

## **Accreditation Handbook**



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## FOREWORD

This *Accreditation Handbook, 2015 Edition* presents a composite of information about the evaluation and accreditation of higher education institutions by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. It includes:

1. General information about accreditation, its nature, purposes, and the agencies involved;
2. Procedural Guide for Applicant, Candidate, and Accredited institutions—including guidance for non-U.S. based institutions;
3. Accreditation criteria (Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation);
4. Policies for the Commission and affiliated institutions; and
5. Glossary of terminology used in this Handbook.

A complimentary printed copy of the current *Accreditation Handbook* is provided to both the chief executive officer and the Accreditation Liaison Officer of Accredited, Candidate, and Applicant institutions. Additional printed copies may be purchased from the Commission office. Institutions are advised to consult the Commission's website ([www.nwccu.org](http://www.nwccu.org)) for the most current information, including fees, timelines, and specific guidelines for preparation of reports. The *Handbook* is also available free of charge in electronic form on the "Publications" section of the Commission's website.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **NWCCU Mission**

The mission of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) is to assure educational quality, enhance institutional effectiveness, and foster continuous improvement of colleges and universities in the Northwest region through in-depth institutional self assessment and critical peer review based upon evaluation criteria that are objectively and equitably applied to institutions with diverse missions, characteristics, and cultures.

### **Accreditation**

Accreditation is a process of recognizing educational institutions for performance, integrity, and quality that entitles them to the confidence of the educational community and the public. Granting of Accreditation status is public recognition that an institution or program meets the accrediting agency's established requirements. This recognition is extended largely through non-governmental, voluntary, institutional, or professional associations, which have responsibility for establishing criteria and evaluating institutions and programs with respect to those criteria.

As practiced in the United States, accrediting agencies fulfill their purposes through a collegial process of institutional self assessment and critical peer review based upon criteria established by the accrediting agencies, approved by their members, and recognized by stakeholders as indicators of educational quality and effectiveness.

### **Types of Accreditation**

There are three primary types of accreditation: regional, national, and specialized. The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities is a regional accrediting agency. An institution may not be accredited by more than one regional accrediting agency. It may, however, be accredited by a regional accrediting agency and a national accrediting agency and/or have one or more of its academic programs accredited by specialized accrediting agencies.

#### **Regional Accreditation**

In the United States, regional accreditation of institutions of higher education is granted by one of seven regional accrediting agencies that operate within a scope of authority approved by the U.S. Department of Education. Regional accreditation applies to an institution as a whole, not individual programs or units within the institution. Because the accreditation status of an institution is reviewed periodically, institutions are engaged in continuous self reflection and improvement.

Regional accreditation agencies perform a number of important functions, including fostering quality education and continuous improvement, and encouraging institutional efforts toward maximum educational effectiveness. The accrediting process requires institutions to examine their own missions, operations, and achievements. It then provides expert analysis by peer evaluators, which may include commendations for accomplishments as well as recommendations for improvement.



For purposes of determining eligibility for United States government assistance under certain legislation, the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education recognizes regional accrediting agencies as reliable authorities on the quality of education offered by educational institutions. One of the requirements for institutions seeking to attain eligibility for federal funds is to hold Accredited or Candidate status with one of the accrediting agencies recognized by the Secretary. Regional accrediting agencies have no legal control over educational institutions or programs. They promulgate standards of quality and effectiveness and admit to membership those institutions that meet those standards.

While the procedures of regional accrediting agencies differ somewhat in detail to allow for regional variations, their rules of eligibility, basic policies, and levels of expectation are similar. Given these variations in detail, regional accreditation of higher education institutions is intended to:

1. Foster excellence in higher education through the development of criteria and guidelines for assessing educational effectiveness;
2. Encourage institutional improvement of educational endeavors through continuous self reflection and evaluation;
3. Assure the educational community, the general public, and other agencies or organizations that an institution has a clearly defined and appropriate purpose, exhibits through its resources and capacity the potential to fulfill its purpose, demonstrates that it substantially fulfills its purpose, and is likely to continue to do so for the foreseeable future; and
4. Provide guidance and assistance to established and developing institutions.

### **National Accreditation**

National accrediting agencies are not bound by geographic constraints. They accredit institutions that are frequently single purpose in nature, such as business or information technology institutes, or that have a clear thematic mission, such as faith-based institutions or liberal arts colleges. Like regional agencies, national accrediting agencies accredit entire institutions rather than individual education programs; have no legal control over educational institutions or programs; promulgate standards of quality and effectiveness; and admit to membership those institutions that meet those standards.

### **Specialized (Programmatic) Accreditation**

Specialized accrediting agencies accredit individual educational programs such as business, law, engineering, or nursing with regard to program-specific standards. Each of these specialized organizations has its distinctive definitions of eligibility, criteria for accreditation, and operating procedures. Educational programs accredited by specialized accrediting agencies may reside within comprehensive institutions or within single-purpose institutions.

## **Overview of NWCCU Accreditation**

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities is incorporated in Washington state as a legally established, private 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation for the expressed purpose of accrediting higher education institutions in the seven-state Northwest region of Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. It replaces the Commission on Colleges and Universities that was originally part of the Northwest Association of Schools and of Colleges and Universities, a voluntary, non-governmental organization for the improvement of educational institutions founded in 1917.

The Board of Commissioners of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities consists of a minimum of 14 Commissioners, a chair, and the President who is an *ex officio* member of the Board. A majority of Commissioners represents NWCCU-accredited institutions; however, at least one-seventh (1/7) of the membership of the Board is comprised of public members who are not affiliated with NWCCU-Accredited, Candidate, or Applicant institutions. Commissioners are elected for staggered three-year terms and serve without compensation. The Board of Commissioners normally meets twice a year, but various committees meet more frequently to facilitate the Commission's work. The Commission's day-to-day activities are conducted by its President and staff.

Accreditation status granted by NWCCU is recognition that an institution's own purpose is soundly conceived, that its educational programs have been intelligently devised, and that its structure, resources, and programs support and result in substantial accomplishment of the institution's stated purposes. When granted or reaffirmed, Accreditation by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities applies to the entire institution at the time of the most recent evaluation. It indicates that the institution as a whole has been evaluated and has been found to be substantially fulfilling its mission. Further, it indicates that the institution substantially meets the Commission's expectations for compliance with the accreditation criteria. Significant institutional changes initiated subsequent to the most recent evaluation are not automatically included in the institution's Accreditation and require the submission of a substantive change prospectus to the Commission for its review and analysis.

The Commission recognizes and supports the diversity of purpose and organizational culture that exists among America's colleges and universities. Member and candidate institutions range from large, urban, multi-campus universities to small, rural colleges; from religiously-affiliated colleges to non-denominational institutions; from liberal arts-focused, private institutions to professional/technical public colleges; from institutions of all residential student communities to colleges of all-commuter student bodies; and from those institutions that are highly selective to those with open admission processes. In respecting such diversity, indicators of educational quality and institutional effectiveness cannot be defined in absolute terms. Therefore the Commission considers each institution's stated mission and identified characteristics when evaluating institutions for Accreditation.

## **Relationship with the U.S. Department of Education**

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities has been recognized since 1952 by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education as a regional accrediting agency for institutions offering collegiate-level degrees. That recognition was most recently reaffirmed in 2013.

The Commission maintains communication with the United States Department of Education (USDE) and other federal agencies. It responds to USDE inquiries regarding institutional eligibility for participation in the Higher Education Act programs. The Commission forwards any received claim of Title IV fraud and abuse to the institution for comments, and it shares with the Department of Education clear evidence regarding such a claim.

### **Actions of State Agencies and Other Accrediting Bodies**

In considering whether to grant Accreditation or Candidacy status to an institution, the Commission requires the institution to report actions taken by other recognized accrediting bodies that have (a) denied such status to the institution, (b) placed the institution on public probation, or (c) revoked the Accreditation or Pre-Accreditation status of the institution.

An Accredited or Candidate institution is expected to remain in good standing with other recognized accrediting bodies or specialized accrediting bodies that have granted Accreditation or Pre-Accreditation status to program(s) within the institution. If another recognized accrediting body or governmental agency (a) places an institution or a principal program offered by the institution on public *Probationary* status or (b) revokes such status, the institution shall report that action to the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, which will promptly review the Accreditation or Candidacy status it has previously granted to the institution to determine if there is cause to alter that status.

### **Retention of Records**

Through its records retention program, the Commission maintains the official records of Commission actions on institutions. It also retains copies of institutional reports and materials, and copies of Self-Evaluation Reports and Peer-Evaluation Reports that formed the basis for those actions. These documents include the two most recent Year Seven Self-Evaluation Reports (or equivalent) of each institution, including on-site Peer-Evaluation Reports, the institution's or program's responses to on-site reports, periodic review reports, any reports of special NWCCU reviews conducted between regularly scheduled reviews, and a copy of the institution's most recent Year Seven Self-Evaluation Report (or equivalent). The Commission maintains a record of all approved substantive changes.

### **Institutional Commitment and Responsibilities in the Accreditation Process**

The effectiveness of self-regulatory accreditation depends upon an institution's acceptance of certain responsibilities, including involvement in and commitment to the accreditation process. This commitment includes a willingness to participate in the decision-making processes of the Commission and to adhere to all policies and procedures, including those for reporting changes within the institution. As part of the accreditation process, an institution is expected to conduct analytical self evaluations at specified intervals and, at the conclusion of the self evaluations, accept peer evaluation of the institution with regard to the Commission's accreditation criteria.

Institutional self evaluations are the most significant aspect of the accreditation process. The aim of the self evaluations is to understand, evaluate, and improve—not merely to defend what already exists. A well-conducted self evaluation should result in a renewed common effort within the institution to improve the whole enterprise and to document its achievements. The self evaluations are expected to be accomplished through an inclusive process that results in improvements for the institution.

Only if institutions accept seriously the responsibilities of Accredited and Candidate institutions will the validity and vitality of the accreditation process be ensured. An institution of higher education is committed to the search for and dissemination of knowledge. Integrity in the pursuit of knowledge is expected, therefore, to govern the entire environment of an institution. Each Accredited and Candidate institution is responsible for ensuring integrity in all operations dealing with its constituencies, in its relationships with other institutions, and in its accreditation activities with the Commission.

Each Accredited and Candidate institution is expected to provide the Commission with access to all aspects of its operation, including accurate information about the institution's affairs, and reports of other accrediting, licensing, and auditing agencies. Institutions are also expected to provide the Commission, or its representatives, with information requested during scheduled on-site evaluation visits, enabling evaluators to perform their duties with efficiency and effectiveness.

The Commission expects Accredited and Candidate institutions to comply with the Title IV requirements of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended. Therefore, institutions will make available information provided by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, including the most recent student loan default rates (and any default reduction plans approved by the U.S. Department of Education) and any other documents concerning the institution's program responsibilities under Title IV of the Act, such as the results of financial or compliance audits and program reviews. The Commission reserves the right to review an institution's Accreditation status when U.S. Department of Education findings demonstrate significant non-compliance with the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended.

## ACCREDITATION PROCEDURAL GUIDE

### Eligibility for Accreditation

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities accredits institutions that:

- Are concerned predominantly with higher learning;
- Have characteristics commonly associated with higher education; and
- Meet its Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation.

The principal programs of eligible institutions are degree related and built upon knowledge and competencies normally obtained by students through a completed high school program or its equivalent. Such programs are based on verifiable knowledge that has been subjected to examination by competent academic persons and by established higher education practitioners. Although diversity of requirements is expected among Candidate and Accredited institutions, course and degree requirements of an Applicant institution must also be congruent with those of the broader higher education community that the Commission represents.

Eligible institutions may properly offer programs or courses that the Commission would not define as higher learning (e.g., subject-based courses that some students may have missed in high school and courses and special programs specifically constructed to assist students to be successful with college-level coursework), but these are offered in addition to the courses and programs relevant to their higher education missions.

The Accreditation Criteria section of the *Accreditation Handbook* contains the Standards for Accreditation by which quality and effectiveness are evaluated and Candidacy and Accreditation status are determined. These Standards are in addition to the essential Eligibility Requirements, which must be met by an institution when seeking initial and continuing Candidacy.

### Pathway to Accreditation

The NWCCU defines three distinct stages in an institution's progression toward achieving Accreditation, each of which may result in the award of a particular status. Each status designation and the process involved in gaining that status is described in the following pages. Only NWCCU Accredited institutions are members of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

**Applicant:** This initial, non-affiliated status may be granted by the Commission after the submission of an Application for Consideration of Eligibility by an institution and subsequent review by the NWCCU Board of Commissioners. Upon being granted Applicant status, an institution must complete its initial self evaluation and be evaluated by peers for consideration of Candidacy within a period not less than one year or more than three years of the time of acceptance of its Application for Consideration of Eligibility.

**Candidacy:** Candidate for Accreditation is a Pre-Accredited, affiliate status with the Commission. It denotes recognition by the Commission that the institution meets its Eligibility Requirements and is progressing toward Accreditation status. It does not, however, imply or ensure eventual NWCCU Accreditation. After an Applicant institution has submitted a Candidacy Self-Evaluation Report addressing all accreditation criteria and the Commission conducts an on-site peer evaluation, the Board of Commissioners may grant Candidacy status to the institution if it finds the institution meets the Eligibility

Requirements, substantially meets the Standards for Accreditation, and has the potential to meet all Standards for Accreditation within the five-year timeframe allowed for Candidacy.

**Accreditation:** Following a period of Candidacy, the Board of Commissioners may grant Accreditation status to an institution following the submission of an Accreditation Self-Evaluation Report addressing all accreditation criteria and completion of an on-site peer evaluation validating that the institution meets the Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation. The institution becomes a member of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities upon being granted Accreditation.

Accreditation is neither permanent nor awarded for a fixed number of years. Accreditation must be reaffirmed periodically following a process of self evaluation and peer evaluation. (See Accreditation later in this section.)

## **Application for Consideration of Eligibility**

### **Submission**

When an institution determines that it meets NWCCU Eligibility Requirements, its chief executive officer makes a written request to the President of the Commission for approval to submit an Application for Consideration of Eligibility, the initial step in seeking accreditation with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. If that request is approved, the institution is authorized to submit a letter of application signed by the chief executive officer, an application fee (see “Dues and Fees” section on the Commission’s website for the current fee), and five printed copies and one electronic copy of the following documents:

1. Thorough written response to each Eligibility Requirement;
2. Current catalog;
3. Current budget and audited financial statement; and
4. Articles of incorporation and bylaws, or charter if the institution is independent, and when appropriate, proof of state authority to operate within the state and grant degrees.

The completed Application for Consideration of Eligibility is to be received in the Commission office not later than 60 days prior to a regularly scheduled meeting of the Board of Commissioners.

### **Commission Evaluation Procedures**

The following procedures are used in reviewing an Application for Consideration of Eligibility:

1. Commission staff review the Application and prepare an analysis.
2. The Application is placed on the agenda for the next regularly scheduled Board meeting.
3. The institution is invited to send a representative(s) to appear before the Board when the Application for Consideration of Eligibility is considered.

### **Commission Actions**

The Board of Commissioners may take one or more of the following actions when considering an Application for Consideration of Eligibility:

1. Accept the Application.
2. Defer action on the Application for Consideration of Eligibility.
3. Reject the Application for Consideration of Eligibility.

Once the Board of Commissioners makes a decision regarding the Application for Consideration of Eligibility, the institution is notified of that decision within one month of the date the decision was reached.

If the Board of Commissioners determines that an institution appears to meet the NWCCU Eligibility Requirements, and Applicant status is granted, the effective date of acceptance is the date on which the decision was made. The institution is noted as an Applicant in the Commission’s records and listed as such in the Directory of Institutions on the website. Further, acceptance of the Application for Consideration of Eligibility authorizes the institution to prepare a Candidacy Self-Evaluation Report addressing all Eligibility Requirements and Standards and host an on-site peer evaluation for consideration of Candidacy, which can occur no earlier than one year and no later than three years following acceptance of the Application for Consideration of Eligibility. If the self evaluation is

not completed within that three-year time limit, acceptance of the institution's Application for Consideration of Eligibility will be removed. A decision by the Board of Commissioners to reject or remove an Application for Consideration of Eligibility is not appealable.

### **Voluntary Withdrawal of Application**

An institution may voluntarily withdraw its Application for Consideration of Eligibility at any time prior to an action by the Board of Commissioners.

### **Reapplication**

If the Board of Commissioners rejects or removes an institution's Application for Consideration of Eligibility, the institution must wait at least two years before resubmitting a new Application for Consideration of Eligibility.

### **Candidacy**

"Candidacy" designates an affiliated, but not Accredited, status with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. It is recognized as a Pre-Accreditation designation by the U.S. Department of Education. Candidacy status indicates that an institution meets NWCCU Eligibility Requirements, substantially meets NWCCU Standards for Accreditation, and is progressing toward Accreditation with the confidence of the Board of Commissioners that the institution will meet all accreditation criteria within the timeframe remaining for attaining Candidacy. However, attainment of affiliate Candidacy status does not ensure that Accreditation will be granted.

Candidacy lapses when an institution fails to achieve Accredited status within five years, the maximum allowed by the U.S. Department of Education (34 CFR 602.16[a] [2]). An institution whose Candidacy lapses must wait at least two years before resubmitting a new Application for Consideration of Candidacy. The Commission also reserves the right during the Candidacy period to remove the institution's Candidacy status, after due notice, if evidence of progress is lacking or if the conditions on which the institution was admitted to Candidacy are substantially altered.

### **Self Evaluation**

The institution is required to prepare a comprehensive, analytical Candidacy Self-Evaluation Report to address all Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation at each point of the candidacy process. Although a Candidate for Accreditation institution is not expected to fully meet the Standards for Accreditation, it must demonstrate that it meets the Eligibility Requirements, substantially meets the Standards for Accreditation, and documents the potential to achieve Accreditation status within five years of the granting of Candidacy.

### **Peer Evaluation**

When an Applicant institution determines that it is ready for an evaluation for a determination of Candidacy, its chief executive officer makes a written request to the President of the Commission to schedule the on-site evaluation visit. That request must be submitted at least six months prior to the season (April or October) in which the on-site evaluation for consideration of Candidacy is to be conducted. If that request is approved, suggested dates for the visit are provided to the institution. Once the dates are confirmed, the on-site evaluation is scheduled, and logistical arrangements are made. The number of peer evaluators depends upon the characteristics of the institution and the



nature of its mission. The institution is charged a fee for each on-site evaluator. (See the Dues and Fees section of the Commission's website for the current fee.) The Commission reserves the right to adjust the evaluation fee to fit unusual circumstances associated with the visit.

Approximately six weeks prior to the scheduled dates of the on-site evaluation, the institution provides print and electronic copies of its Candidacy Self-Evaluation Report to the Commission office and to the on-site peer evaluators.

### **Commission Evaluation Procedures**

The following procedures are used in making a determination of Candidacy for Accreditation:

1. Peer evaluators study the institution's Candidacy Self-Evaluation Report, conduct an on-site evaluation, and prepare a written report of findings. Peer evaluators are assigned from out-of-state Accredited institutions. In selecting evaluators, care is taken to avoid real or perceived conflicts of interest.
2. A draft of the Peer-Evaluation Report is prepared and sent to the institution's chief executive officer, who is given an opportunity to correct errors of fact.
3. The Peer-Evaluation Report is finalized and submitted to the Commission office.
4. Evaluators submit a Confidential Recommendation to the Board of Commissioners. The Confidential Recommendation is advisory only.
5. Print and electronic copies of that report are sent to the institution's chief executive officer and Accreditation Liaison Officer.
6. The institution is offered an opportunity to provide Commissioners with a written response to the Peer-Evaluation Report.
7. At its next regularly scheduled meeting, the Board of Commissioners considers the institution's Self-Evaluation Report, the Peer-Evaluation Report, the institution's written response to the Peer-Evaluation Report (if submitted), verbal statements of the chair of the peer-evaluation committee and institutional representatives, the evaluators' Confidential Recommendation, and third-party comments (if any) in taking action on the Accreditation status of the institution.

Once the Board of Commissioners makes a decision regarding Candidacy for Accreditation, the institution is notified of that decision within one month of the date the decision was reached.

## Commission Actions

### Granting of Candidacy

For each Candidacy evaluation, the Board of Commissioners may take one or more of the following actions:

1. Grant Candidacy.
2. Request a special report (with or without an on-site evaluation) to address specified areas of concern.
3. Defer action on Candidacy for Accreditation.
4. Deny Candidacy for Accreditation.

Once the Board of Commissioners makes a decision regarding Candidacy, the institution is notified of that decision within one month of the date the decision was reached.

If Candidacy is granted, the effective date of Candidacy for Accreditation is the date of the action taken by the Board of Commissioners. That status is noted in the Directory of Accredited and Pre-accredited Institutions and posted to the Commission's website.

### Continuation of Candidacy

Twelve months after being awarded Candidacy status, an institution must submit a *Mission and Core Themes Report (Year One)*. Three years after being awarded Candidacy status, the institution must submit a Mid-Cycle Report and host an on-site peer evaluation.

Five years after being awarded candidacy status, the institution must submit a *Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability Comprehensive Report (Year Seven)* to serve as the Initial Accreditation Self-Evaluation Report and host an on-site peer evaluation for consideration of Accreditation. Requests for early consideration for an evaluation for consideration of Accreditation must be approved in advance by the President of the Commission.

Report guidelines are available on the Commission's website ([www.nwccu.org](http://www.nwccu.org)).

For each Interim Candidacy evaluation, the Board of Commissioners may take one or more of the following actions:

1. Continue Candidacy for Accreditation.
2. Request a special report (with or without an on-site evaluation) to address specified areas of concern.
3. Defer action on Continuation of Candidacy for Accreditation.
4. Issue, continue, or remove a sanction (*Warning, Probation, or Show-Cause*).
5. Remove Candidacy for Accreditation status.

## **Granting of Accreditation**

In considering the granting of Accreditation, the Board of Commissioners may take one or more of the following actions:

1. Grant Accreditation.
2. Request a special report (with or without an on-site evaluation) to address specified areas of concern.
3. Defer action on continuation of Candidacy for Accreditation (if the time limit for Candidacy has not expired).
4. Issue, continue, or remove a sanction (*Warning, Probation, or Show-Cause*) provided that the time limit for Candidacy has not expired.
5. Deny Accreditation.

Once the Board of Commissioners makes a decision regarding the Candidacy or Accreditation status of an institution, the institution is notified in writing of that decision within one month of the date the decision was reached. When Accreditation is granted by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, the effective date of Accreditation is September 1 of the academic year in which the Commission takes action. For example, if the Board of Commissioners grants Accreditation to an institution at its in summer 2013 meeting, the effective date of the institution's Accreditation is September 1, 2012.

## **Terms of Agreement**

Candidate institutions must agree to the following terms:

1. Use the prescribed official definition for Candidate for Accreditation in all official publications and correspondence. For example: (Name of Institution) has been granted Candidate for Accreditation status by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. Candidacy is not Accreditation nor does it ensure eventual Accreditation. "Candidate for Accreditation" is a status of affiliation with the Commission which indicates that the institution has achieved initial recognition and is progressing toward Accreditation.
2. Ensure that Candidacy covers only those programs, degrees, locations, and delivery methodologies at the time Candidacy for Accreditation was granted. Institutional changes subsequent to that date must be approved in advance of implementation by the Commission. (See Substantive Change Policy)
3. File an annual report with the President of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. (Annual report forms are available to Candidate institutions in the spring of each year.)
4. Submit an Interim Candidacy Self-Evaluation Report to address all Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation and host an on-site evaluation visit 18 months after Candidacy for Accreditation is granted to address all Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation.

5. Submit an Interim Candidacy Self-Evaluation Report to address all Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation and host an on-site evaluation visit 36 months after Candidacy for Accreditation is granted to address all Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation.
6. Submit an Accreditation Self-Evaluation Report to address all Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation, and host an on-site evaluation visit for a determination of Accreditation five years after Candidacy for Accreditation is granted. Requests for early consideration of Accreditation must be approved in advance by the President of the Commission.

### **Voluntary Withdrawal from Candidacy**

An institution may voluntarily withdraw its Candidate for Accreditation status at any time prior to action by the Board of Commissioners.

### **Loss of Candidate Status**

If the Commission judges that Candidacy status should be removed, a *Show-Cause* order will be issued requesting that the institution respond to the expressed concerns of the Commission within a specified period of time. The burden of proof rests with the institution to demonstrate why its Candidacy should be continued.

### **Appealable Actions**

Actions by the Board of Commissioners to impose *Probation*, issue a *Show-Cause* order, deny or remove Candidate for Accreditation status, or deny Accreditation may be appealed. (See Appeals Policy and Procedures.) For institutions in Candidacy, the Candidacy for Accreditation status remains in effect during the appeal.

### **Reapplication**

If the Board of Commissioners denies or removes Candidacy for Accreditation, the institution must wait a minimum of two years following the date of that action before resubmitting a new Application for Consideration of Candidacy.

## **Accreditation**

Every NWCCU Accredited institution is required to conduct a thorough self evaluation at specified intervals to address elements of the Eligibility Requirements and elements of the Standards for Accreditation as described below in the overview of the seven-year accreditation cycle. Note: It is assumed that accredited institutions have met Eligibility Requirement 1. At its discretion, the Board of Commissioners may also request that the institution provide additional reports at specified times or submit additional reports and host an on-site peer evaluation visit.

The number of peer evaluators is determined by the nature of the evaluation and characteristics of the institution. The institution is charged a fee for each on-site evaluator. (See the “Dues and Fees” section of the Commission’s website for the current fee.) The Commission reserves the right to adjust the evaluation fee to fit unusual circumstances associated with on-site evaluations.

### **Overview of the Seven-Year Accreditation Cycle**

Because institutions of higher education are complex and dynamic systems that exist within changing environments, the accreditation self-evaluation process is designed to allow for flexibility and growth as institutions seek to maintain quality, implement improvement, and build stability and sustainability. The following outlines the seven-year self-evaluation process and demonstrates the integration of the Standards for Accreditation and the Eligibility Requirements within the process. This process of ongoing self evaluation ensures that the institution's responses to the Commission’s accreditation criteria and the Commission evaluations of those responses remain current and relevant throughout the accreditation cycle.

Guidelines for the preparation of Self-Evaluation Reports are available on the Commission’s website: [www.nwccu.org](http://www.nwccu.org).

### **Institutional Self Evaluation**

#### Year One

In year one of the seven-year accreditation cycle, the institution conducts a thorough self evaluation with respect to Standard One and Eligibility Requirements 2 and 3. Following the self evaluation, it prepares a Year One Self-Evaluation Report for submission to the Commission office.

#### Mid-Cycle

Conducted in the third year of the seven year cycle, the Mid-Cycle Evaluation is intended to ascertain an institution’s readiness to provide evidence (outcomes) of mission fulfillment and sustainability in Year Seven. It is to assist institutions in determining if the process of outcomes assessment will lead them to a successful Year Seven self-evaluation and peer evaluation. It is intended to be a formative and collegial evaluation with the institution in conversation with the evaluators.

#### Year Seven

In year seven of the seven-year accreditation cycle, the institution conducts a comprehensive self-evaluation on all Standards and Eligibility Requirements. In doing so it also updates its response to Standards One and Two to ensure its response to those Standards is current and relevant. Following the self evaluation, it prepares a Year Seven Self-Evaluation Report for submission to the Commission office.

## **Commission Evaluation Procedures**

NWCCU member institutions are not accredited permanently nor for a fixed number of years. Rather, accreditation must be reaffirmed periodically over a seven-year cycle following a process of self evaluation and peer evaluation. The Commission uses the following procedures in evaluating institutions for reaffirmation of Accreditation:

1. All peer evaluators are assigned from out-of-state Accredited institutions. In selecting evaluators, care is taken to avoid real or perceived conflicts of interest.
2. For year one evaluations, a panel of peer evaluators conducts an off-site evaluation of the institution with respect to Standard One and Eligibility Requirements 2 and 3, and prepares a Year One Peer-Evaluation Report of findings.
3. For mid-cycle evaluations, peer evaluators from other Accredited institutions and appropriate agencies study the institution's Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report and conduct an on-site visit of the institution. The purpose is to provide formative feedback regarding the institution's assessment plan and use of data for quality improvement.
4. For year seven comprehensive evaluations, peer evaluators from other Accredited institutions study the institution's Year Seven Comprehensive Self-Evaluation Report, conduct an on-site evaluation with respect to all Standards and Eligibility Requirements, and prepare a Year Seven Peer-Evaluation Report of findings and a Confidential Recommendation.
5. For each evaluation, a draft of the Peer-Evaluation Report is prepared and sent to the institution's chief executive officer, who is given an opportunity to correct errors of fact.
6. The Peer-Evaluation Report is finalized and submitted to the Commission office.
7. Evaluators submit the Confidential Recommendation to the Commission. The Confidential Recommendation is advisory only.
8. Print and electronic copies of the Peer-Evaluation Report are sent to the institution's chief executive officer and Accreditation Liaison Officer.
9. The institution is offered an opportunity to provide Commissioners with a written response to the Peer-Evaluation Report.
10. The Board of Commissioners considers the institution's Self-Evaluation Report, the Peer-Evaluation Report, the institution's written response to the Peer-Evaluation Report (if submitted), verbal statements of the chair of the peer-evaluation committee and institutional representatives (for year seven evaluations), the evaluators' Confidential Recommendation, and third-party comments (if any for Year Seven evaluations) in taking action on the reaffirmation of Accreditation.

## **Commission Actions**

For the evaluation regarding Reaffirmation of Accreditation, the Board of Commissioners may take one or more of the following actions:

1. Reaffirm Accreditation.
2. Request a special report (with or without an on-site evaluation) to address specified areas of concern.
3. Defer action on reaffirmation of Accreditation.
4. Issue, impose, or continue a sanction (*Warning, Probation, or Show-Cause*)
5. Remove a sanction.
6. Terminate Accreditation.

Once the Board of Commissioners makes a decision regarding reaffirmation of Accreditation, the institution is notified of that decision within one month of the date the decision was reached.

## **Terms of Agreement**

Accredited institutions must agree to the following terms:

1. Ensure that Accreditation covers only those programs, degrees, locations, and delivery methodologies at the time the institution was most recently evaluated. Institutional changes subsequent to the last evaluation must be approved in advance of implementation by the Commission. (See Substantive Change Policy.)
2. File an annual report with the President of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. (Annual report forms are made available to Accredited institutions in the spring of each year.)

## **Voluntary Withdrawal from Accreditation**

An institution may voluntarily withdraw its Accreditation status at any time prior to final action by the Commission.

## **Loss of Accreditation**

If the Commission judges that Accreditation status should be removed, a *Show-Cause* order will be issued requesting that the institution respond to the expressed concerns of the Commission within a specified period of time. The burden of proof rests with the institution to demonstrate why its Accreditation should be continued.

## **Appealable Actions**

Actions by the Board of Commissioners to impose *Probation*, issue a *Show-Cause* order, or terminate Accreditation status may be appealed. (See Appeals Policy and Procedures.) For Accredited institutions, the Accredited status remains in effect during the appeal.

## **Reapplication**

An institution for which Accredited status has been terminated must wait a minimum of two years following the date of that action before resubmitting a new Application for Consideration of Eligibility.

## **NON-U.S. BASED INSTITUTIONS**

In furtherance of its mission and in recognition of the increasing globalization of higher education, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities considers selected applications from institutions of higher education located outside of the United States. The Commission only considers applications from institutions where certain conditions prevail. For an explication of these conditions, please see the Commission's *Accreditation of Non-U.S. Institutions Policy*.

## **DUES AND FEES**

### **Dues**

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities determines annual dues for Candidate and Member institutions based upon total educational and general expenditures and mandatory transfers (exclusive of medical school and hospital budgets) for the previous academic year as reported to IPEDS. Invoices for annual dues are mailed in early fall of each year.

The current dues structure may be found in the "Dues and Fees" section of the Commission's website ([www.nwccu.org](http://www.nwccu.org)).

### **Fees**

The current list of fees may be found in the "Dues and Fees" section of the Commission's website ([www.nwccu.org](http://www.nwccu.org)). In case of special circumstances, the Commission reserves the right to adjust the evaluation fee schedule.

### **Billing**

Institutions are billed for the evaluation fee approximately two months prior to the on-site visit and as appropriate off-site visit. In the case of international institutions and other special circumstances, institutions may be billed in part or in total following the visit.



## ACCREDITATION CRITERIA

### PREAMBLE

The Standards for Accreditation establish criteria for evaluating institutional quality. Each of the five Standards articulates a dimension of institutional quality. In applying the Standards the Commission assesses and makes a determination about the effectiveness of the institution as a whole. The Standards are expectations that must be met at least minimally. Exceeding these expectations is desirable and ultimately contributes to the long-term sustainability of the institution. The Standards enable the Commission to evaluate a wide range of collegiate degree-granting institutions, differing in purpose, size, and organization, scope of program, clientele served, support and control. The Commission addresses individual differences in ways designed to protect educational quality and individual philosophy and practice. By design, the Standards as explicated do not preclude creative and imaginative innovation aimed at increasing the effectiveness of higher education. The Standards do not represent regulations or requirements of state or local agencies or the standards of other regional, national or specialized accreditation agencies or other groups that may establish best practices or criteria for quality.

Self-regulation requires institutions to meet the Standards as a condition of their accredited status. Each of the five dimensions of institutional quality has a statement of the Standard set forth in bold type. The considerations in determining the fulfillment of the Standards are articulated in numbered paragraphs below the statement of the Standard. The Standards are interrelated and interdependent. The Standards manifest an accreditation model that is mission centric and outcomes based.

These Standards affirm that the individual mission and core themes of each institution remain the context within which these accreditation Standards are applied during self-evaluation and peer evaluation. The particular way in which a Standard is evidenced may vary, consistent with differences in institutional mission and purposes. In addition, some Standards may not apply fully or at all to some institutions. The standards on General Education, for example, might not be relevant for an institution that only offers graduate degree programs.

The statements following the first paragraph of each Standard provide an explication of the Standard. They specify the particular conditions or qualities that together comprise the Standard. These components have an inherent relationship to each other and collectively these elements constitute compliance. The Standards for Accreditation provide a foundation for institutional reviews and peer evaluator and Commission actions.

## **Eligibility Requirements**

### **1. Operational Status**

The institution has completed at least one year of its principal educational programs and is operational with students actively pursuing its degree programs at the time of the Commission accepting an institution's Application for Consideration for Eligibility. The institution has graduated at least one class in its principal educational program(s) before the Commission's evaluation for initial accreditation.

### **2. Authority**

The institution is authorized to operate and award degrees as a higher education institution by the appropriate governmental organization, agency, or governing board as required by the jurisdiction in which it operates.

### **3. Mission and Core Themes**

The institution's mission and core themes are clearly defined and adopted by its governing board(s) consistent with its legal authorization, and are appropriate to a degree-granting institution of higher education. The institution's purpose is to serve the educational interests of its students and its principal programs lead to recognized degrees. The institution devotes all, or substantially all, of its resources to support its educational mission and core themes.

### **4. Operational Focus and Independence**

The institution's programs and services are predominantly concerned with higher education. The institution has sufficient organizational and operational independence to be held accountable and responsible for meeting the Commission's Standards and Eligibility Requirements.

### **5. Nondiscrimination**

The institution is governed and administered with respect for the individual in a nondiscriminatory manner while responding to the educational needs and legitimate claims of the constituencies it serves as determined by its charter, its mission, and its core themes.

### **6. Institutional Integrity**

The institution establishes and adheres to ethical standards in all of its operations and relationships.

### **7. Governing Board**

The institution has a functioning governing board responsible for the quality and integrity of the institution and for each unit within a multiple-unit institution to ensure that the institution's mission and core themes are being achieved. The governing board has at least five voting members, a majority of whom have no contractual or employment relationship or personal financial interest with the institution.

### **8. Chief Executive Officer**

The institution employs a chief executive officer who is appointed by the governing board and whose full-time responsibility is to the institution. Neither the chief executive officer nor an executive officer of the institution chairs the institution's governing board.

## **9. Administration**

In addition to a chief executive officer, the institution employs a sufficient number of qualified administrators who provide effective leadership and management for the institution's major support and operational functions and work collaboratively across institutional functions and units to foster fulfillment of the institution's mission and achievement of its core themes.

## **10. Faculty**

Consistent with its mission and core themes, the institution employs and regularly evaluates the performance of appropriately qualified faculty sufficient in number to achieve its educational objectives, establish and oversee academic policies, and ensure the integrity and continuity of its academic programs wherever offered and however delivered.

## **11. Educational Program**

The institution provides one or more educational programs which include appropriate content and rigor consistent with its mission and core themes. The educational program(s) culminate in achievement of clearly identified student learning outcomes, and lead to collegiate-level degree(s) with degree designation consistent with program content in recognized fields of study.

## **12. General Education and Related Instruction**

The institution's baccalaureate degree programs and/or academic or transfer associate degree programs require a substantial and coherent component of General Education as a prerequisite to or an essential element of the programs offered. All other associate degree programs (e.g., applied, specialized, or technical) and programs of study of either 30 semester or 45 quarter credits or more for which certificates are granted contain a recognizable core of related instruction or General Education with identified outcomes in the areas of communication, computation, and human relations that align with and support program goals or intended outcomes. Bachelor and graduate degree programs also require a planned program of major specialization or concentration.

## **13. Library and Information Resources**

Consistent with its mission and core themes, the institution maintains and/or provides access to library and information resources with an appropriate level of currency, depth, and breadth to support the institution's programs and services wherever offered and however delivered.

## **14. Physical and Technological Infrastructure**

The institution provides the physical and technological infrastructure necessary to achieve its mission and core themes.

## **15. Academic Freedom**

The institution maintains an atmosphere in which intellectual freedom and independence exist. Faculty and students are free to examine and test all knowledge appropriate to their discipline or area of major study as judged by the academic/educational community in general.

## **16. Admissions**

The institution publishes its student admission policy which specifies the characteristics and qualifications appropriate for its programs, and it adheres to that policy in its admissions procedures and practices.

**17. Public Information**

The institution publishes in a catalog and/or on a website current and accurate information regarding: its mission and core themes; admission requirements and procedures; grading policy; information on academic programs and courses; names, titles and academic credentials of administrators and faculty; rules and regulations for student conduct; rights and responsibilities of students; tuition, fees, and other program costs; refund policies and procedures; opportunities and requirements for financial aid; and the academic calendar.

**18. Financial Resources**

The institution demonstrates financial stability with sufficient cash flow and, as appropriate, reserves to support its programs and services. Financial planning reflects available funds, realistic development of financial resources, and appropriate risk management to ensure short-term solvency and long-term financial sustainability.

**19. Financial Accountability**

For each year of operation, the institution undergoes an annual external financial audit by professionally qualified personnel in accordance with generally accepted auditing standards. The audit is to be completed no later than nine months after the end of the fiscal year. Results from the audit, including findings and management letter recommendations, are considered annually in an appropriate and comprehensive manner by the administration and the governing board.

**20. Disclosure**

The institution accurately discloses to the Commission all information the Commission may require to carry out its evaluation and accreditation functions.

**21. Relationship with the Accreditation Commission**

The institution accepts the Standards and related policies of the Commission and agrees to comply with these Standards and policies as currently stated or as modified in accordance with Commission policy. Further, the institution agrees that the Commission may, at its discretion, make known the nature of any action, positive or negative, regarding the institution's status with the Commission to any agency or members of the public requesting such information.

**22. Student Achievement**

The institution identifies and publishes the expected learning outcomes for each of its degree and certificate programs. The institution engages in regular and ongoing assessment to validate student achievement of these learning outcomes.

**23. Institutional Effectiveness**

The institution systematically applies clearly defined evaluation and planning procedures, assesses the extent to which it achieves its mission and core themes, uses the results of assessment to effect institutional improvement, and periodically publishes the results to its constituencies. Through these processes it regularly monitors its internal and external environments to determine how and to what degree changing circumstances may impact the institution and its ability to ensure its viability and sustainability.

**24. Scale and Sustainability**

The institution demonstrates that its operational scale (e.g., enrollment, human and financial resources and institutional infrastructure) is sufficient to fulfill its mission and achieve its core themes in the present and will be sufficient to do so in the foreseeable future.

## Standards for Accreditation

The five Standards for Accreditation are best understood within the context of the seven-year accreditation cycle. The standards are interconnected and build upon each other in a cycle of continuous improvement.

### Design and Function

The five Standards for Accreditation are statements that articulate the quality and effectiveness expected of accredited institutions, and collectively they provide a framework for continuous improvement within institutions. The five standards also serve as indicators by which institutions are evaluated by peers. The standards are designed to guide institutions in a process of self-reflection that blends analysis and synthesis in a holistic examination of:

- The institution's mission and core themes;
- The translation of the mission's core themes into assessable objectives supported by programs and services;
- The appraisal of the institution's potential to fulfill the mission;
- The planning and implementation involved in achieving and assessing the desired outcomes of programs and services; and
- An evaluation of the results of the institution's efforts to fulfill its mission, assess its ability to monitor its environment, and adapt and sustain itself as a viable institution.

### Structure

Each of the five Standards for Accreditation is designated by a number and title (e.g., Standard One – Mission and Core Themes), and is further defined by *elements* of the standard, which are designated by the number of the standard followed by the letter of the element (e.g., 1.A Mission). The *criteria* for evaluation more specifically define the elements and are identified by the number of the standard, followed by the letter of the standard element, followed by the number of the criterion (e.g., 1.A.1). Each standard is introduced by a narrative summary intended only to provide direction, not to be addressed as a criterion.

### Standard One – Mission and Core Themes

The institution articulates its purpose in a mission statement, and identifies core themes that comprise essential elements of that mission. In an examination of its purpose, characteristics, and expectations, the institution defines the parameters for mission fulfillment. Guided by that definition, it identifies an acceptable threshold or extent of mission fulfillment.

#### 1.A Mission

- 1.A.1 The institution has a widely published mission statement—approved by its governing board—that articulates a purpose appropriate for an institution of higher learning, gives direction for its efforts, and derives from, and is generally understood by, its community.
- 1.A.2 The institution defines mission fulfillment in the context of its purpose, characteristics, and expectations. Guided by that definition, it articulates institutional accomplishments or outcomes that represent an acceptable threshold or extent of mission fulfillment.

## **1.B Core Themes**

- 1.B.1 The institution identifies core themes that individually manifest essential elements of its mission and collectively encompass its mission.
- 1.B.2 The institution establishes objectives for each of its core themes and identifies meaningful, assessable, and verifiable indicators of achievement that form the basis for evaluating accomplishment of the objectives of its core themes.

## **Standard Two – Resources and Capacity**

By documenting the adequacy of its resources and capacity, the institution demonstrates the potential to fulfill its mission, accomplish its core theme objectives, and achieve the intended outcomes of its programs and services, wherever offered and however delivered. Through its governance and decision-making structures, the institution establishes, reviews regularly, and revises, as necessary, policies and procedures that promote effective management and operation of the institution.

### **2.A Governance**

- 2.A.1 The institution demonstrates an effective and widely understood system of governance with clearly defined authority, roles, and responsibilities. Its decision-making structures and processes make provision for the consideration of the views of faculty, staff, administrators, and students on matters in which they have a direct and reasonable interest.
- 2.A.2 In a multi-unit governance system, the division of authority and responsibility between the system and the institution is clearly delineated. System policies, regulations, and procedures concerning the institution are clearly defined and equitably administered.
- 2.A.3 The institution monitors its compliance with the Commission’s Standards for Accreditation, including the impact of collective bargaining agreements, legislative actions, and external mandates.

### **Governing Board**

- 2.A.4 The institution has a functioning governing board\* consisting of at least five voting members, a majority of whom have no contractual, employment, or financial interest in the institution. If the institution is governed by a hierarchical structure of multiple boards, the roles, responsibilities, and authority of each board—as they relate to the institution—are clearly defined, widely communicated, and broadly understood.
- 2.A.5 The board acts only as a committee of the whole; no member or subcommittee of the board acts on behalf of the board except by formal delegation of authority by the governing board as a whole.
- 2.A.6 The board establishes, reviews regularly, revises as necessary, and exercises broad oversight of institutional policies, including those regarding its own organization and operation.

- 2.A.7 The board selects and evaluates regularly a chief executive officer who is accountable for the operation of the institution. It delegates authority and responsibility to the CEO to implement and administer board-approved policies related to the operation of the institution.
- 2.A.8 The board regularly evaluates its performance to ensure its duties and responsibilities are fulfilled in an effective and efficient manner.

### **Leadership and Management**

- 2.A.9 The institution has an effective system of leadership, staffed by qualified administrators, with appropriate levels of responsibility and accountability, who are charged with planning, organizing, and managing the institution and assessing its achievements and effectiveness.
- 2.A.10 The institution employs an appropriately qualified chief executive officer with full-time responsibility to the institution. The chief executive officer may serve as an *ex officio* member of the governing board, but may not serve as its chair.
- 2.A.11 The institution employs a sufficient number of qualified administrators who provide effective leadership and management for the institution's major support and operational functions and work collaboratively across institutional functions and units to foster fulfillment of the institution's mission and accomplishment of its core theme objectives.

### **Policies and Procedures**

#### Academics

- 2.A.12 Academic policies—including those related to teaching, service, scholarship, research, and artistic creation—are clearly communicated to students and faculty and to administrators and staff with responsibilities related to these areas.
- 2.A.13 Policies regarding access to and use of library and information resources—regardless of format, location, and delivery method—are documented, published, and enforced.
- 2.A.14 The institution develops, publishes widely, and follows an effective and clearly stated transfer-of-credit policy that maintains the integrity of its programs while facilitating efficient mobility of students between institutions in completing their educational programs.

#### Students

- 2.A.15 Policies and procedures regarding students' rights and responsibilities—including academic honesty, appeals, grievances, and accommodations for persons with disabilities—are clearly stated, readily available, and administered in a fair and consistent manner.

2.A.16 The institution adopts and adheres to admission and placement policies that guide the enrollment of students in courses and programs through an evaluation of prerequisite knowledge, skills, and abilities to assure a reasonable probability of student success at a level commensurate with the institution's expectations. Its policy regarding continuation in and termination from its educational programs—including its appeals process and readmission policy—are clearly defined, widely published, and administered in a fair and timely manner.

2.A.17 The institution maintains and publishes policies that clearly state its relationship to co-curricular activities and the roles and responsibilities of students and the institution for those activities, including student publications and other student media, if offered.

#### Human Resources

2.A.18 The institution maintains and publishes its human resources policies and procedures and regularly reviews them to ensure they are consistent, fair, and equitably applied to its employees and students.

2.A.19 Employees are apprised of their conditions of employment, work assignments, rights and responsibilities, and criteria and procedures for evaluation, retention, promotion, and termination.

2.A.20 The institution ensures the security and appropriate confidentiality of human resources records.

#### Institutional Integrity

2.A.21 The institution represents itself clearly, accurately, and consistently through its announcements, statements, and publications. It communicates its academic intentions, programs, and services to students and to the public and demonstrates that its academic programs can be completed in a timely fashion. It regularly reviews its publications to assure integrity in all representations about its mission, programs, and services.

2.A.22 The institution advocates, subscribes to, and exemplifies high ethical standards in managing and operating the institution, including its dealings with the public, the Commission, and external organizations, and in the fair and equitable treatment of students, faculty, administrators, staff, and other constituencies. It ensures complaints and grievances are addressed in a fair and timely manner.

2.A.23 The institution adheres to a clearly defined policy that prohibits conflict of interest on the part of members of the governing board, administration, faculty, and staff. Even when supported by or affiliated with social, political, corporate, or religious organizations, the institution has education as its primary purpose and operates as an academic institution with appropriate autonomy. If it requires its constituencies to conform to specific codes of conduct or seeks to instill specific beliefs or world views, it gives clear prior notice of such codes and/or policies in its publications.

2.A.24 The institution maintains clearly defined policies with respect to ownership, copyright, control, compensation, and revenue derived from the creation and production of intellectual property.



- 2.A.25 The institution accurately represents its current accreditation status and avoids speculation on future accreditation actions or status. It uses the terms “Accreditation” and “Candidacy” and related terms) only when such status is conferred by an accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.
- 2.A.26 If the institution enters into contractual agreements with external entities for products or services performed on its behalf, the scope of work for those products or services—with clearly defined roles and responsibilities—is stipulated in a written and approved agreement that contains provisions to maintain the integrity of the institution. In such cases, the institution ensures the scope of the agreement is consistent with the mission and goals of the institution, adheres to institutional policies and procedures, and complies with the Commission’s Standards for Accreditation.

#### Academic Freedom

- 2.A.27 The institution publishes and adheres to policies, approved by its governing board, regarding academic freedom and responsibility that protect its constituencies from inappropriate internal and external influences, pressures, and harassment.
- 2.A.28 Within the context of its mission, core themes, and values, the institution defines and actively promotes an environment that supports independent thought in the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge. It affirms the freedom of faculty, staff, administrators, and students to share their scholarship and reasoned conclusions with others. While the institution and individuals within the institution may hold to a particular personal, social, or religious philosophy, its constituencies are intellectually free to examine thought, reason, and perspectives of truth. Moreover, they allow others the freedom to do the same.
- 2.A.29 Individuals with teaching responsibilities present scholarship fairly, accurately, and objectively. Derivative scholarship acknowledges the source of intellectual property, and personal views, beliefs, and opinions are identified as such.

#### Finance

- 2.A.30 The institution has clearly defined policies, approved by its governing board, regarding oversight and management of financial resources—including financial planning, board approval and monitoring of operating and capital budgets, reserves, investments, fundraising, cash management, debt management, and transfers and borrowings between funds.

### **2.B Human Resources**

- 2.B.1 The institution employs a sufficient number of qualified personnel to maintain its support and operations functions. Criteria, qualifications, and procedures for selection of personnel are clearly and publicly stated. Job descriptions accurately reflect duties, responsibilities, and authority of the position.
- 2.B.2 Administrators and staff are evaluated regularly with regard to performance of work duties and responsibilities.
- 2.B.3 The institution provides faculty, staff, administrators, and other employees with appropriate opportunities and support for professional growth and development to enhance their effectiveness in fulfilling their roles, duties, and responsibilities.

- 2.B.4 Consistent with its mission, core themes, programs, services, and characteristics, the institution employs appropriately qualified faculty sufficient in number to achieve its educational objectives, establish and oversee academic policies, and assure the integrity and continuity of its academic programs, wherever offered and however delivered.
- 2.B.5 Faculty responsibilities and workloads are commensurate with the institution's expectations for teaching, service, scholarship, research, and/or artistic creation.
- 2.B.6 All faculty are evaluated in a regular, systematic, substantive, and collegial manner at least once within every five-year period of service. The evaluation process specifies the timeline and criteria by which faculty are evaluated; utilizes multiple indices of effectiveness, each of which is directly related to the faculty member's roles and responsibilities, including evidence of teaching effectiveness for faculty with teaching responsibilities; contains a provision to address concerns that may emerge between regularly scheduled evaluations; and provides for administrative access to all primary evaluation data. Where areas for improvement are identified, the institution works with the faculty member to develop and implement a plan to address identified areas of concern.

## **2.C Education Resources**

- 2.C.1 The institution provides programs, wherever offered and however delivered, with appropriate content and rigor that are consistent with its mission; culminate in achievement of clearly identified student learning outcomes; and lead to collegiate-level degrees or certificates with designators consistent with program content in recognized fields of study.
- 2.C.2 The institution identifies and publishes expected course, program, and degree learning outcomes. Expected student learning outcomes for courses, wherever offered and however delivered, are provided in written form to enrolled students.
- 2.C.3 Credit and degrees, wherever offered and however delivered, are based on documented student achievement and awarded in a manner consistent with institutional policies that reflect generally accepted learning outcomes, norms, or equivalencies in higher education.
- 2.C.4 Degree programs, wherever offered and however delivered, demonstrate a coherent design with appropriate breadth, depth, sequencing of courses, and synthesis of learning. Admission and graduation requirements are clearly defined and widely published.
- 2.C.5 Faculty, through well-defined structures and processes with clearly defined authority and responsibilities, exercise a major role in the design, approval, implementation, and revision of the curriculum, and have an active role in the selection of new faculty. Faculty with teaching responsibilities take collective responsibility for fostering and assessing student achievement of clearly identified learning outcomes.
- 2.C.6 Faculty with teaching responsibilities, in partnership with library and information resources personnel, ensure that the use of library and information resources is integrated into the learning process.

- 2.C.7 Credit for prior experiential learning, if granted, is: a) guided by approved policies and procedures; b) awarded only at the undergraduate level to enrolled students; c) limited to a maximum of 25% of the credits needed for a degree; d) awarded only for documented student achievement equivalent to expected learning achievement for courses within the institution's regular curricular offerings; and e) granted only upon the recommendation of appropriately qualified teaching faculty. Credit granted for prior experiential learning is so identified on students' transcripts and may not duplicate other credit awarded to the student in fulfillment of degree requirements. The institution makes no assurances regarding the number of credits to be awarded prior to the completion of the institution's review process.
- 2.C.8 The final judgment in accepting transfer credit is the responsibility of the receiving institution. Transfer credit is accepted according to procedures which provide adequate safeguards to ensure high academic quality, relevance to the students' programs, and integrity of the receiving institution's degrees. In accepting transfer credit, the receiving institution ensures that the credit accepted is appropriate for its programs and comparable in nature, content, academic quality, and level to credit it offers. Where patterns of student enrollment between institutions are identified, the institution develops articulation agreements between the institutions.

### **Undergraduate Programs**

- 2.C.9 The General Education component of undergraduate programs (if offered) demonstrates an integrated course of study that helps students develop the breadth and depth of intellect to become more effective learners and to prepare them for a productive life of work, citizenship, and personal fulfillment. Baccalaureate degree programs and transfer associate degree programs include a recognizable core of general education that represents an integration of basic knowledge and methodology of the humanities and fine arts, mathematical and natural sciences, and social sciences. Applied undergraduate degree and certificate programs of thirty (30) semester credits or forty-five (45) quarter credits in length contain a recognizable core of related instruction or general education with identified outcomes in the areas of communication, computation, and human relations that align with and support program goals or intended outcomes.
- 2.C.10 The institution demonstrates that the General Education components of its baccalaureate degree programs (if offered) and transfer associate degree programs (if offered) have identifiable and assessable learning outcomes that are stated in relation to the institution's mission and learning outcomes for those programs.
- 2.C.11 The related instruction components of applied degree and certificate programs (if offered) have identifiable and assessable learning outcomes that align with and support program goals or intended outcomes. Related instruction components may be embedded within program curricula or taught in blocks of specialized instruction, but each approach must have clearly identified content and be taught or monitored by teaching faculty who are appropriately qualified in those areas.

## **Graduate Programs**

- 2.C.12 Graduate programs are consistent with the institution's mission; are in keeping with the expectations of their respective disciplines and professions; and are described through nomenclature that is appropriate to the levels of graduate and professional degrees offered. They differ from undergraduate programs by requiring greater depth of study and increased demands on student intellectual or creative capacities; knowledge of the literature of the field; and ongoing student engagement in research, scholarship, creative expression, and/or appropriate high-level professional practice.
- 2.C.13 Graduate admission and retention policies ensure that student qualifications and expectations are compatible with the institution's mission and the program's requirements. Transfer of credit is evaluated according to clearly defined policies by faculty with a major commitment to graduate education or by a representative body of faculty responsible for the degree program at the receiving institution.
- 2.C.14 Graduate credit may be granted for internships, field experiences, and clinical practices that are an integral part of the graduate degree program. Credit toward graduate degrees may not be granted for experiential learning that occurred prior to matriculation into the graduate degree program. Unless the institution structures the graduate learning experience, monitors that learning, and assesses learning achievements, graduate credit is not granted for learning experiences external to the students' formal graduate programs.
- 2.C.15 Graduate programs intended to prepare students for research, professional practice, scholarship, or artistic creation are characterized by a high level of expertise, originality, and critical analysis. Programs intended to prepare students for artistic creation are directed toward developing personal expressions of original concepts, interpretations, imagination, thoughts, or feelings. Graduate programs intended to prepare students for research or scholarship are directed toward advancing the frontiers of knowledge by constructing and/or revising theories and creating or applying knowledge. Graduate programs intended to prepare students for professional practice are directed toward developing high levels of knowledge and performance skills directly related to effective practice within the profession.

## **Continuing Education and Non-Credit Programs**

- 2.C.16 Credit and non-credit continuing education programs and other special programs are compatible with the institution's mission and goals.
- 2.C.17 The institution maintains direct and sole responsibility for the academic quality of all aspects of its continuing education and special learning programs and courses. Continuing education and/or special learning activities, programs, or courses offered for academic credit are approved by the appropriate institutional body, monitored through established procedures with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and assessed with regard to student achievement. Faculty representing the disciplines and fields of work are appropriately involved in the planning and evaluation of the institution's continuing education and special learning activities.

- 2.C.18 The granting of credit or Continuing Education Units (CEUs) for continuing education courses and special learning activities is: a) guided by generally accepted norms; b) based on institutional mission and policy; c) consistent across the institution, wherever offered and however delivered; d) appropriate to the objectives of the course; and e) determined by student achievement of identified learning outcomes.
- 2.C.19 The institution maintains records which describe the number of courses and nature of learning provided through non-credit instruction.

## **2.D Student Support Resources**

- 2.D.1 Consistent with the nature of its educational programs and methods of delivery, the institution creates effective learning environments with appropriate programs and services to support student learning needs.
- 2.D.2 The institution makes adequate provision for the safety and security of its students and their property at all locations where it offers programs and services. Crime statistics, campus security policies, and other disclosures required under federal and state regulations are made available in accordance with those regulations.
- 2.D.3 Consistent with its mission, core themes, and characteristics, the institution recruits and admits students with the potential to benefit from its educational offerings. It orients students to ensure they understand the requirements related to their programs of study and receive timely, useful, and accurate information and advising about relevant academic requirements, including graduation and transfer policies.
- 2.D.4 In the event of program elimination or significant change in requirements, the institution makes appropriate arrangements to ensure that students enrolled in the program have an opportunity to complete their program in a timely manner with a minimum of disruption.
- 2.D.5 The institution publishes in a catalog, or provides in a manner reasonably available to students and other stakeholders, current and accurate information that includes:
- a) Institutional mission and core themes;
  - b) Entrance requirements and procedures;
  - c) Grading policy;
  - d) Information on academic programs and courses, including degree and program completion requirements, expected learning outcomes, required course sequences, and projected timelines to completion based on normal student progress and the frequency of course offerings;
  - e) Names, titles, degrees held, and conferring institutions for administrators and full-time faculty;
  - f) Rules, regulations for conduct, rights, and responsibilities;
  - g) Tuition, fees, and other program costs;
  - h) Refund policies and procedures for students who withdraw from enrollment;
  - i) Opportunities and requirements for financial aid; and
  - j) Academic calendar.

- 2.D.6 Publications describing educational programs include accurate information on:
- a) National and/or state legal eligibility requirements for licensure or entry into an occupation or profession for which education and training are offered;
  - b) Descriptions of unique requirements for employment and advancement in the occupation or profession.
- 2.D.7 The institution adopts and adheres to policies and procedures regarding the secure retention of student records, including provision for reliable and retrievable backup of those records, regardless of their form. The institution publishes and follows established policies for confidentiality and release of student records.
- 2.D.8 The institution provides an effective and accountable program of financial aid consistent with its mission, student needs, and institutional resources. Information regarding the categories of financial assistance (such as scholarships, grants, and loans) is published and made available to prospective and enrolled students.
- 2.D.9 Students receiving financial assistance are informed of any repayment obligations. The institution regularly monitors its student loan programs and the institution's loan default rate.
- 2.D.10 The institution designs, maintains, and evaluates a systematic and effective program of academic advisement to support student development and success. Personnel responsible for advising students are knowledgeable of the curriculum, program requirements, and graduation requirements and are adequately prepared to successfully fulfill their responsibilities. Advising requirements and responsibilities are defined, published, and made available to students.
- 2.D.11 Co-curricular activities are consistent with the institution's mission, core themes, programs, and services and are governed appropriately.
- 2.D.12 If the institution operates auxiliary services (such as student housing, food service, and bookstore), they support the institution's mission, contribute to the intellectual climate of the campus community, and enhance the quality of the learning environment. Students, faculty, staff, and administrators have opportunities for input regarding these services.
- 2.D.13 Intercollegiate athletic and other co-curricular programs (if offered) and related financial operations are consistent with the institution's mission and conducted with appropriate institutional oversight. Admission requirements and procedures, academic standards, degree requirements, and financial aid awards for students participating in co-curricular programs are consistent with those for other students.
- 2.D.14 The institution maintains an effective identity verification process for students enrolled in distance education courses and programs to establish that the student enrolled in the distance education course or program is the same person whose achievements are evaluated and credentialed. The institution ensures the identity verification process for distance education students protects student privacy and that students are informed, in writing at the time of enrollment, of current and projected charges associated with the identity verification process.

## **2.E Library and Information Resources**

- 2.E.1 Consistent with its mission and core themes, the institution holds or provides access to library and information resources with an appropriate level of currency, depth, and breadth to support the institution's mission, core themes, programs, and services, wherever offered and however delivered.
- 2.E.2 Planning for library and information resources is guided by data that include feedback from affected users and appropriate library and information resources faculty, staff, and administrators.
- 2.E.3 Consistent with its mission and core themes, the institution provides appropriate instruction and support for students, faculty, staff, administrators, and others (as appropriate) to enhance their efficiency and effectiveness in obtaining, evaluating, and using library and information resources that support its programs and services, wherever offered and however delivered.
- 2.E.4 The institution regularly and systematically evaluates the quality, adequacy, utilization, and security of library and information resources and services, including those provided through cooperative arrangements, wherever offered and however delivered.

## **2.F Financial Resources**

- 2.F.1 The institution demonstrates financial stability with sufficient cash flow and reserves to support its programs and services. Financial planning reflects available funds, realistic development of financial resources, and appropriate risk management to ensure short-term solvency and anticipate long-term obligations, including payment of future liabilities.
- 2.F.2 Resource planning and development include realistic budgeting, enrollment management, and responsible projections of grants, donations, and other non-tuition revenue sources.
- 2.F.3 The institution clearly defines and follows its policies, guidelines, and processes for financial planning and budget development that include appropriate opportunities for participation by its constituencies.
- 2.F.4 The institution ensures timely and accurate financial information through its use of an appropriate accounting system that follows generally accepted accounting principles and through its reliance on an effective system of internal controls.
- 2.F.5 Capital budgets reflect the institution's mission and core theme objectives and relate to its plans for physical facilities and acquisition of equipment. Long-range capital plans support the institution's mission and goals and reflect projections of the total cost of ownership, equipment, furnishing, and operation of new or renovated facilities. Debt for capital outlay purposes is periodically reviewed, carefully controlled, and justified, so as not to create an unreasonable drain on resources available for educational purposes.
- 2.F.6 The institution defines the financial relationship between its general operations and its auxiliary enterprises, including any use of general operations funds to support auxiliary enterprises or the use of funds from auxiliary services to support general operations.

- 2.F.7 For each year of operation, the institution undergoes an annual external financial audit by professionally qualified personnel in accordance with generally accepted auditing standards. The audit is to be completed no later than nine months after the end of the fiscal year. Results from the audit, including findings and management letter recommendations, are considered annually in an appropriate and comprehensive manner by the administration and the governing board.
- 2.F.8 All institutional fundraising activities are conducted in a professional and ethical manner and comply with governmental requirements. If the institution has a relationship with a fundraising organization that bears its name and whose major purpose is to raise funds to support its mission, the institution has a written agreement that clearly defines its relationship with that organization.

## **2.G Physical and Technological Infrastructure**

### **Physical Infrastructure**

- 2.G.1 Consistent with its mission, core themes, and characteristics, the institution creates and maintains physical facilities that are accessible, safe, secure, and sufficient in quantity and quality to ensure healthful learning and working environments that support the institution's mission, programs, and services.
- 2.G.2 The institution adopts, publishes, reviews regularly, and adheres to policies and procedures regarding the safe use, storage, and disposal of hazardous or toxic materials.
- 2.G.3 The institution develops, implements, and reviews regularly a master plan for its physical development that is consistent with its mission, core themes, and long-range educational and financial plans.
- 2.G.4 Equipment is sufficient in quantity and quality and managed appropriately to support institutional functions and fulfillment of the institution's mission, accomplishment of core theme objectives, and achievement of goals or intended outcomes of its programs and services.

### **Technological Infrastructure**

- 2.G.5 Consistent with its mission, core themes, and characteristics, the institution has appropriate and adequate technology systems and infrastructure to support its management and operational functions, academic programs, and support services, wherever offered and however delivered.
- 2.G.6 The institution provides appropriate instruction and support for faculty, staff, students, and administrators in the effective use of technology and technology systems related to its programs, services, and institutional operations.
- 2.G.7 Technological infrastructure planning provides opportunities for input from its technology support staff and constituencies who rely on technology for institutional operations, programs, and services.



- 2.G.8 The institution develops, implements, and reviews regularly a technology update and replacement plan to ensure its technological infrastructure is adequate to support its operations, programs, and services.

### **Standard Three – Planning and Implementation**

The institution engages in ongoing, participatory planning that provides direction for the institution and leads to the achievement of the intended outcomes of its programs and services, accomplishment of its core themes, and fulfillment of its mission. The resulting plans reflect the interdependent nature of the institution's operations, functions, and resources. The institution demonstrates that the plans are implemented and are evident in the relevant activities of its programs and services, the adequacy of its resource allocation, and the effective application of institutional capacity. In addition, the institution demonstrates that its planning and implementation processes are sufficiently flexible so that the institution is able to address unexpected circumstances that have the potential to impact the institution's ability to accomplish its core theme objectives and to fulfill its mission.

#### **3.A Institutional Planning**

- 3.A.1 The institution engages in ongoing, purposeful, systematic, integrated, and comprehensive planning that leads to fulfillment of its mission. Its plans are implemented and made available to appropriate constituencies.
- 3.A.2 The institution's comprehensive planning process is broad-based and offers opportunities for input by appropriate constituencies.
- 3.A.3 The institution's comprehensive planning process is informed by the collection of appropriately defined data that are analyzed and used to evaluate fulfillment of its mission.
- 3.A.4 The institution's comprehensive plan articulates priorities and guides decisions on resource allocation and application of institutional capacity.
- 3.A.5 The institution's planning includes emergency preparedness and contingency planning for continuity and recovery of operations should catastrophic events significantly interrupt normal institutional operations.

#### **3.B Core Theme Planning**

- 3.B.1 Planning for each core theme is consistent with the institution's comprehensive plan and guides the selection of programs and services to ensure they are aligned with and contribute to accomplishment of the core theme's objectives.
- 3.B.2 Planning for core theme programs and services guides the selection of contributing components of those programs and services to ensure they are aligned with and contribute to achievement of the goals or intended outcomes of the respective programs and services.

- 3.B.3 core theme planning is informed by the collection of appropriately defined data that are analyzed and used to evaluate accomplishment of core theme objectives. Planning for programs and services is informed by the collection of appropriately defined data that are used to evaluate achievement of the goals or intended outcomes of those programs and services.

#### **Standard Four – Effectiveness and Improvement**

The institution regularly and systematically collects data related to clearly defined indicators of achievement, analyzes those data, and formulates evidence-based evaluations of the achievement of core theme objectives. It demonstrates clearly defined procedures for evaluating the integration and significance of institutional planning, the allocation of resources, and the application of capacity in its activities for achieving the intended outcomes of its programs and services and for achieving its core theme objectives. The institution disseminates assessment results to its constituencies and uses those results to effect improvement.

#### **4.A Assessment**

- 4.A.1 The institution engages in ongoing systematic collection and analysis of meaningful, assessable, and verifiable data—quantitative and/or qualitative, as appropriate to its indicators of achievement—as the basis for evaluating the accomplishment of its core theme objectives.
- 4.A.2 The institution engages in an effective system of evaluation of its programs and services, wherever offered and however delivered, to evaluate achievement of clearly identified program goals or intended outcomes. Faculty have a primary role in the evaluation of educational programs and services.
- 4.A.3 The institution documents, through an effective, regular, and comprehensive system of assessment of student achievement, that students who complete its educational courses, programs, and degrees, wherever offered and however delivered, achieve identified course, program, and degree learning outcomes. Faculty with teaching responsibilities are responsible for evaluating student achievement of clearly identified learning outcomes.
- 4.A.4 The institution evaluates holistically the alignment, correlation, and integration of programs and services with respect to accomplishment of core theme objectives.
- 4.A.5 The institution evaluates holistically the alignment, correlation, and integration of planning, resources, capacity, practices, and assessment with respect to achievement of the goals or intended outcomes of its programs or services, wherever offered and however delivered.
- 4.A.6 The institution regularly reviews its assessment processes to ensure they appraise authentic achievements and yield meaningful results that lead to improvement.

#### **4.B Improvement**

- 4.B.1 Results of core theme assessments and results of assessments of programs and services are: a) based on meaningful institutionally identified indicators of achievement; b) used for improvement by informing planning, decision making, and allocation of resources and capacity; and c) made available to appropriate constituencies in a timely manner.

- 4.B.2 The institution uses the results of its assessment of student learning to inform academic and learning-support planning and practices that lead to enhancement of student learning achievements. Results of student learning assessments are made available to appropriate constituencies in a timely manner.

### **Standard Five – Mission Fulfillment, Adaptation, and Sustainability**

Based on its definition of mission fulfillment and informed by the results of its analysis of accomplishment of its core theme objectives, the institution develops and publishes evidence-based evaluations regarding the extent to which it is fulfilling its mission. The institution regularly monitors its internal and external environments to determine how and to what degree changing circumstances may impact its mission and its ability to fulfill that mission. It demonstrates that it is capable of adapting, when necessary, its mission, core themes, programs, and services to accommodate changing and emerging needs, trends, and influences to ensure enduring institutional relevancy, productivity, viability, and sustainability.

#### **5.A Mission Fulfillment**

- 5.A.1 The institution engages in regular, systematic, participatory, self-reflective, and evidence-based assessment of its accomplishments.
- 5.A.2 Based on its definition of mission fulfillment, the institution uses assessment results to make determinations of quality, effectiveness, and mission fulfillment and communicates its conclusions to appropriate constituencies and the public.

#### **5.B Adaptation and Sustainability**

- 5.B.1 Within the context of its mission and characteristics, the institution evaluates regularly the adequacy of its resources, capacity, and effectiveness of operations to document its ongoing potential to fulfill its mission, accomplish its core theme objectives, and achieve the goals or intended outcomes of its programs and services, wherever offered and however delivered.
- 5.B.2 The institution documents and evaluates regularly its cycle of planning, practices, resource allocation, application of institutional capacity, and assessment of results to ensure their adequacy, alignment, and effectiveness. It uses the results of its evaluation to make changes, as necessary, for improvement.
- 5.B.3 The institution monitors its internal and external environments to identify current and emerging patterns, trends, and expectations. Through its governance system it uses those findings to assess its strategic position, define its future direction, and review and revise, as necessary, its mission, core themes, core theme objectives, goals or intended outcomes of its programs and services, and indicators of achievement.

## **POLICIES**

### **Accreditation Liaison Officer**

To ensure appropriate, ongoing communication with the Commission, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities requires that the President of each accredited, candidate and applicant institution appoint an Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO) from the faculty or administration to work with the Commission on matters related to regional accreditation. The ALO, along with the President, serves as one of the official points of contact between the institution and the Commission.

In the selection of the Accreditation Liaison Officer, it is suggested that the following points be considered:

- knowledge of the institution;
- visibility on the campus;
- interest in accreditation; and
- availability of clerical resources.

### **Duties of the Accreditation Liaison Officer are:**

1. Serve as the focal person on campus for the collection and dissemination of information about institutional accreditation.
  - Keep on file accreditation handbooks and guidelines, self-studies, institutional reports, evaluation committee reports, schedules of evaluations, and copies of correspondence from NWCCU.
  - Respond to inquiries about NWCCU accreditation and make available appropriate information.
2. Take the lead as the key resource person in planning the institution's Year One, Mid-Cycle, and Year Seven/Comprehensive Reports and as applicable other Ad Hoc requested reports including the Financial Resources Review (FRR formerly known as ARFE, Annual Report on Finance an Enrollment.)
3. Assist in organizing follow-up reports requested by the Commission.
4. Assist in the preparation of the institution's Annual Report.
5. Notify the Commission in advance of substantive changes that are being planned; as appropriate, submit substantive changes. (See *Substantive Change Policy*)

## **Accreditation of Non-U.S. Institutions**

In furtherance of its mission and in recognition of the increasing globalization of higher education, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities will entertain, at its sole discretion and in accordance with the following Policy, selected applications from institutions located outside of the United States. Only applications from institutions where the following conditions prevail will be considered:

1. the primary language of instruction is English;
2. the structure and function of the degree-granting institution parallel the American model. A sufficient number of the institution's faculty must be knowledgeable about American higher education through earned U.S. degrees and/or experience;
3. the institution is located in a country that is not included in the United States Department of State's Advisory List for Travel and is judged unlikely to experience civil or political unrest that poses risk to travelers;
4. institutional responses to the Commission's Eligibility Requirements that are indicative of successful candidacy and subsequent accreditation will be considered. Any minor accommodation grounded on cultural differences will be made at the sole discretion of the Commission and in no case will be such as to constitute a waiver or substantive revision of an Eligibility Requirement.

Lastly, the Commission, or the President acting on its behalf, may decline to invite an institution to submit an application for any reason, at its sole discretion.

*Adopted 2010*

## **Annual Reports**

NWCCU requires every candidate and accredited institution to complete an Annual Report. Each spring every institution is required to submit a report that provides both statistical data related to such matters as enrollment and finances as well as information about off-campus programming, contractual relationships, and any significant developments at the institution in the past year that may have a bearing on its accredited status. As its discretion, the Commission may and often does require from individual institutions reports on specified areas related to the Standards for Accreditation and Eligibility Requirements. This focused/ad hoc report may be followed by an on-site evaluation for the purpose of validating the contents of the report.

*2013*

## **Appeals Policy and Procedure**

This Policy is intended to set forth the Commission's procedure for appeals. An institution that is aggrieved by an adverse action issued by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities may appeal.

- a. The institution must give written notice of its intention to appeal within seven (7) days of the institution's receipt of the accreditation decision.
- b. The notice of intention to appeal shall set forth the specific grounds for the request, and shall include a statement of the reasons for each ground, along with any other relevant statements or documents the institution desires to include.
- c. The notice of intention to appeal must be filed with the President of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.
- d. Upon appeal, the prior status of the institution, if any, shall be restored pending disposition of the appeal.

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities shall provide institutions the opportunity to appeal adverse actions, issuance or continuation of Show-Cause orders, and/or imposition or continuation of Probation. The Commission will provide the institution in a timely manner with written notification of the result of the appeal as well as a detailed explanation for the result.

An appeal shall be based on one or more of the following grounds:

- a. the evaluator(s) and/or the Commission made substantial errors or omissions in carrying out prescribed procedures which affected the decision of the Commission;
- b. the evidence before the Commission at the time the accrediting decision was made was materially in error;
- c. the decision of the Commission was not adequately supported by the facts before it at the time, or it was contrary to the substantial weight of evidence before the Commission.

In handling properly filed appeals, the Chair of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities shall appoint a seven-member Appeal Board to consider the grievance and designate the chair. Members of the Appeal Board shall consist of representatives employed full-time by member institutions with the exception of one member who shall represent the public. At least one member of the Appeal Board shall represent an institution with similar characteristics to those of the institution filing the appeal. No member of an Appeal Board shall be a current member of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities or shall have served on an evaluation committee to the aggrieved institution. Members of the Appeal Board shall be subject to the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities' conflict of interest policy.

The Chair of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities shall set the date, time, and place of the hearing by the Appeal Board. The hearing shall be no later than one hundred twenty (120) days after receipt of the appeal and there shall be at least thirty (30) days written notice of the hearing given to the Commission and to the institution. If the institution and/or the Commission plan to call witnesses at the hearing, they shall provide the Chair of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities and the opposing party with all the witnesses' names and positions at least five (5) calendar days before the hearing.

In carrying out its duties the Appeal Board shall:

- a. meet at the time and place designated by the Chair to consider the appeal;
- b. provide a hearing if the institution so requests;
- c. consider the grounds for the appeal as alleged by the institution;
- d. study the evidence submitted by the institution in support of its allegation;
- e. consider the report of the evaluation committee, the institution's response, and other supporting statements and documents;
- f. consider whether the Commission substantially followed stated policies and procedures;
- g. prepare a report of the meeting of the Appeal Board, including a final judgment of the Board, within twenty (20) days after the end of the hearing; and
- h. forward a record to the Chair of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, including a report of the hearing of the Appeal Board, the appeal filed by the applicant, and other relevant statements and documents considered by the Board.

The Chair of the Appeal Board may retain legal counsel as he/she deems appropriate and may decide any prehearing issues that may arise. Discovery such as depositions, interrogatories, and production of documents is not available to the parties except by mutual agreement. The chair of the Appeal Board shall make an initial determination of whether the Appeal Board has jurisdiction to hear the appeal.

- a. The chair of the Appeal Board shall control the hearing and the presentation of the evidence. He/she shall ensure that all participants have a reasonable opportunity to be heard and to present relevant oral and written evidence. The Chair of the Appeal Board may limit the duration of a hearing dividing the available time equitably between the parties.
- b. The technical rules of evidence shall not apply, but the Chair of the Appeal Board may limit the evidence to avoid undue repetition and to ensure relevance. He/she shall rule on all questions pertaining to the conduct of the hearing.
- c. The institution's presentation during the appeal hearing shall be strictly limited to those matters raised in the appeal documents; no additional written materials or evidence unavailable to the Commission at the time of its action may be presented.
- d. Each party shall have the right to be represented by counsel or authorized spokesperson, to examine the witnesses of the other party, and to present oral and written evidence.
- e. The hearing shall be closed. A secretary shall record the minutes of the hearing. A court reporter may be present to prepare a record of the hearing at the election of either party and at the expense of the electing party. Where the hearing is closed, only necessary participants shall be present.
- f. The Appeal Board shall uphold the appeal of an institution only when it is shown with clear and convincing evidence that the institution sustained one of the grounds for appeal listed under Grounds for Appeal, items a. through c.

#### New Financial Evidence

No later than fifteen (15) days prior to the date the Appeal Board is scheduled to meet, the institution may file, in writing, with the Commission President, on one occasion only, financial information, which in the opinion of the institution's chief administrative officer constitutes evidence ("New Evidence") that (a) was not available to the institution at the time the Commission voted for the adverse accrediting action, and (b) is deemed to be so substantial and material that had it been available it is likely to have had a bearing on the decision of the Commission to issue an

adverse accrediting action, and (c) the only remaining deficiency cited by the Commission in support of a final adverse action decision is the institution's failure to meet a Commission standard pertaining to finances.

The Commission President shall appoint a committee of not fewer than three (3) Commissioners (the New Evidence Committee) to review the New Evidence. If, in the sole judgment and discretion of the New Evidence Committee, acting by majority vote, the New Evidence is considered substantial and material to the decision and was not previously available to the institution for submission to the Commission, the Commission President, at the request of the New Evidence Committee, shall postpone any further proceedings or action until the next meeting of the Commission at which time it will consider the New Evidence, and make a further decision upon the basis of all the evidence, including the New Evidence. Should the Commission reaffirm an adverse accrediting action, including any modifications or revisions thereto, the institution shall not have the right to appeal the reaffirmation as modified or revised. The decision by the New Evidence Committee that the New Evidence is not substantial and material or that such evidence was previously available to the institution for submission to the Commission shall not be subject to appeal.

The Appeal Board shall have the authority to affirm, amend, reverse or remand the Adverse Accrediting Action and will direct the Commission to implement the decision in a manner consistent with the Appeal Board's decisions or instructions. In a decision to remand the adverse action to the Commission for further consideration, the Appeal Board must identify specific issues that the Commission must address. The Appeal Board shall inform the institution and the Commission in writing within seven days of filing its decision with the President of the Commission. Such notice will include the basis for the results of the appeal. Notifications to the Commission and to the institution shall be hand delivered or sent by certified mail, return receipt requested. No later than 60 days after the decision the Commission shall inform the United States Secretary of Education and the appropriate state licensing or authorizing agency. Written notification to the public will be available within 24 hours of notifying the institution.

The request for a hearing shall be accompanied by a deposit of \$25,000.00 to the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities to cover necessary costs of the appeal. The costs shall include travel, meals and lodging, and other actual and necessary expenses of the Appeal Board. If the institution is represented by legal counsel at the hearing, it shall provide the name of its legal counsel to the Appeal Board at least 30 days in advance of the hearing, and the institution shall deposit an additional \$50,000.00. Upon final disposition of the appeal, the parties shall be provided a detailed written statement of their share of the costs. Any unused portion of the institution's deposit shall be refunded.

- a. If the decision of the Commission is sustained, the entire cost of the Appeal Board, and cost of Commission legal counsel, shall be borne by the institution.
- b. If the institution's appeal is upheld, the cost of the Appeal Board shall be borne equally by the institution and Commission and each shall each bear the cost of its own legal counsel.

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## **Collective Bargaining**

The decision to enter into a collective bargaining agreement is primarily institutional, governed by state laws for public institutions and federal laws for independent institutions. The Commission takes no position on such agreements and does not encourage or discourage them. Regional accreditation evaluates the effectiveness of an institution in achieving its stated mission and core themes. Its primary concern must lie with the total institution. Whenever institutional policies and procedures are modified by collective bargaining agreements, such modification should not contravene the requirements of Commission standards for accreditation or eligibility requirements.

*1982, 1987, 2010*

## **Commission Action Regarding Institutional Compliance Within Specified Period**

If the Commission determines that an institution it accredits is not in compliance with a Commission standard for accreditation or an eligibility requirement, the Commission will immediately initiate adverse action against the institution or require the institution to take appropriate action to bring itself into compliance within a time period that shall not exceed: (1) twelve months, if the longest program offered by the institution is less than one year in length; (2) eighteen months, if the longest program offered by the institution is at least one year, but less than two years, in length; or (3) two years, if the longest program offered by the institution is at least two years in length.

The Commission may extend the period for compliance noted above should it reasonably expect that, based upon the institution's progress toward meeting the Commission's standard for accreditation or eligibility requirement, the institution will come into full compliance within a reasonable timeframe. Should an institution deem that as a result of mitigating circumstances it is not able to comply with the standard for accreditation or eligibility requirement within the specified period of time, the institution may submit a written request to the Commission for additional time to come into compliance with the standard for accreditation or eligibility requirement. The request is to be submitted prior to the time limit for corrective action set forth by the Commission, provide a detailed explanation of the reasons why the institution cannot comply with the standard for accreditation within the designated time period, and demonstrate that the institution is making good progress in meeting the standard for accreditation. Following a review of the request, the Commission will make a determination as to whether the institution has based its request on valid reasons. If the Commission determines that the institution has substantiated good cause for not complying within the specified time period and is making good progress to come into compliance, the Commission will extend the period for achieving compliance and stipulate requirements for continuing oversight of the institution's accreditation during the extension.

*1997, 2002*

## **Complaints Against NWCCU**

Persons who are aggrieved as a direct result of acts or omissions by the Commission related to its accreditation functions may file a complaint with the Commission. Complaints must be submitted in writing (on paper) with an original inked signature to the Chair of the Commission at the NWCCU office address. The complaint must describe the circumstances showing that the complainant has

been aggrieved as a result of the Commission's acts or omissions related to its accreditation functions. Concern that a Commission action was not in accord with the complainant's expectations is not in and of itself cause for review of the complaint.

#### Procedures for Handling Complaints

- a. Within 15 business days after receipt by the Commission, the Chair will acknowledge its receipt and may request further information regarding the particulars of the complaint. If further information is requested, the Chair may defer further action until an adequate response is received.
- b. If the Chair is a direct subject of the complaint, all actions under this policy to be taken by the Chair may be delegated to an individual who is not a direct subject of the complaint.
- c. If the complaint, or other information received, adequately demonstrates that the complainant is aggrieved as a result of the Commission's acts or omissions related to its accreditation functions, the Chair or designee shall appoint a Review Committee of three (3) College and University Presidents from regionally accredited institutions in the Northwest region to review the complaint and to recommend a course of action to the Chair of the Commission. The Review Committee may not include any sitting NWCCU Commissioners or any other persons who, either individually or in their institutional capacity, are direct subjects of the complaint or who may be otherwise involved in a way that, in the discretion of the Chair, would constitute a disqualifying conflict of interest.
- d. The Committee shall review the complaint and any additional information furnished by the complainant. It may also gather other information regarding the circumstances related to the complaint as, in its discretion, the Committee sees fit. Presumptively, the Committee should complete its review within 45 days after its formation, provided that if more than 45 days is needed, the Committee may request that the Chair or designee grant additional time.
- e. Within 15 business days after receipt of the Committee's recommendation, the Chair or designee will review the Committee's recommendation and shall thereafter consult with the President of the Commission with respect to the appropriate disposition of the complaint. If the President of the Commission is the subject of the complaint, the Chair may consult with Commissioners. Within 10 business days after these consultations, the Chair shall notify the complainant in writing of the Commission's conclusions and actions, if any, with respect to the complaint.

*2007, 2014*

#### **Complaints Regarding Member or Candidate Institutions**

Accreditation by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (Commission or NWCCU) signifies that an institution of higher education is substantially in compliance with the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, and policies. The Commission considers complaints regarding member or candidate institutions only when the reported conditions are related to the eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, and policies of NWCCU. The Commission considers information from many sources in determining institutional compliance with its eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, and policies. However, information must be related to

conditions that affect the general welfare of the institution insofar as those conditions determine whether the institution can fulfill its mission as reflected in the quality of programs offered, organization, resources, capacity, and sustainability of the institution.

Further, the Commission assumes no responsibility for adjudicating isolated individual grievances in such matters as admission, granting or transferring academic credit, grades, financial aid, fees, student discipline, collective bargaining, faculty appointments, promotion, tenure, dismissals, or personal lives of individuals connected with the institution. The Commission expects that such matters will be handled through the internal processes of the institution. Moreover, the Commission will not provide dispute resolution, or act as a court of appeal in such matters, including matters seeking any type of compensation, damages, readmission, or any other redress on an individual's behalf. Finally, the Commission will not consider any complaint that is defamatory, hostile, or contains profanity.

In accordance with the purview of the Commission, this complaint policy, including criteria for consideration of complaints, and associated procedures, are solely for the purpose of addressing significant institutional non-compliance with the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, and policies.

#### Criteria for Consideration of a Complaint:

For a complaint to be considered by the Commission, the complaint:

1. Must relate, on an institutional level, to the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, and policies, and not to an individual grievance.
2. Must provide clear evidence of non-compliance with a specific eligibility requirement, standard for accreditation, or policy. Each eligibility requirement, standard for accreditation, or policy relied on by the complainant must be cited within the complaint and the evidence provided.
3. Must provide substantially documented evidence beyond allegations or assertions such that the Commission can determine whether an institution is non-compliant with eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, and policies.
4. Must demonstrate initiation of the institution's appropriate grievance procedures, the date of initiation, and, if the procedures have been completed, the date of completion and the results of the grievance procedures. Except in extraordinary circumstances, the Commission will not consider complaints if initiation of the institution's grievance procedures did not occur within one year of the events giving rise to the complaint and the complaint was not filed within one year of completion of the grievance procedures.
5. Must be submitted by the complainant and not by a representative such as a parent, a collective bargaining agency, a student group, a friend, or an attorney. The Commission also does not consider anonymous complaints.
6. Must be written in the English language.
7. Must be submitted in writing on paper, including an original inked signature of the complainant, and mailed through the U.S. Postal Service or a common carrier. Electronic emails or facsimiles will not be accepted.

8. Must disclose whether other external channels of resolution are being pursued, including legal action.
9. Must include a statement that the complainant has read the Commission's Policy, *Complaints Regarding Member or Candidate Institutions*.
10. Must state a summary of the complaint resolution the complainant is seeking.

Procedures:

1. The Commission staff will acknowledge, in writing, the receipt of a complaint within 30 business days of its receipt.
2. The Commission President, or his/her designee, will review the complaint and, if the complaint is found to not be within the scope of the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, or policies, the complainant will be so notified in writing and the complaint will be closed. (Individuals who do not meet the requirement for complaints may be advised to submit a Third Party Public Comment).
3. If a complaint appears to be within the scope of the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, or policies, or a pattern or practice appears to be present when considering past complaints against the institution, the chief executive officer of the institution will be notified, in writing, by the Commission President within 10 business days after acknowledging complaint receipt. A copy of the complaint documentation will be shared with the institution, and a written response from the institution regarding the complaint must be submitted to the Commission within 30 business days following the Commission's providing the copy of complaint documentation. Written notification of this action will be provided to the complainant. The Commission reserves the right to share the identity of the complainant with the institution. The institutional response is considered confidential and will not be shared with the complainant.
4. The response from the chief executive officer of the institution will be analyzed to determine institutional compliance with the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, or policies.
5. If the Commission President, on behalf of the Commission, judges the institution to be in compliance with the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, or policies, the complainant and institution will be so notified.
6. If the Commission President, on behalf of the Commission, determines that the institution may be out of compliance with the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, or policies, the matter will be referred to the Commission for consideration and action at its next regularly scheduled meeting. Both the complainant and institution will be notified of the referral.
7. In taking action on the complaint in its next regularly scheduled meeting, the Commission may
  - a. dismiss the complaint;
  - b. make recommendations to the institution suggesting areas for improvement including changes in procedures related to eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation and policies of the Commission;

- c. determine that the institution is out of compliance with the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation and policies, and, require corrective action by the institution within a specified period of time; or
  - d. request a visit to the institution by an ad hoc committee of the Commission to review the areas of non-compliance associated with the complaint.
8. The complainant and the institution will be notified in writing of the Commission's determination regarding the complaint within 30 business days after the Commission meeting.
  9. The Commission shall maintain an up-to-date record of all student complaints received by the Commission. If the Commission has received three or more complaints concerning the same matter in the last accreditation cycle, the Commission will provide a summary of those complaints to the chair of an evaluation committee, or evaluator in the case of a single-person visit, for consideration as part of the next regular evaluation of the institution.

During the processing of a complaint, if the complainant becomes argumentative, abusive, threatening, or defamatory, the Commission will cease consideration of the complaint.

Adopted 1982; Revised 1984, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2016

### **Conflict of Interest**

This Policy is intended to ensure that in carrying out its accreditation responsibilities, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities seeks to ensure that its decisions are based solely on the application of professional judgment regarding the information resulting from its evaluation procedures. Therefore, it seeks to avoid both the reality and the appearance of a conflict of interest. For purposes of this policy, a conflict of interest is defined as:

A circumstance in which an individual's capacity to make an impartial or unbiased accreditation decision may be affected because of prior, current, or anticipated institutional affiliations(s), other significant relationship(s) or associations(s) with the institution under review.

The following are examples of affiliations that should be disclosed to the Commission and Commission staff that may disqualify individuals from discussing and/or voting on institutional accreditation actions.

### **Affiliations and Relationships**

#### **Disclose and Disqualify:**

- Current Employee
- Former employee within five years
- Board member within five years
- Consultant within five years
- Graduate within five years
- Affiliation with another institution in the same system or the same sector within a state
- Affiliation with another institution in which it has a significant interest
- Having sought within the last five years or is currently seeking a position at the institution under review.

**Disclose Only:**

- Former employee more than five years
- Board member more than five years
- Consultant more than five years
- Graduate more than five years
- Having a close relative or domestic partner at an institution under review
- Having sought a position beyond five years at the institution under review

**Other:**

Knowledge or personal interest concerning the institution under review from whatever source, including competitive geographical proximity which might prejudice independence of judgment and decision-making.

Evaluation Committee Members

In selecting evaluation committees, the Commission avoids individuals who have, or appear to have, a conflict of interest in participating in a specific institutional review. However, the Commission also recognizes that it is not possible to be aware of all circumstances where a conflict, or the appearance of a conflict, pertains. Therefore, institutions, in reviewing proposed evaluation committees, are encouraged to bring to the attention of Commission staff any conflicts of interest or the appearance of such. Individuals invited to participate in the evaluation process are expected to decline to serve in the evaluation of an institution where they have, or where it might reasonably appear that they have, a conflict of interest; potential evaluators are expected to disclose possible conflicts or appearance of conflict to Commission Staff.

In addition, an evaluator is expected to refrain from serving as a consultant for the institution visited, paid or otherwise for two years. The Commission also views as conflict of interest an evaluator's intent to use an institutional evaluation visit as an opportunity to seek employment.

Appeal Panel Members

In selecting appeal panels, the Commission avoids individuals who have, or appear to have, a conflict of interest in participating in a specific institutional appeal. However, the Commission also recognizes that it is not possible to be aware of all circumstances where a conflict, or the appearance of a conflict, pertains. Therefore, institutions, in reviewing proposed appeal boards, are encouraged to bring to the attention of Commission staff any conflicts of interest or the appearance of such. Individuals invited to participate in the appeal process are expected to decline to serve in the appeal of an institution where they have, or where it might reasonably appear that they have, a conflict of interest; potential Appeal Board members are expected to disclose possible conflicts or appearance of conflict to Commission Staff.

Public members of the Appeal Panel must additionally acknowledge that neither the public member, nor their parents, spouses, children, or siblings are an employee, member of a governing board, owner, shareholder or consultant of an institution that is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

In addition, an Appeal Board member is expected to refrain from serving as a consultant for the appealing institution, paid or otherwise for two years. The Commission also views as conflict of interest an Appeal Board member's intent to use an institutional appeal as an opportunity to seek employment.

Commissioners

Commission members are committed to full disclosure and restraint in any institutional consideration involving a conflict of interest. Members of the Commission will abstain themselves from deliberations or votes on decisions regarding institutions with which they are affiliated. They do not participate in discussions or vote on decisions on institutions to which they have acted as consultants or with which they have relationships or other associations where they have, or where it would reasonably appear they have, a conflict of interest. Commissioners who are uncertain regarding the possible appearance or reality of conflict of interest shall seek the advice of the Commission chair. At the request of the Commission chair, the Commission can determine the question by vote. In general, however, if there is any doubt on the part of a Commissioner, it should be resolved by the Commissioner refraining from any discussion or action relating to the institution under review.

Public members of the Board of Commissioners must additionally acknowledge that neither the public member, nor their parents, spouses, children, or siblings are an employee, member of a governing board, owner, shareholder or consultant of an institution that is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

#### Commission Staff

The Commission staff members are committed to full disclosure and restraint in any institutional consideration involving a conflict of interest. The Commission staff is responsible for managing the accreditation process and for ensuring that all policies and procedures are carried out fairly. The staff does not engage in the evaluation of institutions, nor does it take responsibility for operating the accreditation process at individual institutions. However, the staff is responsible for providing advice and assistance on request, and is otherwise involved in developing and providing services to assist institutions in structuring their own use of accreditation procedures.

*1996, 2005, 2010/2011, 2013, 2015*

#### **Considerations When Closing an Accredited and Candidate Institution**

Planning for a possible decision to close an educational institution requires thoughtful consideration and careful consultation with all affected constituencies. Every effort should be devoted to informing each constituency, as fully as possible, about the conditions requiring consideration of a decision of such importance, and all available information should be shared. Before closing, such alternatives as merging with another institution, forming a consortium, or participating in extensive interinstitutional sharing and cooperation should be carefully considered. As much as possible, the determination to close an institution should involve a consultative process, but responsibility for the final decision to close rests with the governing board.

Tradition and sentiment are important considerations, but neither should determine decision outcomes. A decision to close should never be made or reversed simply on the basis of fears, hopes, or aspirations that have little relation to reality. Closing an institution should not be delayed to the point where the institution has lost its viability and its educational program no longer retains quality and integrity. Since the immediate interests of current students and faculty are most directly affected, their present and future prospects require especially sensitive attention and involvement.

For purposes of this Policy, it is assumed that closing an institution means discontinuing its educational activities permanently, not merely suspending them for an indefinite period in the hope that circumstances may someday permit their resumption. But it should be noted that most

institutions of higher education are corporations established under the provisions of state law, and, as such, they may have legal responsibilities (holding title to real property, for example) that may necessitate the continued existence of the corporation after the educational activities of the institution have been terminated.

Indeed, it is probable that such continued corporate existence, at least for a time, will prove to be the usual situation. In most cases, it is unlikely that corporate existence and educational activities can be terminated simultaneously.

### Closing an Institution

A decision to close requires specific plans for providing in appropriate ways for the students, the faculty, the administrative and support staff, and for the disposition of the institution's assets. Many considerations bear upon closing an educational institution, and each situation will be unique. The nature and sponsorship of public institutions, seminaries, and church related colleges require different emphases and pose particular conditions to be met in reaching and carrying out the ultimate decision. Nevertheless, general guidelines may be helpful to each institution considering closing.

This Policy makes only incidental reference to such corporate responsibilities and always in the educational context. It is imperative, therefore, that a board of trustees considering closing an institution under its authority should be guided not only by the contents of this Policy, the law and the regulations of state educational authorities, but also by advice of legal counsel. Special counsel to advise, with respect to problems of closing, may be desirable for the institution. NWCCU should also be consulted and be kept fully apprised of developments.

### The Students

Students who have not completed their degrees should be provided for according to their academic needs. Arrangements for transfer to other institutions will require complete academic records and all other related information gathered in dossiers which can be transmitted promptly to receiving institutions. Agreements made with other institutions to receive transferring students and to accept their records should be in writing. Where financial aid is concerned, particularly federal or state grants, arrangements should be made with the appropriate agencies to transfer the grants to the receiving institutions. Where such arrangements cannot be completed, students should be fully informed. In cases where students have held institutional scholarships or grants and there are available funds which can legally be used to support students while completing degrees at other institutions, appropriate agreements should be negotiated.

### Academic Records and Financial Aid Transcripts

All academic, financial aid information and other records should be prepared for permanent filing, including microfilming. Arrangements for filing students' records should be made with the state department of higher education or other appropriate agency. If there is no state educational agency which can receive records, arrangements should be made with another college or university or with the state archives to preserve the records. Notification should be sent to every current and past student indicating where the records are being stored and what the access to those records will be. Where possible, a copy of a student's record should be forwarded to the individual student.

### Completion of Institutional Obligations

When a student chooses to continue at another institution but is within a year or 18 months of completing an academic degree in the closing institution, arrangements may be made to permit that student to complete the requirements for a degree elsewhere, but to receive it from the closed



institution. This may require special action by the appropriate state agency. Such arrangements should also include provision for continuation of the institution's accreditation—for this purpose only by the accrediting agency involved. These steps normally require the institution to continue as a legal entity for 12 to 18 months beyond the closing date, but any such arrangement must be established in careful consultation with the appropriate authorities and with their written consent. If an institution enters into a teach-out agreement with another institution, it must submit the agreement to the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities for approval. (See *Teach-Out Plans and Teach-Out Agreements Policy*)

#### Provisions for Faculty and Staff

Wherever possible, faculty and staff who are needed to effectively complete the work of the institution should be retained to ensure the completion of the institution's work up to the closing date. The institution should make every effort to assist them in finding alternative employment. It should be understood that the institution can make no guarantees, but genuine good-faith efforts to assist in relocation and reassignment are essential. In the event that faculty or staff members find new positions, early resignations should be accepted.

#### The Final Determination

Determinations must be made to allocate whatever financial resources and assets remain after providing for the basic needs of current students, faculty, and staff. When the financial resources of the institution are inadequate to honor commitments, the Board should investigate what alternatives and protection are available under applicable bankruptcy laws before deciding to close. If funds are insufficient to maintain normal operations through the end of the closing process, the institution should not overlook the possibility of soliciting one-time gifts and donations to assist in fulfilling its final obligations.

Every effort should be made to develop publicly defensible policies for dividing the resources equitably among those with claims against the institution. One of the best ways of achieving this goal is to involve potential claimants in the process of developing the policies. Time and effort devoted to carrying the process to a judicious conclusion may considerably reduce the likelihood of lawsuits or other forms of confrontation.

It is impossible to anticipate in advance the many claims that might be made against remaining resources of an institution, but the following three principles may help to sort out possible claims and to set priorities:

1. Students have the right to expect basic minimal services during the final term, not only in the academic division but also in the business office, financial aid office, registrar's office, counseling, and other essential support services. Staff should be retained long enough to provide these services. It may be appropriate to offer special incentives to keep key personnel present.
2. Reasonable notice is given to all employees, explaining the possibility of early termination of contracts and that the reasons for retaining some personnel longer than others are based on satisfying the minimal needs of students and the legal requirements for closing.
3. Every effort should be made to honor long-term financial obligations (e.g., loans, debenture), even though the parties holding such claims may choose not to press them.

#### The Closing Date

The board of trustees should take a formal vote to terminate the institution on a specified date. That date will depend on a number of factors, including the decision to file or not to file for bankruptcy. Another key factor is whether or not all obligations to students will have been satisfactorily discharged. This is particularly important if the decision is made to allow seniors in their final year to graduate from the institution by completing their degree requirements elsewhere. If such arrangements are made, the board must be sure to take the legal action necessary to permit awarding degrees after the institution otherwise ceases to function. Normally, formal vote to award a degree is made after all requirements have been met, but it is legally possible to make arrangements for a student to complete the requirements for a degree at another institution and to receive the degree from the closed institution. These requirements must be clearly specified along with a deadline for completion. Also, the board must identify the person or persons authorized to determine whether or not these requirements have, in fact, been satisfied. Arrangements must be completed with the appropriate state and accrediting agencies in advance in order to ensure that the degree is awarded by a legally authorized and accredited institution.

#### Disposition of Assets

In the case of a not-for-profit institution, the legal requirements of the state and federal government must be carefully examined with respect to the disposition of institutional assets. Arrangements for the sale of the physical plant, equipment, the library, special collections, art, or other essential holdings, and for the disposition of any endowments or special funds, must be explored with legal counsel. In the case of wills, endowments, or special grants, the institution should discuss with the donors, grantors, executors of estates, and other providers of special funds, arrangements to accommodate their wishes. State laws regarding the disposition of funds from a not-for-profit institution must be meticulously followed.

All concerned federal and state agencies need to be apprised of the institution's situation, and any obligations relating to state or federal funds need to be cleared with the proper agencies.

#### Other Considerations

The institution should establish a clear understanding with its creditors and all other agencies involved with its activities to ensure that their claims and interests will be properly processed. Insofar as possible, the institution should ensure that its final arrangements will not be subject to later legal proceedings which might jeopardize the records or status of its students or faculty.

#### Conclusion

The closing of an educational institution is difficult and challenging. Nevertheless, such action can be rendered less traumatic through careful attention to the details of the legal and ethical obligations of the institution. Well-planned and conscientious efforts to ensure that the institution's students, faculty, and staff will be optimally provided for, and that its assets will be used in ways that will honor the intentions of the original donors, should help in avoiding bitterness and rancor. A final report on the closing should be submitted to NWCCU and appropriate state and federal agencies for their records.

*1982, 1996, 2010*

### **Contractual Relationships with Organizations Not Regionally Accredited**

No higher education institution accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities can lend the prestige or authority of its accreditation to authenticate courses or

programs offered under contract with organizations not regionally accredited unless it demonstrates adherence to the following principles:

- A. The primary purpose of offering such a course or program is educational. (Although the primary purpose of the offering must be educational, what ancillary purposes also provide the foundation for the program or course, such as auxiliary services, anticipated income, and public relations?)
- B. Any course offered must be consistent with the institution's educational mission and core themes as they were at the time of the last NWCCU evaluation. If the institution alters its mission and core themes, the Commission must be notified and the Commission's policy on substantive change applied. (How does the institution define the specific relationship between the primary and ancillary purposes and the contracted service, and how does it demonstrate its capability to attain these objectives?)
- C. Courses to be offered and the value and level of their credit must be determined in accordance with established institutional procedures and under the usual mechanisms of review. (What evidence exists that established institutional procedures have been followed?)
- D. Courses offered for credit must remain under the sole and direct control of the sponsoring NWCCU accredited institution which exercises ultimate and continuing responsibility for the performance of these functions as reflected in the contract, with provisions to ensure that conduct of the courses meets the standards of its regular programs as disclosed fully in the institution's publications, especially as these pertain to:
  1. recruitment and counseling of students;
  2. admission of students to courses and/or to the sponsoring institution where credit programs are pursued;
  3. instruction in the courses;
  4. evaluation of student progress;
  5. record keeping;
  6. tuition and/or fees charged, receipt and disbursement of funds, and refund policy;
  7. appointment and validation of credentials of faculty teaching the course;
  8. nature and location of courses; and
  9. library and information resources.

Additional data needed would include course outlines, syllabi, copies of exams, records of students, and evidence of equivalencies with established programs.

#### Requirements for Contractual Arrangements

In establishing contractual arrangements with organizations not regionally accredited, institutions are expected to demonstrate that the following requirements have been met. The not-for-profit institutions should establish that their tax exempt status, as governed by state or federal regulations, will not be affected by such contractual arrangements with a for-profit organization.

- A. The Contract:

1. should be executed only by duly designated officers of the institutions and their counterparts in the contracting organization. While other faculty and administrative representatives will undoubtedly be involved in the contract negotiations, care should be taken to avoid implied or apparent power to execute the contract by unauthorized personnel.
2. should establish a definite understanding between the institution and contractor regarding the work to be performed, the period of the agreement, and the conditions under which any possible renewal or renegotiation of the contract would take place;
3. should clearly vest the ultimate responsibility for the performance of the necessary control functions for the educational offering with the accredited institution granting credit for the offering. Such performance responsibility by the credit-granting institution would minimally consist of adequate provisions for review and approval of work performed by the contractor in each functional area.
4. should clearly establish the responsibilities of the institution and contractor regarding:
  - a. indirect costs
  - b. approval of salaries
  - c. equipment
  - d. subcontracts and travel
  - e. property ownership and accountability
  - f. inventions and patents
  - g. publications and copyrights
  - h. accounting records and audits
  - i. security
  - a. termination costs
  - b. tuition refund
  - c. student records
  - d. faculty facilities
  - e. safety regulations
  - f. insurance coverage.

#### B. Enrollment Agreement

1. The enrollment agreement should clearly outline the obligations of both the institution and the student, and a copy of the enrollment agreement should be furnished to the student before any payment is made.
2. The institution should determine that applicants are fully informed about the nature of the obligation they are entering into, and their responsibilities and rights under the enrollment agreement before they sign it.
3. No enrollment agreement should be binding until it has been accepted by the authorities of the institution vested with this responsibility.

#### C. Tuition Policies

1. Rates

- a. The total tuition for any specific given course should be the same for all persons at any given time. Group training contracts showing lower individual rates may be negotiated with business, industrial, or governmental agencies.
- b. Tuition charges in courses should be bona fide, effective on specific dates, and applicable to all who enroll thereafter or are presently in school, provided the enrollment agreement so stipulates.
- c. All extra charges and costs incidental to training should be disclosed to prospective students before they are enrolled.
- d. The institution should show that the total tuition charges for each of its courses are reasonable in the light of the service to be rendered, the equipment to be furnished, and its operating costs.

## 2. Refunds and Cancellations

- a. The institution should have a fair and equitable tuition refund and cancellation policy.
- b. The institution should publish its tuition refund and cancellation policy in its catalog or other appropriate literature.

## 3. Collection Practices

- a. Methods used by an institution in requesting or demanding payment should follow sound and ethical business practices.
- b. If promissory notes or contracts for tuition are sold or discounted to third parties by the institution, enrollees or their financial sponsors should be aware of this action.

## D. Student Recruitment

### 1. Advertising and Promotional Literature

- a. All advertisements and promotional literature used should be truthful and avoid leaving any false, misleading, or exaggerated impressions with respect to the school, its personnel, its courses and services, or the occupational opportunities for its graduates.
- b. All advertising and promotional literature should clearly indicate that education, not employment, is being offered.
- c. All advertising and promotional literature should include the correct name of the school. So-called "blind" advertisements are considered misleading and unethical.

### 2. Field Agents

- a. An institution is responsible to its current and prospective students for the representations made by its field representatives (including agencies and other authorized persons and firms soliciting students), and therefore should select each of them with the utmost care, provide them with adequate training, and arrange for proper supervision of their work.
- b. It is the responsibility of an institution to conform to the laws and regulations of each of the states in which it operates or solicits students and in particular to see that each of its field representatives working in any such state is properly licensed or registered as required by the laws of the state.
- c. If field representatives are authorized to prepare and/or run advertising or to use promotional materials, the institution should accept full responsibility for the materials used and should approve any such promotional materials in advance of their use.
- d. When field representatives are authorized to collect money from an applicant for enrollment, they should leave with the applicant a receipt for the money collected and a copy of the enrollment agreement.
- e. No field representative should use any title, such as “counselor,” “advisor,” or “registrar” which may indicate that they have other duties and responsibilities.
- f. No field representative should violate, orally or otherwise, any of the standards applicable to advertising and promotional materials.

*1973, 2010*

### **Correspondence Education**

Correspondence education is a means through which institutions may deliver instruction.

Correspondence education means:

1. Education provided through one of more courses by an institution under which the institution provides instructional materials, by mail or electronic transmission, including examinations on the materials, to students who are separated from the instructor.
2. Interaction between the instructor and the student is limited, is not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student.
3. Correspondence courses are typically self-paced.
4. Correspondence education is not distance education.

Instruction offered through correspondence education should be addressed as appropriate in institutional reports.

Correspondence Education is not included in NWCCU's recognition by the U.S. Department of Education at this time. If you are an accredited or candidate institution planning to offer correspondence courses, please contact the Commission office for further information.

2010, 2015

## **Credit Hour**

### Federal Definition of Credit Hour

In accordance with federal regulations effective July 1, 2011, both institutions and accrediting agencies are required to come into compliance with regulations regarding the definition and assignment of credit hours under Section 600.2 and 600.24.

Federal regulations mandate that all candidate and accredited institutions comply with the definition of the credit hour as set forth in Section 600.2, which defines the credit hour as:

*Except as provided in 34 CFR 668.8(k) and (l)\*, a credit hour is an amount of work represented in intended learning outcomes and verified by evidence of student achievement that is an institutionally established equivalency that reasonably approximates not less than:*

- (1) One hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out-of-class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester or trimester hour of credit, or ten to twelve weeks for one quarter hour of credit, or the equivalent amount of work over a different amount of time; or*
- (2) At least an equivalent amount of work as required in paragraph (1) of this definition for other academic activities as established by the institution, including laboratory work, internships, practica, studio work, and other academic work leading to the award of credit hours.*

### Institutional Fulfillment of this Policy

As required by Section 600.24, the Commission will evaluate as part of the *Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability* (Year Seven) evaluation the extent to which the institution meets the federal definition by reviewing:

1. The adoption of a policy on credit hour for all courses and programs at the institution;
2. The processes the institution employs to review periodically the application of its policy on credit hour across the institution to assure that credit hour assignments are accurate and reliable; and
3. Any variations in the assignment of credit hours to assure that these variations conform to commonly accepted practices in higher education.

In implementing this policy, evaluation committees will review institutional documentation including the institution's policy on credit hour and expectations at each degree level, evidence of the implementation of institutional review processes to assure the consistency and accuracy of credit hour assignments in all courses and programs, and through sampling, a variety of course credit assignments based on degree level, academic discipline, delivery modes, and types of academic activities. Evaluation committee findings will be included in reports to the Commission and where deficiencies are found, they shall be so noted, and the Commission will act to assure that these deficiencies are addressed through follow-up reporting. If the Commission

finds systematic non-compliance with the policy regarding one of more programs at the institution, the Commission will promptly notify the Secretary of Education in addition to any follow-up required by the Commission.

*November 2012*

## **Distance Education**

### Definition

The U.S. Department of Education defines Distance Education as:

Distance education means education that uses one or more of the technologies listed below to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously. The technologies may include--

- (1) The internet;
- (2) One-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;
- (3) Audio conferencing; or
- (4) Video cassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs, if the cassettes, DVDs, or CD-ROMs are used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (3).

### Evaluation of Distance Education

NWCCU practice requires that an institution's distance education programming be reviewed as part of its comprehensive evaluation. Evaluators who visit an institution that offers distance education are encouraged to review the "C-RAC Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education (On-Line Learning)".

In keeping with federal requirements, evaluators who visit an institution that offers distance education programs are asked to verify that the institution: (1) has in place effective procedures through which to ensure that the student who registers in a distance education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the course or program and receives the academic credit; (2) makes clear in writing that these processes protect student privacy; and (3) notifies students at the time of registration and enrollment of any projected additional student charges associated with the verification procedures. Through its review of the institution's distance education programs, the Commission seeks assurance that these programs fulfill the Standards for Accreditation; specifically that:

- Distance education programs are consistent with the mission and educational objectives of the institution.
- Distance education programs are integrated into the regular planning processes of the institution.
- The institution provides sufficient resources – financial, human, physical, technological – to support its distance education programs.
- Operation of distance education programming is incorporated into the governance system of the institution.
- The institution's academic unit exercises oversight of distance education programs, ensuring both the rigor of the program and the quality of instruction.
- Courses and programs offered via distance education maintain the same academic standards as those offered on the main campus.



- On-campus faculty have a substantive role in the design and implementation of distance education programs.
- The institution evaluates the educational effectiveness of each distance education program, including assessment of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student and faculty satisfaction, to ensure comparability to campus-based programs.
- Students enrolled in distance education programs have adequate access to and make effective use of learning resources, including library, information resources, laboratories and equipment.
- Students enrolled in distance education programs have adequate access to student services, including financial aid, academic advising, course registration, and career and placement counseling.
- Publications and advertising for distance education programs are accurate and contain necessary information such as the program's goals, requirements, academic calendar, and faculty.
- Contractual relationships and arrangements with consortial partners, if any, are clear and guarantee that the institution maintains direct and sole responsibility for the academic quality of all aspects of distance education programs. Where the institution has entered into contractual relationships involving credits and degrees, it has obtained Commission approval for the substantive change.

*2013*

### **Institutional Advertising, Student Recruitment, and Representation of Accredited Status**

All candidate and accredited institutions, or individuals acting on their behalf, must exhibit integrity and responsibility in advertising, student recruitment, and representation of accredited status in all formats – electronic or print. Responsible self-regulation requires rigorous attention to principles of good practice.

#### **A. Advertising, Publications, Promotional Literature**

1. Educational programs and services offered should be the primary emphasis of all advertisements, publications, promotional literature, and recruitment activities.
2. All statements and representations should be clear, factually accurate, and current. Supporting information should be kept on file and readily available for review.
3. Catalogs and other official publications should be readily available and accurately depict:
  - a. institutional mission and core themes;
  - b. entrance requirements and procedures;
  - c. basic information on programs and courses, with required sequences and frequency of course offerings explicitly stated;
  - d. degree and program completion requirements, including length of time required to obtain a degree or certification of completion;
  - e. faculty (full-time and part-time listed separately) with degrees held and the conferring institution;
  - f. institutional facilities readily available for educational use;
  - g. rules and regulations for conduct;

- h. tuition, fees, and other program costs;
  - i. opportunities and requirements for financial aid;
  - j. policies and procedures for refunding fees and charges to students who withdraw from enrollment; and
  - k. academic calendar.
4. An institution is expected to include in its general catalog a clear and complete statement of its requirements for general education and/or related instruction, as appropriate.
  5. The institution's catalogs and official publications describing career opportunities, should provide clear and accurate information regarding:
    - a. national and/or state legal requirements for eligibility for licensure or entry into an occupation or profession for which education and training are offered;
    - b. any unique requirements for career paths, or for employment and advancement opportunities in the profession or occupation described.
    - c. the caveat that certification obtained through the completion of all undergraduate and graduate professional programs does not imply or guarantee reciprocity or job attainment in another state or in another country.

#### B. Student Recruitment for Admissions

1. Student recruitment should be conducted by well-qualified admissions officers and trained volunteers whose credentials, purposes, and position or affiliation with the institution are clearly specified.
2. Independent contractors or agents used by the institution for recruiting purposes shall be governed by the same principles as institutional admissions officers and volunteers.
3. The following practices in student recruitment are to be scrupulously avoided:
  - a. ensuring employment unless employment arrangements have been made and can be verified;
  - b. misrepresenting job placement and employment opportunities for graduates;
  - c. misrepresenting program costs;
  - d. misrepresenting transfer of credit and acceptance of degrees attained at other institutions;
  - e. misrepresenting abilities required to complete the intended program; and
  - f. offering to agencies or individual persons money or inducements other than educational services of the institution in exchange for student enrollment. (Except for awards of privately endowed restricted funds, grants or scholarships are to be offered only on the basis of specific criteria related to merit or financial need.)

#### C. Representation of Accredited Status

1. The term "accreditation" is to be used only when accredited status is conferred by an accrediting body recognized by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education.

2. No statement should be made about possible future accreditation status or qualification not yet conferred by any accrediting body. Statements like the following are not permissible:
  - a. (Institution) has applied for candidacy with (accrediting body).
  - b. (Institution) is a Candidate for Accreditation with (accrediting body) and initial accreditation is anticipated.
  - c. The (Program) is being evaluated by (accrediting body) and accreditation is expected in the near future.
3. Any reference to state approval should be limited to a brief statement concerning the actual charter, incorporation, license, or registration given.
4. The Commission asks that the following statement be used by the institution for disclosing its accredited status on its website and in catalogues, brochures, advertisements, etc.

The following statement, in its entirety, must be used when an institution includes within its website, catalogue or other material a statement which will give the public a better idea of the meaning of regional accreditation:

\_\_\_\_\_ College (University) is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

Accreditation of an institution of higher education by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities indicates that it meets or exceeds criteria for the assessment of institutional quality evaluated through a peer review process. An accredited college or university is one which has available the necessary resources to achieve its stated purposes through appropriate educational programs, is substantially doing so, and gives reasonable evidence that it will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Institutional integrity is also addressed through accreditation.

Accreditation by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities is not partial but applies to the institution as a whole. As such, it is not a guarantee of every course or program offered, or the competence of individual graduates. Rather, it provides reasonable assurance about the quality of opportunities available to students who attend the institution.

Inquiries regarding an institution's accredited status by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities should be directed to the administrative staff of the institution. Individuals may also contact:

**Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities**  
**8060 165th Avenue N.E., Suite 100**  
**Redmond, WA 98052 (425) 558-4224 [www.nwccu.org](http://www.nwccu.org)**

Accreditation by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities refers to the institution as a whole. Therefore, statements like “fully accredited” or “this program is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities” or “this degree is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities” are incorrect and should not be used.

## **Institutional Response to an Onsite Evaluation Report**

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities ensures that an institution that has undergone an on-site evaluation visit has three opportunities to respond in writing to the evaluation report. The first opportunity is to respond to a draft of the evaluation report to correct factual errors before the report is finalized and submitted to the Commission office. The chair of the Peer Evaluation Committee sends the draft report to the institution and provides 7-10 days to review for “errors of fact.” Prior to the onset of the evaluation visit, the chief executive officer of the institution is notified in writing of this opportunity.

Second, the institution may choose to provide a written response to the content and findings of the final evaluation report. This is done during a period of several weeks prior to the regularly scheduled Commission meeting at which the institution will be reviewed. The Commission considers the institution’s written response to the final evaluation report during its formal deliberations of the institution at its regularly scheduled winter or summer meeting. Prior to the Commission meeting the institution’s chief executive officer is notified in writing of this option.

Third, at the time of the Commission meeting the institution may provide a written response when they appear before the Commission.

*1997, 2013*

## **Notification to the United States Department of Education**

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities shall notify the Department of Education, the appropriate State postsecondary review entity, the appropriate accrediting agencies, and the public of the following types of decisions within thirty (30) days of any action taken:

### Providing Information to the Department of Education Regarding an Institution’s Failure to Comply with its Title IV Responsibilities or Engagement in Fraud or Abuse

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities shall provide to the Department of Education the name of any institution accredited by the Commission that it has reason to believe is failing to meet its Title IV, HEA program responsibilities or is engaged in fraud or abuse.

### Providing Department of Education Information on an Institution’s Compliance with Title IV

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities shall provide, upon the request of the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, information it possesses regarding an accredited or preaccredited institution’s compliance with its Title IV, HEA program responsibilities including its eligibility to participate in Title IV, HEA programs for the purpose of assisting the Secretary in resolving problems with the institution’s participation in these programs.

### Notification to U.S. Department of Education of Commission Action on Institutions Under Negative Sanction by Other Recognized Accrediting Agencies

Under no circumstances shall the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities take an accrediting action on an institution that is under an interim action by its respective state or has been notified that its licensure is threatened. If the Commission did grant initial or continued accreditation under the conditions outlined in 34 CFR 602.28(b), it would provide the Secretary of

the U.S. Department of Education within 30 days with a thorough explanation, consistent with its accreditation standards, as to why the previous action by a recognized institutional accrediting agency or the State does not preclude the agency's granting of accreditation or preaccreditation.

Providing Information to the Department of Education Regarding Changes in Its Policies, Procedures or Accreditation Standards

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities shall provide the Department of Education information regarding any proposed changes in its policies, procedures, or accreditation standards that might alter its scope of recognition or its compliance with recognition requirements.

Providing an Annual Report to the Department of Education

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities will provide the U.S. Department of Education with a copy of its annual report. Following each of its biannual meetings, the Commission will provide the U.S. Department of Education with an updated directory of accredited and preaccredited institutions and a summary of the Commission's major accrediting activities during the previous six months.

1997, 2013

**Public Disclosure of Information Regarding Type of Accreditation Granted, Criteria, Accreditation Procedures, Evaluation Schedule, and Commissioners and Commission Staff**

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities makes publicly available through its website, *Accreditation Handbook*, *Directory of Institutions*, and other publications or relevant correspondence the following information:

1. Each type of accreditation and preaccreditation granted by the Commission;
2. The procedures that institutions must follow in applying for accreditation or preaccreditation;
3. The standards and procedures it uses to determine whether to grant, reaffirm, reinstate, restrict, deny, revoke, terminate, or take any other action related to each type of accreditation and preaccreditation granted by the Commission;
4. The institutions and degree levels currently accredited or preaccredited by the Commission and, for each institution, the year the Commission will next review or reconsider it for accreditation and preaccreditation; and
5. The names, academic and professional qualifications, and relevant employment and organizational affiliations of:
  - (i) The members of the agency's policy and decision-making bodies; and
  - (ii) The agency's principal administrative staff.

All of the above items are available on the Commission's website.

1997, 2002, 2013

## **Public Notification About Affiliated Institutions**

The following policy governs the release of information regarding the status of affiliated colleges and universities by institutions and by the Commission.

1. **Release of Information by Institutions Regarding Their Accreditation Following Commission Action**

At the conclusion of the evaluation process institutions are encouraged to make publicly available information about their accreditation status including the findings of evaluation committee reports and any obligations or requirements established by Commission action, as well as any plans to address stated concerns. Institutions are asked not to publish or otherwise disseminate excerpts from these materials, to avoid the release of any misleading information.

The Commission maintains that it is good practice for an institution to make available copies of self-evaluation reports, peer-evaluation reports, or other documents related to its accreditation, in their entirety, after notification of Commission action.

If an institution releases or otherwise disseminates information which misrepresents or distorts its accreditation status, the institution will be notified and asked to take corrective action to publicly correct any misleading information it may have disseminated, including but not limited to the accreditation status of the institution, the contents of evaluation reports, and the Commission actions with respect to the institution. Should it fail to do so, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, acting through its President, will release a public statement in such form and content as it deems desirable providing correct information.

2. Published Statement on Accredited Status

The Commission asks that the following statement be used by the institution for disclosing its accredited status on its website and in catalogues, brochures, advertisements, etc.

The following statement, in its entirety, must be used when an institution includes within its website, catalogue or other material a statement which will give the public a better idea of the meaning of regional accreditation:

\_\_\_\_\_College (University) is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

Accreditation of an institution of higher education by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities indicates that it meets or exceeds criteria for the assessment of institutional quality evaluated through a peer review process. An accredited college or university is one which has available the necessary resources to achieve its stated purposes through appropriate educational programs, is substantially doing so, and gives reasonable evidence that it will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Institutional integrity is also addressed through accreditation.

Accreditation by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities is not partial but applies to the institution as a whole. As such, it is not a guarantee of every course or program offered, or the competence of individual graduates. Rather, it provides reasonable assurance about the quality of opportunities available to students who attend the institution.

Inquiries regarding an institution's accredited status by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities should be directed to the administrative staff of the institution. Individuals may also contact:

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**Redmond, WA 98052**  
**(425) 558-4224**  
**[www.nwccu.org](http://www.nwccu.org)**

Accreditation by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities refers to the institution as a whole. Therefore, statements like "fully accredited" or "this program is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities" or "this degree is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities" are incorrect and should not be used.



3. Published Statement on Candidate Status

An institution granted Candidate for Accreditation status must use the following statement whenever it makes reference to its affiliation with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities:

\_\_\_\_\_ College (University) has been granted Candidate for Accreditation status by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. Candidacy for Accreditation is a status of affiliation with the Commission which indicates that the institution has achieved initial recognition and is progressing toward accreditation.

Candidacy is not accreditation nor does it assure eventual accreditation. Inquiries regarding the status of an institution affiliated with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities should be directed to the administrative staff of the institution. Individuals may also contact:

**Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities**  
**8060 165th Avenue N.E., Suite 100**  
**Redmond, WA 98052**  
**(425) 558-4224**  
**[www.nwccu.org](http://www.nwccu.org)**

4. Public Notification of Information About Affiliated Institutions by the Commission

The Commission will release the following information about affiliated institutions:

- The date of initial accreditation and/or when candidacy was granted;
- The date and nature (mid-cycle, year seven/comprehensive) of the most recent evaluation and subsequent Commission action on the institution's accredited status;
- The date and nature (mid-cycle, year seven/comprehensive) of the next scheduled evaluation;
- Submission date and action taken on the most recent written report required by the Commission;
- The extent of, or limitations on, the status of affiliation;
- A decision by an accredited or candidate institution to voluntarily withdraw its affiliation with the Commission will be reported within 30 days after the Commission's action on the institution's withdrawal of its accreditation.

Within 30 days after the action on accreditation status is taken, the Commission will notify the Secretary of Education, Northwest state higher education officers, appropriate accrediting agencies, and the public. Such actions include a final decision to:

- Grant candidacy or accreditation;
- Reaffirm/continue an institution's accreditation.

In cases of adverse action (denial or termination of candidacy or accreditation, show cause or imposing probation), the Commission will post notice on its website within 24 hours of its notice to the institution.

In cases of adverse action, no later than 60 days after the decision, the Commission will make available to the institution and at the same time to the Secretary of Education, the appropriate State licensing or authorizing agency, appropriate accrediting agencies and the public, the Commission's reasons for recommending that status, and in the case of probation, its plans to monitor the institution. The institution will be offered the opportunity to make its official comment; if the institution does make an official comment, the comment will be made available by the Commission. If the institution does not comment the Commission will provide evidence that it has been offered the opportunity to provide official comment.

For institutions whose candidacy or accreditation has been terminated, the date of, and reasons for, termination will be made available by the Commission.

Institutions are allowed seven days to file an appeal regarding adverse actions (imposing probation, denial of candidate status or accreditation, revocation of candidacy, and termination of accreditation). If the institution does not notify the Commission of such an appeal, notification will be made. If an appeal is filed, the notification will be communicated after the appeal process is completed. The Commission, at its discretion, may make the adverse action public before an appeal is completed. In so doing, the Commission will provide information about the appeal process.

*October 2012*

### **Public Notification and Third Party Comments Regarding Year Seven Evaluations**

It is the policy of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, in accordance with 34 CFR 602.23, to publish the year when candidate or member institutions are being considered for initial or continuing accreditation. The Commission also provides an opportunity for third-party comment, in writing, concerning the institution's qualifications for candidacy or accreditation.

#### **A. Procedure for Publication by Institutions**

In accordance with Commission policy, an institution that is scheduled for a Year Seven/Comprehensive Report and visit advertises to its publics that a visit is scheduled and invites their comments. Comments will be accepted only when they are submitted in writing and signed.

1. Dissemination of notification. In most cases, a local newspaper will be the most appropriate vehicle for an announcement of a forthcoming visit. However, the Commission recognizes

that an institution's opportunities and vehicles for reaching its publics vary from place to place. In some situations, submitting a press release to a newspaper may not ensure publication; it may be necessary for the institution to purchase space in an appropriate publication or find other means of publicizing the visit.

Alumni magazines and campus newsletters may also be useful ways to communicate to certain constituencies. An institution with operations off-campus, including those outside the United States, should find ways to provide appropriate notification to those affected by the institution's presence at those sites.

2. Content of notice. The Commission does not prescribe specific language for the public notification of the impending visit. However, the Commission recommends that the institution's announcement include the following information:
  - a. the purpose of the forthcoming visit;
  - b. the dates of the visit;
  - c. the institution's current accreditation status with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities;
  - d. the year of the most recent Commission action relating to the institution; and
  - e. an invitation to send comments directly to the Commission that includes the Commission's address and the date by which comments must be received (no later than one month before the visit).
3. Timing of the notice. The notice should appear three to four months prior to the Year Seven Report and visit. The institution sends a photocopy of the printed notice to the Commission office.

B. Procedure for Publication by the Commission

In accordance with Commission policy, the Commission publishes the list of institutions scheduled for evaluation through appropriate Commission publications and invites comments from third parties. Comments will be accepted only when they are submitted in writing and signed.

1. Distribution of notification. The primary means of publicizing the list of institutions for evaluation are the website of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities and the minutes of the Commission's annual winter and summer meetings.
2. Content of notice:
  - a. the names of institutions scheduled for initial candidacy, initial accreditation, or continued accreditation;
  - b. the scheduled dates of the evaluation; and
  - c. the address of the Commission's headquarters to which comments and information may be sent and the date by which comments must be received (no later than one month before the visit).

C. Commission's Procedure for Handling Third-Party Comments

1. The office of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities will acknowledge, in writing, the receipt of all written third-party comments pertaining to an institution's qualification for candidacy or accreditation.

2. Copies of third-party comments will be made available to members of the evaluation committee and to the institution being visited for candidacy or accreditation at least ten days prior to the scheduled evaluation.
3. The institution being evaluated may respond, in writing, to the chair of the evaluation committee. Such response is to be provided no later than the beginning of the on-campus evaluation.
4. The evaluation committee will consider third-party comments and the institution's written response along with all other information available during the evaluation process.
5. The Commission will maintain a file of third-party comments for each institution, and a copy of the letter acknowledging the third-party comments. These records will be maintained for at least five years.

*1996, 2010, 2013*

### **Record of Student Complaints**

In accordance with USDE regulation 602.16(a)(1)(ix), an institution shall make available an account of the student complaints it has received, its processing of those complaints, and how that processing comports with the institution's policies and procedures on the handling of grievances or complaints. The Commission reviews the institution's record of complaints as part of the institution's Mid-Cycle or Year Seven Evaluation.

*2013, 2015*

### **Representation of Academic and Administrative Personnel on All Decision-Making Bodies**

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities includes academic and administrative personnel on all its decision-making bodies. These decision-making bodies include the Board of Commissioners, the Commission's Executive Committee, evaluation committees, and appeal panels.

*2013*

### **Responsibilities for Title IV Oversight**

Based upon the most recent student loan default rate data provided by the Secretary, the results of financial or compliance audits, program reviews, and any other information that the Secretary may provide, the Commission will maintain a record of compliance with institutional responsibilities under Title IV of the Higher Education Act for institutions accredited or preaccredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

*2002*

### **Retention of Records Policy**

The Commission maintains the official records of Commission actions on institutions and all correspondence that is significantly related to accreditation decisions. It also retains copies of institutional reports and materials, and copies of Self-Evaluation Reports and Peer-Evaluation Reports that formed the basis for those actions. These documents include the two most recent Year Seven Self-Evaluation Reports (or equivalent) of each institution, including on-site Peer-Evaluation Reports, the institution's or program's responses to on-site reports, periodic review reports, any reports of special NWCCU reviews conducted between regularly scheduled reviews, and a copy of the institution's most recent Year Seven Self-Evaluation Report (or equivalent). The Commission maintains a record of all approved substantive changes.

*2013*

## Review of Accreditation Criteria

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities conducts a systematic program of review of its accreditation criteria to ensure that they are relevant to the educational needs of students and adequate to evaluate the quality of the education provided by the institutions it accredits and preaccredits. In determining the specific procedures it follows in evaluating its accreditation criteria, the Commission ensures that its program or review includes these elements:

- (1) The Commission conducts a regular review of its accreditation criteria every eight years.
- (2) The Commission takes the following steps in conducting a regular review of its accreditation criteria:
  - (a) The Commission convenes an accreditation review committee for the accreditation criteria being reviewed. Each accreditation review committee is chaired by a Commissioner. Membership in an accreditation review committee consists of representatives of two-year and four-year member institutions from the public and private sectors who possess experience and expertise in the area of the accreditation criteria under review.
  - (b) Notification of the review process; a copy of the accreditation standards(s) under review; request for comment regarding the adequacy, effectiveness, and clarity of the standard(s); and request for suggestions for changes to the standard(s) under review are sent to: the chief executive officer, accreditation liaison officer, and chair of the governing board of each accredited and preaccredited institution; and heads of the appropriate state higher education system authorities. These institutional leaders are responsible for disseminating information regarding the review of the accreditation criteria process to their constituencies on and off campus. Notification of the review process is also sent to heads of appropriate state agencies that oversee higher education. Public notice of the review and request for comment will be posted to the Commission's website.
  - (c) The accreditation review committee reviews the comments received from the constituencies identified above and also reviews standards for accreditation from other accrediting agencies.
  - (d) The accreditation review committee prepares an analysis of findings and recommendation, with rationale, regarding suggested changes, if any, to the Commission's accreditation criteria. The accreditation review committee's findings and recommendation, with rationale, are forwarded to the Commission for consideration at its next regularly scheduled meeting.
- (3) If the Commission determines that changes to its accreditation are not required, a notice is sent to the presidents and accreditation liaison officers of preaccredited and member institutions and a public notice of this determination is posted on the Commission's website. If the Commission determines that a change to its standards for accreditation is needed, it acts within 12 months of the date of that determination to initiate action to revise the accreditation criteria and completes the revision to the accreditation criteria within 24 months from the date the determination was made. The Commission takes the following steps in revising its accreditation criteria:
  - (a) The Commission charges the accreditation review committee identified above with drafting a proposed revision to the accreditation criteria;

- (b) Based upon the charge from the Commission and input received from constituencies, the accreditation review committee prepares a draft of proposed changes and recommendation for consideration by the Commission.
- (c) Following a review of the draft of the proposed revision to the accreditation criteria and recommendation from the accreditation review committee, the Commission may reject the proposed changes and return the matter to the accreditation review committee for further work. If the Commission accepts the proposed changes, including modifications it deems necessary, the changes are forwarded to its constituencies for review and comment. A notice of proposed change(s) and call for comment is distributed to: the president and accreditation liaison officer of all preaccredited and member institutions; and the heads of appropriate state higher education systems; and heads of appropriate state agencies that oversee higher education. Public notice of the proposed change(s) and call for comment is posted on the Commission's website.
- (d) The Commission allows a minimum of 30 days for receipt of comments from its constituencies regarding proposed changes to the accreditation criteria.
- (e) At its next regularly scheduled meeting, the Commission reviews comments received from its constituencies. It may refer the matter back to the accreditation review committee for further work or accept the proposed changes with modifications it may deem necessary and distribute the proposed changes to the membership for a vote of approval.
- (f) Member institutions have thirty (30) days to complete and return the ballot. The votes are tabulated and the Commission announces the results at the next regularly scheduled Commission meeting. If approved by the membership, a copy of the revised accreditation criteria is distributed to the presidents and accreditation liaison officers of preaccredited and member institutions identified above and posted on the Commission's website.
- (g) At the Commission's discretion, it may undertake a review of the accreditation criteria to address minor changes within a shorter timeframe than eight years.

*2002/2013*

### **Selection and Representation of Commissioners and of Evaluation Committees**

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities shall include representation of both administrative and academic personnel. Procedures will be followed that are designed to achieve a balance of both institutional type and institutional role. The Commission endeavors to achieve an appropriate balance of both administrative and academic personnel through a periodic, systematic review of its selection procedures in an effort to ensure the representation of both administrators and academicians. In addition, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities shall include representation of both administrative and academic personnel on its evaluation committees.

*1997*

## **Significant Growth**

In accordance with USDE Regulation 602.19(d), when the Commission has determined, through its annual collection of headcount enrollment data, that the enrollment of an institution, whatever its size or type, has grown by a total of more than 50% over a two-year period (two consecutive institutional fiscal years), or when, in the considered judgment of the Commission, the rate of enrollment growth is such as to impact significantly the capacity and resources of the institution, it will institute special monitoring mechanisms. These mechanisms include ad hoc self-evaluation reports on planning and managing growth, financial resources reviews (FRRs) and other means as deemed necessary. Institutions judged to be experiencing significant growth will also undergo a visit by a team of evaluators as part of the Year Seven *Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability* evaluation. The evaluators will be informed of the institution's significant growth and asked to review issues related to such. The objective of this special monitoring is to ensure that the institution has the resources and capacity to sustain its growth in enrollment.

2013, 2015

## **Student Verification**

The following requirements are mandated by the Higher Education Opportunity Act.

### Student Verification:

An institution that offers distance education or correspondence education is required to have processes through which the institution establishes that the student who registers in a distance education or correspondence education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the program and receives the academic credit. Examples of such methods include:

1. A secure login and pass code;
2. Proctored examinations;
3. New or other technologies; and
4. Pedagogical and related practices that are effective in verifying student identity.

In carrying out these processes, the institution must protect student privacy and must notify students at the time of registration or enrollment of any projected additional student charges associated with the verification of student identity.

2010

## SUBSTANTIVE CHANGE POLICY

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities monitors proposed changes whenever an accredited or candidate institution plans a substantive change in its mission and core themes, scope, ownership or control, area served, or other significant matters. These changes have impact on the resources and capacity of the institution. The Commission defines these changes as major changes or minor changes.

A **Major Change** has significant impact on the resources and capacity of the institution. A major change is of a magnitude to alter an institution's mission, objectives, and supporting core themes; the scope or degree level of its offerings; its autonomy, sponsorship, or the locus of control; its offering of academic programs for credit through contractual relationships with external organizations; its offering of programs for credit outside the NWCCU region; or, its campus locations including a branch campus or the establishment of an additional location apart from the main campus at which the institution offers at least 50 percent of an educational program.

A **Minor Change** has minimal impact on the resources and capacity of the institution. Most changes, such as adding programs that are allied with existing offerings, or dropping programs, and changes in method of instructional delivery, are not major and therefore are categorized as minor changes.

While the decision to make changes is an institutional prerogative and responsibility, the Commission monitors the effect of a change on the validity of the institution's accreditation status with the Commission. Accreditation or candidacy for accreditation of an institution applies to those units, programs, and other institutional activities which were included in the institutional comprehensive self-evaluation report and were reviewed by an evaluation committee as required by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. Substantive changes (major or minor) initiated subsequent to the most recent institutional evaluation are not automatically included in the institution's accredited or candidate status, and must therefore be submitted as change proposals to the Commission for review. Insofar as institutions are in a continual process of change, the Commission continuously monitors institutions through its Substantive Change Policy.

Although the scope and depth of information to be provided in the change proposal will depend upon the nature of the proposed change, **responses to the following are required:**

- a. Mission and Core Themes:
  1. clear statement of the nature and purposes of the change in the context of institutional mission and core themes.
- b. Authorization:
  1. evidence of the date of formal approval by the governing board and by the appropriate governmental agency to offer the proposed existing and/or new program(s) at the proposed site(s). If the institution is located in, or operates in, a state that has only minimal requirements for chartering, but also a higher level of authorization to grant degrees, date and evidence of approval at the higher level is required.



- c. Educational Offerings:
  1. descriptive information of the educational offering(s) including credits to completion, courses by title and assigned academic credit granted;
  2. descriptive information regarding method of instructional delivery (i.e., type of delivery including percent of face-to-face, hybrid, distance delivery, and/or competency-based);
  3. description of expected student learning outcomes;
  4. description of the assessment plan for student learning outcomes;
  5. evidence of approval by the appropriate academic policy body of the institution.
- d. Planning:
  1. plans and descriptive materials indicating evidence of need for the change and the student clientele to be served (common resources include EMSI and the BLS Handbook);
  2. procedures used in arriving at the decision to change;
  3. organizational arrangements required within the institution to accommodate the change including administrative, staff, and faculty hires, facilities, student services, library; and
  4. timetable for implementation.
- e. Student Services: capacity of student services to accommodate the change; and implications of the change for services to the rest of the student body;
- f. Physical Facilities and Equipment: provision for physical facilities and equipment;
- g. Library and Information Resources: adequacy and availability of library and information resources;
- h. Faculty: analysis of the faculty and staff needed which includes educational and professional experience qualifications of the faculty members relative to their individual teaching assignments; and anticipated sources or plans to secure qualified faculty and staff.
- i. Budget:
  1. revenue and expenditures at the program or department level one year prior to the change (if applicable);
  2. projections of revenue and expenditures at the program or department level for each of the first three years of operation;
  3. designated revenue and expenditures associated with the change itself;
  4. institutional financial support to be reallocated to accommodate the change; and
  5. budgetary and financial implications of the change for the entire institution.

Changes categorized as **Major Change** should include a copy of the institution's most recent Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) finances survey.

When an institution seeks approval to establish a **branch campus or additional location where 50 percent or more of a program is offered**, the proposal must include a thorough response to each of *i.1 through i.5* above and formatted within a business plan, to assist in an evaluation of the institution's fiscal and administrative capacity to operate the additional location as required by United States Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Title 34, CFR 602.22(c) and 34 CFR 602.24(a). Revenues and expenditures must include a cash flow analysis. The business plan must also address the educational program and the operation, management, and the physical resources at the branch campus.

Following approval of a substantive (major or minor) change, the Commission may conduct follow-up oversight of the change. The nature of the oversight is determined by the nature of the change. Approved substantive (major or minor) change proposals are included under the accreditation of the

institution, subject to the conditions of oversight.

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities relies upon the staff of the Commission to determine if a proposed change is a **major change** or a **minor change**. Careful consideration is necessary in deciding if an institutional change is major. Size, complexity, maturity, financial health, and experiences of the institution in effecting significant change are important factors. Usually, it is possible for the President of the Commission to determine whether a change proposed by an institution is a **major change** or a **minor change**. If the institution disagrees with the decision of the President regarding the significance of the change, the matter of categorization may be referred to the Executive Committee of the Commission for reconsideration.

When considering a change included in this policy, an institution may communicate with the Commission staff early in its deliberations. Early communication enables the staff to provide information and advice regarding the effect of the proposed change on the accreditation or candidate status of the institution and the procedures to be followed in seeking approval.

Changes in candidate or accredited institutions must be reported to the Commission and approved in advance of implementation.

If an institution implements a change without prior written notice or if it proceeds to implement a substantive change denied by the Executive Committee or Commission, the Commission may issue an order for the institution to show cause as to why its accreditation or candidate status should not be terminated.

Although the NWCCU Annual Report does request a listing of both implemented and future planned changes for each institution, the NWCCU Annual Report is not an appropriate vehicle for notifying the Commission of major or minor substantive changes.

## Procedure for Minor Changes

1. **Proposal Submission.** The purpose of a proposal is to enable the institution to set forth the activities constituting the change and the impact expected on the institution as a whole. The Commission requests online submission of proposals for all changes.
  - a. The Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO) is required to complete and submit the online Minor Change Proposal through the link found on the NWCCU website.
  - b. The proposal contains brief responses to sections *a* through *i* of the NWCCU Substantive Change Policy, including the institution's proposed implementation date, date of institutional governing board approval, and date of faculty review.
  - c. Proposals may be submitted at any time of year. Expedited Review may be requested by the institution and granted at the discretion of the Commission.
2. **Review.** Commission staff review the minor change proposal and determine the nature of change.
  - a. If the change is judged to be consistent with the institution's existing accreditation, the institution is notified in writing that the proposed change is included under the existing accreditation of the institution.

- b. The effective date of the approval of the minor change is the date of the notification letter unless otherwise specified by the Commission.
- c. The Commission establishes appropriate follow-up oversight of minor changes.
- d. The minor change proposal is then noted as an information item on the agenda for the Executive Committee's next regularly scheduled meeting.

## Procedure for Major Changes

1. **Proposal Submission.** The purpose of a proposal is to enable the institution to set forth the activities constituting the change and the impact expected on the institution as a whole. The Commission requests online submission of proposals for all changes.
  - a. The Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO) is required to complete and submit the online Major Change Proposal through the link found on the NWCCU website.
  - b. The proposal contains thorough responses to sections *a* through *i* of the NWCCU Substantive Change Policy, including the institution's proposed implementation date, date of institutional governing board approval, date of faculty review, and, depending upon the nature of the change, any additional supporting materials.
  - c. Proposals may be submitted at any time of the year. Expedited Review may be requested by the institution and granted at the discretion of the Commission.
2. **Review.** The Commission staff will review the proposal and request any further information that is needed.
  - a. The Commission assigns a Major Change Review Panel, as appropriate, to review and to take action on the proposal.
  - b. The Major Change Review Panel consists of a current Commissioner serving as Chair and two to four additional members chosen based on knowledge and expertise, regional location, and affiliation with a public or private institution. The composition of the Major Change Review Panel is consistent with the Commission's philosophy of peer-evaluation of member institutions.
  - c. Following receipt of a major change proposal, Commission staff prepare an analysis of the proposal and sends the analysis with a copy of the proposal to members of a Major Change Review Panel.
  - d. On behalf of the Commission, the Major Change Review Panel considers the impact of the proposed change on existing institutional programs, resources, and services and judges whether it is reasonable to expect that the Commission's accreditation criteria will continue to be met.
  - e. The Major Change Review Panel may take one of the following actions:
    - Accept the proposal without conditions;
    - Accept the proposal with conditions;
    - Defer action pending the receipt of additional information;
    - Defer action and refer the proposal to the Executive Committee of the Commission with a recommendation for action at its next regularly scheduled meeting.
  - f. The Major Change Review Panel communicates its action to the President of the Commission.

If the proposal is approved by all members of the Major Change Review Panel, the institution is notified in writing to proceed with the change which is noted in the institution's accreditation. The effective

date of approval of the change, which is not retroactive, is the date of the notification letter unless otherwise specified by the Commission. In the case of change of ownership, the Commission may designate the date of the change of ownership as the effective date of approval if the accreditation decision was made within 30 days of the change of ownership. The proposal is then noted as an information item on the agenda for the Commission's next regularly scheduled meeting. Also, if one or more of the members of a Major Change Review Panel recommend that the proposal be denied, the proposal is put on the agenda of the next regularly scheduled meeting of the Executive Committee for review and action. If the Major Change Review Panel recommends deferring action and referring the proposal to the Executive Committee, the proposal is put on the agenda for the next regularly scheduled meeting of the Executive Committee for review and action.

**Review of the Proposal by the Executive Committee.** The Executive Committee meets twice per year. If a major change proposal is put on the agenda of an Executive Committee meeting and considered by the Executive Committee acting on behalf of the Commission, one of the following actions will be taken:

- accept the proposal without conditions;
- accept the proposal with conditions;
- deny approval of the proposal;
- defer action pending the receipt of additional information;
- defer action and refer the proposal to the Commission at its next regularly scheduled meeting; or
- request that a new Major Change Review Panel consider the proposal.

The Executive Committee communicates its action to the President of the Commission. The President notifies the institution's chief executive officer in writing of the action taken by the Executive Committee. If the proposal is approved, follow-up actions, if any, are determined by the nature of the change and any other factors deemed appropriate by the Executive Committee. If the proposal is denied, the reasons for the denial are specified in the written notification within 30 days of closure of the regularly scheduled meeting of the Executive Committee.

**Request for Reconsideration of Executive Committee Action.** If the major change is denied by the Executive Committee, the institution may request consideration by the Commission by way of communication in writing within 30 days of the date of notification of the Executive Committee's denial of the change.

**Review of the Proposal by the Commission.** The Commission meets twice per year. If a major change proposal is put on the agenda of the next regularly scheduled meeting and considered by the Commission, one of the following actions will be taken:

- accept the proposal without conditions;
- accept the proposal with conditions; or
- deny approval of the proposal.

The institution's chief executive officer is notified in writing of the action taken by the Commission and the reasons for the action. If the proposal is approved, follow-up actions, if any, are determined by the nature of the change and any other factors deemed appropriate by the Commission. If the proposal is denied, the reasons for the denial are specified in written notification within 30 days of closure of the regularly scheduled meeting of the Commission. If the proposal is denied approval by the Commission, the Commission's decision is final and cannot be appealed.

**Follow-up Actions.** Follow-up Actions are determined by the nature of the change and may include further reporting and an on-site evaluation (subject to the conditions for follow-up oversight in Appendix A).

**On-site Evaluations.** The size and composition of the on-site evaluation committee will depend on the nature of the change. The dates for the on-site evaluation are set by Commission staff in consultation with appropriate institutional officials.

**Report.** Prior to the substantive change evaluation visit, the institution will prepare and submit a concise report that assesses the effect of the change. The report need not repeat material submitted in the change proposal but should provide evidence and analysis of:

- a. effects of the change on the total institution;
- b. desirable revisions in the change based on the first year's experience;
- c. new program(s) not previously approved or existing program(s) offered at a new location(s),
  1. adequacy of administrative, faculty, financial, library, and facilities support for the program's objectives;
  2. evidence of the program's effectiveness;
  3. plans for continuing assessment of the effectiveness of the change; and
  4. impact of the change on the institution as a whole.

**Resubmission of a Proposal.** Institutions may resubmit a significantly revised Major Change Proposal for a new review at least three months beyond the notification date of denial.

## Appendix A: Conditions for Follow-Up Oversight

**Accreditation and Candidacy at a New Degree Level.** If approval is given to offer a program at a degree level not previously approved and listed for the institution in the Commission's Directory, the institution is granted *candidacy* at the new degree level while retaining accreditation at the previously approved degree level(s).

*Candidacy.* When an institution is granted candidacy status at a new degree level, it is expected to host an evaluator(s) dedicated to the review of the new degree level at the next scheduled report, with a visit, in the seven-year process of accreditation. The policies and procedures for evaluations as listed on the Commission's website will apply, and the action taken by the Commission following such evaluation will apply to the accreditation of the institution as a whole, not merely to the programs at the new degree level. The effective date of accreditation at the new degree level is September 1 of the academic year immediately preceding the academic year in which the evaluation took place.

**Branch Campus.** U.S. Department of Education regulations require an evaluation visit within six months following approval for the establishment of a branch campus by an institution. (34 CFR 602.24(a) (3))

**Additional Locations.** U.S. Department of Education regulations require an evaluation visit within six months following approval for the establishment of an additional location geographically apart from the main campus at which the institution offers at least 50 percent of an educational program. (34 CFR (c)). The Commission must determine if the institution has the fiscal and administrative capacity to operate the additional location. In addition, the Commission will visit within six months, each additional location the institution establishes, if the institution:

- (i) has a total of three or fewer additional locations;
- (ii) has not demonstrated, to the Commission's satisfaction, that it has a proven record of effective educational oversight of additional locations;
- (iii) has been placed on warning, probation, or show cause by the Commission or is subject to some limitation by the Commission on its accreditation or preaccreditation status;
- (iv) adds a location abroad, regardless of the number of domestic additional locations, unless waived by staff.

The purpose of the visits to additional locations is to verify that the additional location has the personnel, facilities, and resources it claimed to have in its proposal to the Commission for approval of the additional location.

The Commission will conduct, at reasonable intervals, visits to additional locations of institutions that operate more than three additional locations. When an institution initiates its fourth off-campus site/location, the Commission may, at its discretion, authorize a site visit to review one or more of these additional locations. The Commission, however, may require visits to a representative sample of sites between scheduled reaffirmations, if (1) the additional sites have been initiated since the last scheduled reaffirmation, and (2) the sites have not been visited.

**Rapid Growth.** The Commission may, at its discretion, conduct visits to additional locations, to ensure that accredited and pre-accredited institutions maintain educational quality when experiencing rapid growth in the number of additional locations. Institutions contemplating rapid growth (or uncertain as to whether planned changes fall under this category) should be in contact with the Commission staff prior to submitting information to the Commission.

**Change of Ownership.** U.S. Department of Education regulations require an evaluation visit within six months following approval for change in legal status, sponsorship, form of control, or ownership of the institution including merger with another institution. (34 CFR 602.24(b))

**Other Substantive Changes.** For all other kinds of changes, the Commission may, as a condition of approval, request follow-up oversight, including the scheduling and conduct of an on-site evaluation. The nature of the change will determine the scope of any follow-up evaluation.

## Appendix B: Examples of Major and Minor Changes

**Minor changes** include, but are not limited to, the following:

- a. Adding existing program(s) of one year (or more) in length to a previously reported and evaluated location where 50% or more of the program requirements are delivered (assuming minimal need for additional resources);
- b. Adding a degree or certificate program using Competency-Based Education delivery where Competency-Based Education delivery is previously reported and evaluated;
- c. Adding a site or location geographically apart from the institution's main campus or existing site (within 20 miles) at which the institution offers at least 50 percent of an education program;
- d. Adding a new degree program in the same level of accreditation and closely related to fields of study previously reported and evaluated; and/or
- e. Placing in moratorium, suspending, or terminating a degree program of 30 semester or 45 quarter credits in length.

**Major changes** include, but are not limited to, the following:

- a. Changing institutional mission, objectives, and core themes;
- b. Changing legal status, form of control, ownership, or sponsorship of the institution<sup>1</sup>;
- c. Adding courses or a degree program at a new degree level not listed for the institution with the NWCCU\*;
- d. Establishing a branch campus<sup>1†</sup>;
- e. Acquiring, or merging with, another institution/organization, program or location of another institution;
- f. Adding courses/program(s) for academic credit outside the NWCCU region;
- g. Entering into a contractual agreement with a regionally accredited or non-regionally accredited organization to provide courses and program(s) for academic credit on behalf of the candidate or accredited member institution;
- h. Adding program(s) for academic credit within the NWCCU region in a legal jurisdiction not previously reported and evaluated;
- i. Establishing an additional location geographically apart (more than 20 miles) from the main campus at which the institution offers at least 50 percent of an education program (see Appendix A: Conditions for Follow-Up Oversight);
- j. Adding courses or programs that represent a significant departure from existing offerings of education programs or a significant departure in method of delivery from those that were previously reported and evaluated;
- k. First time use of a distance delivery infrastructure, or, offering 50% or more to completion of program requirements by distance delivery;
- l. First time offering of Competency-Based (or direct assessment) Education Programs<sup>2</sup>;

- m. Adding programs delivered through direct assessment or delivered through a “hybrid” direct assessment approach where not previously reported and evaluated<sup>2,3</sup>;
- n. Changing from clock hours to credit hours or vice versa, or a substantial increase or decrease in the length of a program or the number of clock or credit hours awarded for successful completion of a program; and/or
- o. Adding a permanent location at a site at which the institution is conducting a teach-out for students of another institution that has ceased operating before all students have completed their program of study.

<sup>1</sup>On-site visit required within six months.

<sup>2</sup>Additional information may be found in the “Common Framework for Defining and Approving Competency-Based Education Programs” document located on the NWCCU website.

<sup>3</sup>The “hybrid” direct assessment approach combines the course-based approach granting credit hours and an approach through the direct assessment of competencies.

\* **Program:** A systematic, usually sequential, grouping of courses forming a considerable part, or all, of the requirements for a degree or credential.

† **Branch Campus:** A location of an institution that is geographically apart and independent of the main campus and (1) is permanent in nature; (2) offers at least 50% of the courses of an educational program leading to a degree, certificate, or other educational credential; (3) has its own faculty and administrative organization; and (4) has its own budgetary and hiring authority.



## Teach-Out Plans and Teach-Out Agreements Policy

Federal regulations implementing the Higher Education Opportunity Act require that accrediting agencies require a teach-out plan from an institution in the event of any of the following:

- a) the Department of Education notifies the accreditation agency of an emergency action or action to limit, suspend or terminate institutional participation in federal financial aid against the institution; or
- b) the Commission acts to withdraw, terminate, or suspend the accreditation or candidacy status of an institution; or
- c) a state or other government authorizing authority notifies the accrediting agency that an institution's license or legal authorization to provide an educational program has been or will be revoked; or
- d) the institution notifies the Commission that the institution intends to cease operations; or
- e) the institution notifies the Commission that it intends to close one or more locations that provide 100% of at least one degree program; or
- f) the institution notifies the Commission that it will cease instruction in one or more degree programs before all students have a reasonable opportunity to graduate.

Should any of the above occur, the institution should immediately contact Commission staff regarding the development of a teach-out plan. A teach-out plan is a written plan that provides for the equitable treatment of students if an institution of higher education ceases to operate or ceases instruction at one or more locations that provide 100% of at least one degree program or in one or more degree programs before all students have completed their program of study.

The plan will be approved if it:

1. is consistent with applicable standards;
2. provides that the institution will maintain the necessary experience, resources, and support services to provide an educational program that is of acceptable quality and reasonably similar in content, structure, and scheduling to that promised to the students upon enrollment;
3. demonstrates the institution's stability and the ability to carry out its mission and meet all obligations to existing students; and
4. offers the program to students without additional charge over what had been previously in place, when the institution conducts the teach out without involving another entity, or if another entity is involved, provides notification to students of any additional charges.

In most cases a teach-out plan will include a teach-out agreement. For these purposes, a *teach-out agreement* is defined as "a written agreement between institutions that are accredited or preaccredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency that provides for the equitable treatment of students if one of those institutions stops offering an educational program before all students enrolled in that program complete the program."

An agreement will be approved if it:

1. is consistent with applicable standards;
2. provides for the equitable treatment of students by ensuring that the teach-out is offered by an institution that has the necessary experience, resources, and support services to:
  - provide, insofar as possible without additional charge to the students, an educational program that is of acceptable quality and reasonably similar in content, structure, and scheduling to that provided by the institution ceasing operation entirely or of one of its programs or at one of its locations;
  - remain stable, carry out its mission, and meet all its obligations to students;
  - provide students access to program(s) and services without requiring them to move or travel great distances;
3. requires the teach-out institution to provide notification to students of any additional charges.

If the Commission approves a teach-out plan that includes a program that is accredited by another recognized accrediting agency, it will notify that agency of the plan's approval.

If a candidate or accredited institution closes without a teach-out plan or agreement, the Commission will work with the Department of Education and the appropriate state agency, to the extent feasible, to assist students in finding reasonable opportunities to complete their education without additional charges over what they would have paid at the closed institution.

*1996, 2002, 2010, 2013*

### **Training of New Commissioners Policy**

In an effort to ensure that Commissioners are qualified by training as well as experience, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities shall require that all new Commissioners undergo appropriate training to enable them to effectively fulfill their responsibilities as members of the Commission. Accordingly, all new Commissioners will attend, prior to their first Commission meeting, an orientation session that addresses the responsibilities of a new Commissioner, the practices and procedures of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, and the standards, eligibility requirements, and policies for accreditation.

*1997*

### **Transfer and Award of Academic Credit Policy**

This Policy is directed to institutions of higher education and others concerned with the transfer of academic credit among institutions and award of academic credit for courses taken at another institution. Underlying this Policy is the principle that each institution is responsible for determining its own policies and practices with regard to the transfer and award of credit. Institutions are urged to review their policies and practices periodically to ensure that they accomplish the institution's goals and that they function in a manner that is fair and equitable to students. This Policy should be used as a guide and does not constitute a substitute for institutional policies and practices.

Transfer of credit involves transfer of credit between institutions and recognition of learning beyond the institution accepting the credit. As their personal circumstances and educational objectives change, students seek to have their learning, wherever and however attained, recognized by institutions where they enroll for further study. It is important for reasons of social equity and educational effectiveness, as well as for the wise use of resources, for all institutions to develop reasonable and definitive policies and procedures for acceptance of transfer of credit. Such policies and procedures should provide maximum consideration for the individual student who has changed institutions or objectives. It is the receiving institution's responsibility to provide reasonable and definitive policies and procedures for determining a student's knowledge in required subject areas. All institutions have a responsibility to furnish transcripts and other documents necessary for a receiving institution to judge the quality and quantity of the work. Institutions also have the responsibility to advise the students that the work reflected on the transcript may or may not be accepted by a receiving institution.

### Interinstitutional Transfer of Credit

Transfer of credit from one institution to another involves at least three considerations:

1. The educational quality of the institution from which the student transfers.
2. The comparability of the nature, content, and level of credit earned to that offered by the receiving institution.
3. The appropriateness and applicability of the credit earned to the programs offered by the receiving institution, in light of the student's educational goals.

### Accredited Institutions

Accreditation speaks primarily to the first of these considerations, serving as the basic indicator that an institution meets certain minimum standards.

1. Regional accrediting commissions which accredit total institutions.
2. Certain national accrediting bodies that accredit various kinds of specialized institutions.
3. Certain specialized organizations that accredit free-standing professional schools, in addition to programs within multi-purpose institutions.

Accreditation affords reason for confidence in an institution's or a program's purposes, in the appropriateness of its resources and plans for carrying out these purposes, and in its effectiveness in accomplishing its goals, insofar as these things can be judged. Accreditation speaks to the probability but does not guarantee that students have met acceptable standards of educational accomplishment.

### Comparability and Applicability

Comparability of the nature, content, and level of transfer credit and the appropriateness and applicability of the credit earned in programs offered by the receiving institution are as important in the evaluation process as the accreditation status of the institution at which the transfer credit was awarded. Since accreditation does not address these questions, this information must be obtained from catalogs and other materials and from direct contact between knowledgeable and experienced faculty and staff at both the receiving and sending institutions. When such considerations as comparability and appropriateness of credit are satisfied, however, the receiving institution should have reasonable confidence that students from accredited institutions are qualified to undertake the receiving institution's educational program.

### Admissions and Degree Purposes

At some institutions there may be differences between the acceptance of credit for admission purposes and the applicability of credit for degree purposes. A receiving institution may accept previous work, place a credit value on it, and enter it on the transcript. However, that previous work, because of its nature and not its inherent quality, may be determined to have no applicability to a specific degree to be pursued by the student.

Institutions have a responsibility to make this distinction and its implications clear to students before they enroll. This should be a matter of full disclosure, with the best interests of the student in mind. Institutions also should make every reasonable effort to reduce the gap between credits accepted and credits applied toward an educational credential.

### Unaccredited Institutions

Higher education institutions that are not accredited by a USDE recognized regional or national accrediting agency may lack that status for reasons unrelated to questions of quality. Such institutions, however, cannot provide a reliable, third-party assurance that they meet or exceed minimum standards. That being the case, students transferring from such institutions may encounter special problems in gaining admission and in transferring credits to accredited institutions. Institutions admitting students from unaccredited institutions should take special steps to validate credits previously earned.

### Non-U.S. Institutions

In most cases, non-U.S. institutions are chartered and authorized by their national governments, usually through a ministry of education or head of state. Although this provides for a standardization within a country, it does not produce useful information about comparability from one country to another.

### Validation of Extra-Institutional and Experiential Learning for Transfer Purposes

Transfer-of-credit policies should encompass educational accomplishment attained in extra-institutional settings as well as at accredited higher education institutions. In deciding on the award of credit for extra-institutional learning, institutions will find the services of the American Council on Education's College Credit Recommendation Service (CREDIT) helpful. One of the Office's functions is to operate and foster programs to determine credit equivalencies for various modes of extra-institutional learning. CREDIT maintains evaluation programs for formally structured courses offered by the military and civilian non-collegiate sponsors such as business, corporations, government agencies, and labor unions. Evaluation services are also available for examination programs for occupations with validated job proficiency evaluation systems, and for correspondence courses offered by schools accredited by the Distance Education and Training Council. The results are published in a Guide series. Another resource is the General Education Development (GED) Testing Program, which provides a means for assessing high school equivalency.

For learning that has not been validated through the ACE formal credit recommendation process or through credit-by-examination programs, institutions are urged to explore the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) procedures and processes.

Institutions are encouraged to use this statement as a basis for discussions in developing and implementing as well as reviewing institutional policies with regard to transfer of credit.

Disclosure

The institution's policy on transfer of credit is publicly disclosed through its website and other relevant publications. The publication includes a statement of the criteria established by the institution regarding the transfer of credit earned at another institution of higher education along with a list of institutions with which it has articulation agreements.

*1977, 2010, 2013*

## GLOSSARY

### **Academic Calendar**

A chronology of dates for a scheduled period of instruction which includes an institution's dates for class registration, additions and deletions to course schedules, beginning and ending for the term of instruction, institutionally scheduled examinations, and deadline for applications for graduation.

### **Academic Credit**

Credit applicable toward a degree or credential from the institution awarding it, accepting it on transfer, or acknowledging equivalency from learning experience adequately substantiated. (See Credit, Unit of)

### **Academic Year**

Instruction equivalent of two semesters of approximately 15 weeks each or three quarters of approximately 10 weeks each, either of which may include examination days. (See Credit, Unit of)

### **Accreditation**

The status of public recognition that a recognized accrediting agency grants to an institution or educational program that meets its qualifying requirements and accreditation criteria. The process involves initial and periodic self evaluation followed by an evaluation by peers.

### **Accreditation Agency**

A non-governmental organization formally recognized by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education as a reliable authority concerning the quality of education or training offered by educational institutions or programs. It is a voluntary organization and not established by the federal or state governments or any agency, department, or office thereof. An accrediting agency may be identified by scope (institution as a whole, or program/unit within an institution) or geographic area (regional or national). The essential purpose of the accreditation agency is to provide a professional judgment regarding the quality of the educational institution or program offered and to encourage continual institutional improvement.

### **Accreditation Criteria**

The criteria, consisting of Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation, agreed upon by the membership of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, by which an institution is evaluated and admitted for initial and continuing membership. In the Standards for Accreditation the criteria are designate by the number of the Standard, letter of the element within the Standard, and number of the criterion within that element. (e.g., 4.A.3)

### **Accreditation, Types of**

#### **Regional**

Accreditation of an institution as a whole awarded by an agency recognized by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education for institutions within a prescribed geographic region of the United States.

#### **National**

Accreditation of an institution as a whole awarded by an agency recognized by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education for institutions that are single purpose in nature, such as business or information technology institutes, or that have a clear thematic mission, such as faith-based institutions or liberal arts colleges.

**Specialized or Program**

Accreditation of a unit or educational program within an institution by an agency recognized by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education. The unit accredited may be a school, department, program, or curriculum. It may be a part of a comprehensive educational institution or may be an independent, specialized institution.

**Accreditation Liaison Officer**

An individual selected by the chief executive officer of an institution as a primary point of contact with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities on matters of accreditation.

**Accredited Institution**

An institution that has been awarded Accreditation status by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. (See definition of Accreditation status)

**Accreditation status**

Formal recognition that may be awarded to an institution or to a specialized program for meeting established standards of educational quality, as determined by regional, national, or specialized accrediting bodies.

**Acronyms**

ALO	Accreditation Liaison Officer
ARFE	Annual Report on Finance and Enrollment
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CEU	Continuing Education Unit
FRR	Financial Resources Review
FTE	Full-time Equivalent (See FTE Students, FTE Faculty/Administrator/Staff)
IPEDS	Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System
NWCCU	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
USDE	United States Department of Education

**Adaptation**

An institution's ability to adjust, as necessary, its mission, core themes, programs, and services to accommodate changing and emerging needs, trends, and influences to ensure enduring institutional relevancy, productivity, viability, and sustainability.

**Admission Policy**

The guiding principles that determine admission to an institution. Consideration is given to the role assigned to the institution by its governing body; the programs, resources, and facilities of the institution; and the qualifications and goals of the applicant.

**Adverse Action**

A decision to deny or remove Accreditation status or Candidacy status from an institution.

**Annual Report**

A brief form made available each spring to Candidate and Member institutions to be completed and returned to the Commission office. The purpose of the form is to provide the Commission with current information on matters such as enrollments, programs, and budgets.

**Appeal**

A petition for reconsideration of a negative decision. (See Appeals Policy and Procedures)

**Applicant**

Initial non-affiliated status granted to an institution by NWCCU following acceptance of an Application for Consideration of Eligibility and evaluation and acceptance by the Commission.

**Branch Campus**

A location of an institution that is geographically apart and independent of the main campus of the institution. The location of the institution is considered to be independent of the main campus if it: (1) Is permanent in nature; (2) Offers courses in educational programs leading to a degree, certificate, or other recognized educational credential; (3) Has its own faculty and administrative or supervisory organization; and (4) Has its own budgetary and hiring authority. (34 CFR 600.2)

**Candidate for Accreditation**

Candidate for Accreditation is a Pre-Accreditation, affiliate status with NWCCU following a specified procedure for application, institutional self evaluation, and on-site peer evaluation. Candidacy is not Accreditation and does not ensure eventual Accreditation. It is an indication that an institution: 1) Complies with NWCCU Eligibility Requirements; 2) Substantially meets its Standards for Accreditation; and 3) Is making acceptable progress toward Accreditation.

**Candidacy**

(See Candidate for Accreditation)

**Capacity**

The ability and competency of an institution that, in combination with its demonstration of adequate resources, structures, and processes, predicts its potential to fulfill its mission, accomplish its core theme objectives, and achieve the intended outcomes of its programs and services.

**Catalog**

The official bulletin or publication of a higher education institution stating admission and graduation requirements, majors, minors, current offerings, costs, faculty, and all other significant information necessary for an accurate understanding of the institution.

**Clock Hour**

A period of time consisting of: (1) A 50- to 60-minute class, lecture, or recitation in a 60-minute period; (2) A 50- to 60-minute faculty-supervised laboratory, shop training, or internship in a 60-minute period; or (3) Sixty minutes of preparation in a correspondence course.

**College**

Generic term to denote any of the degree-granting post-secondary educational institutions (including universities). "College" is used as a synonym of "Institution" and does not refer to a specialized unit within an institution.

**Commendation**

A positive recognition of a noteworthy aspect of the institution.

**Commission**

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

**Community Service**

(See Public Service)



**Complaint**

A written allegation against a Member or Candidate institution or against the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. (See Policy Complaints Regarding Member or Candidate Institutions and Complaints Against NWCCU.)

**Conflict of Interest**

A real or perceived circumstance that compromises an individual's capacity to render a fair and impartial evaluation or decision regarding the Accreditation status of an institution.

**Confidential Recommendation**

A private non-binding peer-evaluator suggestion to the Board of Commissioners regarding the accreditation action to be taken on an institution.

**Cooperative Education**

A program that combines study and practice and is accomplished, for example, on an alternating schedule of half days, weeks, or other period of time, thereby providing employment for students with organized, on-the-job training and related higher education instruction.

**Core Theme**

A manifestation of a fundamental aspect of institutional mission with overarching objectives that guide planning for contributing programs and services, development of capacity, application of resources to accomplish those objectives, and assessment of achievements of those objectives. Collectively, the core themes represent the institution's interpretation of its mission and translation of that interpretation into practice.

**Correspondence Education**

Correspondence education means: (1) Education provided through one or more courses by an institution under which the institution provides instructional materials, by mail or electronic transmission, including examinations on the materials, to students who are separated from the instructor; (2) interaction between the instructor and the student is limited, is not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student; (3) correspondence courses are typically self-paced; (4) correspondence education is not distance education. (Correspondence education is not yet included in the Commission's scope of recognition by the U.S. Department of Education.)

**Course**

A purposeful structured sequence of teaching and learning leading to achievement of student learning outcomes related to one or more academic topics. It is commonly designated by a title, number, credits, and expected learning outcomes.

**Credentials**

1) A document stating that a student successfully completed a prescribed curriculum or has passed certain subjects; 2) a detailed record of an applicant for a position, usually including transcripts of academic records and testimonials relative to previous experience, performance, and character.

**Credit, Unit of**

A quantification of student academic learning. One unit represents what a typical student might be expected to learn in one week (40-45 hours including class time and preparation) of full-time study. Thus a six-week summer session might, if full-time, equate to six units. An alternative norm is one unit for three hours of student work per week (e.g., one hour of lecture and two of study or three of

laboratory) for ten weeks a quarter or 15 weeks a semester. A full-time undergraduate student program is usually about 15 units but not less than 12; a full-time graduate program is usually 10 to 12 units. Considerable excess allowed on ground of student ability should be subject to special analysis and approval. (See Credit Hour Policy)

### **Criteria**

The principle-based statements embedded in the Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation by which institutions are evaluated.

### **Degree Levels**

#### **Associate**

A lower division undergraduate degree normally representing two years (approximately 60 semester credits or 90 quarter units) of lower-division collegiate study, or its equivalent in depth and quality of learning experience.

#### **Baccalaureate**

An undergraduate degree normally representing four years (approximately 120 semester credits or 180 quarter credits) of upper- and lower-division collegiate study, or its equivalent in depth and quality of learning experience.

#### **Masters**

A graduate degree representing approximately 30 semester credits or 45 quarter credits of post-baccalaureate study, or its equivalent in depth and quality.

#### **Doctorate**

A terminal degree representing three or more years of graduate study that prepares the recipient to conduct original research, engage in scholarship, create artistic expressions of human emotions, or apply knowledge to practice.

### **Distance Education**

The U.S. Department of Education defines Distance Education as education that uses one or more of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (4) of this definition to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor, and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously. The technologies may include –

- (1) The internet;
- (2) One-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;
- (3) Audio conferencing; or
- (4) Video cassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs, if the cassettes, DVDs, or CD-ROMs are used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (3) of this definition.

### **Eligibility Requirements**

The conditions required of an institution to qualify for consideration of affiliation with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

**Evaluation**

A process periodically and jointly conducted by the institution and the accrediting agency, which may take a number of forms. It includes as a minimum: 1) An institution's Self-Evaluation Report; 2) A Peer-Evaluation report; and 3) The institution's response to the Peer-Evaluation Report.

**Evaluator**

A peer from an Accredited institution chosen by the Commission staff for his/her expertise related to the nature of the evaluation and the institution being evaluated and trained in the accreditation criteria and evaluation process. The evaluator's primary responsibility is to make a considered and informed judgment with respect to the accreditation criteria regarding the institution's educational quality and effectiveness in light of the institution's mission and characteristics.

**Experiential Learning**

Learning acquired from work and life experiences, mass media, and independent reading and study.

**Faculty**

Academic professionals employed by the institution to achieve its educational objectives.

**Full-time Equivalent****Student**

The course load for a student making normal progress toward completion of a degree or certificate; typically computed as 15 credits per term.

**Faculty/Administrator/Staff**

The normal full-time workload/responsibilities expected of a person for that classification and assignment.

**General Education**

An essential collegiate-level component of transfer-based, associate degree programs and baccalaureate degree programs designed to foster effective, independent, lifelong learning by introducing students to the content and methodology of the major domains of knowledge.

**General Education Development (GED)**

An evaluation of adults who did not graduate from high school, to measure the extent to which they have attained the knowledge, skills, and understandings ordinarily acquired through a high school education.

**Guidelines**

Explanatory statements which amplify the criteria for Accreditation or which provide examples of how the requirements may be interpreted to allow for flexibility, yet remain within the framework of the accreditation criteria.

**Higher Education**

Post-secondary education emphasizing degrees and certificates that incorporate broader learning, rather than training limited to skill development.

**Independent Institution**

A college or university with self-perpetuating, or otherwise not publicly chosen, board, and little, if any, direct public tax support.

**Indicators of Achievement**

Assessable, verifiable statements or statistics that identify how an institution will measure the objectives and desired outcomes to accomplish its core themes. Indicators of Achievement form the basis for evaluating accomplishment of core theme objectives.

**Institution**

Educational institutions that offer programs leading to collegiate-level degrees and certificates. (See College)

**Institution - Additional Site**

A component part of an institution but operating in a separate geographic location and authorized for a stated purpose in relation to the parent institution and the area served. It may have planned programs leading to undergraduate, graduate, or professional degrees which are granted by or in the name of the parent institution.

**Institution - Operationally Separate**

An institution that is under the general control of a parent institution or a central administration in a multi-unit system. It has a core of full-time faculty, a separate student body, a resident administration, and it offers programs comprising a totality of educational experience as defined by the appropriate regional accrediting body.

**Institution – Community and Technical Colleges**

Institutions that primarily grant associate degrees to its graduates.

**Institution - Senior Colleges and Universities**

Institutions that primarily grant baccalaureate degrees and/or graduate degrees to its graduates.

**Institutional Integrity**

Institutional operations and pursuit of knowledge governed and administered with respect for individuals in a non-discriminatory manner while responding to the educational needs and legitimate claims of the constituencies served by the institution, as determined by its mission and goals.

**Institutional Research**

The collection, analysis, and use of institutional data to inform planning and judgments of achievements and effectiveness.

**IPEDS**

Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System is designed to gather institutional level data, allow aggregation at various levels, and permit controls on data quality through follow-up and editing.

**Level of Coursework**

Level of collegiate study. “Lower division” refers to coursework that builds the foundation for a baccalaureate degree and is taken in the first two years of a baccalaureate degree program. “Upper division” refers to the coursework taken in the last two years of collegiate study that builds upon the lower-division foundation to develop a deeper level of knowledge and understanding.

**Member Institution**

An institution accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

**Mid-Cycle Evaluation**

The Mid-Cycle Evaluation is an on-site evaluation of the institution conducted in the third year of the seven year cycle. It is intended to ascertain an institution's readiness to provide evidence (outcomes) of mission fulfillment and sustainability in the Year Seven, and is designed to provide formative feedback regarding the institution's assessment plan and use of data for quality improvement.

**Minor Change**

An institutional change such as adding, deleting, or suspending academic programs; developing or deleting program concentrations; or forming or altering relationships with other organizations. (See Substantive Change Policy.)

**Mission**

The institution's articulation of its purpose. The institution's mission statement reflects its values and encompasses the intellectual and affective development of students, the pursuit of knowledge, the study of values and attitudes, and public service. It serves as a guide for educational planning and framework for the allocation of the institution's resources.

**Mission Fulfillment**

Accomplishment of institutional intentions and realization of institutional purpose.

**Negative Action**

An action to deny or remove Candidacy or Accreditation status, issue or continue a *Show-Cause* order, or impose or continue *Probation*.

**Notice of Concern**

A sanction is issued to a Candidate or Accredited institution when it is found to be out-of-compliance with accreditation criteria or substantially in compliance with accreditation criteria, but where improvement is needed. A NOTICE OF CONCERN is issued when the Board of Commissioners concludes that the institution may be on a course that, if continued, could lead to more serious sanction. A NOTICE OF CONCERN is a private sanction and does not affect the Candidate or Accredited status of the institutions. The candidate or Accredited status of the institution continues while the NOTICE OF CONCERN is in effect.

**Peer Evaluation**

An evaluation by peers from Accredited institutions and appropriate oversight agencies with respect to the accreditation criteria of its educational quality and institutional effectiveness in relationship to the institution's stated mission.

**Peer-Evaluation Report**

A written report of findings based on the accreditation criteria by peer evaluators following an evaluation of the institution.

**Peer Evaluator**

(See Evaluator)

**Planning**

The process by which the mission and goals of an institution are determined and the means to achieve them are specified. Institutional planning incorporates the institution's statement of purpose and its self evaluation that takes into account the possible need for modification of goals, clientele served, programs offered, educational methods employed, and modes of support utilized.

**Post-secondary Education**

Education beyond high school level offered primarily to individuals 18 or older.

**Pre-Accredited**

(See Candidate for Accreditation)

**President**

A generic term for the chief executive officer of an institution or organization.

**Prior Experiential Learning (credit for)**

Credit granted toward the award of a certificate or degree for prior learning experiences demonstrated through various means of assessment to be the equivalent of learning gained through formal collegiate instruction.

**Private Institution**

(See Independent Institution)

**Probation**

A public negative sanction indicating that a Candidate or Accredited institution fails to respond to the concerns communicated by the Commission, or when it deviates significantly from NWCCU accreditation criteria, but not to such an extent as to warrant the issuing of a *Show-Cause* order or remove Candidacy or Accreditation. The institution may be placed on *Probation* for a specified period of time. While on *Probation*, the institution may be subject to monitoring, which may include a requirement to submit periodic prescribed reports and to host on-site evaluations. In addition, during the period of *Probation*, any new site or degree program initiated by the institution will be regarded as a major substantive change. (See Substantive Change Policy.) The Candidate or Accredited status of the institution continues during the *Probation* period.

**Professional Development**

Professional learning activities intended to extend the professional competence of institutional personnel by keeping them current in their fields and increasing their job-related effectiveness.

**Professional/Technical Education**

Organized educational programs that develop and aggregate competencies or outcomes in the application of knowledge to specific areas of practice directly related to preparation for employment.

**Program**

A systematic, usually sequential, grouping of courses, forming a considerable part, or all, of the requirements for a degree or a credential. In this context, the General Education components of baccalaureate degrees and transfer associate degrees and the related instruction components of applied degrees are considered to be programs.

**Public Institution**

College or university with governing board elected or appointed by elected officials and supported by public funding.

**Public Representative**

A public member of the Board of Commissioners of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities who represents the public interest and is not: (1) An employee, member of the governing board, owner, or shareholder of, or consultant to, an institution that applied for accreditation or is currently accredited or pre-accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities; (2) A member of any trade association or membership organization related to, affiliated with, or associated with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities; or (3) A spouse, parent, child, or sibling of an individual identified in paragraph (1) or (2) above.

**Public Service**

Service of a practical nature to the external (non-academic) community—local, regional, national, or international. Often includes public lectures and performances, various forms of applied research, non-credit courses, and agricultural or other similar forms of extension.

**Reapplication**

The procedure used to re-submit an Application for Consideration of Eligibility following rejection of an Application for Consideration of Eligibility, denial or removal of Candidacy, or denial or removal of Accreditation.

**Recommendation**

A major finding with respect to the accreditation criteria requiring immediate institutional attention. A Recommendation may indicate an area of non-compliance with accreditation criteria or an area where the institution is substantially in compliance with accreditation criteria, but in need of improvement.

**Related Instruction**

A recognizable body of at least six semester credits or nine quarter credits, or identified equivalent in depth and quality of learning, in program-related areas of communication, computation, and human relations for applied or specialized associate degree or certificate programs of 30 semester credits or 45 quarter credits in length.

**Resources**

An institution's human, financial, student support, education, governance, physical, or technological infrastructure systems that contribute to fulfillment of the institution's mission.

**Self-Evaluation Reports**

Self evaluation is an integrated ongoing process. At clearly identified regular intervals, institutions are required to conduct thorough self evaluations with respect to the accreditation criteria and to prepare Self-Evaluation Reports, which are submitted to the Commission.

**Candidacy Self-Evaluation Report**

An Applicant institution's comprehensive self-evaluation report institution that addresses all NWCCU Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation. The Candidacy Self-Evaluation Report is submitted to the Commission for consideration of Candidacy.

**Interim Candidacy Self-Evaluation Report**

A Candidate institution's comprehensive self-evaluation report that addresses all NWCCU Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation. The Interim Candidacy Self-Evaluation Report is submitted to the Commission for consideration of continuation of Candidacy.

**Accreditation Self-Evaluation Report**

A Candidate institution's comprehensive self-evaluation report that addresses all NWCCU Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation. The Accreditation Self-Evaluation Report is submitted to the Commission for consideration of Accreditation.

**Year One Self-Evaluation Report**

An Accredited institution's thorough self-evaluation report submitted in the first year of the accreditation cycle. It addresses Standard One (Mission and Core Themes) and Eligibility Requirements 2 and 3.

**Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report**

And accredited institution's self-evaluation report submitted in the third year of the seven year cycle. The evaluation is intended to ascertain an institution's readiness to provide evidence (outcomes) of mission fulfillment and sustainability in the Year Seven, and is designed to provide formative feedback regarding the institution's assessment plan and use of data for quality improvement.

**Year Seven Self-Evaluation Report**

An Accredited institution's self-evaluation report submitted in the seventh year of the accreditation cycle. It serves as a comprehensive evaluation addressing all five Standards and all Eligibility Requirements.

**Financial Resources Review (FRR)**

An *ad hoc* report from the institution which may be requested by the Commission to address concerns related to institutional finances and/or enrollment.

**Ad Hoc Evaluation or Special Report**

This is a written Self-Evaluation Report to address one or more specified concerns communicated by the Commission. It may or may not require an on-site peer evaluation.

**Sanction**

One of several conditions (*Warning, Probation, and Show-Cause*) of escalating seriousness with regard to institutional non-compliance with accreditation criteria. The intent of a sanction is to highlight the need for immediate action by the institution to bring itself into compliance with the associated accreditation criteria. *Warning, Probation* and *Show-Cause* are public sanctions.

**Self Evaluation**

An institution's self assessment with respect to the accreditation criteria of its educational quality and institutional effectiveness in regard to its own stated mission.

**Show-Cause**

The Commission's most serious sanction, *Show-Cause* is issued when an institution has not taken satisfactory steps to address identified non-compliance issues related to the accreditation criteria. When a *Show-Cause* order is issued, the burden rests with the institution to demonstrate why its



Candidacy or Accreditation should be continued. The Candidate or Accredited status of the institution remains in effect during the period of *Show-Cause*, and the institution will be subject to Commission monitoring, which may include a requirement to submit prescribed reports and host on-site evaluations.

### **Standard Element**

A major component of an Accreditation Standard. It is designated by the number of the standard, letter of the element, and descriptive name of the element. (e.g., 3.B Core Theme Planning).

### **Standards for Accreditation**

The principle-based criteria, agreed upon by the membership, for evaluating institutions for Candidacy and Accreditation. The five Standards for Accreditation have three levels of specificity. The first level is the Standard (e.g., Standard One – Mission and Core Themes), which is further defined by *elements* of the Standard, which are designated by the number of the Standard followed by the letter of the element (e.g., 1.A Mission). The *criteria* for evaluation more specifically define the elements and are identified by the number of the Standard, followed by the letter of the Standard element, followed by the number of the criterion (e.g., 1.A.1).

### **Substantive Change**

A change that significantly alters an institution's objectives or the scope of its offerings; alters its autonomy, sponsorship, or the locus of control over it; embarks on offering off-campus academic programs for credit; changes the geographic area(s) served; or offers programs or courses for academic credit on a military base. (See Substantive Change Policy.)

### **Sustainability**

Demonstration of institutional viability to fulfill its mission for the foreseeable future.

### **Teach-Out Agreement**

A written agreement between institutions that provides for the equitable treatment of students if one of those institutions closes or stops offering an educational program before all students enrolled in that program have completed it.

### **Transfer Education**

Educational programs offered by associate degree-granting institutions that are intended for those students who plan to continue their degree studies at a baccalaureate institution. Typically, transfer education combines General Education requirements and some requirements in a major field.

### **Unfunded Student Financial Aid**

That portion of total student financial aid that is purely institutional assistance. It is the total amount of tuition scholarships that is awarded but not covered by endowment earnings and annual contributions designated for tuition scholarships; federal, state, or local funding; or monies an outside group contributes for student tuition. It is the amount of total tuition generated from enrollments that the institution foregoes to attract and retain students.

### **University**

A large, multi-purpose institution with extensive graduate degree offerings, library, and other resources, and/or several schools with graduate offerings.

**Warning**

A sanction is issued to a Candidate or Accredited institution when it is found to be out-of-compliance with accreditation criteria or substantially in compliance with accreditation criteria, but where improvement is needed. *Warning* is issued when the Board of Commissioners concludes that the institution may be on a course that, if continued, could lead to more serious sanctions. A *Warning* is a public sanction and does not affect the Candidate or Accredited status of the institution. The Candidate or Accredited status of the institution continues while the *Warning* is in effect.