
Policy and Procedures for Public Comments

Accreditation by the New England Commission of Higher Education represents the Commission's judgment that the institution meets the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation* and demonstrates that it has clearly defined purposes appropriate to an institution of higher learning; has assembled and organized those resources necessary to achieve its purposes; is achieving its purposes; and has the ability to continue to achieve its purposes.

The Commission values information provided by individuals to help in determining whether an institution's performance is consistent with the *Standards for Accreditation* and Commission policies and procedures. For that reason, and in compliance with federal regulations, the Commission accepts Public Comments from students, faculty, staff, and members of the public about affiliated institutions. The Public Comment process is intended to inform the Commission about substantive matters related to institutional quality. It is not designed to address personal grievances or provide a remedy to individuals in disputes with institutions.

Criteria for Consideration of Public Comments

Public Comments consist of general remarks typically related to an individual's experience or judgments about the quality of the institution's programs or services at an institution deemed eligible to apply for Candidacy through NECHE, at an institution granted Candidacy status through NECHE, or at a NECHE accredited institution.

Public Comments must meet the four criteria below to be considered::

1. Be in writing. Public Comments may be submitted electronically or by U.S. mail.
2. Address matters of institutional quality regarding programs or services. The Commission does not intervene in the internal procedures of institutions, consider allegations concerning the personal lives of individuals, or settle disputes.
3. Include contact information. The Commission does not accept anonymous comments.
4. Include permission for the comment to be forwarded to the Chief Executive Officer of the institution in question.

Submission and Review of Public Comments

Public Comments pertaining to an institution deemed eligible to apply for Candidacy through NECHE, at an institution granted Candidacy status through NECHE, or at a NECHE-accredited institution may be submitted at any time. Commission staff review all submitted Public Comments, acknowledge receipt, and determine whether they meet the Commission's criteria for consideration.

If the comment is found not to be within the scope of Commission policy, the author of the comment is informed, and the matter closed. If the comment is determined to meet the Commission's criteria, the author of the comment is informed and one of the procedures below is implemented, depending on whether or not the institution in question is undergoing a comprehensive evaluation when the comment is received.

1. Public Comments submitted at the time of an institution's comprehensive evaluation for candidacy, initial accreditation, or continuation of accreditation:

- Comments made at this time are provided, along with the identity of the author, to the Chief Executive Officer of the institution, who is asked to acknowledge receipt of the comments and given the opportunity to respond.
- Public Comments (and institutional responses, if provided) are forwarded to the Commission for consideration along with other materials involved in the comprehensive institutional review.
- Public Comments submitted at the time of the comprehensive evaluation are included in the institution's NECHE file.
- Normally, no further communication is provided to the commenter.

2. Public Comments submitted at other times:

- A summary of all topics covered in Public Comments submitted at other times (without identifying the institutions or the commenters) is provided to the Commission annually. After the report to the Commission, Public Comments submitted outside the comprehensive evaluation cycle are maintained in accordance with the Commission's Record Retention Policy.
- Commission staff may take up to 30 working days to review a public comment and have the authority to determine the disposition of Public Comments submitted at a time other than an institution's comprehensive evaluation for candidacy, initial accreditation, or continuation of accreditation. Staff review such comments to determine whether further action may be appropriate. The Commission reserves the right to take action as it deems appropriate or necessary on Public Comments submitted at a time other than the institution's comprehensive evaluation.
- If staff determine no further action on a Public Comment is appropriate, the comment is not forwarded to the institution or to the Commission, and the file is closed. Normally, no further communication is provided to the commenter.
- If staff determine further action is appropriate, the comment is forwarded to the Chief Executive Officer of the institution, who is asked to acknowledge receipt of the comment and given the opportunity to respond. The public comment and institution's response are considered by the Commission at its next regularly scheduled meeting. The institution and the commenter will be informed of the Commission's decision, and the public comment is maintained in accordance with the Commission's Record Retention Policy.

The Commission processes public comments as stated in this policy, using good faith in its review. The Commission reserves the right to terminate any further processing on a public comment or suspend consideration of future public comments by the commenter(s) for a period of up to five years if the commenter(s) is threatening or aggressive in communications with the Commission or Commission staff, or in the judgment of the Commission, the repetitive nature and volume of the comments by the commenter(s) rise to the level of harassment.

Inviting Public Comments During the Comprehensive Evaluation

In order to ensure that the public has ample opportunity to provide Public Comments at the time of the comprehensive evaluation, the Commission posts the names of such institutions and the dates of the evaluation visits on its website, neche.org, under “Upcoming Evaluations.”

In addition, institutions are asked to invite Public Comments through appropriate electronic and print media at least one month prior to the campus visit. Appropriate publications for this announcement are those whose readership includes substantial numbers of persons who are knowledgeable and interested in the institution, such as the institution’s website, alumni magazines, campus newspapers, and local newspapers. Institutions are also asked, in their self-study for comprehensive evaluation, to describe their process for soliciting Public Comments. Following is a sample notice institutions may use to invite Public Comments prior to the comprehensive evaluation.

Sample Invitation for Public Comments

Accredited Institutions

(Name of institution) will undergo a comprehensive evaluation visit on (date of visit), by a team representing the New England Commission of Higher Education (formerly the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, NEASC).

The New England Commission of Higher Education is a U.S. accrediting commission that provides institutional accreditation. Accreditation is voluntary and applies to the institution as a whole. The Commission, which is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, accredits approximately 220 institutions in the United States as well as American-style institutions overseas.

(Name of institution) has been accredited by the Commission since (year of initial accreditation) and was last reviewed in (date of last comprehensive evaluation). Its accreditation by the Commission encompasses the entire institution.

For the past year and a half, (name of institution) has been engaged in a process of self-study, addressing the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation*. An evaluation team will visit the institution to gather evidence that the self-study is thorough and accurate. The team will recommend to the Commission a continuing status for the institution. Following a review process, the Commission itself will take the final action.

The public is invited to submit comments regarding the institution to:

Public Comment on (name of institution)
New England Commission of Higher Education
301 Edgewater Place, Suite 210
Wakefield, MA 01880
E-mail: info@neche.org

Public Comments must address substantive matters related to the quality of the institution. The Commission cannot settle disputes between individuals and institutions, whether those involve faculty, students, administrators, or members of other groups. Comments will not be treated as confidential and must include the name, address, and telephone number of the person providing the comments.

Public Comments must be received by (last day of evaluation). The Commission cannot guarantee that comments received after that date will be considered.

Sample Invitation for Public Comments

Candidate Institutions

(Name of institution) will undergo a comprehensive evaluation visit on (date of visit), by a team representing the New England Commission of Higher Education (formerly the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, NEASC).

The New England Commission of Higher Education is a U.S. accrediting commission that provides institutional accreditation. Accreditation is voluntary and applies to the institution as a whole. The Commission, which is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, accredits approximately 220 institutions in the United States as well as American-style institutions overseas.

(Name of institution) became eligible to apply for Candidacy in (term and year). 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.

For the past year and a half, (name of institution) has been engaged in a process of self-study, addressing the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation*. An evaluation team will visit the institution to gather evidence that the self-study is thorough and accurate. The team will recommend to the Commission a continuing status for the institution. Following a review process, the Commission itself will take the final action.

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Public Comments must be received by (last day of evaluation). The Commission cannot guarantee that comments received after that date will be considered.

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