

CHARACTERISTICS *of*  
**EXCELLENCE**  
*in* HIGHER EDUCATION

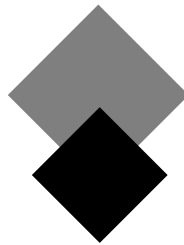
REQUIREMENTS OF AFFILIATION AND STANDARDS FOR ACCREDITATION



Middle States Commission on Higher Education

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Permission is granted to colleges and universities within the jurisdiction of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education to photocopy these standards for the purpose of institutional self-study and peer review. The text of these standards also may be downloaded from the Commission's website. Bound copies may be purchased through the publications order form, also available on the website.

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# Introduction

An institution of higher education is a community dedicated to the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, to the study and clarification of values, and to the advancement of the society it serves. To support these goals, institutions of higher education within the Middle States region joined together in 1919 to form the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, a professional association devoted to educational improvement through accreditation. Today's successor organization for higher education accreditation is the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

Accreditation is the means of self-regulation and peer review adopted by the educational community. The accrediting process is intended to strengthen and sustain the quality and integrity of higher education, making it worthy of public confidence and minimizing the scope of external control. The extent to which each educational institution accepts and fulfills the responsibilities inherent in the process is a measure of its concern for freedom and quality in higher education and its commitment to striving for and achieving excellence in its endeavors.

Middle States' accreditation is an expression of confidence in an institution's mission and goals, its performance, and its resources. Based upon the results of institutional review by peers and colleagues assigned by the Commission, accreditation attests to the judgment of the Commission on Higher Education that an institution has met the following criteria:

- that it has a mission appropriate to higher education;
- that it is guided by well-defined and appropriate goals, including goals for student learning;
- that it has established conditions and procedures under which its mission and goals can be realized;
- that it assesses both institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes, and uses the results for improvement;
- that it is accomplishing its mission and goals substantially;
- that it is organized, staffed, and supported so that it can be expected to continue to accomplish its mission and goals; and
- that it meets the Requirements of Affiliation and accreditation standards of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

Membership in the Middle States Association follows a period of candidacy lasting up to five years. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education reviews institutions periodically through either on-site evaluation or other reports. Accreditation is continued only as a result of periodic reviews and evaluations through assessments of institutional achievements.

*Characteristics of Excellence* is designed as a guide for those institutions considering application for membership, those accepted as candidate institutions, and those accredited institutions engaged in self-review and peer evaluation. In their self-review processes, institutions demonstrate how they meet these accreditation standards within the context of their own institutional mission and goals. No assurance is given or implied that every accredited institution manifests these characteristics and meets these standards in equal proportion. Accredited institutions are expected to demonstrate these standards in substantial measure, to conduct their activities in a manner consistent with the standards, and to engage in ongoing processes of self-review and improvement.

## **Characteristics of Excellence 2002**

Among the principles that guided the development of these standards, three are particularly noteworthy. First, these standards place an emphasis on institutional assessment and assessment of student learning. Second, the standards acknowledge the diversity of educational delivery systems that enable institutions to meet accreditation standards. And third, in order to achieve appropriate specificity, the standards are clearly defined and illustrated, including examples of evidence that could substantiate an institution's achievement of the standards.

The emphasis on institutional and student learning assessment follows naturally from the Commission's long-standing commitment to outcomes assessment, as evidenced historically through its publications, workshops, and training programs. Nonetheless, the Commission is aware of the institutional effort and cultural change that the relative emphasis on assessment may require.

The Commission on Higher Education acknowledges that in order to meet these standards, institutions will be called upon to commit resources to the tasks of research and analysis, particularly as related to the assessment and improvement of teaching and learning.

These standards affirm that the individual mission and goals of each institution remain the context within which these accreditation standards are applied during self-study and evaluation. The standards emphasize functions rather than specific structures, recognizing that there are many different models for educational and operational excellence.

The particular way in which a standard is evidenced may vary, consistent with differences in institutional mission and purpose. In addition, some standards (particularly 12: General Education and 13: Related Educational Activities) may not apply fully or at all to some institutions. The standard on General Education, for example, might not be especially relevant for an institution that only offers graduate degree programs. Similarly, the "Related Educational Activities"

contained in Standard 13 are to be addressed only as they relate to individual institutions.

Although *Characteristics of Excellence* incorporates 14 individual standards, these standards should be viewed as an interrelated whole. The order is not intended to suggest relative importance or priority. The first seven standards address Institutional Context, and the second seven focus on Educational Effectiveness. Consistent with the intended emphasis on assessment, each of these two sections concludes with a related assessment standard (Standard 7: Institutional Assessment and Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning). The effectiveness of an institution rests upon the contribution that each of the institution's programs and services makes toward achieving the goals of the institution as a whole. Standards 7 and 14 build upon the preceding standards, each of which includes periodic assessment of effectiveness or student learning as one of its fundamental elements.

## **Format and Application**

To achieve clarity of presentation, the following format has been used for the 14 standards for accreditation:

### **Standard**

The individual standard is expressed in one or two sentences. The standard is followed by narrative text, under the heading "Context," that addresses the topic of the standard, its context and values; provides guidance and definition; and builds a bridge to the Fundamental Elements. The narrative is not considered to be part of the actual standard.

### **Fundamental Elements**

The Fundamental Elements are an explication of the standard, and, as such, they specify the particular characteristics or qualities that together constitute, comprise, and encompass the standard. Institutions and evaluators will use these elements, within the context of institutional mission, to demonstrate or determine compliance with the standard. Institutions will utilize the Fundamental Elements, along with the Standards, as a guide to their self-study processes.

The Fundamental Elements specified for each standard have an inherent relationship to each other, and collectively these elements constitute compliance. In light of this, neither the institution nor evaluators should use the Fundamental Elements as a simple checklist. Both the institution and evaluators must consider the totality that is created by these elements and any other relevant institutional information or analysis. Where an institution does not 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**

Much of the evidence or analysis an institution will present to demonstrate that it meets the accreditation standards is clear and inherent within the Fundamental Elements themselves. Optional Analysis and Evidence, the final section of each standard, provides additional examples of documentation and analyses that might be carried out by an institution, relative to the particular accreditation standard.

Each institution will determine whether its self-study processes and report may be strengthened by incorporating some of these analyses and resources. The list is not comprehensive but is provided for use, as deemed appropriate, by the institution. It is not intended for independent utilization by the evaluation team, and institutions are not required to provide the information listed. Institutions should make reasonable choices regarding representative, useful sampling of evidence in any suggested category.

Relevant to each standard and its fundamental elements, institutions are encouraged to incorporate other types of assessment and analysis particular to their mission, goals, programs, and structures, including assessment documents prepared for other accrediting or regulatory agencies.



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# Interpreting and Applying the Standards

Judgment is important in applying *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education*. Although the 2002 revision was formatted so that each Standard is followed by separate sections for “Context,” “Fundamental Elements,” and “Optional Analysis and Evidence,” institutions and teams should remember to consider the spirit of the institution and the spirit of the accreditation standards as a whole, rather than applying these specific statements and “fundamental elements” piecemeal.

Institutions that elect the “selected topics” type of self-study demonstrate compliance with those standards or parts of standards not included in the Selected Topics self-study report through a separate review of documents prior to the team visit. Careful coordination is necessary to ensure that compliance is demonstrated either in the self study and visit, or in the documents reviewed in advance. (Please see *Self-Study: Creating a Useful Process and Report* for an explanation of the self-study models.)

If an institution has elected to organize its self-study process and report according to topics that it finds are most useful, rather than tracking the order of the accreditation standards, the team may choose to follow that organization in offering suggestions for improvement in the team report and may determine compliance with accreditation standards by using information diffused throughout the self-study document.

Whatever the type and organization of the self-study, compliance with each standard and with the standards as a whole will require interpretation by evaluators. For example:

- 1. Mission:** Each standard should be interpreted and applied in the context of the institution’s mission and situation.
- 2. Integrated Whole vs. Checklist:** Evaluators must consider the totality 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.
- 3. “Context” Sections:** Not all parts of every statement in the Context sections will apply to every institution.
- 4. All Evidence:** Information gathered during team visits may be used to supplement or contradict information included in the self-study.
- 5. Common Sense:** Are the team’s conclusions consistent with each other, with the self-study, and with information gathered during the visit? Does its report reflect understanding of this particular institution and its goals?

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# 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, 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.