

U.S. Department of Education

Staff Report  
to the  
Senior Department Official  
on  
Recognition Compliance Issues

<b>RECOMMENDATION PAGE</b>
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1. **Agency:** Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (1952/2007)  
(The dates provided are the date of initial listing as a recognized agency and the date of the agency's last grant of recognition.)
2. **Action Item:** Other Report
3. **Current Scope of Recognition:** The accreditation and preaccreditation ("Candidacy status") of postsecondary educational institutions in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington, and the accreditation of programs offered via distance education within these institutions.
4. **Requested Scope of Recognition:** Same as above.
5. **Date of Advisory Committee Meeting:** December, 2010
6. **Staff Recommendation:** Accept the report.
7. **Issues or Problems:** None.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE AGENCY**

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) currently accredits approximately 160 degree-granting institutions located in the Northwest region, which consists of the states of Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. The agency's recognition enables the institutions it accredits to seek eligibility to participate in the Department's student financial aid programs.

#### **Recognition History**

The Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Colleges was included in the Commissioner of Education's 1952 initial list of nationally recognized accrediting agencies as the Northwest Association of Secondary and Higher Schools. NWCCU was first reviewed by the National Advisory Committee on Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility in 1972 as the entity responsible for accrediting postsecondary institutions within the Northwest region. The agency's recognition has been periodically reviewed and continued recognition has been granted after each review.

The last full review of the agency was conducted in December 2007 at which time the Committee recommended and the Secretary concurred that the agency's recognition be renewed for five-years. At that meeting the agency informed the Committee that it was developing an alternative accreditation model that is outcomes-based and linked to an institution's mission and goals. The Committee requested that the agency provide a report that would provide an update on the progress made in developing and implementing the new accrediting model. Due to the passage of HEOA, the agency's report was on hold until the NACIQI was reconstituted. Due to the lapse in time, the agency was requested to submit updated information to its progress report.

## **PART II: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

### **§602.21 Review of standards.**

**(c) If the agency determines, at any point during its systematic program of review, that it needs to make changes to its standards, the agency must initiate action within 12 months to make the changes and must complete that action within a reasonable period of time. Before finalizing any changes to its standards, the agency must--**

**(1) Provide notice to all of the agency's relevant constituencies, and other parties who have made their interest known to the agency, of the changes the agency proposes to make;**

**(2) Give the constituencies and other interested parties adequate opportunity to comment on the proposed changes; and**

**(3) Take into account any comments on the proposed changes submitted timely by the relevant constituencies and by other interested parties.**

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Previous Issue: During the agency's last review for continued recognition, the agency was found to be in compliance with all of the criteria for recognition. During the NACIQI review, the agency elaborated on its plans and progress in developing and implementing a new accreditation process. The members of the NACIQI requested that the agency provide a report on the agency's progress in implementing its new accreditation standards and process.

Discussion: The progress report submitted by the agency noted that the new accreditation model includes new standards for accreditation and a new septennial accreditation process. These new standards and process are interdependent, and the goal of the new accreditation model is to be a more systematic and ongoing evaluative process of institutional performance and effectiveness.

The new standards of accreditation are structured to require an evaluation of an institution's overall effectiveness in achieving its mission for each major component within the institution. The agency has developed five broad standards (mission and goals; resources and capacity; planning and implementation; effectiveness and improvement; and mission fulfillment, sustainability, and adaptation) and the principles of accreditation that are embedded within each standard. The principles of accreditation provide more depth to each broad standard, as well as provide more specific information as to what is expected and required of each institution in each area. (Prior to developing the principles of accreditation, the agency established a framework for the five standards, which included framing principles, to guide the development of the standards and capture the "critical components that underscore the essence of accreditation and need to be encompassed in accreditation evaluations.")

The agency established the architecture of the new accreditation model that breaks the standards down into three groupings:

\* The first section of the model encompasses standards one and two; and is identified as Section A: Purpose and Potential. This section sets expectations for the articulation of institutional mission and core themes within that mission. It requires institutions "to identify indicators of mission fulfillment and indicators of achievement of goals or intended outcomes for each core theme."

\* The second section encompasses standards three and four and is identified as Section B: Plans, Achievements, and Improvements. This section requires institutions to focus on strategic planning and an assessment of their effectiveness relating to its core themes. The agency states that this approach is different from the current accreditation model because the assessment of an institution's effectiveness is not directed at an institution's major functions, but rather at its core themes.

\* The third section is composed of standard five and is identified as Section C: Institutional Efficacy, Relevance, and Viability. This section requires institutions to focus on the evaluation of their mission, their ability to forecast trends, and their ability to adapt to change that might affect the fulfillment of their mission.

Once the new standards are fully implemented, the agency will accredit institutions for a seven-year cycle. All institutions will be required to provide reports on their compliance with the standards throughout the seven years as follows:

Year One: Institutions will provide a report on standard one.

Year Three: Institutions provide an update on standard one and provides data on its compliance with standard two. Additionally, the agency conducts an on-site evaluation covering these two standards.

Year Five: Institutions provide updates for standards one and two as well as provide information and data on their compliance with standards three and four.

Year Seven: Institutions provide an update on standards one through four and provide information and data showing compliance with standard five. Additionally, the agency conducts an on-site evaluation focusing on standards three, four, and five.

The agency indicates that this process allows for continual feedback to the institution on their compliance with the standards and how they are meeting their stated mission and goals. In addition, the agency believes that this process will enhance each institution's self-monitoring and evaluation of its performance and effectiveness.

Finally, the agency provided a timeline for implementing the new standards and converting to the seven-year cycle. The new accreditation process will be implemented in January 2011. The process will begin to be phased in on that date and that all schools will be under the new process by 2017. Until 2011, the agency continues to evaluate institutions under its current standards.

Since the beginning of 2009, the agency has held meetings and workshops with its communities of interest to inform them of the new process and obtain feedback regarding whether additional changes to the process and standards would be warranted. In December 2009, the agency submitted the new standards to its member institutions for a vote of adoption. In January 2010, the Commission's Board ratified the vote of the agency's membership. During 2010, the agency has held workshops with its institutions regarding how to develop a self-study that addresses the new standards and accreditation process, and developed publications, such as the Accreditation Handbook, and related documents, such as Year One Report Guidelines, to provide further guidance. In addition, the agency conducted training sessions for on-site evaluators and team chairs on how the new standards are to be applied during reviews.

The agency will seek continued recognition in 2012. At that time, the Department will review the agency's implementation of its accreditation standards, processes and procedures in the context of their compliance with the current criteria for recognition.

### **PART III: THIRD PARTY COMMENTS**

The Department did not receive any written third-party comments regarding this agency.