CRITERIA FOR ACCREDITATION

ADOPTED REVISIONS
EFFECTIVE SEPTEMBER 2020

BACKGROUND

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) is required by federal regulations and its own policies to initiate a substantive review of its Criteria for Accreditation every five years. Throughout the last two years, HLC conducted an internal analysis, held listening sessions, and analyzed the rigor of team reports, trends across interim reporting and feedback from a survey of member institutions and peer reviewers. These efforts resulted in the alpha version of a Criteria revision, which was published in March 2018. Adjustments were made to the draft Criteria language based on feedback from HLC's membership. A beta version was sent to HLC's Board of Trustees in November 2018 and approved as a proposed policy on first reading. HLC received further input from member institutions and peer reviewers regarding the beta version and made minor changes based on those comments. The final version of the revised Criteria was adopted by the Board at its February 2019 meeting. The new Criteria will go into effect on September 1, 2020.

During the coming year, HLC will provide training opportunities for institutions and peer reviewers to learn how to provide evidence for and apply the revised Criteria in accreditation reviews. During the 2019–20 academic year, HLC also will begin transitioning institutions in the Assurance System to a new Assurance Argument template based on the revised Criteria.

REVISED CRITERIA FOR ACCREDITATION

The revised Criteria for Accreditation were adopted by HLC's Board of Trustees on February 28, 2019. They are effective September 1, 2020. To review the changes made to the current Criteria in this revision, visit hlcommission.org/adopted-policies. The current Criteria are available at hlcommission.org/criteria.

The Criteria for Accreditation are the standards of quality by which the Commission determines whether an institution merits accreditation or reaffirmation of accreditation. They are as follows:

CRITERION 1. MISSION

The institution's mission is clear and articulated publicly; it guides the institution's operations.

Core Components

1.A. The institution's mission is articulated publicly and operationalized throughout the institution.

1. The mission was developed through a process suited to the context of the institution.

2. The mission and related statements are current and reference the institution's emphasis on the various aspects of its mission, such as instruction, scholarship, research, application of research, creative works, clinical service, public service, economic development and religious or cultural purpose.

3. The mission and related statements identify the nature, scope and intended constituents of the higher education offerings and services the institution provides.

4. The institution's academic offerings, student support services and enrollment profile are consistent with its stated mission.

5. The institution clearly articulates its mission through public information, such as statements of purpose, vision, values, goals, plans or institutional priorities.

1.B. The institution's mission demonstrates commitment to the public good.

1. The institution's actions and decisions demonstrate that its educational role is to serve the public, not solely the institution or any superordinate entity.

2. The institution's educational responsibilities take primacy over other purposes, such as generating financial returns for investors, contributing to a related or parent organization, or supporting external interests.

3. The institution engages with its external constituencies and responds to their needs as its mission and capacity allow.

1.C. The institution provides opportunities for civic engagement in a diverse, multicultural society and globally-connected world, as appropriate within its mission and for the constituencies it serves.

1. The institution encourages curricular or cocurricular activities that prepare students for informed citizenship and workplace success.

2. The institution's processes and activities demonstrate inclusive and equitable treatment of diverse populations.

3. The institution fosters a climate of respect among all students, faculty, staff and administrators from a range of diverse backgrounds, ideas and perspectives.

CRITERION 2. INTEGRITY: ETHICAL AND RESPONSIBLE CONDUCT

The institution acts with integrity; its conduct is ethical and responsible.

Core Components

2.A. The institution establishes and follows policies and processes to ensure fair and ethical behavior on the part of its governing board, administration, faculty and staff.

1. The institution develops and the governing board adopts the mission.

2. The institution operates with integrity in its financial, academic, human resources and auxiliary functions.

2.B. The institution presents itself clearly and completely to its students and to the public.

1. The institution ensures the accuracy of any representations it makes regarding academic

offerings, requirements, faculty and staff, costs to students, governance structure and accreditation relationships.

2. The institution ensures evidence is available to support any claims it makes regarding its contributions to the educational experience through research, community engagement, experiential learning, religious or spiritual purpose and economic development.

2.C. The governing board of the institution is autonomous to make decisions in the best interest of the institution in compliance with board policies and to ensure the institution's integrity.

1. The governing board is trained and knowledgeable so that it makes informed decisions with respect to the institution's financial and academic policies and practices; the board meets its legal and fiduciary responsibilities.

2. The governing board's deliberations reflect priorities to preserve and enhance the institution.

3. The governing board reviews the reasonable and relevant interests of the institution's internal and external constituencies during its decision-making deliberations.

4. The governing board preserves its independence from undue influence on the part of donors, elected officials, ownership interests, or other external parties.

5. The governing board delegates day-to-day management of the institution to the institution's administration and expects the institution's faculty to oversee academic matters.

2.D. The institution is committed to academic freedom and freedom of expression in the pursuit of truth in teaching and learning.

2.E. The institution's policies and procedures call for responsible acquisition, discovery and application of knowledge by its faculty, staff and students.

1. Institutions supporting basic and applied research maintain professional standards and provide oversight ensuring regulatory compliance, ethical behavior and fiscal accountability.

2. The institution provides effective support services to ensure the integrity of research and scholarly practice conducted by its faculty, staff and students.

3. The institution provides students guidance in the ethics of research and use of information resources.

4. The institution enforces policies on academic honesty and integrity.

CRITERION 3. TEACHING AND LEARNING: QUALITY, RESOURCES, AND SUPPORT

The institution provides quality education, wherever and however its offerings are delivered.

Core Components

3.A. The rigor of the institution's academic offerings is appropriate to higher education.

1. Courses and programs are current and require levels of student performance appropriate to the credential awarded.

2. The institution articulates and differentiates learning goals for its undergraduate, graduate, post-baccalaureate, post-graduate, and certificate programs.

3. The institution's program quality and learning goals are consistent across all modes of delivery and all locations (on the main campus, at additional locations, by distance delivery, as dual credit, through contractual or consortial arrangements, or any other modality).

3.B. The institution offers programs that engage students in collecting, analyzing and communicating information; in mastering modes of intellectual inquiry or creative work; and in developing skills adaptable to changing environments.

1. The general education program is appropriate to the mission, educational offerings, and degree levels of the institution. The institution articulates the purposes, content and intended learning outcomes of its undergraduate general education requirements.

2. The program of general education is grounded in a philosophy or framework developed by the institution or adopted from an established framework. It imparts broad knowledge and intellectual concepts to students and develops

skills and attitudes that the institution believes every college-educated person should possess.

3. The education offered by the institution recognizes the human and cultural diversity and provides students with growth opportunities and lifelong skills to live and work in a multi-cultural world.

4. The faculty and students contribute to scholarship, creative work, and the discovery of knowledge to the extent appropriate to their offerings and the institution's mission.

3.C. The institution has the faculty and staff needed for effective, high-quality programs and student services.

1. The institution strives to ensure that the overall composition of its faculty and staff reflects human diversity as appropriate within its mission and for the constituencies it serves.

2. The institution has sufficient numbers and continuity of faculty members to carry out both the classroom and the non-classroom roles of faculty, including oversight of the curriculum and expectations for student performance, assessment of student learning; and establishment of academic credentials for instructional staff.

3. All instructors are appropriately qualified, including those in dual credit, contractual and consortial offerings.

4. Instructors are evaluated regularly in accordance with established institutional policies and procedures.

5. The institution has processes and resources for assuring that instructors are current in their disciplines and adept in their teaching roles; it supports their professional development.

6. Instructors are accessible for student inquiry.

7. Staff members providing student support services, such as tutoring, financial aid advising, academic advising, and cocurricular activities are appropriately qualified, trained and supported in their professional development.

3.D. The institution provides support for student learning and resources for effective teaching.

1. The institution provides student support services suited to the needs of its student populations.

2. The institution provides for learning support and preparatory instruction to address the academic needs of its students. It has a process for directing entering students to courses and programs for which the students are adequately prepared.

3. The institution provides academic advising suited to its offerings and the needs of its students.

4. The institution provides to students and instructors the infrastructure and resources necessary to support effective teaching and learning (technological infrastructure, scientific laboratories, libraries, performance spaces, clinical practice sites, and museum collections, as appropriate to the institution's offerings).

CRITERION 4. TEACHING AND LEARNING: EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENT

The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments and support services, and it evaluates their effectiveness for student learning through processes designed to promote continuous improvement.

Core Components

4.A. The institution ensures the quality of its educational offerings.

1. The institution maintains a practice of regular program reviews and acts upon the findings.

2. The institution evaluates all the credit that it transcripts, including what it awards for experiential learning or other forms of prior learning, or relies on the evaluation of responsible third parties.

3. The institution has policies that ensure the quality of the credit it accepts in transfer.

4. The institution maintains and exercises authority over the prerequisites for courses, rigor of courses, expectations for student learning, access to learning resources, and faculty qualifications for all its programs, including dual credit programs. It ensures that its dual credit courses or programs for high school students are equivalent in learning outcomes and levels of achievement to its higher education curriculum.

5. The institution maintains specialized accreditation for its programs as appropriate to its educational purposes.

6. The institution evaluates the success of its graduates. The institution ensures that the credentials it represents as preparation for advanced study or employment accomplish these purposes. For all programs, the institution looks to indicators it deems appropriate to its mission.

4.B. The institution engages in ongoing assessment of student learning as part of its commitment to the educational outcomes of its students.

1. The institution has effective processes for assessment of student learning and for achievement of learning goals in academic and cocurricular offerings.

2. The institution uses the information gained from assessment to improve student learning.

3. The institution's processes and methodologies to assess student learning reflect good practice, including the substantial participation of faculty, instructional and other relevant staff members.

4.C. The institution pursues educational improvement through goals and strategies that improve retention, persistence and completion rates in its degree and certificate programs.

1. The institution has defined goals for student retention, persistence and completion that are ambitious, attainable and appropriate to its mission, student populations and educational offerings.

2. The institution collects and analyzes information on student retention, persistence and completion of its programs.

3. The institution uses information on student retention, persistence and completion of programs to make improvements as warranted by the data.

4. The institution's processes and methodologies for collecting and analyzing information on student retention, persistence and completion of programs reflect good practice. (Institutions are not required to use IPEDS definitions in their determination of persistence or completion rates. Institutions are encouraged to choose measures that are suitable to their student populations, but institutions are accountable for the validity of their measures.)

CRITERION 5. INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS, RESOURCES AND PLANNING

The institution's resources, structures, processes and planning are sufficient to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its educational offerings, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

Core Components

5.A. Through its administrative structures and collaborative processes, the institution's leadership demonstrates that it is effective and enables the institution to fulfill its mission.

1. Shared governance at the institution engages its internal constituencies—including its governing board, administration, faculty, staff and students—through planning, policies and procedures.

2. The institution's administration uses data to reach informed decisions in the best interests of the institution and its constituents.

3. The institution's administration ensures that faculty and, when appropriate, staff and students are involved in setting academic requirements, policy and processes through effective collaborative structures.

5.B. The institution's resource base supports its educational offerings and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future.

1. The institution has qualified and trained operational staff and infrastructure sufficient to support its operations wherever and however programs are delivered.

2. The goals incorporated into the mission and any related statements are realistic in light of the institution's organization, resources and opportunities.

3. The institution has a well-developed process in place for budgeting and for monitoring its finances.

4. The institution's fiscal allocations ensure that its educational purposes are achieved.

5.C. The institution engages in systematic and integrated planning and improvement.

1. The institution allocates its resources in alignment with its mission and priorities, including, as applicable, its comprehensive research enterprise, associated institutes and affiliated centers.

2. The institution links its processes for assessment of student learning, evaluation of operations, planning and budgeting.

3. The planning process encompasses the institution as a whole and considers the perspectives of internal and external constituent groups.

4. The institution plans on the basis of a sound understanding of its current capacity, including fluctuations in the institution's sources of revenue and enrollment.

5. Institutional planning anticipates evolving external factors, such as technology advancements, demographic shifts, globalization, the economy and state support.

6. The institution implements its plans to systematically improve its operations and student outcomes.

CROSSWALKS BETWEEN THE CURRENT AND REVISED CRITERIA

The revisions to the Criteria included some reorganization of the Core Components. The charts below map these changes. Broadly, the reorganized Core Components include the following:

- Core Component 1.B. was merged into Core Component 1.A.

- Core Component 1.D. was renumbered as Core Component 1.B.

- Concepts from Core Component 3.E. were added to Core Component 2.B.

- Core Component 5.A. was renumbered as Core Component 5.B, and Core Component 5.B. was renumbered as Core Component 5.A.

- Core Component 5.D. was merged into Core Component 5.C.

FROM THE CURRENT CRITERIA TO THE REVISED CRITERIA

Current Criteria	Revised Criteria
Criterion 1	
1.A.	1.A.
1.B.	1.A.
1.C.	1.C.
1.D.	1.B.
Criterion 2	
2.A.	2.A.
2.B.	2.B.
2.C.	2.C.
2.D.	2.D.
2.E.	2.E.
Criterion 3	
3.A.	3.A.
3.B.	3.B.
3.C.	3.C.
3.D.	3.D.
3.E.	2.B.
Criterion 4	
4.A.	4.A.
4.B.	4.B.
4.C.	4.C.
Criterion 5	
5.A.	5.B.
5.B.	5.A.
5.C.	5.C.
5.D.	5.C.

FROM THE REVISED CRITERIA TO THE CURRENT CRITERIA

Revised Criteria	Current Criteria
Criterion 1	
1.A.	1.A. and 1.B.
1.B.	1.D.
1.C.	1.C.
Criterion 2	
2.A.	2.A.
2.B.	2.B. and 3.E.
2.C.	2.C.
2.D.	2.D.
2.E.	2.E.
Criterion 3	
3.A.	3.A.
3.B.	3.B.
3.C.	3.C.
3.D.	3.D.
Criterion 4	
4.A.	4.A.
4.B.	4.B.
4.C.	4.C.
Criterion 5	
5.A.	5.B.
5.B.	5.A.
5.C.	5.C. and 5.D.

GLOSSARY OF CRITERIA TERMINOLOGY

This glossary explains how these words are used within the Criteria for Accreditation. Its intent is not to prescribe how institutions must use a particular word or phrase locally, but rather to offer a means to ensure a consistent reading of the meaning and expectations of the Criteria for Accreditation. It is not part of the Criteria policy and will be updated as needed to respond to questions and feedback from institutions and peer reviewers.

"NEW" indicates definitions written for the revised version of the Criteria based on feedback from the membership. Other terms are from the 2013 Criteria glossary.

NEW / ACADEMIC FREEDOM (2.D.)
The ability to engage differences of opinion, evaluate evidence and form one's own grounded judgments about the relative value of competing perspectives. This definition implies not just freedom from constraint but also freedom for faculty, staff and students to work within a scholarly community to develop intellectual and personal qualities.

NEW / ACADEMIC OFFERINGS
Any educational experience offered at an institution for academic credit. This includes, but is not limited to, degree and certificate programs and courses.

NEW / APPROPRIATE TO HIGHER EDUCATION (3.A.)
Curricular and cocurricular programming of the quality and rigor for the degree level that prepares students to think critically and function successfully. It is distinctly different from K-12 education.

NEW / AUTONOMOUS (2.C.)
The institution's governing board acts independently of any other entity in determining the course of direction and policies for the institution.

AUXILIARY (2.A.)
Activities and services related to, but not intrinsic to, educational functions: dining services, student housing, faculty or staff housing, intercollegiate athletics, student stores, a Public Radio station, etc. In many institutions, "auxiliary" simultaneously denotes a segregated budget and dedicated revenues.

NEW / CAPACITY (1.A., 5.C.)
An institution's ability to effectively deliver its educational offerings. Determining capacity refers to an institution's demonstrable ability to establish and maintain academic quality. Indicators of sufficient capacity may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Financial resources to support academic offerings at start-up and in the future.
- Evidence of planning that allocates necessary resources and shows ongoing development.
- Alignment of academic offerings with the institution's mission and evidence of the institution's long-term commitment.
- Evidence of new or revised policies and procedures that demonstrate commitment and sustainability.
- Qualified faculty and staff to serve students.
- Learning environments (whether classrooms, laboratories, studios or online infrastructure) with technological resources and equipment.
- Print and electronic media and support for the access and use of the technological resources across modalities.

NEW / CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (1.C.)
Community service or any number of other efforts (by individuals or groups) intended to address issues of public or community concern.

NEW / COCURRICULAR (3.C., 4.B.)
Learning activities, programs and experiences that reinforce the institution's mission and values and complement the formal curriculum. Examples: Study abroad, student-faculty research experiences, service learning, professional clubs or organization, athletics, honor societies, career services, etc.

UPDATED / CONTROL (2.B.)

The entity that is responsible for the fiscal and operational oversight of an institution and its programs. Control also includes the structure and organizational arrangements of an institution. Examples include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The state board or agency that oversees a public university.
- The board of trustees that oversees a private, nonprofit college.
- The parent corporation of a private, for-profit college.
- The public board authorized by Congress to oversee an institution under federal control.
- Religious bodies and tribal councils.

DUAL CREDIT (3.C., 4.A.)

Courses taught to high school students for which the students receive both high school credit and college credit. These courses or programs are offered under a variety of names; the Core Components that refer to "dual credit" apply to all of them as they involve the accredited institution's responsibility for the quality of its offerings.

NEW / GOOD PRACTICE (4.B., 4.C.)

Practice that is based in the use of processes, methods and measures that have been determined to be successful by empirical research, professional organizations and/or institutional peers.

NEW / INFORMED CITIZENSHIP (1.C.)

Having sufficient and reliable information about issues of public concern and having the knowledge and skills to make reasonable judgments and decisions about them.

NEW / OPERATIONAL STAFF (5.B.)

Personnel who support the academic enterprise, such as those who may work in the areas of finance, human resources, facilities, dining/catering, information technology, planning, security, student services, academic support, etc.

PUBLIC (1.A.)

In phrases such as "makes available to the public" or "states publicly," this refers to people in general, including current and potential students. In phrases such as "the public good," the Criteria refer to public, as opposed to private, good.

NEW / PUBLIC INFORMATION (1.A.)

Information publicly available on websites or other materials that are available freely to the public, without having to ask specifically for it.

NEW / STUDENT OUTCOMES (5.C.)

Education-specific results to measure against the objectives or standards for the educational offerings. Examples could be results from licensure or standardized exams, course and program persistence, graduation rates and workforce data.

NEW / SUPERORDINATE ENTITY (1.B.)

An entity situated hierarchically above the institution, which includes but is not limited to state boards, private owners, corporate parents, Tribal councils or religious denominations.

NEW / UNDUE INFLUENCE (2.C.)

Overreach, suspicious transactions and relationships that are exclusive (without oversight) that could yield influence over the institution's governing board.

WHEREVER AND HOWEVER DELIVERED (2.E., 5.B.)

All modes of delivery of academic offerings and all locations, modalities and venues, including but not limited to the main campus, additional locations, distance delivery, dual credit and contractual or consortial arrangements.

ASSURANCE SYSTEM TRANSITION

To facilitate the transition to the revised Criteria in the Assurance System, during the 2019–20 academic year HLC will begin moving institutions to a new Assurance Argument template that reflects the revised Criteria. The timing of the transition will be based on an institution's position within its accreditation cycle.

When an institution's existing Assurance Argument is moved into the new template, the narrative content automatically will be reorganized in the Assurance Argument template according to the crosswalk provided on page 7. For example, an institution's argument for Core Component 1.B. will be appended to its argument for Core Component 1.A. in the new template. Although the institution will have to adjust the content to account for changes to the Core Component statements and subcomponents, none of its previous Assurance Argument will be lost in the transition to the new Criteria. No changes will be made to the institution's Evidence File or Introduction.

TRANSITION PLAN

HLC will transition institutions into the new template based on their position within their accreditation cycle in the 2019–20 academic year. This process will begin in fall 2019. HLC will provide details about the transition closer to the time periods listed below.

Group 1

Institutions in Years 3 and 9 of Standard and Open Pathways and those with candidacy, biennial or initial accreditation evaluations in 2020–21 will be transitioned to the new Criteria template by the end of the fall term in 2019. (Note: Institutions may still work in the Assurance System prior to the transition to the new template. Any narrative they enter will be reorganized in the new template according to the crosswalk on page 7.)

Group 2

Institutions in Years 1, 2, 5, 6, 7 and 8 of Standard and Open Pathways and those with candidacy, biennial or initial accreditation evaluations later than 2020–21 will be transitioned to the new Criteria template during spring 2020.

Group 3

Institutions in Years 4 and 10 of Standard and Open Pathways, Years 4 and 8 of AQIP Pathway, and those with candidacy, biennial, initial accreditation or sanction evaluations in 2019–20 will transition to the new Criteria template after final action is taken on their evaluation.

NOTES

Criteria for Accreditation: Revisions Adopted February 2019, Effective September 2020