WASC | Senior College and University Commission

WSCUC 2023 Handbook of Accreditation

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Introduction

The WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) *2023 Handbook of Accreditation* is designed for several purposes: to present the Commission's Standards of Accreditation and its framework for making institutional decisions; to guide institutions through the institutional review process; and to support peer review teams at each stage of review. The 2023 *Handbook* is intended to serve a variety of readers: representatives of institutions accredited by the Commission and those seeking accreditation; chairs and members of peer review teams; and the general public. Each major section is designed to stand alone; at the same time, each fits within the larger framework of the *2023 Handbook* as a whole.

The *2023 Handbook* is part of a comprehensive system of support provided by the Commission. Complementary information in the form of policies, guides, and associated documentation is available on the Commission's website and should be used in conjunction with this *Handbook*. The Commission welcomes suggestions for improvement of this *Handbook* and ways to make it, and the accreditation process itself, more useful to institutions, students, and members of the public.

WSCUC is a California nonprofit public benefit corporation established for the purposes of accrediting senior (bachelor's degrees and above) colleges and universities. Its genesis lies in the Western College Association, founded in 1924. WSCUC was formed on July 1, 1962, to evaluate and accredit schools, colleges, and universities in California, Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Today WSCUC accredits institutions located anywhere in the United States and around the world. WSCUC is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a reliable authority concerning the quality of education provided by member institutions of higher education offering baccalaureate and post-baccalaureate degrees.

The Commission reserves the right to make changes to the *2023 Handbook* and all related policies and procedures at any time in order to comply with new federal requirements or in response to new needs. Institutions should refer to the website at www.wscuc.org for the most recent versions of all publications. All simple uses of "the Commission" in this *Handbook* and related documents are intended as references to WSCUC.

The *2023 Handbook* is copyrighted with a Creative Commons license (Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike) that allows sharing and remixing with attribution but prohibits use of the work for commercial purposes. It is the Commission's goal that, through wide dissemination and application, the Standards and processes in this model of accreditation may inform and contribute to improved reviews and institutional practices.

The Status of Accreditation

Accredited Institutions: An institution is accredited when the Commission determines that the institution has fulfilled the requirements for accreditation established by this *Handbook*. This means that the institution has:

1. Conducted a self-review under the Standards of Accreditation, developed and presented indicators of institutional performance, and identified areas for improvement. The Standards define expectations and characteristics of excellence and provide a framework for institutional self-review.
2. Developed approved institutional reports for accreditation that have been evaluated by teams of peer reviewers under the relevant institutional review processes.
3. Demonstrated to the Commission that it meets the expectations of the Standards of Accreditation.
4. Committed itself to institutional improvement, periodic self-evaluation, and continuing compliance with Commission Standards, policies, procedures, and decisions.

Accreditation is a status conferred following the evaluation of the entire institution and continues until formally withdrawn. It is subject to periodic review and to conditions as determined by the Commission. Every accredited institution participates in the Annual Report process and undergoes a comprehensive self-review and evaluation at least every ten years. Initial accreditation, as a matter of Commission policy, requires institutional self-review and peer evaluation no more than six or eight years after the date of the Commission action granting such status.

Institutions Seeking Accreditation: WSCUC's *How to Become Accredited Manual* (HTBA) on its website describes the process for institutions seeking WSCUC accreditation. This document provides information on two stages for seeking accreditation: Eligibility and Candidacy/Initial Accreditation. The Eligibility stage involves submitting an application to demonstrate that the institution can meet WSCUC's Standards for accreditation. The Candidacy/Initial Accreditation stage involves a multi-year self-study process during which the institution assesses its programs, operations, and services against the WSCUC Standards and prepares for a site visit by a team of peer reviewers. The review team's recommendation is considered by the Commission, which makes the determination to require an additional review, confer Candidacy, or confer Initial Accreditation.

WSCUC Policies

WSCUC policies related to institutional accreditation, compliance, and operational and educational effectiveness are available on the WSCUC website. Institutions are expected to adhere to all Commission policies, and it is important that institutions regularly review these policies to ensure they remain in compliance. WSCUC strives to makes these policies accessible and transparent to its member institutions and the public to maintain the integrity of the accreditation process and to promote quality in higher education. Changes to WSCUC policies are reviewed and published for comment according to the Review of Commission Policies and Definitions of Commission Documents Policy.

Standards of Accreditation

STANDARD 1: Defining Institutional Mission and Acting with Integrity

The institution defines its mission and establishes educational and student success objectives aligned with that mission. The institution has a clear sense of its essential values, culture, and distinctive elements, and its contributions to society and the public good. It promotes the success of all students and makes explicit its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The institution functions with integrity and transparency.

CRITERIA FOR REVIEW

Institutional Purposes

CFR 1.1 The institution's mission and other statements of purpose are appropriate for an institution of higher education and clearly define its essential values, culture, and ways the institution contributes to society and the public good.

CFR 1.2 Consistent with its purposes and character, the institution defines and acts with intention to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in all its activities, including its goal setting, policies, practices, and use of resources across academic, student support, and co-curricular programs and services.

Integrity and Transparency

CFR 1.3 The institution operates with integrity and transparency in its operations, and truthfully and clearly represents its academic goals, programs, requirements, services, and costs.

CFR 1.4 The institution maintains appropriate operating policies and business procedures, including timely and fair responses to complaints and grievances.

CFR 1.5 The institution treats faculty, staff, administrators, and students equitably by adhering to its published policies and procedures.

CFR 1.6 The institution maintains, publishes, and adheres to policies on academic freedom.

CFR 1.7 The institution communicates about important issues with its constituents.

CFR 1.8 The institution is committed to honest and open communication with the Commission and to undertaking the accreditation review process with seriousness and candor. The institution abides by Commission policies and procedures and informs the Commission promptly of any matter that could affect the accreditation status of the institution.

STANDARD 2: Achieving Educational Objectives and Student Success

The institution achieves its educational and student success objectives through the core functions of teaching and learning, and through support for student learning, scholarship, and creative activity. It promotes the success of all students and makes explicit its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The institution demonstrates that core functions are performed effectively by evaluating valid and reliable evidence of learning.

CRITERIA FOR REVIEW

Degree Programs

CFR 2.1 The institution's degree programs are appropriate in content, educational objectives, and standards of performance relevant to the level of the degree. All degrees are defined in terms of entry requirements and levels of student achievement necessary for graduation.

CFR 2.2 Degree programs engage students in an integrated course of study of sufficient breadth and depth. These programs ensure the development of core and professional competencies relevant to the level of the degree.

CFR 2.3 The institution clearly identifies and effectively implements student learning outcomes and expectations for achievement. These outcomes and expectations are reflected in and supported by academic programs, policies, and curricula, and provide the framework for academic advising, student support programs and services, and information and technology resources.

CFR 2.4 The institution conducts periodic reviews of its degree programs. The program review process includes analysis of student achievement of the program's learning outcomes.

Faculty

CFR 2.5 The institution has faculty with the capacity and scale to design and deliver the curriculum and to evaluate, improve, and promote student learning and success.

CFR 2.6 The faculty exercise effective academic leadership and act consistently to ensure that the quality of academic programs and the institution's educational purposes are sustained.

CFR 2.7 The faculty are responsible for creating and evaluating student learning outcomes and establishing standards of student performance.

CFR 2.8 The institution has clear expectations for faculty research, scholarship, and creative activity that are commensurate with the mission and degree portfolio.

Student Learning and Performance

CFR 2.9 The institution demonstrates that graduates consistently achieve stated learning outcomes and standards of performance. Faculty evaluate student work in terms of stated learning outcomes.

CFR 2.10 The institution demonstrates that students make reasonable progress toward and complete their degrees in a timely manner.

CFR 2.11 The institution monitors and analyzes the outcomes of its students following graduation and uses the results for improvement.

Student Support

CFR 2.12 The institution ensures that all students understand the requirements of their academic programs and receive timely, accurate, and complete information and advising about academic requirements.

CFR 2.13 The institution offers student support and co-curricular programs and services sufficient in nature, scope, and capacity to promote all students' academic, personal, and professional development.

CFR 2.14 The institution assesses the effectiveness of its student support and co-curricular programs and services and uses the results for improvement.

STANDARD 3: Assuring Resources and Organizational Structures

The institution achieves its educational and student success objectives through investments in human, physical, fiscal, technology, and information resources within appropriate organizational and decision-making structures, and consistent with its explicit commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

CRITERIA FOR REVIEW

Faculty, Staff, and Administrators

CFR 3.1 The institution employs faculty, staff, and administrators sufficient in scale, professional qualifications, and background to achieve the institution's educational and student success objectives, to propose and oversee policy, and to ensure the integrity of its academic, student support, and co-curricular programs and services and administrative processes.

CFR 3.2 Faculty, staff, and administrator recruitment, hiring, and orientation practices and workload expectations are aligned with institutional mission and priorities. The institution examines the extent to which its climate supports faculty, staff, and administrators and acts on its findings.

CFR 3.3 The institution provides professional development and evaluation for faculty, staff, and administrators.

Fiscal, Physical, Technology, and Information Resources

CFR 3.4 Resource planning and development include realistic budgeting, enrollment management, and diversification of revenue sources. Resource allocation is aligned with evidence-based educational and student success objectives consistent with operational and strategic planning.

CFR 3.5 The institution is financially stable and has resources sufficient to ensure long-term sustainability. The institution has unqualified or unmodified independent financial audits.

CFR 3.6 The institution provides physical, technology, information, and other resources sufficient in scope, quality, currency, and kind to support the work of its faculty, staff, administrators, and students.

Organizational Structures and Decision-Making Processes

CFR 3.7 The institution operates with appropriate autonomy governed by an independent board or similar authority that is responsible for mission, integrity, and oversight of planning, policies, performance, and sustainability. The governing board selects and evaluates the chief executive officer.

CFR 3.8 The board members have a range of backgrounds, knowledge, and skills to carry out their responsibilities.

CFR 3.9 The institution has sufficient and qualified leadership capacity at all levels, characterized by integrity, appropriate responsibility, high performance, and accountability.

CFR 3.10 Data are regularly and systematically disseminated internally and externally, and analyzed, interpreted, and applied in institutional decision-making.

CFR 3.11 The institution's organizational structures and decision-making processes are clearly defined, consistent, and transparent, support effective decision-making and risk management, and place priority on sustaining institutional resilience and educational effectiveness.

STANDARD 4: Creating an Institution Committed to Quality Assurance and Improvement

The institution engages in sustained, evidence-based, and participatory reflection about how effectively it is accomplishing its mission, achieving its educational and student success objectives, and realizing its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The institution envisions its future in light of the changing environment of higher education. These activities inform both institutional planning and systematic evaluations of educational effectiveness.

CRITERIA FOR REVIEW

Quality Assurance Processes

CFR 4.1 The institution employs comprehensive quality assurance processes in both academic and non-academic areas and uses the results to improve institutional operations.

CFR 4.2 The institution collects, analyzes and acts on disaggregated student outcomes data including retention and graduation rates.

CFR 4.3 The institution examines the extent to which its climate supports student success and acts on its findings. The institution regularly assesses the characteristics, experiences, and performance of its students and uses this evidence to improve student success.

CFR 4.4 The institution has institutional research capacity, scope, and coordination consistent with its purposes and characteristics.

Institutional Improvement

CFR 4.5 The institution demonstrates improvement based on the results of inquiry, evidence, and evaluation.

CFR 4.6 The institution, with significant faculty involvement, engages in continuous inquiry into the processes of teaching and learning, and the conditions and practices that ensure that the institution's standards of performance are being achieved.

CFR 4.7 The governing board engages in self-evaluation and development.

CFR 4.8 The institution periodically engages its stakeholders in reflection and planning processes based on the examination of evidence. Through these processes it assesses the institution's strategic position, articulates priorities, examines the alignment of its purposes, core functions, and resources, and defines the future direction of the institution.

The Institutional Review Process for Reaffirmation

This section is designed to assist institutions as they address WSCUC's Standards of Accreditation for reaffirmation of accreditation. It provides a description of the steps involved in an institution's reaffirmation process, including the self-study, the essays, and evidence that need to be included in the institutional report, interactions with the review team, and other details.

The Institutional Review Process (IRP) described below applies to institutions that are seeking reaffirmation of accreditation and are not pursuing the Thematic Pathway for Reaffirmation (TPR).

Other models apply for institutions seeking accreditation and for Special Visits. At the Commission's discretion and in special circumstances, institutions may be directed to follow a process that differs from the one described in the pages that follow, and those institutions will be guided by other documents describing those reviews.

All institutions need to demonstrate that they comply with the Standards of Accreditation and with federal regulations that the Commission is required to oversee. Within this context, the goal of the process is the continual improvement of student learning, student success, and institutional effectiveness.

Institutions can typically expect to spend approximately two years pursuing reaffirmation of WSCUC accreditation. The steps for reaffirmation are:

1. The institution conducts a self-study.
2. The institution produces an institutional report based on the self-study.
3. The peer review team conducts an Offsite Review (OSR) of documents.
4. The peer review team conducts an Accreditation Visit (AV) at the institution.
5. The peer review team makes a confidential recommendation to the Commission.
6. The Commission acts on the team's confidential recommendation.

A full description of the reaffirmation review process follows.

The Self-Study

Opportunities for Guidance: WSCUC is committed to supporting institutions as they prepare for the Institutional Review Process for reaffirmation. There are multiple avenues for institutions to gather information and receive guidance.

- **Institutional consultations:** Institutions can arrange on-campus and/or remote consultations at the start of the two-year process with their WSCUC staff liaison. Objectives for this consultation include a review of the institution's responses to previous Commission requirements and identification of the goals for the self-study, including strengths and areas of challenge. In addition, the WSCUC liaison is available to meet with groups and individuals involved in the self-study process. Together, the institution and staff liaison will clarify subsequent steps and

strategies for the review. These may include, for example, how the institution will organize for the review, how various constituencies will be involved, and what resources will be required.

- **Educational Programs:** WSCUC is committed to supporting institutions in preparation for the Institutional Review Process. There are many opportunities for information sharing, professional development, and networking through WSCUC's Educational Programs.

    - The **ARC (Accreditation Resource Conference)** is the annual meeting and professional conference for WSCUC's membership and the broader higher education community of administrators, staff, faculty, and students. Components of the ARC include plenary presentations featuring leading ideas and innovative practices in higher education, gatherings for CEOs and Accreditation Liaison Officers (ALOs), sessions led by WSCUC staff, and presentations from WSCUC membership.

    - The **Accreditation Leadership Academy (ALA)** offers programs that build skills to address contemporary challenges of higher education. Through the application of both theoretical and practical frameworks, the curriculum focuses on critical issues to produce actionable approaches to a pressing need identified by each participant and their institution. The ALA considers the intersections and implications of:
        - The assurance of equity and the importance of inclusion and diversity in higher education culture and practice
        - The need for effective leadership, systems, and evidence to achieve quality

    - **WSCUC Workshops** are sessions led by higher education leaders, including alumni of the Assessment and Accreditation Leadership Academies. These workshops connect accreditation to emerging ideas and proven practices for institutional improvement and sustainability, educational effectiveness, teaching and learning, student engagement, equity and inclusion, and the use of evidence in analysis and action.

Overview of the Self-Study: The self-study is the institution's examination of its effectiveness under the Standards. It is the process of gathering, analyzing, and acting on evidence, and reflecting on the results of those actions. Conducted at the beginning of the IRP, the self-study provides the necessary preparation for later steps. A candid self-study, with broad engagement of the institutional community, provides the foundation for a high-quality institutional report.

In preparation for the self-study, institutions are expected to review their accreditation history. This includes: the most recent team report and all Commission action letters received since the last reaffirmation; documents submitted to WSCUC since the last review for reaffirmation of accreditation (e.g., substantive change proposals); and WSCUC responses where applicable (e.g., recommendations related to an interim report).

Undertaking the Self-Study: Some institutions begin the self-study process with the Compliance with WSCUC Standards Worksheet to get an overall sense of the institution's strengths and weaknesses (see below for a description of the worksheet—this is a required part of the institutional report). Other institutions prefer to begin the self-study process by framing it around their own priorities and planning

(e.g., strategic, academic, and/or financial). The reaffirmation review may then be adapted to support those goals. Surveys or focus groups can help identify top campus priorities. Such approaches have the advantage of putting the emphasis on the institution's goals and then integrating them with WSCUC expectations; thus, they may inspire broader campus engagement, stronger commitment to the process, and greater returns on the effort and resources invested.

After these initial steps, the focus of the self-study shifts to the specific essays that form the institutional report. These essays are described below.

Another essential element at the outset of the self-study is practical planning for how the institution will launch and conduct the reaffirmation review. Such planning addresses the financial and human resources that will be needed, the structures that will support progress, the evidence and data required to support analysis, the metrics that are available or must be generated, and the timeline and milestones that must be met. To the extent possible, institutions are encouraged to make use of existing resources, e.g., standing committees, an assessment office, program review, and institutional research (including WSCUC's Key Indicators Dashboard: https://www.wscuc.org/resources/kid/), before introducing new processes.

Compliance with WSCUC Standards Worksheet: As noted earlier, institutions are required to complete the Compliance with WSCUC Standards Worksheet. This Worksheet provides evidence, via links and artifacts, that the institution complies with each of the Criteria for Review. The institution completes the worksheet, and the peer review team verifies that the evidence meets the requirements of the CFR.

Some institutions complete the Worksheet early in the self-study to prompt conversation on institutional capacity and infrastructure, strengths and weaknesses, priorities, and plans for ensuring compliance with the Standards and institutional improvement.

The Institutional Report

Overview of the Institutional Report: The institutional report is based on the findings of the institution's self-study and must be organized in sections as described below:

- Section A: Introduction - Institutional Context and Response to Previous Commission Actions
- Section B: Institutional Essays
  - Standard 1 - Defining Institutional Mission and Acting with Integrity
  - Standard 2 - Achieving Educational Objectives and Student Success
  - Standard 3 - Assuring Resources and Organizational Structures
  - Standard 4 - Creating an Institution Committed to Quality Assurance and Improvement
- Section C: Reflections - Synthesis of Insights as a Result of the Reaffirmation Process
- Appendix I: Compliance with WSCUC Standards Worksheet
- Appendix II: Federal Compliance Forms
- Appendix III: Institutional Exhibits

In general, each section should include a discussion of the topic within the context of the institution; analyses undertaken; self-assessment and reflection; areas of strength or significant progress and areas of challenge; and next steps, as appropriate. When plans are described, include targets, metrics, and timelines.

Length of the Report and Citation of Standards: The institutional report narrative is typically 12,000 to 18,000 words in length (approximately 50-75 pages, double-spaced). It should be only as long as needed, and not to exceed 75 pages, double-spaced; refer to the style guide on the WSCUC website[1]. In the body of the report, relevant Exhibits in the Appendix should be hyperlinked to support each assertion and to provide easy navigation for reviewers. References to the Standards of Accreditation and citations of specific CFRs are included in the body of the report.

While there is no page limit on institutional exhibits, too many exhibits can become overwhelming and distracting for the reviewer. Limit the number of exhibits to the bare minimum necessary to provide evidence to support the conclusions discussed in the narrative. If the material in the exhibit is not cited in the report, it should not be included. The exhibits should be well-organized, succinct, and clearly and descriptively labeled, allowing readers to access the information they need quickly. The goal is to strike a balance between providing enough supporting evidence to make your point and not overwhelming the reviewer with too much information.

When the institutional report is submitted, it should include a letter, signed by the president/chief executive officer, affirming the accuracy of the information presented and the institution's intention to comply fully with WSCUC Standards and policies.

[1] Do not format the narrative in columns. Columns are difficult to navigate when read on electronic devices.

Sections of the Institutional Report

Section A: Introduction to the Institutional Report: Institutional Context; Response to Previous Commission Actions

This section includes four subsections.

Description of the institution: Provide a succinct history and overview of the institution. Give special attention to significant changes since the last accreditation review, e.g., in mission, student demographics, structure, degree programs, instructional modalities, finances, governance, leadership, and other institution-level matters. This is also the place to provide a description of institutional values and the qualities of the educational experience that the institution emphasizes.

When describing key data elements of the institution, the report should refer to the WSCUC Key Indicators Dashboard (https://www.wscuc.org/resources/kid/), available on the WSCUC website for most institutions, supplemented by the institution's updated data if available. The institution is welcome to provide additional data elements as part of the overview.

Process to prepare the institutional report: As part of this section, the institution shares how it prepared for the review—What was the process? Who was involved? How did this work connect with existing priorities and projects?

Response to previous Commission requirements: The institution reviews the most recent team report and Commission action letters and notes how it has responded to requirements and recommendations.

Other topics: As relevant, substantive change reviews, interim reports, and trends or patterns of complaints against the institution, if any, are discussed.

This overview of its accreditation history, operations, and responses to previous interactions with WSCUC can help the institution identify issues and anticipate questions that peer review team members may pose as the institutional review proceeds. If appropriate, this includes addressing the issues that led to any notices of concern or sanctions.

Section B: Institutional Essays

The institution is challenged to analyze itself as an institution of higher education in the context of each Standard, recognizing that the Standards build on each other. The essays represent separate chapters of a coherent narrative; the institution should tell its story through the evidence and analysis that resulted from the self-study. The essays are the place where the institution makes sense of its own work in such a way that peer reviewers can understand and appreciate the institution's intent and accomplishments.

These essays are analytical, supported by data and evidence, rather than simply descriptive. Description provides the setting (the "who", "what", "where", or "when") for evaluation and interpretation (the "so what?" and "what next?").

Institutions should not address each of the CFRs in the essays described below. The Standards and CFRs are cited in support of the analysis in the institution's narrative, rather than treated as independent objectives to be met. Evidence of adhering to the specific CFRs is documented in the Compliance with WSCUC Standards Worksheet.

Each essay focuses on the emphases of the Standard itself and explains how these emphases are put into practice, and how the resulting outcomes are achieved: What evidence does the institution have to demonstrate how it engages with the Standard? What aspects of the Standards are most significant to the institution, both directly and as amplified through the related Criteria for Review? What does the institution expect to achieve, what has been accomplished so far, how is success measured, and how satisfactory are the outcomes? What do these analyses suggest for future improvement?

Section B: Standard 1 - Defining Institutional Mission and Acting with Integrity

Standard 1: "*The institution defines its mission and establishes educational and student success objectives aligned with that mission. The institution has a clear sense of its essential values, culture, and distinctive elements, and its contributions to society and the public good. It promotes the success of all students and makes explicit its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The institution functions with integrity and transparency*."

In this essay, institutions describe:

(1) Their institutional mission, purposes, values, and culture and how these elements frame and support a commitment to the success of all students within the context of the Commission's policy on equity and inclusion; and

(2) How the mission and purposes support and encourage an open and consultative approach and uphold the principles of integrity and transparency.

Note: The commitment to success for all students and the institution's understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion is a theme that is repeated in each of the four Standards; accordingly, this first essay establishes a foundation for those discussions while also speaking specifically to Standard 1 issues.

Section B: Standard 2 - Achieving Educational Objectives and Student Success

Standard 2: "*The institution achieves its educational and student success objectives through the core functions of teaching and learning, and through support for student learning, scholarship, and creative activity. It promotes the success of all students and makes explicit its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The institution demonstrates that core functions are performed effectively by evaluating valid and reliable evidence of learning.*"

In this essay, institutions analyze the effectiveness of their fundamental education activities by focusing on four key areas:

(1) Degree programs
(2) Faculty
(3) Student learning and performance

(4) Student support

These four crucial areas collectively constitute the fundamental academic function of teaching and learning, which may be supported by research and scholarship conducted by the faculty. Degree programs clearly define the entry requirements, curriculum content, and expected learning outcomes. Faculty members serve as the primary designers and assessors of students' performance in these programs. The institution establishes the expected levels of achievement within each degree program and provides evidence of achieved outcomes. Additionally, the institution describes the appropriate array of support services and co-curricular programs to facilitate the goals of the degrees and assesses the effectiveness of these programs and services.

Section B: Standard 3 - Assuring Resources and Organizational Structures

Standard 3: *"The institution achieves its educational and student success objectives through investments in human, physical, fiscal, technology, and information resources within appropriate organizational and decision-making structures, and consistent with its explicit commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion."*

In this essay, institutions document their ability to provide sufficient resources and effective decision-making processes to assure that degree programs and other institutional operations are appropriately resourced. The essay focuses on two principal areas:

(1) Resources, including human, physical, financial capital, and technological assets, as applicable to the institution's mission; and
(2) Management and implementation of organizational decisions regarding the allocation of these resources in alignment with the institution's mission.

Section B: Standard 4 - Creating an Institution Committed to Quality Assurance and Improvement

Standard 4: *"The institution engages in sustained, evidence-based, and participatory reflection about how effectively it is accomplishing its mission, achieving its educational and student success objectives, and realizing its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The institution envisions its future in light of the changing environment of higher education. These activities inform both institutional planning and systematic evaluations of educational effectiveness."*

In this essay, institutions document and evaluate their processes for carrying out essential functions, and engaging in analysis and planning to ensure they can adapt to future challenges. The essay focuses on two principal areas:

(1) The institution's collection and use of evidence to analyze the effectiveness of its operations to achieve established objectives, using institutional research functions and other activities; and
(2) The institution's analysis of evidence to promote the ongoing improvement of the institution.

Section C: Reflections

This essay is the institution's reflection on the self-study process and the insights gained from that analysis as presented in the essays in Section B. The essay should be focused, succinct, and analytical. It

should present conclusions drawn from the work of the self-study, based on the discussion and evidence presented in the essays in Section B. It is the culminating chapter of the institution's story and should go beyond a mere recitation of things already said. Instead, it should present a coherent understanding of the current state of the institution in relation to the Standards, with particular emphasis on how the conclusions reached in the essays will inform and enhance institutional practice and outcomes. The Commission expects the reaffirmation process to yield an analysis that will catalyze future development.

The Thematic Pathway for Reaffirmation (TPR)

WSCUC offers an alternative pathway for reaffirmation called the Thematic Pathway for Reaffirmation, or TPR, for eligible institutions that demonstrate consistent evidence of a healthy fiscal condition, strong student achievement indicators, and sustained quality performance. While this pathway is as rigorous as the IRP and requires the same level of data, evidence, and analysis, it offers a streamlined process and allows institutions to focus on self-selected themes in addition to demonstrating compliance with the Standards.

The TPR process involves completing three sections and three appendices:

- Section 1: Introduction - Institutional Context and Response to Previous Commission Actions
- Section 2: Essay(s) on Self-selected Theme(s)
- Section 3: Reflections - Synthesis of Insights as a Result of the Reaffirmation Process
- Appendix I: Compliance with WSCUC Standards Worksheet
- Appendix II: Federal Compliance Forms
- Appendix III: Institutional Exhibits

The main difference between the TPR and the IRP is that Section 2 (Essays) in the TPR is neither organized around nor written directly to the Standards, unlike the IRP. The essays use institutionally selected themes to present evidence that the institution meets the Standards. To determine their eligibility for the TPR, institutions should consult with their staff liaison.

Commission Decisions on Institutions

The Commission is both a decision-making and policy-setting body. It is responsible for determining the accreditation status of institutions, including Candidacy, Initial Accreditation, and reaffirmation of accreditation, based on a thorough review process. During the review process, the Commission considers various factors including the institution's accreditation history; the evidence and analysis presented in the institutional report; the peer review team's report and confidential team recommendation; the institution's response, if any, to the team report; any comments made by the institution's representatives to the Commission subsequent to the team report; and any other pertinent documents. As part of the decision process, institutional representatives have the opportunity to appear before the Commission during panel deliberations prior to Commission action. The Commission bases its decisions on the evaluation of the full record of evidence presented.

Possible Commission Actions

Examples of Commission action with regard to institutions include:

1. Grant Candidacy or Initial Accreditation
2. Reaffirm Accreditation
3. Defer Action
4. Issue a Notice of Concern
5. Issue a Sanction
    a. Warning
    b. Probation
    c. Order to Show Cause
6. Deny Candidacy or Initial Accreditation
7. Withdraw Candidacy or Accreditation

Decisions regarding an institution's accreditation are conveyed to the institution in an action letter sent to the institution no later than 30 days after the decision has been made. Action letters may contain special conditions, limitations, or restrictions that the institution is required to follow in order to maintain its accreditation. Examples include requiring Progress Reports, Interim Reports or Special Visits, as well as placing restrictions on initiating new degree programs, opening of additional sites, or enrollment growth.

Following Commission actions, all action letters and team reports are made publicly available on the WSCUC website. A report of Commission actions is published and distributed after each Commission meeting, and the accreditation status of each institution is noted in the Member Directory on the Commission website.

Grant Candidacy or Initial Accreditation

Candidacy: The institution must demonstrate that it meets the Standards of Accreditation at a foundational level and that it has a clear plan in place to achieve more comprehensive compliance with

Standards for accreditation. Candidacy is limited to five years and is granted only when an institution demonstrates that it is likely to become accredited within the five-year period.

Initial Accreditation: The institution has provided evidence that it is in compliance with all Commission Standards. Initial Accreditation is granted for a period of 6, 8 or 10 years.

Reaffirm Accreditation

Reaffirmation of accreditation occurs at the completion of the institutional review process. It indicates the Commission has found that an institution has met the Standards. Reaffirmation is granted for a period of 6, 8 or 10 years. The Commission may also request other reports and/or Special Visits, or issue a Notice of Concern or sanction.

Defer Action

The Commission may defer action to provide time for an institution to correct deficiencies and to provide additional information on its progress. This action allows the Commission to indicate to an institution the need for additional information or progress in one or more specified areas related to the Standards before a decision can be made. Deferrals are generally granted for a maximum period of one year and are not appealable.

Issue a Notice of Concern

The Commission issues a Notice of Concern when it determines that an institution is currently meeting WSCUC Standards but is in danger of being found out of compliance with one or more Standards if current trends continue. A Notice of Concern may also be issued when a sanction is removed because while the institution is found to be meeting Standards it continues to be in danger of being found out of compliance. When a Notice of Concern is issued, the institution typically will have a Special Visit within four years to assess its progress. A Notice of Concern is public information and is posted on the WSCUC website. If the Commission's concerns are not addressed by the time of the next interaction with WSCUC, a sanction as described below may be imposed.

Sanctions

When the Commission finds that an institution fails to meet one or more of the Standards of Accreditation, it notifies the institution of these findings and gives the institution a specific period of time from the date of the action to institute corrective measures:

1. For Warning and Probation: two years
2. For Order to Show Cause: one year

If an institution has not come into compliance with the Commission's Standards at the conclusion of the sanction period, the Commission will withdraw accreditation unless it determines that a good cause extension of accreditation is warranted. Institutions under sanction, therefore, must address the Commission's findings expeditiously, with the full attention of the institution's leadership.

The three sanctions—Warning, Probation, and Order to Show Cause—inform the institution and the public of the Commission's determination that an institution is not meeting one or more Standards or has failed to meet a condition or restriction imposed as part of a Commission action. All sanctions must be

made public on the institution's website homepage and are published on WSCUC's website. WSCUC also publishes the Commission action letter and any related team report, in accordance with the WSCUC policy on Disclosure of Accreditation Documents and Commission Actions. Institutions under sanction must notify students and other constituents of the Commission action.

Issue a Warning

A Warning reflects the Commission's finding that the institution fails to meet one or more of the Standards of Accreditation. While on Warning, any new site or degree program initiated by the institution is regarded as a substantive change. The institution's candidate or accredited status remains in effect while it is on Warning. The institution may request that the Commission review its action according to the Review of Commission Action Policy.

Impose Probation

Probation reflects the Commission's finding that the institution has significant issues of noncompliance with one or more of the Standards of Accreditation. While on Probation, the institution is subject to special scrutiny by the Commission, which may include a requirement to submit periodic reports and to receive Special Visits by representatives of the Commission. In addition, while on Probation, any new site or degree program initiated by the institution is regarded as a substantive change. The institution's candidate or accredited status remains in effect while it is on Probation. The institution may request that the Commission review its action according to the Review of Commission Action Policy.

Issue an Order to Show Cause

An Order to Show Cause is a decision by the Commission to terminate the accreditation of the institution within a maximum period of one year from the date of the Order unless the institution can demonstrate why such action should not be taken. Such an Order may be issued when an institution is found to be in substantial noncompliance with one or more Commission Standards or, having been placed on Warning or Probation for at least one year, has been found not to have made sufficient progress to come into compliance with the Standards. An Order to Show Cause may also be issued as a summary sanction for unethical institutional behavior (see Summary Sanctions for Unethical Institutional Behavior, below). In response to the Order, the institution has the burden of proving why its candidacy or accreditation should not be terminated. The institution must demonstrate that it has responded satisfactorily to Commission concerns, has come into compliance with all Standards, and will likely be able to sustain compliance.

The institution's accredited status remains in effect while it is on an Order to Show Cause, but during this period, any new site or degree program initiated by the institution is regarded as a substantive change and requires prior approval. In addition, the institution may be subject to special scrutiny by the Commission, which may include special conditions and requirements to submit reports or receive Special Visits by representatives of the Commission. The institution may request that the Commission review its action according to the Review of Commission Action Policy.

The foregoing sanctions are not intended or required to be applied in any particular order or sequence.

Good Cause Extension

When a sanction is imposed, the Commission may not continue the institution under the same or a new sanction beyond the maximum timeframe unless the institution presents evidence that there is good cause to provide further time for corrective measures and the Commission determines the evidence supports an extension of time.

The Commission has determined that it will only grant a Good Cause Extension when the institution has demonstrated:

a. Significant accomplishments in addressing the areas of noncompliance during the period under sanction, AND
b. For any remaining deficiencies, an understanding of those deficiencies, and readiness, institutional capacity, and a plan to remedy those deficiencies within the period of extension granted by the Commission.

In determining whether these criteria have been met, the Commission will also consider whether:

a. The quality of education provided by the institution is judged to be in compliance with Commission Standards at the time of the extension, AND
b. The Commission has evidence of any new or continuing violations of Standard 1 regarding institutional integrity, AND
c. The Commission has evidence of other reasons or current circumstances why the institution should not be granted a Good Cause Extension.

The Commission may grant a Good Cause Extension for a maximum of two years, depending on the seriousness of the issues and on its judgment of how much additional time is warranted. When the institution presents evidence that there are exigent circumstances beyond the control of the institution, the Commission may decide to extend the time to come into compliance. By the conclusion of the extension period identified by the Commission, the institution must submit a report, supported by verifiable evidence, that demonstrates its compliance with the Standards that it failed to meet and that led to the sanction. Mere promises of future action or a summary of progress made during the extension period do not constitute evidence of compliance with the Standards.

In addition, when an institution is placed on sanction, the Commission typically requests that the institution's chief leadership personnel, representatives of the institutional governing board, and senior faculty leadership meet with WSCUC staff within 90 days. The purposes of the meeting are to communicate the reasons for the Commission action, to discuss the institution's plan for resolving those issues, and to gain understanding of the institution's plan to notify the institution's community about the sanction.

Deny Candidacy or Initial Accreditation

Denial of candidacy or initial accreditation reflects the Commission's finding that an institution has failed to demonstrate that it meets the Standards of Accreditation at the level required for Candidacy or Initial Accreditation. An institution that is denied candidacy or initial accreditation may reapply after one year. Denial is an appealable action.

Withdraw Candidacy or Accreditation

A decision to withdraw candidacy or accreditation is made by the Commission when an institution has been found to be out of compliance with one or more Standards. Although this sequence is not required, a decision to withdraw accreditation may be made after an Order to Show Cause or another sanction has been imposed and the institution has failed to come into compliance. When accreditation is withdrawn, a specific implementation date is specified. An action to withdraw candidacy or accreditation is subject to the WSCUC appeals process. If an institution closes after a withdrawal action, it must comply with both federal requirements and WSCUC policies about teach-out arrangements. WSCUC has established policies on notice of such actions and on teach-out.

Summary Sanctions for Unethical Institutional Behavior

If it appears to the Commission or its staff that an institution is out of compliance with Standard One (Defining Institutional Mission and Acting with Integrity) in a manner that requires immediate attention, the Commission will conduct an investigation, issue a letter of findings to the institution, and give the institution an opportunity to respond. If the Commission concludes that the institution is out of compliance due to unlawful or unethical conduct it may:

1. Sever relations if the institution has applied for, but has not yet been granted, candidacy or initial accreditation; or
2. If the institution is a candidate or accredited, either:
    a. issue an Order to Show Cause why its candidacy or accreditation should not be withdrawn at the end of a stated period;
    b. in an extreme case, sever its relationship with the institution by denying or withdrawing candidacy or accreditation; or
3. Apply less severe sanctions as deemed appropriate.