



# What is Evidence?

## A Primer for Institutions

Anthea Sweeney, J.D., Ed.D.  
Vice President for Accreditation Relations  
2015 HLC Annual Conference



HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION

# Criteria for Accreditation

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Higher Learning Commission. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Calendar, FAQs, Contact Us, and Sign In, along with social media icons for YouTube, LinkedIn, and Twitter. The main header features the HLC logo and the text "HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION A COMMISSION OF THE NORTH CENTRAL ASSOCIATION". Below the header is a search bar and a "Find Accredited Institutions" section with a text input field and a "Go!" button. A main navigation menu includes links for About HLC, Accreditation, Policies, Publications, HLC Institutions, Peer Review, Annual Conference, and Home. The "Accreditation" menu is expanded, showing sub-links for Criteria, Eligibility & Candidacy, PEAQ, AQIP, Pathways, Institutional Change, and Monitoring & Reporting. A "Quick Links" section contains links for "How Institutions are Accredited", "Directory of HLC Institutions", "Report of Actions", and "Upcoming Visits". A "Sign In" section includes links for "Assurance System" and "Peer Reviewer Data Update System". An "About the Commission" section describes the HLC's role in accrediting degree-granting post-secondary institutions in the North Central region. A "Latest News" section lists several recent updates, including institutional updates, a new president, and policy changes. A "Policy Updates" section lists adopted policies related to accreditation and assumed practices.

The screenshot shows a detailed page titled "The Criteria for Accreditation and Core Components". The page header is identical to the home page. The main content area is titled "The Criteria for Accreditation and Core Components" and includes a paragraph stating that the Commission's Board of Trustees considers clarifying modifications to the Criteria, including Assumed Practices, annually. The "The Core Components" section explains that an institution meets the Core Component if it meets the Component if: a. it is met without concerns, that is the institution meets or exceeds the expectations embodied in the Component; or b. it is met with concerns, that is the institution demonstrates the characteristics expected by the Component, but performance in relation to some aspect of the Component must be improved. The page also states that an institution does not meet the Core Component if it fails to meet the Component in its entirety or is so deficient in one or more aspects of the Component that the Component is judged not to be met. The "The Criteria for Accreditation" section explains that an institution meets the Criterion if the Criterion: a. is met without concerns, that is the institution meets or exceeds the expectations embodied in the Criterion; or b. is met with concerns, that is the institution demonstrates the characteristics expected by the Criterion, but performance in relation to some Core Components of the Criterion must be improved. The page also states that an institution does not meet the Criterion if it fails to meet the Criterion in its entirety or is so deficient in one or more Core Components of the Criterion that the Criterion is judged not to be met. The page concludes that the institution meets the Criterion only if all Core Components are met and that the Commission will grant or continue accreditation (with or without conditions or sanctions), deny accreditation, or withdraw accreditation based on the outcome of its review. A sidebar on the right contains a "More about the Criteria" section with links for "Guiding Values", "Criteria for Accreditation Effective January 1, 2013", "Assumed Practices Effective January 1, 2013", "Obligations of Affiliation Effective January 1, 2013", and "Glossary". A "Webinar" section is highlighted with a red circle, containing a link to a webinar titled "Criteria for Accreditation: Assuring Quality in Higher Education". A "Resources" section includes links for "Dual Credit Programs and Courses", "Qualified Faculty", "School of Record Guidelines", and "Two-Year Institutions Seeking to Offer the Baccalaureate Degree".



# Assurance Argument

## 1.A - Core Component 1.A

 Export/Print ▼

The institution's mission is broadly understood within the institution and guides its operations.

1. The mission statement is developed through a process suited to the nature and culture of the institution and is adopted by the governing board.
2. The institution's academic programs, student support services, and enrollment profile are consistent with its stated mission.
3. The institution's planning and budgeting priorities align with and support the mission. (This sub-component may be addressed by reference to the response to Criterion 5.C.1.)

### **Argument**

---

*There is no argument.*

### **Sources**

---

*There are no sources.*



# General Definitions of Evidence

**Merriam-Webster:** an outward sign; something that furnishes proof.

**Oxford:** the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid.

**Black's Law:** any matter of fact that a party ... offers to prove or disprove an issue in a case.



# Why Evidence is Important

The Commission's ability to adequately assure institutional quality is highly dependent on:

- Institutions' voluntary participation in periodic evaluations;
- Institutions being candid, transparent and forthcoming in their dealings with HLC including in their reports and responses; and
- Peer reviewers' findings which are based almost entirely on the evidence institutions present.

Absence of evidence can have adverse effects.



# Hierarchies of Evidence

## **Black's Law: "Clear Evidence"**

Evidence which is positive, precise and explicit, as opposed to ambiguous, equivocal, or contradictory, and which tends directly to establish the point to which it is adduced, instead of leaving it a matter of conjecture or presumption.

Example: To prove the University President was duly appointed by the Board, clear evidence would be a Board resolution or Board minutes showing a motion to hire said president carried following a vote by the appropriate number of Board members per the Board's by-laws.



# Hierarchies of Evidence

## **Black's Law: "Corroborating Evidence"**

Evidence supplementary to that already given and tending to strengthen or confirm it; additional evidence of a different character to the same point.

Example: In the same example to prove the University President was duly appointed by the Board, an offer letter addressed to the incumbent and signed by the Chair of the Board of Trustees would be corroborating evidence.



# Hierarchies of Evidence

## **Black's Law:** “Circumstantial Evidence”

Evidence which inferentially proves the principal fact by establishing a condition of surrounding circumstances, whose existence is a premise from which the existence of the principal fact may be concluded by laws of reasoning. Never sufficient on its own.

Example: Using the same example, a letter addressed to the Chair of the Board, signed by the University President accepting the presidential appointment would be circumstantial evidence.





# Consensus on Substance

## Teams triangulate the issues by:

- Gathering and comparing evidence on the same point from multiple sources at the institution.
- Remembering that regardless of assigned roles during the visit, different members of the team may have information bearing on the same point.
- Engaging in a discussion and trying to come to a consensus on what exactly is known about the institution based on evidence. What does the pattern of evidence demonstrate factually?



# Consensus on Substance

## Teams discuss the Criteria and Core Components:

- Identify all core components related to each particular nexus of facts.
- Discuss what the underlying principle is concerning each relevant core component.
- Strive for consensus on what each core component means, independent of this visit.



# Developing a Finding

## Teams Analyze the Data:

- Once the team is clear on what is known about the institution and what the core components signify, it views the particulars about this institution through the lens of the Criteria and Core Components.
- This is the earliest juncture at which teams are trained to identify whether one or more core components are met, met with concerns or not met. Anytime prior to this is premature.



# Developing a Finding

## Conclusions (“Team Determinations” or “Findings”):

- The team clearly identifies which Core Components are met, which are met with concerns (if any) and which are not met (if any).
- For this, a shared understanding of the Commission’s rubric is also essential.



# Understanding the Rubric

## What these terms mean:

- **“Met”** – the institution is in compliance with the Core Component and has a satisfactory approach or status with respect to this issue.
- Any opportunities for improvement are clearly within the organization’s capacity without any need for Commission intervention or follow-up.
- Teams are encouraged to differentiate “consultative advice” from bona fide “concerns.”



# Understanding the Rubric

- **“Met with Concerns”** – the institution is in compliance with the Core Component, but its performance in this area is less than satisfactory based on lingering concerns with its approach or results.
- **“Concerns”** indicate improvements requiring some form of Commission follow-up to be assured. (e.g. interim reports, focused visits)
- In severe cases, the institution may be **“at risk of non-compliance”** with this Core Component.



# Understanding the Rubric

- **“Not Met”**– the institution is out of compliance with the Core Component. Its approach or status with respect to this issue, however well-intentioned, is unsatisfactory.
- Because a finding of “not met” on a Core Component constitutes non-compliance, this may indicate problems with related Assumed Practices. Generally, teams will examine the institution’s compliance with the related Assumed Practices and contact the liaison if one or more practices are also “not met.”



# How the Rubric Works

In order for a Criterion to be met, all its Core Components must also be met.

If a single Core Component is met with concerns, the entire Criterion is also met with concerns.

If a single Core Component is not met, the entire Criterion is also not met.

Team's establish these findings based on evidence institutions present.





# Consequences after Conclusions

- Reviewers are encouraged to avoid reverse engineering conclusions either to ensure, or to avoid, certain consequences.
- The evidence, not the potential consequences, drive peer reviewers' conclusions regarding the institution's performance.
- Reviewers consider the consequences, **but only after** drawing conclusions with the prescribed rubric. This discipline ensures integrity of the Commission's process.



# Options for Recommendations

Recommendations are driven entirely by the findings, not the other way around.

Commission policy defines which options are available to teams based on the findings they articulate.



# Options in a Comprehensive Review

If all Core Components are “**met,**” then the team will simply recommend **Continued Accreditation.**

If there is a combination of Core Components that are “**met**” and “**met with concerns,**” but the issues leading to the latter finding are **not grave,** then the team will recommend **Continued Accreditation with some form of interim monitoring,** whether in the form of an interim report or a focused visit.



# Options in a Comprehensive Review

If one or more Core Components are "**met with concerns**," but the issues leading to this finding are **grave** and place the institution "**at risk of being out of compliance**," this language defines the standard for the sanction of Notice and a recommendation for **Notice** will follow.



# Options in a Comprehensive Review

If one or more Core Components are "**not met**," then the institution is clearly **out of compliance** and the team has no other options but to

indicate that either

**a) Probation** should apply OR for very severe cases,

**b) Accreditation** should

be **withdrawn**.

(N.B. Teams do not have authority to recommend "Show Cause").



# Importance of Evidence

The Assurance Filing, which consists of the Assurance Argument and the Evidence File, must be validated through a thorough review of the institution in the context of an on-site visit.

The successful outcome of each evaluation is highly dependent both on the institution's ability a) to establish strong patterns of evidence demonstrating compliance with the Criteria in the ordinary course of its operations and b) skillfully marshal that evidence in the context of a finite evaluation.



# More Information on Criteria for Accreditation

[www.hlcommission.org](http://www.hlcommission.org)

More details can be found under the “Accreditation”  
and “Policies” menus.

