

Eligibility Process and Candidacy Process Overview

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Basic Information

An institution seeking accreditation with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) must complete all of the steps in the process within the time frames prescribed, must adhere to HLC guidelines related to each step, including guidelines related to document submission, and must receive a positive decision by HLC before moving to the next step.

Institutions participating in the Eligibility Process do not hold any status with HLC until awarded Candidacy. An institution must adhere to HLC's guidelines regarding public statements about the fact that the institution is seeking accreditation.

Fees apply at a number of steps throughout the process. A complete list of these fees can be found in the current [HLC Dues and Fees Schedule](#). Where applicable, fees must accompany submissions or are due at the start of a step in the process. An institution will not be permitted to proceed in the process until any required fees are received.

If at any point in the process the institution misses a required deadline, voluntarily withdraws from the process, or fails to achieve the next step in the process, including failing to achieve Candidacy or initial accreditation, the institution must start the process from the beginning of the Eligibility Process. An institution must generally wait one year before restarting the Eligibility Process.

At various steps in the process, the institution will be asked to provide an institutional response to recommendations, as provided in HLC policy.

Additionally, certain determinations within the process are subject appeal, as provided in HLC policy.

The content in this document is supplemental to HLC policy. Institutions should familiarize themselves with applicable HLC policies as they proceed through the process. Institutions should also familiarize themselves with the [HLC Glossary](#). Many terms in this document are defined in HLC policy or the Glossary.

HLC will maintain all documents submitted by institutions in accordance with applicable HLC policies.

Sharing Information About Seeking Accreditation With HLC

As applicable, the institution maintains responsibility for keeping entities such as state higher education agencies, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE), and, if applicable, other accreditors informed throughout the process.

To ensure that students and other stakeholders have a clear understanding of an institution's accreditation status, HLC requires that institutions follow guidelines when publicly discussing their accreditation status and plans. After an institution that is participating in HLC's Eligibility Process has submitted its application to HLC, it may publicly disclose that it has done so and may indicate a general timeline for the process to be completed, including a period of candidacy. The institution should refer others to [HLC's website](#) for a consistent description of the process and should not speculate as to the outcome. If an institution participating in HLC's Eligibility Process is concurrently accredited by another institutional accretor, it should be transparent about that accreditation status.

HLC may indicate publicly that an institution participating in the Eligibility Process has applied, but will generally not provide additional details about the institution's participation in the process unless the institution is no longer seeking accreditation with HLC or as otherwise consistent with HLC policy.

Questions?

Questions about the process may be directed to seekingaccreditation@hlcommission.org. Institutions are encouraged to attend applicable programming, for example at HLC's [annual conference](#) before beginning the Eligibility Process.

Determining Eligibility

The Process at a Glance

The following chart summarizes the initial steps involved in the process of seeking accreditation through the Eligibility Process. Additional information regarding each of the tasks immediately follows the chart.

Step and Associated Activities	Time Frame
<p>1. Application</p> <p>An institution begins the Eligibility Process by submitting an application along with required Preliminary Evidence.</p> <p>HLC staff assess the institution’s application to determine whether it is complete and sufficient to proceed with the Eligibility Process. HLC may require that the institution submit additional materials.</p> <p>This step culminates in a Preliminary Evidence Response, which includes a decision whether the institution may proceed with the Eligibility Interview.</p> <p><i>See page 4 for further details.</i></p>	<p>HLC staff will review the application and respond to the institution, typically within one month.</p> <p>Any additional materials are due within one month of request.</p>
<p>2. Eligibility Interview</p> <p>The institution and HLC participate in an Eligibility Interview.</p> <p>HLC may require that the institution submit additional materials following the Eligibility Interview.</p> <p>This step culminates in a Post-Interview Letter, which includes a decision whether the institution may proceed with submitting an Eligibility Filing.</p> <p><i>See page 5 for further details.</i></p>	<p>A date for the interview must be established within one month after the date of the Preliminary Evidence Response. The interview must occur no more than four months after the date of the Preliminary Evidence Response.</p>
<p>3. Letter of Intent to Submit Eligibility Filing</p> <p>If approved to proceed with the Eligibility Process, the institution submits its Letter of Intent to Submit Eligibility Filing.</p> <p><i>See page 5 for further details.</i></p>	<p>The institution must submit its Letter of Intent to Submit Eligibility Filing within two years of the date of the Post-Interview Letter.</p>
<p>4. Eligibility Filing</p> <p>The institution submits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional Data Form • Compliance with Eligibility Requirements Form <p>HLC staff screen the Eligibility Filing for completeness. HLC may require that the institution submit additional materials.</p> <p>If the Eligibility Filing is complete, peer reviewers evaluate the narrative and evidence provided by the institution. There is no in-person visit or other interaction between the institution and peer reviewers. Peer reviewers may also request additional information.</p> <p>This step culminates in a Letter on Eligibility, which includes a decision whether the institution may proceed with preparing for a comprehensive evaluation for Candidacy.</p> <p><i>See page 5 for further details.</i></p>	<p>The Eligibility Filing must be submitted within one year of the date of the Letter of Intent to Submit Eligibility Filing.</p> <p>The peer review panel takes approximately one month to evaluate the Eligibility Filing and determine the institution’s ability to continue with the process.</p> <p>Any missing materials are due within one month of request.</p> <p>Any additional information is due within one year of the request. The Eligibility Review will not proceed during that time period.</p>

The following sections provide more detailed information about the tasks summarized in the chart above.

1. Application

The Eligibility Process begins with an institution submitting an [application](#) and providing the required application fee. An institution's application will not be considered complete until the application fee is received. See HLC's [Dues and Fees Schedule](#) and the payment information on page 11 of this document for more information.

The institution's application for the Eligibility Process will include documentation (Preliminary Evidence) beginning to demonstrate that the institution may meet the [Eligibility Requirements](#). All Preliminary Evidence must be submitted through the application form as a single PDF files labeled with the file name: (name of institution)PreliminaryEvidence.pdf. It should include the following:

1. Completed [Substantial Presence Worksheet](#).
2. Documentation showing the incorporation of the institution within HLC's jurisdiction in accordance with HLC policy.
3. Documentation showing legal status to operate as an institution offering higher learning in at least one state, sovereign nation or jurisdiction within HLC's jurisdiction in accordance with HLC policy and, if applicable, evidence of authorization in good standing to offer higher learning in any other location in which it is required by state law or regulation to be authorized. Disclose any state action to suspend, limit or terminate the corporate status or higher education authorization of the institution or any related entity within the previous five years.)
4. Articles of incorporation and bylaws (or other equivalent documentation) of the institution and any related entities.
5. A clear and complete description of the relationship between the institution and any related entities.
6. A list of governing board members (or the equivalent) for the governing board of the institution and any other governing boards of related entities. Include profiles of the board members, and the following information regarding the board members (a) any ownership interest in the institution or any related entity; (b) any familial relationship with other board members or senior administration at the institution or any related entity, and (c) any contractual relationships with the institution or any related entity.
7. Mission statement and any similar statements of vision/values.
8. A list of all degree and certificate programs that the institution offers, including information as to which programs are offered by distance or correspondence education.
9. Information about specific current enrollments in all degree and certificate programs shown by program, location, and mode of delivery.
10. A complete description of the institution's general education program including its philosophy and objectives for general education.
11. Print or electronic catalogue or documentation showing other sources through which information about the institution, its personnel, and its academic programs is provided.
12. Comparative budgets for the past fiscal year.
13. Audits by a certified public accountant or public audit agency for the last fiscal year. Any consolidated audit must have a separate schedule for the institution.
14. Business plan for the next three years, including projected growth in programs and enrollment.
15. Job description of the Chief Executive Officer and resume of the current Chief Executive Officer.
16. Description of the faculty governance structure.
17. Roster of faculty and administrative personnel, including the qualifications of individuals, their status (full or part-time, adjunct or independent consultant), department assignment, and a list of the courses they typically teach.
18. Inventory of learning resources.
19. Inventory of student support services.
20. List of current accreditation relationships, including status, and information regarding any other official interactions with other accreditors in the past five years.
21. If the institution is already institutionally accredited or pre-accredited by an accreditor that is recognized by the United States Department of Education, documentation from Federal Student Aid indicating that the institution has demonstrated reasonable cause for changing its primary institutional accrediting agency or for maintaining institutional accreditation by multiple agencies and has the approval of FSA under federal regulations to seek accreditation with HLC.

- 22.** If the institution is already institutionally accredited or pre-accredited by an accreditor that is recognized by the United States Department of Education, a description explaining how the institution's decision to change its primary institutional accrediting agency or maintain institutional accreditation by multiple agencies is voluntary. Information to be included as part of this description could include, but is not limited to (a) the institution's rationale for seeking accreditation with HLC; (b) an analysis of any external factors that are affecting the institution's decision to seek accreditation with HLC; (c) and a description of the institution's decision-making process for choosing to seek accreditation with HLC.
- 23.** List of all lawsuits, prosecutions, state investigations, administrative actions, or judgments within the last five years involving claims related to (a) the academic quality of the institution, (b) the institution's recruiting or admissions, or (c) the institution's financial aid practices.
- 24.** Letter from the governing board of the institution confirming its intention to seek accreditation with HLC and a copy of the minutes from the meeting in which the Board approved seeking accreditation. The institution must make clear whether it is seeking system accreditation for a multi-corporate structure involving multiple institutions or seeking accreditation for a single corporate structure involving only one institution. HLC will make the final decision on whether the requested scope of accreditation is appropriate.
- 25.** Plan for achieving accreditation, including milestones and dates.

After the institution submits the Preliminary Evidence and the application fee, HLC staff evaluate the application and evidence to determine whether the Preliminary Evidence is complete and sufficient such that the institution may proceed with the Eligibility Process.

As part of this evaluation, HLC staff may also request that the institution submit missing or additional Preliminary Evidence within one month of request.

This step concludes with a Preliminary Evidence Response Letter, which includes a decision whether or not the institution may proceed with the next step of the Eligibility Process, the Eligibility Interview.

2. Eligibility Interview

The next step of the Eligibility Process is for the institution and HLC to participate in an Eligibility Interview. During the Eligibility Interview, HLC and the institution will discuss the Preliminary Evidence and the institution's proposed plan and timeline for pursuing membership with HLC. The institution has the opportunity to ask questions about the process and HLC requirements. At HLC's discretion, the Eligibility Interview may be in-person or virtual.

The date for the Eligibility Interview must be established within one month of the Preliminary Evidence Response letter. The interview must occur no more than four months from the date of the Preliminary Evidence Response.

This step concludes with a Post-Interview Letter, which includes a decision whether or not the institution may proceed with the next step of the Eligibility Process, submitting an Eligibility Filing. The Post-Interview Letter may also include a request for additional evidence. In this case, the letter will indicate whether this additional evidence must be submitted prior to or with the Letter of Intent to Submit Eligibility Filing.

3. Letter of Intent to Submit Eligibility Filing

The institution submits a Letter of Intent to Submit Eligibility Filing.

The institution may submit its letter of intent up to two years from the date of the Post-Interview Letter. If applicable, any additional Preliminary Evidence must accompany this letter.

4. Eligibility Filing

The Eligibility Filing includes:

- [Institutional Data Form](#)
- [Compliance With Eligibility Requirements Form](#)

The institution must submit the Eligibility Filing within one year from the date of the Letter of Intent to Submit Eligibility Filing. HLC staff checks to ensure that the Eligibility Filing is complete. If the filing is complete, it will be evaluated by a peer review panel. If it is not complete, HLC may provide the institution an opportunity to submit additional materials. The institution must submit the additional materials within one month of request.

The peer review panel takes approximately one month to evaluate the Eligibility Filing and determine the institution's ability to continue with the process. The review is conducted by two HLC peer reviewers who have been appointed by the HLC Board of Trustees to serve as Eligibility Reviewers. The purpose of the panel review is to determine whether the institution has the capacity and readiness to pursue membership with HLC, specifically to host a comprehensive evaluation visit for Candidacy. The panel review determines whether the institution has presented sufficient evidence such that it appears likely to have met the Eligibility Requirements. A final determination about whether the institution has met the Eligibility Requirements will be made following the comprehensive evaluation visit for Candidacy. However, the panel review is a helpful tool for HLC and the institution to obtain a preliminary analysis regarding the institution's compliance with the Eligibility Requirements without a comprehensive evaluation. The panel may request additional information from the institution. The institution has up to one year to submit that additional information. The panel does

not move forward with its review during this time. An additional fee may be required with the submission of additional information.

At the conclusion of the panel review, including any additional review following the submission of additional information, the panel will determine and provide a rationale regarding whether the institution has or has not provided sufficient information to proceed with the process.

A determination by the panel that the institution has provided sufficient information in its Eligibility Filing to proceed with the process does not mean that future reviewers will also reach a determination that the institution meets the Eligibility Requirements. Each evaluation team will conduct a new review of the applicable information and make an independent judgment.

This step concludes with a Letter on Eligibility, which includes a decision whether the institution may proceed with hosting a comprehensive evaluation for candidacy.



Candidacy and Initial Accreditation

The Process at a Glance

The following chart summarizes the subsequent steps involved in the process of seeking accreditation through a period of Candidacy and application for initial accreditation. Additional information regarding each of the tasks immediately follows the chart.

Step and Associated Activities	Time Frame
<p>1. Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy</p> <p>The institution submits a Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy. The institution is assigned an HLC staff liaison.</p> <p><i>See page 9 for further details.</i></p>	<p>The institution must submit its Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy within three months of the date of the Letter on Eligibility.</p>
<p>2. Comprehensive Evaluation for Candidacy and Related Decision Making</p> <p>The institution submits its comprehensive evaluation materials and hosts an on-site visit by a peer review team.</p> <p>The evaluation includes the following components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assurance Filing demonstrating the institution’s capacity to meet HLC’s Criteria for Accreditation within the period of candidacy • Institutional Data Form • Compliance with Eligibility Requirements Form • Compliance with Assumed Practices Form • Federal Compliance Filing • On-site visit, including if applicable, a Multi-Campus Visit • Student Opinion Survey • IAC Hearing • HLC Board decision <p>The Board may grant or deny Candidacy. If granted, Candidacy is typically four years.</p> <p><i>See page 9 for further details.</i></p>	<p>The comprehensive evaluation for candidacy must take place with sufficient time to allow for action by the Board of Trustees no later than two years from the date of the Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy (the comprehensive evaluation typically takes place about one year after submission of the Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy).</p>

Step and Associated Activities	Time Frame
<p>3. Biennial Evaluation</p> <p>The institution participates in a biennial evaluation.</p> <p>The evaluation typically includes the following components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assurance Filing • Compliance With Eligibility Requirements Form • Compliance With Assumed Practices Form • On-site visit • IAC review <p>If the institution is making reasonable progress toward meeting the Criteria for Accreditation and otherwise meets HLC requirements, the institution maintains its candidate status.</p> <p>If the institution is not making reasonable progress toward meeting the Criteria for Accreditation or does not otherwise meet HLC requirements, the Board of Trustees may withdraw candidacy.</p> <p><i>See page 9 for further details.</i></p>	<p>The biennial evaluation generally occurs two years after the award of Candidacy.</p>
<p>4. Comprehensive Evaluation for Initial Accreditation and Related Decision Making</p> <p>The institution submits its comprehensive evaluation materials and hosts an on-site visit by a peer review team.</p> <p>The evaluation includes the following components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assurance Filing demonstrating the institution's compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation • Compliance With Eligibility Requirements Form • Compliance With Assumed Practices Form • Federal Compliance Filing • On-site visit, including if applicable, a Multi-Campus Visit • Student Opinion Survey • IAC Hearing • HLC Board decision <p>If initial accreditation is granted, the institution is an accredited institution. Alternatively, the Board may deny initial accreditation or extend the period of Candidacy.</p> <p><i>See page 10 for further details.</i></p>	<p>The comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation must take place with sufficient time to allow for action by the Board of Trustees within the established period of Candidacy, which is typically four years (the comprehensive evaluation typically takes place about one year prior to the end of the established period of Candidacy).</p> <p>This step could occur earlier, including replacing the biennial evaluation, if Early Initial Accreditation is requested.</p> <p>Under no circumstances will a period of Candidacy be longer than five years, including any extension.</p>

The following sections provide more detailed information about the tasks summarized in the chart above.

1. Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy

If the Eligibility Review panel has determined that the institution has provided sufficient information to proceed with the process, HLC will request a Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy from the institution.

The institution must submit its Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy within three months from the date of HLC's Letter on Eligibility.

The institution will be assigned an HLC staff liaison after it has submitted its Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy and as it schedules and begins to prepare for a comprehensive evaluation visit for Candidacy.

2. Comprehensive Evaluation for Candidacy and Related Decision Making

The comprehensive evaluation visit for Candidacy must take place with sufficient time to allow for action by the Board of Trustees within two years of the date of the Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy. Typically, the comprehensive evaluation for Candidacy takes place about one year from the date of the Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy.

In a comprehensive evaluation for candidacy, an institution must demonstrate that it has the capacity to meet the Criteria for Accreditation within the period of Candidacy. An institution must also demonstrate that it meets the Eligibility Requirements, Assumed Practices and Federal Compliance Requirements. Candidacy is achieved through submission of comprehensive evaluation materials, participating in HLC's [Student Opinion Survey](#) process, hosting an on-site evaluation by a peer review team to the institution's main campus and, if applicable, a selection of its branch campuses, participating in a hearing by the IAC and action by the HLC Board of Trustees. Each of these steps of the process is conducted in accordance with HLC policy. Regular fees, for example those related to comprehensive evaluations and IAC hearings, apply throughout this step. See HLC's [Dues and Fees Schedule](#) for more information.

Details on submission requirements for the comprehensive evaluation for Candidacy can be found in the Required Materials and Submission Procedures on page 11. Additional information about the comprehensive evaluation process is available on [HLC's website](#).

Important: During the time period from the submission of the Eligibility Review to action by the HLC Board on the comprehensive evaluation for Candidacy, the institution must not undertake any significant changes that would alter the information as described in the Eligibility Filing. Significant changes could include, but are not limited to, changes in mission, ownership or governance; the implementation of new programs that represent significant departures from the institution's current program inventory; new delivery methods requiring substantial planning and implementation; new contractual or consortial relationships; or the initiation of additional locations or branch campuses. Significant change may result in cancellation of any scheduled visit and require resubmission of the Eligibility Filing and review by a new panel. Please contact HLC if the institution is contemplating a change that may be a significant change.

At the conclusion of the review and decision-making process, the HLC Board will grant or deny Candidacy.

If Candidacy is granted, the Board will specify the period of Candidacy. The period of Candidacy is typically four years, with a minimum period of at least two years. In exceptional circumstances, the Board may waive the required period of candidacy.

When granting Candidacy, the Board may also specify particular areas on which the institution should focus prior to the biennial evaluation.

Denial of candidacy by the Board of Trustees is an adverse action that is subject to appeal as detailed in HLC's policies.

If the institution achieves Candidacy, it is required to place the [Mark of Accreditation Status](#) on its website indicating that it is a candidate with HLC.

The institution may also choose to otherwise publicly disclose its status with HLC. The institution may only use the following language to describe its status with HLC:

(Name of institution) is a candidate with the Higher Learning Commission.

3. Biennial Evaluation

An institution hosts a required biennial evaluation visit approximately two years after Candidacy is granted.

In the biennial evaluation, the institution must demonstrate that it is making reasonable progress toward meeting the Criteria for Accreditation by the end of the period of Candidacy. An institution

must also demonstrate evidence indicating that it continues to meet the Eligibility Requirements and Assumed Practices. If the Board of Trustees identified particular areas of focus when granting Candidacy, the biennial evaluation will include a focused review of these areas.

Details on submission requirements for the biennial evaluation can be found in the Required Materials and Submission Procedures on page 11.

Typically, the peer review team does not make a recommendation following a biennial evaluation. Rather, the review team provides a report offering advice on continued progress toward meeting the Criteria for Accreditation in preparation for the evaluation for initial accreditation. In this instance, the Institutional Actions Council (IAC) reviews the report and continues Candidacy.

If, however, the team or the IAC finds that the institution is not making reasonable progress toward meeting the Criteria for Accreditation or does not meet one or more of the Eligibility Requirements or Assumed Practices, the IAC may recommend withdrawal of Candidacy. In this instance, the process will proceed through the procedures established in HLC policy for withdrawal of Candidacy. Withdrawal of Candidacy by the Board of Trustees is an adverse action that is subject to appeal as detailed in HLC's policies.

4. Comprehensive Evaluation for Initial Accreditation and Related Decision Making

At the end of the period of Candidacy, an institution will be evaluated for initial accreditation. Initial accreditation is achieved through submission of comprehensive evaluation materials, an on-site visit by a peer review team, a hearing by the IAC and final action by the Board of Trustees. Each of these steps of the process is conducted in accordance with HLC policy.

The comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation must take place with sufficient time to allow for action by the Board of Trustees within the established period of Candidacy, which is typically four years. Typically, the comprehensive evaluation for Initial Accreditation takes place about one year prior to the end of the established period of Candidacy, typically three years after the award of Candidacy, unless an institution is seeking Early Initial Accreditation.

In a comprehensive evaluation for Initial Accreditation, an institution must demonstrate that it meets the Criteria for Accreditation. This could include findings of met with concerns, except in the case of when an institution seeks initial accreditation through early initial accreditation, as further detailed below. An institution must also demonstrate evidence indicating that it meets the Eligibility Requirements, Assumed Practices and Federal Compliance Requirements. Initial accreditation is achieved through submission of comprehensive evaluation materials, participating in [HLC's Student Opinion Survey](#) process, hosting an on-site evaluation by a peer review team to the institution's main campus and, if applicable, a selection of its branch campuses, participating in a hearing by the IAC and action by the HLC Board of Trustees. Each of these steps of the process is conducted in accordance with HLC policy. Regular fees, for example those related to comprehensive evaluations and IAC Hearings, apply throughout this step. See [HLC's Dues and Fees Schedule](#) for more information.

Details on submission requirements for the comprehensive evaluation for Initial Accreditation can be found in the Required Materials and Submission Procedures on page 11. Additional information about the comprehensive evaluation process is available on [HLC's website](#).

Early Initial Accreditation

An institution may request that it seek initial accreditation by participating in an early initial accreditation process. The request must typically be submitted to HLC in writing at a least one year prior to the desired date of the comprehensive evaluation for early initial accreditation. HLC will review the request and make a determination as to whether the institution may pursue early initial accreditation. In making this determination, HLC will consider multiple factors, such as any issues identified by the team that conducted the comprehensive evaluation for Candidacy and the institution's relationship with HLC during the period of Candidacy. The institution is limited to one request to pursue early initial accreditation during the term of Candidacy.

The process for a comprehensive evaluation for early initial accreditation has the same requirements and follows the same procedures as the comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation. However, in order to successfully be awarded early initial accreditation, an institution must meet the Criteria for Accreditation

with no findings of met with concerns. In most cases, the comprehensive evaluation for early initial accreditation would replace the biennial evaluation.

Decision Making

The Board of Trustees will grant or deny initial accreditation.

In the case of a comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation at the end of the institution's period of Candidacy, the Board may also extend the period of Candidacy. In this instance, the institution will repeat the comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation as specified by the Board of Trustees.

If the Board denies initial accreditation following a request for early initial accreditation, it may either withdraw Candidacy or may continue the period of Candidacy as would have been anticipated if the institution had not pursued early initial accreditation. If the Board continues Candidacy, the institution will repeat the comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation as specified by the Board.

Denial of initial accreditation by the Board of Trustees, except when the Board denies an application for early initial accreditation and continues candidacy status, is an adverse action that is subject to appeal as detailed in HLC's policies.

Under no circumstances shall an institution remain a candidate institution for longer than five years.

Required Materials and Submission Procedures

General Requirements

- Except for the Assurance Argument and associated evidence file materials, HLC requires that all institutional materials be submitted electronically as PDF documents. Ensure that electronic documents are paginated, bookmarked and searchable, with internal document links that allow for ease of movement across chapters, sections and subsections. Do not scan printed documents to create a PDF document, as this will result in a document that is large in file size and not text searchable. Electronic documents should be prepared by an individual with expertise in using appropriate PDF software, such as Adobe Acrobat.

- Include internal document organizational strategies (such as headings or lists of linked documents) that make it easy for the reader to navigate within the electronic document.
- Unless instructed otherwise, avoid links to websites or other materials outside of the required filing. Thus, links to external materials should offer only supplemental information. Reviewers are not required to pursue external links.
- Only use graphics and pictures if they provide specific evidence. Optimize graphics and pictures to reduce the size of the document.
- Ensure that software settings are set to create clear text and graphics, yet not make the file size too large.
- Please review [HLC's guidelines regarding personally identifiable information \(PII\)](#) prior to submitting any materials to HLC.
- Submit only the requested documents. If documents are applicable to more than one item in a filing, submit them once and cross-reference appropriately.
- Do not apply password protection to PDF documents.
- It is the institution's responsibility to ensure that HLC has those documents necessary to provide a complete and accurate understanding of the institution's compliance with HLC's requirements. If the institution has relevant information that has not been specifically requested, it should contact HLC staff for instructions about the appropriateness of submitting the information.
- Documents will be submitted via a file-sharing link or through the Assurance System. Do not send any documents by email to HLC.
- The application fee should be submitted as detailed below. HLC will issue invoices for all other payments. Contact finance@hlcommission.org or 312.881.8119 for instructions on submitting a wire/ACH payment or with other financial inquiries.

The application fee may be submitted by wire/ACH or mailed to:

Higher Learning Commission
P.O. Box 735331
Chicago, IL 60673-5331

General Notes on the Assurance System

HLC's online Assurance System allows institutions to assemble an Assurance Filing and provide any other required forms and materials. The Assurance Filing includes a narrative (Assurance Argument) and supporting evidentiary documents (Evidence File) in a framework built around the Criteria for Accreditation. Institutions use this system to demonstrate their compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation and other HLC requirements. Narrative in the Assurance System should be evaluative in nature and substantiated with clear, specific evidence (versus general references to documents that may contain evidence).

Extensive training is available on HLC's website about using the Assurance System effectively, and HLC staff are available to assist institutions.

All materials for the comprehensive evaluation for Candidacy, the biennial evaluation, and the comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation are submitted through the Assurance System. All materials must be submitted to the Assurance System before the institution's lock date, which is four weeks in advance of the visit (materials can be submitted earlier). After the lock date, the institution will no longer be able to edit its Assurance Filing.

Peer reviewers will access all materials from the Assurance System for the on-site evaluation.

The Assurance System allows for the institution to upload additional material requested by peer reviewers through an Addendum feature that is activated by the peer reviewers when needed.

The institution should not provide materials to peer reviewers, as teams are expected to work from the Assurance System in preparation for and throughout the visit.

Additional information about the Assurance System can be found in the [Assurance System Manual](#).

Required Materials for Eligibility Filing

The materials submitted for the Eligibility Filing are as follows:

1. [Institutional Data Form](#)

- This form is completed by the institution to provide basic institutional data.

- If including other materials to respond to the data requested by the form, combine all documents (including the form) into a single PDF file.

2. [Compliance With Eligibility Requirements Form](#)

- This form is completed by the institution to provide information on its compliance with the Eligibility Requirements.
- Combine all supporting evidence into a single PDF file, separate from the form.

The Eligibility Filing must be submitted as three PDF files: the Institutional Data Form, the Compliance With Eligibility Requirements Form, and the institution's supporting evidence for compliance with the Eligibility Requirements. Submit the files to HLC at hlcommission.org/upload. Select "Eligibility" from the list of submission options to ensure that the materials are sent to the correct staff member.

Required Materials for Comprehensive Evaluations for Candidacy and Initial Accreditation

The materials submitted for the comprehensive evaluation for Candidacy and comprehensive evaluation for Initial Accreditation are as follows. Any differences in submission requirements between the comprehensive evaluation for Candidacy and the comprehensive evaluation for Initial Accreditation are noted.

1. [Institutional Data Form](#) (only required for comprehensive evaluation for Candidacy)

- This form is completed by the institution to provide basic institutional data.
- Download the Institutional Data Form from the Forms Tab of the Assurance System.
- If the institution chooses to use a previously completed Institutional Data Form, ensure that it is updated appropriately regarding any information that has changed since the original submission, as well as the time frames for which data is requested.
- Complete and upload the form to the Forms Tab of the Assurance System. If including other materials to respond to the data requested by

the form, combine all documents (including the form) into a single PDF file before uploading it to the Forms Tab. (Peer reviewers will be able to access the form through the Forms Tab. There is no need to provide a link to this document in the narrative of the Assurance Argument.)

2. [Compliance With Eligibility Requirements Form](#)

- This form is completed by the institution to provide information on its compliance with the Eligibility Requirements.
- Download the Compliance With Eligibility Requirements Form from the Forms Tab of the Assurance System.
- When updating the Compliance With Eligibility Requirements Form, institutions should clearly identify for peer reviewers any items that have been updated since the previous review and, as needed, include information explaining how the institution continues to meet the Eligibility Requirements despite the noted changes.
- Upload the form in the Forms Tab of the Assurance System. (Peer reviewers will be able to access the form through the Forms Tab. There is no need to provide a link to this document in the narrative of the Assurance Argument.)

3. [Compliance With Assumed Practices Form](#)

- This form is completed by the institution to provide information on its compliance with the Assumed Practices.
- Download the Compliance With Assumed Practices Form from the Forms Tab of the Assurance System.
- When updating the form, institutions should clearly identify for peer reviewers any items that have been updated in the document since the preliminary peer review and, as needed, include information explaining how the institution continues to meet the Assumed Practices despite the noted changes.
- Upload the form and any supporting documentation to the Forms Tab of the Assurance System. (Peer reviewers will be able to access the form through the Forms Tab. There is no need to provide a link to this document in the narrative of the Assurance Argument.)

4. Assurance Filing (including Introduction, Assurance Argument and associated Evidence File)

- An overview of institutional history and context is entered in the Introduction Tab of the Assurance System.
- When providing narrative and documentation regarding the Criteria for Accreditation, an institution will provide evidence as to how it has the capacity to meet the Criteria for Accreditation fully within the period of Candidacy (comprehensive evaluation for Candidacy) or fulfills the Criteria for Accreditation (comprehensive evaluation for Initial Accreditation).
- The word limit for the Assurance Argument is 40,000 words.
- Other than specific forms provided by HLC, documents in the Assurance System related to the Assurance Argument are provided through the Evidence File. Materials in the Evidence File must be linked to at least one section of the institutional narrative. The peer review team cannot view documents in the Evidence File that aren't linked to the narrative.

5. Supplemental Materials:

- Include the following Supplemental Materials as hyperlinks in the Assurance Argument, as described in the [Assurance System Manual](#):
 - All current faculty and staff handbook(s)
 - All current student handbook(s)
 - All current institutional catalog(s) or course bulletin(s)
- Further, include audited financial statements for the two most recent fiscal periods as PDFs in the Evidence File and provide a link within the Assurance Argument in the applicable Core Component section

6. Federal Compliance Requirements

- Download the Federal Compliance Filing Form from [HLC's website](#).
- Upload the completed Filing Form and related appendix, if required to the Federal Compliance Tab of the Assurance System. (There is no need to provide a link to this document in the narrative of the Assurance Argument.)

7. Multi-Campus Report (if applicable)

- If the comprehensive evaluation includes a multi-campus visit, prepare a report that addresses each campus being reviewed. See the [Multi-Campus Visit procedure](#) or details on preparing the report.
- Upload the report to the Forms tab of the Assurance System. (There is no need to provide a link to the report in the narrative of the Assurance Argument.)

Biennial Evaluation

For the biennial evaluation, the institution must update the information provided for the comprehensive evaluation for Candidacy. This will require submission of new forms and documents through the Assurance System.

The institution should update its Assurance Argument to explain any changes at the institution since the award of Candidacy and provide an update on progress made on each of the issues and areas needing improvement identified by the Candidacy evaluation team. Please note: At the biennial evaluation, the institution does not need to provide a Federal Compliance Filing.

Related Policies and Documents

Policies

[Eligibility Requirements](#) (CRRT.A.10.010)

[Criteria for Accreditation](#) (CRRT.B.10.010)

[Assumed Practices](#) (CRRT.C.10.010)

[Obligations of Membership](#) (CRRT.D.10.010)

[Federal Compliance Requirements](#)

[Jurisdiction](#) (INST.B.10.010)

[Eligibility Process](#) (INST.B.20.010)

[Candidacy and Initial Accreditation](#) (INST.B.20.020)

[Dues and Fees](#) (INST.B.40.010)

[Denial or Withdrawal of Status](#) (INST.E.60.010)

[Reapplication Following a Denial or Withdrawal of Status](#) (INST.E.80.010)

[Appeals](#) (INST.E.90.010)

[Substantive Change](#) (INST.G.10.010)

Documents

[Substantial Presence](#) Form

[Institutional Data Form](#)

[Compliance With Eligibility Requirements Form](#)

[Compliance With Assumed Practices Form](#)

[Federal Compliance Overview and Filing Form](#)

