



Commission Approves Gamma Version of Criteria on First Reading: Welcomes Further Comments

Roughly every five years the Higher Learning Commission is obliged to review its Criteria for Accreditation. This time around, we began in the fall of 2009 with a survey of our peer corps and of institutions that had recently undergone reaffirmation. In December 2009 the HLC Board of Trustees studied our present Criteria, the standards of other accreditors, and the responses to the survey. The Board endorsed the breadth and flexibility of the present Criteria but concluded that they would benefit from greater specificity.

In the spring of 2010, the U.S. Department of Education issued a report criticizing our Criteria for lack of specificity and in particular for the absence of minimum requirements. Because the Department required a short-term response, we developed a set of “Minimum Expectations” that we characterized as fundamental understandings always tacitly understood in the academic community but now articulated. We expected that in the coming year or two the Minimum Expectations would be absorbed in the process, already begun, of revising the Criteria.

In March 2011, we published a first draft, called Alpha, of the proposed revision to the Criteria. We surveyed our members for responses and held forums for discussion at the Annual Conference in April. Based on the numerous comments we received, we revised the proposal extensively, producing the Beta version that was released in June. Over the summer we held eight regional forums for discussion—with more than 1400 attendees

from more than 550 institutions—and conducted another survey. What we learned from those discussions and that survey informed the drafting of the version presented in this booklet.

Perhaps the most difficult problem throughout this process has been to characterize the Minimum Expectations and place them appropriately on the larger screen of review for accreditation. We have called them different things and placed them in different layouts with the Criteria in various attempts to say, in effect, both that they are important and that most institutions should not pay attention to them. Any apparently irrational message is, of course, hard to convey. Ultimately we located them at the end of the Criteria, not embedded with each Criterion, and we re-named them Assumed Practices. These are things that have been assumed within the community of practice that has been higher education for many decades, and that is why they are both fundamental and not useful for most institutions to spend time worrying about. By writing them down, however, by moving them from community assumptions to explicit statements, we provide a clear basis for requiring institutions to adhere to these practices when such requirement becomes necessary.

One might safely hazard that as much change as there was between the current Criteria and our first proposal for revised Criteria, there has been even greater change between that first proposal and what we present here. For all the changes from where we started to where we are now, we are

indebted to the people who completed surveys, sent emails, and spoke at forums. Many times, of course, one respondent told us (x) and another told us (-x), but nonetheless the commentary from the membership has been impressive, enlightening, and most helpful.

We aren’t quite done yet. On November 4, 2011, the Board of Trustees accepted on first reading the Criteria, Assumed Practices, and Obligations of Affiliation as written in this Gamma version. They are now presented for further comment. We will revise one last time for the second reading by the Board on February 24, 2012. While we do not expect further revisions as radical as the re-conceptualization of the Criteria, or even their re-ordering, we are still very open to improvement, refinement, and editing. General comments are also in order. Please continue to let us know what you think.

GAMMA VERSION

Inside this Edition

1 The Criteria: Overview	2
2 Proposed Criteria: Core Values ...	4
3 Proposed Criteria	6
4 Proposed Assumed Practices.....	10
5 Proposed Obligations	13
Appendix A: Current Criteria.....	14
Appendix B: Timeline and Implementation	15
Appendix C: The Criteria and the Annual Conference	16

Post comments online.
Deadline: January 9, 2012

1

The Proposed Criteria for Accreditation: An Overview

In its review of institutions, the Higher Learning Commission seeks a culture of aspiration and continual improvement rather than satisfaction of minimum requirements. It also seeks to acknowledge the great diversity of its member institutions. For these reasons it uses the term “criteria” rather than “standards.”

The accreditation process is governed by the Criteria for Accreditation. Within the Criteria there are Criterion Statements and Core Components that ensure institutional effectiveness. Underlying the Criteria and Core Components is a set of assumptions shared by the community of practice within higher education and made explicit in the section on Assumed Practices.

Prior to admission to candidacy for accreditation, an institution demonstrates that it meets the Commission’s Eligibility Requirements. For admission to candidacy, the Eligibility Requirements must be fully met and the Assumed Practices fully demonstrated.

For status as an accredited institution, the expectations for performance include the Eligibility Requirements and Assumed Practices but move beyond them to include fulfillment of the Core Components and each of the Criteria, and the emphasis of the Commission’s review shifts accordingly.

Finally, the Commission articulates Obligations of Affiliation, which are behavioral requirements for its member and candidate institutions, including the requirement that they abide by Commission policies.

Core Values

The Criteria for Accreditation reflect a set of core values for institutional accreditation. The Commission articulates these core values so as to offer a better understanding of the Criteria and the intentions that underlie them. Institutions are not expected to address these values: they are offered as explanation.

Criteria for Accreditation and Core Components

The Criteria for Accreditation are broad statements of the areas of fundamental interest to the Commission. The Criteria are applied not to define minimum qualifications but to seek evidence of continual improvement, aspiration, and best practices on the part of member institutions.

The Core Components identify areas of particular focus within each Criterion. Some of these Core Components are further elaborated or explicated in sub-components. The sub-components are not comprehensive: they elaborate certain aspects of the Core Component that the Commission seeks to ensure are not overlooked, but they do not fully constitute the Component. Some of the Core Components do not have sub-components because such elaboration has not appeared necessary. An institution has the opportunity in its documentation and a team has the option in its review to identify topics or issues related to a Core Component other than those specified in the sub-components.

In preparation for accreditation and reaffirmation of accreditation, an

institution provides evidence that it meets all the Criteria and all the Core Components. The distinctiveness of an institution’s mission may condition the strategies it adopts and the evidence it provides that it meets each Core Component.

In the evaluation process, the Commission will review the institution against the Core Components and Criteria according to the following evaluative framework.

The Core Components

The institution **meets** the Core Component if:

- a) the Core Component is met without concerns, that is the institution meets or exceeds the expectations embodied in the Component; or
- b) the Core Component is met with concerns, that is the institution demonstrates the characteristics expected by the Component, but performance in relation to some aspect of the Component must be improved.

The institution **does not meet** the Core Component if the institution fails to meet the Component in its entirety or is so deficient in one or more aspects of the Component that the Component is judged not to be met.

The Criteria for Accreditation

The institution **meets** the Criterion if:

- a) the Criterion is met without concerns, that is the institution meets or exceeds the expectations embodied in the Criterion; or
- b) the Criterion is met with concerns, that is the institution demonstrates the characteristics expected by the Criterion, but performance in relation to some Core Components of the Criterion must be improved.

The institution **does not meet** the Criterion if the institution fails to meet the Criterion in its entirety or is so deficient in one or more Core Components of the Criterion that the Criterion is judged not to be met.

The institution meets the Criterion only if all Core Components are met. The institution must meet all the Criteria in order for it to meet the Criteria for Accreditation.

The Commission will grant or continue accreditation (with or without conditions or sanctions), deny accreditation, or withdraw accreditation based on the outcome of this review.

Assumed Practices

(replaces Minimum Expectations)

Higher education functions within a community marked by shared practices among colleges and universities, practices that have developed out of shared experience, are basic to higher education in the United States, and have been tested over time. Institutional accreditation evolved within these shared practices and relies upon the assumption that institutions follow them. The practices that bear upon the Criteria for Accreditation are outlined in the Assumed Practices.

The Assumed Practices are foundational to the Criteria for Accreditation. Unlike the Criteria and Core Components, they are generally matters to be determined as facts, rather than matters requiring professional judgment, and they are unlikely to vary by institutional mission or context.

Because accredited institutions engage in these Assumed Practices as a matter of course, the Commission does not ask that an accredited institution explicitly address them in an evaluation process except where specifically required to do so to ensure

continuing conformity. Such circumstances include when an institution is undergoing a Change of Control, Structure, or Organization, and when an institution is in the process of removal from probation or an order of show-cause.

When it discovers that an accredited institution is not following an Assumed Practice, the Commission initiates a review, in accordance with its policy and procedure, to determine whether the institution remains in compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation. The Commission also requires that the institution take action to bring its practice into conformity with the Assumed Practices. An accredited institution that finds through its own processes that its practice is departing from the Assumed Practices should take immediate steps to correct the deficiency; it is not required to disclose its finding to the Commission provided that it moves quickly to initiate a remedy.

Institutions seeking candidacy must explicitly demonstrate conformity with the Assumed Practices in the required plan to meet the Criteria for Accreditation within the four years of candidacy. Institutions seeking initial accreditation must explicitly demonstrate conformity with these Practices as they address the Criteria for Accreditation in the self-study for initial accreditation. Institutional conformity with the Assumed Practices is necessary but only partial evidence of fulfillment of the Criteria for Accreditation. Commission decisions regarding accreditation status, while considering conformity with the Assumed Practices, will ultimately be based on a finding of fulfillment of the requirements for Candidacy or the Criteria for Accreditation.

Obligations of Affiliation and Commission Policies

The Obligations of Affiliation describe behavioral requirements

on the part of member institutions, including the requirement to abide by Commission policies. Among those policies, the Obligations draw particular attention to the requirements for transparency as to specified outcomes of the Commission's reviews for accreditation. While the Commission makes information about these reviews public, this information concerns the accreditation relationship of institutions; hence institutions have an obligation to accept such publication and also have an obligation to represent this information accurately. The Obligations of Affiliation are absolute and the Commission may take immediate administrative action in the event that an institution fails to meet any of them.

Commission Policies Related to the Federal Requirements for Recognition of Accrediting Agencies

The Commission has a number of policies regarding the institutions it accredits that are mandated by virtue of its recognition by the U.S. Department of Education as a qualified accreditor for the purposes of eligibility for Title IV funds. While these requirements are outside the Criteria for Accreditation, the Commission will review institutions in the context of all its comprehensive reviews to assure compliance with the requirements outlined in the Commission's Federal Compliance Program.

Note: Eligibility Requirements

The Eligibility Requirements are pre-conditions for the Commission's consideration of an institution's application for candidacy. The Eligibility Requirements and Process for Seeking Status are available in a separate document.

2

The Proposed Criteria for Accreditation: Core Values

The Higher Learning Commission's Criteria for Accreditation reflect a set of **core values**. The Commission articulates these core values so as to offer a better understanding of the Criteria and the intentions that underlie them.

- Focus on student learning
- Education as a public purpose
- Education for a diverse, technological, globally connected world
- A culture of continuous improvement
- Evidence-based institutional learning and self-presentation
- Integrity, transparency, and ethical behavior or practice
- Governance for the well-being of the institution
- Planning and management of resources to ensure institutional sustainability
- Mission-centered evaluation
- Accreditation through peer review

1. Focus on student learning

For the purpose of accreditation, the Higher Learning Commission regards the teaching mission of any institution as primary. Institutions will have other missions, such as research, healthcare, and public service, and these other missions may have a shaping and highly valuable effect on the education that the institution provides. In the accreditation process, these missions should be recognized and considered in relation to the teaching mission.

A focus on student learning encompasses every aspect of students' experience at an institution: how they are recruited and admitted; costs they are charged and how they are supported by financial aid; how well they are informed and guided before and through their work at the institution; the breadth, depth, currency, and relevance of the learning they are offered; their education through co-curricular offerings; the effectiveness of their programs; what happens to them after they leave the institution.

2. Education as a public purpose

Every educational institution serves a public purpose. Public or state-supported institutions make that assumption readily. Not-for-profit institutions receive their tax-exempt status on the basis of an assumption that they serve a public purpose. And although it may appear that a for-profit institution does not require a public purpose, because education is a public good its provision serves a public purpose and entails societal obligations. Furthermore, the provision of higher education requires a more complex standard of care than, for instance, the provision of dry cleaning services. What the students buy, with money, time, and effort, is not merely a good, like a credential, but experiences that have the potential to transform lives,

or to harm them. What institutions do constitutes a solemn responsibility for which they should hold themselves accountable.

3. Education for a diverse, technological, globally connected world

A contemporary education must recognize contemporary circumstances: the diversity of U.S. society, the diversity of the world in which students live, and the centrality of technology and the global dynamic to life in the 21st century. More than ever, students should be prepared for lifelong learning and for the likelihood that no job or occupation will last a lifetime. Even for the most technical qualification, students need the civic learning and broader intellectual capabilities that underlie success in the workforce. The Commission distinguishes higher education in part on the basis of its reach beyond narrow vocational training to a broader intellectual and social context.

4. A culture of continuous improvement

Continuous improvement is the alternative to stagnation. Minimum standards are necessary but far from sufficient to achieve acceptable quality in higher education, and the strongest institutions will stay strong through ongoing aspiration. The Commission embeds improvement as one of two major strands in all its pathways, the other being assurance that member institutions meet the Criteria and the Federal Requirements.

A process of assessment is essential to continuous improvement and therefore a commitment to assessment should be deeply embedded in an institution's activities. Assessment applies not only to student learning and educational outcomes but to an institution's approach to improvement of institutional effectiveness.

For student learning, a commitment to assessment would mean assessment at the program level that proceeds from clear goals, involves faculty at all points in the process, and analyzes the assessment results; it would also mean that the institution improves its programs or ancillary services or other operations on the basis of those analyses. Institutions committed to improvement review their programs regularly and seek external judgment, advice, or benchmarks in their assessments. Because in recent years the issues of persistence and completion have become central to public concern about higher education, the current Criteria direct attention to them as possible indicators of quality and foci for improvement, without prescribing either the measures or outcomes.

Innovation is an aspect of improvement and essential in a time of rapid change and challenge; through its Criteria and processes the Commission seeks to support innovation for improvement in all facets of institutional practice.

5. Evidence-based institutional learning and self-presentation

Assessment and the processes an institution learns from should be well-grounded in evidence. Statements of belief and intention have important roles in an institution's presentation of itself, but for the quality assurance function of accreditation, evidence is critical. Institutions should be able to select evidence based on their particular purposes and circumstances. At the same time, many of the Assumed Practices within the Criteria require certain specified evidence.

6. Integrity, transparency, and ethical behavior or practice

The Commission understands integrity broadly, including wholeness and coherence at one end of the spectrum

and ethical behavior at the other. Integrity means doing what the mission calls for but not doing what it does not call for; governance systems that are freely, independently, and rigorously focused on the welfare of the institution and its students; scrupulous avoidance of misleading statements or practices; full disclosure of information to students before students make any commitment to the institution, even a commitment to receive more information; clear, explicit requirements for ethical practice by all members of the institutional community in all its activities.

7. Governance for the well-being of the institution

The well-being of an institution requires that its governing board place that well-being above the interests of its own members and the interests of any other entity. Because the Commission accredits the educational institution itself, and not the state system, religious organization, corporation, medical center, or other entity that may own it, it holds the governing board of an institution accountable for the key aspects of the institution's operations. The governing board must have the independent authority for such accountability and must also hold itself independent of undue influence from individuals, be they donors, elected officials, supporters of athletics, shareholders, or others with personal or political interests.

Governance of a quality institution of higher education will include a significant role for faculty, in particular with regard to currency and sufficiency of the curriculum, expectations for student performance, qualifications of the instructional staff, and adequacy of resources for instructional support.

8. Planning and management of resources to ensure institutional sustainability

The Commission does not privilege wealth. Students do expect, however, that an institution will be in operation for the duration of their degree programs. Therefore, the Commission is obliged to seek information regarding an institution's sustainability and, to that end, wise management of its resources. The Commission also watches for signs that an institution's financial challenges are eroding the quality of its programs to the point of endangering the institution's ability to meet the Criteria for Accreditation. Careful mid- and long-range planning must undergird an institution's budgetary and financial decisions.

9. Mission-centered evaluation

The Commission understands and values deeply the diversity of its institutions, which begins from the diversity of their missions. Accordingly, mission in some degree governs each of the Criteria. The Commission holds many expectations for all institutions, regardless of mission, but it expects that differences in mission will shape wide differences in how the expectations are addressed and met.

10. Accreditation through peer review

Peer review is the defining characteristic of accreditation and essential for a judgment-based process in a highly complex field. But self-regulation can be met with public skepticism. Therefore, peer review for accreditation must: (1) be collegial, in the sense of absolute openness in the relationship between an institution and the peer reviewers assigned to it as well as between the institution and the Commission; (2) be firm in maintaining high standards, not mistaking leniency for kindness or inclusiveness; and (3) be cognizant of the dual role of peer reviewers in both assuring and advancing institutional quality.

Criteria for Accreditation: Glossary

There are a few words and phrases in the Criteria that require additional clarification, seemingly simple language that, in practice, may be used in different ways by different member institutions. This glossary explains how these words are used within the Criteria for Accreditation. Its intent is not to prescribe how institutions must use a particular word or phrase locally, but rather to offer a means to ensure a consistent reading of the meaning and expectations of the Criteria for Accreditation.

- **auxiliary** denotes activities and services related to but not intrinsic to educational functions: dining services, student housing, faculty or staff housing, intercollegiate athletics, student stores, a Public Radio station, etc. In many institutions **auxiliary** simultaneously denotes a segregated budget and dedicated revenues.
- **assessment** and **evaluation** are used as ordinary language synonyms. When a narrower referent is intended, the terms are modified, as in “assessment of student learning” or “evaluation of academic services.”
- **control** as used in the Criteria refers to the institution’s status as a public, private-not-for-profit, or private-for-profit institution, and in the last instances, to the institution’s ownership and the board’s power to direct its affairs.
- **dual credit** refers to courses taught to high school students for which the students receive both high school credit and college credit. These courses or programs are offered under a variety of names; the Criteria on “dual credit” apply to all of them as they involve the accredited institution’s responsibility for the quality of its offerings.
- **faculty** and **instructors** refer to all those an institution employs or assigns to teach students. **Faculty** is used to refer to the group rather than to each individual instructional staff member, typically to distinguish faculty from administration.
- **goals** and **outcomes** are used inconsistently by member institutions in the context of assessment of student learning, to the extent that one institution’s **goal** may be another’s **outcome** and vice versa. When they use either term, the Criteria indicate through context whether the term refers to the learning intended or to how much students actually learn.
- **public** in phrases such as “makes available to the public” or “states publicly” refers to people *in general*, including current and potential students. In phrases such as “the public good,” the Criteria refer to public, as opposed to private, good. The modifier **public** as used to describe governing board members is defined within the statement requiring such members.
- **wherever and however delivered** is intended to encompass all modes of delivery and all locations, modalities, and venues, including but not limited to the main campus, additional locations, distance delivery, dual credit, contractual or consortial arrangements.

3

Proposed Criteria for Accreditation

Criteria for Accreditation shall be the standards of quality by which the Commission determines whether or not an institution merits accreditation or reaffirmation of accreditation. They are as follows:

Criterion One: Mission

The institution’s mission is clear and articulated publicly; it guides the institution’s operations.

Core Components

- 1.A. The institution’s mission is broadly understood within the institution and guides its operations.
 1. The mission statement is developed through a process suited to the nature and culture of the institution and adopted by the governing board.
 2. The institution’s academic programs, student support services, and enrollment profile are consistent with its stated mission.
 3. The institution’s planning and budgeting priorities align with and support the mission. (This sub-component may be addressed by reference to the response to Criterion 5.C.1.)

- 1.B. The mission is articulated publicly.
1. The institution clearly defines its mission through one or more public documents, such as statements of purpose, vision, values, goals, plans, or institutional priorities.
 2. The document or documents are current and explain the extent of the institution's emphasis on the various aspects of its mission, such as instruction, scholarship, research, application of research, creative works, clinical service, public service, economic development, and religious or cultural purpose.
 3. The document or documents identify the nature and scope of the higher education programs and services the institution provides and whom these activities serve.
- 1.C. The institution understands the relationship between its mission and the diversity of U.S. society.
1. The institution addresses its role in a multicultural society.
 2. The institution's processes and activities reflect attention to human diversity as appropriate within its mission and for the constituencies it serves.
- 1.D. The institution's mission demonstrates commitment to the public good.
1. Actions and decisions reflect an understanding that in its educational role the institution serves the public, not solely the institution, and thus entails a public obligation.
 2. The institution's educational responsibilities take primacy over other purposes, such as generating financial returns for investors, contributing to a

related or parent organization, or supporting external interests.

3. The institution engages with its identified external constituencies and communities of interest and responds to their needs as its mission and capacity allow.

Criterion Two: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

The institution fulfills its mission ethically and responsibly.

Core Components

- 2.A. The institution establishes and follows fair and ethical policies and processes for its governing board, administration, faculty, and staff in its financial, academic, personnel, and auxiliary functions.
- 2.B. The institution presents itself clearly and completely to its students and to the public with regard to its programs, requirements, costs to students, faculty and staff, control, and accreditation relationships.
- 2.C. The governing board of the institution is sufficiently autonomous to make decisions in the best interest of the institution and to assure its integrity.
 1. The governing board's deliberations reflect priorities to preserve and enhance the institution.
 2. The governing board reviews and considers the reasonable and relevant interests of the institution's internal and external constituencies during its decision-making deliberations.

3. The governing board preserves its independence from undue influence on the part of donors, elected officials, ownership interests, or other external parties when such influence would not be in the best interest of the institution.
4. The governing board delegates day-to-day management of the institution to the administration and expects the faculty to oversee academic matters.

- 2.D. The institution is committed to freedom of expression and the pursuit of truth in teaching and learning.

- 2.E. The institution ensures that faculty, students, and staff acquire, discover, and apply knowledge responsibly.

1. The institution provides effective oversight and support services to ensure the integrity of research and scholarly practice conducted by its faculty, staff, and students.
2. Students are offered guidance in the ethical use of information resources.
3. The institution has and enforces policies on academic honesty and integrity.

Criterion Three: Teaching and Learning–Quality, Resources, and Support

The institution provides high quality education, wherever and however its offerings are delivered.

Core Components

<p>3.A. The institution's degree programs are appropriate to higher education.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Courses and programs are current and require levels of performance by students appropriate to the degree or certificate awarded. 2. The institution articulates and differentiates learning goals for its undergraduate, graduate, post-baccalaureate, post-graduate, and certificate programs. 3. The institution's program quality and learning goals are consistent across all modes of delivery and all locations (on the main campus, at additional locations, by distance delivery, as dual credit, through contractual or consortial arrangements, etc.). 	<p>by the institution engages students in collecting, analyzing, and communicating information; in mastering modes of inquiry or creative work; and in developing skills adaptable to changing environments.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. The education offered by the institution recognizes the human and cultural diversity of the world in which students live and work. 5. The faculty and students contribute to scholarship, creative work, and the discovery of knowledge to the extent appropriate to their programs and the institution's mission. 	<p>dent support services, such as tutoring, financial aid advising, academic advising, and co-curricular activities, are appropriately qualified, trained, and supported in their professional development.</p>
<p>3.B. The institution demonstrates that the exercise of intellectual inquiry and the acquisition, application, and integration of broad learning and skills are integral to its educational programs.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The general education program is appropriate to the mission, educational offerings, and degree levels of the institution. 2. The institution articulates the purposes, content, and intended learning outcomes of its undergraduate general education requirements. The program of general education is grounded in a philosophy or framework developed by the institution or adopted from an established framework. It imparts broad knowledge and intellectual concepts to students and develops skills and attitudes that the institution believes every college-educated person should possess. 3. Every degree program offered 	<p>3.C. The institution has the faculty and staff needed for effective, high-quality programs and student services.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The institution has sufficient numbers and continuity of faculty members to carry out both the classroom and the non-classroom roles of faculty (oversight of the curriculum and expectations for student performance; establishment of academic credentials for instructional staff; involvement in assessment of student learning; etc.). 2. All instructors are appropriately credentialed, including those in dual credit, contractual, and consortial programs. 3. Instructors are evaluated regularly in accordance with established institutional policies and procedures. The institution has processes and resources for assuring that instructors are current in their disciplines and adept in their teaching roles; it supports their professional development. 4. Instructors are accessible for student inquiry. 5. Staff members providing stu- 	<p>3.D. The institution provides support for student learning and effective teaching.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The institution provides student support services suited to the needs of its student populations. 2. The institution provides for learning support and preparatory instruction to address the academic needs of its students. It has a process for placing entering students in courses and programs for which the students are adequately prepared. 3. The institution provides academic advising suited to its programs and the needs of its students. 4. The institution provides to students and instructors the infrastructure and resources necessary to support effective teaching and learning (e.g., technological infrastructure, scientific laboratories, libraries, performance spaces, clinical practice sites, museum collections). 5. The institution provides to students guidance in the effective use of research and information resources. <p>3.E. The institution fulfills its claims for an enriched educational environment.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The institution's co-curricular programs are suited to its mission and contribute to the educational experience of its students. 2. The institution engages its students and contributes to

their educational experience through other activities related to its mission, such as research, community engagement, service learning, religious or spiritual purpose, economic development, or others.

Criterion Four: Teaching and Learning–Evaluation and Improvement

The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments, and support services, and evaluates their effectiveness for student learning through processes designed to promote continuous improvement.

Core Components

- 4.A. The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs.
1. The institution maintains a practice of regular program reviews.
 2. The institution evaluates all the credit that it transcripts, including what it accepts in transfer or awards for other forms of prior learning.
 3. The institution affirms that those degree or certificate programs it represents as designed to prepare students for advanced study or employment accomplish these purposes.
 4. The institution maintains specialized accreditation as appropriate to its educational purposes.
 5. The institution maintains and exercises authority over

the prerequisites for courses, rigor of courses, expectations for student learning, access to learning resources, and faculty qualifications for all its programs, including dual credit programs. It assures that its dual credit courses or programs for high school students are equivalent in learning outcomes and levels of achievement to its higher education curriculum.

- 4.B. The institution demonstrates a commitment to educational achievement and improvement through ongoing assessment of student learning.
1. The institution's goals for student learning are clearly stated and processes for assessment of student learning and achievement of learning goals are effective.
 2. The institution assesses achievement of the learning outcomes that it claims for its curricular and co-curricular programs.
 3. The institution uses the information gained from assessment to improve student learning.
 4. Assessment methodologies and processes reflect good practice. Faculty and other instructional staff members participate substantially.
- 4.C. The institution demonstrates a commitment to educational improvement through ongoing attention to its retention, persistence, and completion rates in degree and certificate programs.
1. The institution has defined goals for student retention, persistence, and completion that are ambitious but attainable and appropriate to its mission, student populations, and educational offerings.

2. The institution collects and analyzes information on student retention, persistence, and completion of programs.
3. Processes and methodologies for collecting and analyzing information on student retention, persistence, and completion of programs reflect good practice. (Institutions are not required to use IPEDS definitions in their determination of persistence or completion rates. Institutions are encouraged to choose measures that are suitable to their student populations, but institutions are accountable for the validity of their measures.)
4. The institution uses information on student retention, persistence, and completion of programs to improve its persistence and completion rates as warranted.

Criterion Five: Resources, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness

The institution's resources, structures, and processes are sufficient to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its educational offerings, and respond to future challenges and opportunities. The institution plans for the future.

Core Components

- 5.A. The institution's resource base supports its current educational programs and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future.

1. The institution has the fiscal and human resources and physical and technological infrastructure sufficient to support its operations wherever and however programs are delivered.
 2. The institution's educational purposes do not suffer as a result of elective resource allocations to other areas or disbursement of revenue to any superordinate entity.
 3. The goals incorporated into mission statements or elaborations of mission statements are realistic in light of the institution's organization, resources, and opportunities.
 4. The institution's staff in all areas are appropriately qualified and trained.
 5. The institution has a well-developed process in place for budgeting and for monitoring expense.
- 5.B. The institution's governance and administrative structures promote effective leadership and support collaborative processes.
1. The institution has and employs policies and procedures to engage its internal constituencies in governance, including its governing board, administration, faculty, staff, and students.
 2. The governing board is knowledgeable about the institution, provides oversight for the institution's financial and academic policies and practices, and meets its legal and fiduciary responsibilities.
 3. The institution enables the involvement of its administration, faculty, staff, and students in setting academic requirements, policy, and
- processes through effective structures for contribution and collaborative effort.
- 5.C. The institution engages in systematic and integrated planning.
1. The institution allocates its resources in alignment with its mission and priorities.
 2. The institution's processes for assessment, evaluation, planning, and budgeting are linked effectively.
 3. The planning process takes into consideration the entirety of the institution and appropriate input from internal and external constituent groups.
 4. The institution plans on the basis of a sound understanding of its current capacity. Institutional plans anticipate the possible impact of fluctuations in the institution's sources of revenue, such as enrollment, the economy, and state support.
 5. Institutional planning anticipates emerging factors, such as technology, demographic shifts, and globalization.
- 5.D. The institution works systematically to improve its performance.
1. The institution evaluates its operations.
 2. Documented evidence of performance routinely informs the institution's processes for evaluation, planning, and improvement in its operations.
 3. The institution learns from its operational experience and applies that learning to improve its institutional effectiveness, capabilities, and sustainability, overall and in its component parts.

4

Proposed Assumed Practices

(replaces Minimum Expectations)

Foundational to the Criteria and Core Components is a set of practices shared by institutions of higher education in the United States. Unlike Criteria and Core Components, these Assumed Practices are (1) generally matters to be determined as facts, rather than matters requiring professional judgment and (2) unlikely to vary by institutional mission or context.

A. Ethical and Responsible Conduct

1. The institution has a conflict of interest policy that ensures that the governing board and the senior administrative personnel act in the best interest of the institution.
2. The institution has ethics policies for faculty and staff regarding conflict of interest, nepotism, recruitment and admissions, financial aid, privacy of personal information, and contracting.
3. The institution provides its students, administrators, faculty, and staff with policies and procedures informing them of their rights and responsibilities within the institution.
4. The institution provides clear information regarding its procedures for receiving complaints and grievances from students and other constituencies, responds to them in a timely manner, and analyzes them to improve its processes.
5. The institution makes readily available to students and to the general public clear and complete information including:

<p>a. statements of mission, vision, and values</p> <p>b. full descriptions of the requirements for its programs, including all pre-requisite courses</p> <p>c. requirements for admission both to the institution and to particular programs or majors</p> <p>d. policies on acceptance of transfer credit, including how credit is applied to degree requirements. (Except for courses articulated through transfers or institutional agreements, the institution makes no promises to prospective students regarding the acceptance of credit awarded by examination, credit for prior learning, or credit for transfer until an evaluation has been conducted.)</p> <p>e. all student costs, including tuition, fees, training, and incidentals; its financial aid policies, practices, and requirements; and its policy on refunds</p> <p>f. policies regarding academic good standing, probation, and dismissal; residency or enrollment requirements (if any)</p> <p>g. a full list of its instructors and their academic credentials</p> <p>h. its relationship with any corporate parent and any external provider of its instruction.</p>	<p>cialized or program accreditation and the relationships between licensure and the various types of accreditation.</p> <p>b. An institution offering programs eligible for specialized accreditation at multiple locations discloses the accreditation status of the program at each location.</p> <p>c. An institution that advertises a program as preparation for a licensure examination publicly discloses its licensure pass rate on that examination, unless such information is not available to the institution.</p> <p>8. The governing board and its executive committee, if it has one, include some “public” members. Public members have no significant administrative position or any ownership interest in any of the following: the institution itself; a company that does substantial business with the institution; a company or organization with which the institution has a substantial partnership; a parent, ultimate parent, affiliate, or subsidiary corporation; an investment group or firm substantially involved with one of the above organizations. All publicly elected members or members appointed by publicly elected individuals or bodies (governors, elected legislative bodies) are public members.¹</p> <p>9. The governing board has the authority to approve the annual budget and to engage and dismiss the chief executive officer.¹</p> <p>10. The institution documents outsourcing of all services in written agreements, including agreements with parent or affiliated organizations.</p> <p>11. The institution takes responsibility for the ethical and responsible behavior of its contractual partners in relation to actions taken on its behalf.</p>	<p>credits beyond the bachelor’s for master’s degrees. Any variation from these minima must be explained and justified.</p> <p>b. The institution requires that 30 of the last 60 credits earned for a bachelor’s degree that the institution awards and 15 of the final 30 for an associate’s degree it awards be credits earned at the institution.² Institutions that do not maintain such a requirement, or have programs that do not, are able to demonstrate structures or practices that ensure coherence and quality to the degree. (Consortial arrangements are considered to be such structures.)</p> <p>c. The institution meets the federal requirements for credit ascption described in the Commission’s Federal Compliance Program.</p> <p>d. The institution adheres to policies on student academic load per term that reflect reasonable expectations for successful learning and course completion.</p> <p>e. Courses that carry academic credit toward college-level credentials have content and rigor appropriate to higher education.</p> <p>f. The institution has a process ensuring that all courses transferred and applied toward degree requirements demonstrate equivalence with its own courses required for that degree or are of equivalent rigor.</p> <p>g. The institution has a clear policy on the maximum allowable credit for prior learning as a reasonable proportion of the credits required to complete the student’s program. Credit awarded for prior learning is documented, evaluated, and appropriate for the level of degree awarded. (Note that this requirement does not apply to courses transferred from other institutions.)</p> <p>h. The institution’s policy and practice assure that at least 50% of courses applied to a graduate program are courses designed for graduate work, rather than undergraduate courses credited toward a graduate degree.</p> <p>i. The institution maintains a minimum requirement for general education for all of its undergraduate programs whether through a traditional</p>
<hr/>		
<h2 style="margin: 0;">B. Teaching and Learning—Quality, Resources, and Support</h2>		
<h3 style="margin: 0;">1. Programs, Courses, and Credits</h3>		
<p>a. An institution offering programs that require specialized accreditation or recognition in order for its students to be certified or to sit for licensing examinations either has the appropriate accreditation or discloses publicly and clearly the consequences to the students of the lack thereof. The institution makes clear to students the distinction between regional and spe-</p>	<p>a. The institution conforms to commonly accepted minimum program length: 60 semester credits for associate’s degrees, 120 semester credits for bachelor’s degrees, and 30 semester</p>	<p>credits beyond the bachelor’s for master’s degrees. Any variation from these minima must be explained and justified.</p>

practice of distributed curricula (15 semester credits for AAS degrees, 24 for AS or AA degrees, and 30 for bachelor's degrees) or through integrated, embedded, inter-disciplinary, or other accepted models that demonstrate a minimum requirement equivalent to the distributed model. Any variation is explained and justified.

2. Faculty Roles and Qualifications

a. Instructors (excluding teaching assistants enrolled in a graduate program and supervised by faculty) possess an academic degree relevant to what they are teaching and at least one level above the level at which they teach, except in programs for terminal degrees or when equivalent experience is established. In terminal degree programs, faculty members possess the same level of degree. When faculty members are employed based on equivalent experience, the institution defines a minimum threshold of experience and an evaluation process that is used in the appointment process.

b. Instructors teaching at the doctoral level have a record of recognized scholarship, creative endeavor, or achievement in practice commensurate with doctoral expectations.

c. Faculty participate substantially in:

1. oversight of the curriculum—its development and implementation, academic substance, currency, and relevance for internal and external constituencies;
2. assurance of consistency in the level and quality of instruction and in the expectations of student performance;
3. establishment of the academic qualifications for instructional personnel;
4. analysis of data and appropriate action on assessment of student learning and program completion.

3. Support Services

a. The institution monitors and acts upon student indebtedness, default rates, and repayment of student loans as a matter of the welfare of its students.

b. Financial aid advising clearly and comprehensively reviews students' eligibility for financial assistance and assists students in a full understanding of their debt and its consequences.

c. The institution maintains timely and accurate transcript and records services.

C. Teaching and Learning— Evaluation and Improvement

1. Instructors have the authority for the assignment of grades. (This requirement allows for collective responsibility, as when a faculty committee has the authority to over-ride a grade on appeal.)

2. The institution refrains from the transcription of credit from other institutions or providers that it will not apply to its own programs.

3. The institution has formal and current written agreements for managing internships and clinical placements.

4. A predominantly or solely single-purpose institution in fields that require licensure for practice is also accredited by or is actively in the process of applying to a recognized specialized accrediting agency for each field, if such agency exists.

5. Instructors communicate course requirements to students through syllabi.

6. Institutional data on assessment of student learning are accurate and address the full range of students who enroll.

7. Institutional data on student retention, persistence, and completion are accurate and address the full range of students who enroll.

D. Resources, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness

1. The institution is able to meet its current financial obligations.

2. The institution has a prepared budget for the current year and the capacity to compare it with budgets and actual results of previous years.

3. The institution has future financial projections addressing its long-term financial sustainability.

4. The institution maintains effective systems for collecting, analyzing, and using institutional information.

5. The accredited entity undergoes an external financial audit by a certified public accountant or a public audit agency. For private institutions the audit is annual; for public institutions it is at least every two years.³

6. The institution's administrative structure includes a chief executive officer, chief financial officer, and chief academic officer (titles may vary) with appropriate credentials and experience and sufficient focus on the institution to ensure appropriate leadership and oversight.

Notes:

¹ *Institutions operating under federal control and authorized by Congress are exempt from these requirements. These institutions must have a public board that includes representation by individuals who do not have a current or previous employment or other relationship with the federal government or any military entity. This public board has a significant role in setting policy, reviewing the institution's finances, reviewing and approving major institutional priorities, and overseeing the academic programs of the institution.*

² *For example, for a bachelor's degree requiring 120 credits, the institution accepts no more than 90 credits in total through transfer or other assessment of prior learning, and the remaining 30 must fall within the last 60 credits awarded the student.*

³ *Institutions under federal control are exempted provided that they have other reliable information to document the institution's fiscal resources and management.*

5

Proposed Institutional Obligations of Affiliation

While seeking and holding affiliation with the Commission, an institution voluntarily agrees to meet obligations set forth by the Commission as follows:

1. The institution meets obligations set forth by the Commission, including periodic evaluation through the structures and mechanisms set forth in Commission policies, submission of reports as requested by the Commission, filing of the Annual Institutional Data Update, and any other requirements set forth in its policies.
2. The institution is candid, transparent, and forthcoming in its dealings with the Commission, including in its responses to any special inquiries or requests for information from the Commission. The institution agrees not to enter into any agreement that limits the nature or scope of its communications with the Commission or requires that a third party review and approve those communications prior to their transmission to the Commission.
3. The institution notifies the Commission of any condition or situation that has the potential to affect the institution's status with the Commission, such as a significant unanticipated reduction in program offerings or serious legal investigation. (A fuller list of such conditions or situations is included in the Commission's policy on special monitoring.)
4. The institution informs the Commission of its relationship with any related entity wherein institutional decision-making is controlled by that entity and of any changes in that relationship that may affect the institution's compliance with Commission accreditation requirements. (Definitions and process requirements are contained in the Commission's policy on institutions with related entities.)
5. The institution describes itself in identical terms to the Commission and to any other institutional accrediting body with which it holds or seeks affiliation and notifies the Commission when it receives an adverse action from or has been placed on sanction by any other accrediting agency.
6. The institution assures its employees and students that it will consider fairly all complaints and third-party comments and not engage in retaliatory action against any who have submitted such information.
7. The institution accepts that the Commission will, in the interest of transparency to the public, publish outcomes from its accreditation process.
8. The institution portrays its accreditation status with the Commission clearly to the public, including the status of its branch campuses and related entities. The institution posts the electronic version of the Commission's Mark of Affiliation on at least one place on its Web site, linking users directly to the institution's status on the Commission's Web site.
9. The institution communicates to its constituencies and applicants any Public Disclosure Notice it receives from the Higher Learning Commission.
10. The institution maintains prominently on its Web site a telephone number that includes an option for both current students and the public to speak with a representative of the institution.
11. The institution submits timely payment of dues and fees and accepts the fact of surcharges for late payment.
12. The institution agrees to accept binding arbitration in the event of an action by the Commission's Board of Trustees that the institution disputes and is not able to resolve through the Commission's processes. This agreement follows procedures developed and published by the Commission.

Appendix A: Current Criteria for Accreditation

The current Criteria were adopted February 2003 and became effective on January 1, 2005. The proposed Criteria will replace this version.

Criterion One: Mission and Integrity

The organization operates with integrity to ensure the fulfillment of its mission through structures and processes that involve the board, administration, faculty, staff, and students.

Core Components

- A. The organization's mission documents are clear and articulate publicly the organization's commitments.
- B. In its mission documents, the organization recognizes the diversity of its learners, other relevant constituencies, and the greater society it serves.
- C. Understanding of and support for the mission pervade the organization.
- D. The organization's governance and administrative structures promote effective leadership and support collaborative processes that enable the organization to fulfill its mission.
- E. The organization upholds and protects its integrity.

Criterion Two: Preparing for the Future

The organization's allocation of resources and its processes for evaluation and planning demonstrate its capacity to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its education, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

Core Components

- A. The organization realistically prepares for a future shaped by multiple societal and economic trends.

- B. The organization's resource base supports its educational programs and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future.
- C. The organization's ongoing evaluation and assessment processes provide reliable evidence of institutional effectiveness that clearly informs strategies for continuous improvement.
- D. All levels of planning align with the organization's mission, thereby enhancing its capacity to fulfill that mission.

Criterion Three: Student Learning and Effective Teaching

The organization provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission.

Core Components

- A. The organization's goals for student learning outcomes are clearly stated for each educational program and make effective assessment possible.
- B. The organization values and supports effective teaching.
- C. The organization creates effective learning environments.
- D. The organization's learning resources support student learning and effective teaching.

Criterion Four: Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge

The organization promotes a life of learning for its faculty, administration, staff, and students by fostering and supporting inquiry, creativity, practice, and social responsibility in ways consistent with its mission.

Core Components

- A. The organization demonstrates, through the actions of its board, administrators, students, faculty, and staff, that it values a life of learning.
- B. The organization demonstrates that acquisition of a breadth of knowledge and skills and the exercise of intellectual inquiry are integral to its educational programs.
- C. The organization assesses the usefulness of its curricula to students who will live and work in a global, diverse, and technological society.
- D. The organization provides support to ensure that faculty, students, and staff acquire, discover, and apply knowledge responsibly.

Criterion Five: Engagement and Service

As called for by its mission, the organization identifies its constituencies and serves them in ways both value.

Core Components

- A. The organization learns from the constituencies it serves and analyzes its capacity to serve their needs and expectations.
- B. The organization has the capacity and the commitment to engage with its identified constituencies and communities.
- C. The organization demonstrates its responsiveness to those constituencies that depend on it for service.
- D. Internal and external constituencies value the services the organization provides.

Appendix B: Timeline and Implementation Schedule

Timeline for the Criteria Revision

This document will be revised at various stages as outlined below. Updated versions will be distributed by e-mail, at regional forums, and through the Commission's Web site. The Commission welcomes the participation of its members and others throughout the process.

2011	November:	HLC Board Meeting. First formal reading—gamma version
	November:	Gamma version sent to HLC members for comment
2012	February:	HLC Board Meeting. Adoption of delta version
	March:	Delta version (final) distributed to HLC members
	April:	Presentations at 2012 Annual Conference—training begins
2013	January 1:	Revised Criteria effective for most affiliated institutions (see implementation schedule below)

Criteria Implementation Schedule

Accredited Institutions

The revised Criteria for Accreditation, Assumed Practices, Obligations of Affiliation, and other new and revised related policies are effective for all accredited institutions on January 1, 2013.

What this timeline means for specific Commission processes:

- All visits prior to January 1, 2013, will address the current Criteria.
- All visits occurring on or after January 1, 2013, will address the revised Criteria.*
- Change requests submitted on or after January 1, 2013, will address the revised Criteria, where appropriate.
- AQIP Systems Portfolios submitted November 2012 or thereafter should address the new Criteria for Accreditation.
- All Change of Control requests submitted on or after September 1, 2012, will address the revised Criteria.

* Accredited institutions with comprehensive visits scheduled in spring 2013 will have the option to write their Self-Study Reports based on the revised Criteria or address them through an addendum or a crosswalk. The Commission will provide a template for this crosswalk.

Candidacy through Initial Accreditation

The revised Criteria for Accreditation, Assumed Practices, and other new and revised related policies are effective for all non-affiliated institutions and candidates on September 1, 2012.

Beginning September 1, 2012, non-affiliated institutions will be asked to affirm their willingness to abide by the Obligations of Affiliation if they are granted candidacy in conjunction with the letter of intent to seek candidacy and before the initial candidacy visit. The Obligations are effective for current candidate institutions on January 1, 2013.

What these timelines mean for specific Commission processes:

- All Preliminary Information Forms due after May 1, 2011, will address the new Eligibility Requirements.
- All candidacy and initial accreditation visits occurring prior to September 1, 2012, will address the current Criteria for Accreditation.
- All candidacy and initial accreditation visits occurring on or after September 1, 2012, will address the revised Criteria for Accreditation.

Appendix C: The New Criteria and Pathways at the 2012 Annual Conference

The coming months will bring some significant changes in the accreditation relationship. In September 2012, many institutions will begin the transition into the new Pathways model for maintaining accreditation. On January 1, 2013, the new Criteria for Accreditation will be effective for member institutions. The 2012 Annual Conference will offer a variety of opportunities to gain information about both of these important initiatives. Details about these initiatives are available on the Commission's Web site (www.ncahlc.org).

Implementing the Criteria for Accreditation

The General Program will address the new Criteria for Accreditation through sessions that explain the new Criteria, provide the details of implementation, and focus on specific topics or themes within the new Criteria. The Pre-Conference Workshops will also provide an overview on the new Criteria.

Transitioning to Pathways

The General Program will include a number of sessions on the Pathways model. Commission staff will provide the latest information on Pathways and will offer special sessions to assist institutions in preparing for the Assurance and Improvement Processes. Attendees will hear from institutions participating in the Demonstration Project and will have the opportunity to view initial samples from the new Assurance System and the Quality Initiative.

Pre-conference workshops will provide assistance to those institutions that will have early responsibilities in the new Pathways model. The Open Pathway Workshop is directed to those institutions that are moving to the Open Pathway and have comprehensive reviews in 2015-16, 2016-17, and 2017-18. The Standard Pathway Workshop is directed to all institutions that are moving to the Standard Pathway. (This Workshop is limited to 3 representatives per institution.)

Register Now
annualconference.ncahlc.org