



The Higher Learning Commission

A Commission of the  
North Central Association  
of Colleges and Schools



## Institutional Accreditation: An Overview

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Serving the  
common good  
by assuring and  
advancing  
the quality of  
higher learning

# The Higher Learning Commission

## Institutional Accreditation: An Overview



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The information contained in this document is accurate as of March 1, 2007.

Note: At the time of this publication, it appears likely that changing federal expectations may cause the Commission to change some aspects of its accreditation processes. Institutions should consult the Commission office and/or its Web site for the most current policies and procedures.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the United States, schools and colleges voluntarily seek accreditation from nongovernmental bodies. There are two types of educational accreditation: institutional and specialized.

Institutional accreditation is provided by regional and national associations of schools and colleges. There are six regional associations, each named after the region in which it operates (Middle States, New England, North Central, Northwest, Southern, Western). The regional associations are independent of one another, but they cooperate extensively and acknowledge one another's accreditation. Several national associations focus on particular kinds of institutions (for example, trade and technical colleges, and religious colleges and universities). An institutional accrediting agency evaluates an entire educational organization in terms of its mission and the agency's standards or criteria. It accredits the organization as a whole. Besides assessing formal educational activities, it evaluates such things as governance and administration, financial stability, admissions and student services, institutional resources, student learning, institutional effectiveness, and relationships with internal and external constituencies.

A specialized accrediting body evaluates particular units, schools, or programs within an organization. Specialized accreditation, also called program accreditation, is often associated with national professional associations, such as those for engineering, medicine, and law, or with specific disciplines, such as business, teacher education, psychology, or social work.

## THE NORTH CENTRAL ASSOCIATION

The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools was founded in 1895 for the purpose of establishing close relations between the colleges and secondary schools of the region. Throughout its history, the Association has been committed to the improvement of education at all levels through evaluation and accreditation. Today, the Association is a membership organization of colleges and schools in nineteen states (Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming), Department of Defense schools, and the schools and colleges in sovereign U.S. tribal nations within the nineteen states. The Association controls the use of its name, logo, and intellectual property.

Two independent corporations also hold membership in the Association. The Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (CASI), headquartered in Tempe, Arizona, accredits its schools offering education at the kindergarten through



twelfth-grade levels as well as non-degree-granting post-secondary schools. CASI works extensively through state committees throughout the region. The Higher Learning Commission, located in Chicago, accredits degree-granting organizations of higher education. The two Commissions are legally empowered to conduct accrediting activities for educational organizations.

## ■ THE HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION

In June 2000, the Commission adopted new statements of mission, vision, values, and strategic priorities. The Commission's mission statement is succinct, yet directive:

**Serving the common good by  
assuring and advancing the quality of higher learning**

The Commission's work is guided by the core values of quality, integrity, innovation, diversity, inclusiveness, service, collaboration, and learning, each of which is of equal weight and importance. The Commission's vision is to be known for its distinctive strengths of integrity, flexibility, creativity, responsiveness, and risk-taking, and for its commitment to work for the common good of society. Visit the Commission's Web site for additional information on the mission, vision, values, and strategic priorities.

## ■ COMMISSION PERSONNEL

Several groups conduct the Commission's work.

- Full-time **staff members** in the Commission office are responsible for implementing the Commission's programs and policies and coordinating all of its activities.
- More than a thousand carefully selected and trained educators, from all types of accredited colleges and universities throughout the North Central region, serve in the Commission's **Peer Review Corps**. Eligibility Reviewers support the Eligibility Process for nonaffiliated organizations seeking to affiliate with the Commission. **Consultant-Evaluators** serve the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ) and the Candidacy Program as team members and team chairs on evaluation visits to organizations. AQIP Reviewers serve the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP).
- The **Accreditation Review Council** (ARC) includes at least sixty individuals who have been selected by the Board of Trustees to participate in the Commission's review processes. Most ARC members are experienced Consultant-Evaluators; some are representatives of the public.



- The twenty-six-member **Institutional Actions Council** (IAC) reviews institutional evaluations referred by other decision-making bodies and staff members; it makes accrediting decisions. Twenty members are experienced peer reviewers; six are representatives of the public.
- The **Board of Trustees** is the policy-making body of the Commission. Member organizations elect between fifteen and twenty-one Board members. One-seventh are representatives of the public; the rest are from affiliated organizations. The business meetings of the Board of Trustees are open to the public. The Commission posts information about upcoming meetings on its Web site.

## ■ COMMISSION PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

The Commission offers an extensive array of programs and services.

- Each affiliated organization is assigned a Commission staff liaison who provides assistance, monitors the organization, and offers other types of counsel.
- To inform all of its constituencies, the Commission publishes in print and electronically a variety of materials, including the *Handbook of Accreditation*, which describes the policies and procedures of the accreditation process; the *Exchanges* newsletter; and various other documents and articles.
- The Commission offers an extensive program on self-study, evaluation, and institutional improvement at its Annual Meeting held each spring in Chicago; it publishes *A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement*, an annual volume of papers from the meeting.
- The Commission's Web site provides information about the Commission, its staff, its policies, and its programs.

## ■ FORMS OF AFFILIATION

Colleges and universities are affiliated with the Commission in one of two ways: by gaining and maintaining accredited status, which carries membership in the Commission and in the Association, or by gaining and maintaining candidate status, which is a limited-term, preaccredited status. Currently, nearly a thousand organizations are affiliated with the Commission.



## THE EVALUATION PROCESS

The Commission provides two programs for maintaining accredited status: the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ) and the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP).

PEAQ employs a five-step comprehensive evaluation process to determine continued accredited status.

- The organization engages in a self-study process for approximately two years and prepares a report of its findings in accordance with Commission expectations.
- The Commission sends an evaluation team of Consultant-Evaluators to conduct a comprehensive visit for continued accreditation and to write a report containing the team's recommendations.
- The documents relating to the comprehensive visit are reviewed by a Readers Panel or, in some situations, a Review Committee.
- The IAC takes action on the Readers Panel's recommendation. (If a Review Committee reviewed the visit, the Review Committee takes action.)
- The Board of Trustees validates the work of IAC or a Review Committee, finalizing the action.

Evaluations for initial and continued candidacy and initial accreditation also follow the processes outlined above.

The Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) provides an alternative evaluation process for organizations already accredited by the Commission. AQIP is structured around quality improvement principles and processes and involves a structured set of goal-setting, networking, and accountability activities. AQIP employs these steps to reaffirm an organization's accredited status.

- The organization during a seven year period engages in all AQIP processes, including Strategy Forums, Annual Updates, Systems Portfolio Appraisals, visit to review U.S. Department of Education compliance issues.
- An AQIP Review Panel examines the collective history of the organization's interaction with AQIP and the Commission (i.e., reports of the various processes and activities, organizational indicators, current Systems Portfolio) to determine whether this evidence demonstrates compliance with the Commission's Criteria for Accreditation. The Panel may seek and obtain additional information before making its recommendation.

- The IAC takes action on the Panel's recommendation regarding both reaffirmation of accreditation and continuing AQIP participation.
- The Board of Trustees validates the action.

## THE CRITERIA FOR ACCREDITATION

The Criteria for Accreditation are organized under five major headings. Each Criterion has three elements: Criterion Statement, Core Components, and Examples of Evidence. The **Criteria Statements** define necessary attributes of an organization accredited by the Commission. An organization must be judged to have met each of the Criteria to merit accreditation. An organization addresses each **Core Component** as it presents reasonable and representative evidence of meeting a Criterion. **The Examples of Evidence** illustrate the types of evidence an organization might present in addressing a Core Component.

The Criteria are intentionally general so that accreditation decisions focus on the particulars of each organization, rather than on trying to make it fit a preestablished mold. The widely different purposes and scopes of colleges and universities demand criteria that are broad enough to encompass diversity and support innovation, but clear enough to ensure acceptable quality.

The Criteria Statements and Core Components are presented here. Visit the Commission's Web site to view the Examples of Evidence.

**CRITERION ONE: MISSION AND INTEGRITY. The organization operates with integrity to ensure the fulfillment of its mission through structures and processes that involve the board, administration, faculty, staff, and students.**

- 1a. The organization's mission documents are clear and articulate publicly the organization's commitments.
- 1b. In its mission documents, the organization recognizes the diversity of its learners, other constituencies, and the greater society it serves.
- 1c. Understanding of and support for the mission pervade the organization.
- 1d. The organization's governance and administrative structures promote effective leadership and support collaborative processes that enable the organization to fulfill its mission.
- 1e. The organization upholds and protects its integrity.

**CRITERION TWO: PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE.** The organization's allocation of resources and its processes for evaluation and planning demonstrate its capacity to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its education, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

- 2a. The organization realistically prepares for a future shaped by multiple societal and economic trends.
- 2b. The organization's resource base supports its educational programs and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future.
- 2c. The organization's ongoing evaluation and assessment processes provide reliable evidence of institutional effectiveness that clearly informs strategies for continuous improvement.
- 2d. All levels of planning align with the organization's mission, thereby enhancing its capacity to fulfill that mission.

**CRITERION THREE: STUDENT LEARNING AND EFFECTIVE TEACHING.** The organization provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission.

- 3a. The organization's goals for student learning outcomes are clearly stated for each educational program and make effective assessment possible.
- 3b. The organization values and supports effective teaching.
- 3c. The organization creates effective learning environments.
- 3d. The organization's learning resources support student learning and effective teaching.

**CRITERION FOUR: ACQUISITION, DISCOVERY, AND APPLICATION OF KNOWLEDGE.** The organization promotes a life of learning for its faculty, administration, staff, and students by fostering and supporting inquiry, creativity, practice, and social responsibility in ways consistent with its mission.

- 4a. The organization demonstrates, through the actions of its board, administrators, students, faculty, and staff, that it values a life of learning.
- 4b. The organization demonstrates that acquisition of a breadth of knowledge and skills and the exercise of intellectual inquiry are integral to its educational programs.

- 4c. The organization assesses the usefulness of its curricula to students who will live and work in a global, diverse, and technological society.
- 4d. The organization provides support to ensure that faculty, students, and staff acquire, discover, and apply knowledge responsibly.

**CRITERION FIVE: ENGAGEMENT AND SERVICE.** As called for by its mission, the organization identifies its constituencies and serves them in ways both value.

- 5a. The organization learns from the constituencies it serves and analyzes its capacity to serve their needs and expectations.
- 5b. The organization has the capacity and the commitment to engage with its identified constituencies and communities.
- 5c. The organization demonstrates its responsiveness to those constituencies that depend on it for service.
- 5d. Internal and external constituencies value the services the organization provides.

## ■ SEEKING INITIAL STATUS

An organization seeking initial status with the Commission participates in the Eligibility Process, the goal of which is to determine whether the organization is sufficiently prepared for a team visit. Nonaffiliated organizations interested in seeking initial status may contact the Commission office to request an Preliminary Information Form (PIF) packet, which provides information on seeking affiliation, including costs and a sample timetable. The Commission offers special programming at its Annual Meeting for nonaffiliated organizations.

## ■ THE CANDIDACY PROGRAM

Candidacy is a preaccreditation status. It is the recommended approach for most non-affiliated organizations seeking initial affiliation. In its self-study for initial candidacy, an organization demonstrates that it meets the Eligibility Requirements, documents the degree to which it meets the Criteria for Accreditation, and provides the plan it has designed for its candidacy period. Throughout the candidacy period, teams evaluate whether the college or university is progressively demonstrating the evidence needed to achieve accredited status by the end of the four-year candidacy period.

## OBLIGATIONS OF AFFILIATION

In addition to meeting the Criteria for Accreditation or the requirements of the Candidacy Program, all affiliated organizations voluntarily agree to meet obligations of affiliation, including undergoing periodic reviews, submitting required reports, completing annual reports, hosting other required or requested visits, and paying dues and fees.

Every organization must have its accreditation reaffirmed not later than five years after it has been initially granted and not later than ten years following each subsequent reaffirmation. Candidate organizations are evaluated biennially. Accredited status is not for a specific period of time but is a continuing relationship with the Commission that is subject to periodic review. The Commission may require focused visits or reports between comprehensive visits; it regularly examines organizational annual reports and other information to see whether changes have occurred (or are anticipated) that would necessitate a change in the timing of the next evaluation. In addition, an organization is required to notify the Commission in writing before initiating any change that might alter its relationship with the Commission and to obtain approval before initiating the change.

## INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO THE PUBLIC

The Commission publishes the names of affiliated organizations on its Web site. In certain situations, the Commission may issue a Public Disclosure Notice to explain a particular relationship with an organization. The Commission maintains a Statement of Affiliation Status (SAS) and an Organizational Profile (OP) on each affiliated organization. The SAS contains a summary of the organization's official relationship with the Commission. The OP contains information on organizational characteristics taken from the annual report provided by each organization to the Commission. In the future, the Commission will provide public access to SAS and OP information through its Web site.

## COMPLAINTS AGAINST AN AFFILIATED ORGANIZATION

People who are concerned about conditions at or decisions made by a college or university sometimes address their complaints to the Commission. If the complaint relates to a dispute between a student and a faculty member, or a faculty member and an administrator, or even students and administrators over such issues as billing, grading, financial aid, termination of employment, and contract interpretation, the Commission considers it to be an individual dispute between the parties.

Such disputes are best resolved by the parties through a campus ombudsman or grievance process or, failing such resolution, through a private mediator or the legal system. To help further resolution of such individual disputes, the Commission will, with the consent of the complainant, forward the complaint to the institution but will not conduct any formal inquiry or follow-up subsequent to forwarding the complaint. A complainant is best served by bringing allegations of criminal conduct, such as fraud or conspiracy, to the attention of the state attorney general or the local U.S. attorney, who has the legal authority to conduct an appropriate and thorough investigation and bring criminal charges if appropriate. As a private agency the Commission has no such investigatory or prosecutorial authority.

In some cases, the complaint may indicate problems in the aggregate with organizational behavior or policies. If the Commission determines that such problems appear to be related to its expectations of an accredited or affiliated organization as outlined in the Commission's accrediting standards and its policies, the Commission will conduct an inquiry, asking the CEO of the institution to respond to the broad issues, to describe its own internal inquiry into the matter, and to outline any remedial actions it has undertaken. With the complainant's permission, the Commission will forward the complaint and supporting documentation to the institution as a part of its inquiry.

The Commission encourages anyone considering filing a complaint to review the Commission's Web site for more information about the appropriate steps for filing a complaint and alternative strategies for resolving a dispute with an organization.

## COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE COMMISSION

The Commission encourages feedback from all of its stakeholders. Such exchanges provide valuable information for the improvement of Commission requirements, policies, and processes. Because individuals or groups may choose to provide their comments in the form of complaints, the Board has adopted a policy on formal complaints against the Commission.

A formal complaint against the Commission must involve issues broader than concern about a specific institutional action or a specific team. The document must state clearly the nature of the complaint, and it must be signed. The executive director, on behalf of the Commission, responds to each complaint made against the Commission within thirty days; reports regularly to the Board of Trustees on the nature and disposition of complaints; and compiles an annual list, available to the public on request, that summarizes the complaints and

their dispositions. Upon advice of counsel, the Commission retains the right to withhold public disclosure of information if potential legal action is involved.

The Commission office advises the complainant of the Commission's disposition of the complaint.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### Q. What is accreditation?

A. Accreditation by the Commission and by other nationally recognized agencies provides assurance to the public, in particular to prospective students, that an organization has been found to meet the agency's clearly stated requirements and criteria and that there are reasonable grounds for believing that it will continue to meet them.

### Q. What is the value of accreditation?

A. Accreditation provides both public certification of acceptable institutional quality and an opportunity and incentive for self-improvement in the accredited organization. The Commission reaches the conclusion that a college or university meets the Criteria only after the organization opens itself to outside examination by experienced evaluators familiar with accrediting requirements and with higher education. The process of accreditation provides the accredited organization with an opportunity for critical self-analysis leading to improvement in quality and for consultation and advice from persons from other organizations.

### Q. What is the difference between regional accreditation and state licensure?

A. While many states have established regulations that must be met before an educational organization may operate, in most states such regulations represent a minimum basis for protection of students. State authorization should not be confused with institutional or specialized accreditation. To operate legally, a college or university may need state authorization, but it does not necessarily have to be accredited by an institutional or specialized accrediting association. In fact, an organization must have the appropriate authorization by a state to operate before it can seek affiliation with the Commission.

### Q. Why doesn't the Commission rank colleges?

A. Various publications base ranking on specific numerical details (such as size, tuition, and endowment); faculty selectivity; and/or public opinion. The purpose of accreditation is to provide public assurance of educational quality and institutional integrity. It is important to remember that colleges and universities differ from one

another in significant ways, including mission, programs offered, and students served. Therefore, the important issue for each student is whether the college meets his or her needs. Published rankings are one source of information, but they should not be the only source.

### Q. Why doesn't the Commission recommend colleges to students?

A. Selection of a college is an individual decision. There are so many different types of colleges and universities (small, large, single-program, multiple-program, urban, rural, public, private) that matching a student's interests and abilities to the characteristics of a college requires detailed information about the student and the organization. Information about colleges may be found in books and directories (available in many libraries), and students are advised to consult with their secondary school counselors or advisers. The admissions officers of colleges often are able to provide assistance, particularly information about the organization they represent. Increasingly, useful college information can be found on the Internet. The information available from the Commission is limited to that describing the organization's status with the Commission.

### Q. Does accreditation include distance education courses and programs?

A. Yes. The Commission accredits many organizations that offer courses and programs through various methods of distance delivery. Since the Commission accredits organizations rather than individual programs, it does not maintain listings of such programs. The Commission does provide a list of Internet resources on distance education on its Web site. In addition, the regional associations have developed "Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs" for those organizations that offer courses or programs through distance delivery (available on the Commission's Web site).

### Q. Does accreditation guarantee that credits and degrees can be transferred to another college or university?

A. No. The college or university to which the student has applied determines transferability of credits and degrees. Transferability depends on the college or university at which credits or degrees were earned, how well the credits mesh with the curriculum offered by the school to which the student wishes to transfer, and how well the student did in the courses. Many organizations choose to consider the accredited status of the college at which the credit or degree was earned as one factor in the transfer decision. Some have specific agreements with other colleges or universities guaranteeing transfer of credits. Organizations should be prepared to explain their institutional policies on transfer and the factors in an individual transfer decision.

Students should be skeptical of any school that makes unqualified assertions that its credits will transfer to all other schools. Anyone planning to transfer credits should, at the earliest opportunity, consult the receiving organization about the transfer—before taking the courses for transfer, if possible.

**Q. Does candidacy assure accreditation?**

- A. No. The Commission does not grant candidacy to an organization unless it has strong evidence that the college or university can achieve accreditation within the candidacy period. However, attainment of candidacy does not automatically assure eventual accreditation. The maximum length of candidacy is four years.

**Q. What is the difference between institutional accreditation and program accreditation?**

- A. Institutional accreditation speaks to the overall quality of the organization without making judgments about specific programs. Institutional accreditation is accreditation of all programs, sites, and methods of delivery. The accreditation of individual programs, such as those preparing students to practice a profession, is carried out by specialized or program accrediting bodies that apply specific standards for curriculum and course content.

The Commission does not maintain lists of programs offered by its accredited organizations. Each specialized accrediting body publishes a list of programs it accredits. This information also is shown in the annual directories, *Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education*, published by the American Council on Education, and *Higher Education Directory*, published by Higher Education Publications, which are available in many libraries. The National Center for Education Statistics also provides an online tool, COOL (College Opportunities Online), that contains program and other information (<http://www.nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cool/>). College catalogs usually note all institutional and program accreditations.

**Q. How can a regional agency accredit an educational site outside its regional borders?**

- A. It has been long-standing practice to accredit colleges and universities as total units, no matter where they operate. The regional associations share a definition of a separately accreditable site; and in 2000, they initiated a collaborative evaluation process for organizations operating physical instructional sites in more than one region.

**Q. Who evaluates the Commission?**

- A. The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a national, non-governmental organization that provides recognition of accrediting bodies. The Commission's CHEA recognition was last confirmed in 2002.

In addition, the United States Department of Education maintains a list of accrediting agencies determined to be “reliable authorities as to the quality of training offered by educational institutions and programs.” The list serves as one of the bases for the federal government's determination of institutional eligibility for participation in federally funded programs, including Title IV student financial aid. To appear on the list, an accrediting body must demonstrate its compliance with regulations established in accordance with the Higher Education Act. The Secretary of Education reviews the status of accrediting bodies on the list on a regular schedule. The Commission has been listed by the Secretary of Education (or a predecessor officer) since 1952, when the list was first published. Its most recent renewal of recognition was in 2003.

CHEA and USDE recognition processes evaluate the effectiveness of the Commission's ongoing self-evaluation program. The Commission evaluates its processes in a variety of ways.

- Participants provide routine evaluation of accreditation processes.
- Consultant-evaluators and organizations evaluate team performance.
- Organizations and others respond to surveys on the quality of programs and services.
- Focus groups and task forces address specific issues and challenges.
- Stakeholders share comments through Commission listening opportunities.

## ■ FOR MORE INFORMATION

For further information about accreditation in the North Central region, write or call the appropriate Commission office.

*For organizations of higher education:*

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30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400  
Chicago, Illinois 60602-2504  
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<http://www.ncahlc.org>

For elementary and secondary schools:

Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement  
Arizona State University  
P. O. Box 871008  
Tempe, Arizona 85287-1008  
(800) 525-9517 or (480) 773-6900  
E-mail: [nca@ncacasi.org](mailto:nca@ncacasi.org)  
<http://www.ncacasi.org>

For further information about institutional and specialized accreditation (including names and addresses of accrediting bodies) write or call:

Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)  
One Dupont Circle, Suite 510  
Washington D.C. 20036-1136  
(202) 955-6126  
Fax: (202) 955-6129; E-mail: [chea@chea.org](mailto:chea@chea.org)  
<http://www.chea.org>

## PUBLICATIONS

These are some of the publications available from the Commission. Visit the Commission's Web site for the current listing and order form.

- *Handbook of Accreditation*. This publication is addressed to affiliated organizations and those seeking affiliation. It provides a useful overview of the Commission as well as basic introductions to the various programs for seeking, reaffirming, and maintaining affiliation. It calls attention to good practices and includes numerous references to other resources.
- *A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement*. This annual compilation of papers from the Commission's Annual Meeting program provides a wealth of information from the perspective of affiliated organizations on such topics as assessment of student learning, quality, planning, partnerships, technology, general education, and self-study.
- *Institutional Accreditation: An Overview*. This brochure provides general information about the accreditation of higher learning organizations by The Higher Learning Commission.

## ON THE COMMISSION'S WEB SITE

The Commission's Web site is designed to be accessible using any major Web browser on any platform. Check the site for the most current information as well as for an increasing variety of resources.

- Policy books and bylaws
- Commission calendars
- Rosters of decision-makers and staff
- Financial information, including schedules of dues and fees and audited financial statements
- Information about affiliated organizations
- Procedural documents to support the Eligibility Process, the Candidacy Program, and the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality
- Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) Web site
- Peer Reviewer application forms and Peer Reviewer Corps supporting documents
- Annual Meeting information and registration forms
- Annual Report on Organizational Information and Operational Indicators
- Resources on assessment of student learning
- Policies and government page
- Information on current and recent Commission projects
- Selected Commission publications and ordering information
- Guidelines and good practices

<http://www.ncahlc.org>



Additional copies can be ordered for \$1.50 from:

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