

Procedures for the Substantive Change Evaluation Visit

Commission policy and federal guidelines stipulate that certain types of substantive change require a visit to assess implementation. These include but are not limited to: moving to the higher or lower degree (before the first class has graduated), establishing a branch campus or additional instructional location (as soon as practical, but no later than six months after establishment), establishing an overseas location, moving to a new location, and undergoing a change in control. The substantive change evaluation provides a means of monitoring the institution's capacity to implement the change at an acceptable level of quality and to provide assurance that the institution has in place appropriate personnel, facilities, and resources to support the change. When the Commission requires a substantive change evaluation, the institution prepares an update on its implementation of the change, and a small team visits the institution to validate the information provided in the update, evaluate the institution's success in implementing the substantive change, and report its findings and recommendations to the Commission. The Commission considers the institutional update, the team report and confidential recommendation, and the institution's response to the team report and takes action.

Notification to the Institution

Several months before the visit, the Commission sends a reminder to the institution about the upcoming evaluation and works with the chief executive officer on the selection of dates for the visit. Typically, visits to assess a move to the higher degree are two days in length; in most cases, reviews to assess new U.S. locations involve visits to both the institution's main campus and the off-campus site. Such reviews may require an evening or a weekend visit depending on when the program is offered and students and faculty are available. Visits overseas are typically two days in length, excluding travel time.

The Commission staff selects a prospective team to conduct the evaluation and requests the chief executive officer's comments on the proposed team before appointing its members. The size of the team, typically one to three persons, reflects the complexity of the change, based on Commission experience. When the team is complete, the institution and team members are informed, and appropriate evaluator materials are sent to the team from the Commission office.

Arrangements for the Team Visit

Upon receipt of the team list, the institution contacts the team chair/evaluator to discuss the schedule for the visit, accommodations (if needed), and other arrangements. The institution notifies each team member directly about accommodations and communicates with the team chair about all other matters related to the visit. The institution arranges to have all hotel accommodations and meals, if possible, billed directly to the institution. After the visit, the Commission bills the institution for the team members' out-of-pocket expenses, primarily travel costs. Reimbursement should be made directly and promptly to the team. In keeping with Commission policy, the Commission office bills the institution for the substantive change evaluation fee in effect at the time of the review.

Materials

In advance of the evaluation visit, the institution prepares an update regarding steps taken to implement the substantive change.

The update should reflect and assess the institution's experience in implementing the substantive change including its success in:

1. Achieving the enrollment and financial goals set for the initiative (*Standard 3*);
2. Ensuring sufficient faculty and staff to oversee the quality of the initiative (*Standards 2*);
3. Providing adequate resources and student services to support the initiative (*Standards 2 and 3*);
4. Implementing relevant approaches to assess student achievement and success (*Standard 4*).

In addition, the report should address any areas of emphasis identified by the Commission in its letter approving the institution's plans and to include information about its plans for continued implementation of the substantive change under review as well as its plans, if any, for additional substantive changes. Attention should be given to the institution's capacity to implement these plans.

The update should include a cover page with the institution's name and location, the date, and a brief summary of the subject(s) of the report.

No later than four weeks before the evaluation visit, the institution combines its update and the original substantive change proposal into a single, searchable pdf file and uploads the document through the NECHE Institution Portal. At the same time, the institution sends an electronic copy of the report to each evaluator (and, if requested, a paper copy).

An institution scheduled for a substantive change evaluation is urged to contact Commission staff for assistance in developing its update and making preparations for the evaluation.

Conduct of the Visit

During the on-site evaluation, the visitor(s) meet with institutional representatives who can provide information about the implementation of the substantive change under review. Depending upon the circumstances, these include, but are not limited to: the chief executive officer; chief academic officer; off-campus location site coordinator or program director; faculty; services staff; students; and, in some cases, members of the governing board. The visit concludes with a meeting between the team chair/evaluator and the institution's chief executive officer (or designee) to review the major findings of the evaluation.

For most substantive change evaluations, a preliminary visit by the team chairperson/evaluator is unnecessary. However, regular communication by phone should be initiated by the institution, and the chair/evaluator should feel free to contact the institution to discuss arrangements in detail or to request additional materials if team members see a need for them.

Preparation of the Evaluation Report

Within a month of the visit, the team/evaluator prepares a narrative report of no more than 5-6 pages that describes the institution's success in implementing the substantive change under review, with particular attention to any areas identified for emphasis by the Commission. The report should conclude with a list of identified strengths and concerns related to the institution's implementation of the substantive change.

A draft of the team's report is made available to the institution through the NECHE Institution Portal. The institution is provided an opportunity to review a draft of the evaluation report for factual accuracy and also to write a substantive response to the final team report (also made available through the portal).

Team's Confidential Recommendation to the Commission

In keeping with Commission procedures, the team/evaluator develops a confidential recommendation based upon its findings in evaluating the substantive change. The recommendation should contain the following elements:

1. The team's recommendation on whether inclusion of the substantive change within in the institution's accreditation should be confirmed.
2. The team's recommendation on the timing and content of any follow-up reporting on the implementation of the substantive change. A recommendation for subsequent progress reports related to the substantive change is advisable if the team concludes that further monitoring of the specific situation is necessary.
3. The rationale for the recommendations. Reasons should be given in narrative form for both components of the recommendation.

The team's confidential recommendation is submitted to the Commission office via the NECHE Evaluator Portal.

Commission Action

The team report and confidential recommendation, along with the institutional materials and response, are considered by the Commission at one of its regularly scheduled meetings. Typically, the institutional chief executive officer and team chairperson/evaluator are not requested to attend the meeting when the substantive change evaluation is reviewed. The institution and team member(s) are informed of the Commission's action shortly after the meeting.

July 2009
Editorial Changes March 2014
June 2015
July 2020
August 2021
Editorial Changes July 2026