



Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-2680

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MSCHE Member Institutions to Cast Ballots On Framework of Proposed Changes to Accreditation Processes and Cycle

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education is proposing to change its accreditation processes.

At its March 5, 2015 meeting the Middle States Commission on Higher Education endorsed a proposal to review MSCHE accreditation processes and bring a specific proposal to the Commission's June meeting. At its June 25, 2015 meeting, the Commission received and reviewed a proposal to update and refocus accreditation processes and to change to an eight-year accreditation cycle, and to distribute the proposal for member comment. The Commission endorsed the proposal following its first official reading, and asked the staff to establish a period for comment by member institutions to last through November 2015. The proposal was announced on August 18 in a special edition of the MSCHE newsletter.

Changes Proposed in August

The key components of the proposed processes include the following:

- A Self-Study and Evaluation Team Visit that will include a separate document review to confirm that the institution meets the Standards, freeing the Self-Study Report to focus more directly on institutional initiatives and improvements.
- An Annual Institutional Update submitted electronically by the institution, about which the institution will receive useful feedback.
- An offsite Mid-Point Peer Review of the accumulated information from the Annual Institutional Update between Self-Studies. The institution would not be required to produce a separate report for this review, eliminating the Periodic Review Report.
- An eight-year cycle for Self-Study evaluations.

At the time the Commission announced the proposed changes, it created a new section of its website to describe the proposals in more detail. For more information about the processes please visit <http://www.msche.org/?Nav1=NEWS&Nav2=NEWSROOM&Nav3=PROCESSREVIEW>

Member Feedback

The August 2015 special edition of the MSCHE newsletter that outlined the proposed changes also invited institutional comment via an on-line survey and four Town Hall meetings. By November 2015, 135 individuals had submitted comments through the survey. A total of 415 individuals, representing 214 institutions and six system offices, attended Town Halls held in Jersey City, NJ on September 18, Harrisburg, PA on September 22, San Juan, Puerto Rico on October 13, and Buffalo, NY on October 30.

At each town hall meeting, staff presented information about the proposal, summarized the feedback that had been received to date, and provided clarifications and additional information. A substantial amount of time was allowed for audience questions and comments at each meeting, and all who wished to speak were able to.

Feedback on the proposed changes has been extensive and very consistent. There were some critical comments, most of the feedback was supportive, and many people wanted additional information. The institutional feedback and responses to it are summarized below.

Institutional Self-Study and Evaluation Team Visit

Questions were asked about the proposed documentation review and about the nature of the proposed Self-Study process.

Institutional self-appraisal and review of that self-appraisal by peers have always been—and will remain—at the heart of regional accreditation. The institutional Self-Study will remain an inclusive institution-wide undertaking. There will continue to be a site visit by a team of volunteer peer evaluators. These are widely considered to be the most effective aspects of Middle States accreditation. The changes that are proposed are to introduce an off-site documentation review prior to the team visit and to more explicitly focus the Self-Study Report.

The use of a document roadmap to organize institutional documentation and a document review for compliance with the Standards have been an effective feature of the Commission's Selected Topics Self-Study model for over a decade. The Collaborative Implementation Project to implement the 2014 Standards has introduced the use of the documentation roadmap to all institutions in Self-Study and the proposed Self-Study process will include both the roadmap and off-site documentation review for all Self-Studies. The separate review for compliance with the Standards frees the Self-Study Report from the need to demonstrate that compliance, and having the review prior to the evaluation team site visit enables the institution to address any issues found in the documentation review during the team visit.

The Self-Study Report will focus directly on institutional improvements since the last self-study, institutional initiatives in the present, the cumulative results of the assessment of institutional effectiveness, and institutional improvements now being proposed by the institution for implementation prior to the next Self-Study. Thus the Self-Study Report will be tightly focused and directly related to issues of interest to the institution. There will also be a coherence between sequential Self-Studies that is missing from the current alteration of Self-Study Reports and Periodic Review Reports.

Annual Institutional Update

Many of the questions focused on the proposed Annual Institutional Update, with concerns expressed about the nature of the data elements that will be required and the impact this Update might have on institutional workloads.

Most (70%) of the data elements in the current Institutional Profile are required by federal regulations and will remain in the proposed Annual Institutional Update. The goals of the new Update are to meet external reporting requirements while also gathering data and providing useful feedback to the institution in as convenient a fashion as possible. Any new data elements will be identified in collaboration with representatives of member institutions. Institutions will have the opportunity to provide narrative explanations to aid in the interpretation of their data. Once uploaded, data and documents that do not change will only have to be updated and will be available for the institution's and the Commission's use at all times and for all accreditation activities. In designing the Update every attempt will be made to leverage existing data, avoid duplication, and ensure that information requested will be both useful and used. To achieve these goals the Commission is committed to enhancing its analytics capabilities to enable staff to conduct more in-depth analyses and provide members timely feedback.

Mid-Point Peer Review

There were questions about the relationship of the Mid-Point Peer Review to the Annual Institutional Update and about expectations for institutional progress in four years.

As noted in connection with the *Annual Institutional Update*, each year institutions will update data required by federal regulations and desired by the Commission as determined in collaboration with institutional members. In addition, institutions receiving recommendations from the Commission as an outcome of an accreditation action will submit brief reports on their progress in responding to those recommendations in connection with their Annual Institutional Updates. Because these reports will be iterative they will reflect the institution's on-going improvement efforts; there is no expectation that all changes can or will be made immediately. The institution will not produce a separate report for this review, unlike the current Periodic Review Report.

During the Mid-Point Review peer evaluators will provide a useful report to the institution on what its data and trends in data reveal about the institution's health and its ability to continue to meet the Commission's Standards. In addition, if the institution has reported on its responses to Commission recommendations, the peer reviewers will provide feedback on the progress the institution is making in meeting them.

Eight-Year Evaluation Cycle

The Middle States "ten-year" evaluation cycle has in fact been a five-year cycle, because the Periodic Review Report is also an "accreditation event" at which accreditation is reaffirmed. The proposal will eliminate the Periodic Review Report and will have the most effective of the Commission's accreditation processes—the institutional self-study and evaluation team site visit—occur somewhat more frequently.

Together, the Annual Update and Mid-Point Peer Review processes and the eight-year cycle are intended to facilitate a cumulative and iterative approach to interaction between an institution and the Commission, interaction that supports ongoing and continuous institutional improvement.

Varieties of Follow-Up Activities

The statement that one goal of updating the accreditation processes is to allow them to be "more sensitive to the varying conditions and needs of member institutions" reflects the provision in the proposed processes for a variety of levels and kinds of Follow-Up activities for institutions. The intention is both to reduce unnecessary demands of accreditation on institutions in compliance with the Standards and without serious issues, and to ensure that institutions with serious issues and especially those out of

compliance with one or more Standards and/or Requirements of Affiliation receive appropriate monitoring. That balance is achieved by allowing flexibility at key decision-making points in the accreditation cycle.

As now, the Self-Study and evaluation team visit are the primary decision-making point in the cycle. The Commission is required by federal regulations to ensure that an institution it accredits meet its accreditation standards. The documentation review will use documentation already available in or uploaded to the Commission's information system to confirm that the institution continues to meet the Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation—or will identify issues that can then be addressed during the team visit. The Self-Study Report will be freed to focus on past, present and future institutional initiatives for improvement.

As a result of an evaluation—or at any other time it is necessary—the Commission may give one or more Recommendations to any institution. A Recommendation will identify an important institutional improvement related to continued compliance with the Standards and Requirements of Affiliation. The Commission will request the institution to consider, and to report to Commission with regard to its response to, the Recommendation.

If an institution's compliance with the Standards and Requirements is confirmed by the Commission following the evaluation, and the Commission does not give any Recommendations to the institution, the institution's on-going interaction with the Commission will consist of submitting its Annual Institutional Update each year, updating information as needed. The Annual Institutional Update will allow the Commission to see important information about the institution on a regular basis and the Commission can at any time request more information or direct a visit if serious concern about an institution arises. The institution will report on its progress in addressing the opportunities for improvement it identified in its Self-Study Report in its next Self-Study in eight years.

If an institution receives one or more Recommendations from the Commission, it will provide the required report iteratively each year in connection with its Annual Institutional Update.

If an institution is found to be out of compliance with one or more Standards for Accreditation or Requirements of Affiliation its accreditation cannot be affirmed and a Warning or Probation will be issued. The institution will immediately enter a Follow-Up process identical to that currently in use, involving a Monitoring Report and a small Follow-Up team visit. Accreditation must be reaffirmed or withdrawn within the two-year federal limit on non-compliance. When accreditation is reaffirmed the institution returns to the accreditation cycle at whatever point it would have been without the non-compliance finding.

This approach is intended to avoid requests for unnecessary Follow-Up but to allow the Commission to act whenever it has serious concerns, and to concentrate its monitoring and its efforts to assist institutions on those institutions most in need of such monitoring and assistance.

Timing and Training Considerations

The full eight-year cycle will be phased in over a number of years. Training on the new process will begin in fall 2016. The cohort with evaluations due in 2018-2019 will be the first to follow the new process. Institutions will move into the new cycle and processes at different points depending on where they are in the current cycle, but no institution will be asked to submit a self-study in less than eight years from the date of the previous one. The last Periodic Review Reports would be submitted in June 2017.

The Annual Institutional Update will be phased in over time. A work group comprised of institutional representatives, Commissioners, and MSCHE staff will be convened in early 2016 to examine current data requirements, eliminate those not required and not useful, and incorporate elements whose tracking and analysis will provide institutions and the Commission with insights into institutional quality and health. The earliest that different data elements would be added will be 2017.

Training opportunities will be developed and implemented throughout the transition process. As has always been the case, tools will be developed to guide institutions and evaluators.

Next Steps

The Commission has prepared a ballot for distribution to the chief executive officer of each MSCHE institution, asking the CEO to endorse:

- The Commission's intention to revise its policy on the Cycle and Timing of Accreditation Review in order to adopt an eight-year accreditation cycle and remove the Periodic Review Report from that cycle;
- The outline of the proposed accreditation processes forwarded for comment by the Commission in June 2015, in order to allow the Commission to refine the plan for those processes with input from member institutions, and then submit the plan to the membership for affirmation.

The electronic ballot must be returned no later than January 15, 2016.

If the Commission's member institutions endorse the outline for the proposed processes, the Commission will:

- Immediately establish work groups comprised of institutional representatives, Commissioners, and staff members to refine the plans for the components of the proposed processes;
- Proceed to revise through its regular procedures its policy on the Cycle and Timing of Accreditation Review in order to adopt an eight-year accreditation cycle and remove the Periodic Review Report from that cycle;
- Aim to implement the revised processes beginning with the 2018-2019 academic year;
- Submit to the member institutions for affirmation the plan as refined by the work groups as soon as appropriate and no later than the end of December 2016.

Session on the Proposed Changes at the MSCHE Annual Conference

The proposed changes to the accreditation processes and accreditation cycle will be the subject of a plenary session during the forthcoming Annual Conference. The session is scheduled for Thursday, December 3 from 3:30 to 4:30 pm in Marriott Ballroom 2-3 of the Washington Marriott Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, DC. For further information on the conference, please visit

<http://www.msche.org/?Nav1=EVENTS&Nav2=2015.01.01>.