Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education

Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation

Middle States Commission on Higher Education
Standards at a Glance

Institutional Context

Standard 1: Mission and Goals

The institution’s mission clearly defines its purpose within the context of higher education and indicates who the institution serves and what it intends to accomplish. The institution’s stated goals, consistent with the aspirations and expectations of higher education, clearly specify how the institution will fulfill its mission. The mission and goals are developed and recognized by the institution with the participation of its members and its governing body and are used to develop and shape its programs and practices and to evaluate its effectiveness.

Standard 2: Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal

An institution conducts ongoing planning and resource allocation based on its mission and goals, develops objectives to achieve them, and utilizes the results of its assessment activities for institutional renewal. Implementation and subsequent evaluation of the success of the strategic plan and resource allocation support the development and change necessary to improve and to maintain institutional quality.

Standard 3: Institutional Resources

The human, financial, technical, physical facilities, and other resources necessary to achieve an institution’s mission and goals are available and accessible. In the context of the institution’s mission, the effective and efficient uses of the institution’s resources are analyzed as part of ongoing outcomes assessment.

Standard 4: Leadership and Governance

The institution’s system of governance clearly defines the roles of institutional constituencies in policy development and decision-making. The governance structure includes an active governing body with sufficient autonomy to assure institutional integrity and to fulfill its responsibilities of policy and resource development, consistent with the mission of the institution.
Standard 5: Administration

The institution’s administrative structure and services facilitate learning and research/scholarship, foster quality improvement, and support the institution’s organization and governance.

Standard 6: Integrity

In the conduct of its programs and activities involving the public and the constituencies it serves, the institution demonstrates adherence to ethical standards and its own stated policies, providing support for academic and intellectual freedom.

Standard 7: Institutional Assessment

The institution has developed and implemented an assessment process that evaluates its overall effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals and its compliance with accreditation standards.

Educational Effectiveness

Standard 8: Student Admissions and Retention

The institution seeks to admit students whose interests, goals, and abilities are congruent with its mission and seeks to retain them through the pursuit of the students’ educational goals.

Standard 9: Student Support Services

The institution provides student support services reasonably necessary to enable each student to achieve the institution’s goals for students.

Standard 10: Faculty

The institution’s instructional, research, and service programs are devised, developed, monitored, and supported by qualified professionals.

Standard 11: Educational Offerings

The institution’s educational offerings display academic content, rigor, and coherence appropriate to its higher education mission. The institution identifies student learning goals and objectives, including knowledge and skills, for its educational offerings.
Standard 12: General Education

The institution’s curricula are designed so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills, including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competency.

Standard 13: Related Educational Activities

The institution’s programs or activities that are characterized by particular content, focus, location, mode of delivery, or sponsorship meet appropriate standards.

Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning

Assessment of student learning demonstrates that, at graduation, or other appropriate points, the institution’s students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional and appropriate higher education goals.
Standard 11

Educational Offerings

The institution’s educational offerings display academic content, rigor, and coherence that are appropriate to its higher education mission. The institution identifies student learning goals and objectives, including knowledge and skills, for its educational offerings.

Context

Teaching and learning are the primary purposes of any institution of higher education, whether at the undergraduate or graduate level. The breadth and depth of student learning appropriate to the programs and levels of study and the demonstrable ability of students to integrate knowledge are key elements in judging the success of an institution’s educational programs.

While individual goals of undergraduate study may vary, most graduate study has as its immediate goal the achievement of an advanced degree—that of master or doctor—or a diploma, certificate, or recognized statement of earned credit through the formal, structured pursuit of learning beyond the level of the baccalaureate degree. Graduate studies should offer focused study and relevant independent research of a specialized nature, within the context of comprehensive institutional aims and with principled attention to related demands on institutional resources and implications for the institution’s teaching climate. While the focus and intensity of an undergraduate versus graduate program may be different, this section of Characteristics applies equally to both undergraduate and graduate education.

Educational courses, programs, and experiences are not static constructs. Their creation and lifespan may be characterized as part of a dynamic four-step cycle:

1. Developing clearly articulated written statements of expected learning outcomes;
2. Designing learning experiences that provide explicit opportunities for students to achieve those learning outcomes;
3. Implementing appropriate measures of student achievement of key learning outcomes, as discussed under Standard 14 (Assessment of Student Learning); and
4. Using the results of those assessments to improve teaching and learning, again as discussed under Standard 14.
sufficient content, rigor and depth to be characterized as collegiate or graduate level learning, as appropriate, with a clear distinction between pre-college and college level study, and between undergraduate and graduate study;

clear linkages between the design of specific courses, programs, and learning activities and the articulated goals of the specific programs of which they are part and to the overarching mission of the institution; and

responsiveness to new research findings and modes of inquiry.

Several skills, collectively referred to as “information literacy,” apply to all disciplines in an institution’s curricula. These skills relate to a student’s competency in acquiring and processing information in the search for understanding, whether that information is sought in or through the facilities of a library, through practica, as a result of field experiments, by communications with experts in professional communities, or by other means. Therefore, information literacy is an essential component of any educational program at the graduate or undergraduate levels.

These skills include the ability to:

• determine the nature and extent of needed information;
• access information effectively and efficiently;
• evaluate critically the sources and content of information;
• incorporate selected information in the learner’s knowledge base and value system;
• use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose;
• understand the economic, legal and social issues surrounding the use of information and information technology; and
• observe laws, regulations, and institutional policies related to the access and use of information.

Closely tied to information literacy is the need for technological competency at all levels within an institution and its curricula. Higher education has new information sources and technologies that supplement its print-based knowledge resources and present new challenges for teachers and learners who must learn how to develop and use general or discipline-specific technologies to identify, retrieve, and apply relevant information. Therefore, institutions should provide both students and instructors with the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to use the information, new technology, and media for their studies, teaching, or research. As information technologies emerge, institutions may offer periodic updating or retraining.

In addition to information literacy and technological competency, the institution’s curricula should be designed so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills, including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competency (see Standard 12: General Education). While these skills are often addressed within a general education curriculum, they must often be further addressed within degree or certificate programs so that students may become proficient in these skills as they are applied within a particular field of study.
program goals that are stated in terms of student learning outcomes;

periodic evaluation of the effectiveness of any curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular experiences that the institution provides its students and utilization of evaluation results as a basis for improving its student development program and for enabling students to understand their own educational progress (see Standards 9: Student Support Services and 14: Assessment of Student Learning);

learning resources, facilities, instructional equipment, library services, and professional library staff adequate to support the institution’s educational programs;

collaboration among professional library staff, faculty, and administrators in fostering information literacy and technological competency skills across the curriculum;

programs that promote student use of a variety of information and learning resources;

provision of comparable quality of teaching/instruction, academic rigor, and educational effectiveness of the institution’s courses and programs regardless of the location or delivery mode;

published and implemented policies and procedures regarding transfer credit. The consideration of transfer credit or recognition of degrees will not be determined exclusively on the basis of the accreditation of the sending institution or the mode of delivery but, rather, will consider course equivalencies, including expected learning outcomes, with those of the receiving institution’s curricula and standards. Such criteria will be fair, consistently applied, and publicly communicated;

policies and procedures to assure that the educational expectations, rigor, and student learning within any accelerated degree program are comparable to those that characterize more traditional program formats;

consistent with the institution’s educational programs and student cohorts, practices and policies that reflect the needs of adult learners;

course syllabi that incorporate expected learning outcomes; and

assessment of student learning and program outcomes relative to the goals and objectives of the undergraduate programs and the use of the results to improve student learning and program effectiveness (see Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning).

Institutions and evaluators must consider the totality that is created by the fundamental elements and any other relevant institutional information or analysis. Fundamental elements and contextual statements should not be applied separately as checklists. Where an institution does not possess or demonstrate evidence of a particular Fundamental Element, the institution may demonstrate through alternative information and analysis that it meets the standard.
- evidence of student understanding of the key learning goals of their program, courses, and institution, how they are expected to achieve those learning goals (i.e., through what assignments and learning experiences), and how they are expected to demonstrate their learning;
- review of results from the institution’s implemented outcomes assessment plan (see Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning);
- evidence of local and remote information resources, access structures, and technologies adequate to support the curriculum;
- evidence of information literacy incorporated into the curriculum with syllabi, or other material appropriate to the mode of teaching and learning, describing expectations for students’ demonstration of information literacy skills;
- evidence of accessible reference tools to ascertain where relevant materials exist and are located;
- assessment of information literacy outcomes, including assessment of related learner abilities;
- evidence of trained instructional and reference staff, or other support services, available on-site or via remote access, to help students and teaching staff locate and evaluate information tools and resources;
- evidence of an adequate policy and process, tailored to the mission and goals of the institution, for the development and management of information resources;
- analysis of transfer trends and patterns, both to and from the institution;
- review of articulation agreements and analysis of their impact and effectiveness; or
- review of the impact of transfer agreements or transfer acceptance mandates on the coherence and integrity of the institution’s degree programs.

**Additional Optional Analysis and Evidence for Graduate and Professional Education**

Similarly for graduate and professional education:

- evidence of graduate and professional program goals and objectives that are well-defined, coherent, reflective of institutional mission, and consistent with the profession for which the program prepares students;
- review of the impact of graduate and professional programs on the overall resources of the institution;
- evidence of defined roles and responsibilities for graduate students, especially those who serve as undergraduate instructors and laboratory assistants; or
- assessment of the training, role, and effectiveness of graduate students who provide undergraduate instruction.
Standard 12

General Education

The institution’s curricula are designed so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills, including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competency.

Context

General education is an important component of all undergraduate and some graduate higher education degree programs. All undergraduate and those graduate programs that include a general education component are expected to meet this standard and the related Fundamental Elements. Graduate programs that do not include general education components should ensure that students at admission have appropriate general education skills.

Institutions should identify and provide a recognizable core of general education that:

• expresses the educational philosophy of the institution for each undergraduate degree program or cluster of degree programs;
• incorporates essential knowledge, cognitive abilities, and an understanding of values and ethics;
• enhances students’ intellectual growth; and
• draws students into new areas of intellectual experience, expanding their cultural and global awareness and sensitivity, and preparing them to make enlightened judgments outside as well as within their academic specialty.

What are presented here as general education skills are not necessarily distinct and apart from each other. There is an inherent relationship among these skills. This interrelatedness is evident in the concept of "information literacy," which embraces all of the specific general education skills (see Context, Standard 11).

Consistent with institutional practices, general education degree requirements may be fulfilled through courses completed at the institution, transfer credits, competencies demonstrated in ways determined by the institution, or admission prerequisites.

A general education program—developed, owned, and reviewed by the institution’s faculty—should be purposeful, coherent, engaging, and rigorous. General education skills may be taught or developed as part of courses in the major, in separate courses, or through a decentralized distribution. However, the
Institutions and evaluators must consider the totality that is created by the fundamental elements and any other relevant institutional information or analysis. Fundamental elements and contextual statements should not be applied separately as checklists. Where an institution does not possess or demonstrate evidence of a particular Fundamental Element, the institution may demonstrate through alternative information and analysis that it meets the standard.

**Optional Analysis and Evidence**

In addition to the evidence inherent within or necessary to document the fundamental elements above, the following, although not required, may facilitate the institution’s own analysis relative to this accreditation standard:

- evidence of institutional statements of the rationale supporting the curriculum and the benefits of a quality general education program; and evidence that this rationale has been communicated to students, parents, advisors, employers, and other constituencies;
- analysis of statements of institutional mission, goals, or objectives relative to core knowledge and skills (general education);
- analysis of statements of individual curricular or degree program goals/objectives relative to core knowledge and skills (general education);
- evidence of articulated expectations of student learning outcomes for written communication, speech communication, quantitative reasoning, scientific reasoning, information literacy, technological competence, and critical analysis and reasoning for all undergraduate degree students;
- evidence of student understanding of the key learning outcomes of each general education requirement;
- evidence of institutional support for the general education program (administrative structure, budget, faculty incentives); or
- evidence of completed analytical review of the general education curriculum that addresses topics such as:
  - appropriateness to institutional mission;
  - relevance to student goals, interests and aspirations;
  - provision of adequate time on task and information to learn and to practice the knowledge, skills and abilities imparted by each requirement within the program;
  - provision of adequate balance between theory and practice, given curricular and institutional goals;
  - opportunity for active student engagement in the learning undertaken;
Optional Analysis and Evidence

In addition to the evidence inherent within or necessary to document the fundamental elements above, the following, although not required, may facilitate the institution’s own analysis relative to this accreditation standard:

- review of institutional support for faculty participation in the design, development, and delivery of academic offerings at a distance;
- analysis of partnerships with other institutions to offer or accept offerings at a distance, to assure consistency with the institution’s general policies regarding such partnerships or consortia and to assure the integrity of the degree-granting institution;
- evidence that students have appropriate hardware and the technology skills and competencies needed to succeed in the distance learning environment of the institution;
- analysis of the appropriateness and effectiveness of student services available to students at a distance (admissions, financial aid, registration, advisement, counseling, tutoring, placement, etc.);
- review of published materials, including analysis of the extent to which there is a complete and accurate description of the instructional delivery systems utilized, learning formats, prerequisites for participation, expected learning, and completion and any other requirements;
- analysis of the adequacy of the institution’s technological infrastructure to support the resource needs of distance learning activities, and consideration of how learning outcomes determine the technology being used;
- analysis of the adequacy of technological assistance and support to both student and faculty in distance learning;
- evidence of how the institution assures that students and faculty have sufficient technological skills and those information literacy skills that are necessary to access and to use effectively the information resources available at a distance;
- analysis of institutional processes to evaluate the appropriateness, efficiency, and effectiveness of its distance learning operations; or
- review of articulated expectations for and the effectiveness of interaction between faculty and students and among students.
Various documents supplement the 2006 edition of *Characteristics of Excellence*, describing the Middle States Commission on Higher Education and its accreditation processes and practices. Many of these materials are available on the Commission’s website ([www.msche.org](http://www.msche.org)) and may be downloaded in PDF or as MSWord documents. Others may be purchased with the publications order form on the website.

There are several types of Commission publications:

**Manuals on Accreditation Protocols**
- For institutions seeking candidacy for accreditation
- For institutions planning for and engaged in self-study processes
- For evaluators and chairs of visiting teams
- For institutions preparing and reviewers evaluating periodic review reports
- For institutions requesting collaborative evaluations by the Commission and specialized accrediting agencies

**Guidelines for Institutional Improvement**
- The assessment of overall institutional effectiveness and the assessment of student learning in particular, with a free summary available online
- The integration of *information literacy* across the curriculum to develop research and communication skills
- Best practices for distance or distributed learning
- Best practices for outcomes assessment

**Commission Policies and Procedures**
- Current policy, procedural, and advisory statements.

**Other Materials**
- An on-line searchable directory of member and candidate institutions
- The Commission’s newsletter, archived and searchable on the website
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