

Accreditation: Q & A

Q. What is institutional accreditation?

A. Colleges and universities voluntarily commit to accreditation. Accredited colleges and universities belong to and are accredited by one of six regional accrediting bodies. The purpose of institutional accreditation is to ensure quality and to provide impetus for continuing evaluation and improvement. The day-to-day operations of accrediting bodies are run and managed by a professional staff, but all of their policies, criteria for accreditation and evaluation processes are developed and conducted by “peers,” representatives from member universities. Many professional schools also undergo specialized accreditation.

Q. Which accrediting body accredits KU?

A. KU is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges. Headquartered in Chicago, HLC is the oldest and largest of the 6 regional accrediting bodies. It accredits more than 1,000 colleges and universities of all sizes, types and with varying missions.

Q. Why is accreditation important?

A. Accreditation is important for various reasons, not least of which is that it provides a “good housekeeping seal of approval” to parents, students, and other tax paying citizens. Without accreditation, the diploma students receive at graduation is merely a piece of paper. Accreditation makes KU and its students eligible for federal financial aid, and KU faculty and staff eligible for grants from federal agencies such as the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, or the U.S. departments of Defense, Education, or Energy. Specialized accrediting bodies typically expect the institution to be accredited. States may not recognize graduates from unaccredited programs for licenses they grant and students may have trouble transferring credits from unaccredited institutions. We say accreditation is voluntary, but it really is not.

Q. What are the steps in the accreditation process?

A. KU has been continuously accredited since 1913. Approximately every 10 years since then, KU has undergone a comprehensive reaccreditation process. In part, in response to considerable public critique, the accreditation process has gotten more complicated over the years. In general it consists of these important pieces: 1) a self-study prepared by the institution, 2) a federal compliance report prepared by the institution, 3) an opportunity for third parties to provide input, 4) responses to a student survey prepared by HLC, 5) a comprehensive 2.5 day visit to KU by a team of peer evaluators selected and trained by HLC, 6) a team report and opportunity for KU to correct errors of fact, and 7) a decision by HLC.

Q. What is the self-study and who wrote it?

A. The Self-Study is an approximately 200-page document in which the University presents evidence that it meets the 5 criteria of accreditation and each of their components. Institutions take very different approaches to writing the self-study. Because the HLC requires that reaccreditation engages the institution as a whole, KU appointed a Steering Committee and four sub-committees to provide and review evidence. The Steering Committee included representatives from the Lawrence, Edwards and KUMC campuses, administrators, staff and student representatives. It was chaired by Susan Twombly. Sub-committees were chaired by Rodolfo Torres (Criteria 1 and 2), Ann Cudd (Criterion 3), Barbara Barnett (Criterion 4), and Diane Goddard (Criterion 5) and each were comprised of approximately 20 faculty members, staff and students from across the campus. Sub-committees did much of their work during the 2013-14 academic year. The document was put together by a writing team consisting of Sandra Hannon, OIRP; Gavin Young, Public Affairs; Amanda Kulp, OIRP; Deb Teeter, OIRP; and Susan Twombly. The self-study was vetted across campus in fall of 2014.

Q. What are the criteria?

A. See <http://www.ncahlc.org/Criteria-Eligibility-and-Candidacy/criteria-and-core-components.html>

Q. What is a comprehensive visit?

A. The HLC consultant-evaluators will visit KU to confirm that what we say in the Self-Study is accurate. They will be looking for evidence that we meet each of the Criteria and components in light of our mission as an AAU flagship university.

Q. Who are the consultant-evaluators?

A. The 11 consultant-evaluators have been selected by HLC and come from research universities throughout the HLC region. They are faculty, deans, administrators and university presidents and have been trained to be consultant-evaluators.

Q. Who will they talk to?

A. The consultant-evaluators are assigned to focus on a particular criterion. They will interview prearranged groups of individuals who can speak to some aspect of a criterion. The meeting schedule and group composition is determined in consultation with the team chair and team members. They will also hold open forums for faculty, students, and staff.

Q. Where will the consultant-evaluators be located?

A. They will be headquartered in the Provost's Conference room and will meet with groups primarily in Strong Hall and the Kansas Union. Two of them will conduct a visit to the KU Medical Center Campus.

Q. What types of questions with the consultant-evaluators ask?

A. The site visit is not a test! They will not walk around campus trying to trick faculty, students, and staff into reciting the goals of Bold Aspirations by heart. Rather, the consultant-evaluators will gather a broad array of perspectives regarding KU. They typically prepare specific question relative to each criterion and what they read in the self-study. An example of a general questions consultant-evaluators often ask is to what extent is the strategic plan broadly understood and does it drive decision-making.

Q. How do the consultant-evaluators rate us?

A. Based on the Self-Study, evidence in our electronic resource room and interviews, the team must rate each criterion components as "met," "met with concerns," or "not met." In order to be reaffirmed for reaccreditation and institution must meet all of the five criteria. In order to meet a criterion, the institution must meet each of the components. A component or criterion is considered met if it receives a rating of met or met with concerns. If the team determines that a criterion is met with concerns it has the option of simply noting the concern. However, if the concern is serious, it may require a monitoring report(s) or a focused visit.