



Special Edition Newsletter September 2016

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

Accreditation Process Change: Developing a Holistic Approach

Introduction

In 2014 the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) adopted the *Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation*. Fifteen MSCHE institutions, as members of the Collaborative Implementation Project (CIP), are currently in the midst of piloting the application of the *Standards*. The lessons learned from that effort will be incorporated into a full implementation of the *Standards* beginning with the 2017-2018 self-study cohort.

In addition to approving the *Standards*, in January 2016, members also endorsed a plan to review and revise the process whereby institutions engage in self-study and peer review. This plan called for an eight-year accreditation cycle that includes Annual Institutional Updates (AIU), and a Mid-Point Peer Review. In addition, it indicated that the Commission would bring a fully-formed plan to the members for their endorsement by the end of the 2016 calendar year.

The process renewal is informed by the work of a Process Change Task Force consisting of a Steering Committee and three Work Groups whose 36 members are representative of MSCHE's institutions. Each group focused on one of the following areas: 1) "Student Achievement"; 2) Financial Stability; or 3) the Self-Study and Team Visit. MSCHE staff served as resources to this process.

The Work Groups collaborated via two face-to-face working sessions and innumerable conference calls to craft recommendations leading to a consistent interpretation and application of the *Standards* that: 1) enable the Commission to make unassailable actions; 2) support continuous institutional improvement; 3) are respectful of the resources expended by member institutions; and 4) meet expanding Federal requirements.

At its June 2016 meeting, the Commission reviewed and endorsed the path recommended by the Work Groups, made additional recommendations, and charged the Process Change Steering Committee Chair and MSCHE staff to move to the next stage by clearly defining specific process-related activities and institutional obligations. This Special Edition Newsletter presents a summary of the work to date and a copy of the PowerPoint slides that will guide the five Town Hall meetings that will occur in September and October.

Annual Institutional Update

All MSCHE member institutions are already required to annually review and update "directory information" as well as provide selected enrollment and financial data, and selected substantive change activity via the Institutional Profile (IP). The two data-focused Work Groups ("Student Achievement" and Financial Sustainability) reviewed the current IP to determine what must be collected annually by Federal mandate and then discussed what should be collected from institutions as indicators of institutional health. While the specific metrics are still under consideration and in need of member input via the town halls, the focus areas recommended by these groups are described below.

“*Student Achievement*” metrics will reflect the blending of useful information as defined by the Work Groups and useful information as defined by the Federal government. Information about student achievement is divided into two categories: 1) academic progress leading to the end of a relationship with an institution (graduation, transfer, etc.); and 2) evidence of success after leaving an institution.

The *Financial Sustainability* metrics will continue to be information that is already collected annually via the IP, or is readily available and already used by institutions as indicators of financial health and stability.

In both cases institutions will have the option of adding contextual information to the required data to provide a more holistic picture of factors that may be contributing to a particular trend.

One of the questions to be posed at the town halls concerns data sources. Although IPEDS will remain a primary data source, the Work Groups were adamant that institutions be provided with an opportunity to provide additional information intended to place IPEDS trends within their proper context. Currently, the IP requests the most recent IPEDS information which institutions manually enter annually because it is not yet published. Publicly available IPEDS data, such as can be found on Scorecard or College Navigator sites, can be automatically uploaded. However, data currently in the public domain are not the most recent. This leads to the following question: *Keeping in mind that the focus will be on trends, what source would best balance ease and accuracy: “most recent and uploaded by institutions” or “less recent but easily captured from existing reports”?*

To facilitate data entry, tracking, analysis, and feedback, the Commission has approved the development and implementation of an institution-centric MSCHE portal that will serve as a “one-stop shop” for all things related to accreditation. In addition to its tracking and analytic capabilities, the portal will also enable an institution to view all MSCHE-related activity such as institutional members serving as volunteers, next accreditation event, and current Statement of Accreditation Status (SAS).

Mid-Point Peer Review

The Mid-Point Peer Review no longer includes a Periodic Review Report. The Mid-Point Peer Review is an off-site peer review, occurring in the fourth year of the eight-year cycle. All information entered annually via the Annual Institutional Update including any required follow-up from the previous self-study will be reviewed. No additional information will be required of an institution in preparation for this review. Peer evaluators will review all information and make a recommendation to the Mid-Point Peer Review Committee composed of the institution’s peer reviewers and members of the Commission. The full Commission will then review, modify as necessary, and approve an institution’s next steps. The three-tier level of review is retained.

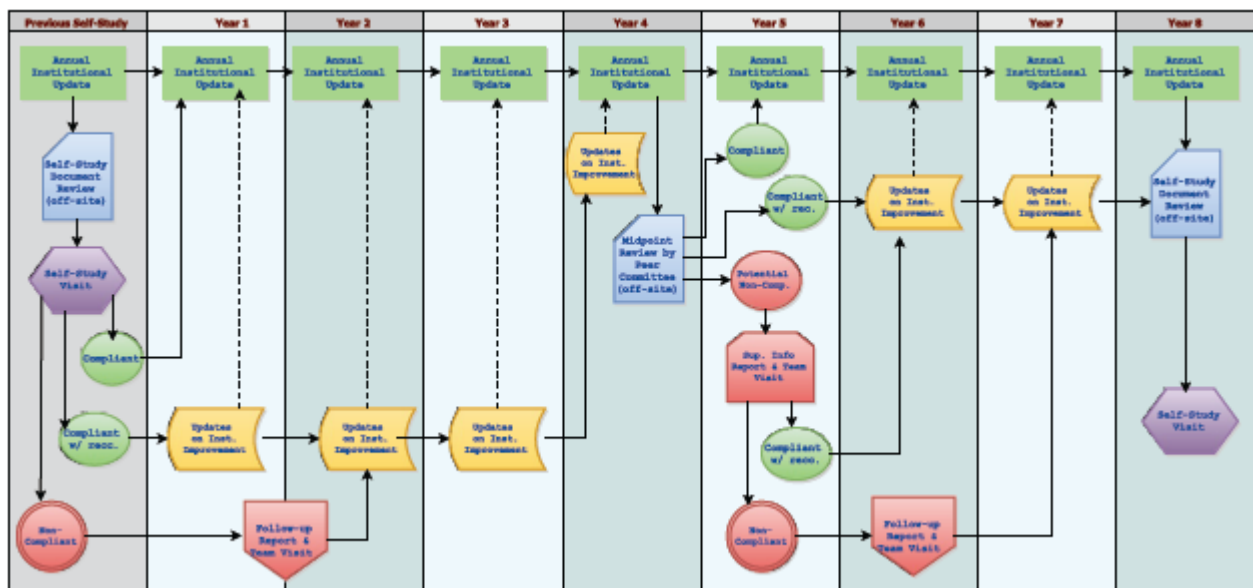
Self-Study Evaluation

While the cycle of self-study will be shortened to eight years, the primary purpose of self-study remains. Intended to engage the entire campus community, institutional self-study is a collaborative and in-depth look at progress made in achieving goals and objectives, plans for future improvements in support of institutional mission, and the degree to which the institution’s actions taken to achieve these ends are in concert with the *MSCHE Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation*.

The focus of the self-study and team visit will remain squarely on demonstrating institutional improvement. Information critical to the institution’s self-study will continue to be gathered via multiple sources of evidence: a document archive, the institutional narrative, and the team visit. An analogy that has been found to be useful in describing this process is self-study as a measure of institutional health, just as a medical checkup is a measure of personal health.

A Holistic Accreditation Cycle

Continuous reflection in the service of institutional improvement has been the hallmark of MSCHE. This revised cycle continues and elevates the Commission’s commitment. It also serves to channel energy and resources to those institutions demonstrating the greatest need for guidance and support. The flow chart below attempts to depict this graphically. (A larger version is available on the MSCHE website at <http://www.msche.org/documents/NewCycle.pdf>)



The graphic begins with the last self-study and then simulates the potential pathways for an institution over the next eight years. The “green” path represents an institution having no Commission-directed follow-up. Its reporting responsibilities will be fulfilled via completing the Annual Institutional Update each year of the cycle until the institution prepares for its next self-study and team visit.

Should an institution be required to submit an additional report because of a specific Commission action, a yearly update of the institution’s progress addressing the Commission’s concerns (depicted in “yellow”) will be added to the AIU. This information will also be added to the material evaluated during the Mid-Point Peer Review.

If an institution is found out of compliance by the Commission (depicted in “red” on the graphic), by Federal requirement, the institution will have a maximum of two years to return to compliance. However, unlike the current evaluation cycle, the institution’s “accreditation clock” will not stop -- the institution will remain on the same eight-year cycle as it works to come into compliance with the *Standards*.

Thus, to continue using the medical analogy, those institutions found to be in “sound health” will be responsible for completing the equivalent of an “annual check-up”. As “symptoms” begin to appear, additional interventions will be added to facilitate the institution’s return to good health.

Revising the Dates for Self-Study

Revising the accreditation cycle from ten to eight years required the reconstitution of the self-study cohorts. This process has been completed. In constructing the new cohorts the Commission adhered to the requirement that no institution would receive an evaluation team in fewer than eight years from their previous visit.

Notification of the new date will be sent electronically to each institution’s President, ALO, and Chief Academic Officer in late September.

In Conclusion

The Commission is pleased to report that development is on track to meet the goal of having a process leading to a consistent interpretation and application of the *Standards* that 1) enables the Commission to make unassailable actions; 2) supports continuous institutional improvement; 3) is respectful of the resources expended by member institutions; and 4) meets expanding Federal requirements.

The Commission looks forward to receiving member feedback and welcomes the opportunity to provide more information at the scheduled Town Halls. A copy of the PowerPoint developed for the Town Halls can be accessed at www.msche.org/documents/Fall2016TownHallSlides.pdf.