



Information for Institutions Interested in Seeking Initial Accreditation

This set of materials responds to inquiries from non-affiliated institutions about the processes for seeking initial accreditation. The following documents are included:

Seeking Accreditation: An Overview of the Eligibility Process and Evaluations for Candidacy and Initial Accreditation.....	2
Sample Timeline for Seeking Accreditation	7
Guidelines for Institutions on Submitting Preliminary Evidence	9
Candidacy, the Biennial Evaluation, and Option for Early Initial Accreditation: An Overview.....	11
Required Materials and Submission Procedures – Eligibility Filing, Candidacy and Initial Accreditation Visits	15

Additional important documents are available on the Commission’s website:

- [Eligibility Requirements](#)
- [Eligibility Filing](#)
- [Data Form for Candidacy Visits](#)
- [Dues and Fees Schedule](#)

SEEKING ACCREDITATION

An Overview of the Eligibility Process and Evaluations for Candidacy and Initial Accreditation

This document specifies the requirements and processes for non-affiliated institutions considering seeking initial accreditation with the Commission. The list below outlines the two stages of the process, pre-application to determine eligibility and application for status, and the steps within each stage. Each step is described in greater detail later in this document. The institution should anticipate a minimum of five years and often up to nine years from the first step through the final decision on initial accreditation.

I. Pre-application to Determine Eligibility

- a. Letter of Inquiry with Preliminary Evidence
- b. Preliminary Evidence Review
- c. Pre-application Interview
- d. Post-interview Commission Letter
- e. Letter of Intent to Complete Eligibility Filing
- f. Eligibility Filing: Institutional Submission
- g. Eligibility Filing: Panel Review
- h. Letter on Eligibility

II. Application for Status

- a. Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy
- b. Preparation and Comprehensive Evaluation Visit for Candidacy
- c. Award and Duration of Candidacy
- d. Biennial Evaluation during Candidacy
- e. Evaluation for Initial Accreditation

Fees apply at a number of steps, as noted throughout this document. See the [Dues and Fees Schedule](#) for more information.

Basic Expectations

An institution seeking accreditation with the Higher Learning Commission must complete all of the steps in the process within the timeframe prescribed in this document, must adhere to the Commission guidelines related to each step, and must receive a positive decision by the Commission before moving to the next step. If at any point in the process the institution misses a required deadline, withdraws, or fails to achieve the next step, the institution must start the process from the beginning. When an institution restarts the process, it must wait one year before submitting a new Letter of Inquiry with Preliminary Evidence. An institution denied initial accreditation must wait two years before reapplying. All fees apply in subsequent pursuit of status.

All documentation must be submitted electronically as bookmarked PDF documents in accordance with the procedures provided in [Required Materials and Submission Procedures](#).

It is expected that the institution will have attended a Commission-sponsored workshop on seeking accreditation before beginning the process, so that the interactions with the Commission can focus on the specific circumstances of the institution rather than process logistics.

Given the duration of the process, the institution must refrain from publicly indicating that it is seeking status with the Commission. The institution does not hold any status with the Commission until it is granted candidacy. No public statement about seeking status should be made until the institution seeks third-party comment a few months prior to the comprehensive evaluation visit for candidacy.

I. Pre-Application to Determine Eligibility

a. Letter of Inquiry with Preliminary Evidence

The institution submits a letter to the President of the Commission requesting a Pre-application Interview. The letter appends the required documentation that provides Preliminary Evidence that the institution may meet the [Eligibility Requirements](#). Details on the required documentation constituting Preliminary Evidence may be found in the [Guidelines for Institutions on Submitting Preliminary Evidence](#). The required fee must accompany this letter.

b. Preliminary Evidence Review

On receipt of the Letter of Inquiry, Preliminary Evidence, and fee, the Commission screens the materials to ensure they are complete. If the materials are not complete, the Commission will request that the institution submit the missing materials within 30 days. If the institution cannot provide the missing materials in this timeframe, the Commission returns the institution's letter and Preliminary Evidence and refunds the fee. If the materials are complete, Commission staff reviews the Preliminary Evidence in depth.

If the review indicates that the evidence is sufficient, the Commission staff sends a notification letter to the institution requesting suggested dates for the pre-application interview. Suggested dates and the interview fee are due within 30 days of the notification letter from the Commission. The pre-application interview must take place at least 60 days and no more than four months from the date of the Commission's notification letter.

If the evidence is not sufficient, the Commission will provide a letter to the institution identifying the issues that preclude the scheduling of a pre-application interview. The institution may submit updated evidence within 30 days and request a second Preliminary Evidence Review without having to pay an additional fee.

c. Pre-application Interview

During the two-hour interview in the Commission office, the Commission queries the institution on its preliminary evidence and proposed plan and timeline for pursuing status. The institution has the opportunity to ask questions about the process and its requirements.

d. Post-interview Commission letter

The Commission staff sends a post-interview letter indicating the timing for the next steps in the process, should the institution choose to continue with it. In that letter, the Commission identifies those Eligibility Requirements that have raised concerns at this stage of the process and any evidence that must be submitted prior to or with the letter of intent if the institution is to continue with the process. The Commission staff may also recommend that the institution is not ready to proceed further with seeking status with the Commission.

e. Letter of Intent to Submit the Eligibility Filing

If the institution chooses to continue to seek accreditation, it submits to the Commission a letter of intent to complete the Eligibility Filing. The institution may submit this letter up to two years after receipt of the post-interview letter from the Commission. The required fee and any required additional evidence must accompany this letter.

f. Eligibility Filing: Institutional Submission

Within one year of submitting the letter of intent, the institution submits its completed [Eligibility Filing](#). In the Eligibility Filing, the institution must provide evidence that it meets all of the Eligibility Requirements. The Commission provides assistance for institutions completing the Eligibility Filing through scheduled workshops and webinars. The institution includes with its Eligibility Filing a written statement signed by the CEO and the Chair of the Board certifying that all the information is truthful and complete and that the institution will begin to abide by the Obligations of Affiliation as soon as it receives permission to schedule an on-site evaluation. The required fee must accompany the Eligibility Filing.

g. Eligibility Filing: Panel Review

Upon receipt of the Eligibility Filing, the Commission staff checks to ensure that the documentation is complete and ready for panel review. If the Eligibility Filing is not ready for panel review, Commission staff may provide the institution an opportunity to submit additional items necessary to complete the Filing. The institution must submit the additional items within 30 days of Commission notification. The Commission also may return the Eligibility Filing to the institution with a letter informing the institution of the issues that preclude review.

The panel review process takes three to five months. The purpose of the panel review is to determine whether the institution has the capacity and readiness to pursue status with the Commission, specifically to host an evaluation visit for candidacy. The panel review determines whether the institution has assembled the necessary documentation to indicate it appears to have met all the Eligibility Requirements. While only an evaluation team can make a determination about whether the institution has met the Eligibility Requirements, this preliminary determination by the panel can save both the Commission and the institution expense and travail if the institution is not ready for a comprehensive evaluation.

The review panel may request additional information in order to complete its review. **The institution has up to one year to submit that additional information.** In the meantime, the review panel process does not move forward. A fee applies to the additional submission.

The review panel may decide that the institution does not appear to have met all the Eligibility Requirements and that the institution is not prepared to host an evaluation visit for candidacy at present. The panel will provide the reasons for its decision.

h. Letter on Eligibility

The Commission sends the institution a letter informing it of the outcome of the review. If the panel's determination is positive, the Commission requests a letter of intent to pursue candidacy.

An affirmative Eligibility Filing review does not predispose any future reviewers to a determination as to whether the institution meets the Eligibility Requirements. Each evaluation team will conduct a fresh review of the evidence and make an independent

judgment. Similarly, the evidence presented for the Eligibility Filing is only a subset—essential but not complete—of the institutional evidence required for an evaluation team to determine whether the institution merits candidacy.

Reminder: The acceptance of the Eligibility Filing does not grant or confer any status with the Commission. The institution does not hold any status with the Commission until the institution is formally granted candidacy by action of the Commission's Board of Trustees. No public statement about seeking status should be made until the institution seeks third-party comment a few months prior to the comprehensive evaluation visit for candidacy.

II. Application for Status

Every non-affiliated institution seeking status with the Commission must apply for and serve a period of candidacy. The institution's submission of its self-evaluation report for candidacy is considered its formal application for candidacy.

a. Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy

If the institution chooses to continue to seek status, it submits to the Commission a letter of intent to pursue candidacy. The institution may submit this letter up to 90 days after the receipt of the Commission letter indicating that the Eligibility Filing was accepted. (For good cause shown, the Commission may grant the institution up to 30 additional days to submit this letter.) The Commission acknowledges receipt of the letter and advises the institution to begin preparing the documentation needed for the comprehensive evaluation for candidacy. The documentation must be received in time for the team visit to take place within two years of the date of the letter of intent. The required fee must accompany the letter of intent.

b. Preparation and Comprehensive Evaluation Visit for Candidacy

Candidacy is achieved through a process of self-study, on-site review by a Commission evaluation team, and a hearing by the Institutional Actions Council, with the final decision rendered by the Board of Trustees. Self-study is a multi-year process of institutional self-evaluation and improvement that results in a Assurance Filing due four weeks prior to the on-site review. The self-study report provides evidence that the institution meets all of the Eligibility Requirements, Assumed Practices, and Federal Compliance Requirements. In addition, the report provides evidence toward fulfillment of each of the Criteria for Accreditation and demonstrates the institution's capacity to meet the Criteria fully within the four-year candidacy period. With the Assurance Filing, the institution submits a letter indicating that it is committed to upholding the Commission's Obligations of Affiliation. A full list of materials required for Candidacy is found in [Candidacy, the Biennial Evaluation, and Option for Early Initial Accreditation: An Overview](#) and includes the [Data Form for Candidacy Visits](#).

Six months prior to the on-site visit, the institution must complete the [Third-Party Comment process](#) as part of fulfillment of the Federal Compliance Requirements. It is at this time that the institution may make public that it is seeking status with the Commission. The institution should use the Commission's prescribed language in making this announcement:

(Name of institution) currently holds no status with the Higher Learning Commission. (Name of institution) has initiated the process of seeking candidate status with the Higher Learning Commission. The Commission will conduct a comprehensive evaluation on (date) to determine whether (name of institution) should be awarded candidacy. The team's recommendation is subject to additional levels of Commission review and decision-making. Therefore, no further information will be provided until the Commission's Board of Trustees makes a final decision on the award of candidacy. The award of candidacy does not assure the eventual award of accreditation.

During the on-site visit, Commission reviewers determine whether the institution meets all of the Eligibility Requirements, Assumed Practices, and Federal Compliance Requirements and whether it has the capacity to meet the Criteria fully within the four-year candidacy period. The recommendation of the evaluation team enters the decision process. The current visit fees apply.

It is important that during the time period from the Eligibility Filing; Panel Review to the Commission's action on the Comprehensive Evaluation Visit for Candidacy that the institution does not undertake any change from the institutional

description it submitted in the Eligibility Filing, such as change in mission, ownership or governance structure, new programs, delivery methods, contractual relationships, and additional locations. Significant change will result in cancellation of any scheduled visit and require re-submission of the Eligibility Filing and another review by a new panel.

c. Award and Duration of Candidacy

The Institutional Actions Council conducts a hearing to consider the report and recommendation of the evaluation team. The Institutional Actions Council prepares a report indicating its agreement with the findings and recommendation of the team or providing different findings or recommendation. The report is reviewed by the Commission Board of Trustees, which renders the final decision to grant or deny candidacy.

The term of candidacy is four years from the date of Commission action. In exceptional circumstances, the Board may offer a fifth year of candidacy to an institution that demonstrates cause for an extension. If the institution achieves candidacy, it may now publicly disclose its status with the Commission using the Commission's prescribed language:

(Name of institution) is a candidate with the Higher Learning Commission.

d. Biennial Evaluation during Candidacy

An institution hosts a required Biennial Evaluation visit two years after candidacy is granted to determine whether the institution is making reasonable progress toward meeting accreditation requirements by the end of the candidacy period.

An institution that has completed two years of candidacy may file an application for early initial accreditation and host an on-site initial accreditation visit to evaluate the institution for this purpose. The institution will be limited to one application for early initial accreditation during the term of candidacy. If the institution applies for early initial accreditation the Board may grant it or may require the institution to complete the full term of candidacy. The current visit fees apply.

e. Evaluation for Initial Accreditation

At the end of the four-year candidacy period, an institution will be evaluated for initial accreditation. Initial accreditation is achieved through a process of self-study, on-site review by a Commission evaluation team, and a hearing by the Institutional Actions Council, with the final decision rendered by the Board of Trustees, as in the process for candidacy. To be granted initial accreditation, the institution must satisfy fully all the Eligibility Requirements, all Assumed Practices, Federal Compliance Requirements, and all the Criteria for Accreditation. If, as a result of the initial accreditation visit, the Board acts to extend the institution's candidacy for a fifth year, the institution will repeat the visit for initial accreditation during that fifth candidacy year. The current visit fees apply.

SAMPLE TIMELINE FOR SEEKING ACCREDITATION

I. Pre-Application to Determine Eligibility			
STAGE	DESCRIPTION	REQUIRED TIMEFRAME	FEE APPLIES (See Dues and Fees Schedule)
INFORMATION	The institution researches the process, requirements, and expectations of achieving accreditation.		
LETTER OF INQUIRY WITH PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE	The institution submits the Letter of Inquiry with required Preliminary Evidence .		Fee applies
PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE REVIEW	Commission screens materials for completeness.	Missing materials are due within 30 days.	
	Commission conducts review and sends Preliminary Evidence Response with outcome. If accepted, the institution proposes potential dates for interview and pays the fee for the interview.	Interview dates and fee due within 30 days of Preliminary Evidence Response.	Fee applies
PRE-APPLICATION INTERVIEW	The Commission conducts Pre-application Interview with institution in the Commission office.	Interview occurs at least 60 days and no more than four months after Preliminary Evidence Response.	Fee applies
POST-INTERVIEW COMMISSION LETTER	Commission sends Post-interview Letter to the institution indicating next steps or that the institution is not ready to proceed.		
LETTER OF INTENT TO SUBMIT THE ELIGIBILITY FILING	If approved, the institution submits its Letter of Intent to submit the Eligibility Filing .	Within two years of Commission Post- interview Letter	Fee applies
ELIGIBILITY FILING: INSTITUTIONAL SUBMISSION	Institution submits completed Eligibility Filing and other required materials.	Within one year of Letter of Intent	Fee applies

ELIGIBILITY FILING: PANEL REVIEW	Commission staff screens materials for completeness and readiness for review. May request additional materials or may return Filing and fee to the institution.	Missing materials are due within 30 days.	
	Panel reviews Eligibility Filing and makes judgment about compliance and readiness to pursue candidacy. Panel may request refined or additional information from institution.	Review takes 3-5 months; refined or additional materials required within one year of panel request.	Fee applies for additional or refined materials
LETTER ON ELIGIBILITY	Commission notifies institution of the eligibility review outcome. If deemed eligible to pursue candidacy, institutions may proceed.	If not deemed eligible, institutions must wait one year before beginning the process from the beginning.	

II. Application for Status			
STAGE	DESCRIPTION	REQUIRED TIMEFRAME	FEE <i>(See Dues and Fees Schedule)</i>
LETTER OF INTENT TO PURSUE STATUS	Institution sends Commission Letter of Intent to pursue Candidacy.	Within 90 days of letter on eligibility panel review.	Fee applies
PREPARATION FOR AND COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION VISIT FOR CANDIDACY	The institution conducts a self-study process, completes an Assurance Filing, and hosts the comprehensive evaluation visit for Candidacy.	Visit must take place within two years of the date of the letter of intent to accommodate action.	Applicable fees + expenses
AWARD AND DURATION OF CANDIDACY	Team recommendation on candidacy reviewed at hearing of the Institutional Actions Council (IAC) prior to Board of Trustees Action. If candidacy is granted, institutions granted four-year term of Candidacy .	Action must take place no later than two years after the date of the letter of intent.	
BIENNIAL EVALUATION DURING CANDIDACY	The institution holds a required Biennial Evaluation visit two years after candidacy is granted to determine whether the institution is making reasonable progress toward meeting accreditation requirements by the end of the candidacy period.	Biennial evaluation occurs two years after initial award of candidacy.	Applicable fees + expenses
EVALUATION FOR INITIAL ACCREDITATION	The institution conducts a self-study process, completes an Assurance Filing, and hosts the comprehensive evaluation visit for Initial Accreditation .	At the end of the Candidacy term	Applicable fees + expenses

GUIDELINES FOR INSTITUTIONS ON SUBMITTING PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE

With its letter seeking a pre-application interview, the institution submits the following evidence regarding its capacity to meet the Eligibility Requirements. The institution is required to submit all of the following documentation and nothing more than the following documentation. All documentation must be submitted electronically in accordance with the procedures outlined in [Required Materials and Submission Procedures](#).

1. Basic institutional data: (a) a list of all locations, including main and branch campuses and additional locations; (b) all degree and certificate programs offered; (c) all programs offered by distance or correspondence education (i.e., wherein 50% or more of the program is offered in any distance or correspondence modality); (d) enrollments in all degree and certificate programs shown by degree or certificate, location, and mode of delivery.
2. Documentation attesting to the incorporation of the institution in one of the 19 states or sovereign nations within the HLC region. (If the institution intends to seek accreditation for a multi-corporate structure it must seek accreditation as a system and provide information about all corporations included in the system.)
3. Documentation demonstrating substantial presence in the 19 states or sovereign nations within the HLC region.
Commission policy on substantial presence states:

INST.B.10.010 Jurisdiction: Substantial Presence

An institution shall demonstrate that its operations are substantially in the 19-state north central region. An institution shall provide evidence that the majority of its educational administration and activity, business operations, and executive and administrative leadership are located or are operating within the north central region. Institutions that have campuses or additional locations must demonstrate that at least one campus and one additional location (if the institution has additional locations) are located in the region. The Commission shall make the decision regarding whether the institution is substantially in the region based on the preponderance of the evidence regarding the operations of the institution. The Commission shall consider evidence presented by the institution as well as evidence available from public sources and from evaluations undertaken by the Commission in making a judgment about the institution's presence in the region.

4. Documentation attesting to legal status to operate as an institution offering higher learning in one of the states or sovereign nations within the HLC region (may overlap with documentation in #2 above) and evidence of state authorization in good standing to offer higher learning in any other state in which it is required by state law or regulation to be authorized. (The institution must disclose any state action to suspend, limit or terminate the corporate status or higher education authorization of the institution or any related entity within the previous 5 years.)
5. Articles of incorporation or charter and bylaws (or operating agreement) of the institution, any parent organization or related corporate entities.

6. A clear and complete description of the relationship between the institution and any corporate parent or other related legal entity to which the institution is subject.
7. A list of governing board members (or managers for LLCs) for all boards in the corporate structure, the profiles of the board members, and disclosure information regarding any ownership interest in the college or related entities, familial relationship with other board members or senior administration at the institution or any related entity, or contractual relationships with the institution or any related entity.
8. Letter from the governing board confirming its intention to seek affiliation with the Commission and a copy of the minutes from the Board meeting in which the Board approved the seeking of accreditation.
9. Mission statement; statements of vision and values if the institution has them.
10. Print or electronic catalogue, including other sources through which information about the institution, its personnel, and its academic programs is provided.
11. Complete description of the institution's general education program including its philosophy and objectives for general education.
12. Audits by a certified public accountant or state audit agency for the last fiscal year (for the interview only, an institution may present a letter from an accountant or bank attesting to the assets of the institution and its financial history). Any consolidated audit must have a separate schedule for the entity seeking accreditation.
13. Comparative budgets for the past fiscal year.
14. Business plan, including projected growth in programs and enrollment, for the next three years.
15. Job description and resume of the CEO.
16. Outline of the faculty governance structure.
17. Roster of faculty and administrative personnel, with qualifications of individuals, their status (full or part-time, adjunct or independent consultant), department assignment and a list of the courses they typically teach.
18. Inventory of learning resources and student support services.
19. List of current accreditation relationships and their status, and information regarding any other official interactions with other accreditation organizations in the past five years
20. List of all lawsuits, including whistleblower lawsuits, state investigations or prosecutions, or judgments within the last five years involving (a) claims by students, faculty or staff related to the academic quality of the institution, (b) its recruiting or admissions, or (c) its financial aid practices.
21. Plan for achieving accreditation: milestones and dates; maximum 1,000 words.

CANDIDACY, THE BIENNIAL EVALUATION, AND OPTION FOR EARLY INITIAL ACCREDITATION

An Overview

Period of Candidacy. The period of candidacy is four years. Every non-affiliated institution seeking status with the Commission will serve a period of candidacy, with a minimum period of at least two years (24 months), but not to exceed four years. In exceptional circumstances, the Board may extend the Candidacy period to five years; it may also waive the required candidacy period. Only institutions that have completed candidacy, or been exempted from candidacy by the Board of Trustees following Commission policies on Candidacy, shall be eligible for initial accreditation.

Biennial Evaluation Visit. On or around the two-year anniversary of the award of candidacy, an institution hosts an on-site evaluation. In preparation for the visit, the institution provides an update to the information it provided for its evaluation for candidacy status. The evaluation team reviews the information provided by the institution and writes a report that offers advice on continued progress toward meeting the Criteria and Core Components in preparation for the evaluation for Initial Accreditation. The institution provides a response to the report; the Institutional Actions Council reviews and accepts the report or takes action as necessary. If the team finds that the institution is not making reasonable progress or does not meet one or more of the Eligibility Requirements or Assumed Practices, the team will recommend withdrawal of candidacy. In this case, the report is forwarded to an Institutional Actions Council (IAC) First Committee Hearing for further review. The IAC may recommend continued candidacy or withdrawal. The case goes to the Board for action (requires board hearing).

Early Initial Accreditation. An institution may request that the biennial evaluation on or around the two-year anniversary of the award of candidacy be replaced with an evaluation for initial accreditation. The institution is limited to one application for early initial accreditation during the term of candidacy. It is the decision of the institution's staff liaison in consultation with the President of the Commission and other Commission staff to allow a visit for early initial accreditation. The staff liaison will consider such factors as the issues at the institution, if any, identified by the candidacy evaluation team related to the institution's meeting the Criteria for Accreditation and Assumed Practices, the institution's relationship with the Commission during the candidacy period, and the Commission's policy on Early Initial Accreditation.

The on-site evaluation team for early initial accreditation conducts a comprehensive evaluation of the institution and makes a recommendation for initial accreditation or continued candidacy. If the team finds that the institution meets (without concerns) the Criteria for Accreditation, it will recommend early initial accreditation. The report is forwarded to the IAC Hearing Committee for further review and to the Board of Trustees for final action.

If the team finds the institution meets the Criteria for Accreditation, but that one or more Core Components are met with concerns, the team has the option to recommend early initial accreditation, but must articulate reasons why the Board should not exercise its discretion to continue candidacy per its policy on Early Initial Accreditation. Alternatively, the team may recommend against early initial accreditation, but determine whether the institution is making reasonable progress towards accreditation as would be anticipated had this been a biennial evaluation visit.

If the team finds that the institution does not meet the Criteria for Accreditation, Assumed Practices or Eligibility Requirements, the team will recommend against initial accreditation but determine whether the institution is making reasonable progress towards accreditation as would be anticipated had this been a biennial evaluation visit.

If the team finds that the institution is not making reasonable progress toward the Criteria or does not meet one or more of the Eligibility Requirements or Assumed Practices, the team will recommend withdrawal of candidacy. In this case, the report is forwarded to an IAC Hearing Committee for further review and to the Board of Trustees for action. The institution may challenge the recommendation against early initial accreditation at the IAC Hearing and subsequent Board of Trustees meeting in its response to the IAC Report. If the Board continues the institution in candidacy, rather than awarding accreditation, this action is not a loss of status and is not appealable. The institution may withdraw its application for early initial accreditation prior to deadlines set by the Commission in advance of the IAC Hearing and Board meeting.

Voluntary Withdrawal from the Process. An institution may voluntarily withdraw its application for status at any time during the process. If the institution chooses to seek status in the future, it must wait a period of at least one year from the date of its request to withdraw and will begin with the first step of the seeking accreditation process; i.e., the submission of preliminary evidence and a request for an eligibility interview.

Processes and Documents

Biennial Evaluation Process

1. The Commission sets the biennial evaluation on or around the anniversary date of award of candidacy.
2. In preparation for the biennial evaluation, the institution provides an update report as defined below.
3. Through August 31, 2015, the biennial evaluation follows the process for a focused visit. Beginning September 1, 2015, the biennial evaluation is a 1½ day visit preceded by an electronic Assurance Review.
4. The team prepares a written report. IAC reviews and accepts the report or takes action as necessary.
5. The institution submits its response to the report.
6. All documents become part of the institution's permanent record.

Team Recommendation. Typically, the team does not make a recommendation following a biennial evaluation. Instead, the report provides advice on continued progress toward meeting the Criteria and Core Components in preparation for the evaluation for initial accreditation. If, however, the team finds that the institution is not making reasonable progress or does not meet one or more of the Eligibility Requirements or Assumed Practices, the team will recommend withdrawal of candidacy. In this case, the report is forwarded to a Commission decision-making body for review and action, as noted above.

Materials Required for the Biennial Evaluation. In preparation for the biennial evaluation, the institution provides an update report that (a) explains any changes at the institution since the award of candidacy and (b) provides an update on progress made on each of the issues and areas needing improvement identified by the candidacy evaluation team. In addition, the institution provides its original plan for seeking accreditation and any new evidence toward any of the Commission's requirements. Beginning September 1, 2015, this update report is an addendum to and additional evidence for the Assurance Filing. The institution also completes the [Data Form for Candidacy Visits](#).

Early Initial Accreditation Process

1. An institution may apply for an evaluation for early initial accreditation. The institution applies at least one year prior to the scheduled biennial evaluation by submitting a letter of request to the Commission. The institution is limited to one application for early initial accreditation during the term of candidacy.
2. If the Commission concurs with the request, it replaces the biennial evaluation with the evaluation for initial accreditation and schedules the visit to occur no earlier than two years from the date of the award of Candidacy.
3. In preparation for the initial accreditation evaluation, the institution conducts a self-evaluation, produces its report, and hosts an on-site visit. Beginning September 1, 2015, the institution conducts its self-evaluation and submits its Assurance Filing; the team conducts an electronic review prior to on-site visit.
4. The on-site visit for initial accreditation is a three-day comprehensive evaluation conducted by a team of four or more peer reviewers.
5. The evaluation team writes its report, which includes a recommendation on initial accreditation; the report is forwarded to the appropriate Commission decision bodies for review and action. At each stage in the decision process, the institution submits its response to the report.
6. All documents become part of the institution's permanent record.

Team Recommendation on Early Initial Accreditation. The team recommends either award or denial of initial accreditation.

If the team recommends early initial accreditation:

The case goes to an IAC First Committee Hearing. The IAC may:

- Confirm initial accreditation
The case goes to the Board for action (no additional hearing)
- Deny initial accreditation, recommend continued candidacy
The institution accepts the IAC recommendation – the action is final OR
The institution takes its request to the Board for action (no additional hearing)
- Deny initial accreditation, recommend withdrawal of candidacy
The case goes to the Board for action (optional board committee hearing available)

If the team recommends denial of early initial accreditation, but recommends continued candidacy:

The institution may

- Withdraw its request for early initial accreditation, the case goes to an IAC First Committee meeting
The IAC confirms continued candidacy – the action is final
- Pursue early initial accreditation, the case goes to an IAC First Committee Hearing
 - The IAC confirms team recommendation for continued candidacy
The institution withdraws its request for early initial accreditation, the action is final OR
The institution pursues initial accreditation, the case goes to the Board for action (no additional hearing)
 - The IAC recommends initial accreditation
The case goes to the Board for action (no board committee hearing; no appeal if the decision is to extend candidacy)

If the team recommends denial of early initial accreditation, but recommends withdrawal of candidacy:

The case goes to an IAC First Committee Hearing

The IAC recommends granting or denial of initial accreditation, continued candidacy, or withdrawal of candidacy

The case goes to the Board for action (optional board committee hearing available; this action is appealable if the Board withdraws candidacy)

At each stage in the process, the institution files a response; these responses are included in the deliberations of the decision bodies. Denial of initial accreditation other than early initial accreditation can be appealed. The information on appealing the decision is found in [Commission Policy INST.E.90.010: Appeals](#).

Materials Required for the Initial Accreditation Evaluation. In preparation for the initial accreditation evaluation, the institution provides evidence that addresses each of the Eligibility Requirements, each of the Assumed Practices, and each of the Criteria and Core Components. In addition, the institution provides the required institutional data, evidence for the Federal Compliance Requirements, a statement committing to the Commission's Obligations of Affiliation, and any required supplemental information. See the [Required Materials and Submission Procedures – Eligibility Filing, Candidacy and Initial Accreditation Visits](#) for a full list of required materials, including the [Data Form for Candidacy Visits](#).

Fees. Through August 31, 2015, the processes and fees that apply to a comprehensive evaluation apply to an evaluation for initial accreditation. The Commission will establish fees for early initial accreditation visits occurring on or after September 1, 2015.

Related Policies

[INST.B.20.020: Candidacy](#)

REQUIRED MATERIALS AND SUBMISSION PROCEDURES

Eligibility Filing, Candidacy, and Initial Accreditation Visits

The Commission requires that all institutional materials be submitted electronically rather than in print. This document provides the instructions for submitting documents electronically.

Requirements for Electronic Documents

Electronic documents should be prepared by an individual with expertise in using appropriate PDF software, such as Adobe Acrobat.

- **DO NOT** scan printed documents to create a PDF document as this will result in a document that is large in file size, and not text searchable.
- **Ensure that electronic documents are bookmarked, indexed, and searchable with internal document links that allow for ease of movement across chapters, sections, and subsections.**
- Include pagination and internal document organizational strategies that make it easy for the reader to navigate within the electronic document.
- Avoid links to websites or other materials outside of the required filing. Thus, links to external materials should offer only supplemental information. **Reviewers are not required to pursue external links.**
- Use only those graphics and pictures that provide specific evidence.
- Ensure that software settings are set to create clear text and graphics, yet not make the file size too large. Optimize graphics (downsample to 150 dpi) and pictures (use jpeg medium quality) to reduce the size of the document.

The institution should submit **ONLY** the documents that are requested. However, it is the institution's responsibility to ensure that the Commission has those documents necessary to provide a complete and accurate understanding of the institution's compliance with the Commission's requirements. If the institution has relevant information that has not been specifically requested, it should contact the Commission staff for instructions about the appropriateness of submitting it.

Required Materials for the Eligibility Filing

File Naming

- Preliminary Evidence for the Eligibility Requirements. File name should read: (name of institution)Evidence.pdf

- Eligibility Filing. File name should read:
 - PDF 1: (name of institution)description.pdf
 - PDF 2: (name of institution)narrative.pdf
 - PDF 3: (name of institution)documentation.pdf

Submission of Electronic Documents

Upload the required electronic documents to the web page below. Do not send electronic documents by e-mail to the Commission.

<http://dropbox.yousendit.com/HLCEligibility73101107>

Required Materials for the Comprehensive Evaluation for Candidacy or Initial Accreditation

The institution should submit the required materials to the Assurance System no later than four weeks in advance of the visit which is the latest possible Assurance System Lock Date (Institutions have the ability to lock the system prior to that time if they have completed their preparations and are ready to provide the peer review team with access to their materials).

Letter Committing to Obligations of Affiliation

The institution's submission of information for a candidacy or initial accreditation visit should be accompanied by a letter from the president of the institution that indicates the Board's and institution's commitment to the Commission's Obligations of Affiliation. This letter should be uploaded as a PDF file in the Evidence File portion of the Assurance System and specific reference to it should be made in the Introduction Tab of the Assurance System along with the necessary hyperlink.

Materials Set I - Assurance Argument and Appendices

1. **Document I – Assurance Argument.** *The suggested limit is 40,000 words.* The content should be evaluative and substantiated with clear, specific evidence (versus general references to documents that may contain evidence). The Assurance Argument should be entered in the Assurance System and should include:
 - a. Overview of institutional history and context (entered in the **Introduction Tab** of the Assurance System)
 - b. Evidence and evaluation of that evidence that demonstrates the institution's fulfillment of the Criteria and Core Components
 - c. Responses to previous challenges raised by the Commission in candidacy or the eligibility filing should be embedded within the relevant Core Components of the Assurance Argument, or in the updated Eligibility Filing, as applicable
2. **Document II - Updated Eligibility Filing.** *The suggested limit is 150 pages.* The institution must provide a succinct document demonstrating evidence that the institution meets all eligibility requirements. The document should address each eligibility requirement. At the time of candidacy or initial accreditation, if the evidence has changed, the institution should provide a complete explanation of how the evidence has changed to demonstrate that the institution still meets the eligibility requirements. Institutions should update their existing Eligibility Filing. Any new text should appear in underlined font, while deleted text should appear in ~~strike-through~~ font. Upload the updated Eligibility Filing as a single PDF document in the relevant window of the **Forms Tab** of the Assurance System. **Note:** Peer reviewers will see the Eligibility Filing without a hyperlink within the narrative of the Assurance Argument.
3. **Document III – Evidence of Compliance with the Assumed Practices.** *The suggested limit is 150 pages.* The institution must provide a document demonstrating evidence that the institution meets all of the Assumed Practices. In evaluations for Initial Accreditation, the institution may provide an update that addresses any changes and provides updates to the evidence previously submitted for the Assumed Practices. In the Assurance System, institutions should utilize the Assumed Practices

themselves as the organizing framework for a document they will create titled: “Evidence of Compliance with the Assumed Practices”. Download the Assumed Practices from the appropriate window in the **Forms Tab**, create the “Evidence of Compliance with the Assumed Practices” document and upload it (along with any attachments) as a single PDF document in the relevant window of the **Forms Tab** of the Assurance System. **Note:** Peer reviewers will see the Evidence of Compliance with the Assumed Practices without a hyperlink within the narrative of the Assurance Argument.

4. **Document IV - Required Supplements.** Submit Document IV as separate electronic documents.
 - a. **Data Form for Candidacy Visits** – This form includes the worksheet on substantial presence. Download, complete and upload this form from the relevant window in the **Forms Tab** of the Assurance System. If the institution chooses to include other materials to respond to the data called for by the form, it should render all the documents as a single PDF file before uploading it in the appropriate window of the **Forms Tab** of the Assurance System.
 - b. **Federal Compliance Materials** –Download, complete and upload the federal compliance packet in the relevant window in the **Forms Tab** of the Assurance System. **Note:** Peer reviewers will see the Required Supplements without a hyperlink within the narrative of the Assurance Argument.

Materials Set II - Other Supplemental Materials

Please provide electronic versions of the items below. In some cases, hyperlinks to documents are acceptable. Contact Lil Nakutis (lnakutis@hlcommission.org) for more information. Name each document clearly, including the institution’s name and if applicable, location (Institution X Catalog Campus Name). These documents should all be uploaded in the **Evidence File** portion of the Assurance System. **Note:** As with all documents in the Evidence File, **these documents should be specifically referenced and hyperlinked within the narrative of the Assurance Argument.**

1. All current faculty and staff handbook(s)
2. All current student handbook(s)
3. Audited financial statements for the two most recent fiscal periods
4. All current institutional catalog(s) or course bulletin(s)

Documents for the Team

Peer reviewers will access all materials from the Assurance System. The institution should not provide hard copies of materials to the team, as teams are expected to work from electronic documents in preparation for and throughout the visit.

Note: If after the Assurance System Lock Date and during the course of the process, the evaluation team requests additional materials, the team chair will enable the **Addendum Tab** in the Assurance System to permit the institution to submit such materials.

Questions? Questions about the process outlined in this document may be directed to Lil Nakutis (lnakutis@hlcommission.org) or Anthea Sweeney (asweeney@hlcommission.org).

Institutions Hosting Biennial Visits

A webinar titled “Assurance Tips for Institutions Seeking Accreditation” is available to clarify the process for preparing materials in the Assurance System. Please contact Anthea Sweeney (asweeney@hlcommission.org) for more information.