

Becoming Accredited: A Guide for U.S. Institutions

New England Commission of Higher Education



Revised 2021

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INTRODUCTION

APPLYING FOR MEMBERSHIP

American regional accreditation is a system of peer review and ongoing self-evaluation designed to promote institutional improvement and provide an assurance of quality to the public.

The New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) has adopted a formal process to consider candidacy applications by U.S. higher education institutions that meet the Commission's *Requirements of Affiliation*. Each step of the process – from screening for eligibility to the candidacy application to the application for initial accreditation – has specific criteria, required institutional reports, evaluation processes, associated costs, and timeframes. The process ensures that institutions will be able to engage in an ongoing relationship with the Commission focused on public accountability and institutional improvement.

The Commission strongly believes that the process of pursuing regional accreditation is a capacity-building exercise for the institution. There is great value to be gained from attending Commission workshops, working closely with Commission staff, and getting feedback on draft documents. Commission staff will provide advice throughout the process; there is no need to hire outside consultants.

An application for candidacy does not constitute an application for initial accreditation. Nor does it commit the Commission to an eventual affiliation with the applicant institution.

Questions may be directed to the President of the Commission.

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Requirements of Affiliation

To be affiliated with the New England Commission of Higher Education as a candidate institution, an institution of higher education must meet the following requirements. Accredited institutions fulfill these requirements through meeting the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The institution:

1. has formally adopted a statement of mission, which demonstrates that the fundamental purposes of the institution are educational, and which is also appropriate to a degree-granting institution, and appropriate to those needs of society it seeks to serve;
2. offers one or more collegiate-level education programs, consistent with its mission, that leads to degrees in recognized fields of study and that require at least one year to complete;
3. awards the bachelor's, master's, or doctor's degree or, if it grants only the associate's degree, includes programs leading to degrees in liberal arts or general studies or another area of study widely available at the baccalaureate level of regionally accredited colleges and universities;
4. has, for each of its educational programs, clearly defined and published objectives appropriate to higher education in level, standards, and quality, as well as the means for achieving them, including a designated course of studies acceptable for meeting degree requirements, adequate guidance to degree candidates in the satisfaction of requirements, and adequate grading or evaluating procedures.
5. awards only degrees appropriate to each graduate's level of attainment;
6. in addition to study of the areas of specialization proper to its principal educational programs, requires a coherent and substantive program of liberal studies at the postsecondary level, as either a prerequisite to or a clearly defined element in those programs;
7. has adopted a statement specifying the potential students it wishes to serve, and admits qualified students to its programs under admission policies consistent with this statement and appropriate to those programs;
8. has students enrolled in and pursuing its principal educational programs at the time of the Commission's evaluation;
9. has available to students and the public a current and accurate website and catalog or comparable official publication setting forth purposes and objectives, entrance requirements and procedures, rules and regulations for student conduct, programs and courses, degree completion requirements, full-time and part-time faculty and degrees held, costs, refunds, and other items related to attending or withdrawing from the institution;

10. has a charter and/or other formal authority from the appropriate governmental agency authorizing it to grant all degrees it awards, has the necessary operating authority for each jurisdiction in which it conducts its activities, and is operating within its authority;
11. has sufficient organizational and operational independence to be held accountable for meeting the Commission's standards;
12. has a governing board that includes representation reflecting the public interest that oversees the institution; assures that two-thirds or more of the board members, including the chair, have no personal or immediate familial financial interest in the institution, including as employee, stockholder or shareholder, corporate director, or consultant;
13. has a chief executive officer, appointed by and responsible to the governing board, whose full-time or major responsibility is to the institution and who possesses the requisite authority;
14. has faculty sufficient in number, qualifications, and experience to support the academic programs offered, including an adequate number of faculty whose time commitment to the institution is sufficient to assure the accomplishment of class and out-of-class responsibilities essential to the fulfillment of institutional mission and purposes;
15. has sufficient staff, with appropriate preparation and experience, to provide the administrative services necessary to support its mission and purposes;
16. devotes all, or substantially all, of its gross income to the support of its educational purposes and programs;
17. documents a funding base, financial resources, and plans for financial development adequate to carry out its stated purposes;
18. has financial records that relate clearly to the institution's educational activities and has these records audited annually by an external auditor in accord with the generally accepted auditing standards for colleges and universities as adopted by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants;
19. has graduated at least one class in its principal educational programs before the Commission's evaluation for accredited status;
20. agrees to submit any dispute involving the final denial, withdrawal, or termination of candidacy or accreditation to initial arbitration prior to any other legal action.

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OVERVIEW

U.S. REGIONAL ACCREDITATION

In the United States, accreditation is the primary process for assuring and improving the quality of higher education institutions. Accreditation of nearly 3,000 colleges and universities is carried out through a process known as ‘regional accreditation’: seven commissions operate in six geographic regions of the country through non-governmental, non-profit voluntary associations.

Accreditation is a self-regulatory, non-governmental peer review process based on rigorous standards. Colleges and universities are judged based on self-evaluations analyzing how well they meet these standards, in light of their mission. Following a review by a team of peers, accrediting commissions determine the accreditation status of the institution and use a variety of means to ensure follow-up as appropriate and further evaluation in the case of substantive change on the part of the institution.

Regional accreditation oversees the quality of research universities; community colleges; liberal arts colleges; state colleges; religiously affiliated institutions; special-purpose institutions in the arts, sciences, and professional fields; military academies; historically black and Hispanic-serving institutions; and tribal colleges. Regionally accredited institutions are public and private, for-profit and not-for-profit, secular and religious, urban and rural, large and small, old and new, traditional and non-traditional. Collectively, they enroll over 18 million students in programs ranging from associate through doctoral level degrees. The quality of these colleges and universities – and the talent they have contributed to develop regional accreditation over the decades – means that regional accreditation is highly regarded around the world. In the United States, each of the regional commissions is recognized by the United States Secretary of Education and by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

Regional accreditation is overseen by a professional staff for each commission, totaling slightly over 100 full-time employees nationally. Annually, the work of accreditation is carried out by approximately 3,500 volunteers who serve on visiting teams and on the commissions. These volunteers include college and university presidents, academic officers, faculty, and campus experts in finance, student services, assessment, and library/technology. At least one of every seven Commissioners is a member of the public, unconnected with higher education.

Regional accreditation traces its roots to 1885. Today’s enterprise is based on decades of experience and refinement, both leading and reflecting the development of American higher education. Today’s standards go beyond inputs and processes – for example, Do students have access to learning resources and are they using them? – to focus increasingly on outcomes: How well are students gaining skills of finding, evaluating, and using information? Over the past decade, regional accreditation commissions have been leaders in helping colleges and universities develop trustworthy and useful ways to understand what and how their students are learning and use the results for improvement.

American higher education is known for its diversity. *The Economist’s* global survey of higher education praised the American system, noting, “A sophisticated economy needs a wide variety of universities pursuing a wide variety of missions [and] the more that the state’s role contracts, the more educational variety will flourish.” Regional accreditation has provided the conditions and framework under which diversity – and quality – have flourished.

NEW ENGLAND COMMISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The New England Commission of Higher Education is responsible for the evaluation of institutions which award the associate's, bachelor's, master's, and/or doctoral degrees. NECHE is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a reliable authority as to the quality of education for the institutions it accredits. The Commission is also recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), affirming that its *Standards for Accreditation* and processes are consistent with the quality, improvement, and accountability expectations that CHEA has established.

NECHE traces its roots to the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), the nation's oldest regional accrediting association that today consists of three commissions dedicated to the accreditation of P-12 institutions: Commission on Independent Schools; Commission on Public Schools; and Commission on International Education P-12. In 2018, the New England Commission of Higher Education became a separate and independent entity.

Recognizing the importance of clearly stated and understood purposes as a guide to the effective conduct of its affairs, the Commission has adopted the following statements affirming its vision and mission:

Vision Statement

Accreditation by NECHE is widely recognized as an effective and efficient system of peer review, assuring the quality of education, supporting innovation, and providing value to institutions and to the public.

Mission Statement

The Commission exercises the dual roles of quality assurance and encouraging continuous improvement for degree-granting institutions of higher education. The Commission assures the education community and the public that accredited institutions have clearly defined objectives consistent with Standards for Accreditation established by the Commission; that they have the organization, staffing and resources to accomplish and sustain these objectives. In addition, through its process of accreditation, the Commission promotes the improvement and effectiveness of its affiliated educational institutions.

The New England Commission of Higher Education consists of at least 21 members elected for three-year terms at its annual meeting in December. A Commissioner may be elected for one additional three-year term; Commissioners serving as chair or vice-chair may have their terms extended. Membership on the Commission is drawn from a range of institutions and from the public. At least one of every seven commissioners is a member of the public who, along with immediate family members, is not an employee, contractor, or trustee of an institution of higher education. Commissioners serve without compensation and those who are institutional representatives must be currently active on the faculties or staffs of an institution accredited by the Commission. The Commission normally meets four times a year.

The day-to-day activities of the Commission are conducted by the President of the Commission, professional staff, and support staff. The President and professional staff oversee and direct the work of the Commission's evaluation program, including the self-study and on-site evaluation processes. In addition to representing the Commission to its affiliated colleges and universities, they also work closely with the various state offices of higher education and promote the work of the Commission through participation in appropriate local, state, regional, national, and international meetings.

PEER EVALUATORS

U.S. accreditation is a system of peer review. The Commission has a database of about 2,000 evaluators – full-time faculty members and administrators at accredited institutions who are qualified by their credentials and experience to apply Commission standards.

Commission staff consult with the institution being evaluated to determine the composition of the visiting team, in light of each institution's specific situation and the Commission's requirement that all standards receive appropriate coverage. The team as a whole is chosen to represent diverse groups and talents from comparable institutions, as well as both experienced and new evaluators.

Evaluators are provided with intensive training prior to the evaluation visit. They are expected to make sound professional judgments, based on the *Standards for Accreditation*, that will help the Commission evaluate and enhance the quality of higher education in New England. All evaluators are responsible for excusing themselves from participating in any review that might represent or be perceived as a conflict of interest. For further information on how the institution and its self-study are evaluated by peer evaluators, consult the *Evaluation Manual*, which is available on the Commission website www.neche.org.

ELIGIBILITY

MEANING OF ELIGIBILITY

Eligibility is a finding by the New England Commission of Higher Education that the institution substantially meets the *Requirements of Affiliation* and may, if it chooses, apply for candidacy for accreditation within the next two years. Eligibility is a preliminary finding. It does not indicate any affiliation with the New England Commission of Higher Education.

ELIGIBILITY PROCESS

1. In-person meeting with Commission staff

If an institution believes that it meets the *Requirements of Affiliation* and wishes to explore the possibility of accreditation with the Commission, its chief executive officer should contact the Commission President to arrange an in-person meeting and presentation of institutional materials at the Commission offices.

The purpose of the in-person meeting is twofold: to help the Commission learn about the institution and to help the institution understand the accreditation process. Following a brief presentation by the institution about its mission, the context in which it operates, the programs it offers, and its own assessment of how it meets the eligibility requirements, Commission staff will provide an overview of Commission policies and procedures, offer a preliminary review of the *Requirements of Affiliation* and *Standards for Accreditation*, and discuss next steps.

2. Staff visit and advice to institution

If the institution appears eligible to pursue accreditation with the Commission, it prepares a draft report of eligibility, and a visit to the institution by a senior staff member will be scheduled. Meetings with the institution's senior leadership, governing board, faculty, and students will provide an in-depth introduction to the institution.

Following the visit, the institution receives confidential written feedback on the draft report and the site visit, including advice on whether it would be appropriate for the institution to pursue eligibility at this time or whether there are conditions that must be met first. This feedback is provided to the institution only; it does not go to the Commission.

3. Report of Eligibility

Based on the feedback from the above visit, the institution may finalize its report of eligibility addressing the institution's compliance with the *Requirements of Affiliation*. (Specific instructions on preparing the report of eligibility can be found in the Appendix to this booklet.) The institution should include a letter of intent stating that the institution's governing board has authorized seeking affiliation with the New England Commission of Higher Education.

An electronic version (single, searchable pdf file) of the report of eligibility should be sent to the Commission offices.

4. Eligibility Visit

Normally, submission of the report of eligibility is followed by a team visit undertaken by a member of the Commission staff and two peer evaluators. Its purpose is to prepare a report validating the contents of the institution's report of eligibility and to make a confidential recommendation to the Commission regarding whether the institution is eligible to make a formal application for candidacy.

An eligibility visit and the resulting team recommendation do not constitute an evaluation for candidacy, nor does a finding of eligibility result in any affiliation with the Commission.

5. Cost of the Eligibility Visit

Members of evaluation teams are volunteers and serve without honoraria. Their transportation and accommodation costs are the responsibility of the institution. In addition, an evaluation fee for the eligibility visit is charged to the institution prior to the visit. The current fee for the eligibility visit can be found on the Commission website www.neche.org.

6. Commission Decision on Eligibility

At one of its regularly scheduled meetings, the Commission will consider the institution's report of eligibility and the report and confidential recommendation prepared by the visiting team to determine if the institution should be declared eligible to apply for candidacy. Normally, the Commission will convey the expectation that consideration for candidacy will occur within two years. Should the application for candidacy take longer than two years, the Commission reserves the right to revisit the institution's eligibility for candidacy. In addition, the institution is obliged to communicate any planned significant changes to the Commission staff.

The Commission decision on eligibility applies to the institution as it exists at the time of the evaluation visit. New programs, degree levels, sites, and other substantive changes, as defined in Commission policy, must be reported in advance to the Commission, which may require further evaluation before the institution may apply for candidacy. The Policy on Substantive Change can be found on the Commission website www.neche.org.

If the Commission determines that the institution is not eligible, the institution will be so notified and given the reasons for the decision. This decision is not subject to appeal. An institution denied eligibility may resubmit a report of eligibility one year following the Commission's notification.

In special circumstances, the Commission President may, after review of the institution's report of eligibility, decide that an eligibility visit is not necessary and may declare the institution eligible to apply for candidacy. This decision, based on the visit by the senior staff member, would normally be based on the institution's long-established record in the higher education community and clear evidence that the eligibility requirements are met. The expectation that the consideration for candidacy take place within two years is applicable in this circumstance, as is the need for the institution to report to the Commission any substantive changes.

PUBLIC REPRESENTATION OF ELIGIBILITY

A determination of eligibility is not a formal status or affiliation with the Commission. It is a preliminary finding that the institution is potentially accreditable by the New England Commission of Higher Education, and that it may proceed with the process for candidacy within two years.

In order to ensure that there is no misunderstanding by the public, institutions must use only Commission-approved language about a finding of eligibility on their websites and in other public communications. If the institution receives a favorable decision regarding its eligibility, the institution may use only the following public statement in its entirety:

"The New England Commission of Higher Education has determined that [Name of institution] is eligible to proceed with an application for candidacy for accreditation within two years. A determination of eligibility is not candidacy or accreditation, nor does it indicate a likelihood of eventual accreditation. Questions about eligibility and the accreditation process should be directed to the President of the Commission."

Use of other language will be viewed as a breach of institutional integrity. Failure to comply with this requirement may result in withdrawal of the application process.

CANDIDACY

For new or developing institutions, candidacy is the normal route to accreditation. However, a long-established institution that believes itself to be in compliance with all the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation* may be permitted to apply directly for initial accreditation.

MEANING OF CANDIDACY

Candidacy is a pre-accreditation status of affiliation that indicates an institution has met the Commission's *Criteria for Candidacy*, is progressing toward accreditation, but does not yet meet the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation*. Only accredited institutions are members of the Commission.

A candidate institution has a maximum period of five years, from the effective date of candidacy, within which to achieve initial accreditation status. It is not mandatory that candidate institutions remain in candidate status for the maximum period of five years. However, early applications are appropriate only when encouraged by the results of evaluation visits and Commission action.

CRITERIA FOR CANDIDACY

To be granted candidacy status, an institution must demonstrate that it:

1. meets all the *Requirements of Affiliation*;
2. has, with the intention of meeting the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation*, effectively organized sufficient human, financial, learning, and physical resources into educational and other activities so that it is accomplishing its immediate educational purposes;
3. has established and is following realistic plans to acquire, organize, and appropriately apply any additional resources needed to comply with the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation* within the candidacy period;
4. currently meets the Commission's standard on *Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure*.

APPLYING FOR CANDIDACY

An institution may apply for candidacy only after it has been determined that the institution is eligible to do so. Once the institution has been declared eligible, Commission staff will work closely with the institution on the formal application for candidacy.

An application for candidacy in no way establishes any affiliation with the New England Commission of Higher Education. An institution's public statements about its pursuit of accreditation must be limited to Commission-approved language as provided in this booklet.

SELF-STUDY FOR CANDIDACY

The self-study undertaken for a candidacy application serves both internal and external purposes. It encourages institutional improvement through rigorous self-analysis. It also creates a basis for the Commission's evaluation in respect to the *Requirements of Affiliation*, the *Criteria for Candidacy*, and the *Standards for Accreditation*.

As indicated in the *Criteria for Candidacy*, the institution should demonstrate in the self-study how it is organizing its current resources to accomplish immediate educational purposes and how it is planning to acquire future resources necessary to fulfill the *Standards for Accreditation*.

The self-study for candidacy is organized in nine chapters, corresponding to the nine standards. In each chapter, the institution discusses what it currently does to meet the standard. It analyzes candidly what areas need to be improved and what plans exist to accomplish that improvement. Included with the self-study narrative are data forms and supplementary materials. For a fuller discussion of the self-study and required data forms, institutions should consult the *Self-Study Guide*, available on the Commission website www.neche.org.

Commission staff will provide guidance as the institution undertakes the comprehensive self-study to address each of the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation*. The institution should plan to attend the self-study workshop offered by the Commission each October. It is also strongly recommended that the institution seek Commission staff review of a draft of the self-study in order to ensure that the document meets Commission expectations. A draft may be sent in paper copy or electronically. Normally, staff can provide feedback within two weeks.

In addition to the self-study, the institution submits its report of eligibility, updated to respond to Commission questions and requests. Once the final self-study and updated report of eligibility are prepared, an electronic version (single, searchable pdf file) should be submitted to the Commission through the NECHE Institution Portal, and paper copies of these materials should be sent to team members who request them.

ON-SITE EVALUATION FOR CANDIDACY

Further information about the on-site evaluation can be found in the *Evaluation Manual*, which is available on the Commission website www.neche.org.

1. Selection of Visiting Team

Institutions are asked to select dates for the visit from several possibilities during the academic year. (Team visits are typically from Sunday to Wednesday.) Well in advance of the campus visit, Commission staff, with consideration for the nature of the institution, propose a visiting team chair to the chief executive officer of the institution. If the selection of the chair is approved by the chief executive officer, the chair is invited to serve. Team chairs are normally institutional presidents and provosts from comparable institutions with extensive experience in accreditation activities. To ensure objectivity in the evaluation process, institutions are asked to review the proposed chair and team members for any actual or perceived conflicts of interest.

After the team chair has been confirmed, a visiting team (typically about 5-7 individuals) is selected from the Commission's database of peer evaluators. While the Commission always reserves the right to appoint the visiting team, the views of the institution are important in ensuring the appropriateness and effectiveness of the visiting team and in preventing conflicts of interest. The Commission relies on the personal and professional integrity of individuals to refuse any assignment where even the slightest potential for conflict of interest exists. As soon as all team members have accepted appointment, Commission staff inform the institution.

2. Preliminary Visit by the Team Chair

Three to six months prior to the evaluation visit, the chair of the visiting team makes a preliminary visit to the institution. This visit is designed to help the institution understand how the team will operate and to enable the chair to assess the institution's self-study progress and discuss the institution's arrangements for the visit. The chair communicates with the institution's chief

executive officer to discuss the upcoming visit, the team's time of arrival, schedule, accommodations, and related matters.

The institution should arrange for charges for the visiting team's lodging and meals to be billed directly to the institution. The visiting team members are guests on campus but they are also outside evaluators with a job to do, and objectivity is crucial to their work. Hospitality should be considerate, but it need not be lavish. Gifts are not appropriate.

3. Candidacy Visit

The on-campus evaluation is typically scheduled for a three-day period, from Sunday afternoon through Wednesday afternoon. The team's work begins on Sunday afternoon to review team assignments and the protocol for the visit. That evening, the team meets with senior administrators, faculty, and board members over dinner. The following days of the visit are spent conducting a review of the institution and preparing the team's report and recommendation. Classroom observations are not necessary and typically are not helpful. The exact schedule of the team is arranged in advance through discussions between the team chair and institutional staff.

On the final day, the team chair first meets privately with the chief executive officer of the institution to discuss the team's findings. The chief executive officer and team chair determine who, in addition to the full visiting team, will be present to hear those findings presented at a meeting known as the "exit report." The session may be an open one for the entire institutional community or a gathering of just the senior leaders of the institution. At the exit report, the team chair provides an oral preview of major points that will be included in the team's written report.

4. Team Report and Confidential Recommendation to the Commission

The visiting team chair, with the assistance of the other team members, is responsible for the preparation of a written report for submission to the institution and the Commission. This report is essentially an assessment of the extent to which the institution meets the *Criteria for Candidacy* and its potential for attaining initial accreditation within a maximum of five years.

After the chair has completed a first draft of the report, it is sent to the other team members for correction. Commission staff also review the draft team report to make sure it is complete and in keeping with Commission requirements. The chair then forwards the report to the institution's chief executive officer, who is allowed a brief interval to identify any factual errors.

When the chair completes the final draft of the report, it is sent to the chief executive officer. The institution duplicates the report and sends a copy to each team member and submits an electronic copy of the report (single, searchable pdf file) to the Commission through the NECHE Institution Portal.

In a separate communication, the team submits to the Commission a confidential recommendation on whether the institution should be granted candidacy. This confidential recommendation is not shared with the institution. Specific reasons based on the *Criteria for Candidacy* must be set forth in support of the team's recommendation to grant or deny candidacy.

Prior to the Commission's consideration of the report, the chief executive officer is invited to submit an institutional response to the team report.

5. Cost of the Candidacy Visit

Members of evaluation teams serve without honoraria. Transportation and accommodation costs for the visiting team are the responsibility of the institution. In addition, an evaluation fee for the candidacy visit is charged to the institution prior to the visit. The current fee for the candidacy visit can be found on the Commission website www.necche.org.

COMMISSION ACTION ON CANDIDACY APPLICATION

At one of its regularly scheduled meetings in the semester following the evaluation visit, the Commission considers the institution's application for candidacy, reviewing all relevant information available: the self-study, the updated report of eligibility, the report of the visiting team, the institutional response to the report, and the team's confidential recommendation. The institutional chief executive officer and team chair are asked to meet in person with the Commission at this meeting.

Following the meeting, the Commission notifies the institution in writing of its decision. The policy on the Range and Meaning of Commission Actions Affecting Institutional Status describes the possible outcomes of the Commission's deliberations and is available on the Commission website www.neche.org

If candidate status is granted, the effective date (unless otherwise specified) is the last day of the evaluation visit that resulted in the Commission's action.

An institution denied candidate status is free to reapply when it can demonstrate that it has substantially improved those areas cited as reasons for the denial.

PUBLIC STATEMENTS ON CANDIDATE STATUS

In order to ensure that there is no misunderstanding by the public, institutions are asked to use only Commission-approved language about candidacy. An institution granted candidacy status must use only the following statement whenever it makes reference to its affiliation with the New England Commission of Higher Education on its website or in print publications. Use of other language will be viewed as a breach of institutional integrity. Failure to comply with this requirement may result in withdrawal of the candidacy process.

[Name of institution] has been granted candidate for accreditation status by the New England Commission of Higher Education.

Candidacy is not accreditation, nor does it assure eventual accreditation. Candidacy is a formal affiliation with the New England Commission of Higher Education. It indicates that the institution has achieved initial recognition and is progressing toward accreditation.

Inquiries regarding an institution's affiliation status with the Commission should be directed to:

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Burlington, MA 01803
Direct line to Commission offices: (781) 425-7785
E-mail: info@neche.org
Website: www.neche.org

Upon inquiry about a candidate institution, the Commission will release the date when candidacy was granted, the date of the next review, and certain other information described in the Policy on Public Disclosure of Information About Affiliated Institutions.

BENEFITS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF CANDIDACY

1. Candidacy is a formal status of affiliation with the Commission that can be mentioned in print and electronic publications using the Commission-approved language above.
2. Candidate institutions are listed on the Commission website in the roster of affiliated institutions.
3. Candidate institutions may nominate senior members of its faculty and administration to serve on evaluation teams. Such service is selective and dependent on finding an appropriate match for the individual's expertise.
4. Candidate institutions are invited to provide comments to the Commission on revisions to policies and other relevant matters.

Candidate institutions also have the following responsibilities:

Annual Report. All affiliated institutions are asked to complete and submit an online data form in the spring of each year.

Notification of Substantive Change. Candidate status encompasses only those aspects of the institution in existence at the time of the evaluation visit. New programs, degree levels, sites, and other substantive changes, as defined in Commission policy, must be reported in advance and approved by the Commission before the institution can claim inclusion of such changes in its candidate status. The Policy on Substantive Change can be found on the Commission website www.neche.org.

Biennial Review. Two years after candidacy has been granted, the institution submits an updated self-study reflecting developments since the time of the initial visit, including steps taken to respond to identified concerns. The report is followed by a brief focused evaluation visit conducted by a small team of three or four evaluators. The purpose of this biennial review is to determine if the institution continues to meet the *Criteria for Candidacy* and is making reasonable progress toward accreditation. The biennial review does not serve as an evaluation for initial accreditation.

COSTS OF CANDIDACY

If the institution is accepted as a candidate, it pays annual dues based on its full-time equivalent enrollment and total expenses. The current schedule of dues and fees is available on the Commission website www.neche.org.

LOSS OF CANDIDACY

Candidacy lapses when an institution fails to achieve accredited status by the end of the five-year period. Extensions of candidacy beyond the fifth year are granted only rarely and require action by the Commission. An institution may withdraw from candidacy at any time.

Withdrawal of candidacy within the five-year period can occur, following procedures outlined in the policy on the Range and Meaning of Commission Actions Affecting Institutional Status, as a result of a determination that the institution no longer meets one or more of the *Criteria for Candidacy* or that conditions at the institution have been radically altered since it was admitted to candidacy. An institution removed from candidacy may reapply for candidate status when it can demonstrate that the conditions leading to the lapse or withdrawal of candidacy have been

corrected. However, in no case will the Commission consider such application prior to the effective date of loss of candidacy.

BIENNIAL REVIEW OF CANDIDACY

The purpose of the biennial review during candidacy is to determine if the institution continues to meet the Commission's *Criteria for Candidacy* and is making reasonable progress toward accreditation. The steps in the biennial review process are:

1. preparation of a report (updated self-study) by the candidate institution;
2. on-site evaluation to validate the contents of the report;
3. visiting team report and confidential recommendation on continuation of candidacy;
4. Commission action to continue or terminate candidate status.

At the time of the biennial review, a long-established institution that believes itself to be in compliance with all the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation* may request that the biennial evaluation serve as the evaluation for initial accreditation. Such requests are granted infrequently. An institution wishing to make this request is encouraged to consult with the Commission staff.

1. Preparation of the Institution's Biennial Report

In order that the institution's preparation for biennial review may be more productive than burdensome, the Commission specifies that the report be an update of the self-study submitted for the institution's candidacy application. Typically, the letter from the Commission communicating the decision to award candidacy will include some areas of emphasis to be addressed in the biennial report. The institution should consider the biennial review a phase of its planning process, an opportunity to measure its progress toward meeting the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation*. If the institution's biennial self-assessment is effective, the self-study it will prepare for initial accreditation will be an updating of its biennial report.

Therefore, the most useful biennial report will be both a progress report and a planning document, addressing each of the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation* as well as its *Criteria for Candidacy*. Like the self-study for candidacy, the report should be a comprehensive and coherent narrative accompanied by the required supportive materials. Where progress has occurred, it should be documented. Where problems remain, they should be candidly acknowledged and plans for their solution should be detailed.

2. On-Site Evaluation

For the biennial review, the process for scheduling the visit and appointing the evaluation team is essentially the same as that for the candidacy application. Three or four team members, spending two or three days on campus, will examine materials, conduct interviews, and present an "exit report" consisting of an oral preview of their findings. As with the candidacy application, the host institution is responsible for travel and accommodation expenses for the team, as well as for a focused evaluation fee. The current schedule of dues and fees is available on the Commission website www.neche.org.

3. Visiting Team Report

The steps in the preparation of the team report and distribution are the same as those prescribed for other evaluation reports. The institution is asked to provide to the Commission a written response to the team's report.

4. Commission Action on Biennial Review

At one of its regularly scheduled meetings in the semester following the evaluation visit, the Commission considers the institutional materials, the report of the visiting team, the institutional response to the report, and the team's confidential recommendation. The institutional chief executive officer and team chair are asked to meet in person with the Commission at this meeting.

The Commission's decision whether or not to continue candidate status is final. Should the Commission determine that candidacy should be withdrawn, it will provide the institution an opportunity to appear before it in person and show cause why that action should not be taken. The Commission's final decision is subject to the appeal process then in effect.

INITIAL ACCREDITATION

Accreditation is not a one-time event but an ongoing relationship with the Commission. For the relationship to be effective as both a framework for institutional improvement and a means of assuring the public of institutional quality, institutions must commit to regular monitoring through reports and on-site visits. An open and candid dialogue with peer evaluators and the Commission is the hallmark of the U.S. accreditation system of self-regulation. The five years of candidacy provide sufficient opportunity for the institution to understand Commission expectations fully and for the Commission to develop trust that the future relationship will be a good one. Decisions about initial accreditation and the acceptance of an institution into membership are taken with the utmost seriousness.

EVALUATION FOR INITIAL ACCREDITATION

An evaluation for initial accreditation normally occurs during the fifth year of candidate status. In special circumstances, a candidate institution may apply for an earlier review. Institutions contemplating an early application should consult the President of the Commission.

The components of the application and evaluation for initial accreditation – self-study, team visit, team report and confidential recommendation, institutional response, Commission decision – are the same as those for candidacy, but the requirements are different: all nine *Standards for Accreditation* must be met at least minimally. Commission staff provide appropriate materials and advice on preparing for the evaluation for initial accreditation. Institutions should also consult the *Self-Study Guide* and the *Evaluation Manual* on the Commission website www.neche.org.

PUBLIC STATEMENT ON INITIAL ACCREDITATION

An institution granted initial accreditation is asked to use only the following statement in its entirety when it announces its new status on its website or in printed publications.

[Name of institution] has been granted initial accreditation status by the New England Commission of Higher Education.

Accreditation by the Commission indicates that the institution meets or exceeds criteria for the assessment of institutional quality periodically applied through a peer review process. An accredited college or university has been found to have the necessary resources to achieve its stated purposes through appropriate educational programs. It also gives reasonable evidence that it will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

Accreditation by the Commission is not partial but applies to the institution as a whole. As such, it is not a guarantee of every course or program offered, or the competence of individual graduates. Rather, it provides reasonable assurance about the quality of opportunities available to students who attend the institution.

Inquiries regarding an institution's affiliation status with the Commission should be directed to:

The New England Commission of Higher Education
3 Burlington Woods Drive, Suite 100
Burlington, MA 01803
Direct line to Commission offices: (781) 425-7785
E-mail: info@neche.org
Website: www.neche.org

Upon inquiry about an affiliated institution, the Commission will release the date when initial accreditation was granted, the date of the next review, and certain other information described in the Policy on Public Disclosure of Information About Affiliated Institutions. If an institution releases information that misrepresents its affiliation, the institution will be notified and asked to take corrective action. Should it fail to do so, the Commission will take appropriate action.

COSTS OF AFFILIATION

Accreditation is a system of peer review. In New England it is conducted largely by volunteers who serve without honoraria. Fees and annual dues paid by affiliated institutions cover the cost of services provided by the Commission and are the means by which independent, non-governmental accreditation is sustained.

All affiliated institutions pay annual dues based on their full-time equivalent enrollment and total expenses. In addition, evaluation fees are charged for every site visit by a review team. The current schedule of affiliation and evaluation fees is available on the Commission website www.neche.org.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF NEWLY ACCREDITED INSTITUTIONS

Annual Report. All affiliated institutions are asked to complete and submit an online data form in the spring of each year.

Notification of Substantive Change. Accreditation status encompasses only those aspects of the institution in existence at the time of the evaluation visit. New programs, degree levels, sites, and other substantive changes, as defined in Commission policy, must be reported in advance and approved by the Commission before the institution implements the change. The policy on Substantive Change can be found on the Commission website www.neche.org.

Next comprehensive evaluation. Newly accredited institutions undergo a comprehensive evaluation after five years. Following that evaluation, the Commission will establish the date of the next comprehensive evaluation and any further monitoring it may deem appropriate.

DENIAL OF INITIAL ACCREDITATION

An institution denied initial accreditation is free to reapply when it can demonstrate that it has substantially improved those areas cited as reasons for the denial. An applicant for initial accreditation may withdraw its request for affiliation at any time prior to action by the Commission. Denial of initial accreditation is subject to the Commission's appeal process then in effect.

APPENDIX

THE REPORT OF ELIGIBILITY: RESPONDING TO THE COMMISSION'S REQUIREMENTS OF AFFILIATION

The *Requirements of Affiliation* define the Commission's universe of institutions by cataloging those basic elements and characteristics considered essential in any affiliated institution. Each institution applying for candidacy must document compliance with the *Requirements* in its report of eligibility. If candidate status is granted, the institution is required to demonstrate continued compliance through the biennial review and in its self-study for initial accreditation.

The report of eligibility should respond specifically to each of the numbered requirements below. The Commentary states the rationale for the requirement and identifies specific factual information that should be included in the response to the numbered item. (Each requirement should be stated in the report. It is not necessary to repeat the commentary.) When asked to indicate where information can be found in the institution's catalog, include the specific page number. When asked to indicate where information can be found on the institution's website, include the URL that links specifically to the requested information.

The report of eligibility should be concise, no longer than thirty (30) pages, and should be accompanied by relevant supporting documents in an appendix.

Providing the report of eligibility does not constitute a formal application for candidacy, nor does it commit the Commission to an evaluation of the institution for affiliation.

The institution:

1. *has formally adopted a statement of mission, which demonstrates that the fundamental purposes of the institution are educational, and which is also appropriate to a degree-granting institution and appropriate to those needs of society it seeks to serve;*

Commentary: The term "mission" refers to a general, relatively unchanging broad purpose that the institution seeks to fulfill. Statements of institutional mission provide the basis for the Commission's evaluation process, since institutions are evaluated against their stated purposes.

The Commission limits its accreditation activities to degree-granting institutions. The mission of an institution seeking to establish affiliation with the Commission must conform generally to those of institutions within the traditions of American higher education. Furthermore, because education serves the end of meeting the needs of society, the purposes of educational institutions should be directed toward that goal.

- ✓ State the institutional mission and indicate where the mission statement is published in the institution's catalog and website (specific page number and URL).
- ✓ Indicate when the mission was adopted and by what body.

2. *offers one or more collegiate-level education programs, consistent with its mission, that leads to degrees in recognized fields of study and that require at least one year to complete;*

Commentary: The Commission deals only with degree-granting institutions. Institutions offering only short courses or certificates are excluded from its scope. (The Commission does, however, regard as appropriate the offering of short courses or

certificates in a context established by the presence of degree programs.) The institution's mission gives general direction to its academic programs; programs should be consistent with the mission.

- ✓ Summarize the programmatic offerings of the institution, including their relationship to the mission, and the anticipated time to complete each degree.
- ✓ Indicate where detailed information about the institution's academic programs can be found in the institution's catalog and website (specific page number and URL).

3. *awards the bachelor's, master's, or doctor's degree or, if it grants only the associate's degree, includes programs leading to degrees in liberal arts or general studies or another area of study widely available at the baccalaureate level of regionally accredited colleges and universities;*

Commentary: This requirement limits the range of degree-granting institutions that may be found eligible. Specifically, the Commission's purview is limited to institutions that provide students with the opportunity to complete academic programs that will prepare them to pursue degrees at a higher level at regionally accredited institutions in the United States.

- ✓ Identify all degrees awarded. If only the associate's degree is granted, indicated programs in the liberal arts or general studies or in areas of study widely available at the baccalaureate level of regionally accredited colleges and universities.
- ✓ Indicate where information about liberal arts offerings can be found in the institution's catalog and website (specific page number and URL).

4. *has, for each of its educational programs, clearly defined and published objectives appropriate to higher education in level, standards, and quality, as well as the means for achieving them, including a designated course of studies acceptable for meeting degree requirements, adequate guidance to degree candidates in the satisfaction of requirements, and adequate grading or evaluating procedures;*

Commentary: This requirement speaks to the need to assure the public that each program offered by the institution has a purpose, plan, and objectives; that each student is following a purposeful course of study and receives guidance in ensuring fulfillment of the course requirements; and that the grading and evaluation systems are appropriate, fair, and consistent.

- ✓ Summarize the institution's policies on the development of program objectives and curricula.
- ✓ Indicate where program objectives and curricula are published in the institution's catalog and website (specific page number and URL).
- ✓ Summarize advising activities and resources available for students.
- ✓ Summarize the institution's grading or evaluation procedures. Indicate where information on the evaluation of student work is available in the institution's catalog and website (specific page number and URL).

5. *awards only degrees appropriate to each graduate's level of attainment;*

Commentary: The concern addressed here is the integrity of the institution's degrees. The institution should assure that credentials are awarded only to students who have fulfilled all program requirements at a satisfactory level of achievement.

- ✓ Indicate how the institution guarantees the integrity of its degrees, including the protection of academic freedom, the acceptance of transfer credit, and the prevention of plagiarism.
- ✓ Indicate any degree audit processes or other means by which the institution can demonstrate that its graduates' level of attainment is acceptable to baccalaureate institutions (in the case of associate degree graduates), graduate schools, and future employers.

6. *in addition to study of the areas of specialization proper to its principal educational programs, requires a coherent and substantive program of liberal studies at the postsecondary level, as either a prerequisite to or a clearly defined element in those programs;*

Commentary: This requirement ensures that a defined general education component is an essential element of an undergraduate degree program. The Commission's standard on *The Academic Program* further stipulates that at least 40 semester credit hours of an undergraduate program leading to a bachelor's degree (or 20 semester credit hours for an associate's degree) consist of courses in arts and the humanities, the sciences (including mathematics), and the social sciences. To ensure that the recognized purposes of general education in a degree program are fulfilled, the Commission requires that it be offered at the collegiate level and that it not be a random collection of courses but rather have coherence as a whole. Recognizing that there are degree-granting institutions which offer only professional graduate programs, the Commission has provided explicitly that this requirement can be met by making undergraduate work containing a general education component a prerequisite to admission to such graduate institutions.

- ✓ Briefly describe the institution's general education requirement. Include the number of courses and credit hours students are required to take as well as the fields of study encompassed in the general education component.
- ✓ Indicate where information regarding the general education requirement can be found in the institution's catalog and website (specific page number and URL).
- ✓ For institutions offering undergraduate programs, indicate the number of general education courses offered and the number of faculty who teach general education courses. Identify the library and technology resources and physical facilities (e.g., labs, studios) available to support the general education curriculum.
- ✓ For institutions offering only graduate programs, summarize the general education prerequisite and indicate where this information can be found in the institution's catalog and website (specific page number and URL).

7. *has adopted a statement specifying the potential students it wishes to serve, and admits qualified students to its programs under admission policies consistent with this statement and appropriate to those programs;*

Commentary: This requirement ensures that an institution has given consideration to the characteristics of its potential student population and that the statement indicating

the students it wishes to serve is compatible with the institution's mission and programs. It also obligates institutions to admit students who are capable of successfully completing its programs.

- ✓ Provide the institution's statement about the students it serves.
- ✓ Indicate when the statement was adopted and by what body.
- ✓ Summarize institutional admission policies and practices. Provide data on the most recently admitted class demonstrating that only qualified students are admitted.
- ✓ Indicate where a description of the current student body can be found in the institution's catalog and website (specific page number and URL).

8. *has students enrolled in and pursuing its principal educational programs at the time of the Commission's evaluation;*

Commentary: The Commission considers for eligibility only institutions that are currently in full operation.

- ✓ List current degree programs with the number of students enrolled in each.

9. *has available to students and the public a current and accurate website and catalog or comparable official publication setting forth purposes and objectives, entrance requirements and procedures, rules and regulations for student conduct, programs and courses, degree completion requirements, full-time and part-time faculty and degrees held, costs, refunds, and other items related to attending or withdrawing from the institution;*

Commentary: The Commission believes that each institution must operate openly, providing to its prospective and enrolled students all necessary information about its programs, activities, and procedures.

- ✓ Include a chart that indicates where on the institution's website each piece of the required information can be found.
- ✓ Include a chart that indicates where in the institution's catalog or other official publications each piece of the required information can be found; include a copy of the catalog.
- ✓ Describe briefly the institution's procedures to ensure the currency and accuracy of its website, catalog, and other official publications.

10. *has a charter and/or other formal authority from the appropriate governmental agency authorizing it to grant all degrees it awards, has the necessary operating authority for each jurisdiction in which it conducts activities, and is operating within its authority;*

Commentary: By this requirement, the Commission is assured that affiliated institutions are operating legally.

- ✓ Indicate the source or sources of the institution's degree-granting or operating authority for all jurisdictions in which the institution provides instruction.

- ✓ Include a copy of the institution's charter(s) or other document(s) conferring degree-granting authority.

11. *has sufficient organizational and operational independence to be held accountable for meeting the Commission's standards;*

Commentary: The Commission wishes to be assured that the institution is sufficiently independent of any related entity and has the autonomy to fulfill the *Standards for Accreditation*.

- ✓ Identify any related entity (owner, parent corporation, sponsoring church or religious congregation, system) associated with the institution and describe the relationship between the related entity and the institution.
- ✓ Identify any functions shared between the institution and the related entity or other institutions associated with the related entity.

12. *has a governing board that includes representation reflecting the public interest that oversees the institution; assures that more than two-thirds of the board members, including the chair, have no personal or immediate familial financial interest in the institution, including as employee, stockholder or shareholder, corporate director, or consultant;*

Commentary: An affiliated institution must demonstrate the existence of a properly constituted entity responsible for its governance that has the requisite powers to see that purposes of the institution are fulfilled and sufficient independence to act in the best interest of the institution. The ability to act in the best interest of the institution is demonstrated, in part, by assuring that at least two-thirds of the board members, including the chair, have no personal or immediate financial interest in the institution. The requirement of representation of the public interest on governing boards recognizes that educational institutions serve a public purpose; their graduates not only should have personal gains from their education, but also should enhance the public good by being well-educated citizens and workers.

- ✓ Summarize the source and extent of the governing board's authority.
- ✓ Provide the names and affiliations of the members of the governing board, indicating the nature of any relationship individual trustees have with the institution apart from their membership on its governing board.
- ✓ Identify the members of the board who have a financial interest in the institution and indicate the nature of that interest.
- ✓ Provide a copy of the board bylaws, statement of board responsibilities, and a copy of the board conflict of interest policy.

13. *has a chief executive officer, appointed by and responsible to the governing board, whose full-time or major responsibility is to the institution and who possesses the requisite authority;*

Commentary: This requirement ensures that affiliated institutions have a governing and administrative structure, including a chief executive office whose primary task is to direct the affairs of the institution. Furthermore, it assures the Commission of an authoritative point of contact with the institution.

- ✓ Identify the bylaws or other organizational document(s) that outline the authority and responsibilities of the institution's chief executive officer.
- ✓ Describe the duties of the chief executive officer and identify the positions in the institution that report directly to him/her.
- ✓ Indicate the appointment and evaluation procedures for the institution's chief executive officer.

14. *has faculty sufficient in number, qualifications, and experience to support the academic programs offered, including an adequate number of faculty whose time commitment to the institution is sufficient to assure the accomplishment of class and out-of-class responsibilities essential to the fulfillment of institutional mission and purposes;*

Commentary: Through this requirement, the Commission is assured that the institution has sufficient faculty, with appropriate qualifications, to deliver its academic programs and to fulfill non-teaching responsibilities of faculty.

- ✓ Indicate the number of full-time faculty members and the number of part-time faculty members employed by the institution. If the institution has academic departments or divisions, indicate the number of faculty employed in each department/division.
- ✓ Summarize the academic qualifications and experience of the faculty.
- ✓ Describe the non-teaching responsibilities of faculty and indicate how these are fulfilled by the faculty employed by the institution.

15. *has sufficient staff, with appropriate preparation and experience, to provide administrative services necessary to support its mission and purposes;*

Commentary: The Commission seeks assurance that the non-academic functions of the institution are staffed by individuals with the expertise to fulfill their responsibilities effectively for the ongoing sustainability and improvement of the institution.

- ✓ Provide a list of the members of the senior leadership and their titles, indicating the degrees and experience of each, as well as the number of years at the institution.
- ✓ Provide a list of full-time and part-time professional staff, indicating their qualifications.
- ✓ Provide the full-time equivalent numbers of support staff by function.
- ✓ Provide an organizational chart.

16. *devotes all, or substantially all, of its gross income to the support of its educational purposes and programs;*

Commentary: The purpose of this requirement is to guarantee that the educational purposes of affiliated institutions are paramount and are not subverted to the achievement of other goals.

- ✓ Provide the operating budgets for the current and next fiscal year showing revenue and expenses for all areas of operations. Indicate the percentage of the expense budget dedicated to the support of educational purposes and programs.
- ✓ Describe how any operating surpluses are used.

17. *documents a funding base, financial resources, and plans for financial development adequate to carry out its stated purposes;*

Commentary: The Commission wishes to be assured that institutions have the financial capacity to support their educational objectives and that their fiscal stability is not unduly dependent on a vulnerable or narrow base of funding support now or in the future.

- ✓ Describe the institution's funding base and financial resources.
- ✓ Identify all external funding sources, foundation grants, public subsidies, etc.
- ✓ Describe the institution's plans for financial development. Include fundraising and financial planning documents.

18. *has financial records that relate clearly to the institution's educational activities and has these records audited annually by an external auditor in accord with the generally accepted auditing standards for colleges and universities as adopted by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants;*

Commentary: The students' welfare is the concern of the Commission in this requirement. When students enroll, making a substantial commitment of time and money, they should be assured that the institution has the financial means of carrying out its programs now and into the future.

- ✓ Provide the institution's most recent audited financial statements and management letter.

19. *has graduated at least one class in its principal educational programs before the Commission's evaluation for accredited status. If the institution has graduated its first class not more than one year before the Commission's evaluation, the effective date of accreditation will be the date of graduation of that first class.*

Commentary: Since accreditation covers the entire institution, up to and including the awarding of degrees, the Commission must be able to evaluate a complete cycle of the institution's principal program as it actually operates. The provision that accreditation be retroactive to the date of graduation of the first class (if not more than one year before the Commission's evaluation) is designed to eliminate the difficulties that graduates of that first class might have with professional licensure and admission to certain graduate programs if their degrees were from an unaccredited institution.

- ✓ Provide the date of the first graduating class.
- ✓ Provide the numbers of graduating students by program over the past five years.

20. *agrees to submit any dispute involving the final denial, withdrawal, or termination of candidacy or accreditation to initial arbitration prior to any other legal action.*

Commentary: This requirement comes directly from federal regulations. A statement indicating the institution's agreement to submit any dispute to initial arbitration should be included in the eligibility report.