

Among the many assets the college owns, earns, and/or maintains, one of the most important is our regional accreditation. The accreditation allows for credits earned by students to transfer to all other accredited institutions. Holding an accreditation is a strong signal to students, employers, and the public that our college is a “real one,” not a degree mill or a fly-by-night organization. And, probably most importantly, our accreditation allows for NCCC and its students to receive a wide variety of federal support. Chief among this support is Title IV funds, better known as the Pell Grant and student loan program. With about 25% of our total head count receiving the Pell Grant to help pay for their tuition and fees, keeping our accreditation is beyond vital to NCCC and its students.

We earn our regional accreditation through an organization known as the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) who has been authorized by the US Department of Education to grant accredited status. The HLC have developed a process where we have to prove we meet their Five Criteria for Accreditation, through a report. The report is read by other higher education professionals known as peer-reviewers. If they agree your report shows the evidence for these five criteria are met, then you get re-accredited. We have to do this report twice every ten years, at year four and at year ten of the cycle. (Why not year five instead of four? You’ll have to ask them. Ours is not to reason why, but to do and...well, you know the rest.)

So all we have to do is just make sure we are doing these five things, have some evidence to prove that, write it up in a report, get it approved, and we are good for another 4 or 6 years. Credits transfer, students get the Pell Grant, and everyone knows NCCC is a real college and not in the same category as, “Earn your degree in two weeks at Scam University! Go Scammers!”

Sounds simple, right? Not exactly.

The five criteria are actually made up of a total of 21 “core components,” and those components are made up a total of 68 subcomponents. And each of these subcomponents are important, though some are more important than others, depending on the institution. So, it is very possible that if you fail to convince the peer-reviewers that you are meeting one of the subcomponents’ expectations you could fail the core component. And if you fail the core component, then you will fail the entire criteria. And if you fail the criteria you get sanctioned – which is not good at all.

So, essentially you have to get 68 things right at your college, keep a lot of evidence that prove you are doing things right, and then write a convincing argument (yes, HLC calls it an argument) attaching that evidence to prove your point. It’s high stakes, for sure, which really measures how well you can keep all aspects of your college moving forward – from education, to leadership, to planning, to governance, to assessment and everything in between. For years every division, every department, and every employee has to be fulfilling the mission of the college while meeting the requirements of the Five Criteria for Accreditation.

Once you are doing all of that simultaneously, and you have all of your documentation, you are ready to write the argument. The argument is written in a fully electronic document system where you can cite a particular piece of evidence, then have a link embedded in the text so that the peer-reviewer can verify that evidence as they read the document.

In our case, the argument was about 45,000 words long. That's 100 single-spaced pages. We then linked over 500 pieces of evidence in the form of spreadsheets, documents, meeting minutes, diagrams, and even photos. I can't even guess how many pages that added to the full report, but I'm guessing quite a few.

It took over a year to put this report together and years and years of effort meeting the Five Criteria (the 21 core components and the 68 subcomponents). With just a few months before it was due to the HLC, the guidance on how to complete the report changed significantly, so we had a massive rewrite of the document. The first draft of our report was about 25,000 words, but with the new guidance and the rewrite we increased it to 45,000 words. It was a lot of late nights and weekends to get it finished. Then we turned it in.

If an institution doesn't fully meet all five sections they can receive a wide range of "follow-up" items from the HLC – from an extra report to write called a monitoring report that shows your efforts to fix a problem, all the way up to a very serious sanction, such as probation, where you have two years to fix the problem or face the possibility of losing your accreditation. Those of you who know NCCC's history know what I'm talking about here.

With so many subcomponents, core components, and criteria to meet, it is not surprising that 80% of colleges and universities in HLC's region are on some form of follow-up. It's not a terrible thing to have to fix something. You can complete 67 things to the satisfaction of the peer-reviewers and miss one thing which could lead to some follow-up. Not surprisingly then, only about 200 of the 1,000 institutions in our region make it through the process without that follow-up. It's just hard to fire on all cylinders when there are 68 cylinders.

Well, the report from the peer-reviewers came back and -drum roll please- we met all five criteria! The report was very complimentary of our assessment system, our planning, our leadership, and our governance. There were a few suggestions to improve that we will be looking at very strongly, but overall it was a great report.

Of course the secret of getting all five criteria met is not writing a great argument (although that helps). It's in the years and years of doing things right in every department on campus. Without everyone working together to advance our mission every day it would not be possible. I want to extend a heartfelt thanks to our Board of Trustees, our wonderful faculty, our amazing leadership, and our fantastic staff for this Herculean effort. You did it! Great job!

A huge thanks goes to our local HLC Steering Committee who worked for a year on the argument and an extra special thanks goes to Dr. Sarah Robb and Dr. Marie Gardner who coordinated the whole effort and did what had to be done to get the argument over the finish line. I could not be more proud of this effort.

Moving forward, NCCC has another argument due in 2023-2024. HLC is re-writing the Criteria now, so we'll have a somewhat new set of 68 things to meet then. The process of keeping and advancing our accreditation never stops. But once in a while – you can pause to say thanks, and to celebrate!

If you have any questions about this column or anything else, please feel free to contact me at [binbody@neosho.edu](mailto:binbody@neosho.edu).