where the program is delivered, (a) utilize multiple student success and achievement metrics and measure the results against established goals; (b) evaluate and report success toward achievement of the goals; and (c) discuss strategies the institution implemented to improve student success.

21. Student and Academic Support Services

> *Student and academic support services provide essential scaffolding necessary for student success and institutional mission attainment.*

The institution provides (a) academic and student support services appropriate to the students it serves; (b) library, learning information resources and services consistent with the mission; (c) information and guidance to assist students in understanding debt, loan repayment, and financial management; and (d) assistance to students with post-completion transitions appropriate to the programs offered.

22. Student Rights and Written Complaints

> *Student rights and meaningful avenues for addressing concerns foster fairness, accountability, and trust within the institution.*

The institution has broadly disseminated clear, appropriate, and published (a) statements of student rights and responsibilities and (b) procedures for addressing written student complaints. The institution (c) demonstrates that it fairly administers those policies and procedures when resolving student complaints, and (d) maintains a record of student complaints that The Commission can access upon request.

23. Intellectual Pluralism

> *Exposure to diverse viewpoints strengthens learning, critical thinking, and the pursuit of knowledge.*

The institution (a) publishes and implements policies designed to support, promote, and prioritize intellectual diversity and affirm the respectful, civil exchange of ideas and viewpoints; and (b) periodically measures student and faculty perceptions of the range of viewpoints and perspectives.

24. Transparency in Admissions and Institutional Representation

> *Admissions policies that are clear and aligned with the institution's mission enable prospective students to make informed decisions and to enroll with a realistic understanding of their academic opportunities.*

The institution (a) publishes and implements admissions policies consistent with its mission; (b) publishes advertising materials and provides recruitment materials that accurately represent the institution's programs and admissions practices and policies; and (c) ensures that independent agents or contractors used for recruiting purposes and for admission activities are governed by the same principles and policies as institutional employees.

(End of standards, see next page for Accreditation Attestations)

Accreditation Attestations

Preamble

In our accreditation process, an attestation is a formal statement, signed by the institution's Chief Executive Officer (CEO), affirming that the institution is in compliance with a given set of requirements. The CEO's signature represents the institution's assurance that the statement is accurate and complete, and that the institution has reviewed its policies, practices, and outcomes against the requirements of the standard.

Accreditation Attestations differ from other requirements in three key ways: (1) they are typically not modified significantly by the institution year to year; (2) in general, they may be responded to as a matter of fact rather than requiring lengthy explanation; and (3) they are not expected to vary significantly by institutional mission, thus not requiring differentiation.

An attestation is not offered in isolation. It is accompanied by supporting evidence that demonstrates the institution's assurance, such as policies, procedures, records, data, or other documentation. Together, the attestation and the evidence provide The Commission evaluators with both the institution's formal assurance and the means to verify it. Evaluators will read each attestation as the institution's accountable declaration of compliance and evaluate the accompanying evidence to confirm that it supports that declaration. On-Site Reaffirmation Committees are empowered to ask institutions to discuss or provide additional evidence of Attestations during the campus visit.

Institutions will attest to The Commission that they are meeting the following requirements and provide evidence of the attestation. Guidance for Attestations will be included in the Resource Manual. As with the Standards, every institution is expected to comply with all Accreditation Attestations at all times.

Accreditation Attestations

Accreditation Attestation A: Institutional Mission

The institution has a clearly defined and published educational mission, appropriate to the institution and credentials offered.

Accreditation Attestation B: Institutional Credits for Graduation

The institution demonstrates that at least 25% of the credit hours required for undergraduate degrees and 33% of the credit hours required for graduate-level degrees are earned through instruction offered by the institution awarding that credential. An institution making an exception to the required credit hours will provide a clear rationale.

Accreditation Attestation C: Protection of Privacy and Integrity of Student Records

The institution (a) demonstrates that it takes reasonable measures to protect the privacy, security, and integrity of student records, and (b) explains steps that will be taken if there is a breach of privacy or security.

Accreditation Attestation D: Publicly Disclosed Information

The institution provides evidence that it publishes accurate and accessible academic calendars, grading policies, cost of attendance, refund policies, and academic catalogs that are accurate and accessible to meet the needs of prospective, current, and former students.

Accreditation Attestation E: Status and Reporting Changes

The institution (a) accurately represents its accreditation status and publishes the name, address, telephone number, and website address of The Commission in accordance with the requirements and federal policy, and (b) ensures that all its branch campuses include the name of that institution and make clear that their accreditation depends on the continued accreditation of the parent campus.

Accreditation Attestation F: Representation to Other Agencies

The institution (a) represents itself accurately to all U.S. Department of Education recognized accrediting agencies with which it holds accreditation, and (b) informs The Commission and those agencies of any change of accreditation status, including the imposition of public sanctions.

Accreditation Attestation G: Compliance with New Policy or Obligations

The institution complies with The Commission's policy statements that pertain to new or additional institutional obligations that may arise, including all Substantive Change requirements, which are not part of the standards in the current Principles of Accreditation.