

Accrediting Agencies Approved for Florida College System Institutions

Introduction

Pursuant to section (s.) 1008.47, Florida Statutes (F.S.), Florida College System (FCS) institutions under s. 1000.21(3), F.S., must seek institutional accreditation from a State Board of Education (SBOE)-identified accreditor in the year following reaffirmation or fifth-year review by their current accrediting agencies.

Effective April 19, 2022, FCS institutions and State University System (SUS) institutions are prohibited from being accredited by the same accrediting agency or association for consecutive accreditation cycles. This prohibition will expire on December 31, 2032. Coupled with the elimination of the state mandate in statute for public institutions to be accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), the prohibition implements 2020 U.S. Department of Education (USED) regulatory changes that eliminated distinctions between regional and national accreditors, and allows institutions to seek accreditation from an agency best suited to their mission and goals.

Background

In the United States, accreditation is a process by which peers evaluate the extent to which postsecondary institutions are maintaining high levels of quality based on a defined set of standards established by the membership. Accrediting agencies and associations are non-governmental entities that the USED entrusts to ensure academic quality at postsecondary institutions at which federal financial aid funds may be used. USED recognizes two types of educational accreditation: 1) institutional accreditation, which applies to an entire institution, and 2) specialized or programmatic accreditation, which typically applies to programs, departments, or schools that are parts of an institution.

In order to receive federal student aid funds (e.g., Federal Pell grant, Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education Grant, Direct Subsidized Loans, etc.), students must be enrolled at a postsecondary institution that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency, is authorized by the state in which the institution is located, and has received approval from the USED through a program participation agreement. Federal law requires each accrediting agency to establish standards for accreditation that may be used to affirm institutional quality. Minimally, all USED-recognized accrediting agencies or associations must establish standards for:

- Student success, in relation to the institution's mission, including as applicable, course completion, passage of state licensing examinations, and job placement rates.
- Curriculum.
- Faculty.

- Facilities, equipment, and supplies.
- Fiscal and administrative capacity as appropriate to the specified scale of operations.
- Student support services.
- Recruiting and admissions practices, academic calendars, catalogs, publications, grading, and advertising.
- Measures of program length and the objectives of the degrees or credentials offered.
- Record of student complaints received by, or available, to the agency.
- Record of compliance with the institution's responsibilities under title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, based on the most recent loan default data, the results of financial or compliance audits, program reviews, and any other information provided by USED.

To be an agency recognized by USED, the Higher Education Act and Code of Federal Regulations specify that accrediting agencies or associations must:

- Consistently apply and enforce standards that ensure the education programs offered are of sufficient quality to meet the stated objective for which they are offered.
- Use review standards that assess student achievement in relation to the institution's mission, including, as applicable, course completion, passage of state licensing examinations, and job placement rates.
- Evaluate, among other considerations, an institution's or program's curricula, faculty, facilities, and fiscal and administrative capacity.
- Meet required operating and due process procedures with respect to the institutions and programs they accredit.

Again, prior to 2020, USED distinguished regional accreditors, which operated in specific regions of the country, from national accreditors. In 2020, USED revised federal regulations to eliminate distinctions between regional and national accreditors, given that all accreditors are held to the same standards. With the removal of geographic boundaries, postsecondary institutions now have additional options for selecting their accrediting bodies, which results in increased opportunity for innovation, flexibility, and efficiency in achieving high standards for student success.

Research

As of July 2022, USED recognizes 38 institutional accrediting agencies whose member institutions may establish eligibility to participate in federal financial aid programs:

1. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics
2. Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools
3. Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Herbal Medicine

4. Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing, Inc.
5. Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges
6. Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training
7. Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools
8. American Bar Association, Council of the Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar
9. American Board of Funeral Service Education, Committee on Accreditation
10. American Osteopathic Association, Commission on Osteopathic College Accreditation
11. American Podiatric Medical Association, Council on Podiatric Medical Education
12. The Association for Biblical Higher Education, Commission on Accreditation
13. Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools, Accreditation Commission
14. Association of Institutions of Jewish Studies
15. Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools
16. Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation
17. Council on Accreditation of Nurse Anesthesia Educational Programs
18. The Council on Chiropractic Education, Commission on Accreditation
19. Council on Occupational Education
20. Distance Education Accrediting Commission
21. Higher Learning Commission
22. Joint Review Committee on Education in Radiologic Technology
23. Middle States Commission on Higher Education
24. Middle States Commission on Secondary Schools
25. Midwifery Education Accreditation Council
26. Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education
27. National Accrediting Commission of Career Arts and Sciences, Inc.
28. National Association of Schools of Art and Design, Commission on Accreditation
29. National Association of Schools of Dance, Commission on Accreditation
30. National Association of Schools of Music, Commission on Accreditation
31. National Association of Schools of Theatre, Commission on Accreditation
32. New England Commission of Higher Education
33. New York State Board of Regents, and the Commissioner of Education
34. Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
35. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges
36. Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools, Accreditation Commission
37. WASC Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges
38. WASC Senior College and University Commission

Both FCS and SUS staff reviewed the 38 recognized agencies. The majority were removed from consideration based on the scope of institutional membership being limited to: secondary or adult schools; private postsecondary institutions; career and technical education/vocational institutions; artistic units, dance units, musical units, etc.; or religious-affiliated institutions. In short, research

yielded that the majority of these accreditation agencies fell outside the scope/mission of all FCS and SUS institutions.

Upon removal of these agencies that were not suited for Florida's colleges and universities, five (5) accrediting agencies remained for a more thorough review:

1. Higher Learning Commission (HLC)
2. Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
3. Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)
4. New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE)
5. Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)

Summary of Findings & Criteria for Selection

As part of the review, both Chancellors of the FCS and SUS and staff collaborated in a four-step process for evaluating these five agencies:

1. A series of introductory phone calls with the executive directors of the five formerly regional accrediting associations to discuss the implementation of (s.) 1008.47, F.S.;
2. Follow up discussions with the five accrediting associations regarding Florida-specific questions created by FCS, SUS, and college and university staff;
3. Detailed interviews with accreditation agency staff focused on the following topic areas/criteria:
 - Quality of Standards
 - Accreditation Agency's Fit / Alignment to Institutional Mission (with special focus on articulation and Florida's 2+2 system)
 - Ability to Strengthen FCS and SUS Institutional Quality
 - Cost
 - Timeline for Accreditation
4. The development of two matrices for evaluation and analysis: 1) for formulation of the Board's list, a high level essential information chart to compare and contrast agencies to determine their inclusion on the best fit list and 2) for use later by institutions in best fit decision-making, a detailed comparison chart of each of the SACSCOC standards and related standards from the five agencies.

Importantly, as part of the review, FCS and SUS staff college and university institutional representatives (e.g., chief academic officers, institutional research vice presidents, etc.) to

evaluate each remaining agency’s suitability for Florida based on these matrices. Institutional buy-in and excitement remained a critical aspect of FCS and SUS staff’s evaluation.

The following represents a summary of the five accrediting agencies that remained for a more thorough review.

Higher Learning Commission (HLC)

Cycle	10-year cycle with reviews after four (4) years
Current Membership	Roughly 1,000 degree-granting institutions in states including AR, AZ, CO, IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, OH, OK, SD, WI, WV
Process	There is an accelerated/expedited process for institutions in good standing with another regional accreditor. The typical timeframe for an institution in good standing to be reviewed, approved, and accredited is roughly within 18 months of application.
Standards	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mission 2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct 3. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support 4. Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement 5. Institutional Effectiveness, Resources, and Planning
Recommendation	High Learning Commission Staff provided information that confirms their suitability for Florida institutions. Recommend including HLC on the list suitable for Florida institutions.

Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)

Cycle:	Eight (8) year cycle with reviews after four (4) years
Current Membership:	Roughly 525 degree-granting institutions in states including DE, the District of Columbia, MD, NJ, NY, PA, and other geographies
Process:	There is not currently an accelerated/expedited process for institutions in good standing with another regional accreditor. The typical timeframe for an institution to be reviewed, approved, and accredited is roughly within 26-30 months of application.
Standards:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mission and Goals 2. Ethics and Integrity 3. Design and Delivery of the Student Learning Experience 4. Support of the Student Experience 5. Educational Effectiveness Assessment 6. Planning, Resources, and Institutional Improvement 7. Governance, Leadership, and Administration
Additional Information and Recommendation	Middle States staff provided information that confirms their suitability for Florida institutions. Recommend including MSCHE on the list suitable for Florida institutions.

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)

Cycle:	Seven (7) year cycle with reviews after three (3) years
Current Membership:	Roughly 150 degree-granting institutions in states including AK, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA, and other geographies
Process:	There is currently an accelerated/expedited process for institutions in good standing with another regional accreditor. The typical timeframe for an institution to be reviewed, approved, and accredited is roughly within a few months to up to three years of application.
Standards:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students 2. Compliance
Additional Information and Recommendation	Northwest Commission staff provided information that confirms their suitability for Florida institutions. Recommend including NWCCU on the list suitable for Florida institutions.

New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE)

Cycle:	10-year cycle with reviews after five (5) years
Current Membership:	Roughly 200 degree-granting institutions in states including CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT, and other geographies
Process:	There is currently an accelerated/expedited process for institutions in good standing with another regional accreditor. The typical timeframe for an institution to be reviewed, approved, and accredited is roughly within eight (8) months of application.
Standards:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mission and Purposes 2. Planning and Evaluation 3. Organization and Governance 4. The Academic Program 5. Students 6. Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship 7. Institutional Resources 8. Educational Effectiveness 9. Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure
Additional Information and Recommendation	Information gleaned from interviews with NECHE administration indicate they are not seeking applications from outside of their region at this time. Recommend not including NECHE on the list of suitable agencies.

Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission
(WSCUC)

Cycle:	Eight (8) – 10 year cycle with reviews as ready
Current Membership:	Roughly 220 degree-granting institutions (baccalaureate and above) in states including CA, HI and other geographies such as Guam, American

	Samoa, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, and Northern Marianas Islands
Process:	The length of time depends on institutions providing evidence the four (4) standards have been met.
Standards:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Defining institutional purposes and ensuring educational objectives 2. Achieving educational objectives through core functions 3. Developing and applying resources and organizational structures to ensure quality and sustainability 4. Creating an organization committed to quality assurance, institutional learning, and improvement
Additional Information and Recommendation	Western Association is split between two levels of postsecondary accreditation, the Senior College and University Commission and the Junior College Commission. Although WSCUC officials indicated that they had future interest in working with all Florida institutions (FCS and SUS), at this time FCS institutions could only be considered by their Junior College agency, because the primary focus on our institutions is sub-baccalaureate programs. Given the importance of 2+2 articulation in Florida, recommend not including WSCUC on the list of suitable agencies until such time as all institutions could be accredited by WSCUC.

Results

Following this review process, it was determined that, while all five accrediting agencies have the principles required by USDE, only (3) three would be suitable for FCS institutions at this time.¹

The three that have been identified have a demonstrated commitment to quality, equal to that of SACSCOC, and the costs of the three are relatively equal to or less than SACSCOC. All three evidenced an ability to continue to improve institutional quality.

Lastly, all three demonstrated a clear commitment to student outcomes, clearly the most important element for Florida’s education mission.

For many FCS and SUS institutions, the reaffirmation or reaccreditation process with SACS-COC has become rote; a process primarily viewed as “a box that must be checked.” The opportunity for improved efficiency, greater flexibility, and educational innovation is great. Our colleges and universities are excited to leverage, finally, the opportunity afforded to them by the 2020 USED regulatory changes.

Thus, upon completion of the current accreditor’s reaffirmation or fifth-year review, we would recommend FCS institutions seek institutional accreditation from:

¹ Note: Florida Statutes do not prevent the State Board of Education from modifying the list of approved accrediting agencies from time to time.

- Higher Learning Commission (HLC)
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)

Once the reaffirmation or fifth-year review by the current accreditor is complete, FCS institutions will be required to provide quarterly reports on their progress of seeking accreditation from an accreditor identified by SBOE. If each SBOE-identified accreditor refuses to grant candidacy to an FCS institution, that institution must seek accreditation from an agency or association that is recognized by USED. In the case candidacy status is not granted, the FCS institution may remain with its current accreditor.

Florida Statutes do not prohibit the SBOE from identifying additional agencies at a future date should circumstances become favorable to do so.