Middle States Commission on Higher Education
3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-2680
Phone: 267-284-5000 Fax: 215-662-5501 www.msche.org

Guidelines

Selection of Peer Evaluators

(Effective January 22, 2010)

The Commission's volunteer peer evaluators include team chairs, team members, periodic review report reviewers, substantive change committee members, finance associates and Commissioners. They are the foundation of the Commission's multilayered accreditation process:

- Volunteer evaluators from peer institutions, often working in a team, use reports, documents, visits, or a combination of these to review an institution and recommend a Commission action.
- A member of an appropriate Commission committee reviews the recommended action and supporting documents, including the institutional response to the peer evaluators' team report, and recommends an action to the committee.
- The committee, in turn, recommends an action to the Commission.
- The Commission decides on the action and informs the institution.

These guidelines outline the principles that the Commission follows in selecting peer evaluators for particular assignments. They build on the Commission's policy statement, "Conflict of Interest: Commissioners and Volunteer Peer Evaluators."

Characteristics of Effective, Appropriate Peer Evaluators

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education aims for accreditation processes in which the Commission's standards are interpreted and applied consistently and the Commission's actions are fair, equitable, and appropriate. **It is thus essential that peer evaluators approach their responsibilities with objectivity, impartiality, rigor, and consistency. Any circumstance that could conceivably affect these qualities is a potential conflict of interest.** In order to preclude actual conflicts, potential conflicts, or even the appearance of conflicts of interest, the Commission strives to avoid assigning a peer evaluator under the circumstances delineated in its "Conflict of Interest: Commissioners and Volunteer Peer Evaluators" policy.

Because the Commission's accreditation standards are applied within the context of each institution's mission, **peer evaluators must also be able to understand and appreciate the mission, goals, culture, values, and perspectives of the institution under review**. While this understanding and appreciation may come from experience at a similar institution, the ideal peer evaluator is sufficiently open-minded and broad-minded to appreciate institutions that differ from his or her own.

Potential peer evaluators fall into a continuum. At one end are peer evaluators from institutions very similar to the one under review in terms of attributes such as Carnegie classification, size, location, diversity, and program mix. At the other end are peer evaluators from institutions completely dissimilar to the institution under review. Peer evaluators at the first end may be more apt to understand and appreciate the institution's mission, goals, culture, values, and perspectives, but over-familiarity may affect objectivity, impartiality, rigor, and consistency. Peer evaluators at the latter end may find it easier to approach their responsibilities with objectivity, impartiality, rigor, and consistency, but they may face a steeper learning curve in understanding and appreciating the institution's mission, goals, culture, values, and perspectives.

The Commission thus aims to avoid either extreme of the continuum. It endeavors to select peer evaluators who are able to appreciate institutional culture and values but who understand that their primary responsibility is to render objective, impartial recommendations. The following circumstances are *examples that might affect* objectivity and impartiality:

- The individual's home institution and the institution under review compete closely, such as for students or significant state funding.

- The two institutions are part of a small established group of institutions such as an athletic conference or a small institutional association, organization, or consortium.

- The two institutions are part of a small informal community or network of peer institutions, such as institutions sharing a relatively specialized mission.

Other valuable characteristics of effective team members include organizational, interviewing, and writing skills and the capacities to spend adequate time preparing for the assignment, to be collegial, to maintain confidences, to avoid prescriptive feedback, to root feedback in the Commission's accreditation standards, and to complete assignments fully and on time.

Selection Process and Responsibilities

Commission staff members are responsible for selecting peer evaluators for assignments. *Final determination of peer evaluator assignments rests with the Commission.*

The Commission generally does not encourage institutions to recommend specific individuals as peer evaluators, as this may imply a level of familiarity that could represent a potential conflict of interest.

Team rosters and other peer evaluator assignments are shared with the institution's president (and, for team rosters, the team chair) as soon as they are complete. If either the president or the chair discerns a conflict of interest with any peer evaluator, he or she should make a formal request for review to the Commission liaison. If the liaison determines that an actual or potential conflict of interest clearly exists, as defined in the Commission's "Conflict of Interest" policy, the Commission will remove the peer evaluator from the assignment. The Commission will consider changes, for reasons other than conflict of interest, only under exceptional circumstances.

The institution is responsible for educating its community about the principles presented in these guidelines, for ensuring that the institutional community understands the Commission's rationale for selecting each team member, and for making sure that all team members, regardless of background and experience, are treated respectfully as professional colleagues.

Decennial Evaluation Teams

The Commission liaison discusses these guidelines with institutional representatives during the self-study preparation visit, with special attention to the characteristics of effective and appropriate team chairs and team members and potential conflicts of interest. Institutional representatives are invited to offer suggestions on appropriate backgrounds and skills of team members, such as expertise in a particular area under review.

The Commission liaison asks the institution's president to endorse the liaison's proposed evaluation team chair before an invitation is issued.

Additional Considerations in Selecting Peer Evaluators

Team Chair

As a key person in the evaluation process, a team chair should bring:

- skills in leadership, facilitation, coaching, organization, and maintaining appropriate control of a team,
- an acceptance of each institution's unique reality, and
- a solid professional background with experience in a leadership position or other substantial position at his or her own institution.

Potential team chairs thus include presidents, provosts, vice presidents, deans, associate vice presidents, other institutional leaders, and faculty with broad, distinguished experience, among others.

For visits to unusually large or complex institutions, or ones with numerous additional locations, the Commission may appoint a co-chair. In these situations, the Commission liaison, chair, and co-chair collectively define the respective responsibilities of the chair and co-chair.

Team chairs may bring someone from their own institution, at their own institution's expense, to assist them in executing their responsibilities as team chair.

Team Size

Teams for comprehensive evaluations typically have six to eight members, including the team chair, to assure a variety of viewpoints and adequate coverage of each of the standards. Teams visiting institutions with focused missions and relatively smaller enrollment may be smaller, while teams visiting complex institutions, including those with numerous locations, may be larger.

Areas of Expertise

The Commission's overall intent in assembling teams for comprehensive reviews is to ensure that the team is capable of reviewing the institution's compliance with all 14 accreditation standards. Because the Commission typically aims for teams of six to eight members, team members are often selected for their capacity to do "double duty." An institutional researcher, for example, might be able to examine both planning and assessment, while a faculty member might be able to examine educational offerings, faculty, and general education.

Most teams for comprehensive evaluations include individuals with the following areas of expertise, in addition to the chair:

- Institutional finance
- Assessment
- Academic and teaching experience in at least one of the disciplines or subjects considered important in the offerings of the institution including, as appropriate, general education
- Online education or other distance education offerings, if such programs are included within the scope of the institution's Middle States accreditation, or if the institution plans to seek Commission approval to offer such programs

The remaining team member(s) bring expertise in other key areas identified through the self-study design and preparation visit that are important to the institution and germane to Commission standards. Examples include:

- Planning
- Institutional research
- Enrollment management, including admissions and/or retention
- Administration and governance
- Student life programs and student development programs
- Student support programs
- Developmental education
- Information literacy
- Graduate programs
- Off-campus programs (especially if additional locations are to be visited)
- Programs abroad
- First-year experience programs

Experience as a Middle States Peer Evaluator

While the Commission aims for a majority of team members to have experience as Middle States peer evaluators, it also aims to include some team members without prior team experience, to introduce fresh perspectives and grow the Commission's pool of experienced volunteers.

Experience at Institutions Accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education

The vast majority of the Commission's peer evaluators are currently employed at institutions accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. At the discretion of the Commission, teams may occasionally include one or more of the following individuals, especially if they have prior experience at institutions accredited by the Commission:

- Individuals currently employed by institutions outside the Middle States region
- Individuals currently employed by organizations that work with higher education institutions, such as the American Council on Education or the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
- Recent retirees from higher education institutions
- Practitioners in fields that are important to the institution

Language Fluency

One of the Commission's Requirements of Affiliation states, "The institution's representatives are able to communicate with the Commission in English, both orally and in writing." When the institution's primary language is not English, the Commission attempts to include at least one person fluent in the institution's primary language on evaluation teams, although this is not always possible.

Commissioners

Commissioners may serve as team members or team chairs. As noted in the Commission's "Conflict of Interest" policy, Commissioners who serve on teams recuse themselves from Commission discussion and votes on actions stemming from the visit.

Prior Evaluations of the Institution

The Commission generally aims to invite peer evaluators who are not overly familiar with the institution, its leaders, and its issues, as articulated in its "Conflict of Interest" policy. But peer evaluators who have previously reviewed the institution may occasionally serve on a subsequent team. This typically happens in complex situations, when it may take exceptional time to understand institutional culture, issues, and history, or when it is important to recognize and appreciate changes since the last visit.

Team Members from the Same Institution

The Commission may occasionally invite two individuals from the same institution to serve on the same team. This is especially possible when the institution under review has few peers and the two individuals have very different institutional roles.

Other Considerations

Because the Commission's concern is with the current status of its institutions and not its aspirations, the Commission does not generally aim to assign peer evaluators from institutions that the institution under review considers aspirational peers. While the Commission aspires for a pool of peer evaluators who are collectively diverse in terms of gender and racial/ethnic representation, it does not typically aim for any particular representation on its teams. The Commission does not collect or maintain information on peer evaluators' personal religious affiliations, and this is not a consideration in assigning peer evaluators.

Special Teams

Selected Topics Evaluation Teams

Selected topics evaluation teams are typically smaller than those for comprehensive reviews. They include a generalist evaluator who reviews compliance with those Commission standards not addressed in the self-study. Teams visiting complex institutions may have two generalist evaluators. Other selected topics evaluation team members are selected based on the areas that are specifically addressed in the selected topics self-study. For more information, see the Commission's *Team Visits* handbook.

Follow-Up Visit Teams

The size and composition of follow-up visit teams depend on the complexity of the issues under review. The team may be as small as one person. The team chair and team members may all be experienced Middle States peer evaluators, depending on the seriousness of the Commission's concerns. In situations where particular expertise and experience are paramount, the team chair and team members may be from institutions that are not peers.

The Commission liaison usually accompanies the team, depending on availability and the complexity and seriousness of the Commission's concerns, to provide orientation for the team as well as interpretation and clarification of Commission policies and standards.

For more information, see the Commission's guidelines on "Follow-Up Reports and Visits."

Applicant Assessment Teams

Applicant assessment teams visit applicant institutions to determine their readiness to be granted candidate status. The team's role is more limited than that of an evaluation team; it examines the institution's compliance with Commission standards but not continuous improvement beyond compliance. It may therefore be smaller. Team members are generally senior administrators and typically include someone with financial expertise. The Commission liaison usually accompanies the team to provide orientation for the team as well as interpretation and clarification of Commission policies. For more information, see the Commission's handbook *Becoming Accredited.*