



ACCELERATED PROCESS FOR INITIAL ACCREDITATION

Policy Change Approved on First Reading

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Board of Trustees (“the Board”) approved this policy on first reading at its meeting on February 25–26, 2021.

Background

Federal regulations that went into effect on July 1, 2020, indicated that the U.S. Department of Education would no longer limit historically regional accreditors’ geographic area of accrediting activities to a federally designated region. This change allows historically regional accreditors, including HLC, to independently choose to expand their individual jurisdictions to operate on a larger geographic scale.

This new proposed policy is a companion to a related [proposed policy change](#), which the Board also approved on first reading at its February meeting, to extend HLC’s jurisdiction for accreditation to institutions of higher education that are incorporated in, or operating under federal authority in, the United States; and that have a substantial presence, as defined in HLC policy, in the United States.

The new policy would establish an accelerated process for initial accreditation for certain institutions. Specifically, this process would allow institutions to be initially accredited by HLC that have a proven history of quality assurance from a historically regional accreditor and that meet certain other requirements after undergoing a rigorous evaluation process, but without serving a period of candidacy.

If the Board adopts the policy on second reading at its meeting in June 2021, conforming changes will be made throughout HLC policies.

For more information, see HLC’s [press release](#) on the proposed expansion of its jurisdiction.

Comments Invited

HLC invites comments on this change before the Board takes final action at its meeting on June 24–25, 2021. Comments can be sent to policycomments@hlcommission.org. Comments are due by May 21, 2021.

Proposed New Policy

Policy Title: Accelerated Process for Initial Accreditation

Number: INST.B.20.032

In some instances, institutions that meet the qualifications listed below may be eligible to apply for initial accreditation through an accelerated process.

The accelerated process is distinct from HLC's other processes for seeking accreditation. An institution participating in an accelerated process does not participate in the Eligibility Process. The institution does not hold candidacy status, and thus does not hold any status with HLC, prior to being granted initial accreditation.

Qualifications to Apply for Initial Accreditation Through the Accelerated Process

An institution must meet the following qualifications in order to apply for initial accreditation through the accelerated process:

1. The institution is currently accredited by an accrediting agency that is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and that is historically known as a regional accreditor;
2. The institution has (a) been accredited by its current accrediting agency for at least the past ten (10) years or (b) has undergone a reaffirmation of accreditation review with its current accrediting agency in the past two (2) years that did not result in a sanction or other similar negative action; and
3. The institution has not been placed on a sanction, show-cause order, or other similar negative action with its current accrediting agency for at least the past ten (10) years.

Application for Initial Accreditation Through the Accelerated Process

An institution that meets the qualifications above may apply for initial accreditation through the accelerated process. As part of the application process, an institution will be required to demonstrate through a peer review process that it meets the qualifications for participating in the accelerated process, and that it otherwise preliminarily meets HLC's requirements, including the Eligibility Requirements.

As part of the application process, HLC may also require that the institution participate in educational activities designed to familiarize the institution with HLC requirements, policies and procedures.

Comprehensive Evaluation for Initial Accreditation Through the Accelerated Process

If peer reviewers determine that the institution is eligible to proceed with the accelerated process, the institution will participate in a comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation. This process will include the institution completing an Assurance Argument and undergoing an on-site visit by peer reviewers. The institution will be required to demonstrate, as detailed below, that it meets HLC's Eligibility Requirements, Assumed Practices, Criteria for Accreditation, and Federal Compliance requirements.

Decision-making for Initial Accreditation Through the Accelerated Process

Consistent with HLC policies, only the Board of Trustees may grant initial accreditation, including following an accelerated process. An institution participating in the accelerated process will also participate in an Institutional Actions Council (IAC) hearing prior to Board action. Prior to being granted initial accreditation following the accelerated process, the institution does not hold any status with HLC.

Evaluative Framework for Initial Accreditation Through the Accelerated Process

The requirements for granting initial accreditation following the accelerated process are as follows:

1. The institution meets each of the Eligibility Requirements.
2. The institution meets each of the Assumed Practices.
3. The institution meets or meets with concerns the Criteria for Accreditation.
4. The institution meets the Federal Compliance Requirements.

If the Board of Trustees grants initial accreditation following the accelerated process, the Board may, in its discretion, grant such initial accreditation subject to interim monitoring, restrictions on institutional growth or substantive change, or other contingencies.

If the Board of Trustees denies initial accreditation following the accelerated process, the institution may choose to re-apply to participate in the accelerated process. Prior to re-applying, the institution must take steps to remedy the underlying circumstances that led to the denial of initial accreditation. Alternatively, an institution may also choose to proceed with applying for status with HLC through the Eligibility Process. If the Board of Trustees does not grant initial accreditation following the accelerated process, the Board of Trustees will inform the institution as to the earliest date it will consider any new application for initial accreditation through the accelerated process, subject to timeframes in HLC policies.

Denial of initial accreditation following an accelerated initial accreditation policy is an adverse action that is subject to appeal.