



ACCELERATED PROCESS FOR INITIAL ACCREDITATION

Policy Change Adopted on Second Reading

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Board of Trustees (“the Board”) adopted this policy on second reading at its meeting on June 24, 2021.

Background

Federal regulations that went into effect on July 1, 2020, indicated that the U.S. Department of Education would no longer limit historically regional accreditors’ geographic area of accrediting activities to a federally designated region. This change allows historically regional accreditors, including HLC, to independently choose to expand their individual jurisdictions to operate on a larger geographic scale.

This new policy is a companion to a related [policy change](#), which the Board also adopted on second reading at its June meeting, to expand HLC’s jurisdiction for accreditation so that HLC may now accredit institutions of higher education that are incorporated in, or operating under federal authority in, the United States, and that have a substantial presence, as defined in HLC policy, in the United States.

This new policy establishes an accelerated process for initial accreditation for certain institutions. Specifically, the accelerated process would allow institutions to be initially accredited by HLC that have a proven history of quality assurance from a historically regional accreditor and that meet certain other requirements after undergoing a rigorous evaluation process, but without serving a period of candidacy.

Following the Board’s approval of this policy on first reading at its February 2021 meeting, HLC circulated the proposed policy to the membership and other interested parties after the Board’s February 2021 meeting. One comment in support of the proposed policy was received. HLC staff also identified a need for revisions to clarify the qualifications for when an institution may be eligible to pursue the accelerated process for initial accreditation, and regarding the use of Eligibility Reviewers in the process. These revisions, which were adopted by the Board, are noted in the policy text below.

Conforming changes have also been made throughout HLC policies. This includes, for example, revisions to the Eligibility Requirements policy (CRRT.A.10.010), the Eligibility policy (INST.B.20.010), the Candidacy and Initial Accreditation policy (INST.B.20.020), and other policies as needed, to account for the option of achieving initial accreditation through an accelerated process.

Implementation

This policy is effective immediately.

Adopted New Policy

Changes between first and second reading, other than minor editing, are indicated in bold italics (*new wording*). The new policy has been published on HLC's website at hlcommission.org/policies.

Policy Title: Accelerated Process for Initial Accreditation

Number: INST.B.20.032

In some instances, institutions that meet the qualifications listed below may be eligible to apply for initial accreditation through an accelerated process.

The accelerated process is distinct from HLC's other processes for seeking accreditation. An institution participating in an accelerated process does not participate in the Eligibility Process. The institution does not hold candidacy status, and thus does not hold any status with HLC, prior to being granted initial accreditation.

Qualifications to Apply for Initial Accreditation Through the Accelerated Process

An institution must meet the following qualifications in order to apply for initial accreditation through the accelerated process:

1. The institution, *in its current form*, is currently *institutionally* accredited by an accrediting agency that is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and that is historically known as a regional accreditor;
2. The institution, *in its current form*, has (a) been accredited by its current *institutional* accrediting agency for at least the past ten (10) years or (b) has undergone a reaffirmation of accreditation review with its current *institutional* accrediting agency in the past two (2) years that did not result in a sanction or other similar negative action; and

3. The institution, *in its current form*, has not been placed on a sanction, show-cause order, or other similar negative action with its current *institutional* accrediting agency for at least the past ten (10) years.

Application for Initial Accreditation Through the Accelerated Process

An institution that meets the qualifications above may apply for initial accreditation through the accelerated process. As part of the application process, an institution will be required to demonstrate through a peer review process that it meets the qualifications for participating in the accelerated process, and that it otherwise preliminarily meets HLC's requirements, including the Eligibility Requirements. *Peer reviewers participating in the initial phases of the accelerated process may be Eligibility Reviewers chosen by the Board of Trustees, or other peer reviewers.*

As part of the application process, HLC may also require that the institution participate in educational activities designed to familiarize the institution with HLC requirements, policies and procedures.

Comprehensive Evaluation for Initial Accreditation Through the Accelerated Process

If peer reviewers determine that the institution is eligible to proceed with the accelerated process, the institution will participate in a comprehensive evaluation for initial accreditation. This process will include the institution completing an Assurance Argument and undergoing an on-site visit by peer reviewers. The institution will be required to demonstrate, as detailed below, that it meets HLC's Eligibility Requirements, Assumed Practices, Criteria for Accreditation, and Federal Compliance requirements.

Decision Making for Initial Accreditation Through the Accelerated Process

Consistent with HLC policies, only the Board of Trustees may grant initial accreditation, including following an accelerated process. An institution participating in the accelerated process will also participate in an Institutional Actions Council (IAC) hearing prior to Board action. Prior to being granted initial accreditation following the accelerated process, the institution does not hold any status with HLC.

Evaluative Framework for Initial Accreditation Through the Accelerated Process

The requirements for granting initial accreditation following the accelerated process are as follows:

1. The institution meets each of the Eligibility Requirements.
2. The institution meets each of the Assumed Practices.
3. The institution meets or meets with concerns the Criteria for Accreditation.
4. The institution meets the Federal Compliance Requirements.

If the Board of Trustees grants initial accreditation following the accelerated process, the Board may, in its discretion, grant such initial accreditation subject to interim monitoring, restrictions on institutional growth or substantive change, or other contingencies.

If the Board of Trustees denies initial accreditation following the accelerated process, the institution may choose to re-apply to participate in the accelerated process. Prior to re-applying, the institution must take steps to remedy the underlying circumstances that led to the denial of initial accreditation. Alternatively, an institution may also choose to proceed with applying for status with HLC through the Eligibility Process. If the Board of Trustees does not grant initial accreditation following the accelerated process, the Board of Trustees will inform the institution as to the earliest date it will consider any new application for initial accreditation through the accelerated process, subject to timeframes in HLC policies.

Denial of initial accreditation following an accelerated initial accreditation policy is an adverse action that is subject to appeal.

Policy Number Key

Section INST: Institutional Processes

Chapter B: Requirements for Achieving and Maintaining Membership

Part 20: Becoming and Defining a Member Institution

Last Revised:

First Adopted: June 2021

Revision History:

Notes:

Related Policies: