New England Commission of Higher Education
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Procedures for the Review of Institutions Moving to the Higher or Lower Degree Level

Overview: Because the accreditation of an institution extends only to the degree levels awarded at the time of its most recent evaluation by the New England Commission of Higher Education, per the Commission's Policy on Substantive Change, moving to the higher or lower degree level is considered a substantive change. Indeed, it is one of the most fundamental changes an institution can make.

Examples of moving to the higher degree include an associate's degree-granting institution beginning to offer the bachelor's degree, a bachelor's degree-granting institution beginning to offer the master's or other graduate degrees, and the master's degree-granting institution beginning to offer a professional or research doctorate.

Also, the initiation of coursework leading to a degree, certificate, or credential at a level higher than the degree level at which the institution is currently accredited is considered a substantive change.

From time to time, an institution may add programs at a lower degree level; for example, a graduate-only institution may add a baccalaureate degree. This, too, is a substantive change and the procedures in this document apply[1].

In these cases, the Commission must evaluate the initiative and take positive action to extend the institution's accreditation to the new degree level (note: "new degree level" will be used going forward to describe "higher or lower degree level").

As with all substantive change requests, the report should be submitted to the Commission no later than six months before the institution plans to enroll students. When possible, an earlier submission is advised.

Procedures: The following procedures describe the means by which such evaluations take place. Through their application, the Commission works closely with the institution to facilitate its transition to the new degree level. The Commission endeavors to assure that the new degree level programming is developed and offered in keeping with the *Standards for Accreditation* at appropriate levels of quality and is sustained with sufficient support.

[1] In the remainder of this document, any time "higher degree" is used, the material also applies to the initiation of a "lower degree."

Questions about these procedures should be directed to the Commission's staff. Institutions planning a move to a new degree level should also consult the Commission's *Policy on Substantive Change* and its *Policy on Credits and Degrees*.

Advance Notice: An accredited or candidate institution contemplating offering one or more programs at a new degree level than its accreditation is asked to inform the Commission of its intent. Often this is done through the Annual Report Form which is sent to affiliated institutions in the late spring. However, the institution is encouraged to bring such initiatives to the Commission's attention at any time when they move from consideration to actual planning. Doing so facilitates early consultation with the Commission's staff to ensure that Commission expectations and applicable policies and procedures are clearly understood and that a timely evaluation of the institutional effort is facilitated.

Submission of Substantive Change Proposal: Prior to offering instruction at the new degree level, the institution provides the Commission a proposal detailing its plans to do so. This proposal affords the Commission an opportunity to review the initiative and provide feedback prior to its implementation. As noted above, the proposal should be submitted to the Commission at least six months before the institution plans to implement the proposed changes. The Commission will consider a proposal for a new degree only after all institutional and any necessary state approvals have been achieved.

Because moving to a new degree level represents a fundamental institutional change, the Commission, through its review of the proposal, seeks assurance that the rationale for the proposed degree(s) as well as the consequent changes in mission, faculty, student body, student support, and resources needed for the academic program(s) have been carefully considered by the institution's governing board, administration, and faculty, and that there are plans in place to accomplish the changes over a period of several years. Also, in reviewing institutional plans, the Commission seeks assurance that the institution has in place the appropriate means to review the changes and their implementation and use the results of those reviews for improvement.

The proposal should demonstrate explicitly and in detail that the institution has realistic plans in place to offer the proposed degree program(s) in keeping with the *Standards for Accreditation*. In addition, the proposal should address each of the Standards, as appropriate, to provide information about the actions planned and in place to assure the changes necessary for an institution offering the new degree level. A recommended outline for the proposal is included in this document beginning on page 4. The institution is encouraged to consult with Commission staff as it prepares its proposal.

Preliminary Commission Review of the Institution's Proposal: The Commission will review the proposal at its next scheduled meeting following its receipt, provided it is received by the deadline published on the Commission website. The purpose of this review is to: (1) determine if the proposed programming is consistent with the institution's mission and fulfills the *Standards for Accreditation* and relevant Commission policies; (2) assess the institution's planning for the proposed degree(s) and identify any areas to be monitored during implementation; and (3) make a determination about whether to include the degree(s) within the institution's accreditation. Following a favorable review or upon taking any necessary corrective steps identified by the

Commission during its preliminary review, the institution should proceed with the implementation of its plans. In disseminating information about its initiative at the new degree level to prospective students and others, the institution should accurately describe the accreditation status of the activity in keeping with the Commission's standard on *Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure.*

Site Visit: Within two years of the program(s)'s initiation, but before the first class is graduated, the Commission assesses the implementation of institutional plans through an on-site evaluation. This may be accomplished through a visit focused on the new initiative alone, or as part of a previously scheduled evaluation, with specific attention given to the new activity at the new degree level. When conducted through a visit focused on the new initiative alone, the *Procedures for the Substantive Change Evaluation Visit* will be followed in these reviews.

Prior to the site visit, the institution prepares an update of its original proposal to reflect and assess actual experience and to respond to any matters specified by the Commission in its notification letter. The institution is also asked to give particular attention in the update to plans for any additional programming at the new degree level being contemplated as well as the capacity of the institution to implement such plans.

Commission Action Following the Site Visit: Following its review of the institutional materials and visiting team's evaluation report, utilizing its usual procedures, the Commission takes an action to confirm the extension of the institution's accreditation to encompass the new degree program(s). The Commission may stipulate further monitoring that may include focused evaluations of the institution at the new degree level and/or requirements that the institution's further development at the new degree level be given particular emphasis in previously scheduled interim reports, which may be followed by a visit, or in comprehensive self-studies.

Should the Commission find that the institution has not satisfactorily implemented its own plans and/or not taken the corrective steps indicated by the review of the institution's proposal, or if it determines that there are other impediments to offering programming at the new degree level in keeping with the *Standards for Accreditation*, the institution will be asked to remedy expressed concerns before confirming the extension of the institution's accreditation to include the new degree. In such cases, the Commission indicates plans for a subsequent review.

Following initial extension of accreditation to include a program at a new degree level, institutions are required to notify the Commission of their intention to initiate other programs at the new degree level, or to modify substantively the content or the delivery of programs previously reviewed.

Typically, the Commission will review at least three programs at a new degree level before granting general approval at that level, as the Commission expects to see developed capacity at the new degree level, success with initial programs, and the development of an institutional culture supporting academic programming at the new degree level.

Recommended Outline for the Proposal for Moving to the Higher or Lower ("New") Degree

While no length of the proposal is specified, generally a proposal of approximately 15-20 pages (plus attachments such as program outlines, course descriptions, representative syllabi, specific information about faculty qualifications, a multi-year budget, and documentation of approval by the institution's governing board and, as required, the state) is satisfactory. And while no format is prescribed for the proposal, it is useful to provide a concise description of the proposed change, followed by a discussion of how the institution has planned for the change, considering each of the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation*, as illustrated below. Institutions are encouraged to send a draft of their proposal for review by Commission staff.

Cover page: Include the institution's name and location, the date, and the purpose of the proposal.

Proposal Summary: State the degree(s) the institution plans to offer, the intended student body, when the institution proposes to implement the program(s), and where and how the programming will be delivered. Indicate dates when the proposed degrees were approved by the institution's governing board and any applicable state authority. Include a copy of such approvals as appendices to the proposal.

***Standards for Accreditation*:** Describe how, through the proposed program(s), the institution will continue to fulfill each of the five Standards:

1. Mission, Organization, Governance, and Planning: Describe how the proposed move to the new degree is consistent with the institution's mission or in what ways the move to the new degree level changes the institution's mission. (Note: Standard 1.1, 1.2). Describe how the governance structure will accommodate – or be adjusted to accommodate – the new degree level and how constituencies, including the governing board, participated in planning and decision-making. (Note: Standards 1.4, 1.12, 2.3) Discuss the process through which the institution's governing board reviewed and approved the proposed degree(s). Explain how faculty have primary responsibility for the content, quality, and effectiveness of the curriculum at the new degree level. (Note: Standard 1.13) Provide evidence that preparations for the proposed move to a new degree level included analysis of need or demand; projects realistic short- and long-term goals; and provides information about how the institution will regularly and systematically evaluate the changes as a result of moving to the new degree level. (Note: Standard 1.14)

2. The Academic Program, Faculty, and Students: Describe the proposed academic program(s): student learning goals, structure, curriculum, delivery format, and content. Indicate how the academic requirements for the new program(s) are benchmarked against similar programs at peer institutions and against standards and requirements within the relevant professional field, as appropriate. Provide evidence of the institution's capacity to offer the new program(s) and to maintain its current programs at an acceptable level of quality. Include the schedule and plan for program review. (Note Standards 2.1, 2.4, 2.10, 2.13) Describe how credit hour requirements, collegiate-level skills in the English language, the rigor of academic work expected, transfer credit requirements, and general education requirements (if applicable) are fulfilled at the new degree level. (Note Standards 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, 2.8, 2.9, 2.11, 2.12) Describe how the institution ensures there

are sufficient faculty and academic staff for the new degree level and that their preparation, qualifications, ongoing support, and evaluation are appropriate to the nature of their assignments. Describe the effect the implementation of the new program(s) will have on the allocation of current faculty time and how the institution will continue to assure the quality of programs currently taught by faculty who will be reassigned to the new program(s). Include information about the institution's plans to support the increased expectations for faculty scholarship and research associated with moving to the new degree level, as appropriate. (Note Standards 2.18, 2.19, 2.20, 2.22) Describe the student body the institution intends to serve through the program(s) offered at the new degree level and how students will be recruited and considered for admission. (Note Standard 2.23) Describe how the institution intends to provide support, advising, and, as applicable, co-curricular programs and opportunities for students studying at the new degree level. (Note Standards 2.25) Describe how the institution will identify and systematically respond to the needs of students studying at the new degree level. Discuss how the significant presence of students studying at the new degree level will change the culture and atmosphere of the institution. Include evidence that the institution has the capacity to provide the services required by its current students as well as the new student body, including information about any new services to be provided. (Note Standard 2.24) Include program outlines, course descriptions, representative syllabi, curricula vitae, and job descriptions for new faculty and academic staff, as appropriate, as appendices.

3. Institutional Resources: Provide evidence of the institution's financial capacity to offer the proposed program(s) at the new degree level; include multi-year enrollment projections and revenue and expense budgets, including indirect costs. Discuss how the institution's governing board has considered the financial aspects of the planned change. (Note: Standards 3.1, 3.2) If applicable, describe how facilities renovation(s) or construction and any new physical or digital information and learning resources are sufficient to support the implementation of program(s) at the new degree level, including plans for hiring additional faculty and/or staff, and indirect costs. (Note: Standards 3.9, 3.10, 3.11)

4. Educational Effectiveness and the Success of All Students: Identify the learning outcomes that have been established for the proposed program(s) and demonstrate that they are appropriate for the degree level. Discuss how the institution will assess student learning, as well as the quality and effectiveness of its academic, co-curricular, and student services program, of the program(s) at the new degree level. Describe the mission-appropriate quantitative and qualitative measures of student success (including retention and graduation rates, and post-enrollment/post-graduation success measures as defined by the institution) that have been identified for the program(s) offered at the new degree level and how the institution will use assessment results for improvement. (Note Standards 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.5)

5. Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure*:* Describe how the institution maintains high ethical standards in its dealings with all constituents, the public, and the Commission with respect to the program(s) at the new degree level. (Note Standards 5.1, 5.4) Discuss how the institution provides accurate, timely, and readily accessible digital and/or physical information about the new degree level, including the educational opportunities, learning goals, resources and support services available, to the public and its internal and external constituencies. Provide information

about the proposed program(s) will be described in official institutional print and electronic publications. If applicable, describe how the institution has secured and maintains the necessary authority for each jurisdiction in which it conducts the program(s) at the new degree level; include any official approval documents in an appendix. (Note Standards 5.2, 5.5)

Future Plans: Conclude with a discussion of the institution's plans, if any, to offer additional programs at the proposed degree level or to undertake other substantive changes.

Submission of the Proposal
An electronic copy of the report, including all appendices, (single, searchable pdf file) should be submitted to the Commission through the NECHE Institution Portal.

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