

Institutional Policies and Procedures for Determining Faculty Qualifications: HLC's Criteria for Accreditation and Assumed Practices

Guidelines for Institutions and Peer Reviewers

Introduction

These guidelines explain the Criteria for Accreditation and Assumed Practices related to institutional policies and procedures for determining faculty qualifications. The guidelines also provide guidance to HLC-accredited institutions and peer reviewers in evaluating institutional policies and procedures for determining faculty qualifications.

HLC's requirements regarding institutional policies and procedures for determining faculty qualifications apply to all instructors. This includes full-time, part-time, adjunct, dual credit, temporary, non-tenure-track, graduate assistants, and other instructors. The requirements also apply to all other entities to which the institution assigns responsibility of instruction. In this document, the term "faculty" or "instructors" is used to apply to all of these categories.

Background on HLC's Requirements Regarding Faculty Qualifications

Together, HLC's Criteria for Accreditation and Assumed Practices address HLC's requirements with respect to the policies and procedures that all member institutions must have to achieve and maintain HLC accreditation.

The Assumed Practices state that an institution must establish and maintain policies and procedures for determining that faculty are qualified; and that an institution could consider a variety of factors as part of these policies and procedures.

Relevant Criteria and Assumed Practices

Criterion 3. Teaching and Learning for Student Success

[Effective September 1, 2025.]

The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments and support services, and it evaluates their effectiveness in fulfilling its mission. The rigor and quality of each educational program is consistent regardless of modality, location or other differentiating factors.

Core Component 3.C. Sufficiency of Faculty and Staff. The institution has the faculty and staff needed for effective, high-quality programs and student services.

This Core Component addresses, in part, a faculty member's ability to understand and convey the essentials of a specific discipline in a collegiate environment. Qualified faculty should be able to engage professionally with colleagues regarding the learning objectives for program graduates, as well as possess the knowledge, skills and dispositions appropriate to the credential awarded. HLC expects that through the curricula and learning contexts that faculty develop, the exercise of intellectual inquiry and the acquisition, application and integration of broad learning and skills are integral to an institution's educational programs. Qualified faculty should also be aware of student learning through the ongoing collection and analysis of appropriate data, because an institution should be able to demonstrate its commitment to educational achievement and

improvement through ongoing assessment of student learning.

Assumed Practice B. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources and Support

[Effective September 1, 2025.]

B.2.a. Faculty Roles and Qualifications

The institution establishes and maintains reasonable policies and procedures to determine that faculty are qualified. The factors that an institution considers as part of these policies and procedures could include, but are not limited to: the achievement of academic credentials, progress toward academic credentials, equivalent experience, or some combination thereof. The institution's obligations in this regard extend to all instructors and all other entities to which it assigns the responsibility of instruction. HLC will maintain "Institutional Policies and Procedures for Determining Faculty Qualifications Guidelines" to further explain requirements for reasonable policies and procedures in accordance with this Assumed Practice.

Pursuant to this Assumed Practice, faculty should participate substantially in the establishment of institutional policies and procedures for faculty qualifications.

In order to assist institutions and peer reviewers with understanding and complying with the requirements detailed in the Assumed Practices on this topic, HLC shares the following common understandings:

Reasonable policies and procedures to determine that faculty are qualified—Reasonable policies and procedures to determine that faculty are qualified means the policies and procedures to determine that instructors are qualified that are developed and implemented by the institution. These policies and procedures are aligned with the common understandings set forth in these Guidelines. These policies and procedures must be codified, transparent, consistently implemented, and regularly reviewed.

As noted in the Assumed Practice, the reasonable policies and procedures that an institution establishes and maintains to determine that faculty are qualified may include the factors listed in the Assumed Practice (achievement of academic credentials, progress towards credentials, equivalent experience) or other factors established by the institution.

Achievement of academic credentials—Achievement of academic credentials means that an instructor possesses an academic degree relevant to what they are teaching and at least one level above the level at which they teach, except in programs for terminal degrees. In terminal degree programs, an instructor possesses the same level of degree.

In the context of general education courses, or other non-occupational courses, achievement of academic credentials typically means that an instructor holds a master's degree or higher. Generally, this degree is in the discipline or subfield in which the instructor is teaching. If an instructor holds the degree in a discipline or subfield other than that in which they are teaching, the individual has completed a reasonable amount of coursework in the discipline or subfield in which they teach, as defined by the institution.

Progress toward academic credentials—Progress toward academic credentials means demonstrable, current, and consistent progress toward the academic credential(s) deemed relevant by the institution for an instructor to be qualified. It is expected that an instructor who is qualified as a result of progress toward academic credentials will not permanently be qualified on that basis; rather, the instructor will eventually be qualified on another basis. An instructor who is qualified based on progress toward academic credentials has access to and engages with resources that the institution provides to support their teaching. This could include, for example, professional development opportunities or opportunities to collaborate with other qualified faculty members who are not qualified based solely on progress toward academic credentials.

Equivalent experience—Equivalent experience means experience that is commensurate with achievement of academic credentials such that it qualifies an instructor for the instruction. This could include through a minimum threshold of experience; research and/or scholarship; recognized achievement; and/or other activities and factors. Equivalent experience may differ by discipline or program. Previous years of classroom instruction does not alone constitute equivalent experience.

Other Entities—Other entities means entities other than the institution to which the institution assigns the responsibility of instruction. This could include, for example, contractual partners, consortial partners, dual enrollment partners, or institutional subsidiaries and other related entities.

HLC's Review of Institutional Policies and Procedures for Determining Faculty Qualifications

In keeping with HLC's commitment to peer review processes, the professional judgment of HLC's peer review teams is central to the evaluation of member institutions. HLC and its peer reviewers understand that there may be circumstances related to institutional policies and procedures for determining faculty qualifications that will need to be explained and justified to the peer review teams charged with assuring the quality and integrity of educational offerings within an institution.

Peer reviewers are charged to evaluate the entire institution and its compliance with HLC requirements. Peer reviewers are not expected to evaluate the individual qualifications of specific faculty members. If systemic non-compliance is identified, the peer review team will seek additional information and, as applicable, recommend HLC follow-up to ensure that the institution meets HLC's requirements.

Comprehensive Evaluations

Institutions preparing for a comprehensive evaluation must write specifically to Core Component 3.C. This should include evidence that the institution's policies and procedures ensure that faculty are qualified.

Institutions hosting routine comprehensive evaluations, whether on the Standard or Open Pathway, need not write specifically to the Assumed Practices.

As detailed in HLC policy, institutions hosting other evaluations, including some other comprehensive evaluations, may be expected to write to some or all of the Assumed Practices.

Peer reviewers will evaluate the policies and procedures that the institution establishes and maintains to determine that faculty are qualified.

Other Evaluations

Institutions participating in other evaluations may be required to address HLC requirements related to institutional policies and practices for determining faculty qualifications.

For example, HLC may request information about compliance with HLC requirements, including Assumed Practices, through HLC's complaints process. As part of this process, an institution may be asked to provide documentation regarding ongoing compliance. Should the response be deemed sufficient, HLC will conclude the complaint process with a response letter. Should the outcome of the complaint review be a determination that the institution may not be in compliance with HLC requirements, HLC will follow up with additional peer review as applicable.

Other Information Regarding HLC Requirements Related to Faculty Qualifications

HLC requirements related to institutional policies and procedures for determining faculty qualifications are in no way a mandate from HLC for an institution to make any personnel decisions.

These requirements apply only to faculty and other instructional personnel. They do not apply to other staff members. Institutions must determine appropriate qualifications for such personnel, as consistent with HLC requirements.

Questions?

Please contact the institution's HLC staff liaison.

