



## NECHE 2026 DRAFT *Standards for Accreditation*

July 2026

### Preamble

As an institutional accreditor recognized by the United States Department of Education, the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), is authorized to accredit colleges and universities across the United States. NECHE has also, for almost fifty years, accredited institutions outside the United States that meet certain enumerated requirements including a curriculum delivered primarily in English.

NECHE is a voluntary, non-profit, self-governing organization having as its primary purpose the accreditation of educational institutions. Through its evaluation activities, the Commission provides public assurance about the educational quality of degree-granting institutions that seek or wish to maintain accreditation. Moreover, the Commission expects affiliated institutions to work toward improving their quality, increasing their effectiveness, and continually striving toward excellence. Its evaluative processes are designed to encourage such improvement.

Institutions of higher learning achieve accreditation from NECHE by demonstrating they meet the Commission's *Standards for Accreditation* and comply with its policies. The *Standards for Accreditation* establish criteria for institutional quality; in addition, the Commission adopts policies that elucidate the Standards, relate to their application, and otherwise ensure that the Commission is current with respect to federal requirements and changing circumstances in higher education and public expectation.

Each of the *Standards for Accreditation* articulates a dimension of institutional quality. In applying the Standards, the Commission assesses and makes a determination about the effectiveness of the institution as a whole. The institution that meets the Standards:

- 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 recognizes that some aspects of an institution can be stronger than others. Meeting the *Standards for Accreditation* does not guarantee the quality of individual programs, courses, or graduates, but serious weaknesses in a particular area may threaten the institution's accreditation.

The Commission approaches institutional differences in ways designed to protect both educational quality and individual philosophy and practice. The Standards set aspirational expectations against which institutions measure their performance and improvement over time. They allow the Commission to appraise a wide variety of collegiate institutions, differing in purpose, size, organization, scope of program, clientele served, support, and control. The existence of collective bargaining agreements, in and of themselves, does not abrogate institutional, faculty, or staff obligations to comply with the *Standards for Accreditation*.

By design, the Standards as explicated welcome and encourage thoughtful, imaginative innovation aimed at increasing the effectiveness of higher education. The institution whose policies, practices, or resources differ significantly from those described in the *Standards for Accreditation* must demonstrate that its approach is appropriate to higher education, consistent with the institution's mission and purposes, and effective in meeting the intent of the Commission's Standards. NECHE's Policy on Innovation encourages member schools to bring new initiatives that, while perhaps not fully meeting all of the Standards, still serve to improve student outcomes.

Self-regulation is an essential element in the success of accreditation. Accordingly, these *Standards for Accreditation* were developed through a comprehensive participatory process that involved member institutions in articulating the dimensions of quality required of institutions of higher education deserving of the public trust. In addition, the public was also invited to participate in the process as NECHE recognizes the importance of higher education to the individual and collective well-being of our citizenry and for our economy. Thus, NECHE's Standards represent the accrued wisdom of over 230 colleges and universities and interested others about the essential elements of institutional quality and offer a perspective that stresses the public purposes of higher education. The Commission continually evaluates the effectiveness of its Standards and its processes for applying them and makes changes as conditions warrant.

Self-regulation obliges institutions to adhere to the Standards as a condition of their accredited status; accredited colleges and universities demonstrate their integrity through their continued voluntary compliance to these criteria. Adherence to the Standards is periodically reviewed through peer evaluation that is preceded by institutional self-study directed toward demonstrating that it meets the Standards and that it has effective means to ensure institutional improvement. This system of accreditation is based on institutions agreeing to participate in – and to accept and profit by – an honest and forthright assessment of institutional strengths and weaknesses.

Each of the dimensions of institutional quality has a Statement of the Standard set forth in bold type. Considerations used to determine fulfillment of the Standard are articulated in numbered paragraphs below the Statement of the Standard; these considerations provide a basis for institutions to undertake self-study as well as a basis for institutional evaluation by visiting teams and the Commission. Because the Standards represent dimensions of institutional quality, they are necessarily interrelated.

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# Standard One: Mission, Organization, Governance, and Planning

**The institution's mission defines its distinctive character, provides direction for institutional activities and forms the basis for institutional planning, resource allocation, assessment, and improvement. The organization has a system of governance, internal and at the Board level, that facilitates the accomplishment of its mission, provides for effective planning and evaluation, and supports institutional improvement and innovation. The institution has sufficient autonomy and control of its programs and operations to be held accountable for meeting the Commission's Standards for Accreditation.**

## Mission

- 1.1 The institution's mission, approved by the governing board and consistent with its charter and other operating authority, defines its distinctive character, gives direction to its activities, and is broadly understood by all constituents,
- 1.2 The institution's mission is periodically reviewed and either reaffirmed or modified.

## Governance

- 1.3 The authority, responsibilities, and relationships among the governing board, administration, faculty, staff, and sponsoring entity (if any) are clearly described and mutually understood.
- 1.4 When the institution's ownership or affiliation structure or other circumstances or requirements involve more than one legally constituted body with authority, the institution demonstrates that the governing body with direct responsibility for the institution's quality and integrity has sufficient authority and control to be held accountable for meeting all Commission Standards and Policies and to ensure that it can act in the best interest of the institution.
- 1.5 Two-thirds or more of the board should be free of any personal, financial, or familial interest in the institution including as an employee, stockholder, shareholder, corporate director of a related organization or contractor. The composition of the board is appropriately balanced to serve the institution's mission and goals.
- 1.6 In multi-campus systems under a single governing board, the division of responsibility and authority between the system office and the institution is clear.
- 1.7 For institutions located outside the United States, requirements imposed by the country in which a school is located may not be consistent with the governance structures set forth in our Standards. In these instances, the Commission has the authority to allow an exception to our requirements if it determines it is appropriate to do so.

1.8 The board appoints the chief executive officer and annually reviews their performance. It regularly conducts self-evaluations, incorporating external perspectives, and provides on-boarding for new members and training in fiduciary responsibility.

1.9 The board delegates to the chief executive officer and as appropriate to others the requisite authority and autonomy to manage the institution.

1.10 The institution's internal governance provides for appropriate participation of constituencies in accordance with its established policies and norms and maintains regular and effective communication channels.

1.11 The institution places primary responsibility for the content, quality, and effectiveness of the curriculum with its faculty. Faculty have a substantive voice in matters of educational programs, faculty qualifications, and other aspects of academic policy that relate to their areas of responsibility and control.

## Planning

1.12 The institution demonstrates planning beyond the short-term, is realistic in establishing its goals, regularly and systematically evaluates the effectiveness of its planning, aligns institutional resources with strategic priorities, and has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning.

## Standard Two: Academic and Co-Curricular Programs and Students

**The institution's academic and co-curricular programs are consistent with and serve to fulfill its mission and purposes. The institution works systematically and effectively to plan, provide, oversee, evaluate, improve, and assure the quality and integrity of its academic programs and credits and degrees awarded as well as its co-curricular programs. The institution sets a standard of student achievement appropriate to the degree or certificate awarded and develops systematic means to understand how and what students are learning and to use the evidence provided to improve the academic program.**

2.1 The institution has among its senior administration a position typically referred to as its chief academic officer. The institution's chief academic officer is directly responsible to the chief executive officer and, in concert with the faculty and other academic administrators, is responsible for the quality of the academic program.

2.2 New programs and academic initiatives align with the institution's plans and are supported by sufficient resources.

2.3 The institution offers collegiate-level programs consisting of a curriculum of studies that leads to a degree in coherent fields of study.

2.4 The institution publishes learning goals and requirements for each program.

2.5 Programs leading to a degree or other awards have a coherent design and are characterized by appropriate breadth, depth, continuity, sequential progression, and synthesis of learning.

### Faculty and Staff

2.6 There is an adequate number of faculty and academic staff to accomplish curricular, co-curricular, and student support responsibilities.

2.7 The preparation, qualifications, and evaluation of all faculty and academic staff are appropriate to the nature of their assignments.

2.8 The institution protects and fosters academic freedom for all faculty. It is the responsibility of each institution to develop and make public its policies related to academic freedom.

### Academic Programs

2.9 The institution reviews its academic programs on a regular cycle.

2.10 The institution undertaking substantive changes (as defined in Commission policy) demonstrates its capacity to undertake and sustain such initiatives and seeks Commission approval prior to implementation.

2.11 When programs are eliminated or program requirements are changed, the institution makes appropriate arrangements for enrolled students to complete their education with a minimum of disruption (see Commission policies on teach-outs).

2.12 Students completing an undergraduate or graduate program demonstrate collegiate-level skills in the English language; exceptions to this requirement need to be approved by the Commission prior to implementation.

2.13 Undergraduate degrees must include a general education requirement of at least one-third of the total credit hours required for the degree and also offer students an opportunity to take some electives. The general education program should ensure a balanced regard for what are traditionally referred to as the arts and humanities, the sciences including mathematics, and the social sciences. Institutions that offer an open curriculum must demonstrate equivalency with this requirement.

2.14 A bachelor's degree consists of a minimum of 120 credits, an associate's degree a minimum of 60 credits, a master's degree a minimum of 30 credits. An institution must have approval to offer specific degrees with fewer credits (see Commission Guidelines).

2.15 The level of academic work expected of students in the institution's graduate programs is significantly higher than that expected of undergraduates.

2.16 In accepting transfer credit, the institution exercises the responsibility to ensure that students have met its stated learning outcomes of programs at all degree levels. The institution does not erect barriers to the transfer of credit that are unnecessary to protect its academic quality and integrity.

2.17 The institution offering competency-based programs including through direct assessment produces a transcript for each student showing the credit equivalencies of the competencies obtained (see Commission policy).

2.18 The institution demonstrates its clear and ongoing authority and administrative oversight for the academic elements of all courses for which it awards institutional credit. It retains, even with contractual, dual enrollment, or other arrangements, responsibility for the design, content, and delivery of courses.

2.19 Credit for prior experiential or non-collegiate sponsored learning is awarded only with appropriate faculty and academic oversight and student learning and achievement must be demonstrated to be at least comparable to breadth, depth, and quality of the institutionally provided learning experiences.

2.20 Individuals admitted must demonstrate a reasonable potential for success.

## Student Support Services

2.21 The institution systematically and regularly identifies the needs of its student population and provides support services and makes provisions for responding to them including strategies for having all students feel welcomed, supported, included in the community.

2.22 The institution provides advising, academic support, and other student support services appropriate to the student body.

2.23 The institution provides students with clear and accurate information about cost, debt, and repayment, and includes information on how their degree will benefit them post-graduation.

## Standard Three: Institutional Resources

**The institution has and maintains sufficient human, financial, information, physical, and technological resources and capacity to support its mission wherever and however its academic programs are offered. Through periodic evaluation, the institution demonstrates that its resources are sufficient to sustain the quality of its educational program and to support institutional improvement now and in the future. The institution demonstrates, through verifiable internal and external evidence, its financial capacity to graduate its entering class. The institution administers its resources in an ethical manner that assures effective systems of enterprise risk management, regulatory compliance, and internal controls.**

### Financial Resources

3.1 The institution is financially stable. It has a realistic multi-year financial plan that reflects the capacity of the institution to depend on identified sources of revenue. The institution's stability and viability are not unduly dependent upon vulnerable financial resources or an historically narrow base of support.

3.2 The institution sets and achieves realistic enrollment goals that align with its financial planning and projections.

3.3 The institution ensures that it has sufficient and appropriately qualified finance staff, led by a chief financial officer whose primary responsibility is to the institution.

3.4 The institution's financial planning, including contingency planning, is integrated with overall planning and evaluation processes. The institution demonstrates its ability to analyze its financial condition and understand the opportunities and constraints that will influence its financial condition and acts accordingly. The institution implements a realistic plan for addressing issues raised by the existence of any operating deficit.

3.5 The institution prepares financial statements in accordance with accounting principles generally accepted in the US. The annual audit is prepared by an auditor external to the institution in accord with generally accepted US auditing standards. For institutions whose financial statements are included and audited as part of a larger system or corporation, those statements separately disclose financial information for the institution which is accredited. In all cases, the audit and required communications letter are appropriately reviewed by the institution's administration and governing board who take appropriate action on resulting recommendations or conclusions.

### Human, Physical, and Technological Resources

3.6 The institution maintains sufficient and qualified personnel to fulfill its mission.

3.7 All fiscal and employment-related policies are clearly stated in writing.

3.8 The institution's facilities are constructed and maintained in accordance with legal requirements to ensure access, safety, and security.

3.9 Institutions must ensure their physical, information, and technological resources are sufficient to support student learning.

3.10 The institution implements effective policies to ensure the integrity and security of data and the privacy of individuals. The institution has disaster recovery and business continuity plans and procedures that are regularly evaluated and updated.

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## Standard Four: Educational Effectiveness and the Success of All Students

**The institution demonstrates its educational effectiveness and the success of all students by ensuring appropriate levels of student achievement on mission-appropriate student outcomes. Based on sustained, evidence-based reflection and study, the institution employs comprehensive quality assurance processes to improve institutional effectiveness and student learning and success.**

4.1 The institution identifies a set of mission-appropriate goals for student learning and success at the institutional level, across all programs (academic and co-curricular), and at the course level as well as across all locations and all modalities. It establishes metrics to facilitate the assessment of its goals; these metrics include retention, graduation, and success rates.

4.2 The institution uses a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods, direct and indirect measures, and internal and external perspectives, to assess its mission-appropriate goals for student learning and success and understand the academic and co-curricular experiences and outcomes of its students.

4.3 The institution regularly and systematically collects and analyzes its mission-appropriate data and uses this data to identify areas for improvement and develop realistic plans to address those areas.

4.4 The institution demonstrates progress towards achieving its mission-appropriate goals based on the results of its inquiry, evidence, and evaluation of its educational effectiveness.

4.5 The institution understands and demonstrates the post-enrollment success of its students through mission-appropriate metrics such as transfer, employment, service, repayment, alumni feedback, well-being, flourishing, etc.

## Standard Five: Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure

**Through its commitment to ethical practices, transparency, and accountability, the institution upholds high standards in all its operations. It provides complete, accurate, timely, and accessible information to all constituents, including the public and the Commission.**

5.1 The institution subscribes to and advocates high ethical standards in the management of its affairs, including its research activities if relevant, and in its dealings with all constituents, the general public, and the Commission.

5.2 In presenting the institution to its constituents, the public, and the Commission, the institution provides information through its website and other means that is complete, accurate, timely, readily accessible, clear, and sufficient for intended audiences to make informed decisions about the institution, including details on the total cost of education, net price, debt, and student success.

5.3 The institution publishes its accreditation status, complaint and public comment procedures, transfer and credit policies, articulation agreements, list of programs offered and student services, cost, financial aid, and anti-discrimination policies.

5.4 The institution adheres to the Commission's published policies and procedures and communicates promptly with the Commission on matters that could impact its accreditation status.

5.5 The institution observes all applicable legal requirements. It has a charter and/or other formal authority from the appropriate governmental agency authorizing it to grant all degrees it awards; it has the necessary operating authority for each jurisdiction in which it conducts activities; and it operates within this authority.