



**STANDARDS FOR  
ACCREDITATION AND  
REQUIREMENTS OF  
AFFILIATION**

Fourteenth Edition

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## Published by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education

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*Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation* replaces all the earlier editions of *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Requirements of Affiliation and Standards for Accreditation*: 1919, 1941, 1953, 1957, 1971, 1978, 1982, 1988, 1989, 1994, 2002, and those revised with editorial changes in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2015.

# Introduction

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) requires that its institutions meet rigorous and comprehensive accreditation standards, which are addressed in the context of the mission of each institution and within the culture of ethical practices and institutional integrity expected of accredited institutions. In meeting the quality standards of MSCHE accreditation, institutions earn accredited status, assuring students and the public of excellence in higher education.

Over the course of history, our identity has been closely aligned with assuring trust and instilling confidence in higher education. As an institutional accreditor, the Commission prides itself on advocating for honest self-reflection that results in meaningful change at our institutions.

We verify the quality of higher education through peer review, assessment, and evaluation. An institution is accredited when the educational community has confirmed through self-reflection and peer review that its mission is achieved and progress is made toward institutional goals. The extent to which each institution accepts and fulfills the responsibilities inherent in the process of accreditation is a measure of its commitment to continuous improvement.

Our *Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation* serve as an ongoing guide for institutions considering application for membership, candidate institutions seeking initial accreditation, and accredited institutions striving for reaffirmation through engaged self-reflection and peer evaluation. Institutions are expected to demonstrate compliance with our *Standards for Accreditation, Requirements of Affiliation*, policies and procedures, and applicable federal regulatory requirements; conduct their activities in a manner consistent with the standards; and engage in ongoing processes of self-reflection and continuous improvement. Accredited institutions pursue excellence and innovation at all levels through ongoing quality assurance, improvement, innovation, and systematic, periodic, and sustained assessment.

In this document, each standard is expressed in one or two sentences and is then followed by criteria, which are used together, within the context of institutional mission, to demonstrate or determine compliance. The criteria specify characteristics or qualities that encompass the standard. The criteria are used holistically to evaluate how an institution meets the standards.

## Principles

Five principles guide the analysis in each of our seven standards because of their importance in higher education.

Guiding Principles
1. Application of the Standards within the Context of an Institution's Mission and Goals
2. Centrality of the Student Experience
3. Reflection on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
4. Emphasis on Data and Evidence-based Decision-making
5. Innovation as an Essential Part of Continuous Improvement

### Mission-Centric: Guiding Principle 1

The individual mission and goals of each institution remain the context within which our accreditation standards are applied. Our standards intentionally emphasize functions rather than specific structures in recognition of the many different models for educational and operational excellence.

### Centrality of the Student Experience: Guiding Principle 2

The standards focus on the student learning experience. Institutions should design and provide student learning experiences aligned with mission, creating an appropriately supportive learning environment and understanding and improving student learning outcomes. An institution's student learning programs and opportunities must be characterized by rigor, coherence, and appropriate assessment of student achievement throughout the educational offerings, and institutions must offer a curriculum that is designed so that students acquire and demonstrate essential skills including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, technological competency, and information literacy (Standard III). Consistent with the institution's mission, the general education program must also include the study of values, ethics, and diverse perspectives (Standard III). Institutions must commit to student retention, persistence, completion, and success 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 (Standard IV).

## **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Guiding Principle 3**

Throughout the seven standards, institutions should reflect deeply and share results on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the context of their mission by considering at a minimum: goals and actions (Standard I); demographics and policies or processes (Standard II and VII); curriculum and services (Standard III and IV); assessments (Standard V); and resource allocation (Standard VI). One goal of DEI reflection would be to address disparate impacts on an increasingly diverse student population if discovered. Throughout the standards, institutions define *DEI* and *populations* and follow best practices with attention to data integrity and security.

## **Data-Based Decision-Making: Guiding Principle 4**

The standards reflect our commitment to data-based decision-making. Institutions must analyze a range of data, including disaggregated data, to ensure students are appropriately served and institutional mission and goals are met. Institutions should rely upon the data required by the Commission and additional data used by the institution. Institutions should follow the Commission's evidence expectations that are reflective of a range of data considerations, consonant with higher education expectations, and consistent with the institution's mission. Periodic and systematic evaluation and assessment allow institutions to demonstrate commitment to reflection, and our standards provide the opportunity to evaluate progress toward institutional goals. Institutions can leverage periodic assessment through each standard, using assessment results for continuous improvement and innovation to ensure levels of quality for constituents.

## **Innovation: Guiding Principle 5**

Institutions are dynamic organizations that change and evolve for the benefit of their students and communities. The seven standards reflect our commitment to innovation and allow institutions to consider innovative practices in the context of mission and the students served.

## **United States Department of Education Recognition**

MSCHE is recognized as an institutional accreditor by the United States Department of Education (USDE) to conduct accreditation and candidate for accreditation status activities for institutions of higher education, including distance education and correspondence education programs offered at those institutions. USDE recognizes accrediting agencies as authorities on the quality of higher education. Under the Higher Education Act's (HEA's) federal student aid programs, accrediting agencies recognized by the United States Department of Education must meet the Department's regulatory criteria. MSCHE is a title IV gatekeeper, and many institutions access title IV through our accreditation. Part of the work of MSCHE is ensuring institutions remain in compliance with applicable federal requirements, including through their title IV responsibilities.



## Mission, Vision, and Values

Our Mission, Vision, and Values define our overall purpose, reflect our forward-thinking nature, and define values that guide our work.

### Mission

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) promotes educational excellence through innovation across diverse institutions.

### Vision

To be a prominent voice and champion in higher education to leverage accreditation for our member institutions and students.

### Values

#### Protecting the Future

We ensure that member institutions meet rigorous and comprehensive standards to protect educational quality.

#### Guiding for Good

We fuel discovery and progress for our community and society as an independent voice in higher education.

#### Setting the Standard

We promote quality through honest reflection, institutional growth, and meaningful change.

These values guide our external and internal relationships where integrity, respect, and self-improvement promote personal and collective growth, creativity, collaboration, accountability, and fair and equitable treatment.

# Eligibility Requirements

An institution interested in accreditation with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) is required to demonstrate that it meets minimum eligibility requirements. In determining eligibility, the Commission considers an institution's legal authority to operate or licensure, standing with other accreditors, operational status, mission and related goals, governance and administrative structures, financial resources, and certifications of information. The eligibility requirements are further defined in Commission policy and procedures.

## Requirements of Affiliation

To be eligible for, to achieve, and to maintain Middle States Commission on Higher Education accreditation, an institution must demonstrate that it meets our requirements of affiliation. Compliance is expected to be continuous and will be validated periodically, typically at the time of institutional self-study and during any other evaluation of the institution's compliance. Once eligibility is established, an institution then must demonstrate on an ongoing basis that it meets the standards for accreditation.

1. The institution is authorized or licensed to operate as a postsecondary educational institution and to award postsecondary degrees; it provides written documentation demonstrating both. Authorization or licensure is from an appropriate governmental organization or agency as required by each of the jurisdictions, regions, or countries in which the institution operates.

Institutions that offer only postsecondary certificates, diplomas, or licenses are not eligible for accreditation by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

2. The institution is operational, with students actively enrolled in its degree programs.
3. For institutions pursuing candidate for accreditation status or the grant of accreditation, the institution will graduate at least one class before the team visit for the grant of accreditation takes place, unless the institution can demonstrate to the satisfaction of the Commission that the lack of graduates does not compromise its ability to demonstrate that students have achieved appropriate learning outcomes.
4. The institution must communicate with the Commission in English, both orally and in writing, including all accreditation materials to support the multi-level accreditation decision-making process.



# Standard I: Mission and Goals

The institution's mission defines its purpose within the context of higher education, the students 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

A candidate or accredited institution possesses and demonstrates the following attributes or activities:

1. clearly defined mission and goals that:
  - a. are developed through appropriate collaborative and inclusive 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 structures in making decisions related to planning, resource allocation, program and curricular development, and the 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 internal stakeholders;
  - g. are periodically evaluated;
2. institutional goals that are realistic, appropriate to higher education, and consistent with mission;
3. goals that focus on student learning outcomes and student achievement that
  - a. include retention, graduation, transfer, and placement rates;
  - b. consider diversity, equity, and inclusion principles;
  - c. are supported by administrative, educational, and student support programs and services;
  - d. prioritize institutional improvement; and
4. periodic assessment of mission and goals to ensure they are relevant and achievable.

# 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

A candidate or accredited institution possesses and demonstrates the following attributes or activities:

1. a commitment to academic freedom, intellectual freedom, freedom of expression, and respect for 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. a grievance policy that is documented and disseminated to address complaints or grievances raised by students, faculty, or staff. The institution's policies and procedures are fair and impartial and assure 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 employment practices, including all phases of hiring, evaluation, promotion, discipline, and separation, with appropriate attention to diversity;
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, has policies, services, or programs in place to:
  - a. promote diversity, equity, and inclusion;
  - b. promote affordability and accessibility;
  - c. 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 government laws and regulations and Commission policies and procedures, including but not limited to:
  - a. required information for students and the public;
  - b. representation of accreditation status;
  - c. full disclosure of information on institution-wide assessments, graduation, retention, certification and licensure or licensing board pass rates;
  - d. institution's compliance with the Commission's Requirements of Affiliation;
  - e. verification of student identity in distance and correspondence education;
  - f. substantive changes affecting institutional mission, goals, programs, operations, sites, and other material issues which must be disclosed in a timely and accurate fashion; and
9. periodic assessment of ethics and integrity as evidenced in institutional policies, processes, practices, and the manner in which these are implemented.

# Standard III: Design and Delivery of the Student Learning Experience

**An institution provides students with learning experiences that are characterized by rigor and coherence at all program, certificate, and degree levels, regardless of instructional modality. All learning experiences, regardless of modality, program pace/schedule, level, and setting are consistent with higher education expectations.**

## Criteria

A candidate or 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:
  - a. are designed to foster a coherent student learning experience and to promote synthesis of learning;
  - b. are assigned a reasonably approximate number of credit hours (or other value) for the amount of work completed by a student;
  - c. include sufficient course content and program length appropriate to the objectives of the degree or other credential;
2. student learning experiences that are designed, delivered, and assessed by faculty (full-time or part-time) and/or other appropriate professionals who are:
  - a. rigorous and effective in teaching, assessment of student learning, scholarly inquiry, and service, as appropriate to the institution's mission, goals, and policies;
  - b. qualified for the positions they hold and the work they do;
  - c. sufficient in number with a core of faculty (full- or part-time) and/or other appropriate professionals with sufficient responsibility to the institution to assure the continuity and coherence of the institution's educational programs;
3. academic programs of study 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 expected time to completion;
4. sufficient learning experiences and resources to support both the institution's programs of study and the academic progress of all student populations;
5. at institutions that offer undergraduate education, a general education program, free standing or integrated into academic disciplines, 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;
  - d. provided with and utilize sufficient opportunities, resources, and support for professional growth and innovation;
  - e. reviewed regularly and equitably based on written, disseminated, clear, and fair criteria, expectations, policies, and procedures;

## Standard III cont.

- 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, technological competency, and information literacy. Consistent with mission, the general education program also includes the study of values, ethics, and diverse perspectives;
  - c. in non-US institutions that do not include general education, provides evidence that students can demonstrate general education skills;
- 6. in institutions that offer graduate and professional education, opportunities for the development of research, scholarship, and independent thinking, provided by faculty and/or other professionals with credentials appropriate to graduate-level curricula;
  - 7. adequate and appropriate institutional review and approval on any student learning opportunities designed, delivered, or assessed by third-party providers; and
  - 8. periodic assessment of the effectiveness of student learning experiences for all student populations.

# Standard IV: Support of the Student Experience

Across all educational experiences, settings, levels, and instructional 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, completion, and success 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

A candidate or accredited institution possesses and demonstrates the following attributes or activities:

1. clearly stated, ethical policies, practices, and processes to recruit, admit, retain, and facilitate the success of students whose interests, abilities, experiences, and goals provide a reasonable expectation for success and are compatible with institutional mission, including:
  - 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 appropriate educational outcomes;
  - c. orientation, advisement, and counseling programs to enhance retention and guide students throughout their educational experience;
  - d. processes designed to enhance student achievement including certificate and degree completion, transfer to other institutions, and post-completion placement;
- e. processes to disaggregate and analyze student achievement data to inform and implement strategies that improve outcomes for all student populations;
2. fair and transparent policies and procedures regarding evaluation and acceptance of transfer credits, credits awarded through experiential learning, prior non-academic learning, competency-based assessment, and other alternative learning approaches;
3. policies and procedures for the safe and secure maintenance and appropriate release of student information and records;
4. 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;
5. if applicable, adequate and appropriate institutional review and approval of student support services designed, delivered, or assessed by third-party providers; and
6. periodic assessment of the effectiveness of student support services for all student populations with appropriate metrics and evaluation.

# Standard V: Educational Effectiveness Assessment

**Assessment of student learning and achievement demonstrates that the institution's students have accomplished educational goals consistent with their program of study, degree level, the institution's mission, and appropriate expectations for institutions of higher education.**

## Criteria

A candidate or 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. organized and systematic assessments, conducted by faculty and/or appropriate professionals, evaluating the extent of student achievement of institutional and degree/program goals. Institutions should:
  - a. define student learning outcomes that are appropriate to higher education with defensible standards for assessing whether students are achieving those outcomes;
  - b. articulate how they prepare students in a manner consistent with their mission for successful careers, meaningful lives, and, where appropriate, further education. They collect and provide data on the extent to which they are meeting these goals;
  - c. support and sustain assessment of student learning outcomes and communicate the results of this assessment to stakeholders;
3. consideration and use of disaggregated assessment results for all student populations for the improvement of student learning outcomes, student achievement, and institutional and program-level educational effectiveness;
4. if applicable, adequate and appropriate institutional review and approval of assessment services designed, delivered, or assessed by third-party providers; and
5. periodic assessment of the effectiveness of assessment policies and 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 structures are aligned with each other and are sufficient to fulfill its mission and goals, to continuously assess and improve its programs and services, and to respond effectively to opportunities and challenges.

## Criteria

A candidate or accredited institution possesses and demonstrates the following attributes or activities:

1. institutional and unit goals that are clearly stated, assessed appropriately, 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 inclusive constituent participation;
3. planning that integrates goals for institutional effectiveness and improvement, including a focus on student achievement, educational outcomes, overall institutional improvement, and the results of institutional assessments;
4. planning for diversity, equity, and inclusion that is aligned with the institution's mission and goals, maintains sufficient resources, and leads to institutional improvement;
5. a financial planning and budgeting process that is aligned with the institution's mission and goals, evidence-based, and clearly linked to the institution's and units' strategic plans/objectives;
6. fiscal and human resources as well as the physical and technical infrastructure adequate to support its operations wherever and however programs are delivered;
7. documented financial resources, funding base, and plans for financial development, including those from any related entities adequate to support its educational purposes and programs and to ensure financial stability;
8. a record of responsible fiscal management, including preparing a multi-year budget and an annual independent audit confirming financial viability and proper internal financial controls, with evidence of corrective measures taken to address any material findings cited in the audit or an accompanying management letter;
9. well-defined, inclusive decision-making processes and clear assignment of responsibility and accountability for achieving institutional and unit effectiveness;
10. comprehensive planning for facilities, infrastructure, and technology that includes consideration of sustainability and deferred maintenance and is linked to the institution's strategic and financial planning processes;

## Standard VI cont.

11. compliance with its program responsibilities under existing federal title IV and other state laws and regulations, including any audits of financial aid programs as required by federal and state regulations;
12. strategies to measure and assess the adequacy and efficient utilization of institutional resources required to support the institution's mission and goals; and
13. 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 benefits the institution, its students, and the other constituencies it serves. Even when supported by or affiliated with a related entity, the institution has education as its primary purpose, and it operates as an academic institution with appropriate autonomy.

## Criteria

A candidate or accredited institution possesses and demonstrates the following attributes or activities:

1. a clearly articulated and transparent governance structure that outlines roles, responsibilities, and accountability for inclusive decision making by each constituency, including the institution's legally constituted governing body, administration, faculty, staff, and students, as well as any related entities;
2. a legally constituted governing body 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, integrity, planning, and fiscal well-being of the institution;
  - b. has sufficient diversity, independence, and expertise to ensure the integrity of the institution. Members must have primary responsibility to the accredited institution, meet regularly, and not allow political, financial, relationship with a related entity, or other undue 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, the establishment of personnel policies and procedures, the approval of policies and by-laws, and the assurance of strong fiscal management;
  - e. 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;
  - f. appoints and regularly evaluates the performance of the Chief Executive Officer;
  - g. is informed in all its operations by principles of good practice in board governance;
  - h. is not chaired by an institutional or system representative to avoid conflict of interests;

## Standard VII cont.

- i. 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. A majority of members have no employment, family, ownership, or other personal financial interest in the institution;
  - j. supports the Chief Executive Officer in maintaining the autonomy of the institution;
  - k. makes freely available to the Commission accurate, fair, and complete information on all aspects of the institution and its operations and ensures the institution describes itself in comparable and consistent terms to all of its accrediting and regulatory agencies.
3. 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, identifying 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 and is responsible for establishing procedures for assessing the organization's efficiency and effectiveness;
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 diverse representation 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 in advancing the institution's goals and objectives;
  - f. systematic procedures for evaluating administrative units and for using assessment data to enhance operations; and
5. periodic assessment of the effectiveness of governance, leadership, and administration.

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