

MIDDLE STATES COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

CHARACTERISTICS OF EXCELLENCE

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PREAMBLE

Statement Regarding the Purpose of

And Commitment to

Accreditation

by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education

An institution of higher education is a community dedicated to students, to the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, to the study and clarification of values, and to the advancement of the society it serves. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), through accreditation, mandates that its member institutions meet rigorous and comprehensive standards, which are addressed in the context of the mission of each institution and the culture of ethical practices and institutional integrity expected of accredited institutions. In meeting the quality standards of MSCHE accreditation, institutions earn accredited status, and this permits them to profess unequivocally: “Our students are well-served; society is well-served.”

Standard I: Mission and Goals

The institution's mission defines its purpose within the context of higher education, whom it serves, and what it intends to accomplish. The institution's stated goals are clearly linked to its mission and specify how the institution fulfills its mission.

Criteria

An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates the following attributes or activities:

1. clearly defined mission and goals that:
 - a. are developed through appropriate collaborative participation by all who facilitate or are otherwise responsible for institutional development and improvement;
 - b. address external as well as internal contexts and constituencies;
 - c. are approved and supported by the governing body;
 - d. guide faculty, administration, staff, and governing bodies in making decisions related to planning, resource allocation, program and curricular development, and definition of institutional and educational outcomes;
 - e. include support of scholarly inquiry and creative activity, at levels and of the type appropriate to the institution;
 - f. are publicized and widely known by the institution's members;
 - g. are periodically evaluated;
2. institutional goals that are realistic, appropriate to higher education, and consistent with mission; and
3. goals that focus on student learning and related outcomes that are supported by administrative, educational, and student support programs and services, the institutional mission, and institutional improvement.

Standard II: Ethics and Integrity

Ethics and Integrity are central, indispensable, and defining hallmarks of effective higher education institutions. In all activities, whether internal or external, an institution must be faithful to its mission, honor its contracts and commitments, adhere to its policies, and represent itself truthfully.

Criteria

An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates the following attributes or activities:

1. a commitment to academic freedom, intellectual freedom, freedom of expression, and protection of intellectual property rights;
2. a climate that fosters respect among students, faculty, staff, and administration from a range of diverse backgrounds, ideas, and perspectives;
3. fair and impartial processes, published and widely available, to address grievances raised by students, faculty, or staff. The institution assures that grievances are addressed promptly, appropriately, and equitably;
4. the avoidance of conflict of interest or the appearance of such conflict in all activities and among all constituents;
5. fair and impartial practices in the hiring, evaluation and separation of employees;
6. honesty and truthfulness in public relations announcements, advertisements, recruiting and admissions materials and practices, as well as in internal communications;
7. as appropriate to its mission, services or programs in place:
 - a. to promote affordability and accessibility;
 - b. to enable students to understand funding sources and options, value received for cost, and methods to make informed decisions about incurring debt;
8. compliance with all applicable Federal, State, and Commission reporting policies, regulations, and requirements to include reporting regarding:
 - a. the full disclosure of information on institution-wide assessments, graduation, retention, certification and licensure or licensing board pass rates;
 - b. the Commission's Requirements of Affiliation;
 - c. substantive changes affecting institutional mission, goals, programs, operations, sites, and other material issues which must be disclosed in a timely and accurate fashion;
 - d. the Commission's policies; and

9. periodic assessment of integrity as evidenced in institutional policies, processes, practices, and the manner in which these are implemented.

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Standard III: Student Learning Opportunities

An institution provides students with learning opportunities characterized by rigor and coherence appropriate to program, certificate or degree level, and institutional mission. All learning opportunities, regardless of modality, program pace/schedule, level, and setting, are consistent with higher education and societal expectations.

Criteria

An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates the following attributes or activities:

1. certificate, undergraduate, graduate, and/or professional programs leading to a degree or other recognized higher education credential, designed to foster a coherent student learning experience and to promote synthesis of learning;
2. student learning opportunities that are designed, delivered, and assessed by faculty and/or other appropriate professionals who are:
 - a. qualified for the positions they hold and the work they do;
 - b. sufficient in number;
 - c. rigorous and effective in teaching, assessment of student learning, research, and service, as appropriate to the institution's mission, goals, and policies;
 - d. provided with and utilize sufficient opportunities, resources, and support for professional growth and innovation;
 - e. reviewed regularly and equitably based on written, publicly available, clear, and fair criteria, expectations, policies, and procedures;
3. programs that are clearly and accurately described in official publications of the institution in a way that students are able to understand and follow degree and program requirements and expectations for time to completion;
4. sufficient learning opportunities and resources to support both the institution's educational programs and students' academic progress;
5. a general education program that:
 - a. offers a sufficient scope to draw students into new areas of intellectual experience, expanding their cultural and global awareness and cultural sensitivity, and preparing them to make well-reasoned judgments outside as well as within their academic field;
 - b. offers a curriculum designed so that students acquire and demonstrate essential skills including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competency. Consistent with mission, the general education program also includes the study of values, ethics, and diverse

- perspectives;
 - c. provides evidence, in graduate programs that do not include general education, that, at admission, students can demonstrate appropriate general education skills;
 - d. provides evidence that students can demonstrate general education skills in non-US institutions that do not include general education;
6. when applicable, adequate and appropriate institutional review and approval has been completed on student learning opportunities designed, delivered, or assessed by third-party providers; and
 7. periodic evaluation of the effectiveness of programs providing student learning opportunities.

Standard IV: Support of the Student Experience

Across all educational experiences, settings, levels, and modalities, the institution recruits and admits students whose interests, abilities, experiences, and goals are congruent with its mission and educational offerings. The institution commits to student retention, persistence, and completion through a coherent and effective support system sustained by qualified professionals, which enhances the quality of the learning environment, contributes to the educational experience, and fosters student success.

Criteria

An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates the following attributes or activities:

1. a clearly stated, ethical program to admit, retain, and facilitate the success of students whose interests, abilities, experiences, and goals provide a reasonable expectation for success and are compatible with the institutional mission. This program includes:
 - a. accurate and comprehensive information regarding expenses, financial aid, scholarships, grants, loans, repayment, and refunds;
 - b. a process by which students who are not adequately prepared for study at the level for which they have been admitted are identified, placed, and supported in attaining educational goals;
 - c. orientation, advisement, and counseling programs to enhance retention and guide students throughout their educational experience;
 - d. processes designed to enhance the successful achievement of students' educational goals including degree completion, transfer to other institutions, and post-completion placement;
2. policies and procedures regarding evaluation and acceptance of transfer credits, and credits awarded through experiential learning, prior non-academic learning, competency-based assessment, and other alternative learning approaches;
3. reasonable, widely disseminated, and appropriately documented procedures for equitably addressing student complaints or grievances;
4. policies and procedures for the safe and secure maintenance and appropriate release of student information and records;
5. if offered, athletic, student life, and other extracurricular activities that are regulated by the same academic, fiscal, and administrative principles and procedures that govern all other programs;
6. if applicable, adequate and appropriate institutional review and approval of student support services designed, delivered, or assessed by third-party providers; and

7. periodic evaluation and improvement of the effectiveness of programs supporting the student experience.

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Standard V: Educational Effectiveness Assessment

Assessment of student learning demonstrates that, across all levels and modalities of the learning experience, at graduation and at other appropriate points, the institution's students have achieved knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with their degree level, institutional goals, and appropriate higher education and societal expectations.

Criteria

An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates the following attributes or activities:

1. clearly stated student learning outcomes, at the institution and degree/program levels, which are interrelated with one another, with relevant educational experiences, and with the institution's mission;
2. assessments demonstrating the extent of student achievement of institutional and degree/program outcomes. These assessments include examples of the extent to which student work and performance demonstrate the achievement of stated learning outcomes;
3. consideration and use of assessment results for the improvement of educational effectiveness. Consistent with the institution's mission, such uses include some combination of the following:
 - a. assisting students in improving their learning;
 - b. improving pedagogy and curriculum;
 - c. reviewing and revising academic programs and support services;
 - d. planning, conducting, and supporting a range of professional development activities;
 - e. planning and budgeting for the provision of academic programs and services;
 - f. informing appropriate constituents about the institution and its programs;
 - g. improving key indicators of student success, such as retention, graduation, transfer and placement rates;
 - h. implementing other processes and procedures designed to improve educational programs and services;
4. clear expectations for assessment activities that are institutionally supported, sustained, well-articulated, and communicated to stakeholders;
5. if applicable, adequate and appropriate institutional review and approval of assessment services designed, delivered, or assessed by third-party providers; and
6. periodic evaluation of the assessment processes utilized by the institution for the improvement of educational effectiveness.

Standard VI: Planning, Resources, and Institutional Improvement

The institution's planning processes, resources, and structure are aligned with each other and sufficient to fulfill its mission and goals, continuously assess and improve its programs and services, and respond effectively to opportunities and challenges.

Criteria

An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates the following attributes or activities:

1. institutional objectives, both institution-wide and for individual units, that are clearly stated, measurable, linked to mission and goal achievement, reflect conclusions drawn from assessment results, and are used for planning and resource allocation;
2. clearly documented and communicated planning and improvement processes that provide for constituent participation, and incorporate the use of assessment results;
3. a financial planning and budgeting process that is evidence-based, aligned with the institution's mission and goals, and clearly linked to the institution and unit strategic plans/objectives;
4. fiscal and human resources as well as the physical and technical infrastructure adequate to support its operations wherever and however programs are delivered;
5. well-defined decision-making processes, assigned authority that facilitates planning and renewal, and assignment of responsibility and accountability;
6. comprehensive planning for facilities, infrastructure, and technology, that includes consideration of sustainability and deferred maintenance that is linked to the institution's strategic and financial planning processes;
7. an annual independent audit confirming financial viability with evidence of follow-up on any concerns cited in the audit's accompanying management letter;
8. strategies to measure and assess the adequacy and efficient utilization of institutional resources required to support the institution's mission and goals; and
9. periodic assessment of the effectiveness of planning, resource allocation, institutional renewal processes and availability of resources.

Standard VII: Governance, Leadership, and Administration

The institution is governed and administered in a manner that allows it to realize its stated mission and goals in a way that effectively and efficiently benefits the institution, its students, and the communities it serves.

Criteria

An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates the following attributes or activities:

1. a clearly articulated and transparent governance structure that clearly outlines roles, responsibilities, and accountability for decision making for each constituency, including governing board, administration, faculty, staff and students;
2. a legally constituted governing structure that:
 - a. serves the public interest, ensures that the institution clearly states and fulfills its mission and goals, has fiduciary responsibility for the institution, and is ultimately accountable for the academic quality, planning, and fiscal well-being of the institution;
 - b. has sufficient independence and expertise to ensure the integrity of the institution. Members must have primary responsibility to the accredited institution and not allow political, financial or other influences to interfere with their governing responsibilities;
 - c. ensures that neither the governing body nor its individual members interfere in the day-to-day operations of the institution;
 - d. oversees at the policy level, the quality of teaching and learning; the approval of degree programs and the awarding of degrees; establishment of personnel policies and procedures; approval of policies and by-laws; and the ensurance of strong fiscal management;
 - e. prepares, reviews, and modifies as needed written by-laws under which it operates;
 - f. delineates processes for regularly selecting and orienting new members; provides continuing education for current members; and conducts periodic, objective self-assessment;
 - g. plays a basic policy-making role in financial affairs to ensure integrity and strong financial management. This may include a timely review of audited financial statements and/or other documents related to the fiscal viability of the institution;
 - h. considers institutional assessment results as it participates in institutional planning;
 - i. certifies to the Commission that the institution is in compliance with requirements of affiliation and accreditation standards and policies; describes itself in identical terms to all of its accrediting and regulatory agencies;

- communicates any changes in its accredited status; and, agrees to disclose information (including levels of governing body compensation, if any) required by the Commission to carry out its accrediting responsibilities;
 - j. establishes and complies with a written conflict of interest policy designed to ensure the impartiality of the governing body by addressing matters such as payment for services, contractual relationships, employment, and family, financial or other interests that could pose or be perceived as conflicts of interest;
 - k. supports the Chief Executive Office in maintaining the autonomy of the institution;
 - l. evaluates the performance of the Chief Executive Officer on a regular basis;
 - m. plans for continuity of leadership;
3. a Chief Executive Officer who:
- a. is appointed by, evaluated by, and reports to the governing body and shall not chair the governing body;
 - b. has appropriate credentials and professional experience consistent with the mission of the organization;
 - c. has the authority and autonomy required to fulfill the responsibilities of the position including developing and implementing institutional plans, staffing the organization, locating and allocating resources, and directing the institution toward attaining the goals and objectives set forth in its mission;
 - d. has the assistance of qualified administrators, sufficient in number, to enable the Chief Executive Officer to discharge his/her duties effectively;
 - e. is responsible for establishing procedures for assessing the organization's efficiency and effectiveness; and
4. an administration possessing or demonstrating:
- a. an organizational structure that is clearly documented and that clearly defines reporting relationships;
 - b. an appropriate size and with relevant experience to assist the Chief Executive Officer in fulfilling his/her roles and responsibilities;
 - c. members with credentials and professional experience consistent with the mission of the organization and their functional roles;
 - d. skills, time, assistance, technology, and information systems expertise required to perform their duties;
 - e. regular engagement with faculty and students to be effective in advancing the institution's goals and objectives;
 - f. systematic procedures for evaluating administrative units and for using assessment data to enhance operations;

Verification of Compliance with Accreditation-Relevant Federal Regulations

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education, as a federally recognized accreditor, is obligated to ensure that its candidate and member institutions comply with accreditation-relevant federal regulations. This document is focused on the Commission's verification of institutional compliance in several areas:

- student identity verification in distance and correspondence education
- transfer of credit policies and articulation agreements
- Title IV program responsibilities
- institutional records of student complaints
- required information for students and the public
- standing with state and other accrediting agencies
- contractual relationships; and
- assignment of credit hours

In the event that one or more of these regulations do not apply to an institution, that institution shall indicate that fact in the compliance document. Otherwise, all accredited and candidate institutions must respond with regard to each of the areas.

These areas may also be reviewed as part of the self-study or periodic review process, especially as they relate to the MSCHE Standards.

Please note that as additional guidance is received from the U.S. Department of Education, these guidelines may be modified.

Student Identity Verification in Distance and Correspondence Education

In accordance with 34 CFR 602.17(g), the Commission must verify that Institutions have effective procedures in place to ensure that the students who register in a distance or correspondence education course are the same students who participate in and complete the course, and receive the academic credit.

Institutions must provide the following documentation:

1. written description of the method(s) used to ensure student identity verification in distance or correspondence education courses. Include information related to the Learning Management System (LMS) and integration with college-wide systems;
2. written procedure(s) regarding the protection of student privacy in the implementation of such methods; (Include information related to the Family Education and Privacy Rights Act (FERPA) and student record access and process for resetting student passwords.)

3. written procedure(s) for notifying students about any projected additional charges associated with student identity verification such as proctoring fees; and
4. written procedure(s) indicating the office(s) responsible for the consistent application of student identity verification procedures.

Transfer of Credit Policies and Articulation Agreements

In accordance with 34 CFR 602.24(e), the Commission must confirm that an “institution has transfer of credit policies that: (1) are publicly disclosed in accordance with section 668.43(a)(11); and (2) include a statement of criteria established by the institution regarding the transfer of credit earned at another institution of higher education.”

Section 668.43(a)(11) states:

(a) Institutional information that the institution must make readily available to enrolled and prospective students under this subpart includes, but is not limited to-

(11) A description of the transfer of credit policies established by the institution which must include a statement of the institution’s current transfer of credit policies that includes, at a minimum—

- (i) Any established criteria the institution uses regarding the transfer of credit earned at another institution; and
- (ii) A list of institutions with which the institution has established an articulation agreement.

In addition, the Commission must confirm that any articulation agreements with other educational institutions are readily available to current and prospective students.

Institutions must provide the following documentation:

1. written policies and procedures for making decisions about the transfer of credits earned at other institutions, including all modes of delivery;
2. public disclosure of the policy for transfer of credit. Document the URL and the catalog location of this information; include other publications if available;
3. procedures that indicate the office(s) responsible for the final determination of the acceptance or denial of transfer credit; and
4. a published and accessible list of institutions with which the institution has established an articulation agreement. Document the URL and publication location of this information.

Title IV Program Responsibilities

In accordance with 34 CFR 602.16(a)(1)(x), the Commission must review the institution's record of compliance with its Title IV program responsibilities to determine if that record suggests the institution may not be in compliance with Commission standards and requirements. The Commission is particularly interested in reviewing significant deficiencies and material weaknesses that have been identified and any corrective action plans that have been developed to address those deficiencies and material weaknesses.

Institutions must provide the following documentation:

1. formal documentation from the U.S. Department of Education regarding the institution's cohort default rate for the three most recent years. Provide the most recent 3-year rates and/or 2-year rates supplied by the U.S. Department of Education;
2. reports on compliance from U.S. Department of Education in regard to the cohort default rate;
3. external audits of federal programs (A-133) for the past three years. Include the complete single audit report (A-133) for the most recent three years as an appendix, even if included in other documentation;
4. relevant correspondence from U.S. Department of Education such as program reviews and any actions to limit, suspend, or terminate the institution's eligibility to participate in Title IV. Include institutional responses, if applicable; and
5. Financial Responsibility Requirements – documentation of the three most recent years of composite ratios used by the U.S. Department of Education.

Institutional Record of Student Complaints

In accordance with 34 CFR 602.16(a)(1)(ix), the Commission must confirm that institutions have effective policies and procedures for tracking and resolving student complaints.

Institutions must provide the following documentation:

1. written description of the policy and methods used in handling student complaints;
2. documentation regarding the record of student complaints over the last five years, including the number and type of complaints and their resolution; and

3. written procedure for making modifications and improvements to the institution as a result of information obtained in handling student complaints.

Required Information for Students and the Public

In accordance with 34 CFR 602.16(a)(1)(iv), the Commission must confirm that institutions make available to students and the general public fair, accurate and complete information in catalogs, handbooks and other publications regarding the institution's calendar, grading, admissions, academic program requirements, tuition and fees, and refund policies.

In addition, the Commission must verify that institutions collect and post information on their websites concerning student performance in academic programs and their successful completion. Information should also be available regarding student employment after graduation and performance on licensing exams, as appropriate.

Finally, in accordance with 34 CFR 602.23(d), the Commission must verify that institutions provide clear and accurate information in their advertising and recruiting material about their accreditation status with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

Institutions must provide the following information:

1. URLs for course catalogs and student handbooks, or the location of any alternative institutional website documenting required disclosures;
2. as required by Student Right to Know, the URL and supporting documentation for the following items:
 - a. graduation and completion rate for the student body disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, and receipt of Pell grants;
 - b. overall cohort graduation rate;
 - c. process for withdrawing as a student;
 - d. cost of attendance (i.e. net tuition calculator);
 - e. policies on the refund and return of Title IV funds;
 - f. names of applicable accrediting agencies;
 - g. description of facilities and accommodations available for the disabled;
 - h. policy on enrollment in study abroad;
 - i. as appropriate, licensure pass rates for the most recent three-years;
3. policies covering satisfactory academic progress, attendance and leave of absence. (URL and/or catalog location);
4. written description of the methods used to collect and review information on student outcomes and licensure pass rates; and

5. documents and URLs for advertising and recruitment materials that are available to current and prospective students that show the accreditation status with the Commission and any other U.S. Department of Education approved agencies.

Standing with State and Other Accrediting Agencies

In accordance with 34 CFR 602.28, the Commission must verify that an institution is properly authorized or licensed to operate and is in good standing with each state in which it is authorized or licensed to operate. In addition, if the institution has status with a specialized, programmatic, or institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, the Commission must verify that the institution is in good standing with the agency or agencies.

Institutions must provide the following documentation:

1. written documentation about the relationships with any specialized, programmatic, or institutional accrediting agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and all governing or coordinating bodies in the state(s) and countries in which the institution has a presence; and
2. written documentation regarding any review resulting in a non-compliance action determination by the accrediting agency, state or country within the past five years.

Contractual Relationships

In accordance with 34 CFR 602.22(a)(2)(vii), the Commission is required to review any contractual arrangements an institution enters into with an organization that is not certified to participate in the Title IV, HEA programs and offers more than 25 percent of one or more of the accredited institution's education programs.

As institutions seek to improve the ways in which they provide education to their students, they may find it more practical or efficient to contract with other institutions or organizations to provide certain components of the educational experience. Any institution accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education is held responsible for all activities carried out under the institution's name.

Institutions must provide the following documentation:

1. list of contractual arrangements for educational services; and
2. written documentation of policies and procedures specifying that the institution is responsible for all required segments of the educational service.

Assignment of Credit Hours

In accordance with 34 CFR 602.24(f), the Commission “must conduct an effective review and evaluation of the reliability and accuracy of the institution’s assignment of credit hours.” Specifically, the Commission must review the institution’s policies and procedures for determining the credit hours awarded as well as the application of the institution’s policies and procedures to its programs and coursework, and make a “reasonable determination of whether the institution’s assignment of credit hours conforms to commonly accepted practice in higher education.”

Institutions must provide the following documentation:

1. written policies and procedures for credit hour assignment covering all types of courses, disciplines, programs, degree levels, formats, and modalities of instruction. Include each policy that documents the assignment of credit hours specific to the types noted above. Specify the location of the policy in the catalog and website. The following should be clearly indicated:
 - a. academic period (e.g.,15 weeks plus 1 week exam over two semesters);
 - b. recommended instructional time (e.g., three 50-minute sessions or two 75-minute session per week);
 - c. recommended out-of-class time requirements (e.g., twice in-class time);
2. evidence that the institution’s credit hour policies and procedures are applied consistently across the full range of institutional offerings. If the institution is required to obtain approval from the relevant State Department of Education, compliance with this requirement should be documented. Other evidence must include:
 - a. documentation from recent academic program reviews;
 - b. new course or program approvals;
 - c. documentation for registration software/systems that ensure a consistent schedule of courses based on the credit hour assignment;
 - d. academic calendars and/or schedules, and course matrices;
 - e. documentation of adherence to credit hour requirements, consistent with federal regulations, from a system, or disciplinary organization, etc.;
3. a description and evidence of the processes used by the institution to review periodically the application of its policies and procedures for credit hour assignment. Indicate the individual(s) and/or entities responsible for the final review and approval; and
4. a list of the courses and programs that do not adhere to the federal definition of credit hour or its equivalent as specified in the MSCHE Credit Hour Policy (e.g., online or hybrid, laboratory, studio, clinical, internship, independent study, and accelerated format) and evidence that such variations in credit hour assignment conform to commonly accepted practice in higher education.

- a. Each course or program that does not adhere to the federal definition should be specified and supporting evidence that it conforms to commonly accepted practice should be provided using the criteria described above in Item 2.

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