



ACICS

SELF-STUDY GUIDELINES

Revised: February 2021

This document explains all procedures necessary for institutions applying for initial accreditation (including branch-to-main) and renewal of accreditation with ACICS.

Contents

SELF-STUDY GUIDELINES	2
PHILOSOPHY OF ACCREDITATION.....	2
APPLICANTS FOR INITIAL ACCREDITATION	2
Seeking Initial Accreditation	2
Seeking Reclassification of a Branch Campus to a Main.....	3
APPLICANTS FOR RENEWAL OF ACCREDITATION	3
SCHEDULE OF FEES.....	3
SELF-STUDY DOCUMENT.....	3
Planning for the Self-Study	3
Non-Main Locations.....	3
Organizing Prior to Preparation of the Self-Study	3
The Self-Study Questions	4
Submitting the Self-Study	4
REQUIRED APPLICATION MATERIALS	4
SCHEDULING SITE VISITS.....	5
EVALUATION TEAMS.....	5
STATE OFFICIALS	5
PREPARING FOR THE TEAM’S ARRIVAL.....	6
EVALUATION VISIT MEETING ROOM MATERIALS.....	6
EXIT INTERVIEW	6
VISIT REPORT.....	6
FINANCIAL REPORTS	6
INTERMEDIATE REVIEW COMMITTEE.....	7

COUNCIL MEETINGS..... 7

SELF-STUDY PREPARATION GUIDE 8

 PLANNING FOR THE SELF-STUDY 8

 Context of the Self-Study 8

 Purposes and Design of the Self-Study 8

 BENEFITS OF INSTITUTIONAL SELF-STUDY 8

 Reminder of Institution’s History and Philosophy 8

 Cross-Sectional Representation and Sense of Common Purpose..... 9

 Clarification, Improvement, and Expansion of Internal Processes 9

 SELF-STUDY TOOLS..... 9

 PREPARING A SELF-STUDY 9

 Steering Committee 10

 Editing Committee (Editor) 10

 Standards Committee 10

 Program Committee..... 10

 SELF-STUDY TIMETABLE 11

 Preparation Phase..... 11

 Start-up Phase..... 11

 Action Phase..... 12

 Follow-up Phase..... 13

SELF-STUDY GUIDELINES

PHILOSOPHY OF ACCREDITATION

The accreditation of a postsecondary institution is an expression of confidence in the institution’s integrity, performance, and ability to improve. Accreditation signifies that the institution has clearly defined its reason for existence, has developed objectives that are educationally sound, and meets the standards of quality which are indices of its standing within the educational community. It is expected that an accredited institution will continuously review its mission in relation to its operations.

APPLICANTS FOR INITIAL ACCREDITATION *(including branch-to-main)*

Seeking Initial Accreditation

ACICS works with applicant institutions to meet its *Accreditation Criteria* and attain accreditation. There is no pre-candidacy or candidacy status with ACICS; the entire process may take anywhere from one to three years, depending upon the ability of the institution to comply with ACICS standards. Once an institution has been invited to apply for

initial accreditation, it is critical to begin review of the Self-Study narrative document to determine the areas that will require a significant investment of time and resources.

Seeking Reclassification of a Branch Campus to a Main

The application procedures for reclassification of a branch campus to a main are similar to those for initial accreditation, except that a resource visit may not be needed prior to preparation of the Self-Study. Before scheduling an evaluation visit, ACICS staff must review an Application for Initial Accreditation and financial statements for the institution's most recent fiscal year that have been audited by an independent CPA. A non-main campus seeking to be reclassified as a main campus must meet all minimum eligibility requirements.

An institution considering applying for reclassification from a branch to a main campus should review the USDE procedures for eligibility and recertification for Title IV funding, if applicable.

APPLICANTS FOR RENEWAL OF ACCREDITATION

ACICS is committed to collaborating with the institution in effecting a smooth and deliberate path toward meeting ACICS criteria and maintaining accreditation. The renewal of accreditation process may take from 9 months (if there are absolutely no areas of non-compliance) to 24 months.

To initiate a renewal of accreditation, an institution must – in accordance with Section 2-1-300 of the *Accreditation Criteria* – purchase an application and upload the Self-Study and required documents **three months** prior to the visit cycle it is assigned in the letter sent out roughly 12 months prior to expiration of the current accreditation. Although ACICS practice is to notify institutions 12 months prior to expiration of their accreditation, the institution is responsible for initiating the renewal of accreditation process. Additional information regarding the process can be found at <https://www.acics.org/accreditation-process>.

SCHEDULE OF FEES

Please see the most current fee schedule at <https://www.acics.org/accreditation-schedule-of-fees>. Initiation of the application process requires that institutions log on to their member account and purchase the required application. The preferred method of payment is by credit card; however, ACICS does accept payment by check. When the process is initiated by check, it may take up to two weeks to process the payment before the institution can upload the required application and supporting documents to their member account.

SELF-STUDY DOCUMENT

Planning for the Self-Study

The Self-Study is the most important part of the accreditation process. It requires a great deal of time, effort, and careful planning by the institution. The Self-Study provides the institution with the opportunity to engage in a comprehensive analysis of all aspects of its operations. Essentially, the self-evaluation process forms the basis for the improvement of the educational effectiveness of the institution. If the Self-Study is done well, the institution can use it in both short- and long-term planning as part of the Campus Effectiveness Plan (CEP).

Non-Main Locations

Institutions that operate branch campuses must prepare and submit a separate Self-Study for the main campus and each branch. Please note that this requirement does not apply to those non-main campuses designated by the Council as learning sites. Information regarding learning sites should be incorporated into the Self-Study for the main or branch campus responsible for administering them.

Organizing Prior to Preparation of the Self-Study

Proper organization for the Self-Study is essential. Although the exact organizational plan will vary from campus to campus, the following suggestions may be helpful:

1. Select an appropriate staff member to direct the preparation of the Self-Study.
2. Involve all members of the faculty, administration, and governing board in the discussions of the Self-Study. Consider involving student and graduate representatives in the Self-Study process. It is important that all members of the administration, faculty, governing board, and student body understand and appreciate the importance of the Self-Study and its value to the institution.
3. Establish a coordinating committee to work with the Self-Study director to make suggestions and to edit the final report.
4. Establish subcommittees to prepare specific sections of the Self-Study.
5. Adopt a reasonable time schedule and abide by it.

The Self-Study Questions

The Self-Study questions are based on the standards contained in the *Accreditation Criteria* and are designed to assist in the thorough analysis of the institution. Before commencing the Self-Study, institutions are encouraged to carefully review the Evaluation Standards identified in Title III.

The narrative report should be prepared in clear and concise language and should respond to all the questions asked. There is no required format for the report, but it is advisable to follow the questions closely in its preparation and to limit it to 100 pages in length.

Exhibits may be included at the end of the narrative report. These should be provided only if they are essential to the team's review and preparation prior to the visit. Information that can be reviewed during the visit should be provided in the team meeting room.

Submitting the Self-Study

Guidelines for submitting a renewal of accreditation application, including the Self-Study narrative and additional documents can be found by logging in to the ACICS Member Center and clicking on the "Application Documents" folder. The Renewal of Accreditation Application documents house the Self-Study Narrative, Guidelines, and other applicable documents. To remain current in the changes to this process, please review the material in Member Center and seek guidance well in advance of the submission deadline.

REQUIRED APPLICATION MATERIALS

1. An explanation of how the Self-Study was planned; who organized, supervised, and participated in its preparation; which person(s) prepared each section of the report; and to what extent the document is viewed by the institution as a planning document for the future. This document will trigger the additional documents required in the submission process.
2. An explanation of future plans for the institution, with specific references to planned changes in faculty, administration, physical plant, equipment, library, admissions, graduation requirements and standards, curriculum, increase or decrease in student body or faculty, and any other future plans.
3. Most recent CEP in effect at the institution.
4. Academic Credit Analysis form listing all courses for each program offered by the campus.
5. Self-Study narrative (response to Self-Study questions).
6. Additional update documents to be provided to the evaluation team two weeks prior to the visit.

SCHEDULING SITE VISITS

Visits take place during two travel periods: January–March and July–September. The scheduling of a visit depends on a number of factors, including the availability of evaluators and staff. Accredited institutions applying for renewal will be scheduled for one of the travel periods during the final year of their current grant. Approximately one year prior to the expiration of the current accreditation, institutions requiring renewal are contacted by email and assigned a site visit during the following year.

The staff coordinator assigned to conduct the visit will contact the school to schedule a date prior to the site visit. *Initial applicants should note that visits will not be scheduled until the required financial statements have been received and reviewed.*

Although staff make every effort to accommodate requests for a particular date, this is not always possible as visits are normally scheduled to coincide with other visits within a similar geographic area in order to minimize costs. Ordinarily, a site visit is scheduled for no fewer than two days. The length of a visit will depend on the institution's location, size, and program offerings, as well as any non-main campus operations and their locations.

EVALUATION TEAMS

The minimum team assigned to a renewal of accreditation visit comprises a chair, a student relations evaluator, an educational activities evaluator, a program specialist, and an ACICS staff representative. A full team must comprise at least one public representative, one academic evaluator, and one administrative. The highest credential offered at an institution is critical in selecting the team chair and the program evaluators. For example, chair and program evaluators visiting an institution that offers a bachelor's degree must be from an institution that offers bachelor's degree programs, hold appropriate credentials, or have had equivalent work experience.

A program specialist evaluates all programs offered by the institution. A staff member ordinarily accompanies the team in an effort to achieve consistency in evaluation team reports. This person's responsibilities are as follows:

1. Coordinate the visit;
2. Provide guidance to the team on Council priorities;
3. Provide information on Council standards; and
4. Ensure that the report is completed and submitted in a timely manner.

The staff member will be present at all Council meetings where the report is considered and may be asked questions about what the team observed and reported during the visit.

The institution is responsible for all expenses incurred by the evaluation team and the ACICS staff member. The institution will be invoiced for the visit at least two weeks prior to the scheduled visit, with payment due 10 days after the invoice is received.

Prior to the visit, the Council will advise the institution to forward a complete copy of the application materials and an Update Report to each team member. The team will review the materials in advance, making the time spent at the institution as productive as possible. Most of the visit time is devoted to verification of the information provided in the application. An institution is expected to be operating in accordance with the application and to be in compliance with all Council criteria.

STATE OFFICIALS

Appropriate state officials are contacted before the visit and are invited to observe and to share any pertinent information about the institution. State officials do not participate in preparing the team report.

PREPARING FOR THE TEAM'S ARRIVAL

The institution shall provide a suitable workroom for the evaluation team that is private and has sufficient table space to allow team members to comfortably review all materials, interview administrative and faculty personnel, and type the report. A telephone and a computer with a printer should also be made available in the room.

Institutions are provided in advance with a list of current materials and documents (see following page) that must be placed in the workroom prior to the team's arrival on the day of the visit. Also, at least two weeks prior to the visit, institutions are required to update any significant changes to the application since its submission to the Council, to be submitted in the Update Report provided to the team.

The team normally arrives in the morning on the first day of the visit. In some cases, when the institution offers evening classes, the team may visit the institution the evening before the first full day. When the team arrives, they will take a brief tour of the facilities, followed by an introductory meeting with the chief on-site administrator. At the introductory meeting, the administrator(s) should fully describe all changes that have occurred since submission of the application.

During the visit, team members will meet with administrators, faculty, and students. They will visit classrooms and other parts of the facility. The institution should have informed its faculty, staff, and students of the date and purpose of the visit. The team will examine information, such as course syllabi, student academic and financial records, files of faculty and staff, and minutes of meetings. Some team members may also want to consult with directors or trustees and community leaders or employers.

The team will have lunch privately, either in the workroom or off the premises. The lunch period is used to assess the progress of the visit. The institution is expected to provide and pay for lunch for the team and to provide refreshments in the workroom.

NOTE: *It is inappropriate for the team to be entertained by the institution in the form of gifts, favors, or social functions before, during, or after the visit.*

EVALUATION VISIT MEETING ROOM MATERIALS

Materials that institutions are to place in the room provided to the evaluation team can be found on the ACICS website at <https://www.acics.org/process-evaluation-site-visit>. Additional materials may be requested when the team is at the institution.

EXIT INTERVIEW

When the team has completed a draft of its report, it will conduct an exit interview with the on-site chief administrator and anyone else the administrator wishes to be present. The exit interview includes a summary of the findings to be included in the team report and the next steps in the process. The team does not speak for the Council as to the final action on the accreditation of the institution. The exit interview is not a forum for debate of the team's findings and is not intended to be lengthy. The institution will be given the opportunity to respond in writing to the team report.

VISIT REPORT

The team chair will edit the draft of the visit report and email the final copy to the Council office. After multiple edits by ACICS staff, a copy of the report is then emailed to the institution, which must ensure that ACICS has the current email address of its chief on-site administrator. Once the report is received, the institution has the opportunity to respond in writing to the team's findings.

FINANCIAL REPORTS

Both accredited institutions and those seeking initial accreditation must demonstrate financial stability. Therefore, all institutions must submit a financial statement audited by an independent CPA for the most recent fiscal year. The financial statements are to be submitted via the Annual Financial Report (AFR) system. Evaluation team members do not

receive or review financial reports. Initial applicants must submit current audited statements with their application for initial accreditation. Go to https://www.acics.org/s/FRC-Guidelines_v2020.pdf on the ACICS website for specific details.

INTERMEDIATE REVIEW COMMITTEE

All materials pertinent to an institution's accreditation are reviewed by a panel of the Intermediate Review Committee (IRC) prior to review by the Council. These materials include the institution's application and Self-Study, the visiting team's report, the institution's response to the team report, the institution's current catalog, any official reports from state or federal regulatory bodies, and any complaints (current and closed) filed against the institution.

The IRC will make a recommendation regarding accreditation if the evaluation process has been completed. If the process has not been completed, the committee will organize facts from the institution's files for the Council but will not make a specific recommendation. The Council has the option of postponing examination of files which were incomplete at the time of the interim review, even if subsequent information has been received by the time the Council meets.

COUNCIL MEETINGS

The Council reviews applications at the meeting following the site visit – in May and November. It reviews each file and takes an action regarding the accreditation status of an institution.

The institution is notified in writing, normally within a month, of the Council's action. Council members or staff may not discuss actions with a school before it receives the written notice. If an institution wishes to appeal a negative decision of the Council, it may do so in accordance with Title II, Chapter 3 of the *Accreditation Criteria*. All supporting documentation and exhibits referenced in this Self-Study Narrative must be maintained at the campus location for review by the accreditation visit team. *Do not submit your supporting documentation with this application.*

SELF-STUDY PREPARATION GUIDE

PLANNING FOR THE SELF-STUDY

Context of the Self-Study

The Self-Study process serves as an evaluation and planning vehicle for the improvement of all institutional services.

One major benefit is validation of the institution's findings by a group of professional colleagues during an extended visit. A thorough, professional review by highly qualified professional peers produces problem-solving insights.

Another benefit is the public recognition of institutions with accreditation status. Successful completion of the accreditation process signifies not only that the institution's services are sound but that the institution is meeting its broader social responsibility.

The decision to complete a Self-Study is an important step and should be conducted with the full cooperation and assistance of the entire staff.

Three basic commitments are essential to a successful self-evaluation:

1. Willingness to invest the necessary time, effort, and expense;
2. Support of all institutional personnel;
3. Dedication to make all improvements that the study shows are needed.

It requires continuous leadership to achieve these objectives. Within the framework of the standards, each institution is evaluated according to its own stated purpose and objectives. Deficiencies in a basically sound program do not hinder accreditation, provided that the institution is willing to remedy the deficiencies in a reasonable period of time.

Purposes and Design of the Self-Study

Scope

The Self-Study should be a comprehensive analysis of the institution in which each of its functions will be examined in detail in its present and future state.

Purposes

1. To clarify the institution's mission statement through the Self-Study process.
2. To describe and evaluate all programs, support services, and facilities; its human, financial, and physical resources; and its system of administration and planning within the context of the institution's mission and purposes.
 - a. To identify the strengths of the institution
 - b. To reveal areas of concern, including institutional weaknesses.
3. To develop and implement a systematic program and function review system to maintain the quality of the institution's operations.
4. To respond to accreditation standards.

BENEFITS OF INSTITUTIONAL SELF-STUDY

Reminder of Institution's History and Philosophy

1. A better understanding for the institution's organization as a whole

2. Broader understanding of the operational features of the departments and of the institution overall
3. Stronger personal identification with the institution

Cross-Sectional Representation and Sense of Common Purpose

1. Heightened awareness of teamwork
2. Freedom to collect and evaluate data, as well as make recommendations
3. Consideration of various perspectives
4. Synthesis of ideas contributed by various functional areas
5. Ability to focus on strengths and weaknesses while being more aware of achievements and outcomes

Clarification, Improvement, and Expansion of Internal Processes

1. Increased staff development activities
2. Shared sense of present values and future development
3. Improved and enhanced communication
4. Mechanism and desire to maintain continuous self-evaluation (data collection and evaluation)

SELF-STUDY TOOLS

1. *Accreditation Criteria*
2. Self-Study Procedures and Guidelines
3. Evaluation Procedures and Guidelines
4. Your Last On-site Evaluation Report
5. Accreditation Workshop Binder
6. ACICS Staff

PREPARING A SELF-STUDY

A successful self-study must have the commitment from the institution's governing body, administration, and all staff. The community, advisory committee(s), student body, and graduates should be kept fully informed and as closely involved as possible or practical. Adequate time should be allowed for effective planning and preparation of all studies and documents.

Many factors will influence how an institution chooses to complete its Self-Study: the number of students and staff, the number and diversity of academic programs, and the involvement of outside bodies such as advisory boards.

A steering committee is recommended to coordinate the work of the various committees and to provide overall supervision of the study. This committee will be responsible for organizing the results into a logical, cohesive document and for establishing schedules for each sub-committee.

Sub-committees should conduct an in-depth analysis of each aspect of the institution as it relates to each standard. The suggested committee breakdown provides one committee for editing and one for each standard, though staff size and logistics may make this impractical. In addition to the Standards Committees, a suggested committee is one for each

instructional program. These committees, if devised, will work closely with the Standards Committees and the Steering Committee.

Before finalizing the Self-Study report, there should be an opportunity for all staff to review the reports of the committees to ensure a general consensus regarding the final report.

Suggested committee roles for a large institution:

Steering Committee

1. To specify the objectives, scope, and priorities of the Self-Study process.
2. To review findings and questions posed by the various work committees/task forces and to suggest approaches.
3. To present a realistic plan of action to meet future needs of the institution.
4. To keep the institution community informed of the progress and results of the Self-Study.
5. To prepare the Self-Study appendices, basic institutional data, and bibliography.

Editing Committee (Editor)

1. To prepare and edit the final report.
2. To establish a format for committee reports to simplify the collection and preparation of information.

Standards Committee

1. To be informed about the criteria, evaluation data, and process for accreditation as a whole.
2. To meet periodically with members of the committees at the respective campuses to direct their efforts
3. To communicate between joint committees to ensure cohesiveness of effort.
4. To collect drafts of outlines and narratives from members at the respective campus according to the timetable.
5. To follow-up at the direction of the Steering Committee to expand or re-focus their work.
6. To communicate periodically with the Steering Committee (as to the status of committee work) and to complete tasks throughout the Self-Study process and in preparation for the evaluation site visit.

Program Committee

1. To be informed about the criteria, evaluation data, and process for accreditation as a whole
2. To meet periodically with members of the committees at the respective campus to direct their efforts
3. To communicate between joint committees to ensure cohesiveness of effort
4. To collect drafts of outlines and narratives from members at the respective campus according to the timetable
5. To follow-up at the direction of the Steering Committee to expand or re-focus their work
6. To communicate periodically with the Steering Committee (as to the status of committee work) and to complete tasks assigned by them throughout the Self-Study process and in preparation for the evaluation site visit

SELF-STUDY TIMETABLE

Preparation Phase

School Director

1. Determine priorities of Self-Study and objectives for institutional development
2. Plan for faculty and staff involvement
 - a. Number and type of committees
 - b. Committee membership
 - c. Committee leadership
 - d. Communication structure
 - e. Desired outcomes
3. Set tentative timetable and general framework
 - a. Beginning date of the Self-Study
 - b. Deadline for preliminary data collection
 - c. Meeting dates of committees
 - d. Completion of committee reports
 - e. Final date for review of committee reports
 - f. Final date for completion of self-study

Start-up Phase

Meetings of all faculty and staff

1. Distribute and explain plan for Self-Study
 - a. General explanation of *Accreditation Criteria*
 - b. Priorities of self-study in order to address *Accreditation Criteria*
 - c. Objectives for institutional development to be achieved through Self-Study process (i.e., staff development, communication, long-range planning)
 - d. Tentative timetable
2. Invite faculty and staff to become working members
 - a. General invitation to “volunteers”
 - b. Announcement of committee memberships
3. Assure follow-up and response to all concerns identified during the process
4. Distribute resource package to working committees

- a. Elaboration on *Accreditation Criteria*
 - b. Suggestions for data collection and evaluation
 - c. ACICS self-studies; models for addressing assigned topic
5. Determination by committee groups of their own logistics
- a. Meeting times
 - b. Working style
 - c. Resource materials review
 - d. Questions, needed resources, progress report

Action Phase

Work completed by all individual committees

1. Prepare preliminary outline of committee work and report
2. Collect data related to committee work and report needs
3. Write draft of committee findings and submit to Steering Committee
4. Revise draft based on suggestions from Steering Committee
5. Prepare final copy of draft
6. Write institutional/executive summary (abstract)

Steering Committee Operations

1. Review preliminary outlines
2. Suggest additional perspectives, data, considerations, and strategies to working committees
3. Assure comprehensiveness in scope and depth of topics among committees
4. Participate in long-range planning process implementation
5. Communicate accomplishments (both accreditation self-study and institutional development) to working committees and institution at large
6. Identify institutional strengths and concerns

Coordination features

1. Exchange of drafts between committees
2. Minimizing overlap of activities such as survey instruments
3. Mid-cycle meeting of all participants
4. Update meeting in preparation for evaluation list
 - a. Summary of strengths and concerns

- b. Anticipated questions
- c. Mock visit

Follow-up Phase

School Director

1. Assess degree to which institutional development objectives were achieved
2. Obtain suggestions for improvements and identification of strengths in methods and process used
3. Maintain commitment to continuous self-study and development
4. Respond to concerns and invite further input for planning