



## **SELF-STUDY, PLANNING, AND EVALUATION PROCESSES**

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### **5.3. SELF-STUDY, PLANNING, AND EVALUATION PROCESSES**

The Commission on Secondary Schools determines the accreditation status of an institution through information gathered during the candidacy phase, from the self-study and planning process conducted by the institution, and from information gathered and observations made during an onsite visit conducted by an external team of evaluators appointed by the Commission. Some of the requirements of the self-study, planning, and evaluation processes will be dictated by the protocol used.

#### **5.3.1. Self-Study and Planning Processes**

5.3.1.1. Use of Approved Self-Study and Planning Protocols: Institutions conducting self-study and planning as part of the accreditation process use a protocol approved for use by the Commission. If an institution desires to use a protocol not on the approved list, the institution is advised to discuss the matter with the Executive Director of the Commission well in advance of the implementation of the self-study and planning process.

5.3.1.2. Changes to Approved Self-Study and Planning Protocols: The institution shall not make changes to the approved protocols without prior permission from Commission staff.

5.3.1.3. Adequacy of the Institution's Self-Study and Planning Document: The institution's self-study and planning document is a fundamental aspect of the Commission on Secondary Schools' accreditation process. It provides the basis on which the evaluation team conducts its evaluation of the institution and prepares its report. Therefore, if the Chair of the Evaluation Team and the Executive Director of the Commission concur that the institution's self-study and planning document is incomplete, inadequate, or not received in time for the evaluation team to prepare for the visit, the visit may be cancelled or postponed until such time as the institution is deemed ready to proceed. Any additional costs incurred by such cancellation or rescheduling shall be assumed by the institution.

5.3.1.4. Distribution of the Institution's Self-Study and Planning Document: The institution shall distribute, well in advance of the team visit, complete copies of self-study and planning documents to the Commission on Secondary Schools, to the team leadership, and to all members of the evaluation team. Additional copies may be distributed to school community members as the institution determines.

5.3.1.5. Retention of the Institution's Self-Study and Planning Document: The institution may request that team members, with the exception of the team chair, return their copies of the self-study and planning document.

### 5.3.2. Evaluation Teams

5.3.2.1. Authority of Chair and Evaluation Team Members: Members of the evaluation team serve as agents of the Commission on Secondary Schools during their service in the institution to be evaluated.

5.3.2.2. Composition of Evaluation Teams: The CSS accreditation process is a peer-administered review. Therefore, team members shall, in most cases, be practicing and/or recently retired experienced educators. In developing evaluation teams, consideration will be given to the institution's unique characteristics and local needs. All evaluation teams to postsecondary institutions shall include a mix of academic (with subject matter experts in the occupational fields within the school) and administrative personnel on the team.

5.3.2.3. Role of the Evaluation Team: The evaluation team assesses the quality of teaching and learning along with the institution's continuous improvement processes in terms of the institution's stated mission and the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. The evaluation team shall review the degree to which the institution meets each standard.

5.3.2.4. Disqualification of Team Members: A proposed team member, including the proposed chair, may be disqualified, for cause, by the institution being evaluated.

5.3.2.5. Observers on Evaluation Teams: Under special circumstances, the Commission may allow observers on evaluation teams. An observer is defined as an individual who is not chosen by the Commission staff to serve on an evaluation team, but who participates in all activities of the team except for deliberations of the evaluation team and the decisions of the team.

An individual may request to be an observer by writing the Commission. An observer is assigned to an evaluation team only after receiving Executive Director approval and approval of the institution to be evaluated.

An example of an observer might be staff of the U.S. Department of Education.

### 5.3.3. Evaluation Reports

All institutions shall have regular, onsite evaluation team visits that are followed by a written evaluation team report. In the case of distance education institutions, the onsite visit shall take place at the office or headquarters of the institution.

5.3.3.1. Responsibility of the Team Chair: The chair of the evaluation team is responsible for the preparation of the report in its final form and its submission to the Commission on Secondary Schools.

5.3.3.2. Corrections of Errors of Fact: During the draft stage of the evaluation report and prior to submission of the final report, the head of the institution shall be asked to review the report to suggest corrections of errors of fact.

5.3.3.3. Responsibility of the Head of the Institution: The head of the institution is responsible for distribution of the final report in compliance with Policy 1.2.4.-- Expectations for Accredited Institutions.

5.3.3.4. Contents of the Evaluation Report: The written evaluation report shall include the institution's compliance with accreditation standards, areas of strength and areas

needing improvement, an analysis of actual student performance results, and plans for institutional improvement.

5.3.3.5. Limits of the Evaluation Report: Neither the total evaluation report nor any of its subsections is to be considered an evaluation of any individual staff member, but rather a professional appraisal of the institution's adherence to Standards for Accreditation, commitment to continuous improvement, and the quality of teaching and learning processes.

5.3.3.6. Institutional Response to the Evaluation Report: Upon receipt of the evaluation report, institutions shall have the right to develop, within 30 days, an institutional response to the evaluation team's recommendations. The institution's response shall be clearly identified as a separate document and the author(s) of the response shall be identified. The institutional response shall accompany the evaluation team report throughout the review process and shall become a part of the institution's accreditation file.

#### 5.3.4. Open Access

All aspects of the institution, except student and personnel records protected by applicable privacy laws, shall be open to review during the self-study and planning process and by the evaluation team.

#### 5.3.5. Stakeholder Comment

When an institution is scheduled to be evaluated for initial accreditation (candidates for accreditation) or reaccreditation, notice will be made by MSCSS and the institution that stakeholders may submit comments regarding the institution's ability to meet the Middle States Standards for Accreditation and that these comments will be considered in the course of the evaluation.

The purpose of this policy is to provide stakeholders who are not part of the institution's self-study process the opportunity to provide input regarding whether the institution meets the Middle States Standards for Accreditation.

5.3.5.1. Notification by the Commission: When the dates for an institution's accreditation evaluation are established, notice of the scheduled evaluation will be posted on the Commission's website. The notice will inform the institution's stakeholders that they may submit comments to the Commission regarding the institution's meeting the Middle States Standards for Accreditation and include the following information:

- Comments must be directly related to the institution's ability to meet the Standards for Accreditation.
- The web address at which the Standards for Accreditation can be viewed (<http://www.css-msa.org/resources/publications.html#standards>)
- The requirement that comments must be in writing and include the stakeholder's name and affiliation with the institution
- The requirement that comments must be received not later than 30 days prior to the first day of the evaluation visit.
- The Commission's address (mailing and e-mail) to which comments and information can be sent

5.3.5.2. Institutions Scheduled for an Accreditation Evaluation: When the dates for an institution's accreditation evaluation are established, the institution will make public notice that an accreditation evaluation has been scheduled and that stakeholders may

submit comments to the Commission regarding the institution's meeting the Middle States Standards for Accreditation and include the following information:

- Comments must be directly related to the institution's ability to meet the Standards for Accreditation.
- The web address at which the Standards for Accreditation can be viewed (<http://www.css-msa.org/resources/publications.html#standards>)
- The requirement that comments must be in writing and include the commenter's name and affiliation with the institution
- Comments by stakeholders shall be submitted in writing (via letter or e-mail) to the Executive Director, Commission on Secondary Schools.
- The requirement that comments must be received not later than 30 days prior to the first day of the evaluation visit.
- The Commission's address (mailing and e-mail) to which comments and information can be sent

Public notice shall be made by at least two means that are accessible to all the institution's stakeholders. Examples include the institution's website and notice in local newspaper.

5.3.5.3. Institutional Response to Third Party Comments: Because comments by stakeholders provide the Commission with information or evidence regarding an institution's ability to meet Standards for Accreditation, the Executive Director shall provide the comments received to the head of the institution prior to the visit of the evaluation team. The institution will be invited to respond to the comments and/or provide evidence to respond to the comments received. The institution may respond in a separate report or as an element of the self-study report submitted to the visiting team and the Commission.

5.3.5.4. Visiting Team Review: All comments received by the Executive Director that meet the requirements of Policy 5.3.5 and any response to the comments by the institution shall be provided to the chair of the visiting team. The chair of the visiting team shall consider as the comments and response by the institution along with other evidence observed when determining whether the institution meets the Standards for Accreditation. However, it shall not be the responsibility of the visiting team to resolve any concerns presented in the comments.

The visiting team shall not recommend or require any action of the institution based on comments by stakeholders unless the comments have been confirmed by other evidence observed by the team.

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