



NECHE 2026 Standards for Accreditation

Preamble

As an institutional accreditor recognized by the United States Department of Education, the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) accredits 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 and institutional capacity 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 and promoting the public good. 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.

The *Standards for Accreditation* articulate dimensions 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, constituents 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 propose 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 the institution 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.

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 institution 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 As appropriate to its mission, the institution provides clear public statements about what students are expected to gain from their education (e.g., civic engagement, information literacy, employability, critical thinking, religious formation, global awareness).
- 1.3 The institution's mission is periodically reviewed and either reaffirmed or modified.

Governance

- 1.4 The authority, responsibilities, and relationships among the governing board, administration, faculty, staff, and sponsoring entity (if any) are clearly described and mutually understood.
- 1.5 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.
- 1.6 Two-thirds or more of the Board are free of any financial or immediate 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.
- 1.7 In multi-campus systems under a single governing board, the division of responsibility and authority between the system office and the institution is clear.

1.8 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 the Standards. In these instances, the Commission has the authority to allow an exception to its requirements, if it determines it is appropriate to do so.

1.9 The Board appoints the chief executive officer and annually reviews their performance. The Board delegates to the chief executive officer and as appropriate to others the requisite authority and autonomy to manage the institution.

1.10 Using the institutional governance structure, the Board establishes and maintains appropriate and productive channels of communication among its members and with the institutional community. The Board regularly conducts self-assessments and incorporates external perspectives when evaluating its own effectiveness.

1.11 In exercising its fiduciary responsibility, the governing board assures that senior officers identify, assess, and manage risks and ensure regulatory compliance. It provides on-boarding for new Board members and training in fiduciary responsibility.

1.12 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.

1.13 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 and Evaluation

1.14 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: The Academic Program, Faculty, and Students

The institution's academic program and student services 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 student services and co-curricular programs. The institution supports teaching and learning through a well-qualified faculty and academic staff, who, in structures and processes appropriate to the institution, collectively ensure the quality of instruction and support for student learning. The institution sets a standard of student achievement appropriate to the degree or certificate awarded and develops systematic means to demonstrate how and what students are learning and to use the evidence provided to improve the academic program.

The Academic Program

- 2.1 The institution offers collegiate-level programs consisting of a curriculum of studies that leads to a degree. Degree programs and other awards have a coherent design and are characterized by appropriate breadth, depth, continuity, sequential progression, and synthesis of learning.
- 2.2 Academic programs and initiatives align with the institution's mission and are supported by sufficient resources.
- 2.3 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.
- 2.4 The institution publishes learning goals and requirements for each program. (See also 4.1, 4.2)
- 2.5 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 modified degrees with fewer credits (see Policy on Innovation, and Guidance for Institutions Preparing Proposals to offer Bachelor's Degrees of Fewer than 120 Credits). At the bachelor's level, curricula include substantial requirements at the advanced undergraduate level, with appropriate prerequisites.
- 2.6 A bachelor's degree includes a general education requirement of at least 40 semester credits, and all undergraduate degrees—including those requiring fewer than 120 credits—include general education courses totaling at least one-third of the overall credits and provide students with the opportunity to take electives.
- 2.7 The general education program is coherent, reflects the institution's mission and values, and embodies its definition of an educated person. It ensures 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 demonstrate that student learning outcomes and the institution's approach to assessment fulfill this requirement.

2.8 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. (See Policy on Innovation)

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

2.10 The institution reviews its academic programs on a regular cycle, incorporates external perspectives when applicable, and uses the results for program improvement.

2.11 Students complete at least one-fourth of their undergraduate credits, including substantial advanced work, at the institution awarding the degree.

2.12 In accepting transfer credit, the institution exercises the responsibility to ensure that students have met the stated learning goals of its 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. In the acceptance of transfer credit, the institution ensures that the proportion of intermediate and advanced coursework is sufficient to maintain the academic quality and integrity of the program.

2.13 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, quality and delivery of courses.

2.14 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).

2.15 Credit for prior experiential or non-collegiate sponsored learning is awarded only with appropriate faculty and academic oversight and is limited to 75% for credentials of 30 credits or fewer. Student learning and achievement should be demonstrated to be at least comparable to breadth, depth, and quality of the institutionally provided learning experiences. Such credit does not substantially diminish the proportion of intermediate and advanced coursework in a student's academic program.

2.16 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.

2.17 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).

Faculty and Academic Staff

2.18 There are sufficient faculty and academic staff appropriate to the institution's mission, size, and scope.

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

2.20 Faculty assignments are consistent with the institution's mission and purposes. The institution's policies are consistently applied to allow faculty to perform their assigned duties such as providing effective instruction; advising and evaluating students; contributing to program and institutional assessment and improvement; continuing professional growth; participating in scholarship, research, creative activities, and service compatible with the mission and purposes of the institution. Faculty assignments and workloads are reappraised periodically and adjusted as institutional conditions change.

2.21 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.

2.22 The institution has academic support personnel (e.g., librarians, academic advisors, instructional designers) sufficient to support its teaching and learning environment and, as appropriate, its research and public service mission. (See also 3.9 and 4.2)

Students

2.23 Consistent with its mission, the institution describes the characteristics of the student populations it seeks to serve and maintains an orderly and ethical program of recruitment and admission. Individuals admitted must demonstrate a reasonable potential for success.

2.24 The institution regularly identifies the needs of its student populations and systematically makes provisions for responding to them and regularly assesses the effectiveness of such provisions. (See also 4.2)

2.25 As applicable, the institution provides co-curricular programs and opportunities for student participation in campus organizations and governance. (See also 4.2)

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 on an ongoing basis. The institution demonstrates, through 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 a 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 manages its financial resources and allocates them in a way that reflects its mission and purposes. Financial stability is not achieved at the expense of educational quality.
- 3.4 The institution ensures that it has sufficient and appropriately qualified finance staff, led by a chief financial officer with fiduciary responsibility to the institution. All fiscal policies are clearly stated in writing and consistently implemented in compliance with ethical and sound financial practices.
- 3.5 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. It demonstrates the ability to respond to financial emergencies and unforeseen circumstances and implements a realistic plan for addressing issues raised by the existence of any operating deficit.
- 3.6 The institution prepares financial statements in accordance with accounting principles generally accepted in the US, such as: US GAAP or International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS). 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 auditor's required communications letter are appropriately reviewed by the institution's administration and governing board who take appropriate action on resulting recommendations.

Human, Physical, Information and Technological Resources

- 3.7 The institution maintains sufficient and qualified personnel to fulfill its mission.
- 3.8 All human resources policies are readily available, consistently applied, and periodically reviewed. Policies provide for the equitable redress of grievances.
- 3.9 The institution provides access to information and learning resources—physical and/or digital—that are sufficient for the needs of its academic programs, research activities, and public service mission.
- 3.10 The institution has sufficient and appropriate physical, information, and technological resources necessary for the achievement of its purposes and to support student learning. Sufficient resources are allocated to maintain and enhance them.
- 3.11 The institution’s facilities are constructed and maintained in accordance with legal requirements to ensure access, safety, and security.
- 3.12 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.

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 demonstrate and continually 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 institution, program and course levels, for all students, across all locations and all modalities. It establishes metrics to facilitate the assessment of its goals, including retention, graduation, and success rates.

4.2 The institution uses a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods, and direct and indirect measures, to assess its mission-appropriate goals for student learning and success and to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of its academic programs, student services, and co-curricular programs in achieving its mission and facilitating student success.

4.3 The institution regularly and systematically collects and analyzes data aligned with its mission and uses the findings to identify and address areas for improvement.

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 defines and demonstrates the post-enrollment/post-graduation success of its students using mission-appropriate metrics, e.g., transfer and further education, return on investment, employment, service, loan repayment, social mobility.

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 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 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, student debt, loan repayment and default, and student success, and includes information on how the student's degree will benefit them post-graduation.

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 is committed to compliance with applicable legal requirements, including ones addressing non-discriminatory policies and practices. It has a charter and/or other authority from the appropriate governmental agencies 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.