

Qualifications for Accelerated Process for Initial Accreditation

Proposed Policy Change

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Board of Trustees (“the Board”) approved this proposed policy on first reading at its meeting on June 22, 2023. The Board will take final action on this proposal at its meeting on November 2–3, 2023.

Background

HLC’s Accelerated Process for Initial Accreditation allows certain institutions, with a demonstrated record of quality assurance with certain other recognized accreditors, to pursue an accelerated path to HLC accreditation. Since the process was developed in 2021, HLC has continued to evaluate, and when appropriate revise, the qualifications for when an institution can participate in the accelerated process.

Currently, an institution may participate in the accelerated process if, among other things, it has been accredited by its current institutional accreditor for at least 10 years or has undergone a reaffirmation of accreditation review within the past two years. The proposed change would modify this provision, requiring an institution to have undergone one reaffirmation of accreditation with its current institutional accreditor. Institutions that cannot meet that requirement would also have the option to demonstrate other indicia of continuity and stability in its accreditation history.

Likewise, the policy changes would shorten the time period—from 10 years to five years—during which an institution must not have been placed on a sanction, Show-Cause Order, or other similar negative action with its current institutional accreditor.

These changes would allow for greater flexibility as to how an institution demonstrates a stable and continuous accreditation history with certain recognized accreditors, while still providing for robust quality assurance by limiting the accelerated process to institutions with a proven accreditation record with certain recognized accreditors.

Comments Invited

HLC invites comments on this change before the Board takes final action at its meeting on November 2–3, 2023. Comments can be sent to policycomments@hlcommission.org. Comments are due by September 18, 2023.

Proposed Change

Wording that was deleted or revised is shown as strikethrough (~~old wording~~); new language, whether through addition or revision, is shown in bold (**new wording**). Wording that was moved is shown with a double underline in its new location (moved to) and a double strikethrough in its previous location (~~moved from~~).

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 **all of** the following qualifications in order to apply for initial accreditation through the accelerated process:

1. The institution, ~~in its current form,~~ is currently institutionally accredited (a) by an accreditor that is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and that is historically known as a regional accreditor or (b) by a state entity that is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as an institutional accreditor of degree-granting institutions of higher education;.
2. The institution, in its current form, has ~~(a) been accredited by~~ **undergone one reaffirmation of accreditation with** its current institutional accreditor. ~~for at least the past ten (10) years or (b) has undergone a reaffirmation of accreditation review with its current institutional accreditor in the past two (2) years that did not result in a sanction or other similar negative action; and~~ **If an institution has not, in its current form, undergone one reaffirmation of accreditation with its current institutional accreditor, the institution must be able to demonstrate other indicia of continuity and stability in its accreditation history.**

3. The institution, ~~in its current form~~, has not been placed on a sanction, Show-Cause Order, or other similar negative action with its current institutional accreditor for at least the past ~~ten (10)~~ **five years, and its current institutional accreditor is not currently considering placing the institution on a sanction, Show-Cause Order, or other similar negative action.**

Notwithstanding any institution's ability to meet the above qualifications, nothing in HLC policy nor federal regulations requires HLC to consider any non-member institution for initial accreditation, whether through the Accelerated Process or through the Eligibility Process.

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. Peer reviewers participating in the initial phases of the accelerated process may be Eligibility Reviewers chosen by the Board of Trustees, or other peer reviewers.

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.

Policy History

Last Revised: February 2022

First Adopted: June 2021

Revision History: February 2022

Notes:

Related Policies: