DESIGNS *for* EXCELLENCE

HANDBOOK *for* INSTITUTIONAL SELF-STUDY

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 this handbook for the purpose of institutional self-study and peer review. The text of this publication 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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Acknowledgments

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Additions to this Edition

The eighth edition of *Designs for Excellence: Handbook for Institutional Self-Study* modifies, clarifies, and expands upon the earlier versions of the handbook. It incorporates the 2002 revisions in *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation*, revisions in accreditation processes, and government regulations that affect accreditation. In addition, it includes two new chapters: Chapter 6, which addresses implementation of the design and development of the self-study report, and Chapter 7, which places the self-study within the context of the full accreditation cycle.

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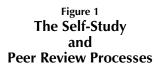
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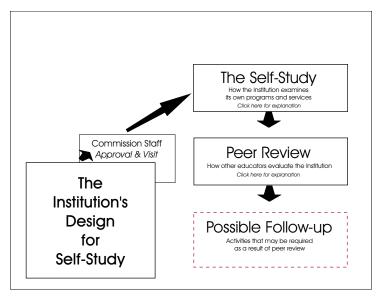
A ssuring quality and integrity in education has long been both a public and an institutional goal. Regional accreditation, a means of self-regulation adopted by the higher education community, has evolved to support this goal. In 1919, institutions of higher education in the Middle States region joined to form an association of colleges and secondary schools. Subsequently, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education was established to oversee educational quality and improvement through the accrediting process based on peer review. Its current mission statement appears in Appendix A. Accreditation, therefore, is intended to strengthen and sustain higher education, making it worthy of public confidence and minimizing the scope of external control.

Colleges and universities become members of the Middle States Association upon accreditation by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. Membership in the Association includes a commitment to continuous self-assessment. The extent to which each educational institution accepts and fulfills this responsibility 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.

The Commission requires every candidate seeking initial accreditation and every member institution preparing for reaccreditation to undertake an intensive self-study, followed by peer review (Figure 1). This process occurs approximately five years after an institution is initially accredited and every ten years thereafter.

The purpose of this handbook is to provide a description and explanation of the self-study process within the context of the overall cycle of institutional accreditation. *Designs* is intended primarily as a reference guide for the members and chairs of self-study steering committees at Middle States colleges and universities.

Figure 1
The Self-Study
and
Peer Review Processes

The Self-Study
How the Institution examines
its own programs and services
Click here for explanation

Commission Staff
Approval & Visit

The
Institution's
Design
for
Self-Study

Peer Review
How other educators evaluate the Institution
Click here for explanation

Possible Follow-up
Activities that may be required
as a result of peer review

The Self-Study Process and Result

During self-study, the institution carefully considers its educational programs and services, with particular attention to student learning and achievement, and it determines how well these programs and services accomplish the institution's goals, fulfill its mission, and meet the Commission's standards. Under the leadership of a steering committee appointed by the institution, working groups examine existing data and evaluative reports, frequently gather new information, and prepare draft evaluative reports on their assigned topics (Figure 2). The steering committee edits the reports of the various working groups, produces a draft for discussion, and disseminates the final self-study report.

A cross-section of the campus community is expected to participate in the self-study process at each stage: in the steering committee, the working groups, and the campus-wide discussions.

Figure 2
The Self-Study Process

Steering Committee Organizes the Process

Charges to
Groups
Reports from
Groups

Working Groups at the Institution
Study the Programs and Services
Included in the Self-Study Design,
Existing Data, and Evaluative Reports
Gr. #1 | Gr. #2 | Gr. #3 | Gr. Etc.

Steering Committee
Develops
Draft Report
from
Working Groups'
Reports

Campus-wide
Discussion
by
Various
Constituencies

Steering
Committee
Prepares
Final Report

Institution
Disseminates
Final
Report

The self-study that each college or university conducts is the most important and valuable aspect of the accrediting process, and the benefits it brings to an institution are proportional to the incisiveness of its inquiry. The self-study process enables the campus community to examine the institution's strengths and challenges relative to accreditation standards. The process also enables each institution to develop solutions to problems, and to identify opportunities for growth and development. The aim is to understand, evaluate and improve, not simply to describe or defend.

The primary benefit of self-study should be continuous growth and development of the institution. Therefore, self-study will be most helpful if the institution adapts and implements it as a continuous process that supports the institution's regular planning cycle. Because self-study is a major element in the life of an institution, it should be a useful activity, planned and executed carefully, and not simply a formal exercise.

The self-study also serves the institution's responsibility of accountability to various constituencies. Both the self-study and the evaluation team report are shared by the institution with its community. The accreditation decision by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education that follows the self-study and team visit is available to the public as part of the "Statement of Accreditation Status" issued by the Commission for each of its members.

Important stages in the self-study process include:

❑ Selecting the type of self-study model that will be most useful to the institution in supporting and promoting its particular goals and priorities

❑ Organizing committees and campus-wide participation for effective involvement of the entire institutional community

❑ Using the process for self-analysis and planning

❑ Writing a report summarizing the institution's conclusions and recommendations

❑ Hosting an evaluation team of peers who review the institution's self-study in the context of the institution's mission

❑ Responding to the report of the evaluation team

❑ Receiving the Commission's decision regarding initial or continued accreditation status

Role of *Characteristics of Excellence*

The most essential point of reference for self-study and peer review is *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education*, the Commission's eligibility requirements and standards for accreditation. The standards reflect indicators of quality that are appropriate for institutions of higher education and are the basis for judging institutional effectiveness. They identify an institution's mission, goals, and objectives as guideposts for all aspects of the accreditation protocol. The institution's mission provides a lens through which the institution and the Commission's evaluation team view the standards and apply them to that institution.

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 an institutional review by peers and colleagues assigned by the Commission, accreditation attests the judgment of the Commission on Higher Education that an institution:

❑ has a mission appropriate to higher education;

❑ is guided by well-defined and appropriate goals, including goals for student learning;

❑ has established conditions and procedures under which its goals can be realized;

❑ is accomplishing its goals substantially;

❑ is so organized, staffed, and supported that it can be expected to continue to accomplish its goals; and

❑ meets the eligibility requirements and standards of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

Role of the Self-Study Institute and Commission Staff

The Commission provides each institution preparing to engage in self-study with the opportunity to send representatives to a Self-Study Institute. Commission staff assigned to work with the institution are also available at any time to answer questions and provide additional assistance.

The Self-Study Institute is an orientation and training workshop conducted annually. The agenda includes speakers familiar with issues and options relevant to the development of self-studies. Sessions focusing on practical approaches feature representatives from institutions that have recently completed model self-study processes. Institutions usually are invited to participate in the Self-Study Institute approximately two and one half years before the expected date for an evaluation team visit. This lengthy lead-time is intended to provide each institution with adequate time to organize, prepare, and review a self-study using an open and participative process.

Each candidate or member institution has an assigned institutional Middle States staff liaison. This person should be viewed as a resource and will be involved in some formal aspects of the self-study process. For example, the staff liaison will be available during the Self-Study Institute. The staff liaison will arrange an on-campus self-study preparation visit at each institution and will also be responsible for the Commission's formal acceptance and approval of the self-study design. The liaison is also available to the institution informally for information, advice, and support at any time.

The Self-Study Design

With the advice of Commission staff, the institution submits a document known as a "design for self-study" in which a steering committee, appointed by the institution, outlines how the self-study will be accomplished. The design includes the rationale, scope, expected outcomes, charge questions, participants, and timetable for the self-study process.

The most fundamental decisions that will be made about the self-study will be reflected in the design document. For example, the design will record decisions about the type of self-study the institution has decided to undertake (e.g., a comprehensive, comprehensive with emphasis, selected topics, or collaborative review).

Contents of the Handbook

As has been noted previously, *Designs* is intended as a reference guide. Chapters in the handbook address topics of concern in organizing and implementing the self-study process. Chapter 2 describes the various models and approaches to self-study. This chapter is especially important because selection of a self-study type or model is one of the most important decisions that will be made.

Chapter 3 and 4 focus on how to organize the work of self-study. Chapter 3 centers on early planning for the self-study process, and Chapter 4 focuses on how to connect the self-study to accreditation standards. This connection is critically important because it represents a means of ensuring that the self-study will contain information required in order for evaluation teams to be able to formulate an appropriate recommendation concerning accreditation or reaccreditation.

Chapter 5 describes the contents of the self-study design. The design represents a blueprint for the self-study process and the self-study document. It also represents an agreement with the Commission about the form and content of self-study, so it must be submitted and approved by Commission staff.

Chapter 6 centers on implementation of the design and on the production of a self-study report. Practical advice, gathered from those who have successfully completed the process, is intended to simplify the work and assist steering committees in avoiding potential pitfalls.

Finally, Chapter 7 provides an overview of the full cycle of institutional accreditation. It should be particularly helpful to those who have not previously engaged in accreditation activities. This chapter provides a broad context for the self-study: what does it lead to immediately, and what will happen during the subsequent 10-year period.

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Models and Approaches to Self-Study

T he self-study process should **not** require an institution to set aside its needs and priorities in order to undergo peer review for accreditation. **Indeed, each institution is encouraged to select the approach that best suits those needs and priorities.** The specific model chosen is less important than the long-term usefulness of the self-study.

One of the goals of selecting a particular model and approach should be to foster further institutional self-study and planning. Institutional growth and improvement on a continuous basis after the self-study and evaluation team visit are as important as the short-range improvements and accountability typically expected from the process. To ensure the long-term usefulness of the self-study, the narrative in each self-study report should include, in addition to description and analysis, links to the institution's existing plans for the future and its ongoing planning processes.

Overview of Self-Study Models

There are three major models for self-study. They are the comprehensive model (including a variation involving special emphases), the selected topics model, and the collaborative model. Within these broad models, there are many possible approaches to self-study and evaluation. This flexibility recognizes the differences in mission, purpose, internal conditions, needs, and external influences at each educational institution.

The designs for self-study may be conceptualized as points on a continuum in which any particular approach falls somewhere between a fully comprehensive self-study and one which is narrowly focused. A number of institutions elect the comprehensive model for self-study, and many institutions benefit from the self-reflection and analysis that are required by this model. However, if an institution recently conducted a thorough self-evaluation, perhaps as a part of an institution-wide planning process, the institution might want to consider the selected topics approach. Institutions which have separately accredited programs may benefit from the collaborative self-study model, which offers the option of combining the review processes of Middle States with those of the institution's specialized accreditor(s).

Institutions wishing to focus their self-studies on particular institutional topics or issues will want to consider whether the institution and the Commission will be served better by a comprehensive with emphases or a selected topics approach. While both models are discussed in detail within this chapter, it may be helpful to highlight briefly key differences between the two.

The comprehensive with emphasis model allows the institution to give increased attention to topics or issues it has identified, while still engaging the institution's community in a comprehensive self-review. The selected topics model allows a more exclusive focus on the topics or issues identified by the institution.

In the selected topics approach, there is no opportunity within the process for the institution's community to engage in substantive discussion and evaluation of issues or concerns that fall outside the selected topics. Similarly, the institution's self-study report (unlike that for a comprehensive with emphasis self-study) will not address in any substantive way those accreditation standards or institutional concerns not included within the selected topics.

Furthermore, institutions contemplating a selected topics self-study will need to consider the availability of existing documentation (evaluative reports and other information and data) that would demonstrate substantive compliance with those accreditation standards not addressed through the topics selected by the institution. If an institution determines that the available documentation is not adequate, then the institution should consider how a comprehensive with emphasis approach might allow the institution to focus productively on identified issues or topics.

The approach to self-study that an institution selects should be sufficiently broad to meet the institution's needs, as well as sufficiently thorough to provide the basic information that will enable the Commission to determine whether the institution is fulfilling its stated mission and goals. The Commission also expects that all of the eligibility requirements and accreditation standards identified and discussed in *Characteristics* will be addressed either in the institution's self-study or in other materials prepared by the institution.

Sometimes, an official action taken by the Commission relating to a specific institution recommends that an institution give further emphasis to a particular area in its next self-study. The Commission's staff liaison will assist the institution in determining how best to address the required issues.

Analysis and Planning vs. Description

The self-study narrative should summarize the institution's current situation and offer factual data as appropriate. The majority of the self-study report should be concerned with introspection, analysis, and the presentation of findings, rather than with description. The self-study models described below offer different methods of establishing compliance with Middle States standards.

Avoiding Duplication

In order to avoid duplication, the institution may use recent research, reports, and evaluations prepared for internal use, for governmental agencies, or for other purposes. One way to avoid unnecessary duplication is to maintain an annotated inventory of all data, evaluations, and other reports. If such an inventory does not exist at the beginning of the self-study process, it is wise to create one and distribute it early. The inventory can be subsequently updated, publicized regularly throughout the institution, and made available on-line or in a centrally located hard copy.

At the end of the self-study process, the steering committee should reach a consensus on the recommendations which result from the self-study analysis. These recommendations

should be synthesized where appropriate to avoid repetition and confusion. For example, if most of the academic work groups recommend increasing efforts to review general education requirements, that recommendation can be presented as an "institutional" recommendation.

The Comprehensive Models

The Basic Comprehensive Model

A comprehensive self-study enables a college or university to appraise every aspect of its programs and services, governing and supporting structures, resources, and educational outcomes in relation to the institution's mission and goals. This comprehensive review is framed by the accreditation standards detailed in *Characteristics.*

A typical comprehensive self-study begins with a careful reassessment of the institution's mission, goals, and objectives. This review lays the groundwork for gathering data and conducting analyses, as well as setting priorities and making recommendations for change and improvement.

The basic comprehensive model will include an in-depth inquiry in each area. As a natural course of the self-study process, the steering committee may find that it emphasizes some areas more than others in the final self-study document.

The Comprehensive with Emphasis Model

A "comprehensive with emphasis" self-study is a variant of the basic comprehensive model. It is particularly useful for an institution wishing to give special attention at the outset to selected issues that affect it. This model involves an overall assessment of the institution within the context of Middle States accreditation standards and an in-depth examination of issues or areas which the institution judges to be of primary concern or significance.

The areas of emphasis may focus on one or more of the standards included in *Characteristic*s (see Figure 4), or on an issue which is common to several of those standards and of special interest to the entire campus (see Figure 5), such as technology, off-campus locations, certificate programs, or consortial arrangements with other institutions. Institutions usually select from one to three areas of emphasis within a single self-study.

An institution chooses areas of emphasis in consultation with the Commission staff liaison assigned to that institution. The balance between the areas of emphasis and the comprehensive component of the self-study will vary from institution to institution.

In selecting the focus, it is important to remember that areas which allow the working groups and the visiting team to understand and analyze a cross-section of the institution often are more valuable than those which are limited to a particular unit or program. For example, it is more valuable to examine the impact of technology on the entire teaching and learning process than to review only the instructional technology department or program.

The steering committee should decide whether each area of emphasis will be addressed in a separate chapter or whether the issues will permeate the entire self-study report. Nevertheless, it is the nature of a comprehensive self-study with special emphasis that recommendations by the institution in the report give special attention to the chosen areas of emphasis. The visiting team will also address its greatest efforts to the areas of emphasis.

Figure 3 **The Comprehensive Report** **[in the context of the standards in *Characteristics of Excellence*]**	Figure 4 **The Comprehensive Report** **[with emphasis on one or more standards]**	Figure 5 **The Comprehensive Report** **[with emphasis on one or more issues]**
		In this example, the issue chosen for emphasis is OFF-CAMPUS LOCATIONS.
Institutional Context	**Institutional Context**	**Institutional Context**
Mission, Goals, and Objectives	Mission, Goals, and Objectives	Mission, Goals, and Objectives
Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal	**PLANNING, RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND INSTITUTIONAL RENEWAL**	Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal
Institutional Resources	Institutional Resources	Institutional Resources
Leadership and Governance	Leadership and Governance	– **OFF-CAMPUS LOCATIONS**
Administration	Administration	Leadership and Governance
Integrity	Integrity	Administration
Institutional Assessment	Institutional Assessment	Integrity
		Institutional Assessment
Educational Effectiveness	**Educational Effectiveness**	**Educational Effectiveness**
Student Admissions	Student Admissions	Student Admissions
Student Support Services	Student Support Services	Student Support Services
Faculty	Faculty	– **OFF-CAMPUS LOCATIONS**
Educational Offerings	Educational Offerings	Faculty
General Education	**GENERAL EDUCATION**	Educational Offerings
Related Educational Activities	Related Educational Activities	– **OFF-CAMPUS LOCATIONS**
Assessment of Student Learning	**ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING**	General Education
		Related Educational Activities
Note: Institutions may combine, group, or organize standards in other ways that reflect their culture, structure, or processes.		– **OFF-CAMPUS LOCATIONS**
		Assessment of Student Learning

The Selected Topics Model

A selected topics model allows an already accredited institution to devote concentrated attention to selected issues, without having to provide comprehensive analysis of institutional programs and services and without having to address all accreditation standards within the self-study report. The defining characteristic of this self-study model is that the review of compliance with those accreditation standards **not** addressed within the selected topics occurs in a manner that distinguishes and separates it from the evaluation team visit focused on the selected topics. This part of the review is based on existing documentation and does not require additional analysis or explanation.

The institution begins by identifying those Commission standards it intends to address in the selected topics self-study, ensuring that coverage of those standards is sufficiently broad to provide an adequate "window" on the institution. Topics may be aligned with individual accreditation standards or may reflect issues common to several standards. For example, a complex research university might choose to limit its self-study to undergraduate programs. Some other possibilities include the first-year experience, graduate education, and the assessment of student learning.

In this model, at least 24 months before the anticipated team visit the institution submits to the Commission staff liaison a preliminary proposal (separate from the full self-study design) identifying: the proposed selected topic(s); why the topic(s) are important to the institution; which accreditation standards would be substantively addressed by the proposed self-study; and a description of what type of evidence and documentation the institution has available to substantiate compliance with those standards **not** addressed by the proposed self-study. Depending on the selected topic(s), it may be that some standards will be addressed partially by the self-study and partially through documentation separate from the self-study.

The Commission staff evaluates the proposal, particularly to identify institutions that have insufficient documentation to substantiate compliance with accreditation standards not addressed by the proposed self-study, as well as those institutions that would derive greater benefit from a comprehensive or comprehensive with emphasis self-study. If the Commission staff judge the proposal to be acceptable, the institution submits a full self-study design for the proposed process. If staff judge the proposal not to be acceptable, staff work with the institution to revise the selected topics proposal so that it is acceptable or to develop a self-study design based on the comprehensive with emphasis or other model.

The institution, in consultation with Commission staff and the team chair, selects one of two options for the review of documentation relative to standards not encompassed by the selected topics self-study. For both options (detailed below), the institution assembles, or otherwise makes accessible on site, the existing documentation relative to those accreditation standards that the selected topics self-study does not address. In addition, the institution provides to the Commission and to those conducting the review a brief roadmap that identifies which documents relate to a particular accreditation standard.

Selected Topics Option 1: Review during the Chair's Preliminary Visit

(usually 4-6 months prior to the full team visit)

The preliminary visit of the team chair includes meetings with institutional representatives to discuss the draft self-study and plans for the team visit. In addition, the team chair and one (or in complex instances, two) designated generalist evaluator(s), using the roadmap provided by the institution, review the assembled documentation to verify institutional compliance with those standards that are not substantively reflected in

the self-study. This option may necessitate extending the length of the chair's preliminary visit.

The team chair and the designated generalist evaluator prepare a brief written report, affirming and certifying that the institution meets accreditation standards not being addressed within the selected topics model or noting any areas where compliance is in question. This summary report identifies any standards for which the institution will need to provide further or updated information at the time of the team visit. (Note: A possible advantage of Option 1 versus Option 2 is that the institution has more time to assemble any further information that is needed.) Otherwise, the report simply affirms that the documentation demonstrates that the institution meets the specified accreditation standards. This summary report, which notes any standards for which compliance is in question but does not include recommendations for improvement, is shared with the institution and with the members of the evaluation team.

The team chair (and the designated generalist evaluator, if the chair and Commission staff determine it to be appropriate) participates in the full evaluation team visit. Where deemed necessary, the chair or generalist evaluator verifies that the institution continues to meet standards covered in the summary report and reviews any further or updated information the institution has been requested to provide in response to the preliminary summary report.

The size and profile of the evaluation team is tailored to the selected topics; the team visit focuses exclusively on the selected topics of the institution's self-study and the related accreditation standards. The findings and conclusions of the early certification report (prepared by the team chair and generalist evaluator) are provided to the team, incorporated into the final team report, and appended to the final team report.

Selected Topics Option 2: Review Concurrent with the Full Team Visit

The preliminary visit of the team chair is conducted in the usual manner, with a focus on acquiring familiarity with the institution through meetings with institutional representatives and discussions of the draft self-study and plans for the team visit.

Concurrent with the full team visit, the team chair and one (or in complex instances, two) designated generalist evaluator(s), using the roadmap provided by the institution, review the assembled documentation to verify institutional compliance with those standards that are not substantively reflected in the self-study. If needed to verify compliance, additional information may be requested during the visit.

The team chair and the generalist evaluator prepare a brief written report, affirming and certifying that the institution meets accreditation standards not being addressed within the selected topics model or noting any areas where compliance is in question. Otherwise, the report simply affirms that there is sufficient documentation to conclude that the institution meets the specified accreditation standards. This summary report, which does not include recommendations for improvement, is shared with the institution and with members of the evaluation team.

The size and profile of the evaluation team is tailored to the selected topics; the full team visit focuses exclusively on the selected topics of the institution's self-study and the related accreditation standards. The findings and conclusions of the report prepared by the team chair and generalist evaluator are incorporated into the team report, and the summary report is appended to the final team report.

Figure 6
The Selected Topics Report

*[In this example, the selected topic is "Undergraduate Education,"
within a research, graduate-degree offering university.]*

Within the topic of "Undergraduate Education," the institution would address substantively these accreditation standards:

Student Admissions	**General Education**
Student Support Services	**Assessment of Student Learning**
Educational Offerings	

For these remaining standards, the institution would assemble existing documentation to demonstrate compliance and provide a roadmap to facilitate review during the chair's preliminary visit (Option 1) or concurrent with the full team visit (Option 2):

Mission, Goals, and Objectives	**Administration**
Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal	**Integrity**
Institutional Resources	**Institutional Assessment**
Leadership and Governance	**Faculty**
	Related Educational Activities

The Collaborative Model

All institutions of higher education are subject to review and oversight by multiple agencies or organizations. Some institutions find it helpful to coordinate one or more of these reviews with their Middle States self-study in order to minimize duplication of effort and to maximize institutional benefit.

The collaborative review is a cooperative review process in which an accredited institution invites institutional, specialized, or professional accrediting agencies; state or federal agencies; or other organizations to join with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education in a review of the institution. These reviewing organizations may choose whether to participate.

The collaborative process usually involves the completion of a single institutional self-study (or other similar process or document), one on-site review using a single visiting team, and one coordinated report by the visiting team. The institution satisfies each organization's accreditation or other standards and requirements in a manner acceptable to the organization, and the organizations cooperate to avoid duplication.

The results of the collaborative review process inform the participating agencies and the public, to varying degrees depending on the agency, of significant strengths and challenges facing the institution and its programs. While each reviewing organization relies on the same information in reaching its decision, each also uses its own decision-making process and standards and issues its own accreditation or other decision.

An accredited institution may invite collaboration by more than two reviewing organizations, but an institution applying for initial Middle States accreditation generally is not eligible for collaborative review under these guidelines.

Flexibility and thorough advance planning are essential to the success of any collaboration. When a regional and one or more specialized accrediting or other organizations agree to conduct a collaborative evaluation visit, the design for a collaborative self-study addresses the specific concerns of all parties, and a number of issues should be agreed upon in advance by all parties. Some of the issues to be considered include:

❑ the structure of the self-study process and the scope of involvement by institutional stakeholders in that process;

❑ the evaluation responsibilities of both the entire collaborative team and the members representing each accrediting body or organization;

❑ the protocol to be followed in conducting the exit interview; and

❑ the structure, organization, length, and style of the evaluation report that will be prepared by the visiting team.

For further information about this process, consult the Commission's publication *Handbook for Collaborative Reviews* (2002).

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Planning and Organizing for Self-Study

The self-study will be most effective when there is a broad institutional engagement with, and commitment to, institutional self-examination. The self-study process is enhanced by the effective leadership of a committed steering committee, frequent communication within the institution about ongoing self-study activities, and regular contact with Commission staff. This chapter focuses on initial self-study considerations. Subsequent chapters will provide additional detail and will encourage the institution to focus on the Commission's standards.

The prerequisites for the effective design and implementation of an institutional self-study process are institutional desire to plan and improve, an understanding of the overall goals of the Commission in regard to accreditation, a self-study environment which includes appropriate resources, a campus climate of cooperation, and effective institutional functions which promote planning, research, and assessment.

In the self study process:

♦ the Commission expects an institution to provide verifiable evidence showing how it meets accreditation standards within the context of its own mission and goals. This process is intended to support and enhance the quality and integrity of the institution and to serve institutional ends, as well as to offer public assurance that Middle States expectations have been met.

♦ the institution must provide adequate resources including working time and space for those involved in the process, information, and the technology needed to support data gathering and report preparation.

♦ a climate of mutual respect and broad communication is essential. Successful self-study planning requires a widely held understanding of institutional activities and priorities as well as a commitment to the attainment of measurable objectives.

♦ planning, research, and outcomes assessment are fundamental. The Commission's standards emphasize the importance of ongoing planning, the establishment of measurable objectives, and the evaluation of institutional and educational outcomes. The intention is to move accreditation processes away from assertion and description toward demonstration and performance.

Consideration of the following set of preliminary questions may aid the institution in choosing its form of self-study process and in designating those individuals who will form the self-study steering committee and who will assume major responsibility for developing the self-study design and implementing it. These questions are intended to be broad and to establish an institution's ability to focus on the Commission's standards as described in *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education* and in Chapter 4 of this document.

Preliminary Questions

Has there been a recent review of the mission?

One of the explicit standards for accreditation is that an institution have a mission that "clearly defines its purpose within the context of higher education and explains whom the institution serves and what it intends to accomplish." Additionally, the standard notes that stated goals and objectives should clearly specify how the institutional mission will be fulfilled. (*Characteristics*, p. 1)

The mission should reveal its philosophical stance and societal obligations, provide guidelines for the maintenance of institutional integrity, and serve as a guide for educational planning. It also will operate as a frame of reference for decisions about such matters as student admission and retention, equity, the curriculum, the faculty, and the allocation of resources. Recent changes to the institution's mission and goals should be reflected in the self-study. If there has not been a recent review, this may be the time to begin one. On the other hand, the self-study process might reveal the need to modify slightly or to change significantly the institution's mission.

Is there an information system that will adequately support the self-study process?

Characteristics places particular emphasis on assessment. Evidence should demonstrate that the institution meets each Commission standard. Such evidence should be relevant to the issues being investigated, verifiable, representative, and cumulative. Without adequate and appropriate data, the self-study process cannot function effectively, and there can be no solid basis for either descriptive or analytical results.

The existence of adequate institutional data to meet the Commission's expectations must be established early in the self-study process. Ideally, this evidence would be readily available internally as a product of the institution's regular outcomes research. If such data are not available, compiling and analyzing them should be an essential part of the planning for self-study. The institution should review its evidentiary resources and mobilize them to its advantage as soon as possible.

Not all institutions have well organized and staffed institutional research offices, but most can conduct institutional research, even if the research is done by several units of the institution.

Institutions may make use of the Commission filings, such as the Institutional Profile report that is submitted to the Commission each year. A comparison of Institutional Profiles for several years could provide information about the basic characteristics and trends affecting the institution. The institution's most recent Periodic Review Report, as well as the previous self-study and team report, should become an integral part of the materials to be reviewed by the steering committee.

Institutions generally have a variety of resources, including special studies and reports; data bases containing student records; personnel information and financial accounting; surveys of students, alumni, and faculty; annual reports; program review and other assessment data; facilities reports; licensure examination results; inventories and similar data. In addition, reports on faculty credentials, library resources, enrollments, finances, and other topics may be required by external agencies. Information required by the federal government in annual reports to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) may be particularly useful.

The self-study committee or the institutional research office should identify and gather all materials that might serve as sources of information. In the context of accreditation, it will be useful to structure the resulting general inventory in terms of the kinds of evidence that appear most relevant to particular standards.

Does the institution have a planning process?

The standards for accreditation require that an institution "conducts ongoing planning and resource allocation based on its mission and uses the results of its assessment activities for institutional renewal" (*Characteristics*, p. 4). Information gathered through ongoing formal planning is very useful in the self-study process. Formal planning should have prepared the institution for self-study, and recommendations growing out of the self-study process should be incorporated into the continuing planning process.

While the Commission does not prescribe a particular institutional planning process, it strongly suggests that regular institutional planning include:

❑ a thorough examination of institutional mission, goals and objectives;

❑ a review of internal and external opportunities and constraints to form preliminary estimates of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats;

❑ development and implementation of a system for setting priorities and for developing budgets, strategies, activities, and timetables;

❑ establishment of an institution-wide assessment plan that guides the collection and analysis of data, including a set of measurable objectives for institutional and educational outcomes and identifies methods to assess success;

❑ a procedure for systematically reviewing assessment results in the context of institutional mission, goals, and objectives; and for the purposes of revising assessment plans providing information for institutional planning; and

❑ an evaluation procedure for systematically reviewing progress in achieving goals set by routine internal planning, by self-study, and by external peer reviewers.

Are there processes for systematically reviewing and improving institutional and educational effectiveness?

Data from planning process reviews, as described above, should be used in the self-study process. Information on the application of assessment results to institutional improvement should be a key component in establishing the institution's compliance with Commission standards.

Is there another major institutional study in progress or recently completed? Are there ways to avoid unnecessary duplication in the self-study process?

The availability of such a study may be relevant to the selection of a self-study model. In any case, an institution should not duplicate unnecessarily any evaluative activity that was recently completed or fail to use any that is currently in progress. Information gathered from such evaluations should be reviewed carefully to determine how it might be used in the Middle States self-study process. Significant existing data and analysis may affect both the scope of the self-study undertaken by the institution and the nature of the documentation needed to support the self-study and the evaluation visit. For example, the institution may be engaged in a major self-evaluation or a planning process for external constituents, such as for state and federal regulatory agencies, or for other accrediting organizations, and may therefore wish to consider requesting a collaborative self-study and evaluation visit by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education and other specialized accreditors or state administrative agencies. Alternatively, the institution may wish to have the Commission give serious consideration to existing reports to demonstrate how the institution satisfies Commission standards. In that case, it might be appropriate for the institution to request the special topics self-study model so that it can focus its attention and its resources on new areas.

Have there been recent major events which have caused or might cause significant changes in the institution's circumstances?

Because preparation for an evaluation visit should be an intensification of an institution's existing self-study and planning process, the self-study will be most useful if it emphasizes current needs, problems, and opportunities. An institution, therefore, should review carefully any recent changes which may have altered its mission, its internal or external circumstances, or its delivery of services. It should consider the impact of any significant changes such as new programs, building commitments, or technology investment planned for the future.

Is the campus environment conducive to self-study?

Institutions should make every effort to ensure the interest, cooperation, and active participation of all their constituents. This is perhaps the most crucial aspect of the preparation stage, and the initial visit to the campus by a Commission staff member can serve to stimulate interest in self-study. In extraordinary circumstances, a major unresolved campus conflict may lead the institution and the Commission to consider a delay in commencing or completing self-study.

Have appropriate plans been made to involve the institution's constituencies and its larger community?

Self-study provides a special opportunity for each institution to reach out to all of its constituents. A broad cross-section of an institution's constituencies might include, for example, faculty, students, trustees, administrators, alumni, parents, employers, neighbors, and legislative representatives (for publicly-funded institutions).

Such participation is essential because each institution's decision-making process can be enriched if it incorporates a wide range of diverse perspectives, ideas, and judgments. In addition, the institution's internal stakeholders and external community will better understand the institution, will be more likely to have a sense of "ownership" and to

become constructively involved in the self-study process, and will be more prepared to implement any resulting plans.

The self-study process and the resulting reports and accreditation action will address the accountability concerns of the broader community if it is involved throughout the process.

Methods of achieving wide representative participation in self-study will vary from institution to institution and should be considered in self-study planning. In addition to having representation from each campus constituency participate in the work of the steering committee and the working groups that carry out the self-study, many institutions rely on focus groups, surveys, and targeted review/discussion of self-study drafts to reach wider audiences within each constituency.

Planning for the Self Study

Self-study done well is an educational but time-intensive process. A full academic year is the normal minimum working time needed, but preparation should begin at least four semesters before the anticipated date of the evaluation visit. If an institution has special needs or concerns, more time may be needed to emphasize particular issues.

Early planning may be carried out by a core group of individuals who are appointed by the chief executive officer, who are familiar with the mission and the essential functions of the institution, and who will serve on the self-study steering committee. This group should meet as soon as possible with the institution's senior administrators to discuss the relevant issues, especially the approach or model that might be used for self-study. An alternative approach is to have the entire steering committee appointed sufficiently in advance to carry out early planning functions.

This stage of the process is not too early to involve the governing board, faculty, institutional research, and planning staff. The chief executive officer may choose to provide a concept paper to the board on the institutional issues that may be highlighted in the self-study. The chief academic officer also may wish to use this early period to prepare the faculty for participation in the process by reviewing academic records, such as program reviews and any external evaluations that may have been conducted. Institutional research and planning personnel should be consulted about the scope of available data and its ability to demonstrate compliance with Commission standards. If research functions are not being carried out through either a central or a distributed model, data coordinators should be appointed. Their role, beginning immediately, should be to compile data which will assist the institution in addressing Commission standards and to create indices to those data for purposes of the self-study.

The Steering Committee

Careful attention must be given to identifying and appointing competent, well-respected, and committed individuals who will form a steering committee and who will provide leadership by fulfilling specific responsibilities during the entire self-study process.

Membership

The committee is led by a chair, who usually is appointed by the institution's chief executive officer. In some circumstances, it is useful to appoint co-chairs to lead the self-study effort. This arrangement may be particularly useful at large and complex universities or at multi-campus institutions.

The Commission encourages careful consideration of the skills and attributes necessary for successful leadership of the self-study effort. It is essential that there be adequate faculty involvement in the self-study process, and appointment of a faculty chair may encourage such participation. Involvement of key administrators also is important, and appointment of an administrator as a chair or co-chair may also be appropriate. In other words, all members of the institutional community should feel that the self-study report "belongs" to them.

A question often posed by college or university chief executive officers is: "When and how should I be involved in the self-study process?" While there is no single correct answer to this question because institutional circumstances vary, the key to a successful self-study experience is the development of good working relationships and communication between the steering committee and the executive. The self-study report should represent a consensus about the current state and future prospects of the institution. Except in special circumstances, it is unusual for the chief executive officer to serve as a member of the self-study steering committee.

The members of the steering committee may be appointed or elected, but they should represent the total campus community and should include adequate faculty representation. Institutions should consider carefully the abilities, credibility, availability, and skills of committee members. Steering committee members and chairs must have a sense of commitment to the process and to the eventual goal of institutional improvement. They also must be given the authority and resources to carry out their duties.

Although some institutions elect to use an existing committee, most institutions choose to create a new steering committee because of the value of having fresh insights and judgments from a new group. If a new steering committee is formed, it should work closely with relevant existing committees on campus to avoid duplication and conflict, and to ensure that the new committee's work is continued and implemented by the institution's continuing standing committees after the self-study is completed.

Responsibilities

The steering committee is responsible for providing leadership to the entire self-study process. This includes determining the key issues for self-study, recommending (in consultation with campus administrative leadership) a self-study model that would best reflect those issues, developing a self-study design, establishing and charging subcommittees and coordinating their work on the various issues to be studied, ensuring that the timetable is implemented as planned, assuring communication within the institution about the self-study process, arranging one or more campus hearings to review drafts of the self-study, and overseeing the completion of the final self-study report and any other documents relevant to the self study process and team visit.

Key Issues: Among the first tasks of the steering committee is to identify key issues and questions to be addressed and to consider the self-study model it believes would be most useful in addressing those issues. This process begins with a review of the institution's mission and goals. Advice from the campus community may assist the committee in determining key issues and questions. Understanding Commission standards and the information needed to demonstrate compliance with them may assist the committee in selecting its preferred self-study model.

Self-Study Design: Once a preferred self-study model has been agreed upon by the steering committee and campus administrative leadership, the steering committee is responsible for developing and submitting the design to the Commission office for review and comment. The steering-committee then conducts the self-study process.

Subcommittees and Their Work: The topics which emerge in the discussion of key issues, consideration of Middle States standards, and recommendation of the self-study model will become the basis for establishing working groups or subcommittees. Each subcommittee will be responsible for an assigned portion of the self-study. The steering committee will develop the charges for each of these working groups, develop and distribute guidelines and a schedule for preparing reports, and provide training to all working group members. The working groups should include a broad range of constituencies on the campus, although the number and size of these subcommittees, the methods for distributing assignments, and the nature of the tasks assigned will vary by institution and by the self-study model chosen. Chapters 4 and 5 provide additional details about the nature of tasks assigned to working groups.

As noted, verifiable evidence of institutional performance will be critically important in the development of the self-study. The steering committee should consider all available and appropriate institutional data and research resources. With the relevant subcommittees, these resources should be inventoried and identified in the self-study design, made available to appropriate committees, and utilized in carrying out the self-study itself. The committees should identify any deficiencies in the information needed to demonstrate compliance with Commission standards and take steps to address those inadequacies.

Timetable: The steering committee is responsible for establishing an overall timeline for completing the self-study that includes dates for completing the tasks of each subcommittee and for supplying necessary documents and information to Middle States and the evaluation team. Each committee and workgroup creates a schedule for its own work that supports the overall self-study effort. Progress reports and interactions among the various committees will aid in assuring adherence to the established schedules for completion.

Communication: Communication is of primary importance during the entire process. In self-study preparation, this includes communication among and between the steering committee, the working groups, and the various campus constituencies.

The campus community should have opportunities at various points in the process to learn about and respond to self-study issues and approaches and to review the self-study in draft. Communication may be enhanced by conducting town meetings to receive feedback on report drafts. Many institutions also effectively use electronic posting of documents (on either an intranet or the Internet) and communication via e-mail to facilitate the process.

Reports: Whatever the self-study model chosen, the committee will be responsible for analyzing interim reports from the various work groups to determine whether charge questions have been addressed, whether assumptions are clear, whether data demonstrate institutional performance, whether statistics are appropriately interpreted and discussed, and whether appropriate analysis and recommendations are included. Finally, it will be the steering committee's responsibility to assemble and edit the drafts submitted by each of the subcommittees and to prepare the self-study report and other associated documents such as exhibits.

Contacts with Commission Staff

The Commission staff liaison, who is the primary link between the Commission and the institution, will be available to answer all questions, concerns, or requests for assistance relating to the self-study, the team visit, the Commission's action, or other matters. The staff liaison has direct contact with the institution's representatives at several points before the evaluation team visit, including informal feedback to the institution on the design of the self-study (Figure 7).

Approximately 24 to 30 months prior to a regularly-scheduled evaluation, the Commission staff liaison contacts the institution to arrange for an on-campus visit. During the visit, which usually occurs 18 to 24 months prior to the evaluation team visit, the Commission staff member meets with the chief executive officer, other staff officers, trustees, the self-study steering committee, a substantial number of faculty who are representative of the entire faculty, and student representatives (Figure 8).

However, the Commission's staff liaison is not an evaluator. The preliminary staff visit for self-study preparation is intended to reinforce the partnership between the institution and the Commission, and permit the staff member to become better acquainted with the institution by establishing and maintaining a professional relationship with the institution. It is an opportunity for staff to learn more about the current status of the institution, to assist the institution in finding the most appropriate means of addressing relevant issues, to provide expertise on the Commission's procedures, to assist in the institution's preparations for self-study and peer review, and to discuss self-study with various groups that will have crucial roles throughout the process.

In addition to these early staff contacts, the Commission sponsors an annual Self-Study Institute each fall for institutions that are beginning early planning for self-study. It features sessions led by peers who have completed the process and by Commission staff. Representatives of institutions that are preparing to design a self-study are invited to participate.

Figure 7
Points of Contact between Institutions and Commission Staff

The Self-Study Institute

Preliminary Staff Visit

Review of the Self-Study Design

Consultation and Informal Feedback

Nomination of the Team Chair

Consultation and Informal Feedback

Appointment of the Evaluation Team

Figure 8
Agenda for Preliminary Staff Visit

A typical agenda for the day should include meetings with the following individuals and groups:

- the president
- the president and self-study chair
- the president's cabinet or key administrators
- the self-study steering committee
- a representative student group
- a representative faculty group
- the board of trustees

Staff also are available for consultation concerning the information provided in the Commission's publications and policies. A complete and current list of Commission publications may be obtained from the Commission's web site at www.msache.org.

4

Linking the Design and Self-Study to Commission Standards, Commission Expectations, and External Requirements

Commission Standards

The self-study process goes beyond complying with accreditation standards; it gathers the institution's communities to reach consensus on the institution's future course. The Middle States accreditation standards, set forth in the 2002 edition of *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation*, were developed by consensus among member institutions in the Middle States region and provide the basis and context for the self-study process. Each institution may emphasize in its self-study issues of special importance to the institution while also addressing compliance with specific standards.

As has been true in the past, the revised *Characteristics* emphasizes the importance of institutional mission. While accredited institutions are expected to comply with all standards, the questions which institutions frame and address in regard to the standards, and the manner in which institutions demonstrate compliance with those standards, should be responsive to and support the institutional mission.

The most recent version of *Characteristics* does differ from prior editions in important ways, however. Among the principles that guided its development, three are noteworthy here. First, these standards place greater 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 greater specificity, the standards are more clearly defined and illustrated, including examples of evidence that could substantiate an institution's achievement of the standards. The 2002 edition of *Characteristics* covers 14 individual standards. These standards should be viewed as an interrelated whole. The first seven standards address Institutional Context, and the second seven focus on Educational Effectiveness. While they are in no priority order, each of the standards includes an

expectation that the institution's approach to the topic will be evaluated regularly and that the outcomes will be considered in planning and in institutional change and improvement.

It should be noted as well that *Characteristics* (pp. xi-xiii) includes eligibility requirements for institutions seeking Candidacy status, Initial Accreditation, or Reaffirmation of Accreditation. These requirements are divided into two sections. All institutions, including those seeking reaffirmation of accreditation, must meet the first seven; evidence relative to these seven eligibility requirements may be integrated within relevant sections of the self-study or may be addressed together in a separate introductory section of the document. Only those seeking candidacy or initial accreditation must demonstrate their compliance with the remaining eligibility requirements.

Because each institution is governed by its own mission, goals, and objectives, all of the standards do not apply in equal proportion to all institutions. Nonetheless, within the context of the mission, the design for self-study should indicate that the process will address all standards. This may be accomplished by addressing each standard in a comprehensive or collaborative self-study, or, in the special topics model, by focusing on one or more of the standards and providing other evidence that the remaining standards have been achieved.

The organization of *Characteristics* should inform institutions as they consider the self-study process. Each of the 14 standards is presented in a four-part format:

Standard

Each standard is expressed in one or two sentences.

Context

Narrative text addresses the topic of the standard, its context and values; provides guidance and definition; and builds a bridge to the Fundamental Elements. The context narrative is not considered to be part of the actual standard.

Fundamental Elements

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

Fundamental Elements for each standard have an inherent relationship to each other, and collectively these elements constitute compliance. However, neither the institution nor evaluators should use the Fundamental Elements as a simple checklist. The totality that is created by these elements and any other relevant institutional information or analysis must be considered. Where an institution does not evidence a particular Fundamental Element, the institution may demonstrate through alternative information and analysis that it meets the standard.

Optional Analysis and Evidence

Additional examples of documentation and analyses that might be carried out by an institution, relative to the particular accreditation standard, are included. The information is provided for use as the institution deems appropriate; it is not intended for independent utilization by the evaluation team. The list is not comprehensive, and institutions are not required to provide the information listed. However, some self-study processes may be strengthened by the

incorporation of some of these analyses and resources into the self-study process and related reports. Institutions are encouraged to incorporate other types of assessment and analysis particular to their mission, goals, programs, and structures.

Institutions will need to consider each required element, and other related matters, in a manner that will lead to demonstration or evidence of institutional compliance with the standards.

Getting Started: Some Sample Questions

While this chapter gives some examples of such consideration, these are intended only to be a starting point and a guide to the steering committee as it manages the breadth and depth of the self-study discourse and as it directs the report-writing process. It is critically important that the steering committee and those involved in the self-study process review and be fully familiar with the Standards for Accreditation in *Characteristics.*

The "starting point" questions given below are associated with the Fundamental Elements of each of the 14 accreditation standards, and they may assist institutions in conceptualizing and planning their self-study processes. In some instances, a descriptive question is posed in order to establish the necessary foundation for analysis and institutional self-reflection. **All questions are offered as points of departure only**. Each institution must reflect on its own institutional mission, issues, current challenges and initiatives, culture, and history in developing institutionally-appropriate questions associated with the standards.

The responses to such questions (derived both from the Fundamental Elements and institutional mission/circumstances), when taken together, should constitute collectively a body of evidence that the institution meets accreditation standards. In addition, the institutional self-reflection framed by these self-study questions should assist the institution in its ongoing planning and improvement efforts.

For a few of the Fundamental Elements, a more detailed example of a researchable question ("Sample Self-Study Questions") is provided. These examples illustrate some of the many specific ways Commission standards could be addressed, and they are intended to assist institutions as they consider specific ways to address Commission standards.

Furthermore, the information in this chapter should guide steering committees as they develop for working groups the charge questions, which are key elements of the self-study design that are discussed in Chapter 5. The manner in which the final, specific self-study questions are developed will vary among institutions. Some steering committees develop the detailed questions themselves at the outset, possibly in consultation with working committee leaders. Other steering committees choose to provide only general charge questions to working committees, with the expectation that these committees will develop more detailed and institutionally-specific questions as part of their initial work. If the steering committee elects such an approach, the more detailed questions developed by the working committees should be reviewed by the steering committee to assure the completeness and consistency of the overall self-study process.

Institutional Context

Standard 1:
Mission, Goals and Objectives

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

Characteristics insists on consistency between the mission, goals, and objectives in both the institutional and educational contexts. Institutional objectives should be outcomes based and capable of being evaluated, and institutional assessments should provide a mechanism for on-going review and refinement of goals. Goals and objectives should be sufficiently flexible for the institution to be able to respond to opportunities and changes which might be reflected in programs or even in the institution's mission.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

Describe the institution's mission, goals, and objectives. Is each clearly defined?

How are institutional goals and objectives consistent with the mission? Provide examples.

> **Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
> What are the principal components of the institutional mission? How (and where) are the institution's short and long term goals and objectives described? In what way do these goals and objectives address one or more of the principal components of the institutional mission? Could goals and objectives be better aligned to achieve the mission? Describe any principal components of the mission which are not currently associated with an explicit goal or objective. If there is a lack of consistency between the mission and the goals and objectives, what will the institution do to address this matter?

How do the mission, goals, and objectives guide faculty, administration, staff and governing bodies in making decisions related to planning, resource allocation, program and curriculum development, and definition of program outcomes?

In what way do the mission, goals and objectives include support of scholarly and creative activity at levels and of the kinds appropriate to the institution's purposes and character?

> **Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
> Does the mission guide the nature of scholarly and creative efforts? How do the results of these efforts promote the institution's mission?

Explain how the mission, goals, and objectives were developed through collaborative participation by those who facilitate or are otherwise responsible for institutional improvement and developments.

Describe how the mission, goals, and objectives were formally approved, publicized and made widely known by the institution's members.

How do the mission, goals, and objectives relate to external as well as internal contexts and constituencies?

To what extent is the mission linked to institutional goals and objectives that focus on student learning, other outcomes, and institutional improvement?

Standard 2:
Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal

An institution conducts ongoing planning and resource allocation based on its mission 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.

An effective institution is one in which growth, development, and change are the result of thoughtful and rational self-assessment and planning and where such activities are integral to its ongoing activities. Institutional planning is a disciplined and coordinated effort where the mission provides the starting point and where those affected are a part of the planning process. The resulting plan should help define how to allocate and manage resources and how to improve services and processes. *Characteristics* emphasizes the interrelationship between planning and resource allocation and the need for such allocation to support the development and change necessary to enhance institutional quality.

(For information regarding the relationships between and among institutional strategic plans and assessment plans, as well as suggestions for related self-study documentation, please see pp. 46-47. "Commission Expectations: Institutional Plans and Assessment Plans.")

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

Demonstrate how the institution's clearly stated goals and objectives, both institution-wide and for individual operational units, are linked to mission and are used for planning and resource allocation at the institutional and unit levels.

> **Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
> How do resource allocation categories relate to plans, goals, and objectives of the institution? Are all of the major goals and objectives of the institution supported by available resources? If some are not, what strategies will be established to ensure such support or to modify the goals and objectives to match available resources?
>
> Are there immediate priorities among the goals and objectives? Are allocation strategies specifically related to those priorities? Are resources available to support priority goals and objectives? Are resources available to plan and develop relative to longer-range goals and objectives?

Are appropriate constituencies involved in planning and improvement processes? Are these processes clearly communicated? What evidence is there that these processes incorporate the use of assessment results?

Demonstrate that the institution has objectives for improvement that are clearly stated, reflect conclusions drawn from assessment results, and are linked to mission and goal achievement, both institution-wide and for individual units.

Is planning facilitated by clearly defined and communicated authority and processes for decision-making?

To whom does the institution assign responsibility for improvements and assurance of accountability? Has this worked effectively?

Provide evidence of institutional and unit improvement efforts.

> **Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
> How is the institution organized for the delivery of programs and services? How does each unit of the organization assess the attainment of its objectives? How does each unit utilize assessment results in supporting and improving its efforts? How does the institution incorporate these outcomes evaluations in its overall assessment? How does it support efforts to improve at the unit as well as institutional level?

Demonstrate how the institution's periodic assessments of planning, resource allocation, and institutional renewal processes have resulted in improvements or modifications of these processes.

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.

The effective use of resources is crucial to institutional performance; thus, resource allocation should reflect institutional priorities. No matter whether the source of revenues and the monitoring of expenditures is institutional or system wide, institutional management of resources is crucial to achieving mission and attaining goals.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

What strategies does the institution employ to measure and assess the level and efficient utilization of institutional resources required to support the institution's mission and goals?

> **Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
> Are benchmarks used? If so, how are they selected? Are resource trends over time analyzed? How does the institution determine its future educational and other needs in terms that define what resources will be needed? Are alternative sources such as outsourcing considered regularly? If used, how are outsourced services supervised and assessed?

Describe the institution's policies and procedures to determine allocation of assets. What are the reasons for using the existing procedures? Are they applied consistently?

Sample Self-Study Questions:

What is the resource allocation process at this institution? Which constituencies are involved, when, and in what way? How does constituency involvement in the allocation process reflect broader governance structures? Are there constituencies affected by the allocation of resources that are not adequately represented in this process? Who makes final allocation decisions? How are these decisions communicated in the institutional community?

How does the allocation approach ensure adequate faculty, staff, and administration to support the institution's mission and outcomes expectations?

Demonstrate that the institution's budget process is aligned with the institution's mission, goals, and a strategic plan that provides for an annual budget and multi-year budget projections for at least three years, both institution-wide and among departments. Does the budget process utilize planning and assessment documents? Does the budget process address resource acquisition and allocation for the institution and any appropriate subsidiary institutional systems? How does the institution ensure efficient and timely acquisition of resources?

Are there a comprehensive facilities or infrastructure master plan and a facilities/infrastructure life-cycle management plan, as appropriate to mission? Have such plans been followed? Do *ad hoc* decisions often create exceptions to the plans?

Does the institution's comprehensive plan assure that facilities, such as learning resources fundamental to all educational and research programs and libraries, are adequately supported and staffed to accomplish the institution's objectives for student learning, both on campus and at a distance? Who determines what facilities are needed, when, and what support staff are appropriate and adequate?

Does the institution have an educational and other equipment acquisition and replacement process and plan, including provision for current and future technology, as appropriate to the educational programs and support services? How has it been implemented? What standards determine when equipment is in need of replacement?

What institutional controls deal with financial and administrative operations, including auxiliary enterprises such as real estate management, the bookstore, or food service?

Is there an annual independent audit (institutional or system-wide), confirming financial responsibility? How does the institution follow-up on any concerns cited in the audit's accompanying management letter?

Describe the institution's periodic assessment of the effective and efficient use of institutional resources**.** Have changes been implemented as a result?

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.

The primary goal of governance is to enable an educational entity to realize its mission and goals in an efficient and effective manner. Governance provides the means through which authority and responsibility are assigned and shared. The governance structure

should provide for sufficient independence and expertise to assure the academic integrity of the institution. As appropriate to the institution's mission, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education expects a climate of shared collegial governance in which issues concerning mission, program planning, and resource allocation can be discussed openly by those affected by and responsible for such activity.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

Describe the institution's system of collegial governance including written policies outlining governance responsibilities of administration and faculty that are readily available to the campus community.

How do the institution's written documents (such as a constitution, by-laws, enabling legislation, charter or similar documents):

✓ provide for collegial governance by defining the governance structure, including the duties, powers, and responsibilities of administration and faculty;

✓ assign authority and accountability for policy development and decision making, including a process for the involvement of appropriate institutional constituencies and policy development and decision making; and

✓ provide for the selection process for governing body members.

How are governance documents and policies shared with the community?

What opportunity exists for student input regarding decisions that affect them?

How is it determined whether the institution's system of governance affords appropriate sharing of responsibilities with "checks and balances" and appropriate representation of or attention to the needs of all relevant constituencies? Who assesses the effectiveness of the system in meeting defined standards of performance? Who defines those standards?

How does the institution's governing body reflect constituent and public interest? Who determines how public interest is to be represented? Is the governing body of a size appropriate to fulfill all its responsibilities? Does it include members with sufficient expertise to assure that the body's fiduciary responsibilities can be fulfilled? Is the institution's governing body chaired by someone other than the chief executive officer?

Does the institution have a governing body that certifies to the Commission that the institution is in compliance with the eligibility requirements, accreditation standards and policies of the Commission; describes itself in identical terms to all its accrediting agencies; communicates any changes in its accredited status; and agrees to disclose information required by the Commission to carry out its accrediting responsibilities, including levels of governing body compensation, if any?

How does the conflict-of-interest policy for the governing body (and the fiduciary body, if such exists) address matters such as remuneration, contractual relationships, employment, family, financial or other interests that could pose conflicts of interest in a manner that assures that those interests are disclosed and that they do not interfere with the impartiality of governing body members or outweigh the greater duty to secure and ensure the academic and fiscal integrity of the institution?

Self-Study Questions:

What types of situations are considered conflicts of interest?
How is it determined that conflicts do or do not affect institutional integrity?
Who resolves ambiguities?

Is the manner in which the governing body assists in generating resources needed to sustain and improve the institution effective and productive? Is it appropriate? Is there long-term planning for governing body resource generation? How is the plan created and assessed?

Is the process for orienting new members and providing continuing updates for current members of the governing body on the institution's mission, organization, and academic programs and objectives effective?

Sample Self-Study Questions:

By what means are governing body members appointed or elected? Do these appointments occur on a regular/predictable schedule? What materials are sent to new governing body members? How are the members personally briefed about the institution, its mission, organization, programs and plans? Do these briefings take place at the institution itself? What persons from the institution participate in these briefings?

What information about the institution and institutional developments is regularly presented to and discussed with members of the governing body? Are there opportunities for governing body members to raise issues or questions for broader discussion and consideration?

What procedure is in place for the periodic objective assessment of the governing body in meeting stated governing body objectives?

Sample Self-Study Questions:

How are these objectives defined? Are external consultants used for assessment? What are the roles of internal constituencies in assessing governing body performance?

Is there a chief executive officer (CEO), appointed by the governing board, with primary responsibility for the institution? How are his or her responsibilities and powers defined and updated?

What periodic assessment process is in place to evaluate the effectiveness of institutional leadership and governance? Who is assessed besides the CEO? Who participates in the assessment process?

Standard 5:
Administration

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

Proper administration and staffing are needed for an institution to function successfully. The administration should have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, as well as a thorough understanding of institutional mission, goals, and objectives.

The administrative structure typically includes a chief executive officer, who reports to the governing board, and such other administrative officers as are necessary to accomplish institutional goals. As individuals, each provides oversight for various institutional activities. The administrative staff should work effectively as a team and work cooperatively with other constituencies of the institution.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

Is there a chief executive whose primary responsibility is to lead the institution toward achieving its goals and who has responsibility for the administration of the institution? Is there adequate definition of the CEO's responsibilities, as well as guidance and supervision?

How does the institution determine what combination of academic background, professional training, and/or other qualities appropriate to the institution's mission best equip its president? How does it assess the president's performance? (Note: Such an inquiry should focus on the process of performance assessment. The self-study itself is not an appropriate vehicle for assessing presidential performance.)

Do the administrative leaders and staff members have appropriate skills, degrees, and training to carry out their responsibilities and functions? How are required skills or training identified? On what basis are administrators and staff members assessed?

Provide evidence that the institution has qualified staffing appropriate to the goals, type, size, and complexity of the institution.

Do adequate information and decision-making systems support the work of administrative leaders?

Are the lines of organization and authority sufficiently clear to ensure institutional efficiency and effectiveness?

> ### Sample Self-Study Questions:
>
> Display the institutional organization chart. Does the chart differentiate staff and line responsibilities? Are the job responsibilities of all senior members of the administration clearly understood by those individuals and in the institution as a whole? Are there regular opportunities for senior administrators to meet to consider matters which cross the boundaries of individual responsibility?

What is the process for periodic assessment of the effectiveness of administrative structures and services? Does this include periodic redefinition of administrative and staff responsibilities? Is it conducted in a manner that can lead to improvement without creating conflict?

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 to academic and intellectual freedom.

Integrity is a central, indispensable, and defining hallmark of effective higher education institutions. In all its activities, whether internal or external, an institution should keep its promises, honor its commitments, and represent itself truthfully. The same adherence to ethical standards and conduct should extend to all members of the institution, regardless of their role or their location.

Academic freedom, intellectual freedom, and freedom of expression are central to the academic enterprise and they, too, should be extended to all members of the institution's community. Educational institutions should exemplify those qualities that they endeavor to impart to their students.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

Provide evidence of fair and impartial processes, published and widely available, to address student concerns or alleged violations of institutional policies. How are concerns promptly, appropriately, and equitably addressed?

Sample Self-Study Questions:

In what institutional documents are students informed about: (a) institutional policies which affect them and (b) the procedures for them to bring possible violations to the attention of the institution? What office is principally responsible for assisting students who have concerns? What are the procedures for resolving concerns? Do students understand the processes available to them to resolve concerns? Are students satisfied with these procedures? Does the institution maintain and use records of student complaints to improve the institution's approach to student concerns? Do students participate in assessing and improving institutional procedures? Are records analyzed for patterns of complaints that can lead to improvements?

Are institutional practices in the hiring, evaluation, and dismissal of employees fair and impartial?

Sample Self-Study Questions:

Who determines what practices are appropriate, and who assesses the effectiveness of these practices? Could the practices better promote community morale and/or performance?

How does the institution provide sound ethical practices and respect for individuals through its teaching, scholarship/research, service, and administrative practice, including the avoidance of conflict of interest or the appearance of such conflict in all its activities and among all its constituents?

Are there areas within the institution which are likely to raise issues of equitable and consistent treatment (e.g., student discipline, student evaluation, grievance procedures, faculty promotion, tenure, retention and compensation, administrative review, curricular improvement, and institutional governance and management)? How have complaints been addressed?

How does the institution foster a climate of academic inquiry and engagement supported by widely disseminated policies regarding academic and intellectual freedom? How does it know that its efforts are successful? How are lapses handled?

How does the institution define and protect intellectual property rights? Is this treatment accepted by its constituents as fair?

How does the institution's climate foster respect among students, faculty, staff, and administration for a range of backgrounds, ideas, and perspectives? How should the institution update its efforts as demographics and issues change?

How does the institution ensure that it behaves with honesty and truthfulness in public relations announcements, advertisements, and recruiting and admissions materials?

Sample Self-Study Questions:

Are there internal and/or external review procedures for announcements, advertisements, and other materials? How is compliance monitored? How are breaches addressed?

Is there reasonable, continuing student access to paper or electronic catalogs?

When catalogs are available only electronically, does the institution's web page provide a guide or index to catalog information for each catalog available electronically?

When catalogs are available only electronically, how does the institution archive copies of the catalogs as sections or policies are updated?

How does the institution decide what information about itself should be shared, and with whom? For example, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education annual data reporting, the self-study or periodic review report, the team report, and the Commission's action should be accurately reported and made publicly available to the institution's community.

Can sharing of institutional information be improved to ensure student and public access, by print, electronic, or video presentation?

Does the institution have processes to ensure that it fulfills all applicable standards and reporting and other requirements of the Commission?

What is the assessment process for the periodic review of the integrity evidenced in institutional policies, processes, practices, and the manner in which these are implemented?

> **Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
> Could the process be improved by reorganizing the level of review, the personnel used, or the integration of the process into other ongoing activities such as faculty and student senate meeting agenda items?

Standard 7:
Institutional Assessment

The institution has developed and implemented an assessment plan and process that evaluates its overall effectiveness in: achieving its mission and goals; implementing planning, resource allocation, and institutional renewal processes; using institutional resources efficiently; providing leadership and governance; providing administrative structures and services; demonstrating institutional integrity; and assuring that institutional processes and resources support appropriate learning and other outcomes for its students and graduates.

Institutional assessment builds on the six previous standards, each of which includes periodic assessment of effectiveness as a fundamental element. The information for the prior six standards can be used as a basis for evaluating the institution's effectiveness in achieving its goals. In addition, all assessment information should be linked to planning and resource allocation.

Assessment is not an end; it should be a means by which an institution improves teaching, learning, and the institution as a whole. Therefore it is essential that faculty, staff, and others be involved in the assessment process.

(For information regarding the relationships between and among institutional strategic plans and assessment plans, as well as suggestions for related self-study documentation, please see pp. 46-47, "Commission Expectations: Institutional Plans and Assessment Plans.")

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

Provide evidence of a written institutional assessment plan and process that includes:

- ✓ a foundation in its mission, goals and objectives;

- ✓ periodic assessment of institutional effectiveness that addresses the total range of educational offerings, services, and processes, including planning, resource allocation, and institutional renewal processes; institutional resources; leadership and governance; administration; institutional integrity; and student learning outcomes;

- ✓ support and collaboration of faculty and administration;

- ✓ systematic and thorough use of multiple qualitative and/or quantitative measures, which maximize the use of existing data and information;

- ✓ evaluative approaches that yield results that are useful in institutional planning, resource allocation, and renewal;

- ✓ realistic goals and a timetable, supported by appropriate investment of institutional resources;

- ✓ periodic evaluation of the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of the institution's assessment plan.

How does the institution use assessment results to improve and gain efficiencies in administrative services and processes, including activities specific to the institution's mission (e.g., service, outreach, research), as well as in all areas of educational effectiveness?

> **Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
> Describe the processes used to assess institutional effectiveness in all administrative services and other processes. Is assessment conducted in each major area of institutional responsibility? How does the institution incorporate these assessments in its establishment of priority activities and programs and in its resource allocation? Are there examples of change directly attributable to such assessments? Can the institution improve its own assessment processes?

How have specific assessment results been used in the development and revision of the institution's strategic plan?

Educational Effectiveness

Standard 8:
Student Admissions

The institution seeks to admit students whose interests, goals and abilities are congruent with its mission.

Because the student is the primary beneficiary of the institution's educational mission, the success of each institution is best measured by the success of its students during and after enrollment in the institution's programs. Every institution's admission practices

should ensure that students have a reasonable opportunity for success in meeting their educational goals.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

How do the institution's admission policies, as developed and implemented, support and reflect the mission of the institution?

Are accurate policies and criteria available to assist the prospective student in making informed decisions? Are they easily accessible?

Show evidence of accurate and comprehensive information regarding the institution's academic programs, including any required placement or diagnostic testing.

> **Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
> How are potential students informed about the institution, its expectations, its programs, and its admission and placement processes? Is there an opportunity for a student to obtain individualized information about the institution and its compatibility with the student's educational objectives and abilities?
> How does the institution determine the interests, goals, and abilities of its students? Is placement or diagnostic information used by students or advisors in structuring the course of study?

How is information on student learning outcomes made available to prospective students?

Demonstrate that the institution provides accurate and comprehensive information, and advice where appropriate, regarding financial aid, scholarships, grants, loans, and refunds.

Show evidence that the institution uses published and implemented policies and procedures regarding transfer credit and credit for extra-institutional college-level learning.

Describe the institution's process for the assessment of student success, including but not necessarily limited to retention, that evaluates the match between the attributes of admitted students and the institution's mission and programs. Which students are successful in which areas—academic, social, research, etc.? What attributes of entering students are key variables? What changes, if any, have been generated by these evaluations?

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.

A well-organized and supported program of student services promotes the comprehensive development of the student, and these services become a part of the educational process, helping to strengthen learning outcomes. Appropriate student services should support all student learning in the context of the institution's mission and chosen educational delivery system. The institution should clearly convey to students their roles and responsibilities as partners in the educational process.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

Demonstrate how the institution's program of student support services is appropriate to student strengths and needs, reflective of institutional mission, consistent with student learning expectations, and available regardless of place or method of delivery.

Demonstrate that student support services and programs are provided and supervised by qualified professionals.

What procedures does the institution use to identify, to define, and to address the varied spectrum of student academic and other needs, in a manner that is equitable, supportive, and sensitive, through direct service or referral?

> **Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
> Describe, in general terms, the student body at this institution. What kinds of support services are particularly important to this student body? Are there special needs that the institution is addressing? Are there needs to which the institution responds through referrals? Are there student services, commonly offered, that are not needed at this institution? Is confidentiality maintained where appropriate? Are students regularly queried as to their needs and their satisfaction with services provided by the institution, or, upon referral, by others?

Demonstrate that the institution uses appropriate student advisement procedures and processes.

If offered, are athletic programs regulated by the same academic, fiscal, and administrative principles, norms, and procedures that govern other institutional programs? If not, demonstrate the appropriateness of the principles or norms used.

What widely disseminated procedures are used for addressing student complaints or grievances?

Does the institution maintain records of student complaints or grievances?

What policies and procedures, developed and implemented, ensure safe and secure maintenance of student records?

Are there published and implemented policies for the release of student information?

What assessment process is used in the evaluation of student support services? How are the assessment results utilized for improvement? How does the institution anticipate and provide for changing student needs?

Standard 10:
Faculty

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

Faculty are central to each institution's teaching and learning activities, and faculty bear primary responsibility for promoting, facilitating, assuring, and evaluating student learning. The faculty and other qualified professionals are responsible for devising and developing an institution's academic, professional, research, and service programs within the framework of its educational mission and goals.

Within some institutions, functions previously assumed to be a part of traditional faculty roles are now the responsibility of other professionals qualified by virtue of education,

training, experience, and skills. Such professional qualifications should be consistent with the expected academic outcome.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

Demonstrate that the faculty and other professionals are appropriately prepared and qualified for the positions they hold, with roles and responsibilities clearly defined, and sufficiently numerous to fulfill those roles appropriately.

>**Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
>How does the institution determine what qualifications are appropriate for faculty? How does it determine the number of professionals needed at each level and in each area? How are roles and responsibilities defined?

How are educational curricula designed, maintained, and updated by faculty and other professionals who are academically prepared and qualified? Is there appropriate cooperation and support across academic fields and across types of professionals?

>**Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
>Who sets standards for such excellence and determines whether they have been met? How is excellence in teaching linked to student learning outcomes?

How do faculty and other professionals, including teaching assistants, demonstrate excellence in teaching and other activities, and demonstrate continued professional growth?

How does the institution support the advancement and development of faculty?

How does the institution support its faculty in establishing and maintaining appropriate linkages among scholarship, teaching, student learning, research and service?

Provide evidence of published and implemented standards and procedures for all faculty and other professionals, for actions such as appointment, promotion, tenure, grievance, discipline and dismissal, based on principles of fairness with due regard for the rights of all persons.

>**Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
>Are all faculty and staff provided with accurate information on personnel policies and procedures? Do such procedures include hiring, promotion, tenure, grievances and discipline? How are the relevant constituencies involved in the establishment, implementation, and assessment of such policies and procedures?

How does the institution use carefully articulated, equitable, and implemented procedures and criteria for review of all individuals who have responsibility for the educational program of the institution?

Are the criteria for the appointment, supervision, and review of teaching effectiveness for part-time, adjunct, and other faculty consistent with those for full-time faculty?

How does the institution demonstrate its adherence to principles of academic freedom, within the context of institutional mission?

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.

Teaching and learning are the primary purposes of any institution of higher education, whether at the graduate or undergraduate level. Key elements in judging the success of the educational programs at each level are the breadth and depth of study and the ability of students to integrate knowledge. The institution identifies expected student learning and creates coherent programs of study that lead to these outcomes.

Higher education has available a variety of new information resources and an evolving array of technologies and methods for accessing these resources. Institutions are challenged to develop and utilize such resources and to ensure that those responsible for student learning are adequately prepared to take advantage of these new opportunities.

Institutions should consider various means to facilitate a student's progress without compromising institutional integrity or the quality of its degrees. These means might include the availability of opportunities for students who change institutions or objectives, and for those whose learning needs are different from those of traditional full-time or residential students.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

How do the institution's educational offerings reflect and promote its mission? Provide evidence that educational offerings offer appropriate areas of academic study of sufficient content, breadth and length, and conducted at levels of rigor appropriate to the programs or degrees offered.

How are formal undergraduate, graduate, and/or professional programs—leading to a degree or other recognized higher education credential—designed to foster a coherent student learning experience and to promote synthesis of learning?

Show evidence that program goals are stated in terms of student learning outcomes.

What is the institutional process for periodic evaluation of the effectiveness of any curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular experiences it provides its students? How does the institution utilize evaluation results as a basis for improving its student development program and for enabling students to understand their own educational progress?

> **Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
> How are co-curricular and extra-curricular goals selected and described? Do students participate? Is it appropriate to produce different results in different students? How is the complementary effect of curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular programs planned, used, and assessed?

Are learning resources, facilities, instructional equipment, library services, and professional library staff adequate to support the institution's educational programs?

Sample Self-Study Questions:

How are the expectations regarding obtaining, evaluating, analyzing and utilizing various learning resources made clear to students throughout their education? How are students trained to access information, regardless of the level, location, or instructional mode of their academic work? What kinds of learning resources are particularly important at this institution? How does the institution ensure that students are properly supported in their efforts to utilize various learning resources?

How do professional library staff and faculty collaborate in teaching and fostering information literacy skills relevant to the curriculum?

How does the institution promote student use of information and learning resources?

How does the institution ensure comparable quality of teaching/instruction, academic rigor, and educational effectiveness of its courses and programs regardless of the location or delivery mode?

Show evidence of published and implemented policies and procedures regarding transfer credit. Do those policies recognize that the acceptance or denial of transfer credit 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? Are these policies and procedures fair, consistently applied, and publicly communicated?

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

Consistent with the institution's educational programs and student cohorts, demonstrate that the institution has practices and policies that reflect the needs of adult learners.

Demonstrate that course syllabi incorporate expected learning outcomes.

How does the institution undertake the assessment of student learning and program outcomes relative to the goals and objectives of the undergraduate programs and use the results to improve student learning and program effectiveness?

How do graduate curricula provide for the types of development of research and independent thinking appropriate at the advanced level?

Sample Self-Study Questions:

What aspects of graduate programming (in general, or curriculum specific) focus on research? How do these graduate activities develop both knowledge of and experience with research methods, hypothesis development, information collection and analysis? What aspects of graduate programming allow students to demonstrate their capacity for independent thinking? How are student research capabilities and independent thinking assessed? Is the institution's evaluation of these skills made known to students applying for graduate education?

Are faculty credentials appropriate to the graduate curricula?

Are student learning and program outcomes assessed relative to the goals and objectives of the graduate programs (including professional and clinical skills, professional examinations, and professional placement where applicable)? How are the results used to improve student learning and program effectiveness?

Standard 12:
General Education

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

General education is an important component of all undergraduate and some graduate higher education degree programs. A core of general education, expressing the educational philosophy of the institution, should exist for undergraduate degree programs. This general education program, established by the faculty, should be purposeful, coherent, engaging and rigorous. General education courses should not focus narrowly on skills, techniques and procedures specific to a particular occupation or profession, but should incorporate essential knowledge, cognitive abilities and an understanding of values and ethics. General education should draw students into new areas of intellectual experience, expanding their cultural awareness and preparing them to make enlightened judgments outside as well as within their academic specialty.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

How does the institution structure and deliver general education? Is the program sufficient in scope and quantity? Are general education skills and abilities applied in the major or study in depth?

> **Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
> What is the structure of the institution's general education program? Are the general education components undertaken early or throughout the student's program of study? How are the skills and abilities, expected to be developed in the general education program, utilized in all components of the student's education? What specific efforts, if any, are made to relate elements of general education to the academic major?

Consistent with the institution's mission, how does the program of general education incorporate study of values, ethics, and diverse perspectives?

How does the institution assure that, upon degree completion, students are proficient in oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, technological capabilities appropriate to the discipline, and information literacy which includes critical analysis and reasoning?

Are general education requirements clearly and accurately described in official publications of the institution?

What is the institutional process for the assessment of general education outcomes within the institution's overall plan for assessing student learning? How have assessment results been utilized for curricular improvement?

Standard 13:
Related Educational Activities

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

The integrity and credibility of an institution's educational program rest on its acceptance of responsibility for all activities conducted in its name or under its sponsorship. An institution is expected to meet this standard and to provide appropriate outcomes assessment for related educational activities, including but not limited to basic skills, certificate programs, evaluated experiential learning, non-credit offerings, programming at other sites, and programs offered under contractual relationships.

Some of the activities addressed within Standard 13 may also constitute a substantive change for institutions planning or engaging in such activities. See the Commission's policy "Substantive Change" for related definitions, requirements, and processes for Commission review and approval.

BASIC SKILLS or developmental courses may benefit underprepared students. When offered, such pre-college level courses can prepare a student to achieve his or her educational goals.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

How does the institution systematically identify students who are not fully prepared for college-level study?

For admitted underprepared students, is there institutional provision of or referral to relevant courses and support services?

How does the institution make it clear that remedial or pre-collegiate level courses do not carry academic degree credit?

CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS may be offered at the pre-baccalaureate, post-baccalaureate, post-masters and post-doctoral level. Certificates are granted upon completion of a coherent, sequential program of study, usually for credit. Such programs and their courses should follow the institution's usual development, approval, review, and assessment processes.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

Demonstrate that certificate programs have clearly articulated expectations of student learning that are designed, approved, administered, and periodically evaluated under established institutional procedures.

> **Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
> What has the evaluation of certificate programs disclosed? How do graduates use the institution's certificates?

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, the recognition of college-level learning derived from work or other experience, may facilitate a student's progress without compromising an institution's quality or the quality of its degrees. Institutional policies and procedures should provide appropriate consideration, consistent with good educational practice, for the student who has gained college-level learning from other sources. Such procedures should define college-level learning and assure that credit is awarded for such learning, and not merely for experience.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

How does the institution ensure that credit awarded for experiential learning is supported by evidence in the form of an evaluation of the level, quality, and quantity of that learning?

Has the institution published and implemented policies and procedures: defining the methods by which prior learning can be evaluated and the level and amount of credit available by evaluation; defining the acceptance of such credit based on the institution's curricula and standards; and providing for the recording of evaluated prior learning by the awarding institution?

Sample Self-Study Questions:

What documents contain information about credit for learning derived outside the classroom? How is the need for demonstrating such learning made clear and explicit? How is the need for such learning to be at a college level made clear and explicit? How are the specific institutional policies regarding the amount, type, and applicability of such learning made clear and explicit?

How does the institution determine that evaluated learning credit is appropriate to the subject and the degree context into which it is accepted? What processes does it use? Can its determinations be validated?

Are the evaluators of experiential learning knowledgeable about the subject matter and about the institution's criteria for the granting of college credit?

NON-CREDIT OFFERINGS may be available on-site and through distance learning. Where non-credit offerings are an important part of an institution's activities, they should be consistent with its mission and goals and, if potentially applicable for credit, academic oversight should assure the comparability and appropriate transferability of such courses.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

How are non-credit offerings designed, approved, administered, and periodically evaluated under established institutional procedures?

BRANCH CAMPUSES, ADDITIONAL LOCATIONS, and OTHER INSTRUCTIONAL SITES away from the main institutional location may extend learning opportunities to some who are not otherwise served. Such programs should meet standards comparable to those of other institutional offerings.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

Do institutional offerings at branch campuses, additional locations, and other instructional sites (including study abroad locations and programs offered at business/corporate sites) meet standards for quality of instruction, academic rigor, and

educational effectiveness comparable to those of other institutional offerings? Are the locations and types of offerings consisstent with the institution's mission?

DISTANCE or DISTRIBUTED LEARNING is an educational process in which some or all of the instruction occurs when the learner and the instructor are in separate locations. Programs delivered through distance learning modalities should meet academic and learning support standards, appropriate to the type of delivery, comparable to those offered in more traditional formats within higher education.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

Do the institution's distance learning offerings (including those offered via accelerated or self-paced formats) meet institution-wide standards for quality instruction, articulated expectations of student learning, academic rigor, and educational effectiveness? If the institution provides parallel on-site offerings, do the same institution-wide standards apply to both?

How are the offerings via distance learning consistent with the institution's mission and goals? What is the rationale for distance learning delivery?

> **Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
> Does the institution offer distance learning? Are there particular reasons why distance learning is appropriate to the institutional mission? Are those who undertake learning at a distance (a) regularly enrolled students who prefer to do some of their academic work in this way, (b) students who would be unlikely to enroll at this institution were distance learning not available, or (c) students with other characteristics? Do the students enrolled in distance learning feel that it supports their educational goals?

How does planning for distance learning include consideration of applicable legal and regulatory requirements?

Demonstrate program coherence, including stated program learning outcomes appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the degree or certificate awarded.

How has the institution committed to continuation of offerings for a period sufficient to enable admitted students to complete the degree or certificate in a publicized timeframe?

What assurance is in place that the arrangements with consortial partners or contractors do not compromise the integrity of the institution or of the educational offerings?

How do faculty validate any course materials or technology-based resources developed outside the institution?

Are there available, accessible, and adequate learning resources (such as libraries or other information resources) appropriate to the offerings at a distance?

How does the institution provide appropriate orientation, training, and support for faculty participating in electronically delivered offerings?

Are there adequate technical and physical plant facilities, including appropriate staffing and technical assistance, to support electronic offerings?

CONTRACTUAL RELATIONSHIPS and AFFILIATED PROVIDERS may offer opportunities for institutions to provide certain aspects of the educational experience in different ways. Because an accredited institution is responsible for all activities carried out under its name, the Commission's standards, policies, and procedures are fully applicable to any contractual arrangements. Even if an affiliate is not included within the scope of the institution's accreditation, the nature of the affiliation should be made clear to the Commission and to the public.

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

In regard to contractual relationships with affiliated providers, other institutions, or organizations, what processes are in place to protect the accredited institution's integrity and to assure that the accredited institution has appropriate oversight of and responsibility for all activities carried out in the institution's name or on its behalf?

Standard 14:
Assessment of Student Learning

Assessment of student learning demonstrates that the institution's students have the knowledge, skills and competencies consistent with institutional goals and that students at graduation have achieved appropriate higher education goals.

The systematic assessment of student learning is essential to monitoring quality and providing the information that leads to improvement. The mission of the institution provides focus and direction to its outcomes assessment plan, and the plan should show how the institution translates its mission into learning goals and objectives. In order to carry out meaningful assessment activities, the institution must articulate statements of expected student learning at the institutional, program, and individual course levels, although the specific learning goals at each level need not be included in the assessment plan itself.

Assessment is not an event but a process and should be an integral part of the life of the institution. Most significantly, a commitment to the assessment of student learning requires a parallel commitment to ensuring its use. The evidence resulting from such assessment should be available to those who develop and carry out strategies that will improve teaching and learning.

The separate Middle States publication *Assessment of Student Learning: Options and Resources* and the accompanying website of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (www.msache.org/pubs.html) provide guidance on organizing an institution to define and measure student learning in ways that are consistent with its mission and culture.

(For information regarding the relationships between and among institutional strategic plans and assessment plans, as well as suggestions for related self-study documentation, please see pp. 46-47, "Commission Expectations: Institutional Plans and Assessment Plans.")

Questions related to Fundamental Elements:

Discuss how the institution has established articulated expectations of student learning at various levels (institution/degree/program/course) that are consonant with the institution's mission and with the standards of higher education and of the relevant disciplines.

Does the institution have a plan that describes student learning assessment activities being undertaken by the institution, including the specific methods to be used to validate articulated student learning goals and objectives?

> **Sample Self-Study Questions:**
>
> Describe the institution's learning assessment plan. What types of information does the institution collect on student learning goals and expectations? Does the institution make use of varied forms of assessment? Are student learning goals made available to constituencies? Is there evidence of intentional connections between learning goals at all levels (institutional, program, and course)? Have these assessments shown a congruence of learning expectations and learning outcomes? If there is divergence, what does the institution plan to do to address the matter?

How is student learning assessment information used to improve teaching and learning?

How is student assessment information used as part of institutional assessment?

Commission Expectations:
Institutional Plans and Assessment Plans

Standard 2 (Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal), Standard 7 (Institutional Assessment), and Standard 14 (Assessment of Student Learning) all make reference to "plans" of various types that are to be utilized and reviewed as essential documentation within the self-study process. The standards do not prescribe a particular format, structure, or process for such plans.

It is the Commission's intent, through the self-study process, to prompt institutions to reflect on those assessment activities currently in place (both for institutional effectiveness and student learning), to consider how these assessment activities inform institutional planning, and to determine how to improve the effectiveness and integration of planning and assessment.

The information that follows is intended to provide clarification regarding relationships among the "plans" referenced in the different standards and to suggest ways in which appropriate documentation might be provided.

Institutional Plans (strategic)

In order to demonstrate that it has the "planing and improvement processes" required in Standard 2, an institution will need to have one or more institutional planning documents. However, the institutional planning process and the related documents may be decentralized or individually focused (e.g., a separate facilities master plan), rather than be a comprehensive institution-wide process and document. It is worth noting that the final Fundamental Element for Standard 7 requires a written institutional (strategic) plan.

As for the location of the documentation (the institution's strategic plan), such documentation itself would not be included within the self-study. Rather, the self-study would furnish information on the institutional planning process(es) and provide a roadmap for specific planning documents available to the team as exhibits.

Assessment Plans: Institutional Effectiveness

Standard 7 requires a written assessment plan and process for the assessment of overall institutional effectiveness. Conceptually, this assessment umbrella includes the assessment of student learning (addressed in detail in Standard 14).

The assessment plan may be presented within the self-study itself, or the self-study may refer readers to the institutional assessment plan as a separately existing document. In either case, the plan would likely give a somewhat detailed **summary** of those institutional assessment activities already in place and what particularly these activities assess (student support services, aspects of the institutional mission, particular institutional goals, etc.). There may be separate assessment plans for various operational units of the institution. Documents with this greater level of detail would be available to the team as exhibits; while they might be referenced as examples within the self-study, such documents would not be appropriate for full inclusion within the self-study.

The overall plan for the assessment of institutional effectiveness may also include a component on the assessment of student learning. Alternatively, the institutional assessment plan may refer to and create a bridge to a separate document that specifically addresses the assessment of student learning. In either case, however, information on the assessment of student learning (whether presented as part of the institutional assessment plan, as a separate assessment plan for student learning, or within the self-study) would need to be supplemented by exhibits that provide greater detail and examples.

Assessment Plans: Student Learning

One of the Fundamental Elements of Standard 14 requires a "plan that describes student learning assessment activities being undertaken. . . ."

As noted above, the plan (which in many ways is more of a summary with sufficient detail to make it comprehensible) may be integrated within the self-study or may be a separate document. A plan presented within the self-study would probably be at a less detailed level than a plan that is separate.

Both presentations of the plan for the assessment of student learning would need to be supported at a more detailed level by other documents (e.g., individual departmental or program assessment plans). While an institution might provide one departmental or program assessment plan as an example within the self-study, all such plans would never be included within the self-study. The plan for the assessment of student learning could not reasonably include in full detail all activities for the assessment of all levels of student learning goals. Rather, the focus in the plan for assessment of student learning should be on institution-wide learning goals, and these goals should set the frame for assessment processes at the department/program level.

External Requirements

In addition to ensuring that the self-study process addresses the standards, policies, and procedures of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the institution should integrate and address appropriately within its self-study the requirements imposed by federal and state regulatory agencies, as well as by other accrediting organizations. This coordination is especially important if the institution has requested a joint visit with a

state agency or a collaborative review visit with one or more of the specialized institutional accreditors or specialized programmatic accreditors.

Federal Requirements

Amendments to the Higher Education Act impose requirements on accrediting agencies and on institutions that participate in Title IV student financial assistance programs. Some of these requirements are effected through federally mandated accreditation standards and regulations. In addition to those federal requirements which were already a part of the Commission's standards for accreditation, institutions should demonstrate that they meet the additional criteria described below, as well as any other criteria that may be mandated in the future. The self-study design should assure that the institution's self-study process addresses these criteria.

Institutions should monitor the cohort default rate and ensure that it is within federal limits. If the institution has triggered a review or other action by the U.S. Department of Education (USED), the self-study should include a description of the issues and the institution's plans to address them.

Any reference to Middle States accreditation must include the address and phone number of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. The Commission also requires that at least the catalog, the institution's World Wide Web site, and its primary recruiting materials include this information. The self-study should include references to these listings.

Federal regulations require the Commission to consider the actions of state licensing bodies and other accrediting agencies when making accreditation decisions. Institutions holding accreditation from agencies other than the Middle States Commission on Higher Education should include an overview of the institution's or program's current status with each agency, including the date of the most recent agency review, formal action taken by that agency, and the date of the next review.

The federal government requires that the outcomes assessment plan include a review of the institution's success with respect to student achievement in relation to mission. Institutions should include in the self-study a review of course completion, graduation rates, state licensure exam pass rates, and other data as appropriate to the mission of the institution and the programs it offers. (This may be included in, or cross-referenced to, related accreditation standards such as standards 7 and 14.)

If the institution charges program-specific tuition, the self-study should address whether the tuition and fees are appropriate for the subject matter taught and the objectives of the degree or credential being offered.

Currently, Middle States accreditation of institutions holding degree-granting authority from one of the states in the Middle States region but located abroad is not viewed by the USED as extending Title IV eligibility to those institutions. Any reference to accredited status by a foreign institution—whether or not chartered or licensed within the Middle States region—may not make reference to USED recognition or imply that the Secretary's recognition of the Commission extends to foreign institutions. These institutions should contact USED regarding other federal programs that may be available to them or their students.

Institutions should consult with staff and monitor the Commission's publications to identify any laws or regulations that may affect what accrediting organizations may require of institutions after the publication of this edition of *Designs for Excellence*.

State Requirements

Because particular state requirements vary within the Middle States region, the Commission suggests strongly that the institution contact its state regulatory or coordinating body regarding current requirements. Free-standing institutions abroad that are recognized by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education must contact the state agency which granted their license and degree-granting authority to identify any special requirements that may apply to the institution. In some instances, institutions which are a part of state or local systems of higher education may face other requirements.

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education shares with each of the state regulatory or coordinating agencies the schedule of evaluation visits planned for accredited institutions within that state. The state regulatory agencies may elect to send a representative to work with and serve as a resource to the team during the evaluation visit. Such cooperative efforts are intended to minimize unnecessary duplication and to ease the reporting and evaluative burden placed on the institution.

5

Preparing and Submitting the Design

A design for self-study is a blueprint for the self-study process and for the final document. It establishes the intellectual boundaries for the self-evaluation and the schedule for the entire process. It establishes the institution's expectations, and it informs the Commission of the institution's plans. A good design cannot guarantee an excellent self-study, but a poorly developed design can decrease the chances of producing a useful final document. Because the creation of the design is as significant as the preparation of the final self-study report, institutions should give thoughtful attention to this early step in the self-study process. The following suggestions describe the format and scope of the design document and the procedures for submitting it to the Commission.

Elements of a Self-Study Design

The length of the self-study design will depend upon several factors, such as the self-study model selected, the complexity of that approach, and the level of detail in the charges to the various subcommittees. The Commission liaison will discuss the self-study model with the institution as soon as the institution has considered which model it thinks may be most appropriate to its mission and needs. The model agreed upon will have a major impact on how the design is developed, written, and submitted.

It is important to remember that the primary audience for the design is the institution itself. The design should have sufficient detail to guide the self-study process, to facilitate the writing of the self-study report, and to inform the Commission. In most instances, however, the design need not exceed 50 pages.

All self-study designs, regardless of the self-study model chosen, will address the elements detailed below. However, certain additional considerations pertain to the design and planning of selected topics or collaborative approaches.

Elements of All Self-Study Designs

A design for self-study should include the following components:

Nature and Scope of Self-Study

The nature and scope of an institution's self-study will vary with each institution's needs and special circumstances. Therefore this first section of the design should identify the model that the institution has chosen and explain the approach to that model planned by the institution. The institution should demonstrate that the selected approach to self-study will be useful, attuned to current and future institutional needs and priorities, and focused on the teaching and learning process.

Specific Goals and Objectives

The goals for the self-study process are statements of outcomes, which describe what the institution intends to accomplish by an in-depth analysis of its programs, services, and resources, as they are defined in the 14 standards in *Characteristics*. Goals might include the following:

- ✓ to identify institutional strengths and weaknesses relative to each accreditation standard and to use this information to make recommendations for improvement

- ✓ to identify the current range of assessment activities in place at the institution

- ✓ to provide Middle States with the information and analysis necessary to make a decision about the institution's reaccreditation

The specific objectives describe the activities in which the institution will engage during self-study to accomplish its goals.

Organizational Structure of the Steering Committee and Subcommittees

The self-study design should include a clear description of the structure of the steering committee and the subcommittees or working groups, the names of their members and each person's title. There are various ways in which the steering committee can interact with each subcommittee or working group. For example, members of the steering committee may serve as chairs of the self-study groups to facilitate the communication of information about the progress of the self-study. Alternatively, the steering committee may decide to name a liaison from its membership to each study group, and this person would report directly to the committee; that liaison may or may not be a full member of the subcommittee. In this structure, the subcommittee has its own chair who is separate from the steering committee liaison.

Charges to Subcommittees

The charges to the subcommittees are perhaps the single most important element of the self-study design. As discussed in Chapter 4, the questions in the subcommittee charges should reflect both the accreditation standards and the institution's particular mission, issues, culture, and aspirations.

Within the charges, each subcommittee or study group should be given a clear statement of expectations and a schedule for submitting interim and final reports. The guidelines to the subcommittees should identify the specific written products that are requested—

usually a brief description of the
specified area and the way in which
the inquiry was carried out,
a documented analysis of strengths
and problems in that area, and
recommendations for building on
strengths and addressing problems
(Figure 9). The subcommittees should
understand that they are charged not
with finding definitive solutions for
every problem but, rather, with
proposing possible courses of action
which might lead to solutions.

Figure 9
Typical Guidelines for
Subcommittee Reports

1. Brief description of area or topic under review

2. Analysis of strengths and problems
   (with reference to accreditation standards and
   related fundamental elements)

3. Recommendations for improvement

Study groups can best accomplish
their tasks by receiving charges that
require them to produce "evidence" regarding their responses. Such evidence will
promote the requisite self-study analysis by study groups. The following are examples of
descriptive versus evidential charge questions that might be given to a subcommittee:

Descriptive: What are the College's mission, goals and objectives?

Evidential: Do we demonstrate that the members of the institutional community are
aware of, believe in, and act consistently with regard to the mission,
goals and objectives of the institution?

Descriptive: What is the process for reviewing general education outcomes?

Evidential: What evidence do we have in regard to general education learning
outcomes? What changes have been implemented as a result of
this evidence?

Descriptive: How are student support services provided?

Evidential: What evidence is there that student support services are effective?

For a more complete discussion of how to develop self-study questions, see Chapter 4.

Each subcommittee should receive a copy of the complete design, not only its own
charge. This allows the group to understand its own task within a larger context and to
relate its work to that of the other subcommittees.

Inventory of Support Documents

Certain data useful to the self-study process should be readily available throughout the
institution. The process of compiling and analyzing these data is an essential part of
institutional research and planning. Institutions with an office for research and planning
may have accomplished this task prior to the preparation for the self-study process.

This section should include an annotated inventory of recent and current self-studies,
reports, collections of data, assessment instruments, and other resources that can be
utilized by the self-study subcommittees. It is often tempting to prepare an exhaustive list

of institutional documents, but it is more useful to list only those documents which have been identified as relevant to the general or specific foci of the self-study. Some institutions find it helpful to organize the document inventory so that it reflects major self-study headings or structures.

Timetable

To develop a timetable for the self-study process, institutions may utilize the following approach (illustrated in Figures 10, 11, and 12), allowing sufficient time for vacations, holidays, special campus events, and inevitable "down time":

❑ Begin by selecting an approximate time period for the scheduled evaluation team visit. These visits occur either in the fall or spring, but generally before mid-November (fall) and mid-April (spring) to ensure timely review by the Committee on Evaluation Reports and subsequent action by the Commission. The institution establishes the final dates for site visits, in collaboration with the team chair. After the team makes its report, the institution is entitled to respond, and the response must be received before the Commission will review the team report.

❑ From the date selected for the evaluation visit, count backwards six weeks to allow for the distribution of the finished study and its review by members of the evaluation team and the Commission staff liaison.

❑ Count backwards again, allowing the number of weeks needed to produce a final version that has been reviewed by the campus community.

❑ Still counting backwards, assign time for the steering committee to develop one or more drafts of the self-study report, based upon the subcommittee reports. Allow sufficient time for the subcommittees to complete their reviews and to produce their subcommittee reports. Each subcommittee may require a different amount of time, according to the scope of its task. The steering committee also may receive subcommittee drafts on a staggered reporting schedule.

❑ Before the subcommittees begin their work, for example in the fall of the first planning year, the steering committee should be named, the Commission staff liaison will visit the institution to discuss the self-study process, the institution then selects its self-study model and its approach to that model, the steering committee writes its charges to the subcommittees, and the final design is submitted to the Commission for approval.

Chapter 6 provides detailed information on what the institution is to send to team members prior to the visit and to the Commission office prior and subsequent to the visit.

Figure 10
A Self-Study Timetable for Comprehensive, Comprehensive with Emphasis, and Collaborative Reviews

[Counting Backwards from the Team Visit and the Institution's Response to the Team Report]

Commission Action
(June, Year 3)

⬆

Scheduled Team Visit, Team Report, and the Institution's Response
(March-May, Year 3)

⬆

Final Self-Study Report
Mailed to Team and CHE
(February, Year 3)

⬆

Chair's Preliminary Visit
(Fall, Year 2)

⬆

Community Feedback Received after Draft Self-Study is Circulated on Campus
(Fall, Year 2)

⬆

Steering Committee Receives Subcommittee Drafts
(Spring, Year 2)

⬆

Subcommittees Begin Their Work Design Submitted to CHE for Approval Steering Committee Writes Charges to Subcommittees
(Fall, Year 1)

⬆

Model and Approach Chosen and Subcommittees Identified, CHE Staff Visit to Institution, Steering Committee Named
(Prior to Beginning of Fall Semester, Year 1)

Figure 11
A Self-Study Timetable for Selected Topics Reviews: Option 1

Commission Action
(June, Year 3)

⬆

Scheduled Team Visit, Team Report, and the Institution's Response
(March-May, Year 3)

⬆

Final Self-Study Report
Mailed to Team and CHE
(February, Year 3)

⬆

Chair's Preliminary Visit;
Chair and Evaluator Review Documentation Relative to Standards Not Addressed in Self-Study; and Prepare Report
(Fall, Year 2)

⬆

Community Feedback Received after Draft Self-Study is Circulated on Campus
(Fall, Year 2)

⬆

Steering Committee Receives Subcommittee Drafts
(Spring, Year 2)

⬆

Subcommittees Begin Their Work Design Submitted to CHE for Approval Steering Committee Writes Charges to Subcommittees (Fall, Year 1)

⬆

Model and Approach Chosen and Subcommittees Identified, CHE Staff Visit to Institution, Steering Committee Named
(Prior to Beginning of Fall Semester, Year 1)

⬆

Preliminary Proposal to Commission Staff

Figure 12
A Self-Study Timetable for
Selected Topics Reviews: Option 2

Commission Action
(June, Year 3)

⬆

Scheduled Team Visit, Team Report, and the
Institution's Response (March-May, Year 3)
******
Chair and Evaluator Review Documentation
Relative to Standards Not Addressed in
Self-Studyand Prepare Report,
Concurrent with Team Visit

⬆

Final Self-Study Report Mailed to
Team and MSCHE (February, Year 3)

⬆

Chair's Preliminary Visit
(Fall, Year 2)

⬆

Community Feedback Received after
Draft Self-Study is Circulated on Campus
(Fall, Year 2)

⬆

Steering Committee Receives
Subcommittee Drafts (Spring, Year 2)

⬆

Subcommittees Begin Their Work
Design Submitted to CHE for Approval
Steering Committee Writes Charges to
Subcommittees (Fall, Year 1)

⬆

Model and Approach Chosen
and Subcommittees Identified,
MSCHE Staff Visit to Institution,
Steering Committee Named
(Prior to Beginning of Fall Semester, Year 1)

⬆

Preliminary Proposal to Commission Staff
(Spring, Year 1)

Editorial Style and Format

The design for self-study should include guidelines that will facilitate the compilation of information and assure that the final report reflects a consistent style. This statement of editorial style and format should include criteria for writing draft documents from subcommittees, for preparing the steering committee's final self-study report, and for incorporating any reports that have been prepared internally or externally for another review process. The guidelines (addressing such topics as the designated word processing program, fonts, margins, spacing, and the use of institutional acronyms) may be incorporated within the text of the self-study design or attached as a separate document.

Subcommittees should be urged to present findings, conclusions, and recommendations in a coherent, concise, and objective manner; to avoid jargon; and to utilize compatible technological applications for assembling and processing the document. Some parts of the design, such as the institutional overview and the statement of objectives, probably can be used with some modification in the introductory chapter of the self-study.

The steering committee then must reduce the materials produced by the subcommittees to a length that peer reviewers can realistically be expected to read and study. Therefore, 200 double-spaced or 100 single-spaced pages is the accepted maximum length for a self-study report. Length, however, is less important than substance; brevity with substance is ideal.

The final self-study report should be a concise and readable, but substantial document to be used by its principal readers, the campus community. This audience may include, for example, faculty members, students, trustees, administrators, alumni, parents,

employers, neighbors, and for publicly-funded institutions, legislative representatives. The design should anticipate that campus constituents will discuss the final draft of the self-study report, that there will be a process to gain general acceptance of the document, and that the faculty, administration, and governing board ultimately will take responsibility for the entire report. The report will serve as a point of departure for the work of Commission staff, the team chair, members of the evaluation team, and the Commission. It also should be available, at the discretion of the institution, for informational use by outside groups.

The writing or editing of the self-study report may be assigned to a professional writer/editor, such as a menber of the faculty, who need not be a member of the steering committee. However, report writing should be viewed as a multi-phased activity that covers the entire self-study process, beginning with the development of the self-study design. This person, therefore, should be chosen prior to the start of the process and should participate in developing the writing and editorial guidelines to be disseminated to self-study participants.

The Organization of the Self-Study Report

The design document should offer a clear description of the organization and structure that will be used for the final self-study report. An annotated outline should describe clearly what will be included in the document, and it should include subheadings (such as topic/accreditation standard addressed, analysis, summary of findings, recommendations) or sufficient details to assist the subcommittees in organizing and understanding their charges.

There is no one "best way" of organizing and writing a self-study report. What the Commission seeks is an institution's own sense of purpose and best assessment of its progress, its perspicacity, and its style. Of course, the quality of a self-study report will tell outsiders a great deal about an institution.

The self-study report should include an executive summary of no more than five pages that briefly describes the self-study process and highlights the major findings and recommendations of the study. A copy of the annual Institutional Profile most recently submitted to the Commission (key data about the institution) should be provided also. The executive summary and the Institutional Profile may be bound as part of the self-study or may be provided separately.

Profile of the Evaluation Team

The self-study design should include the institution's recommendations concerning the types of evaluation team members that it believes should be selected to visit the institution at the conclusion of the self-study process.

The Commission staff liaison will consider carefully the institution's suggested team profile, although the final decision about team membership remains with the Commission and its staff. In selecting team members, the Commission relies heavily upon the type of institution, the self-study model and approach that the institution selects, and the Commission staff liaison's background knowledge of the institution and the self-study, in addition to the institution's suggestions for the types of team members.

Visiting teams for comprehensive, comprehensive with emphasis, and collaborative reviews in the Middle States region usually include from eight to ten evaluators, but the nature of the institution and its self-study approach may sometimes be served best by a smaller team. On the other hand, the complexity of the institution or its self-study may

require additional team members. For example, multi-unit institutions or systems may require separate evaluation teams for each unit or a single evaluation team of sufficient size to cover all units. In some instances, all units will be evaluated simultaneously; when there are multiple branch campuses or additional locations (domestic or international) to be visited, such units may be evaluated in sequence or in stages on a well-defined schedule.

Teams usually are composed of peers from institutions that are located in states other than the state of the institution under review, and team members may be drawn from outside the Middle States region. In unusual circumstances, Commission staff may request the institution's permission to utilize an evaluator from the same state. Geography is less important than the evaluator's expertise, experience, and ability to handle the assignment in a manner that will be useful to the institution and to the Commission.

One goal in selecting an evaluation team is to establish the best match between the institution's self-study process and the members of the team. As the team examines the institution as a whole, it is expected to give particular attention to any special focus in the self-study. This is especially important if the institution has chosen a comprehensive with emphasis or a selected topics model. Depending on the nature of the institution's self-study, such teams reasonably may exclude some areas of expertise found on a more traditional team utilized for a comprehensive self-study. When an institution has completed a selected topics self-study, the review of documentation relative to standards not addressed within the self-study will occur separately from the full evaluation team visit. Commission staff will make every effort to provide the appropriate guidance to chairs and evaluators on these types of teams to ensure that they understand and respect the premises of the institution's self-study.

For further guidance, consult the Commission policy statement *Selection of Evaluation Teams and Chairs*.

Selected Topics Self-Study: Additional Design Considerations

❑ Prior to submitting the full self-study design, the institution submits a **preliminary proposal** to the Commission staff liaison. This preliminary submission identifies the proposed selected topics(s); why the topic(s) are important to the institution; which accreditation standards would be substantively addressed by the proposed self-study; and a description of what type of evidence and documentation the institution has available to substantiate compliance with those accreditation standards **not** addressed by the proposed self-study.

❑ If Commission staff judge the preliminary proposal to be acceptable, the institution submits a full self-study design for the proposed selected topics process, addressing the design elements detailed above. The design must also identify (with annotation as necessary) the existing documentation and evidence the institution will provide to the team chair and designated generalist evaluator either at the time of the chair's preliminary visit (Option 1) or concurrent with the full team visit (Option 2) to substantiate institutional compliance with standards not addressed by the proposed self-study. A preliminary roadmap matching documents to particular accreditation standards must be included.

❑ If the preliminary proposal is judged not acceptable, the staff liaison works with the institution to strengthen the proposal or to formulate a different self-study approach (e.g. comprehensive with emphasis).

❑ If Option 1 is selected by the institution, the chair's preliminary visit is expanded in scope (and perhaps length) to allow for the review of existing documentation assembled by the institution to demonstrate compliance with those standards not substantively addressed in the selected topics self-study. In Option 2, this review occurs concurrent with the full team visit.

❑ The team chair is assisted in the review of institutional documentation, as noted above, by a generalist evaluator (either during the chair's preliminary visit or during the full team visit).

❑ The team chair and the designated evaluator prepare a brief written report, affirming that the institution meets accreditation standards not being addressed within the selected topics model and noting any areas where compliance is in question. Unless there is a need for further or updated institutional information, the report simply will affirm that there is sufficient documentation to conclude that the institution meets the specified accreditation standards. This summary report is shared with the institution and with the members of the evaluation team.

Collaborative Self-Study: Additional Design Considerations

❑ Institutions planning a collaborative self-study must submit a self-study design, even if the agency collaborating with Middle States does not require it.

❑ The self-study design reflects the collaborative approach and provides detailed information regarding agreed upon protocols for the self-study process and the evaluation team visit.

❑ The self-study design may follow a format suggested by the cooperating agency, rather than the format suggested above. However, the design should address all relevant design elements.

Submitting the Design

As soon as the design has been completed, the steering committee should submit it to the Commission staff liaison assigned to the institution. The staff liaison will respond to the institution with any comments, suggestions, or questions arising from a review of the design. If the design is not complete or acceptable, the institution will be asked to submit either additional information or a revised design.

The final self-study design becomes an essential guide for the Commission staff in selecting a team chair, which usually occurs a year or more prior to the planned evaluation visit, and for selecting the members of the evaluation team. The design also serves as an important resource and reference for the staff liaison throughout the period of self-study.

The Commission's staff liaison directs each institution to share its design, along with other basic information about the institution, with the chair well in advance of the chair's preliminary visit. Together with any draft self-study materials that may be prepared, the design sets the context for discussions between the chair and the institution's representatives. It also enables the chair to plan the deployment of evaluation team members.

Finally, every person directly involved in the process should receive a copy, and the design should be readily available throughout the institution.

6

Implementing the Design and Writing the Self-Study Report

The self-study report is the document that summarizes each institution's self-analysis and future plans. It sets the agenda for the visiting team of peer reviewers. More importantly, it sets the agenda for the institution itself for several years. As a "living" document, a clear self-study report should serve as a plan and a reference source for all of the institution's constituencies.

This chapter is intended to assist in the final preparation of the self-study by offering some practical advice, warnings about some possible pitfalls, and descriptions of some ways to approach the writing of the report itself. Participation in the Commission's Self-Study Institute, offered each fall, will provide additional ideas, suggestions, and advice.

By the time the self-study design has been developed and approved by Middle States, an institutional steering committee should be in place and the process well underway. However, there are a number of broad matters that should be kept in mind as the institution proceeds to complete the self-study.

Matters to Consider

The Committees

The steering committee will provide leadership during the self-study process. It will coordinate the work of subcommittees, communicate with the campus community, ensure that the timetable is implemented, and oversee the completion of the final self-study report and other documents. Throughout the process, the steering committee will interact with working groups, the institution's administration and, in many cases, with other constituencies including the institution's Board. Such involvement is critical to the honesty, accuracy and quality of the self-study, and all participants should recognize their importance in the process.

Good working relationships between the steering committee and the institution's executive leadership are critical. Working together, the executive leadership and the steering committee will ensure that all relevant perspectives have been considered and that the institution is accurately portrayed through the institutional "voice" of the report. A potential pitfall to be avoided is the surprise ending in which a steering committee produces a final report that is unforeseen and unacceptable to the institution's leadership. The goal of a consensus document always should be kept in mind.

The committee role has been described as "Meeting, Monitoring and Mentoring." With such an array of responsibilities, the institution may wish to consider whether the members of the steering committee are and remain appropriately representative of all relevant campus constituencies.

During the design phase, the steering committee will have established and charged working groups to focus on issues and to adhere to the very important self-study timetable. To a large extent, working groups will be responsible for locating, generating, and analyzing the information that will "demonstrate" or "provide evidence" of the institution's compliance with Commission standards. The steering committee and working groups should attempt to identify, as quickly as possible, deficiencies in charges and areas not adequately covered.

Timing

The self-study timetable is key to a coherent and effective self-study report. The timetable must be realistic, taking into account vacations and breaks; religious, state, and federal holidays; and other events that might interrupt the self-study process. The timetable should recognize specific demands based on the type or model of self-study employed, and it also should provide adequate allowances to develop research questions, to locate or generate relevant information, to analyze results, to write report drafts, and to review and respond to the drafts. Once such a schedule is in place, an important task of the steering committee is to make certain that all self-study committees adhere to that schedule.

Communicating

Every campus constituency needs to feel ownership of the process and, as a result, of the self-study product. Full and frequent communication is an important prerequisite to that institutional ownership. The self-study design, organized around key issues derived within the institution, should be distributed to every person directly involved in the process and should be made widely available on the campus. Throughout the self-study period, information and opportunities for comment and review should be conveyed on a regular basis.

Potential Pitfalls

Experience has shown that the self-study steering committee must guard against a number of potential pitfalls. Some of the most common problems and pointers to overcome them are illustrated in the following notes and in Figure 13. Any of these problems or pitfalls can side-track a self-study effort, costing the steering committee time and endangering successful completion of the report.

1. The Benefits of Self-Study

Pitfall: Viewing self-study as peripheral to the institution's work

Pointer: Focus on issues of importance to the institution and remember that planning, assessment, and accreditation can help the institution to receive greater benefits as it continuously improves the quality of educational programs. The visiting team will be composed of true peers who have experience in similar institutions and who understand the challenges and opportunities inherent in the institution's mission and goals.

2. Analysis

Pitfall: Describing what the institution does without analysis

Pointer: Analyze how what the institution does affects its students and whether what it does is related to the goals set out in its plan and mission statement.

3. Supporting Data

Pitfall: Using unsupported assertions that the institution's students have learned

Pointer: Provide data, explain the methods used to gather it, and describe how the evidence will be used to promote institutional change and improvement.

4. Analyzed Data

Pitfall: Using confusing or conflicting data and statistical jargon

Pointer: Provide analytical reporting to explain what was learned about students and their achievements, programs and their effectiveness, and whether the institution's mission and goals are being achieved in classrooms and co-curricular programs. Always confirm data sources and accuracy.

5. Strategic Plan

Pitfall: Relying on non-specific aspirations

Pointer: Create a strategic plan that states goals that are based on the institution's mission and value statements and that are measurable. Institutional plans should be consistent, so that goals lead to curricular design and the institutional assessment plan follows from that.

Figure 13
Potential Pitfalls in the Self-Study Process

1. The Benefits of Self-Study
Viewing self-study as peripheral to the institution's work

2. Analysis
Describing what the institution does without analysis

3. Supporting Data
Using unsupported assertions that students have learned

4. Analyzed Data
Using confusing or conflicting data and statistical jargon

5. Strategic Plan
Relying on non-specific aspirations

6. Benchmarks
Assuming that the institution is too "special" to use available benchmarks

7. Role of Special Interest Groups
Allowing a subgroup or individual to stand in the way of the whole

8. Authority of Each Institutional Constituency
Allowing one type of constituency to control the self-study process

6. Benchmarks

> *Pitfall*: Assuming that the institution is too "special" to use available benchmarks
>
> *Pointer*: Use benchmarks to set specific goals for the strategic plan, and use those goals for realistic assessment. If widely published available benchmarks are not a good comparison, use a variety of sources to construct a useful cohort.

7. Role of Special Interest Groups

> *Pitfall*: Allowing a subgroup or individual to stand in the way of the whole
>
> *Pointer*: Create a self-study process that represents a healthy, life-giving event for the institution.

8. Authority of Each Institutional Constituency

> *Pitfall*: Allowing one type of institutional constituency (such as faculty or administration or institutional researchers) to control the self-study process
>
> *Pointer*: Share accountability for leadership—and authority to lead—among all key institutional constituencies.

Writing the Document

The self-study process might be seen as a series of writing endeavors, punctuated by periods of data collection, analysis, and review. At each stage, the written material should reflect a consistent style, should present findings in a coherent, concise, and objective manner, and should present the institution in an honest and forthright manner.

The goal, of course, is a self-study report that fairly and honestly represents the institution; that avoids institutional politics and personal agendas; that warrants and receives broad support among campus constituencies; and that demonstrates institutional compliance with Commission standards.

The activities specifically associated with creating the self-study might be grouped around the several stages of document writing.

The Self-Study Design

The key audience for the self-study design is the institution itself. Continued reference to the institution's design will reemphasize decisions made about the nature and scope of the self-study and the organization and structure necessary to generate it. The design includes an outline of self-study topics, sub-topics, and related assignments for working groups charged with documenting strengths and challenges, demonstrating institutional procedures and processes, and recommending possible courses of action. A review of the institution's design also will reemphasize the guidelines for compilation of information and for editorial style and format.

The steering committee should assure itself that the charges to the various working groups remain clear and appropriate to the self-study outline contained in the design. Communication between the steering committee and the working groups—and, where appropriate, among the working groups—alleviates redundancies and ensures that all topics are adequately covered.

Initial Reports by Working Groups

Working groups are charged to address certain key institutional issues in the context of the self-study design and to convey their responses and recommendations in a report that is clear and concise. A very early task should be to translate the issues into researchable questions and to accumulate or generate data that will answer those questions. It should be remembered that the purposes of a self-study are to demonstrate: (1) institutional improvement, and (2) how the institution satisfies accepted standards for Middle States accreditation. Methods of inquiry can be both qualitative and/or quantitative.

As working groups consider their specific tasks, a common approach to drafting a report is useful. Such an outline might include:

❑ An overview of the committee charge;

❑ A reference to relevant Commission standards (where appropriate);

❑ The method(s) of approach to the issues addressed, including the research questions to be answered;

❑ An analytical discussion of the inquiry undertaken and the outcomes of that inquiry; and

❑ A summary of evidence and recommendations for improvement as well as compliance with accreditation standards.

Follow-up Reports by Working Groups

When the initial reports have been written, the steering committee should review them to ascertain whether all appropriate topics have been addressed. The steering committee then should determine if self-study questions have been appropriately asked and answered and whether, in total, the working groups have developed and presented sufficient information and evidence to support the writing of the self-study report itself. If, overall, the steering committee finds insufficient topic coverage or inadequate demonstration of institutional compliance with Commission standards, relevant working groups should be asked to address these needs and be informed of the time available for this reconsideration.

Initial Draft of the Self-Study

Once the working group reports and other relevant institutional information have been compiled, the steering committee will begin the task of drafting the self-study itself. It is the task of the steering committee to create a concise and readable, but substantial, draft document to be considered by its principal readers, the campus community.

Sample outlines appropriate to various types of self-study can be found in Chapter 2 of this handbook. The text should incorporate both quantitative and qualitative evidence in the narrative as well as in charts and graphs. The report should also be consistent in style and clear to those unfamiliar with the institution's own terminology and abbreviations.

Institutional constituencies should be given full opportunity to consider the outcomes of the self-study process, to ask questions, and to query conclusions and recommendations. Careful consideration of the ideas expressed by the campus community, and report modification where warranted, ensures the general acceptance of the final document.

To avoid subsequent delays, design elements and printing needs should be established and arranged before the final self-study has been completed.

Submitting the Final Version of the Self-Study

In developing the final copy, it is a good idea for the steering committee to "roll out the dough" and remove "lumps and holes" to create a smooth, even, logical document.

Assuming that no major changes are needed after institutional review of the scope and focus of the self-study draft, steering committee members, with an editor if one has been appointed, create a final self-study document. Brevity with substance is the ideal. The self-study should be no more than 100 single-spaced pages in length. It should be logically organized, and the prose should be clear (and of similar style throughout); graphs, charts, and tables should be properly labeled and clearly associated with text information. Evidence of institutional improvement and adherence to accreditation standards should be precise and compelling.

An executive summary should preface the report. Its purpose is to provide a narrative abstract and to define clearly the type and nature of the self-study.

The self-study should be ready for distribution no later than six weeks prior to the scheduled evaluation team visit. By that time, copies of the self-study and supporting documents (including institutional catalogs, faculty and student handbooks, and other documents considered essential to understanding the self-study) should be sent directly to the chair of the evaluation team and to each member of the team. In addition, two copies of the self-study and related materials should be sent to the Commission office.

The Self-Study as a "Living Document"

The self-study process represents a significant commitment in time and other institutional resources. It also presents a unique opportunity to reflect on the institution's progress and to inform institutional plans for the future. The continuing usefulness of the self-study document depends on the clarity of its content and recommendations, as well as on its availability to institutional constituencies.

The institution may ensure continuing use of the self-study recommendations by taking such steps as:

- ✓ continuing the existence of the steering committee

- ✓ creating timelines with assignments of responsibility for accomplishing the recommendations of the self-study and the visiting team

- ✓ incorporating the recommendations into the explicit charges to already-existing committees

- ✓ using institutional research staff to support and assist implementation efforts

- ✓ hiring outside consultants.

In any event, review of implementation should be incorporated into the institution's ongoing planning and assessment activities.

7

The Accreditation Process:
From Self-Study Submission through
Commission Action and Beyond

Commission visits, actions, and reports are useful in providing the institution with external peer opinion and in assuring the public that the institution is achieving its own goals and is continuing to plan realistically for its future.

This final chapter is intended to place the self-study within the context of the range of the Commission's activity included within the full accreditation cycle. The descriptions of accreditation processes provided here should help self-study steering committee members understand what happens after the self-study has been completed and submitted. These descriptions also should provide a basic understanding of the major activities that are necessary in order to maintain institutional accreditation that is complete and inclusive.

Elements of the accreditation cycle that will be discussed in this chapter include the following:

❑ The peer review process (team visit) following completion of the self-study;

❑ Follow-up reports after Commission action;

❑ Periodic Review Reports usually completed the 5th year after self-study;

❑ Institutional Profile annual submissions;

❑ Substantive change submissions prior to occurrence of the substantive change; and

❑ The Range of Actions that the Commission can take at the time of any change or report.

The outline included here is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of accreditation processes, nor is it intended to describe every possible course of action that may be followed. Variations in process may occur depending on the individual circumstances of each member institution. For example, institutions moving from candidacy status, after being granted initial accreditation, undergo the self-study and peer review process again after five years rather than the more usual 10-year cycle.

A variety of publications by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education provide more detailed information and specifics about accreditation processes. Citations will be noted in the text. The Commission's website (located at www.msache.org also includes a listing of publications and an order form.

The Commission's staff liaison who is assigned to work with each member institution can answer questions and provide more details about the accreditation process. Questions about the specific circumstances of each member institution should be directed to this person.

The Peer Review Process

Peer review, which begins after the self-study is complete, is the process by which educators from similar organizations review the institution to assess whether the institution's self-study is realistic in its goals and methods, to confirm that the institution meets the Commission accreditation standards, and to help the institution improve by making additional suggestions. It is a thorough evaluation by peers who consider the institution's self-study and conduct a team visit. This is followed by a discussion and decision undertaken by different peers and public representatives serving on the Middle States Commission on Higher Education

Evaluation Team Review

Peer review is initiated when Commission staff nominate a team chair and identify several evaluators appropriate to the institution under review and to the self-study model selected by the institution. Several steps, as seen in Figure 14, are included in the review process:

Figure 14

1. The institution is given an opportunity to review the proposed team and must approve its composition.

2. The team chair will make a preliminary visit to discuss readiness for the evaluation team visit and to review logistics and preliminary scheduling. Prior to the preliminary visit, the institution should provide the team chair with available information including, at a minimum, the institution's catalog and a copy of the self-study design. If the self-study has been completed under the selected topics model, this preliminary visit may also include an additional reviewer. In such cases, the scope of the preliminary chair's visit may be expanded to encompass review of documentation about selected accreditation standards. (Refer to details about selected topics visits found in Chapter 2.)

3. Team members will read the self-study report and other background materials prior to the evaluation team visit.

4. The purpose of the on-site evaluation team visit is central to the peer review process. During the visit, the team gathers additional information and perspectives from faculty, students, staff, administrators, trustees, and community members. More details about the Chair's preliminary visit and the evaluation team visit can be found in a separate handbook for conducting and hosting an evaluation team visit.

The team visit is intended to validate the institution's findings in its self-study. The review is made within the context of the institution's chosen mission and goals.

At the conclusion of its visit, the evaluation team will compile a report and will recommend whether the Commission on Higher Education should accredit or reaccredit the institution. As noted in Figure 15, the team report may include commendations for significant achievements and non-binding suggestions for improvement. It may recommend action that must be taken to ensure compliance with the Commission's accreditation standards. It may also recommend follow-up activities if there is a concern about the continuing ability of the institution to meet the Commission's accreditation standards.

The institution is expected to share the self-study report and evaluation team report with the campus community, as described in Chapter 5.

Commission Action

The evaluation team's written report is reviewed by the institution for factual accuracy and then is considered by the Commission, through its Committee on Evaluation Reports. The particulars of each case are discussed fully, and the Committee decides whether to accept or modify the course of action that the evaluation team recommended. The Committee then makes a recommendation for final action by the Commission.

The Commission's final decision may include several types of action, ranging from reaffirmation of accreditation to reaffirmation with required follow-up reports. Other actions that may be taken include warning or "show cause" why accreditation should not be removed. In the event that an adverse action is taken by the Commission, the institution may invoke an appeal process. The full range of possible Commission actions can be found in Appendix B.

The action of the Commission is communicated in writing to the institution within 10 business days after a Commission meeting. This communication is delivered in the form of an action letter addressed to the institution's chief executive officer that is intended for circulation to all of the institution's constituencies.

Figure 15
Examples of Evaluation Team Commendations,
Suggestions for Improvement, and Recommended Actions

Commendations

- The evaluation team commends the institution for developing and implementing a comprehensive outcomes assessment plan.

- The institution should be commended for its open and participative planning and budgeting process.

Suggestions for Improvement

- Retention has been noted as a significant issue. In order to increase student retention, the institution may wish to complete a review of relevant services such as student advising programs. The institution may also wish to consider developing new data-gathering systems to support rretention reviews.

- One place where the strategic planning process may be less successful is in the use of institutional research data to enable judgments about the success of particular strategies. Research results are available and could be integrated into the planning process.

Recommended Actions

- In accordance with Standard 14, the institution needs to complete development of its learning outcomes assessment plan and process so that it will be able to evaluate and improve academic programs.

- The institution needs to complete a review and revision of its mission statement, which appears to be out-of-date when compared with current operations.

The action letter is accompanied by a copy of the institution's Statement of Accreditation Status (SAS). The SAS, a public information document, includes basic information about the institution and its affiliation with the Commission, and it also provides context for Commission actions. A sample Statement of Accreditation Status can be found in Appendix C. As a public information document, the SAS is provided upon request to any inquiring individual. In the future, a copy of the institution's SAS may be accessible through the the Commission web site.

Follow-up Reports

As a part of an accreditation action, the Commission may require member institutions to submit follow-up reports (progress letters, monitoring reports, or supplemental information reports). In addition, the Commission also may require a follow-up visit to an institution. Follow-up reports and visits may be required in the event that the Commission determines that there is a need for additional information about a specific area not adequately covered within the context of either the self-study, the evaluation team visit, or the periodic review report.

Because follow-up activities are tailored to the circumstances of individual institutions, there is no set format for a follow-up report. However, the scope of the report will depend on the issues specified in the Commission's letter communicating an accreditation action. The areas of coverage usually are limited to specific topics, but these should be addressed within the context of the institution as a whole because Commission's accreditation pertains to the entire institution.

Follow-up visits required by the Commission may involve a single Commission staff member, or it may involve a special visiting team. A special financial reviewer may be appointed if significant financial issues are included in the follow-up report. Staff follow-up visits may be directed, for example, when the Commission believes that the institution could benefit from a face-to-face discussion about reporting expectations of the Commission.

In cases where the Commission has directed a follow-up visit by an evaluation team, the team may be limited in number, and it may include a staff observer and a representative of the appropriate state agency. The visiting team will develop a report and formulate a recommendation for action that will be forwarded to the Commission's Committee on Follow-up/Candidate Institutions. Institutions will be provided with an opportunity to review and respond to the team's report.

After a thorough discussion of the report(s) and any accompanying materials, the Committee will forward its recommendation to the full Commission for a final decision. The Commission's action will follow the options provided in the "Range of Actions" (as previously described) and will be communicated to the institution in an action letter accompanied by the current Statement of Accreditation Status. Actions will be communicated to the institution within 10 business days after the Commission's meeting.

Periodic Review Reports

One of the principles of voluntary accreditation by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education is that peers review written reports from institutional members at least every five years, and peers conduct on-site evaluation visits at least every 10 years. Therefore, a Periodic Review Report (PRR) is usually due five years after the decennial self-study and reaffirmation of accreditation. The specific timing for PRRs may vary with the circumstances of individual institutions.

The report is intended to be a retrospective, current, and prospective analysis of the institution. In other words, it provides a review of significant developments since the decennial self-study and evaluation visit, a view of the institution at the time of the report, and the institution's plans for the future. The PRR also should demonstrate that the institution continues to meet the Commission's accreditation standards.

Most importantly, the PRR should serve as a useful planning and development tool for the institution. The preparation of a PRR, like that of a self-study, provides opportunities for constructive discussion involving all institutional constituencies and includes various points of view about recent institutional developments and current institutional issues.

Periodic review reports are considered initially by a team of two reader/reviewers and a financial reviewer selected by the Commission who will consider relevant aspects of the report. The reviewers produce a brief report, and the institution is provided with an opportunity to respond. Accumulated materials are then forwarded for consideration by the Committee on Periodic Review Reports. To ensure consistency in applying the Commission's standards, reports from institutions of similar type (e.g., community colleges or four-year public institutions) often are reviewed on the same day.

After a full discussion of each case, the Committee formulates a recommendation for action that is forwarded to the Commission for a final decision. Accreditation actions following review of the PRR may range from acceptance of the PRR and reaffirmation of accreditation to a requirement for follow-up activities or to an adverse action. In the event that an adverse action is taken, the institution has the same right of appeal as noted previously for other actions. Commission actions will be communicated by letter

accompanied by a copy of the Statement of Accreditation Status within 10 business days of the Commission meeting.

More information about PRRs can be obtained from the Commission's publication, *Handbook for Periodic Review Reports*.

Institutional Profile Updates

The Institutional Profile (IP) is an annual survey designed to collect basic data about each member or candidate institution. The IP report serves several purposes: (1) to inform the Commission and its staff about changing circumstances at each institution, (2) to provide evaluation teams and reader/reviewers with basic institutional information prior to regular or special reviews, and (3) to fulfill the U.S. Department of Education requirement that the Commission regularly monitor institutions throughout the accreditation and pre-accreditation period.

IP surveys include the following elements: (1) a general description of the institution (e.g., type of institution, affiliation, related institutions, system information, and personnel and their addresses), (2) basic data about the institution (e.g., enrollment, graduation rates, institutional finances, and instructional personnel), (3) a question inquiring about substantive changes in specified areas, and (4) additional specialized data questions as needed by the Commission.

Information about the Institutional Profile is sent to institutions annually in the winter. Instructions accompany the survey. The data collection period extends through early spring.

Substantive Change Submissions

When an institution is accredited or reaccredited, that action applies to conditions existing at the time of the Commission's decision. While the decision to modify an institution is an institutional prerogative and responsibility, the Commission is obligated to determine the effect of any substantive change on the quality, integrity, and effectiveness of the entire institution. Therefore, institutions are responsible for notifying the Commission of plans for certain important proposed or actual changes in their operations or status. The Commission needs current information about each institution in order to sustain and satisfy its accountability requirements as an accrediting agency recognized by the federal government.

A substantive change is one that:

- ♦ significantly alters the mission, goals, or objectives of an institution;

- ♦ alters the legal status, form of control, or ownership;

- ♦ establishes instruction consisting of at least 50% of a degree program in a significantly different format/method of delivery;

- ♦ establishes instruction at a new degree or credential level;

- ♦ replaces clock hours with credit hours;

- ♦ increases substantially the number of clock or credit hours awarded for successful completion of a program;

- ♦ establishes instruction constituting at least 50% of a degree program at a new geographic location;

♦ relocates the primary campus or existing branch campus; or

♦ otherwise affects significantly the institution's ability to support and to continue the support of existing and proposed programs.

Institutions submit substantive change proposals to the Commission as needed. Proposals are considered by the Commission's Committee on Substantive Change. The Commission has empowered the Committee to render final decisions on its behalf or to forward proposals to the Commission for additional review and final decision. Actions taken by either the Committee or the Commission will be forwarded to the institution in an action letter within 10 business days.

More information about Substantive Change, including the required content of a substantive change submission and the criteria for review, can be obtained from the Commission's policy statement *Substantive Change*.

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Appendix A

Mission Statement of the
Middle States Commission on Higher Education

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education is a voluntary, non-governmental, peer-based membership association dedicated to educational excellence and improvement through peer evaluation and accreditation. As a recognized leader in promoting and ensuring quality assurance and improvement in higher education, the Commission defines, maintains, and promotes educational excellence and responds creatively to a diverse, dynamic, global higher education community that is continually evolving.

The Commission supports its members in their quest for excellence and provides assurance to the general public that accredited member institutions meet its standards. The Commission achieves its purposes through assessment, peer evaluation, consultation, information gathering and sharing, cooperation, and appropriate educational activities. The Commission is committed to the principles of cooperation, flexibility, openness, and responsiveness to the needs of society and the higher education community.

Appendix B

Sample Statement of Accreditation Status

STATEMENT OF ACCREDITATION STATUS

NAME OF THE INSTITUTION
Address of Institution
City, State and Zip Code of Institution
Phone: (xxx) xxx-xxxx; Fax: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
www.xxxxx.edu

Chief Executive Officer:

System Information:

Institutional Information

Enrollment
(Headcount):
Control:
Affiliation:
Institution Type: (Carnegie Classification)
Degrees Offered:
Distance Learning: (Yes if 2 or more programs have been reviewed)
National and Specialized Accreditation: (List includes only accreditation agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.)

Instructional Locations

Branch Campuses:

Additional Locations:

Other Instructional Sites:

Accreditation Information

Status: Member since xxxx.
Last Reaffirmed: xxxx.

Most Recent Commission Action: (Includes formal language from last action letter.)

Brief History Since Last Comprehensive Evaluation: (Includes summary of all actions taken since last decennial review.)

Next Self-Study Evaluation: xxxx-xxxx.

Next Periodic Review Report: June 1, xxxx.

Date Printed: xx-xxxx-xxxx (Not necessarily updated as of this date.)

Definitions

Branch Campus: A location of an institution that is geographically apart and independent of the main campus of the institution. The location is independent if the location: offers courses in educational programs leading to a degree, certificate, or other recognized educational credential; has its own faculty and administrative or supervisory organization; and has its own budgetary and hiring authority.

Additional Location: A location, other than a branch campus, that is geographically apart from the main campus and at which the institution offers at least 50 percent of an educational program.

Other Instructional Sites: A location, other than a branch campus or additional location, at which the institution offers one or more courses for credit.