

Using the Assurance System in the Accelerated Process for Initial Accreditation

A Supplemental Guide for Institutions

The Higher Learning Commission's (HLC's) Assurance System is an online tool designed to assist the work of institutions and peer reviewers in the preparation for, and conducting of, accreditation reviews that center on the Criteria for Accreditation. Institutions participating in HLC's [Accelerated Process for Initial Accreditation](#) use HLC's Assurance System in ways that are both the same as and different from institutions not participating in the Accelerated Process.

In particular, institutions in the Accelerated Process use the system in the same way as other institutions preparing for and undergoing a comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation. However, one important step prior to the comprehensive evaluation is the preliminary peer review, which uses the Assurance System in an abbreviated fashion. This document, which is only intended for institutions preparing for the preliminary peer review as part of the Accelerated Process for Initial Accreditation, is supplemental to other HLC [training and documentation](#) on using the Assurance System. This guide focuses on the institution's responsibilities in preparation for and following the preliminary peer review. After reviewing this guide, institutional representatives with questions about these responsibilities should [contact](#) HLC staff for clarification.

Preliminary Peer Review

The preliminary peer review is a streamlined approach to ascertain readiness for the institution to proceed in the Accelerated Process for Initial Accreditation. As part of the review, institutions will use the Assurance System to submit an abbreviated Assurance Filing demonstrating that the institution has provided sufficient information regarding each of HLC's Criteria for Accreditation to proceed, as well as the following items:

- [Institutional Data Form](#)
- [Compliance With Eligibility Requirements Form](#)
- [Compliance With Assumed Practices Form](#)

In this step, the institution uses only a subset of the Assurance System to provide narrative at the Criterion level in the Assurance System's five Criterion Summary sections rather than writing to the detailed level of each Criterion's Core Components. The narrative should include links to specific evidentiary materials, which the institution will upload to the Evidence File section of the Assurance System. The word limit for the narrative portion of the preliminary peer review is approximately 1,500 words or fewer per section.

In consultation with the institution, HLC will set a lock date for the institution's Assurance System site. The institution must provide its narrative and upload the required forms to the Forms tab prior to that date. When the site locks, the institution's materials will be shared with the peer review panel for their evaluation. The institution will retain read-only access to the site, but will not be able to add, edit, or delete anything until this step is complete and the site is unlocked by HLC staff. The peer review panel takes approximately four weeks to conduct its review, and the institution is notified of their decision by HLC shortly thereafter.

Comprehensive Evaluation for Initial Accreditation

After the preliminary peer review is complete and if the peer review panel indicates that the institution may proceed in the accelerated process, the site is unlocked by HLC staff, and the institution regains full access to the site. A new lock date is identified based on the date on which the comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation will begin; this date is identified by HLC in consultation with the institution.

The institution then resumes its preparation for the comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation by shifting its focus from the abbreviated nature of the preliminary peer review to a more detailed focus at the Core Component level. Institutions will need to revise the narrative that they provided in the five Criterion summary sections of the Assurance system. It is likely that much of that narrative can be relocated to the Core Component sections and supplemented by additional detail and links to uploaded evidentiary documents, as appropriate. In preparation for the comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation and in contrast to the preliminary peer review, the expectation now is that the Criterion summary sections in the Assurance System are quite brief, typically a paragraph or two summarizing information from the constituent Core Component sections.

Once this shift is made following the preliminary peer review, the regular [comprehensive evaluation process](#) is followed thereafter, as noted on HLC's website and as is communicated to the institution in subsequent stages of the process. This includes the assignment of an [HLC staff liaison](#), whose role is to serve as the institution's primary contact to HLC and to advise institutions about HLC's policies and procedures and help coordinate the peer review and decision-making process.

Questions?

Contact HLC at seekingaccreditation@hlcommission.org