HLC Online Assurance Review and the Pathways Model

All Assurance Reviews will be conducted by teams of 3, 5, or 7 depending on institution size. The fourth year review will not include a campus visit unless problems are detected. Otherwise, the reviews will be conducted online and the analysis and recommendations posted to the site. This preparation and review process is repeated in year ten.

All Assurance Reviews will be based on an electronic file system developed for HLC and will consist of:

- An Evidence File: Material uploaded by the institution that will be tagged to the criteria and could be books, audits, budgets, handbooks, rosters, etc. This will include current AIDU information.
- An Assurance Argument: A narrative that documents compliance. Must be a brief (35,000 word limit), thorough analysis of evidence that makes the case for meeting requirements, and will include links to materials from the evidence file.
- Additional Materials: Any additional documents or materials that can provide evidence of compliance.

The new system will be ready for first use by fall 2013. This is true for both the Standard and the Open Pathway and the Standard Pathway just keeps recycling through Assurance Reviews. Each institution will have three individuals with access assigned to the site and each institution can also allow access for up to twelve additional individuals who will interact with the data and write the documentation.

In the Open Pathway, the institution must develop, have approved, and conduct a “quality initiative” that must begin (at least by identifying the topic and getting approval) by year 5 of the cycle and the initiative must be completed and reviewed prior to year 10. An institution cannot lose accreditation based on the outcome of the quality initiative. The only way to fail on the quality initiative is by not putting in a good faith effort.

The institution may choose its own quality initiative, work collaboratively with one or more additional institutions on an initiative, or HLC will help select one by providing a list of options. If an institution becomes a member of the Assessment Academy (conducted by HLC), satisfactory participation will satisfy the requirement of a quality initiative. HLC intends to provide additional options similar to the Assessment Academy in which institutions may participate to fulfill the requirement. One example mentioned was “retention and persistence” since it is more highly emphasized in the new criteria, the assumed practices, and the federal compliance portions of accreditation.

In addition to, and supporting the Criteria, HLC has established a set of Assumed Practices and Obligations of Affiliation. The Assumed Practices, the Obligations of Affiliation, the Criteria and a Federal Compliance Policy are all parts of an institutional review process.
The new criteria now contain three levels: The original Criteria and Core Values, plus the Core Values now contain Subcomponents which must be specifically addressed. Meeting all of the Subcomponents can be equated to meeting the Core Values which can be equated to meeting the Criteria. If any subcomponent or core value is not met, that Criterion is not met and sanction follows. All components will be rated by reviewers as 1) met or exceeded, 2) met with some concerns, or 3) not met (which means sanction).

The new Criteria contain an additional, or new, emphasis on the following:

- More explication of mission
- Public obligation and purpose
- Primacy of educational responsibilities over other areas/interests
- Responsible and ethical conduct and full disclosure
- Clarity in governing structures, priority and authority
- Appropriateness of degree programs-differentiated by learning goals
- Assured, consistent quality wherever and however programs or courses are delivered
- Effective advising, preparation and placement of students
- Appropriateness of co-curricular programs
- Ability to demonstrate claims made for the educational environment and student experience
- Assessment of student learning
- Program review (must include, in addition to assessment, information regarding retention/persistence and should include information regarding placement of program graduates)
- Student retention, persistence and completion
- Appropriateness of transcription of credit and program and course rigor (some examples mentioned here were dual course credit, transfer equivalency, non-traditional format of course length, presentation format, i.e., face-to-face, online, etc.
- Institutional effectiveness, systematic performance documentation and improvement