CHE MSA **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

Follow-Up Reports and Visits

(Effective January 22, 2010)

The Commission typically takes an accreditation action once every five years, following a self-study and on-site evaluation or periodic review report. The Commission requests follow-up reports and visits as part of its action when it is concerned about current or future institutional compliance with one or more of its accreditation standards. The Commission may also request follow-up reports and activities at any other time that it has evidence through institutional reports or visits that the institution may no longer meet requirements of affiliation or accreditation standards. For more information on the circumstances under which the Commission requests follow-up activities, see the Commission's policy statement, "Range of Commission Actions on Accreditation."

The purpose of all follow-up activities is to ensure sustained institutional compliance with the standard(s) under review. Follow-up activities may take the form of reports, visits, or both. The Commission may request any of the following follow-up reports, all of which are addressed in these guidelines:

- Progress reports (previously known as progress letters)
- Monitoring reports
- Supplemental reports (previously known as supplemental information reports)

The Commission may also direct any of the following follow-up visits:

- Commission liaison guidance visits (previously known as staff visits)
- Small team visits
- Substantive change visits to branch campuses and additional locations, which are addressed in separate guidelines.

Commission Support during the Follow-Up Process

Each institution is assigned a Commission vice president who serves as liaison to the institution and is available to answer questions regarding all accreditation matters including follow-up reports and visits. Contact the Commission liaison by telephone or e-mail. The Commission liaison may also be available for a meeting with institutional representatives in Commission offices or during the Commission's annual conference.

Commission Liaison Guidance Visits
(Previously known as Staff Visits)

The Commission directs a Commission liaison guidance visit when it has reason to believe that the institutional community may need additional information and guidance in order to fully understand and address the Commission's concerns. Commission liaison guidance visits are typically conducted by the Commission liaison, who may be accompanied by one or more Commissioners or other peer evaluators. Commission liaison guidance visits are spent discussing the Commission's standards and expectations. These visits are not accreditation reviews and do not result in any Commission action other than to note that the visit has taken place.

The Commission liaison establishes the visit date and schedule in consultation with the institution president. The schedule varies according to the issues at hand but usually includes meetings with key administrators and representative faculty, staff, and governing board members. The liaison may also request one or more open meetings. Once the visit schedule is established, the institution president ensures that the meetings requested by the Commission liaison are scheduled and shared in advance with the Commission liaison.

The institution arranges accommodations for the Commission liaison. On occasion, in consultation with the Commission liaison, the institution may also arrange and pay for flights, local ground transportation, and local meals. See the section on "Fees and Expenses" at the end of these guidelines for more information.

Progress Reports
(Previously known as Progress Letters)

The Commission reaffirms accreditation and requests a progress report when an institution meets the Commission's standards for accreditation, but the Commission needs assurance that the institution is carrying out activities that the institution has reported as planned or being implemented. An institution that has developed a financial plan, for example, might be asked to document in a progress report that the plan is being carried out successfully.

Monitoring Reports

The Commission requests a monitoring report under two circumstances. One is when the institution meets the Commission's standards for accreditation, but the Commission has concerns about ongoing compliance with one or more standards. The other is when the Commission places the institution on warning or probation because of a lack of evidence that the institution is in compliance with one or more standards, and the Commission needs evidence that the institution has made appropriate improvements to bring itself into compliance.

Supplemental Reports

The Commission postpones an accreditation decision and requests a supplemental report when it has insufficient information to substantiate institutional compliance with one or more accreditation standards. A supplemental report is intended only to allow the institution to provide further information, such as audited financial statements that were not complete at the time of an evaluation team visit. Supplemental reports are not intended to give the institution time to formulate plans or initiate remedial action. The time the Commission allows for preparation of a supplemental report is therefore typically relatively short.

Preparing an Effective Follow-Up Report

The Commission offers the following suggestions.

Read and Understand the Commission's Action

Read carefully the Commission's entire action as conveyed in the Commission's letter to the institution's president. The action is also included in the Statement of Accreditation Status, which is available on the Commission's website as part of information provided about the institution. Contact the Commission liaison if anything in the action is unclear.

Understand the Commission's Underlying Concerns and Expectations

The Commission's request for a follow-up report is always based on concern about ongoing compliance with one or more of the Commission's standards. Read the relevant standard(s) in the Commission's publication *Characteristics of Excellence*. Review not only the entire standard but also the introduction to *Characteristics of Excellence,* which explains the Context and Fundamental Elements of each standard.

Also review all reports that were considered by the Commission when it took its action. These may include the institution's self-study and subsequent evaluation team report; the institution's periodic review report and subsequent peer evaluator report; a prior follow-up report; and/or a prior follow-up visit report. If issues identified in the Commission's action are longstanding, review past reports on the issues at hand.

If, after reviewing these documents, any questions about the Commission's concerns and expectations remain, contact the Commission liaison.

Address Everything that is Requested

Include in the report all information requested by the Commission in its action. Write the report so that it clearly documents compliance with the standard(s)—or the aspect of the standard(s)—about which the Commission has indicated concern.

Focus on the Past and Present, Not Intentions or Pledges for the Future

The Commission's interest is with current and sustained compliance with its standards, not intentions to come into compliance at some point in the future. Focus the report on accomplishments and outcomes that have already been achieved. If more work remains to be done, provide concrete details rather than vague generalities, including specific, detailed action plans with specific timelines, accountabilities, and benchmarks.

Focus on Outcomes

The focus of all Commission standards is generally on outcomes more than on the structure or processes used to arrive at those outcomes. For a report on governance, for example, the Commission often looks for evidence that the governance structure is fulfilling its responsibilities rather than just evidence of what the structure is. Similarly, for a report on assessment, the Commission often looks for systematic results of implemented assessments and systematic evidence of how those results are used to improve teaching, learning, and the institution's programs and services, rather than just a description of how assessments are being conducted.

Provide Documented Evidence

The Commission looks for documented evidence, not platitudes or unsubstantiated assertions. Support all claims (for example, "The campus has made major progress toward creating a thriving culture of assessment") with solid evidence…or remove them from the report. The type or extent of evidence that should be provided depends on the nature of the Commission's request. In some cases, specific documents such as a mission statement, strategic plan, board by-laws, or audited financial statements are appropriate. In other cases, excerpts or summaries—but not isolated examples—of evidence may suffice. Documentation of certain board actions, for example, might consist of the text and dates of relevant actions taken by the board rather than the full minutes of the meetings at which those actions were taken. Documentation of faculty qualifications might consist of a table summarizing faculty credentials rather than the full resumes of all faculty. For information on documenting evidence regarding assessment (Standards 7 and 14), see the Commission's publication, "Assessing Student Learning and Institutional Effectiveness: Understanding Middle States Expectations."

Be Forthright and Honest

In all interactions with the Commission, honesty is essential. Omitting relevant information or being selective about evidence that is provided raises questions about the institution's compliance with Standard 6 (Integrity). If progress has been slower than anticipated, explain the underlying reasons and how the institution is addressing them. If the institution cannot comply with a Commission request (if, for example, audited financial statements are not yet finalized by the date the follow-up report is due), explain why and provide a definite date when the requested information will be available.

Be Concise and Well-Organized

Commissioners and other volunteer peer evaluators want to give a follow-up report the careful attention that it deserves. Be respectful of their time. An unnecessarily voluminous report may only frustrate and confuse the reader, so include only those documents or evidence that are essential to demonstrating the institution's compliance with the standard(s) and issue(s) at hand. Avoid "data dumps" of everything that seems remotely applicable, and cull out all irrelevant information and documentation.

Make the report easy to follow. If the follow-up report is extensive, begin it with an outline of the contents that follow. Avoid dense text and use subheadings, charts, and bulleted lists as appropriate. Make sure that readers can easily see the connection between the text of the report and supporting documents by clearly labeling each supporting document and providing clear references to it in the text.

Submit the Report on Time

If an institution fails to submit a follow-up report by the deadline stated in the Commission's action, the Commission may consider the institution to have voluntarily allowed its accreditation to lapse, as explained in the Commission's policy on "Range of Commission Actions on Accreditation." The institution may present its case for continued accreditation by means of a substantive report and/or an on-site evaluation or other action as determined by the Commission. The Commission may require the institution to show cause as to why its accreditation should not be removed.

Follow-Up Report Organization and Format

The Commission does not prescribe any particular length for follow-up reports. Relatively short reports with well-organized appendices are generally the best approach. Keep in mind that self-studies, which document compliance and improvement regarding *all* Commission standards, are typically no longer than 100 single-spaced pages plus appendices. Follow-up reports are generally considerably shorter, in proportion to the number and complexity of issues being addressed. A progress report addressing a solitary, limited issue might run only a page or two, plus supporting documentation.

Follow-up reports should follow the following format.

Title Page

Download and complete the title page template from the Commission's website (www.msche.org).

Introduction

To orient readers who may be unfamiliar with the institution or the situation at hand, provide a few paragraphs that offer a very brief overview of the institution and relevant background or context on the issues or topics that will be addressed in the report.

Also note in this section any relevant changes or developments at the institution, such as changes in institutional leadership or major changes in curriculum, enrollment, or institutional financial health.

Progress to Date and Current Status

For each of the matters addressed in the report, provide a substantive summary, discussion, and analysis of actions that have been taken or implemented and the institution's current status. If appropriate, provide specific details on next steps to be taken to sustain compliance.

Appendices of Supporting Documentation

For each of the matters addressed in the report, append appropriate supporting documentation of relevant evidence that supports the statements made in the report. If one of the topics is planning, for example, append a copy of the institution's strategic plan. If one of the topics is student retention, append evidence that new or modified retention strategies are based on justifiable, realistic, and appropriate assumptions about their likely effectiveness. If one of the topics is assessment, see the Commission's publication, "Assessing Student Learning and Institutional Effectiveness: Understanding Middle States Expectations" for information on supporting documentation.

Conclusion

Conclude with a brief summary and analysis of the institution's progress and current status regarding each matter addressed in the report. As with the rest of the report, keep the conclusion evidence-based and avoid platitudes or unsubstantiated assertions.

Submitting a Follow-Up Report

Follow-up reports and appendices may be submitted on paper or, upon consultation with the Commission liaison, as e-mail attachments. The Commission's Evaluation Services Office contacts the institution two or three months before the report is due with the e-mail address to which the report may be submitted. Paper submissions should be bound only with staples or paper clamps (please do not use loose leaf binders or folders), with four copies sent to the Evaluation Services Office at the Commission. If paper appendices are voluminous, they may be burned onto a CD or provided through clear links to online resources rather than submitted on paper. If appendices are burned onto a CD, label the CD or its case with an index of its contents.

If a small team visit follows submission of the report, follow-up reports and appendices should also be sent directly to the team members, as explained in the next section.

Small Team Visits

The Commission may direct a small team visit after submission of a monitoring report or supplemental report if verification of institutional status requires an on-site review in addition to a document review. As explained in the Commission's policy on "Range of Commission Actions on Accreditation," small team visits are required when an institution has been placed on warning or probation.

Selection of Small Team Members

The Commission liaison is responsible for identifying the peer evaluator(s) who will conduct the small team visit, as explained in the Commission's "Selection of Peer Evaluators" guidelines. The number, backgrounds, and expertise of team members vary according to the number and complexity of issues in the follow-up report. If more than two peer evaluators conduct the visit, the Commission liaison names one as team chair.

The Commission liaison usually accompanies the team to provide orientation for the team members as well as interpretation and clarification of Commission policies.

The Commission liaison generally identifies team members and establishes the date of the visit well before the follow-up report is due. If the Commission has stated that a visit "may" follow submission of the follow-up report, the Commission liaison may identify tentative team members and dates before the report is submitted. The Commission liaison reviews the follow-up report upon receipt and determines whether a visit is needed. The Commission liaison then notifies the institution president (and team members, if they have been identified) whether the visit will proceed or be cancelled.

Setting the Date of the Visit

The Commission liaison is responsible for establishing the date of the small team visit, which typically lasts one to two days, and generally does so in consultation with the team chair and the institution president. Small team visits take place at least one week after the follow-up report is delivered, to give the team members time to review it before the visit. The Commission liaison usually aims to schedule the visit early enough that the team report, institutional response, and chair's confidential brief can be completed and submitted at least two weeks before the next scheduled meeting of the Committee on Follow-Up Activities. If this is not possible, the team's recommended action is considered at the subsequent Committee on Follow-Up Activities meeting. The Commission liaison works with the team chair and the institution president to set deadlines for submission of all required reports after the visit.

Preparation for the Visit

Once the small team members and visit date have been confirmed, a Commission staff member communicates with the team and the institution president to:

- Provide the full text of the Commission action that led to the visit.

- Confirm the date(s) of the visit.
- Share the names, titles, and contact information of the team members and the institution president.
- Ask the team chair and the institution president to advise the team of the specific times when the visit will begin and when it will conclude, so team members can make travel plans.
- Remind the institution president that the institution is expected to make appropriate hotel reservations for team members and communicate this information to them, along with information regarding transportation arrangements.
- Provide copies of the institution's Statement of Accreditation Status, Institutional History, and most recent Institutional Profile.
- Refer everyone to online copies of *Characteristics of Excellence* and these guidelines.
- Request that the institution president arrange to send to all team members, by the deadline specified in the Commission's action,
    - The follow-up report and supporting documentation;
    - Institutional reports and peer evaluator reports that preceded the Commission's action (for example, the most recent self-study and evaluation team report, the most recent periodic review report and PRR evaluators report, or the most recent monitoring report and small team report);
    - Links to current online catalog(s) or paper copies if the catalogs are not available online; and
    - Any other information that the institution president believes would be useful to the team.
- Give the team members a travel expense voucher to claim transportation and other out-of-pocket expenses at the conclusion of the visit.

The institution arranges accommodations for the team member(s). On occasion, in consultation with the Commission liaison and team members, institutions may also arrange and pay for flights, local ground transportation, and local meals. See the section on "Fees and Expenses" at the end of these guidelines for more information.

Follow-up reports and appendices may be sent to team members on paper or, upon consultation with the Commission liaison and team chair, as e-mail attachments. If paper appendices are voluminous, upon consultation with the Commission liaison and team chair they may be burned onto a CD or provided through clear links to online resources rather than submitted on paper.

Once team members receive the follow-up report and supporting materials, they study these materials, *Characteristics of Excellence*, and relevant Commission policies. They keep detailed notes on their analysis so that, before arriving on campus, they will have identified major strengths and weaknesses, areas of concern, gaps in information, and other useful areas of inquiry. The team chair may choose to hold a conference call with team members and the Commission liaison to discuss the report and any implications for the schedule and conduct of the visit.

Schedule for the Visit

The team chair establishes the visit schedule in consultation with the institution president, team members, and the Commission liaison. The schedule varies according to the issues at hand but usually includes meetings with key administrators, governing board members, and representative faculty, staff, and students, plus time for the team members to confer as a team. The schedule may also include, if needed, a tour of facilities and/or time to review onsite documents.

Once the visit schedule is established, the institution president ensures that the meetings requested by the team chair are scheduled and the schedule is shared in advance with team members and the Commission liaison.

Drafting the Team Report

At the end of its visit, the team drafts a report to the institution and the Commission using a template available on the Commission's website (www.msche.org). Both the institution and the Commission are best served by a report that is candid, honest, clear, and forthright in its appraisal of the institution's strengths and weaknesses and its compliance with Commission standards.

At this time, the team also decides on the action it will recommend to the Commission, using the Commission's "Range of Actions" policy, "Standardized Language" guidelines, and "Summary of Actions a Team May Take or Recommend to the Commission," all available on the Commission's website (www.msche.org). **The team does not share this recommended action with the institution.**

Oral Exit Report

Before leaving the campus, the team chair meets with the institution president to share the key findings of the draft team report. The team then meets with institutional representatives for an oral exit report in which the team chair conveys the substance of the draft team report. The president is encouraged to invite members of the campus community to hear the oral exit report. In the oral exit report, the team chair conveys the team's conclusions about the institution's compliance with the Commission's standards and its plans for improvement, along with the team's key commendations, recommendations, and suggestions. The oral exit report must not differ materially from the draft team report and should be equally candid, honest, clear, and forthright. **Under no circumstances does the team chair or any other team member share with the institution the action that the team is recommending to the Commission.** The team's recommendation is only the first step in the peer review process and is subject to change.

Finalizing the Team Report

Within one week after the visit, the team chair completes the draft team report and sends it to the institution president. The report must not differ materially from the oral exit report. **As with the oral exit report, the report does not include the action that the team is recommending to the Commission.**

The institution reviews the draft report and, within one week, notifies the team chair **only** of any errors of fact.

Within one week of receiving the institution's corrections, if any, the team chair sends one copy of the final report to the institution president and to each team member and three copies to the Evaluation Services Coordinator at the Middle States Commission office. E-mailed reports may be acceptable, upon consultation with the Commission liaison.

Depending on the dates of the small team visit and the next meeting of the Committee on Follow-Up Activities, the team chair, institution president, and Commission liaison may agree to different deadlines for these steps that ensure that all reports are completed and submitted in time for consideration by the Committee on Follow-Up Activities at its next meeting.

Institutional Response to the Team Report

Within one week of receiving the final team report, the institution president submits a formal institutional response to the team report. (Again, the team chair, institution president, and Commission liaison may agree to a different deadline as necessary to ensure that all reports are completed and submitted in time for consideration by the Committee on Follow-Up Activities.) The response is a letter addressed to the Commission on Higher Education, in care of the Commission President. The institution mails the original and two copies of the response to the Evaluation Services Coordinator at the Middle States Commission office. An e-mailed institutional response may be acceptable upon consultation with the Commission liaison.

The institutional response should be brief, thoughtful, and forthright. It should focus on major specific issues, such as significant differences with perceptions and/or interpretations, rather than minor points of disagreement. Additional information, or analyses that differ from those of the team, may be helpful to the Commission.

If the Commission does not receive the institutional response when it is due, the Commission may choose not to act on the team report or to act without the institutional response.

Chair's Confidential Brief

Immediately following completion of the team report, the chair prepares a confidential brief using a template available on the Commission's website (www.msche.org). The chair submits the brief only to the Commission, addressed to the Evaluation Services Coordinator at the Middle States Commission office. An e-mailed report may be acceptable, upon consultation with the Commission liaison.

The brief, which should be no more than a few pages long, should address only those standards under review by the team. The brief summarizes and interprets the team report, including its recommendations, and presents the action that the team recommends to the Commission. The team report and institutional response will be available to Commissioners, so the brief should summarize rather than repeat the team report. It cannot substantively alter the content or tone of the team report. **The chair's brief addresses only the information included in the team report and any developments since the small team visit to which the institution has been offered a documented opportunity to respond.**

Commission Review and Actions After Follow-Up Reports and Small Team Visits

The follow-up report (along with, if a small team visit was conducted, the team report, institutional response, and chair's confidential brief) is placed on the agenda for consideration by the Commissioner-members of the Committee on Follow-up Activities.

Monitoring reports and supplemental reports are reviewed by a member of the committee and the Commission liaison. Progress reports (formerly known as progress letters) are initially reviewed by the Commission liaison. If the liaison judges the report to be adequate and acceptable, a recommendation for action is placed on the committee's consent agenda. If the liaison believes that the progress report may not adequately address issues or topics, the institution is placed on the committee's discussion agenda.

The Committee on Follow-up Activities subsequently forwards its recommendation for action to the Commission for consideration at the Commission's next regularly scheduled meeting. Actions taken by the Commission are consistent with the options outlined in the Commission's policy on "Range of Commission Actions on Accreditation."

Fees and Expenses

Institutions pay for the travel expenses of all Commission visitors, both volunteers and staff, who participate in follow-up visits, in accordance with the Commission's "Travel Expenses" administrative procedures. This includes travel to the institution or site, meals, lodging, and incidental expenses such as tips.

Institutions also pay a fee for small team visits, as explained in the Commission's "Dues and Fees" policy.

Institutions should not reimburse Commission visitors directly. Most institutions arrange to have hotel expenses billed directly to them. On occasion, in consultation with the Commission liaison and team members, institutions may also arrange and pay for flights, local ground transportation, and local meals. Otherwise, immediately after a visit, Commission visitors use an expense voucher to submit to the Commission all expenses associated with the visit that are not billed directly to the institution including travel costs, meals, lodging, and associated expenses. The Commission reimburses the visitors and submits an invoice to the institution.

International institutions and those with international locations should note that the Commission allows visitors to fly business class to international locations under certain circumstances, as described in the Commission's "Travel Expenses" administrative procedures.