

Applying for Accreditation by the New England Commission of Higher Education:

**A Guide for Institutions Currently Accredited by an
Agency that is Recognized by the
U.S. Department of Education**

New England Commission of Higher Education



Revised 2024

Copies of this guide are available online at
www.neche.org

New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE)
301 Edgewater Place, Suite 210, Wakefield, MA 01880

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INTRODUCTION

Applying for Accreditation by the New England Commission of Higher Education

Effective July 1, 2020, the U.S. Department of Education passed a regulation declaring that "regional" accrediting agencies could expand their scope by accrediting institutions outside of their traditional region.

The New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) has adopted a formal process to consider applications for accreditation from institutions currently accredited by another federally recognized institutional accreditation agency. To transition to NECHE accreditation, the institution must provide evidence that: 1) it is in good standing with its current accreditation agency; 2) it is financially stable; and 3) it meets NECHE's *Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation*. 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 NECHE accreditation is an on-going capacity-building exercise for the institution. There is great value to be gained from attending NECHE's Annual Meeting and 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.

The acceptance of an application to become accredited by NECHE does not commit the Commission to an eventual affiliation with the applicant institution.

Questions may be directed to the President of the Commission.

New England Commission of Higher Education
301 Edgewater Place, Suite 210
Wakefield, Massachusetts 01880

Direct line to Commission offices: (781) 425-7785

E-mail: info@neche.org

Website: www.neche.org

BEFORE APPLYING FOR ACCREDITATION BY NECHE, TWO STEPS MUST OCCUR:

1. Preliminary Meeting with Commission Staff

If an institution wishes to explore the possibility of relinquishing its accreditation with its current accreditation agency and become accredited by the New England Commission of Higher Education, its chief executive officer should contact the Commission President to arrange a meeting and presentation of institutional materials.

The primary purpose of the meeting is to understand the reasons for which the institution wishes to relinquish its accreditation with its current agency and become accredited by NECHE. The meeting will also help the Commission learn about the institution and help the institution understand the NECHE accreditation process and Commission expectations. Following a brief presentation by the institution about its mission, the context in which it operates, the programs it offers, the reasons it is seeking NECHE accreditation, and its own assessment of how it meets the *Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation*, Commission staff will provide an overview of Commission policies and procedures, offer a preliminary review of the *Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation*, and discuss next steps.

2. Approval by the U.S. Department of Education

On July 19, 2022, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) released guidance documents addressing the responsibilities of institutions and accrediting organizations when an institution seeks to change accreditors:

- [Procedures for Institutions Seeking Approval of a Request to Change or Add Accrediting Agencies](#)
- [Guidance from USDE's Office of Federal Student Aid on Guidance for Institutions Seeking to Change or Add Accrediting Agencies](#)

After the preliminary meeting and approval to change accreditors is received from the U.S. Department of Education, the Commission President will notify the institution if it is invited to pursue accreditation by NECHE. If such an invitation is issued and accepted, the institution may begin drafting its applicant report.

APPLICATION FOR ACCREDITATION BY NECHE

The application process, which is equivalent to a comprehensive evaluation, comprises six key steps:

1. Campus Visit by Commission Staff
2. Preparing the Applicant Report
3. The Financial Screen and Financial Screening Response Report
4. Submitting the Applicant Report
5. Application Validation Visit
6. After the Applicant Visit

1. Campus Visit by Commission Staff

If the institution accepts NECHE's invitation to pursue accreditation through NECHE, Commission staff will schedule a convenient date to visit the institution's campus. The purpose of the staff visit is to verify, through review of institutional materials and follow-up meetings with key constituents at the institution (e.g., the Board of Trustees; academic and administrative leadership; faculty; staff;

students), that the institution is prepared to move forward with the application process. The visit will comprise one or two NECHE staff members and take place over the course of one or two days, depending on the size and complexity of the institution. Staff will conduct a workshop for the campus community related to becoming accredited through the New England Commission of Higher Education either prior to or during the visit.

Prior to the staff visit, the institution will complete an Account Information Form that will enable staff to create an account for the institution in the Commission's database and provide the institution with access to the NECHE Institution Portal. The following information is required:

- The full name of the institution and mailing address of the main campus
- The address of additional instructional locations (if any)
- The billing address of the institution
- The URL to the institution's website
- The full-time equivalent enrollment (FTE) and total expenses (this information is required to calculate annual dues). Information about dues and fees can be found on the Commission [website](#)
- The name and contact information (phone, email, and mailing address if different from the main campus) for the institution's:
 - Chief Executive Officer
 - The assistant to the CEO, if applicable
 - Chief Academic Officer
 - Chief Financial Officer
 - Accreditation Liaison Officer if one has been identified

2. Preparing the Applicant Report

The institution will prepare a comprehensive Applicant Report for the Commission that substantiates its rationale for relinquishing its accreditation with its current accreditation agency and documents the institution's compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation* and *Requirements of Affiliation*. Commission staff will conduct a Zoom session to discuss the Applicant Report, and the institution will submit one or more drafts of its report to NECHE staff for review and feedback prior to uploading the final report to the NECHE Institution Portal.

The final report will include:

1. Cover page stating NECHE Applicant Visit of [name of institution] and dates of visit
2. Table of Contents
3. Institutional Overview that introduces the reader to the institution and provides an explanation of why the institution wishes to relinquish its accreditation with its current agency and become accredited by NECHE
4. Narrative (40-50 pages) to demonstrate compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation* and the *Requirements of Affiliation*
5. Data First Forms to accompany each of the nine standards
[Data First forms \[formatted so instructions print\]](#) (.xlsx)
6. Appendix
 - a. Completed [Affirmation of Compliance](#) (.pdf), signed by the institution's CEO
 - b. Two most recent years of audited financial statements (Note: Comparative financial statements satisfy this requirement.)
 - c. Auditor's management letter containing specific recommendations to the institution on its financial controls and practices
 - d. [Student Achievement and Success: Making Assessment More Explicit \(E-Series\)](#) forms

- e. A summary of the reports, notification letters, agency actions, and related correspondence between the institution and its current institutional accreditation agency since the time of the institution's last comprehensive evaluation (note: these documents will be made available to the visiting team either electronically or in paper format during its visit)
- f. Financial Screening Response report, if applicable

Forms and related documents can also be downloaded from the Commission [website](#)

3. The Financial Screen and Financial Screening Response Report

Applicant institutions that are independent institutions of higher education are required to complete the NECHE financial screen. This is an annual process required of all NECHE independent institutions whereby the Commission attempts to identify institutions with fiscal and/or enrollment issues that may adversely affect their ability to continue to comply with the *Standards for Accreditation*. This screening is done by analyzing a dashboard of financial indicators that measure the institution's strength in four areas: market revenue/durability; cash flow sufficiency; liquidity; and wealth. The institution's dashboard results are compared to thresholds set by the Commission. Applicant institutions that fall below the established thresholds will submit a Financial Screening Response Report (FSRR) as an appendix to the Applicant Report.

The Financial Screening Response report consists of 3 components:

1. Financial Dashboard as provided by the Commission.
2. Two most recent years of audited financial statements (Note: Comparative financial statements satisfy this requirement.)
3. Narrative discussion (3-5 pages) of the institution's Financial Dashboard: The narrative provides an opportunity for the institution to analyze the conditions that resulted in its financial indicators falling below the thresholds, including any special circumstances that may have led to the outcome. The report will include a separate section for each area (i.e., market revenue/durability; cash flow sufficiency; liquidity; and wealth) with indicators below a threshold. The narrative will also enable the institution to demonstrate to the Commission that it understands its situation and is developing realistic plans to improve its financial condition.

The Financial Screening Response report will also be made available as a workroom document for review by the visiting team, and the Commission will consider the report as part of the application review.

4. Submitting the Applicant Report

The institution is asked to upload an electronic version (single, searchable pdf file) of the report and appendices to the NECHE Institution Portal six weeks prior to the scheduled team visit. The institution is also asked to mail the Applicant Report to team members who request a paper copy. Prior to the review of the institution's report by the Commission, the contents of the report and appendices, and workroom documents will be validated by a visiting team. While the team members will have access to the institution's Applicant Report through the Portal, the institution will need to provide each team member with electronic access to workroom documents. In addition to relevant institutional documents related to strategic planning, governance, enrollment, program review, finances, and assessment (see [Sample Documents for the Workroom](#)), workroom documents will include the following materials related to the institution's current accreditor:

- a. Most recent self-study, team report, institution's response to the team report, and agency's notification letter
- b. Most recent interim/mid-term report, team report, institution's response to the team report (if a visit was conducted in connection with the interim/mid-term report) and agency's notification letter

- c. Last two Annual Reports
- d. All reports submitted since the last comprehensive review, including but not limited to progress reports, substantive change reports, enrollment and/or finance reports, along with correspondence between the agency and the institution related to these reports
- e. All correspondence received from the current accreditation agency (including correspondence from programmatic accreditation agencies, if applicable) during the NECHE accreditation process
- f. Any complaints about the institution that were reviewed by the agency along with the agency's notification letter responding to the complaint(s)

5. Applicant Validation Visit

An on-campus team visit to validate the contents of the Applicant Report is required. Commission staff will work with the institution to coordinate dates for the visit. Team visits are typically scheduled in Spring or Fall, and they are conducted from Sunday to Wednesday.

Selection of the Visiting Team

Well in advance of the applicant visit, Commission staff, with consideration for the nature of the institution, will propose a visiting team chair to the chief executive officer of the institution. To ensure objectivity in the evaluation process, institutions are asked to review the proposed chair (and, as noted below, team members) for any actual or perceived conflicts of interest. If the selection of the chair is approved by the chief executive officer, the chair is invited to serve. The team chair is generally an institutional president or provost from a comparable NECHE-accredited institution who has extensive experience in accreditation activities.

After the team chair has been confirmed, a team of 4-6 individuals from NECHE-accredited institutions is selected from the Commission's database of peer evaluators and proposed to the institution's CEO. Peer reviewers from other regions may also serve as 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 NECHE team members have accepted appointment, Commission staff inform the institution.

Preliminary Visit by the Team Chair

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 Applicant Report 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 Applicant Visit

Visiting team members begin their review of the institution's Applicant Report and workroom documents six weeks prior to the 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 meeting with the institution's senior leadership, governing board, faculty, staff, and students 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. Visits to off-campus instructional locations will be determined in consultation with Commission 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.

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 the institution's 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.

6. After the Applicant Visit

Team Report, Confidential Recommendation to the Commission, and Institution's Response to the Team Report

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 an assessment of the extent to which the institution meets the *Standards for Accreditation* and the *Requirements of Affiliation* and its potential for becoming an accredited member of the New England Commission of Higher Education. The team also prepares a confidential recommendation to the Commission.

A team visit and the resulting team recommendation
do not constitute an affiliation with the Commission.

Within about six weeks after the visit, an autogenerated email to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) will alert the institution that the draft team report is available through the NECHE Institution Portal, and that the institution has one week to review the draft for factual accuracy. When the team report is finalized (generally by the ninth week after the visit), once again, an autogenerated email will be sent to the CEO requesting that the institution's response to the team report be uploaded via the Portal within two weeks. The Commission will receive all materials related to the applicant visit (applicant report, team report, institution's response to the team report, and confidential recommendation) several weeks prior to one of its regularly scheduled meetings.

Commission Decision

A semester after the application visit, the Commission will review the institution's Applicant Report, the team report, the team's confidential recommendation, and the institution's response to the team report to determine if the institution should be declared an accredited member of NECHE. The Commission will conduct its review at one of its regularly scheduled Commission meetings. The institution's CEO and the chair of the visiting team are invited to attend the 60-minute session at which the review takes place.

Notification of the Commission's Decision

The institution will receive a formal notification from the Chair of the Commission within 30 business days after the meeting detailing the Commission's decision.

If the Commission denies the institution's application for accreditation, the institution will be notified and given the reasons for the decision. This decision is subject to appeal according to the procedures outlined in Commission policy. If the application for accreditation is denied, the institution may resubmit an Applicant Report one year following the Commission's notification.

Note that public comments regarding the institution will not be accepted as part of the applicant visit as the institution is not yet affiliated with the Commission.

NECHE Staff Assistance and Workshops

Commission staff will guide the institution throughout the application process. The institution will also be asked to participate in NECHE workshops and training sessions. Staff assistance and workshops may be offered in a variety of delivery modalities including virtually or face-to-face at the office of the Commission in Wakefield, MA or on the institution's campus.

Commission staff will guide the institution on matters related to:

- The NECHE Institution Portal
- Writing the Applicant Report
- Becoming a NECHE Accredited Institution
- Standards, Policies, and Procedures
- Preparing Data First Forms and E-Series Forms
- Preparing for the Team Visit

The institution may also be invited to attend workshops that are offered to NECHE member institutions on an annual or semi-annual basis, including:

- Self-Study Workshop (held in October each year)
- Self-Study II Workshop (held in January and July each year)
- Data First Forms Workshops (held in January each year)

There are registration fees for some NECHE workshops.

COSTS OF THE APPLICATION VISIT AND AFFILIATION WITH THE COMMISSION

The current schedule of affiliation and evaluation fees is available on the Commission website www.necche.org

Cost of the Staff Visit

Depending on the size and complexity of the institution, one or two NECHE staff members will conduct the staff visit. The institution is responsible for the transportation and accommodation costs associated with the visit. In addition, a fee for the staff visit is charged to the institution prior to the visit.

Cost of the Applicant 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 application visit is charged to the institution prior to the visit.

Cost of Affiliation with the Commission

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 (FTE) and total expenses. In addition, evaluation fees are charged for every site visit by a review team.

PUBLIC REPRESENTATION OF THE INSTITUTION'S PURSUIT OF NECHE ACCREDITATION

Public Disclosure

An application for NECHE accreditation is not a formal status or affiliation with the Commission. If the institution chooses to inform the public that it is applying for accreditation through NECHE, in order to ensure that there is no misunderstanding by the public, institutions must use only Commission-approved language about its application on its websites and in other public communications. It may use only the following public statement in its entirety:

“[Name of institution] has submitted an application to become accredited by the New England Commission of Higher Education. This application does not constitute accreditation, nor does it indicate a likelihood of eventual accreditation. Questions about the application or accreditation process should be directed to the President of the Commission.”

New England Commission of Higher Education
301 Edgewater Place, Suite 210, Wakefield, MA 01880
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E-Mail: info@neche.org

Per the Commission’s policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions, once an institution has been granted accreditation, the Commission asks that the institution use one of the following statements to disclose on its website and in catalogues, brochures, advertisements, etc., that it is accredited.

_____ College (University) is accredited by the New England Commission of Higher Education (formerly the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Inc.). Inquiries regarding the accreditation status by the Commission should be directed to the administrative staff of the institution. Individuals may also contact:

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An institution may wish to include within its website, catalogue, or other material a statement which will give the public a better idea of the meaning of accreditation. When that is the case, the Commission requests that the following statement be used in its entirety:

_____ College (University) is accredited by the New England Commission of Higher Education (formerly the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Inc.).

Accreditation of an institution of higher education by the Commission indicates that it meets or exceeds criteria for the assessment of institutional quality periodically applied through a peer review process. An accredited college or university is one which has available the necessary resources to achieve its stated purposes through appropriate educational programs, is substantially doing so, and gives reasonable evidence that it will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Institutional integrity is also addressed through accreditation.

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.

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

RESPONSIBILITIES OF ACCREDITED INSTITUTIONS

Reports and Notification to the Commission

Annual Report. All affiliated institutions are asked to complete and submit the Commission's online Annual Report in the spring of each year.

Financial Screen. As noted above, all independent affiliated institutions are asked to complete the annual financial screen dashboard and, if requested, to submit a Financial Screening Response Report in the late fall of each year.

Notification of Substantive Change. Accreditation status encompasses only those aspects of the institution in existence at the time of the applicant visit. New programs, degree levels, off-campus instructional 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.