

Self-Study Guide

New England Commission of Higher Education

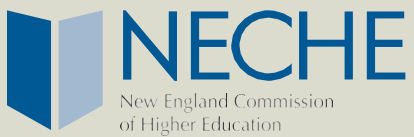


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INTRODUCTION

This guide is designed for institutions preparing for comprehensive evaluations for accreditation or candidacy. It should be used in conjunction with the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation* and relevant policies and procedures found on the Commission website www.neche.org. Additional information is provided in a workbook for the annual self-study workshop and through campus visits and consultation by Commission staff.

Questions about the guide or the self-study process should be directed to the office of the Commission. To assist in further revisions of the guide, the Commission welcomes suggestions from those who use it. Please address questions or comments to

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U.S. ACCREDITATION: AN OVERVIEW

In the United States, accreditation is the primary process for assuring and improving the quality of higher education institutions. Regional accreditation traces its roots to 1885. Today's enterprise is based on decades of experience and refinement, both leading and reflecting the development of American higher education. Current accreditation standards go beyond inputs and processes – for example, do students have access to learning resources and are they using them? – to focus increasingly on outcomes: How well are students gaining skills of finding, evaluating, and using information? Over the past decade, regional accreditation commissions have been leaders in helping colleges and universities develop trustworthy and useful ways to understand what and how their students are learning and to use the results for improvement.

Today, the accreditation of nearly 3,000 colleges and universities is carried out through a process known as 'institutional accreditation.' In 2020, the Department of Education discontinued differentiating between "regional" and "national" accreditation bodies and "institutional accreditation" is the term now used to describe applicable accreditation bodies that are recognized by the United States Secretary of Education. The process of peer review is based on standards set by the higher education community. Colleges and universities are evaluated on how well they meet these standards, in light of their mission. Following review by a team of peers, accrediting commissions determine the accreditation status of the institution and ensure follow-up and further evaluation as appropriate.

Institutional (formerly Regional) Accreditors oversee the quality of research universities; community colleges; liberal arts colleges; state colleges; religiously affiliated institutions; special-purpose institutions in the arts, sciences, and professional fields; military academies; historically black and Hispanic-serving institutions; and tribal colleges. Accredited institutions include public and private, for-profit and not-for-profit, secular and religious, urban and rural, large and small, old and new, traditional and non-traditional. The quality of these colleges and universities – and the talent they have contributed to develop regional accreditation over the decades – means that U.S. accreditation is highly regarded around the world.

Annually the work of accreditation is carried out by thousands of volunteers who serve on visiting teams and on the commissions. These volunteers include college and university presidents, academic officers, faculty, and campus experts in finance, student services and library/technology. At least one of every seven commissioners is a member of the public unconnected with higher education.

American higher education is known for its diversity. As Educator Gordon Gee notes, "Our higher education system is one of the things that makes America exceptional. There's no place else that has the assets we do when it comes to higher education. People from all over the world aspire to come here and study here. And that is a good thing." Regional accreditation has provided the conditions and framework under which diversity – and quality – have flourished."

NEW ENGLAND COMMISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Commission has adopted the following statement affirming its mission:

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

The Commission consists of twenty-nine members, who are elected at the annual meeting for staggered three-year terms. A Commissioner may be elected for a second three-year term. Membership on the Commission is drawn from different types of institutions and the general public. By federal regulation, one of every seven Commissioners must be a member of the public without connection to higher education. Commissioners serve without compensation and meet in four regularly scheduled meetings each year, as well as at an annual retreat for discussion of topics critical to higher education. Various sub-committees may meet more frequently to facilitate the Commission's work.

PEER EVALUATORS

Accreditation is a system of peer review. The Commission has a database of about 2,000 evaluators -- full-time faculty members and administrators at accredited institutions who are qualified by their credentials and experience to apply Commission standards.

Commission staff consult with the institution being evaluated to determine the composition of the visiting team, in the light of each institution's specific situation and the Commission's requirement that all standards receive appropriate coverage. The team as a whole is chosen to represent diverse groups and talents from comparable institutions, as well as both experienced and new evaluators.

Evaluators are provided with intensive training prior to the evaluation visit. They are expected to make sound professional judgments, based on the *Standards for Accreditation*, that will help the Commission evaluate and enhance the quality of higher education in New England. All evaluators are responsible for excusing themselves from participating in any review that might represent or be perceived as a conflict of interest. For further information how the institution and its self-study are evaluated by peer evaluators, consult the Evaluation Manual, which is available on the Commission website www.neche.org.

Chapter 1 COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION

Accreditation is a non-governmental, non-profit, self-regulatory, peer review process based on rigorous standards. Colleges and universities are evaluated on how well they meet these standards, in light of their missions.

Because accreditation is a process of self-regulation, it requires that institutions engage periodically in a comprehensive and candid self-study of their own strengths and weaknesses. Self-study is at the heart of accreditation, serving both external and internal purposes: quality assurance and institutional improvement through rigorous self-analysis. It also provides a basis for the Commission's evaluation in accordance with its *Standards for Accreditation*.

THE STANDARDS AT A GLANCE

The *Standards for Accreditation* represent the Commission's articulation of the membership's expectations for quality in a system of self-regulation. Derived through a highly participatory process involving member institutions, the Standards were fashioned to afford institutions opportunities to be creative, innovative, and collaborative in approaching self-study and engaging in self-examination for purposes of institutional improvement.

The Standards are almost entirely qualitative rather than quantitative. Their non-prescriptive quality acknowledges the diversity of institutions of higher learning in New England and enables evaluation in light of institutional mission.

Nine separate standards have been developed, each with specific detail and emphasis elaborated in a series of numbered paragraphs. The *Standards for Accreditation* set aspirational goals toward which institutions are expected to strive. Notwithstanding the importance of each of these discrete standards, the Commission's judgments about accreditation are made about the institution as a whole.

Following are the statements of each of the nine standards. *The Standards for Accreditation* in their entirety, with numbered paragraphs of further detail, can be found on the Commission website www.neche.org. Print copies the *Standards for Accreditation* are available through the Commission offices.

STATEMENTS OF THE STANDARDS

Standard One Mission and Purposes

The institution's mission and purposes are appropriate to higher education, consistent with its charter or other operating authority, and implemented in a manner that complies with the Standards of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education. The institution's mission gives direction to its activities and provides a basis for the assessment and enhancement of the institution's effectiveness.

Standard Two Planning and Evaluation

The institution undertakes planning and evaluation to accomplish and improve the achievement of its mission and purposes. It identifies its planning and evaluation priorities and pursues them effectively. The institution demonstrates its success in strategic, academic, financial, and other resource planning and the evaluation of its educational effectiveness.

Standard Three Organization and Governance

The institution has a system of governance that facilitates the accomplishment of its mission and purposes and supports institutional effectiveness and integrity. Through its organizational design and governance structure, the institution creates and sustains an environment that encourages teaching, learning, service, scholarship, and where appropriate, research and creative activity. It demonstrates administrative capacity by assuring provision of support adequate for the appropriate functioning of each organizational component. The institution has sufficient autonomy and control of its programs and operations consistent with its mission to be held accountable for meeting the Commission's Standards for Accreditation.

Standard Four The Academic Program

The institution's academic programs are consistent with and serve to fulfill its mission and purposes. The institution works systematically and effectively to plan, provide, oversee, evaluate, improve, and assure the academic quality and integrity of its academic programs and the credits and degrees awarded. The institution sets a standard of student achievement appropriate to the degree awarded and develops the systematic means to understand how and what students are learning and to use the evidence obtained to improve the academic program.

Standard Five Students

Consistent with its mission, the institution sets and achieves realistic goals to enroll students who are broadly representative of the population the institution wishes to serve. The institution addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity among its students and provides a safe environment that fosters the intellectual and personal development of its students. It endeavors to ensure the success of its students, offering the resources and services that provide them the opportunity to achieve the goals of their educational program as specified in institutional publications. The institution's interactions with students and prospective students are characterized by integrity.

Standard Six Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship

The institution supports teaching and learning through a well-qualified faculty and academic staff, who, in structures and processes appropriate to the institution, collectively ensure the quality of instruction and support for student learning. Scholarship, research, and creative activities receive support appropriate to the institution's mission. The institution's faculty has primary responsibility for advancing the institution's academic purpose through teaching, learning, and scholarship.

Standard Seven Institutional Resources

The institution has sufficient human, financial, physical, information, and technological resources and capacity to support its mission. Through periodic evaluation, the institution demonstrates that its resources are sufficient to sustain the quality of its educational program and to support institutional improvement now and into the foreseeable future. The institution demonstrates, through verifiable internal and external evidence, its financial capacity to graduate its entering class. The institution administers its resources in an ethical manner with integrity and assures effective systems of enterprise risk management, regulatory compliance, internal controls, and contingency management.

Standard Eight Educational Effectiveness

The institution demonstrates its effectiveness by ensuring satisfactory levels of student achievement on mission-appropriate student outcomes. Based on verifiable information, the institution understands what its students have gained as a result of their education and has useful evidence about the success of its recent graduates. This information is used for planning and improvement, resource allocation, and to inform the public about the institution. Student achievement is at a level appropriate for the degree awarded.

Standard Nine Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure

The institution subscribes to and advocates high ethical standards in the management of its affairs and in its dealings with students, prospective students, faculty, staff, its governing board, external agencies and organizations, and the general public. Through its policies and practices, the institution endeavors to exemplify the values it articulates in its mission and related statements. In presenting the institution to students, prospective students, and other members of the public, the institutional website provides information, including information about student success, that is complete, accurate, timely, readily accessible, clear, and sufficient for intended audiences to make informed decisions about the institution.

The full text of the *Standards for Accreditation* can be found on the Commission website www.neche.org.

COMMISSION EMPHASES

Two themes permeate the *Standards for Accreditation*: institutional integrity and institutional effectiveness.

The Commission expects that institutions demonstrate their integrity by complying with standards and policies, acknowledging candidly their challenges, and engaging in open discussion with the Commission on ways they could improve. The Commission's Policy Statement on Institutional Effectiveness articulates the expectation that institutions' evaluation of their own effectiveness, including assessment of student learning, is systematic and ongoing.

One of the indicators of institutional quality is the capacity of the institution to evaluate its success in carrying out its purposes, with a primary emphasis on educating students, and using the results of that evaluation for improvement, through efforts that are

- a regular part of the institution's agenda, not just as part of an accreditation review;
- approached thoughtfully – not in a formulaic way – to reflect the institution's mission and character;
- focused on understanding, through the analysis of assessment data at the course, program, and institutional levels, what and how students are learning, reflective of the central purpose of the institution to educate students;
- supported by the faculty, the president, and other institutional officers and accorded appropriate levels of institutional support to produce useful findings;
- concentrated on using the results of assessment for improvement, principally of programs and services for students;
- regularly reviewed and integrated so that assessment and evaluation are not simply individual efforts but also contribute to a shared understanding of the institution's fulfillment of its purposes.

A THREE-PART PROCESS

The comprehensive evaluation has three distinct components:

- an institutional self-study, in which the institution evaluates how well it meets the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation* and makes realistic, specific projections for improvement;
- an on-site evaluation by a trained group of peers, which provides a valuable external perspective to the institution and to the Commission;
- a review and decision by the Commission.

The institutional self-study is a product that addresses the *Standards for Accreditation* and presents a clear, concise, accurate picture of the institution as a dynamic entity with a sense of its history, an understanding of its present, and a vision of its future. Self-study is also an intensive process that demonstrates the institution's capacity for reflecting candidly on its strengths and weaknesses and using that analysis for improvement. As such, self-study should be an integral part of ongoing planning and evaluation efforts, not an isolated phenomenon that occurs only when an evaluation team is expected.

The on-site evaluation by a group of faculty and administrators provides the institution and the Commission with a valuable external perspective. Evaluation team members are selected because of their experience at an institution comparable to the one being evaluated. They are trained by Commission staff to validate the self-study in light of the institution's mission.

Commission review of the self-study, team report, and any institutional response occurs at one of the Commission's four regular meetings each year. In addition, in keeping with federal regulations, the Commission seeks and considers public comments regarding each institution undergoing a comprehensive evaluation. The Policy and Procedures for Public Comments, including information for institutions about their role in soliciting public comment during the comprehensive evaluation, can be found on the Commission website www.neche.org.

Chapter 2 SELF-STUDY: THE PROCESS

Undertaking a self-study is a major enterprise. The institution mobilizes its community – including faculty, staff, and students both on- and off-campus and in online programs, trustees, and others – to reflect on its effectiveness, to examine its strengths and areas in need of improvement, and to commit to specific methods for the resolution of problems identified. Done well, self-study is a rewarding experience for the entire institution.

Because it helps various constituencies come together with a common purpose – candid self-evaluation and direction-setting – self-study is well suited to the development of a comprehensive strategic planning process or the audit of quality assurance systems. The process can also be especially valuable during institutional transitions, expansions, and system changes, as it helps institutions define challenges and create plans for addressing them. Each institution is unique. An institution is free to orchestrate its self-study process in a manner appropriate to its own circumstances and community. The Commission does not prescribe a specific self-study process but expects that the effort will

- focus on the institution as a whole. The Commission accredits the entire institution, not departments, programs, locations, or means of instruction. However, the *Standards for Accreditation* require that all the institution's component parts be examined and that all locations, student populations, and modes of offering its academic program be included. Ultimately, the information gathered through evaluation of each part is used to formulate an evaluation of the institution as a whole.
- evolve from a plan of action. Self-study involves detailed planning and consideration of its significance both within and beyond the home campus. It is best done with foresight and thoughtful structuring of the process to gain maximum benefit from the time and energy expended.
- be an integral part of ongoing self-evaluation efforts. The self-study should exemplify the institution's systematic process of analysis and self-improvement.
- emphasize student achievement and success. The central purpose of higher education is student learning. The self-study should pay particular attention to what the institution knows about student learning and how it seeks to improve student achievement.
- evaluate overall institutional effectiveness. An effective self-study report analyzes how well the institution functions. By identifying strengths and weaknesses along with plans for the future, the institution demonstrates the capacity to be forthright about how it meets its objectives and works to improve its performance in all areas.

TIMEFRAME FOR THE SELF-STUDY

Self-study cannot be done well under rushed conditions. Preparation should begin at least eighteen months before the date of the team evaluation visit, and some institutions begin planning more than two years in advance. Institutions are encouraged to invite a Commission staff member to come to campus early in the process to meet with the steering committee and the faculty as they consider the nature of the enterprise and to help them to plan it advantageously.

Though the self-study is completed prior to the arrival of the visiting team, its impact lives on long after. Accreditation is an ongoing relationship and dialogue with the Commission, rather than a single event. A well-planned comprehensive self-study, visiting team evaluation, Commission decision, and follow-up processes can encompass three to five years. These activities should be seen as intertwined with other institutional planning and evaluation. To the extent possible, they should build on and enhance existing resources, processes, and data.

ROLES FOR VARIOUS CONSTITUENCIES

A self-study by its very nature is a complex project that requires perspectives from various institutional constituencies. Widespread institutional participation is likely to lead to the most beneficial results. Committees should be organized so that ultimately their work represents the institution as a whole, including off-campus locations, distance and/or competency-based education, and all student and faculty populations. Institutions should also consider how to involve the governing board, administrative staff, alumni, and other significant institutional groups.

The president's role is to set the tone and provide the appropriate context conducive for pursuing self-study. He or she needs to stimulate interest, encourage participation, be involved without dominating the process, and see that the results of the effort are channeled into planning, evaluation, and decision-making processes. Typically, the president first appoints a chair to lead the steering committee.

The self-study chair should be an active, interested person with extensive knowledge of the institution. The chair plans and oversees the work of various committees, suggests approaches, and assumes the responsibility for having the final report edited. Being a chair, with its demands on time and energy, is a major assignment. It is also a rewarding and valuable one. Some institutions appoint co-chairs, typically a senior academic officer and a faculty member.

The steering committee should be representative of faculty, administration, and, as appropriate, students. Since its role is to help the chair coordinate the self-study process, its members should be familiar with Commission standards and be well-informed about the institution so that it can initiate ideas and suggest cross-references. It will shepherd the narrative from a collection of committee reports to an institutional report with one voice. The steering committee, or its designee(s), should have clear editorial authority to reduce the total materials submitted to a 100-page narrative. A clear and concise self-study is most useful to the institution, the evaluation team, and the Commission.

STEPS TO AN EFFECTIVE PROCESS

Once a steering committee and self-study chair (or co-chairs) have been determined, they should begin planning for the activities ahead.

1. Review the *Standards for Accreditation* and recent communication from the Commission to the institution. A broad understanding of the Standards will help provide an overview and set of boundaries for the self-study. The Commission's most recent notification letter will highlight any areas that the institution should address with special attention.
2. Determine what self-study committee structures will best serve the institution. The steering committee plays an essential role in ensuring coordination among the committees and in bringing to the fore the most important themes identified in the self-study. The steering committee may serve as a group of overseers, with other committees or task forces addressing each of the standards individually. Or it may be composed of the chairs of the committees for each standard. A third approach is to charge already existing campus committees with gathering the information for the standard in their area. There is no correct way. The goal is to create an effective means for the institution to analyze itself.
3. Encourage wide participation. Opportunities for committee participation, input to the document, regular information sharing, and timely feedback help keep the institution – including off-campus populations such as trustees, online students and faculty, and alumni – motivated and aware of the purpose of the self-study. An inclusive process ensures that the whole community understands and takes responsibility for the entire report.
4. Adopt a definite timetable. Plan backward. Give enough lead time for tasks to be accomplished and insist that such a timetable be maintained. Set a publication date for the self-study report at least ten weeks before the team is due so that it can be in the hands of the evaluators six weeks before the campus visit. Having determined the completion date, allow at least a month preceding that for final editing and duplicating. Then work back toward the beginning, allowing the necessary intervals for each stage. Keep in mind what a major undertaking this is and how many people will be involved. While self-study must deal with separate aspects and components of the institution's life, it must also focus on the institution's total effort and overall educational impact, and with the efficiency of each of its units. That takes time.
5. Ensure that each committee becomes especially familiar with the standard to which it has been assigned and the relevant NECHE Data Dashboards. Committees evaluate institutional components encompassed by the standard, using data to support their evaluation. They should reserve the majority of time and attention to in-depth analysis of how well the institution meets the standard.

6. Gather data and evidence early. The Commission expects that claims and assertions in the self-study will be supported by data and other evidence. Self-study is an ideal occasion to evaluate existing institutional research and consider whether the institution would benefit from additional measurements. An inventory of assessment efforts, using the Commission's E-Series forms and the measures of student success in the NECHE Data Dashboards, can form a baseline for discussion of how results have been or should be used for improvement. Committees should review the relevant NECHE Data Dashboards relevant to their chapters before beginning to write the narrative. To demonstrate thorough analysis of that data, information from the dashboards should be integrated into the narrative where appropriate.
7. Work from the start to promote reflection and a "culture of inquiry." "Encourage all committees to be inquisitive, to question assumptions, and to debate multiple perspectives on institutional issues. Self-study can bring the institution into focus, emphasizing relationships and performance within units, stimulating healthy cross-fertilization of ideas, and encouraging data-based decision-making. Based on their analysis of institutional strengths and areas for improvement, committees will be developing projections outlining concrete plans to address problems, enhance strengths, and deal with anticipated changes. The most useful projections are not "wish lists" but specific institutional commitments to improve.
8. Make sure that the self-study content includes all students, all locations, all modalities of instruction, and any planned substantive changes. Full- and part-time, residential and commuter, off-campus, correspondence, and online students are an integral part of an institution. Services and programs are held to the same standard of quality, no matter where in the institution they take place. Multiple instructional locations or contractual relationships with non-regionally accredited groups may be involved. The institution may be planning a significant change. Some changes require Commission approval prior to implementation. The Policy on Substantive Change can be found on the Commission website www.neche.org. Consult with Commission staff for further information.
9. Allow sufficient time for editing so that the narrative speaks with "one voice." The self-study is an institutional document, not a collection of departmental views. Involving the final editor early and allowing adequate time for synthesis will help ensure a cohesive story.
10. Confirm that all accreditation-related federal requirements related to Title IV participation are fulfilled. The Policy on Institutional Responsibilities Under Title IV and the required Affirmation of Compliance form can be found on the Commission website www.neche.org.

Chapter 3 SELF-STUDY: THE PRODUCT

The self-study needs to be a holistic and integrated document. Though driven by nine separate and distinct standards for accreditation, and created in parts, the final self-study should reflect the unified totality of one institution, not a checklist response to the Standards. Its content, tone, structure, and supporting documents need to “tell the institution’s story.” The whole should indeed be greater than the sum of the parts.

CONTENT

Like all narratives, the self-study report includes over-arching themes, supporting detail, and a proper balance of quantitative and qualitative evidence for its assertions. Adequate attention may be paid to institutional history, but the focus is on present circumstances and future directions.

The narrative content is organized in chapters, each of which is a three-part response to one of the standards. The Commission asks institutions to use the analytical framework of

Description - Appraisal - Projection to organize complex content most effectively. The triad of Description – Appraisal – Projection raises three questions: What does the institution do to meet the standard? How well does it meet the standard? What commitments does it make to improve? Following this format allows the institution to show concisely how it evaluates itself today and plans for the future.

➤ *Description.* A realistic and objective presentation of the present status of the institution with respect to each standard. The team and the Commission need a comprehensive understanding of how the institution operates. Concise summaries are most effective; extensive details can be provided in workroom documents.

➤ *Appraisal.* A thorough analysis and evaluation of institutional practices in a given area, recognizing both achievements and areas for improvement. It should include sufficient evidence so that the reader understands the basis on which the evaluation has been made. This critical and candid self-judgment forms the single most significant internal activity in the entire self-study process. It requires deliberation and critical thinking. The visiting team and the Commission will pay particular attention to the judgments made in the Appraisal section, for these provide insight into the internal planning and management of the institution's resources to achieve its objectives. Equally important, the Appraisal section demonstrates the accuracy of the institution's self-image and its integrity in identifying areas for improvement.

➤ *Projection.* Specific, realistic institutional commitments to maintain and enhance strengths and to address areas of concern. In accordance with the Commission's overall view that self-study is inextricably linked to planning, projections are expected to be part of the institution's planning process and represent concrete commitments over the next several years.

The Commission wishes to be assured that institutions evaluate themselves systematically and regularly on all the standards. Therefore, institutions are asked to clearly articulate in each chapter the structures or mechanisms in place to conduct evaluation on a systematic and ongoing basis, not just periodically in a self-study.

TONE

Neither dry nor lofty, the tone of a self-study narrative should illustrate the institution's unique character and its capacity for analysis. Candor is considered a sign of that capacity. To be candid with the Commission, the institution must be candid with itself, balancing pride in its accomplishments with frank self-evaluation.

STRUCTURE

To ensure that institutional information is complete and readily accessible to the Commission and the visiting team, institutions are asked to include in their self-study all eight components below. All required forms are available on the Commission website www.neche.org.

1. Cover page

Identify the institution and the date.

2. Table of Contents

Paginate the document sequentially, not chapter-by-chapter, and provide the reader with an easy way to find various elements.

3. Institutional Characteristics Form

The form provides the team and the Commission with a concise and factual summary of key institutional data.

4. Table of NECHE Actions, Items of Special Attention, or Concerns (outline NECHE concerns the Interim (Fifth-Year) Report).

Include: 1) date of NECHE letter; 2) detailed actions, items of special attention, or concerns; 3) NECHE Standards cited for each matter; 4) Self-Study page number where each matter is addressed.

5. Introduction (2-3 pages)

A brief description of the campus self-study process affords insight into how various constituencies (faculty, administration, staff, students, trustees) participated in the self-study and how they were organized and undertook their task. In addition, the introduction should discuss the goals of the self-study and the extent to which they were achieved.

6. Institutional Overview (5 pages)

A summary description of the institution, its history, current context, and the themes and findings of the self-study. Explain any structural, programmatic, and financial issues. Identify major institutional changes since the last Commission review. This important section introduces the institution to the reviewer and previews the major themes and accomplishments of the self-study.

7. Narrative (maximum 100 pages)

A response to the *Standards for Accreditation* in no more than 100 single-spaced pages. The three-part (Description-Appraisal-Projection) format applies to the chapter as a whole. The nine standards vary in length, degree of detail, scope, and complexity. The Commission requests that institutions use the subheadings provided in many standards to organize the chapters and to ensure that no required information is missing.

Institutions are encouraged to incorporate information from the NECHE Data Dashboards and E-Series forms into the narrative. Charts and graphs are also useful for presenting trend data and summarizing complex information concisely.

8. Appendices

The final section of the self-study includes important materials that complement and support the narrative.

- Affirmation of Compliance with federal requirements of Title IV
- Making Assessment More Explicit (E-Series forms). Institutions choose one of the four options: E-1, Inventory; E-2, Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA); E-3, Institutional Claims; or E-4, Peer Comparison. (Forms can be downloaded from the Commission website: www.necche.org.
- NECHE Finance Forms
- Most recent audited financial statements (Note: International institutions will submit financial statements that have been translated into English and reflect finances in US currency)
- Auditor's management letter. (The management letter contains the auditor's specific recommendations to the institution on its financial controls and practices. It is not the "independent auditor's report.")
- List of supporting documents available in the workroom or provided electronically

All reports, including the self-study, are to be submitted as a single, searchable pdf file to the Commission. The single, searchable pdf file of the self-study will include all appendices and be submitted via the NECHE Institution Portal.

PUBLIC DISCLOSURE (Using the NECHE Institutional Portal)

Additionally, remember to log in to the NECHE Institutional Portal and update web page links related to Public Disclosure. This step is required when submitting a self-study. Click on the "Other" tab in the Institutional Portal and then select "Public Disclosure and Key Documents."

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Self-study assertions are expected to be validated by concrete evidence within the text and in supporting documents. The nature of these supporting documents is varied, tending to fit the Description - Appraisal - Projection framework used in the narrative. Some describe institutional facts and activities; some appraise or evaluate those activities; some project, or plan for the future.

Each institution is unique. The list below offers only some examples of the types of documents found at every institution. Many apply to more than one standard, and an institution will certainly have additional pieces of evidence and supporting documents. A list of suggested documents to support each standard can be found on the Commission website www.neche.org.

DOCUMENTS OF *DESCRIPTION*

- ✓ Institutional charter, license to operate
- ✓ Institutional and program catalogs
- ✓ Enrollment trends; graduation and retention rates
- ✓ Statistics on library and technology usage
- ✓ Faculty, staff, student, Board handbooks, bylaws, and orientation materials
- ✓ Contracts with outside agencies, vendors
- ✓ Policies on academic freedom; plagiarism; award of credit; award and transfer of credit; research ethics; conflict of interest; non-discrimination; grievance procedures; student complaints, faculty hiring, evaluation, promotion, and tenure; Board evaluation of CEO; risk management; investment and endowment spending; financial aid; faculty workload; IT security, etc.
- ✓ Departmental annual reports (These are sometimes also appraisal)
- ✓ Minutes of committee meetings, faculty senate, Board meetings
- ✓ Faculty cv's and syllabi; job descriptions for senior administrators
- ✓ Board membership and affiliations
- ✓ Expected student learning outcomes for general education
- ✓ Academic calendar

DOCUMENTS OF *APPRAISAL*

- ✓ Reviews of mission statement
- ✓ Board self-evaluations
- ✓ Studies of student achievement and success
- ✓ Evaluations of advising system
- ✓ Analyses of student participation in athletics, arts, student government
- ✓ Satisfaction surveys, course evaluations
- ✓ Evaluations of management information systems, reliability, security
- ✓ Cost/revenue studies by location, program, mission element
- ✓ Evaluations of use and effectiveness of policies and procedures
- ✓ Program reviews of academic and non-academic units
- ✓ Placement studies of graduates
- ✓ Studies of alumni accomplishments, IT proficiency, AHANA programs
- ✓ Impact studies of endowment, community service, financial aid
- ✓ Analysis of retention and graduation of specific populations (e.g., first-generation, transfer students, AHANA students, online students, athletes)
- ✓ Records and reports regarding institutional handling of student complaints

DOCUMENTS OF *PROJECTION*

- ✓ Mission statements, strategic plan, vision statements
- ✓ Financial Plan, plans to retire debt, fundraising plans
- ✓ Academic Plans, outcomes of program reviews
- ✓ IT Plan, Facilities Master Plan, Library plans for collection development
- ✓ Case statements for grant proposals, capital campaigns
- ✓ Student and faculty recruitment plans and budgets
- ✓ Board goals
- ✓ Scheduled program reviews and specialized accreditations
- ✓ Technology training programs
- ✓ Deferred maintenance list and plans for addressing
- ✓ Budget allocations and requests by departments, divisions

THE WORKROOM

Key institutional documents gathered to support the self-study are organized in a comfortable workroom where the visiting team can work and confer during the campus visit. The workroom typically contains electronic access to (or paper copies of) all documents referred to in the self-study and other relevant materials.

Institutions are encouraged to consider creating an entirely electronic “workroom” that can be accessed by the team prior to the visit, thereby offering an opportunity for early preparation and more productive use of time on campus. Electronic workrooms may be created in a variety of ways -- on a secure website or flashdrive, for example. Electronic workrooms require detailed planning and organization, but they can save paper and storage space, in addition to providing a valuable continuing archive for the institution.

Whether the workroom consists of paper or electronic materials, coordinators will want think carefully how to organize and cross-reference documents so that they are easily accessible to all members of the team.

The team will require a physical space in which to work privately during the campus visit. The workroom should be a comfortable, lockable meeting space set aside for the team’s exclusive use during the visit. It should be equipped with a phone, computer(s) and printer(s), campus directory, basic office supplies, and occasional refreshments.

Chapter 4 SELF-STUDY OPTIONS

Higher education institutions in New England, like those throughout the United States, differ considerably from one another. The Commission recognizes that institutional responses to addressing the *Standards for Accreditation* will differ as well. The traditional self-study format, with its nine-chapter narrative, can convey a wealth of information succinctly. It works well for most institutions.

Nonetheless, there may be circumstances when it would be advantageous for an institution to take a different approach. The Commission is open to considering innovative ways for institutions to demonstrate quality with respect to the Standards, provided that the self-study created includes required information in a format that can be used effectively by the visiting team and the Commission.

TRADITIONAL FORMAT WITH VARIATIONS

There are many ways to adapt a uniform format to a unique institution. An institution may choose to incorporate slight variations to the traditional nine-chapter narrative in order to provide deeper insight into its unique situation. Such variations could include:

- The addition of a tenth chapter, in the Description - Appraisal - Projection format, expanding on a discrete topic of particular relevance.
- The addition within a chapter of a set piece (generally ten pages or less, created for some other purpose) that expands on institutional philosophy, plans, or challenges. Examples might include an executive summary of a strategic plan; an excerpt from a case statement for a grant proposal for changes to the academic program; or a vision statement for sharpening the mission.
- The weaving of an important theme – e.g., creativity, diversity, access, research – throughout most or all nine chapters to create a coherent overarching institutional “story.”

The list above is not exhaustive. Institutions are free to suggest innovations in their self-study reports provided that there is a compelling case for doing so. Regardless of the approach adopted, all nine standards must be addressed, and the narrative must fit within the 100-page limit.

THE SELF-STUDY WITH AREAS OF EMPHASIS

A special alternative to the traditional self-study is the Self-Study with Areas of Emphasis. Generally related to a major institutional planning effort, the Self-Study with Areas of Emphasis includes all the elements of a traditional self-study plus a substantive addition. The narrative is formatted in two parts. In the first part, the institution addresses in a concentrated way how well it meets each of the Commission’s *Standards for Accreditation*. The second part is a more expansive examination of up to three salient and challenging issues, designed to enhance institutional performance in these areas. Both sections are organized along the Description - Appraisal - Projection format. Because of the centrality of the academic program to the accreditation endeavor, the academic program (or a significant aspect of it) must be one of the areas studied.

The responses to the nine standards are somewhat compressed to allow room for the more expansive treatment of the areas of emphasis. A Self-Study with Areas of Emphasis is expected to yield greater analytical depth and breadth across the institution. Such a self-study is challenging, and it requires greater coordination and focus to accomplish successfully.

In determining whether a Self-Study with Areas of Emphasis is appropriate, an institution should consider the following:

- Are there important institutional issues that warrant this kind of intensive examination?
- Do conditions prevail in the life cycle of the institution that make the timing right to engage in self-examination with respect to these issues?
- Are other areas of the institution strong and settled enough to be represented well without the intense focus of the traditional 12-18 months of analysis?
- Does the institution have in place effective planning and evaluation mechanisms that can be used to demonstrate that it meets the *Standards for Accreditation* without using the traditional comprehensive self-study format?

Institutions wishing to consider this option should first discuss the possibility with a member of Commission staff. If there is an agreement that conducting such a self-study is desirable, the institution should submit a proposal to the Commission office answering the following questions:

- What is the rationale for undertaking the Self-Study with Areas of Emphasis?
- What is the institution's capacity (depth of institutional research, consensus on existing strengths and challenges, etc.) to address the Standards in a compressed format?
- What will be the areas of emphasis and how are these related to the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation*?
- How will the areas of emphasis be studied?
- What will be the structure of the document to be presented to the visiting team and the Commission?

A Self-Study with Areas of Emphasis requires

- ✓ Approval of the proposal by Commission Staff
- ✓ Review of a rough draft at least six months prior to submission

CHALLENGES TO AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Variations to the traditional self-study format can be especially useful to institutions at certain moments in their history, but they are considerably more laborious. Institutions considering alternatives should consult closely with Commission staff to ensure that their self-study remains focused and deals adequately with the Standards.

Whatever the approach, the Commission expects that the self-study process and resulting report will be undertaken in a thoughtful and deliberative manner that fulfills the basic purposes of accreditation: quality assurance and institutional improvement. It is also important that the self-study address broad institutional issues and provide a basis for judgment regarding fulfillment of the *Standards for Accreditation*.

Chapter 5 INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND ASSESSMENT

One of the major themes permeating the *Standards for Accreditation* is institutional effectiveness. The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education defines institutional effectiveness as *the capacity of an institution to assess, verify, and enhance the fulfillment of its mission and purposes, giving primary focus to the attainment of its educational objectives*. Considered one of the essential elements of institutional quality, institutional effectiveness speaks to the dual purposes of accreditation – accountability and improvement.

Institutional effectiveness serves as a useful framework for institutions to use the Standards in an aspirational way. The Preamble to the *Standards for Accreditation* indicates that the self-study is dedicated to “demonstrating that the institution meets the Standards and that it work toward improving their quality, increasing their effectiveness, and continually striving toward excellence. Its evaluative processes are designed to encourage such improvement.”

The foundation for institutional effectiveness is contained within the standard on *Planning and Evaluation*:

- 2.2 *Institutional research is sufficient to support planning and evaluation. The institution systematically collects and uses data necessary to support its planning efforts and to enhance institutional effectiveness.*
- 2.3 *The institution plans beyond a short-term horizon, including strategic planning that involves realistic analyses of internal and external opportunities and constraints. The results of strategic planning are implemented in all units of the institution through financial, academic, enrollment, and other supporting plans.*
- 2.6 *The institution regularly and systematically evaluates the achievement of its mission and purposes, the quality of its academic programs, and the effectiveness of its operational and administrative activities, giving primary focus to the realization of its educational objectives. Its system of evaluation is designed to provide valid information to support institutional improvement. The institution’s evaluation efforts are effective for addressing its unique circumstances. These efforts use both quantitative and qualitative methods.*
- 2.7 *The institution’s principal evaluation focus is the quality, integrity, and effectiveness of its academic programs. Evaluation endeavors and systematic assessment are demonstrably effective in the improvement of academic offerings, student learning, and the student experience. Systematic feedback from students, former students, and other relevant constituencies is a demonstrable factor in institutional improvement.*

Implicit in these criteria is the Commission’s expectation that institutional effectiveness is demonstrated through an ongoing cyclical process that involves aligning priorities and program goals to mission; gathering evidence to ascertain attainment of those goals; interpreting that evidence; and using analysis to inform decision-making that enables continuous improvement.

ADDRESSING INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS IN THE SELF-STUDY

Through the self-study, the institution is afforded an opportunity to discuss and examine its efforts to ensure institutional effectiveness both for each standard and in a more integrated way for the institution as a whole. In both instances, the institution needs to go beyond discussing evaluative processes and relate how it actually makes use of the results of its various institutional effectiveness efforts. Examples that describe specific results and the way the results have affected planning, decision-making, and resource allocation are most useful.

The Commission asks that the self-study chapter on *Planning and Evaluation* provide an overall summary and analysis of institutional effectiveness efforts and how the results of evaluation are used for improvement. Through this discussion, the institution should explain how it determines its institutional effectiveness priorities, collects evidence, undertakes the interpretation of such evidence, and uses the gathered information in various decision-making processes to make changes and improvements throughout the institution. The chapter also affords the opportunity to examine the extent to which the institution has moved from isolated and sporadic efforts in planning and evaluation to the development of practices and systems that are more comprehensive, systematic, and integrated – and thus more useful to the institution.

In keeping with its function of quality assurance, the Commission asks that the self-study chapters on *Planning and Evaluation*, *The Academic Program* and *Educational Effectiveness* describe and assess the measures used to determine that the institution's mission and purposes are being met. An important component of this effort should be the presentation of aggregate evidence of institutional accomplishment. The institution should also explain how it will more effectively demonstrate mission-related outcomes.

One fundamental purpose of the Commission's focus on institutional effectiveness is to cultivate within an institution a habit of inquisitiveness, both formal and informal, about the institution's own effectiveness and a corollary commitment to make meaningful use of the results of that curiosity. In a "culture of inquiry," institutional deficiencies can be recognized and corrected. Equally important, institutional strengths can be preserved, strengthened, and celebrated. While each college or university is autonomous in establishing its own goals, all must strive to verify that they are achieving their purposes as a condition of accreditation. In that way, the accountability function of accreditation is served.

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

The Commission works to keep its dual responsibilities of quality assurance (the public role) and quality improvement (the private role) in balance. Nowhere is this dual role more in play than in the area commonly summarized by the term "student assessment." The Commission's *Standards for Accreditation* speak to assessment as the means for improving the academic program and services for students. At the same time, the Standards speak to the Commission's public responsibility for ensuring an appropriate level of student success and in making the results used and known – part of its responsibility as being recognized by the federal government as a reliable authority on the quality of education.

The Commission expects institutions to be explicit in their self-studies about how they assess student achievement and success, with the following assumptions:

- Given the diversity of institutions in New England, there is no single way to carry out assessment. The accreditation system is best served when institutions choose the assessment method that fits their mission;
- Greater clarity in institutional reporting of assessment will be useful to institutions, visiting teams, and the Commission;
- The Commission offers clear choices, subject to alternatives proposed by the institution and changes over time by the Commission, based on its experience;
- The Commission's approach should stimulate greater coherence in institutional approaches to assessment and greater collaboration among institutions.

Data on student achievement (E forms) are to be completed and data from the NECHE Data Dashboards on student success need to be analyzed and included with each self-study. It is expected that analysis of data will be integrated in the narrative. E-Series forms and NECHE Finance Forms can be found on the Commission website www.neche.org. The NECHE Data Dashboards can be accessed through the Institutional Portal.

Within the standard on *Educational Effectiveness*, assessment is a core component. Specific to assessment of student learning, institutions demonstrate that they meet the Commission's criteria for institutional effectiveness through a process that articulates expected student outcomes, gathers and interprets evidence regarding what and how students are learning, and uses these interpretations to enhance teaching and learning and to inform institutional decision-making in order to continually improve students' learning experiences and their outcomes. The following numbered paragraphs provide more explication of the standard:

- 8.3 Assessment of learning is based on verifiable statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. The process of understanding what and how students are learning focuses on the course, competency, program, and institutional level. Assessment has the support of the institution's academic and institutional leadership and the systematic involvement of faculty and appropriate staff.
- 8.4 The institution with stated goals for students' co-curricular learning systematically assess their achievement.
- 8.5 The institution uses a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods and direct and indirect measures to understand the experiences and learning outcomes of its students, employing external perspectives including, as appropriate, benchmarks and peer comparisons.
- 8.6 The institution defines measures of student success and levels and achievement appropriate to its mission, modalities and locations of instruction, and student body, including any specifically recruited populations. These measures include rates of progression, retention, transfer, and graduation; default and loan repayment rates; licensure passage rates; and employment. The institution ensures that information about student success is easily accessible on its website.

- 8.7 The institution uses additional measures of student success, such as further education, civic participation, religious formation, and others, as appropriate to its mission, to understand the success of its recent graduates. Information from students and former students is regularly considered.
- 8.8 The results of assessment and quantitative measures of student success are a demonstrable factor in the institution's efforts to improve the learning opportunities and results for students.
- 8.9 The institution devotes appropriate attention to ensuring that its methods of understanding student learning and student success are valid and useful to improve programs and services for students and to inform the public.
- 8.10 The institution integrates the findings of its assessment process and measures of student success into its program evaluation activities and uses the findings to inform its planning and resource allocation and to establish claims the institution makes to students and prospective students.

Given that the achievement of defined educational objectives is central to the purpose of every institution of higher learning, the Standards also speak explicitly to the need to verify the competence of students and graduates. It is by no means the Commission's intent to assess and certify such competence for individuals. Rather, institutions meet the Commission's criteria for assessment of student learning by

- Articulating expected student outcomes;
- Gathering and analyzing evidence of what and how students are learning;
- Using these analyses to enhance teaching and learning and to inform institutional decision-making to improve student success.

PROVIDING EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING

Evidence of student learning can be collected through both direct and indirect methods during students' undergraduate and graduate careers and after graduation.

Direct methods reveal student attainment of knowledge, abilities, skills, attitudes, and values. Other terms used for direct methods of assessment include "performance assessment," "authentic assessment" or, when integrating assessment with instruction, "embedded assessment."

Indirect methods gather the perceptions of students and others about what students have learned, and opinions and reflections about the teaching and learning process as well as indications of what factors affect student learning.

Using a combination of direct and indirect methods offers complementary information regarding what and how students learn. The following examples illustrate the different kinds of evidence of student learning that institutions may gather:

Methods that can provide DIRECT EVIDENCE of student learning

- Locally developed tests administered program- or institution-wide
- Standardized tests
- Pre- and post-tests
- Essay tests blind scored across units
- Internally and externally juried review of student projects, internships
- Performance on national licensure examinations
- Collections of student work (e.g., portfolios)
- Course-embedded assessment

Methods that can provide INDIRECT EVIDENCE of student learning

- Alumni and employer surveys
- Student surveys, focus groups
- Exit interviews with graduates
- Participation rates in internships, study abroad, other enrichment programs
- Graduate follow-up studies
- Percentage of students who go on to graduate school
- Admission rates to selective programs at the higher degree
- Student performance in disciplinary and professional competitions
- Retention and transfer studies; job placement statistics

Simply collecting evidence of student learning is insufficient. Assessment should be part of an ongoing process of improving teaching and learning, a “feedback loop.”



Institutions seeking further guidance on institutional effectiveness and assessment are encouraged to attend the NECHE Annual Meeting, held each December. Nationally recognized experts in the field of institutional effectiveness and assessment present examples of good practice from institutions throughout New England.

Chapter 6 SELF-STUDY SUBMISSION

The self-study report has three audiences: the visiting team, the Commission, and the institutional community. Since the self-study may be a reader's first impression of the institution, it should be complete, well-written, and delivered with adequate lead time before the campus visit.

VISITING TEAM

At least six weeks prior to the visit, the institution mails each member of the visiting team:

- an electronic copy of the full self-study (narrative and appendices) Note: some team members may request a paper copy of the self-study
- a list of documents that will be available in the workroom (or electronic access to those documents)

COMMISSION

At the same time, the institution provides to the Commission:

- a single, searchable pdf file of the self-study (narrative and appendices) will be uploaded to through the NECHE institutional portal. (Note: institutions may need to secure a version of the financial statements that is not password protected in order to integrate the statements into the single, searchable pdf file.)

The mailing address and contact information for the Commission are:

New England Commission of Higher Education
301 Edgewater Place, Suite 210
Wakefield, MA 01880

Direct line: 781-425-7785

Fax: 781-425-1001

Email: info@neche.org

Website: www.neche.org

INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNITY

The Commission strongly urges that the self-study be widely distributed to the institutional community (including students and faculty at branch campuses and online, alumni, and trustees) well before the evaluation team arrives for its site visit. Many institutions post self-studies on their websites for easier distribution.

The self-study represents a significant commitment of institutional time and resources. Ideally, it is a living document that sets the stage for the institution's future development. After the evaluation team has departed, the narrative (particularly the Appraisal and Projection sections) can be used to guide planning activities and promote continuous improvement.

Chapter 7 STAFF ASSISTANCE

Commission staff assist institutions undergoing self-study in several ways. Each year in October, the Commission offers a Self-Study Workshop intended for institutions preparing for comprehensive evaluations in two years' time. (Institutions three years out are invited to send a "scout.") Participating in the workshop are presenters who have experienced the various facets of the accreditation and self-study process through service as self-study chairs, as visiting team members, or as presidents of institutions recently evaluated. The workshop is designed for teams of key individuals who will be most intimately involved in organizing and directing the self-study, and it provides a valuable opportunity to learn more about the intricacies and complexities involved.

A second workshop is provided to institutions in the semester before self-studies are due to the Commission. Held at the Commission offices in small-group format, this half-day discussion focuses on the challenges of preparing the final version of the self-study and hosting the visiting team.

From the time of the Self-Study Workshop, through the period of intense institutional self-examination involved in self-study, and even during the evaluation team's visit, questions arise and concerns surface. Commission staff are available to assist at any time. The most common requests for assistance include a staff presentation or consultation on campus and staff review of a draft of the self-study report.

At any time, please know the staff are only a phone call away. Names of staff and their direct phone lines and email addresses are on the Commission website www.neche.org. No question is unworthy of being asked as an institution undergoes this intensive and important process. Through discussion in person during the course of staff site visits, over the telephone and via correspondence and e-mail, every effort is made to ensure that self-study is a fulfilling experience and that the individuals and the institution are able to reach their fullest potential for self-improvement through that effort.

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