

Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation

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At various points in its accreditation relationship with HLC, an institution provides 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. This document is a resource for institutions and peer reviewers alike and is suggestive of the types of evidence closely aligned with HLC's Criteria for Accreditation.

Differing Expressions of Accountability

Mission is the essential driver of the institution's curriculum, student outcomes, research, community engagement, operations and resources, and future goals. In addition to some common types of evidence that most institutions provide (e.g., financial documents, academic catalogs and personnel policies), an institution will also provide additional evidence that best demonstrates its compliance with the Criteria and Core Components according to its mission. The examples below seek to make the centrality of mission explicit as institutions write to the Criteria using evidence relevant to their particular sectors and unique institutional mission.

How to Use This Document

A Starting Point

This document provides suggestions to assist institutions in thinking about possible sources of evidence. The examples provided offer possibilities that would serve as a starting point for institutions when demonstrating their compliance with the Criteria and Core Components.

Not a Checklist

This document should not be viewed by institutions or peer reviewers as an exhaustive list or be used as a checklist either when preparing institutional materials or conducting a review.

HLC encourages institutions to provide evidence that is relevant and persuasive within the context of the institution's mission, student population, and institutional type and sufficient to demonstrating its compliance with the Criteria. The sources listed below are not exhaustive, and the institution may and should provide different information relevant to its specific mission and setting. Depending upon the institution's sector, type or circumstances, some of the examples will **not** be applicable. Further, institutions are not required to use these examples and peer reviewers should defer to institutional determinations instead of requiring any of the sources listed. Again, this document is not intended to serve as a checklist.

Identifying Evidence

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

- Support the institution's argument that it has met the Criteria for Accreditation.
- Substantiate the facts presented in the institutional narrative.
- Respond to the concerns, recommendations and suggestions for improvement of prior peer reviewers.
- 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, operational integrity and financial sustainability.

How Much Evidence to Provide

In order to identify whether any gaps exist in the institution's evidence, institutions should analyze each Core Component from the perspective of the peer review team. The team will base its recommendations on the evidence presented in support of the institution's persuasive argument that it has met the Criteria for Accreditation. 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 its compliance with the Criteria. The institution also should clarify the relevance of any evidence presented and, when applicable, direct peer reviewers' attention to specific information within evidentiary documents.

Common Types of Evidence Provided by Institutions

While there are no specific requirements, institutions regularly provide the following types of evidence, regardless of their sector or mission.

- Mission statement
- Academic catalog
- Student, staff, and faculty handbooks
- Meeting minutes from decision-making groups (for example: institutional board, faculty senate, campus committees)
- Current enrollment and retention data
- Strategic plan
- Operating budget and current financial statements
- Audited financial statements

Sources of Evidence, Depending Upon Mission and Institutional Type

In addition to the most common forms of evidence, institutions should provide additional evidence, which will be specific to their sector and mission. The following are examples of the additional types of information an institution may present in addressing the Criteria and Core Components. This list was developed based on input from institutional representatives and peer reviewers.

Important: Please note that the sources are not exhaustive, and institutions may provide different information relevant to their circumstances. 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 determinations 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. Mission Alignment

The institution's educational programs, enrollment profile and scope of operations align with its publicly articulated mission.

Examples

- Documentation of the history, development and adoption of the institution's mission statement.
- 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 that educational 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.
- 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. Mission and Public Good

The institution's operation of the academic enterprise demonstrates its commitment to serving the public good.

Examples

- The institution's mission documents, if they specifically address the institution's role in the community.
- Brief descriptions of initiatives, services, educational programs, workforce development projects, partnerships and consulting arrangements that meet community or constituent needs.
- Information about the institution's collaborative involvement in local or regional initiatives such as those focused on environmental stewardship, community development activities and sustainability initiatives.
- Evidence that academic programs serve the public good and/or enhance economic development in the region through such activities as advisory boards, training initiatives, clinical sites, workforce development and job attainment.

- Documentation of public events and artistic/cultural series the community may 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).

1.C. Mission and Diversity of Society

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, such as 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, alternative spring break experiences, military service, or entrepreneurship.
- Documentation of student or campus-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.
- Campus definitions of diversity, equity and inclusion, if applicable.
- Student demographics and enrollment strategies that demonstrate a focus on access and inclusion.
- Documentation of campus committees, student organizations and associated activities that support civic engagement, multi-cultural perspectives and global awareness.
- Documentation of events and activities that the institution hosts or in which it participates, if applicable, to support diverse perspectives and global connection.

Criterion 2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

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

2.A. Integrity

Actions taken by the institution's governing board, administration, faculty and staff demonstrate adherence to established policies and procedures.

Examples

- External (independent) and internal audits since the institution's last comprehensive evaluation or Assurance Review.
- Schedule of meetings and associated minutes for institutional decision-making entities, such as board audit and/or finance, strategic planning, capital planning, and facilities planning committees.
- Hiring qualifications and processes for faculty and staff, including a search committee procedure or handbook.
- 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 faculty, staff and students.
- Grievance policies for faculty, staff and students (if not delineated in handbooks) and evidence of adherence to these policies.
- Evidence of adherence to institutional policies on non-discrimination, anti-harassment, anti-nepotism, intellectual property and federal requirements, such as FERPA and Title IX.
- Documentation of adherence to policies related to personnel and student complaints and resolutions.
- Policies related to risk mitigation for events such as public health crises, social unrest, extended technology disruption and natural disasters.

2.B. Transparency

The institution presents itself accurately and completely to students and the public with respect to its educational programs and any claims it makes related to the educational experience.

Examples

- An accurate, updated website.
- Academic catalog that includes program requirements for all degree levels.

- Publicly accessible posting of tuition and fees and net price calculator.
- Course schedule for all degree levels offered.
- Course listing including the range of options for general education courses.
- Published list of all current accreditations and statuses.
- Recruitment and admissions documents for prospective students indicating requirements for institutional and program entry.
- Information regarding study abroad opportunities.
- Information pertaining to the entity that is responsible for the fiscal and operational oversight of the institution, if applicable.
- A sample of academic student organizations and clubs demonstrating the range of groups on campus.
- Agendas and minutes from student athlete advisory committee and/or student government association.
- Information about athletic academic services.
- Examples of a rich campus environment, which may include fine arts offerings, cultural events and academic symposia.
- Documentation of partnerships with internal and external entities to offer community service opportunities or service-learning experiences.
- Documentation of any volunteer clubs and student participation.
- Information about campus newspapers, magazines, radio programming and/or cable television shows.
- Guidance on how to contact faculty and staff.

2.C. Board Governance

In discharging its fiduciary duties, the institution's governing board is free from undue external influence and empowered to act in the best interests of the institution, including the students it serves.

Examples

- Board manual, policies and bylaws, such as a conflict-of-interest policy; documentation of board members' receipt/completion of current documents.
- Board approval of planning and budgeting documents.
- Information about board selection of, evaluation of, and right to terminate the president of institution.
- Documentation of the selection process for board members and for selection of chair, vice chair and other officers.

- Evidence of consideration of board composition, membership and ad hoc committee structure.
- List and bios of board members.
- Dates, agendas and minutes of board meetings and other relevant engagement with campus members for multiple years.
- On-boarding and orientation process for new board members.
- Information about professional development and training for board members.
- Agendas and minutes of governing board demonstrating knowledge and oversight of finances and academic functions.
- Disclosure (and relevant documentation) of superordinate entity or operational partners, as applicable.

2.D. Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression

The institution supports academic freedom and freedom of expression in the pursuit of knowledge as integral to high-quality teaching, learning and research.

Examples

- Policy on freedom of expression and/or academic freedom for campus community.
- Policies and procedures for peaceful assembly of students.
- Statement on censorship.
- Documentation that such information has been conveyed to key constituents via training, handbooks, orientations, and employee on-boarding.
- Listing of activities supported and sponsored by the institution that allow for a discussion of varying views and opinions.

2.E. Knowledge Acquisition, Discovery and Application

The institution adheres to policies and procedures that ensure responsible acquisition, discovery and application of knowledge.

Examples

- Research opportunities and policies.
- Policy on academic integrity.
- Protocol, bylaws and training documentation for Institutional Review Board (or similar entity).
- Institutional animal care and research policy, if appropriate.

- Training programs on plagiarism, citations, online research and use of library resources, artificial intelligence and related technology.
- Applicable policies and procedures in student and faculty handbooks, including student honor code/code of conduct.
- Judicial affairs or student conduct process and training agendas.
- Information about sponsored program and grants office.
- Documentation of research symposia, highlighting faculty and student scholarship.

Criterion 3. Teaching and Learning for Student Success

The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments and support services, and it evaluates their effectiveness in fulfilling its mission. The rigor and quality of each educational program is consistent regardless of modality, location or other differentiating factors.

3.A. Educational Programs

The institution maintains learning goals and outcomes that reflect a level of rigor commensurate with college-level work, including by program level and the content of each of its educational programs.

Examples

- Website and/or academic catalog that states learning goals at the program level.
- Examples of course- and program-learning goals for each degree level across all modes and locations.
- Agendas and minutes from graduate council, faculty senate and/or curriculum review committee meetings.
- A syllabus template or guidelines for course outlines.
- Documentation that supports the method in which the institution determines program levels, such as Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains or other methodology or framework.
- Program-level admission requirements.
- Curricular alignment with national credentialing, such as licensure examinations, as appropriate to specific academic programs.
- External reviews conducted of programs.
- Documentation of any linkages between undergraduate- and graduate-level programs and differentiation of student learning outcomes by level.
- Dual credit guidelines.

3.B. Exercise of Intellectual Inquiry

The institution's educational programs engage students in collecting, analyzing and communicating information; in practicing modes of intellectual inquiry or creative work; and in developing skills adaptable to changing environments.

Examples

- Sample course syllabi that require demonstrated intellectual inquiry and/or creative work product.
- Assessment data that speak to the use of information and inquiry/creative competence.
- Documentation that different modes of inquiry are required in the curricula, and evidence that students engage in them.
- Qualitative data from performances in theater, music, or dance; critiques of artistic practice; recitals, juries, exhibitions of artistic work.
- Documentation of the process for developing curriculum and course outlines.
- List of graduate and undergraduate internship and practica program sites.
- Agendas and minutes of committees related to educational programs.
- Departmental improvement plans.
- 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.
- Documentation that programs meet programmatic accreditation requirements.
- Research symposia.

3.C. Sufficiency of Faculty and Staff

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

Examples

- Policy and procedural documents indicating how faculty qualifications are determined and monitored.
- Student-to-faculty ratio (overall, on-ground, online).
- Evidence that staff and faculty are sufficient to deliver educational experience, according to its mission.
- Summary of qualifications of Student Affairs staff.
- Student-to-staff ratio in direct service areas, as applicable.

- Documentation of professional development and training opportunities for staff and faculty, including support for instructional design.
- Sabbatical policy and how it contributes to high quality programs.
- Guidelines and processes for hiring faculty (such as full-time, part-time, adjunct, online) that are in compliance with HLC's and specialized accreditors' requirements, 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) and staff.

3.D. Support for Student Learning and Resources for Teaching

The institution provides student support services that address the needs of its student populations, as well as the teaching resources and infrastructure necessary for student success.

Examples

- Student handbook.
- Website and/or academic catalog.
- Evidence of use and functionality of student support services, disability services, financial aid, advising, career counseling, campus childcare, cocurricular activities, veteran's affairs and health services with discussion of improvement activities (include for all modalities).
- Evidence of use and effectiveness of writing and math assistance, tutoring programs, or other support provided to students, along with relevant improvement activities.
- Schedule or documentation of student activities, programming and organizations that meet a range of student needs.
- Listing of remedial or developmental courses inclusive of effectiveness information.
- Documentation on how campus advising works (matriculation through graduation).
- Information about computer labs, clinical sites, scientific labs and performance spaces and their role in student success efforts.
- First-year experience program (academic and cocurricular).
- Documentation of undergraduate and graduate student research resources.
- Documentation of programming offered and evaluated by student affairs.

- Information regarding plagiarism and academic integrity training across campus.
- Information about libraries and resources to support learning and research.
- Information about the use of data from internal resources and external services and repositories (national/federal databases, for example) to improve student support activities and services .
- Resources for faculty related to teaching and learning, pedagogy, and student support as pertinent to institution's mission.

3.E. Assessment of Student Learning

The institution improves the quality of educational programs based on its assessment of student learning.

Examples

- Meeting minutes and agendas demonstrating departmental use of assessment data, with evidence of action taken based on review and analysis of data. Such sources may include minutes from faculty senate, assessment committees, and department meetings.
- Evidence that assessment tools are being used, such as curriculum maps, rubrics, internal or external benchmarking, student work products, and employer/graduate school data.
- General education and course-, program- and institutional-level learning goals (as applicable) and outcomes.
- Annual reports of the assessment process.
- Stated expectations of faculty involvement in assessment of student learning.
- Documentation of cocurricular assessment, if applicable, and improvements based on data.
- Assessment plan and/or process and calendar/ cycle.
- Documents and reports using direct measures for assessment of student learning.

3.F. Program Review

The institution improves its curriculum based on periodic program review.

Examples

- Program review policy, processes, schedule and guidelines (such as academic rigor, curricular currency, financial viability, cost and market analysis).
- Sample program review reports.

- 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, Advanced Placement and College Level Examination Program policies and procedures, information on dual credit programs and guidelines, and articulation agreements with other institutions.
- Transfer student resources.
- Internal and external curricular review process.
- Published list of all current accreditations and statuses.
- Documentation of a process for reviewing, approving and implementing new programs.
- Documentation of engagement of faculty, academic administration, and governing board in academic program review process.

3.G. Student Success Outcomes

The institution's student success outcomes demonstrate continuous improvement, taking into account the student populations it serves and benchmarks that reference peer institutions.

Examples

- Benchmarking with peer institutions relative to common data points such as graduation, persistence, retention, completion and transfer.
- Licensure or certification exam data.
- Data on where students go after graduation, such as continuing education, job placement rates, admission rates to advanced degree programs, and participation rates in fellowships, internships and special programs (e.g., Peace Corps and AmeriCorps).
- Collection and analyses of economic information related to graduate earnings, loan debt, and field(s) of employment over time.
- Surveys of alumni.
- State degree requirements and evidence of compliance.
- Results related to participation in Federal, state, or privately funded initiatives related to persistence, completion and retention.

Criterion 4. Sustainability: Institutional Effectiveness, Resources and Planning

The institution's resources, structures, policies, procedures and planning enable it to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its educational programs, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

4.A. Effective Administrative Structures

The institution's administrative structures are effective and facilitate collaborative processes such as shared governance; data-informed decision making; and engagement with internal and external constituencies as appropriate.

Examples

- List of campus committees and teams participating in collaborative planning processes, such as faculty or university senate, assessment committee, general education committee, strategic planning committee, budget committee, policy advisory group, and/or library committee, with descriptions of their roles in such processes.
- 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 institution's organizational structure.
- Resolutions and meeting minutes of different constituent groups.
- Evidence of institutional action based on review of data.
- Evidence of the institution's engagement with community, non-institutional entities and local organizations. Examples might include public transportation, partnerships with local law enforcement, and support for local nonprofit organizations.

4.B. Resource Base and Sustainability

The institution's financial and personnel resources effectively support its current operations. The institution's financial management balances short-term needs with long-term commitments and ensures its ongoing sustainability.

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.
- Documentation of strategic plan investments.
- Budget requests and procedures delineating flow of decision making.
- Projected budgets/pro forma budgets.
- Compliance with bank covenants and lines of credit.
- Endowment drawdown policy (and explanations of any anomalies during a review period).
- Process for monitoring expenses.
- Mission statement and activities of institution's foundation or advancement office, as relevant to the support of facilities and educational programs.
- Fundraising documentation and results.
- Enrollment plan, current enrollment and enrollment projections.
- Evidence of allocation of budget for instruction, strategic plan, mission, professional development and similar priorities.
- Duration and amount of grants received by the institution.
- Evidence of the alignment of planning initiatives with current educational programs, such as facilities planning, budget processes, and advancement initiatives.
- Collective bargaining agreement(s).
- Investment policy and documentation demonstrating compliance.
- Internal budget control policies.
- Bond rating since last comprehensive evaluation or Assurance Review, if available.
- Information about training and professional development for faculty and staff.

4.C. Planning for Quality Improvement

The institution engages in systematic strategic planning for quality improvement. It relies on data, integrating its insights from enrollment forecasts, financial capacity, student learning assessment, institutional operations and the external environment.

Examples

- History and process of strategic plan creation and constituencies involved in such activities.
- Annual updates to strategic plan; status of action plans.
- 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, and market analyses.
- Facilities and technology plans.
- Evidence of attainment of strategic planning goals.
- Documentation delineating linkage between planning, budgeting and evaluation/assessment.
- 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 student satisfaction with facilities, libraries, technology, human resources, security, and other services (e.g., counseling, dining, residence life, student recreation, student activities, parking, for example).
- 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).
- Current rates of and goals for institutional persistence, retention and completion data and reports (include the institution's definitions of these terms), documentation of a consortium for student

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

- 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.
- Information about the effectiveness of the institution's student success center.
- Documentation of utilization of datasets to make improvements.
- Documentation of campus services to support student needs (e.g., writing skills, math tutoring, study skills, time management)
- Analysis of and actions based on suspension and probation trends, DFW rates and tracking in sequenced courses, effects of add/drop and withdrawal policies on student success.
- Analysis of student success based on academic preparation and financial well-being and various demographics.
- Student advising procedures and policies.
- Student exit survey results and action taken to address concerns as applicable.



Related Resources

Criteria for Accreditation

hlcommission.org/criteria

Assumed Practices

hlcommission.org/assumed-practices

Comprehensive Evaluation

hlcommission.org/comprehensive

Assurance Review

hlcommission.org/assurance-review