Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation

Updated for Criteria for Accreditation, Effective September 1, 2020

An institution has to provide a narrative and supporting evidence that demonstrate it meets HLC's Criteria for Accreditation. A team of peer reviewers evaluates the institution to validate its argument and determine if each Core Component of the Criteria is met. HLC provides suggestions to assist institutions in thinking about possible sources of evidence. This document should not be viewed by institutions or peer reviewers as an exhaustive list or be used as a checklist when preparing institutional materials or conducting a review.

Contents

Identifying Evidence

The evidence an institution provides to demonstrate that it complies with HLC's Criteria should do the following:

- Substantiate the facts and arguments presented in its institutional narrative.

- Respond to the prior peer review team's concerns and recommendations.

- Explain any nuances specific to the institution.

- Strengthen the institution's overall record of compliance with HLC's requirements.

- Affirm the institution's overall academic quality and financial sustainability and integrity.

HLC encourages institutions to provide thorough evidence and ensure that the sources it selects are relevant and persuasive. To identify compelling evidence, it may be helpful to consider the three categories of evidence presented in Black's Law: clear, corroborating and circumstantial.

- **Clear evidence** is precise, explicit and tends to directly establish the point it is presented to support. Institutions should provide clear evidence of their compliance with each Core Component.

  Example: Clear evidence that a president was duly appointed by an institution's board would be a board resolution or meeting minutes showing a motion and vote to hire the president.

- **Corroborating evidence** is supplementary to evidence already given and tends to strengthen or confirm it. This type of evidence can be useful in illustrating points made in the institution's narrative, but it may not be persuasive to peer reviewers on its own.

  Example: Corroborating evidence that a president was duly appointed by an institution's board would be a copy of the offer letter addressed to the president.

- **Circumstantial evidence** establishes a condition of surrounding circumstances, from which the principal fact may be inferred. This type of evidence is never sufficient on its own.

  Example: Circumstantial evidence that a president was duly appointed by an institution's board would be a copy of a letter from the president to the chair of the board, accepting the presidential appointment.

Finally, institutions should remember the peer review team will base much of its recommendations on the evidence presented. In order to identify whether any gaps exist in the institution's evidence, it is recommended institutions analyze each Core Component from the perspective of the peer review team. Peer reviewers will consider all materials presented and ask questions if they determine information is missing, but it is ultimately the institution's responsibility to present evidence of their compliance with the Criteria.

Possible Sources of Evidence

The following are examples of the types of information institutions may present in addressing the Core Components. This list was developed based on input from institutions and peer reviewers.

Important: Please note that the sources are not exhaustive, and institutions may provide different information relevant to their specific context and mission. The examples will not be applicable to all institutions. Further, institutions are not required to use these examples, and peer reviewers should defer to institutional preference instead of requiring the sources listed. This document is not intended to serve as a checklist.

Criterion 1. Mission

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

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

Examples

- Documentation of the history, development and adoption of the institution's mission statement.

- Documentation that the mission statement is regularly reviewed by the administration and reviewed and approved by the governing board.

- Documentation that academic programs, student support services and planning and budgeting priorities align with the mission (e.g., documents with budget allocations to instruction, student services, etc.).

- Enrollment profile.

- Information about new student, employee, and board member orientation that imparts the mission.

- Information about where the mission statement, purpose, vision, values, plans and goals are located and their accessibility to staff, faculty, students and the general public.

- Documentation of the policies and actions implemented or discontinued to achieve clearer alignment between an institution's practices and its mission.

- Recruitment materials.

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

Examples

- The institution's mission documents, if they specifically address the institution's role in the community.

- List of efforts, programs and certificates that meet community or constituent needs.

- Information about the institution's sustainability program.

- A list of partnerships and consulting arrangements with local businesses.

- Documentation of public events and series the community is able to attend.

- Documentation of the utilization of campus facilities by the community.

- Engagement of faculty, staff, and students in the community (i.e., community service, service-learning, etc.).

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.

Examples

- Documentation of course-based activities that promote civic engagement, including alternative spring break experiences, capstone experiences, community service projects, international service projects, professional or clinical practicum, community-based student employment, organized mission- or faith-based services in the community, military service or entrepreneurship.

- Documentation of student or residential-life-based service or experiences, such as service clubs, fraternity or sorority service projects, athletic team service activities, resident advisor employment or residential life service projects, or institution-led volunteer experiences.

- Documentation of extramural and independent volunteer or community service activities, including arts- and culture-based activities, children/youth-based service, human rights service or advocacy, public health and public policy-based activities, environmental and sustainability activities, food security/hunger-relief volunteering, church-based community service, or political campaign volunteering.

- Documentation of how diversity and inclusion are addressed in the institution's mission documents and strategic plan.

- Student demographics and enrollment strategies that demonstrate a focus on diversity and inclusion.

- List of on-campus centers, offices and committees that address societal diversity, inclusion, and/or global awareness.

- List of student organizations that support societal diversity, inclusion, and/or global awareness.

- Listing of activities that the institution hosts or participates in that emphasize diversity, inclusion, and/or global awareness.

Criterion 2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

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

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.

Examples

- Hiring qualifications and processes for faculty and staff, including a search committee procedure or handbook.

- External (independent) and internal audits since last comprehensive evaluation.

- Investment policy and documentation demonstrating compliance.

- Internal budget control policies.

- Bond rating since last comprehensive evaluation, if available.

- Schedule of and minutes for board audit and/or finance committee meetings.

- Documentation supporting ongoing training related to integrity issues and ethical behavior for all employees and board members (e.g., sexual harassment, sexual assault, campus- safety, etc.).

- Annual conflict of interest affirmation forms signed by board and senior leadership.

- Handbooks for employees (staff and/or faculty), students, student athletes (if applicable).

- List of auxiliary functions and information about each (e.g., dining services, residential life, bookstore, parking, student health services).

- Grievance policy for faculty, staff and students if not delineated in faculty, staff and student handbooks.

- Academic catalog.

- Institutional policies on non-discrimination, anti-harassment, FERPA, anti-nepotism, intellectual property, Title IX, etc.

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

Examples

- Academic catalog that includes program requirements for all degree levels.

- Course schedule for all degree levels offered.

- Published list of all current accreditations and statuses.

- Listing of tuition and fees and net price calculator.

- Faculty and staff roster.

- Recruitment and admissions documents for prospective students indicating requirements for institutional and program entry.

- Information pertaining to the entity that is responsible for the fiscal and operational oversight of the institution.

- Sample evaluations of activities that support the learning claimed in activity.

- A sample of academic student organizations and clubs demonstrating the diversity of groups on campus.

- Agendas and minutes from student athlete advisory committee and/or student government association.

- Information about athletic academic services.

- A list of fine arts offerings.

- Documentation of partnerships with internal and external entities to offer community service opportunities or service-learning experiences.

- Documentation of any volunteer clubs and detail of student participation.

- Campus newspapers, magazines, radio programming, and/or cable TV shows.

- List of cultural events and research and academic symposiums.

- Study abroad opportunities.

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.

Examples

- Board manual, policies and bylaws, including a conflict of interest policy.

- List and bios of board members.

- Documentation of the selection process for board members and for selection of chair, vice- chair, etc.

- Dates, agendas and minutes of board meetings for multiple years (and town hall or community meetings with the board).

- On-boarding and orientation process for new board members.

- Information about professional development and training for board members.
- Board approval of planning and budgeting documents.
- Board selection, evaluation, and right to terminate president of institution.
- Board self-evaluation.

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

Examples

- Institutional learning principles.
- Listing of activities supported and sponsored by the institution that allow for a discussion of varying views and opinions.
- Policy on freedom of expression and/or academic freedom.
- Course listing including the range of options for general education courses.
- Policies and procedures for peaceful assembly of students.
- Statement on censorship.

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

Examples

- Research opportunities and policies.
- Policy on academic integrity.
- Protocol, by-laws, and training documentation for Institutional Review Board (or similar entity).
- Institutional animal care and research policy, if appropriate.
- Training programs on plagiarism, citations, use of library resources, online research, etc.
- Applicable policies and procedures in student and faculty handbooks, including student honor code.
- Judicial affairs or student conduct meeting and training agendas.
- Information about sponsored program and grant office.
- Documentation of research symposia, highlighting faculty and student scholarship.

Criterion 3. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support

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

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

Examples

- Academic catalog.
- Documentation that the institution is in compliance with federal policy for credit hour requirements, where appropriate.
- Agendas and minutes from graduate council, faculty senate and/or curriculum review committee meetings.
- Examples of course- and program-learning goals for each degree level across all modes and locations.
- A syllabus template or guidelines for course outlines.
- Documentation that supports the method in which the institution determines program levels, e.g., Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains or other methodology or framework.
- Program-level admission requirements.
- External reviews conducted of programs.
- Documentation of any linkages between undergraduate and graduate level programs and differentiation of student learning outcomes by level.

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 the environments.

Examples

- Documentation of the process for developing curriculum and course outlines.
- List of graduate and undergraduate internship and practicum program sites.
- Agendas and minutes of committees related to educational programs.
- Departmental improvement plans.
- Agendas, minutes and activities of multicultural committees.

- General education learning goals and curriculum.

- Notification from the state that the institution meets the state requirements for general education coursework, if applicable.

- Notable faculty and student achievements relative to scholarship and creative work.

- Dual credit guidelines.

- Documentation that programs meet programmatic accreditation requirements.

- Research symposia.

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

Examples

- Statement on faculty expectations and minimum qualifications.

- Student-to-faculty ratio (overall, on-ground, online).

- Faculty handbook.

- Summary of qualifications of Student Affairs staff.

- Documentation of professional development and training opportunities for staff and faculty, including support for instructional design.

- Sabbatical policy.

- Complete faculty roster (full-time, part-time, adjunct, online, dual credit) with information on highest degree and teaching content area with evidence of courses taught.

- Guidelines and process for hiring faculty (includes full-time, part-time, adjunct, online, dual credit) that are in compliance with HLC and specialized accreditors, as appropriate.

- Faculty and staff professional development plans and annual evaluations.

- Orientation program for all faculty (includes full-time, part-time, adjunct, online, dual credit).

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

Examples

- Student handbook.

- Academic catalog.

- List of student support services, disability services, financial aid, advising, career counseling, campus

childcare, cocurricular activities and health services (include for all modalities).

- Information about writing and math assistance, tutoring programs, or other support provided to students.

- Schedule or documentation of student activities, programming and organizations.

- List of veterans' affairs office activities.

- Listing of remedial or developmental courses.

- Documentation on how campus advising works (matriculation through graduation).

- Information about computer labs, clinical sites, scientific labs and performance spaces.

- First-year experience program (academic and cocurricular).

- Documentation of undergraduate and graduate student processes and research.

- Documentation of programming offered by residence life and student affairs.

- Plagiarism and academic integrity training.

- Information about libraries and resources (e.g., interlibrary loan, reference services, Ask a Librarian).

- Information about utilization of data from internal resources and external national surveys, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement or Community College Survey of Student Engagement.

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.

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

Examples

- Program review policy, processes, schedule and guidelines.

- Sample program review.

- Program advisory board agendas and minutes. Curriculum review committee minutes.

- Transfer credit policies, course equivalency guides, and credit validation process for prior learning and third-party providers.

- Transfer student resources.

- Advanced Placement and College Level Examination Program policies and procedures.

- Academic catalog, specifically information about transfer credit and experiential learning.

- Internal and external curricular review process.

- Guidelines for hiring faculty and a hiring process.

- Dual credit programs and guidelines.

- Published list of all current accreditations and statuses.

- Data on where students go after graduation, such as employment rates, admission rates to advanced degree programs, and participation rates in fellowships, internships and special programs (e.g., Peace Corps and AmeriCorps).

- State degree requirements and evidence of compliance.

- Documentation of a process for reviewing, approving and implementing new programs.

- Licensure or certification exam results.

- Surveys of alumni.

- Articulation agreements with other institutions.

- Documentation of engagement of faculty, academic administration, and governing board in academic program review process.

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

Examples

- General education and course, program- and institutional-level learning goals and outcomes.

- Annual reports of the assessment process.

- Faculty senate minutes.

- Curriculum maps.

- Faculty expectations and evaluation processes.

- Assessment and/or curriculum committee minutes.

- Meeting minutes and agendas demonstrating departmental use of assessment data with evidence of action taken based on review and analysis of data.

- Institutional learning outcomes and rubrics.

- Documentation of cocurricular assessment and improvements based on data.

- Assessment plan and/or process and calendar/ cycle.

- Documents and reports using direct measures for assessment of student learning.

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

Examples

- Current rates of and goals for institutional persistence, retention and completion (include the institution's definitions of these terms).

- Strategies or initiatives implemented based on review and analysis of data to make improvements in persistence, retention and completion, such as agendas, meeting minutes and action items of units working in these areas.

- Enrollment management plan.

- Documentation of a consortium for student retention data exchange.

- Information about the institution's student success center.

- Documentation of utilization of datasets to make improvements.

- Analysis of graduation and retention rates by distinctive student populations (e.g., age, gender, race, ethnicity, first-generation status).

- Documentation of campus services to support student needs (e.g., writing center, math tutoring, study skills, time management, etc.).

- Suspension and probation trends.

- Student advising procedures and policies.

- Participation in Federal TRiO programs as it relates to persistence, completion, and retention, if applicable.

- Student exit survey results and action taken to address as applicable.

Criterion 5. Resources, Planning, Institutional Effectiveness

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.

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.

Examples

- List of campus committees and teams, such as faculty or university senate, assessment committee, general education committee, library committee, etc.

- Bylaws, policies, procedures and schedules for the institution's faculty or university senate, student government association, staff senate or council, and governing board.

- Documentation outlining the organizational structure.

- Document resolutions and meeting minutes of different constituent groups.

- Agendas and minutes of governing board demonstrating knowledge and oversight of finances and academic functions.

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

Examples

- Independent audited financial statements and Composite Financial Index patterns for multiple years.

- Documentation of investments in facilities and technology, including deferred maintenance.

- Campus master plan including additions and deferred maintenance.

- Policy for faculty and staff credentials.

- Information about training and professional development for faculty and staff.

- Documentation of strategic plan investments.

- Budget requests and procedures delineating flow of decision-making.

- Projected budgets/Pro-forma.

- Compliance with bank covenants and lines of credit.

- Endowment drawdown policy.

- Process for monitoring expenses.

- Mission statement and activities of institution's foundation or advancement office.

- Fundraising documentation and results.

- Enrollment plan, current enrollment and projections.

- Allocation of budget for instruction, strategic plan, mission, professional development, etc.

- Duration and amount of grants received by the institution.

- Evidence of linkage to planning initiatives related to current educational programs.

- Collective bargaining agreement(s).

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

Examples

- History and process of strategic plan creation and constituencies involved.

- Annual updates to strategic plan.

- Budget requests and procedure for budget planning.

- Budget allocation by major area.

- Budget projections for multiple years.

- Enrollment management plan.

- Environmental scan results.

- Evidence of resources used to aid in planning activities, such as, state reports on demographics, industry/vocational employment demands, etc.

- Facilities and technology plans.

- Evidence of attainment of strategic planning goals.

- Documentation delineating linkage between planning, budgeting and evaluation/assessment.

- Retention and completion data and reports.

- Student success data and reports.

- Documentation of institutional effectiveness plans and strategies, including goals and measurable outcomes for identified functional areas.

- Student learning and academic program assessment documentation.

- Documentation regarding assessments of and satisfaction with facilities, libraries, technology, human resources, security, and other services (e.g., counseling, dining, residence life, student recreation, student activities, parking, etc.).

- Key performance indicators/dashboard.

- Meeting minutes, agendas and/or task lists indicating review and analysis of data to inform improvements of operational activities (e.g., counseling, residence life, information technology, parking, student activities).

Related Resources

Criteria for Accreditation
hlcommission.org/criteria

Comprehensive Evaluation
hlcommission.org/comprehensive

Assurance Review
hlcommission.org/assurance-review

Sample Assurance Arguments
hlcommission.org/assurance-samples