

The New Mission of the Higher Learning Commission and the New Criteria for Accreditation

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

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

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

The change in mission was accompanied by an important corporate reorganization of the Association and its Commissions. In fall of 2000, institutional members approved new corporate bylaws for the Association that would allow each Commission to incorporate. The Commission filed in November for new corporate status as an independent corporation with clear legal responsibility for its accrediting activities. Concurrently, the Board changed the name from the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education to The Higher Learning Commission, a step that had been under consideration for some time. The Commission initiated a program to establish a new logo, corporate colors, and corporate identity in all of its communication tools and documents. In spring 2001 the Commission initiated a major review of its requirements and criteria for accreditation and designed a process to ensure broad stakeholder participation.

The Commission's work is conducted by several groups: a full-time staff, a Board of Trustees, Consultant-Evaluator (**C-E**) Corps [more than 900 educators throughout the North Central region], Accreditation Review Council (**ARC**), and the Institutional Actions Council (**IAC**). ARC and IAC members come from the C-E Corps; some are representatives of the public.

The Commission's **process of evaluation** for both initial and continued accreditation is structured to determine whether an institution meets the General Institutional Requirements (GIRs) and the Criteria for Accreditation. Although some institutions may follow alternative patterns of self-study by written agreement with Commission staff, the evaluation process for most institutions can be summarized as follows:

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

- The institution is visited by a team of Consultant-Evaluators appointed by the Commission. This team summarizes its findings in a written Team Report that assesses whether the institution satisfies the GIRs and the Criteria for Accreditation, offers advice and suggestions for improvement, and concludes with a formal recommendation for accreditation action.
- Through a multi-tiered process, ARC members and IAC members make accrediting decisions based on the Self-Study Report, the Team Report, an institutional response, and in some cases meetings with representatives of the institution and team. When these reviews result in suggested changes in the team recommendation, the institution and the team chair have an opportunity to respond in writing.
- All decisions made by the ARC and IAC processes are validated by the Board of Trustees. The Board itself reviews and acts on those cases involving sanctions, denial or withdrawal of affiliation, and/ or disputed cases involving initial candidacy or initial accreditation.

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

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

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

The five new Criteria for Accreditation may be found in the **Handbook for Accreditation 2003* or in Adobe Acrobat [.pdf] format at the following web site:
<http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org/> [then search on Overview of Accreditation].

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

Information Available to the Public The Commission maintains a Record of Status and Scope (RSS) for each affiliated institution. The RSS contains two sections: the Statement of Affiliation Status (SAS) and the Statement of Institutional Scope and Activities (SISA). The SAS contains, in summary format, language describing the institution's official relationship with the

Commission; this language is recommended by an Evaluation Team and officially adopted through the Commission 's processes. The SISA contains information on institutional characteristics. Information on the SISA is taken from the Annual Report provided by each institution to the Commission and is not officially reviewed or adopted by the Commission.

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

***A *Handbook of Accreditation*.** This document is addressed to institutions affiliated with the Commission, those seeking affiliation, and the Consultant-Evaluators involved in the various decision-making processes. It documents the policies and procedures related to the evaluation and accreditation processes of the Commission.