Standards *for* Accreditation *and* Requirements *of* Affiliation

Thirteenth Edition

CHE MSA Middle States Commission on Higher Education

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Published by the

Middle States Commission on Higher Education
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Philadelphia, PA 19104

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www.msche.org

Approved by the MSCHE Member Institutions, Fall 2014
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Revised for clarification with editorial changes, May 2015
Revised for clarification with editorial changes to the Requirements of Affiliation, November 2015.

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 and 2011.

Permission is granted to colleges and universities within the jurisdiction of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education to photocopy this handbook for the purpose of institutional self-study and peer review.

The text of this publication also may be downloaded from the Commission's website. Bound copies may be purchased through the publications order form, also available on the website.

Printed in the United States of America

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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 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, and this permits them to state with confidence: "Our students are well-served; society is well-served."

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Introduction

Middle States accreditation is an expression of confidence in an institution's mission and goals, its performance, and its resources. An institution is accredited when the educational community has verified that its goals are achieved through self-regulation and peer review. The extent to which each educational institution accepts and fulfills the responsibilities inherent in the process of accreditation is a measure of its commitment to striving for and achieving excellence in its endeavors.

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education Accreditation Standards and Requirements of Affiliation are comprised of the enclosed seven standards and 15 requirements which serve as an ongoing guide for those institutions considering application for membership, those accepted as candidate institutions, and those accredited institutions engaged in self-review and peer evaluation. Accredited institutions are expected to demonstrate compliance with these standards and requirements, to conduct their activities in a manner consistent with the standards and requirements, and to engage in ongoing processes of self-review and improvement.

Four principles guided the development of these standards: first, the mission-centric standards acknowledge the diversity of institutions; second, the focus of the standards is on the student learning experience; third, the standards emphasize institutional assessment and assessment of student learning; fourth, the standards support innovation as an essential part of continuous institutional improvement.

These standards affirm that the individual mission and goals of each institution remain the context within which these accreditation standards are applied. They emphasize functions rather than specific structures, recognizing that there are many different models for educational and operational excellence.

Each standard is expressed in one or two sentences and is then followed by criteria. The criteria specify characteristics or qualities that encompass the standard. Institutions and evaluators will use these criteria together with the standards, within the context of institutional mission, to demonstrate or determine compliance. Institutions and evaluators should not use the criteria as a checklist.

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 fully meets the following 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 within the Middle States region (Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands), as well as by other agencies 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 Candidacy or Initial Accreditation, the institution will graduate at least one class before the evaluation team visit for initial 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's representatives communicate with the Commission in English, both orally and in writing.

5. The institution complies with all applicable government (usually Federal and state) laws and regulations.

6. The institution complies with applicable Commission, interregional, and inter-institutional policies. These policies can be viewed on the Commission website, www.msche.org.

7. The institution has a mission statement and related goals, approved by its governing board, that defines its purposes within the context of higher education.

8. The institution systematically evaluates its educational and other programs and makes public how well and in what ways it is accomplishing its purposes.

9. The institution's student learning programs and opportunities are characterized by rigor, coherence, and appropriate assessment of student achievement throughout the educational offerings, regardless of certificate or degree level or delivery and instructional modality.

10. Institutional planning integrates goals for academic and institutional effectiveness and improvement, student achievement of educational goals, student learning, and the results of academic and institutional assessments.

11. The institution has documented financial resources, funding base, and plans for financial development, including those from any related entities (including without limitation systems, religious sponsorship, and corporate ownership) adequate to support its educational purposes and programs and to ensure financial stability. The institution demonstrates a record of responsible fiscal management, has a prepared budget for the current year, and undergoes an external financial audit on an annual basis.

12. The institution fully discloses its legally constituted governance structure(s) including any related entities (including without limitation systems, religious sponsorship, and corporate ownership). The institution's governing body is responsible for the quality and integrity of the institution and for ensuring that the institution's mission is being accomplished.

13. A majority of the institution's governing body's members have no employment, family, ownership, or other personal financial interest in the institution. The governing body adheres to a conflict of interest policy that assures that those interests are disclosed and that they do not interfere with the impartiality of governing body members or outweigh the greater duty to secure and ensure the academic and fiscal integrity of the institution. The institution's district/system or other chief executive officer shall not serve as the chair of the governing body.

14. The institution and its governing body/bodies make freely available to the Commission accurate, fair, and complete information on all aspects of the institution and its operations. The governing body/bodies ensure that the institution describes itself in comparable and consistent terms to all of its accrediting and regulatory agencies, communicates any changes in 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.

15. The institution has a core of faculty (full-time 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.

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

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 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 and related outcomes and on institutional improvement; are supported by administrative, educational, and student support programs and services; and are consistent with institutional mission; 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

An 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 practices in the hiring, evaluation, promotion, discipline, 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 institution's compliance with 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 institution's compliance with the Commission's policies; 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

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, of a length appropriate to the objectives of the degree or other credential, designed to foster a coherent student learning experience and to promote synthesis of learning;

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;
   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;

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 opportunities and resources to support both the institution's programs of study and students' academic progress;

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;

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; and
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 programs providing student learning opportunities.

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

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

1. clearly stated, ethical policies and processes 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 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 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 certificate and 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. 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 programs supporting the student experience.

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

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

1. clearly stated educational goals 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 meaningful curricular goals with defensible standards for evaluating whether students are achieving those goals;
   b. articulate how they prepare students in a manner consistent with their mission for successful careers, meaningful lives, and, where appropriate, further education. They should collect and provide data on the extent to which they are meeting these goals;
   c. support and sustain assessment of student achievement and communicate the results of this assessment to stakeholders;

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. 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 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

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, 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 constituent participation, and incorporate the use of assessment results;

3. 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;

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 and clear assignment of responsibility and accountability;

6. 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;

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 benefits the institution, its students, and the other constituencies it serves. Even when supported by or affiliated with governmental, corporate, religious, educational system, or other unaccredited organizations, the institution has education as its primary purpose, and it operates as an academic institution with appropriate autonomy.

Criteria

An 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 decision making by each constituency, including governing body, administration, faculty, staff and students;

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, 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 interferes 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. 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;

i. supports the Chief Executive Officer in maintaining the autonomy of the institution;

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, 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 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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