Higher Learning Commission

On-Site Visits

This procedure identifies the general expectations for institutions undergoing evaluation and for peer reviewers serving on teams conducting on-site visits. The specific visit process may vary depending on the type of evaluation being conducted. Institutions and peer reviewers should consult materials provided by HLC at the time of an on-site visit for further information.

Table of Contents

The Role of the Peer Review Team

The peer review team evaluates the institution to determine the extent to which it is in compliance with HLC requirements, makes recommendations to HLC decision-making bodies regarding the outcome of the evaluation, and provides informal input relative to the ongoing improvement of the institution.

Institutional Communication About the On-Site Visit

The institution is expected to inform the campus community about the visit. The institution should:

- Announce the dates of the visit to all constituent groups.
- Publicize the schedule of the team's open meetings.
- Contact students, employees, and other constituents who may be invited to participate in the visit and arrange tentative time frames for access.
- Be receptive to times for team members to interact informally with members of the institution.
- Consult with the team chair regarding requests from any special groups to meet with the team; the chair will make the final decision about whether to accommodate such requests.

The institution may share the names of team members, their titles, and their institutional affiliations. The institution should not share contact information for the team members (street addresses, email addresses, phone numbers) and it should not identify the team's place of lodging during the visit.

Team Expenses

Team members are expected to pay for their own expenses during the visit and to seek reimbursement from HLC. Following the visit, HLC bills the institution for the evaluation visit and team expenses, which typically include travel, honoraria and facility expenses for team members.

The institution has no other direct financial responsibility for the team's transportation, housing, and meals, unless it chooses to host a limited social event. The institution should not establish a master bill for the team or pay bills that clearly belong to the team.

The institution also is not obligated to transport the team during the visit; if it does provide a car or livery service, it absorbs those costs directly. Any exceptions to this procedure should receive prior approval from HLC staff.

Team members are expected to act with appropriate fiscal moderation while conducting an institutional evaluation. The basic assumption is that arrangements should be professional and comfortable to allow the team to conduct its work without distraction. Arrangements should neither be extravagant nor overly modest.

Gifts for the Team

Team members are not permitted to accept gifts, incentives, or other compensation from any institution under review unless those gifts are nominal in nature (less than $50 fair market value per individual gift, such as a branded mug) or of particular cultural significance to the hosting institution.

Hotel Accommodations

While team members will pay for their hotel accommodations, the institution, in consultation with the team chair, should make hotel reservations for the team; this should be done early to ensure availability. Teams often meet late into the evening and therefore, if possible, hotel arrangements may include a room in which the team can meet as a group. Wireless internet access must be available to the team for them to do their work. The team chair will notify the institution of any special needs of team members.

On-Campus Meeting Space and Support

The team chair will advise the institution about the team's needs on campus. The institution should provide the team with a secure workspace on the campus that includes internet access and ready access to a printer and photocopier.

Once on campus, the team will need the assistance of a person who can help with the scheduling of interviews and with accessing any needed materials. Technology support should also be available for team members.

Team Activities on Campus

Team chairs take the lead in establishing the basic visit agenda, usually a month or two before the visit, with the understanding that late modifications to the agenda are to be expected. Some team chairs will request scheduled appointments with key people. These may include members of the governing board, representatives of the state coordinating board or other related agency, faculty representatives, student representatives, or alumni and community leaders. Most team chairs ask for a special meeting with the governing board and publicized open meetings with faculty and staff. Meetings will primarily take place in person, but the institution may also provide the option for individuals to participate over video- or teleconference, if needed.

Typically, team members arrive at the institution's main location the day before the visit officially begins, and the team chair convenes an initial team meeting. Through earlier communication, the team chair and the institution's chief executive officer (CEO) have decided whether a get-acquainted gathering will be held on the day the team members arrive. If such an event is scheduled, it is held early in the evening and is relatively brief.

The institution may provide a meal or social function for the team. This event should not be elaborate or costly and should allow the team to accomplish some of its work, such as meeting with a key stakeholder group or an open forum.

Note: The institution should ensure that individuals who meet with the team, either in person or virtually, do not record the meeti ng on their computer, phone or other device.

Observers

Occasionally, the institution or HLC may request that an observer be present for all or a portion of the visit. Observers do not participate in the team's deliberations or decision making. The institution's HLC staff liaison reviews all requests for observers. In most situations, the team chair, the institution, and HLC must agree that the observer may be present during the visit.

If the observer is from a state agency or a recognized accreditor, see Observation of HLC Visits by Other Recognized Accreditors and State Agencies for more information about this process.

Note: In certain situations, HLC expects that the HLC staff liaison or other HLC staff member will accompany the evaluation team. The role of staff on such visits is defined in HLC policy Staff Role and Responsibility (COMM.B.10.010).

Team Communication With the Institution's Chief Executive Officer

For comprehensive evaluations, the peer review team typically starts the first full day of the visit by meeting the institution's CEO and anyone else they invite. This meeting establishes the tenor of the visit and clarifies for the team any unique contexts in which the visit might be conducted. The team is prepared to pose questions, and the CEO is expected to answer them. The team may also use this meeting to confirm appointments with members of the administration, faculty, staff and governing board.

The team chair may meet with the CEO at other times during the visit to summarize the progress of the team and to learn if some constituencies of the institution still expect to talk to the team. The CEO should feel free to ask for time with the chair at any point in the visit, particularly if there are any concerns emerging about the conduct of the visit.

Exit Session

The team may conduct an exit session at the conclusion of the visit. Holding an exit session is optional and at the team's sole discretion. If held, an exit session is an opportunity for the team to thank the institution for its efforts and to share with the institution the team's initial observations about strengths and concerns, as well as information about next steps in the review and decision processes. The team will not indicate its recommendations or speculate on its recommendations during the exit session.

The team chair and institutional leadership should ensure that all matters surrounding the exit session are discussed no later than the start of the visit, so that all parties may prepare for the exit session appropriately. Exit sessions are typically private meetings with the institution's president or senior leadership team. With appropriate notice to the team chair, an institution's leadership may designate the exit session as public if necessary to satisfy institutional mandates or as required by applicable laws, but all in attendance should clearly understand that any comments provided are unofficial, limited in scope, and do not

include the final recommendation of the team. In cases involving issues of a highly sensitive nature, the team chair may advise the institution's leadership to host the exit session in a private rather than public fashion.

During the exit session, the team chair may elect to read from a statement prepared by the team, but the team will not invite or respond to questions during the session. No written materials will be provided to the institution, and no audio or video recordings of the exit session are permitted to be made. Because the session is not a publicity event, the media should not be expressly invited; however, they may be in attendance to observe an open meeting as defined and permitted by law.

Team Report and the Decision-Making Process

Following its visit, the team will prepare a report with its recommendation for action by an HLC decision-making body. The institution will have an opportunity to review the draft report for corrections to errors of fact. Errors of fact are statements in the report that are factually incorrect and can be demonstrated as such by evidence available to the team. Examples of this are typographical errors or other mistakes, such as

incorrect enrollment numbers, job titles, etc. The team may accept or decline any corrections provided by the institution.

When the team submits its final report to HLC, the report will be shared with the institution again, and the institution will be invited to submit a response to the team's findings and recommendations. The team report and the institution's evaluation materials and response are sent to an HLC decision-making body for review and action. See HLC's website for more information about the decision-making process.

Beyond the Evaluation

For three years following a visit, peer reviewers may not engage in consulting activities for an institution they have reviewed. The role of peer reviewers in consulting relationships is defined in HLC's Statement on Peer Reviewers Serving as Independent Consultants.

Questions?

Contact the institution's HLC staff liaison with any questions about this process.