

The essential guide to HLC accreditation

Tips for successful accreditation reporting



Obtaining accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) may be one of the most significant (and complex!) activities you will undertake as a higher education leader. At its core, the accreditation process requires you to examine the quality and effectiveness of your institution, giving you concrete evidence that your institution possesses the qualities found at all HLC-accredited colleges and universities. Specifically, these qualities require that:

- ✓ **Your institution's mission** reflects your role in higher education.
- ✓ You can demonstrate that you have the **needed resources, programs, and services** to achieve your mission.
- ✓ You have **institution-wide, measured educational objectives** that prove you are fulfilling your mission.

Having these items in place will signify that your college or university meets the standards of a HLC-accredited organization.

The benefits of a solid assessment and accreditation process

Preparing for HLC can be a “gift that keeps on giving.” Once you have completed the accreditation process, you will have a roadmap to continuous quality improvement at your fingertips. You will have procedures to collect feedback for your departments and programs. Even faculty preparation for a campus visit can have lasting positive effects on how your faculty express the impacts of their teaching.

If HLC has accredited your institution in the past, you will need to periodically go through a reaffirmation process. For reaffirmation, your institution will have to produce proof of compliance with HLC:

- 1 **Criteria for Accreditation**
- 2 **Assumed Practices**
- 3 **Federal Requirements**

This guide focuses on a few ways Watermark software can help you prepare to meet selected HLC Standards of Quality, based on our experience helping our clients through the process. For information about all HLC Criteria for Accreditation, Assumed Practices, and Federal Requirements, please review the [Higher Learning Commission's website](#).

We design our products with accreditation in mind so that you can align your efforts on campus to HLC standards. When you use Watermark technology, you can capture relevant data daily, which creates a single source of truth that can be used for accreditation and reaffirmation reporting.

In this quick guide, we'll take a deep dive into how Watermark's technology supports you in meeting and demonstrating compliance with HLC standards, including how to interpret the data to support the documentation you need for accreditation.

Refine your institution's mission

Everything in your organization should flow from and support your institution's mission statement. Review your mission statement to ensure it reflects the current purpose of the institution. The mission statement should make a promise to students, faculty, and the community at large, and it should also state what your institution intends to achieve in the next three, five, or ten years.

A good mission statement is specific enough to guide an institution's colleges, schools, and departments. Mission statements evolve over time, and sometimes, when the mission statement changes, not everyone is aware of the change. Watermark Planning & Self-Study eliminates this challenge by providing a single location where everyone can find the latest version of the mission statement. Planning & Self-Study also keeps an archive of all iterations of the statement for reference.

Academic and operational units can create and revise their insights about how their outcomes assessments relate to the mission statement. The tool creates an archive of these inputs, documenting how the institution has aligned its goals with changing institutional missions over time.



Justify and document faculty qualifications and accomplishments

For many faculty, the penultimate goal is to become a tenured professor. However, there are strict requirements for individuals climbing the academic ladder. To reach tenure, faculty must fulfill the stringent requirements of your university. As they collect and document their credentials, they create a rich reservoir of information that could help your institution meet accreditation requirements.

It is essential to keep in mind that the faculty's self-documentation should show how they are helping the institution to achieve its mission. This process starts with faculty demonstrating that their course content has a direct positive effect on students' grades, attendance, and other administrative information found in the student information system.

Another aspect of faculty data to consider is any alternative qualifications the faculty member may have. This could include working in an industry related to the subjects they teach. For example, a public relations professor may have years of experience working at a public relations firm, which should be accounted for in their record.

Identify and remedy any gaps in faculty credentials that could be a problem during HLC accreditation. This process is easy when you have access to a consistent data set. Watermark has designed [Watermark Faculty Success](#) to capture faculty activity information in a format that aligns with accreditation requirements.

Review and refine institutional planning and effectiveness

Your Office of Institutional Planning and Effectiveness is focused on continuous evaluation and improvement of your institution as it works to fulfill its mission. Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic have taught higher education that it must be future proof and adaptable. The ability of this office to define and measure outcomes for student learning and operational success is more important than ever.

A well-oiled Office of Institutional Planning & Effectiveness will help:

- 1 Furnish the data your institution needs to make informed decisions.
- 2 Pinpoint the academic programs that need improvement.
- 3 Deliver the data to back up assertions the institution makes to accreditation officials.
- 4 Empower the institution to plan forward-thinking strategies and intelligent resource allocation for ongoing improvement.

With Planning & Self-Study, your Office of Institutional Planning & Effectiveness can measure, visualize results, and determine any necessary adjustments to improve in the next cycle.

Review student achievement and outcomes documentation systems

Efficient student achievement and outcomes documentation can go beyond accreditation reporting. Your school's reputation for academic quality is a determining factor when prospective students decide to attend, and having a comprehensive reporting system in place is essential for establishing your institution's competitive qualities. Another significant benefit of measuring student achievement is gaining visibility into where your institution should invest its time, money, and resources. In short, reporting on student achievement is vital to your institution's bottom line.

This essential reporting begins with individual faculty members. They create outcome statements to clarify what they want the students to achieve in each course. They also state what students must do to achieve those outcomes and which measurements faculty will use to prove that the students have achieved their goals. Furthermore, outcome statements should always explain how reaching the stated objectives will further the institution's mission.

Curriculum mapping can track student progress and generate valuable insights. This process shows the connections between the expected results of an academic program and the courses where this learning takes place. Curriculum mapping creates a strong foundation for your assessment process by highlighting any gaps that may be interfering with student progress. It also provides a source of clarity and dialogue for faculty to collaborate to fill in any gaps they have identified.

Both direct and indirect measurements will be part of your academic assessment strategy. Direct measurements show tangible proof of student learning, and this evidence consists of such items as essays, exams, or capstone projects. Indirect measures are more subjective and may include surveys, sentiment scores, or attendance.

Faculty design surveys for student evaluation to measure the extent to which students meet or do not meet the desired course outcomes. Thus, the response options must correspond to criteria for meeting or not meeting the course outcome. Administrators and contributors can view the results of the measure itself and include them in assessment plan reports.

Watermark's [Course Evaluations & Surveys](#) makes it easy to capture indirect measures, and is also easy to integrate with many LMS systems. The solution sends email reminders to your students, resulting in impressive response rates and meaningful results. These results provide you with a solid collection of data for revelatory analysis. Combined with direct measurements, you'll have a holistic story about student performance against learning outcomes. You now have the data you need to deliver consistent and continuous improvement.



You can also leverage results integrations for direct measures in [Planning & Self-Study](#) by pulling student learning assessment data directly from your LMS. Or, utilize [Watermark Student Learning & Licensure](#) to bolster the rigor of your direct measurement approach and generate data that flow into Planning & Self-Study to support accreditation reporting and continuous improvement efforts.

Student Learning & Licensure provides multiple methods to choose and use in combination so you can manage assessment in the manner that's best for your institution and programs. Use rubrics to assess learning in the classroom and the field. Leverage pools of evaluators and sampling-based assessment projects when you need to understand performance quickly or at a large scale, like for general education outcomes. With ePortfolios, students can reflect and showcase their full learning journey. Give students the personalized and substantive feedback they need to propel their progress while gleaning the reliable data and insights you need to drive improvement and illustrate that your programs are in compliance.

Of course, the idea of all this measurement is to be able to report the results to internal and external stakeholders. You'll need to analyze the results to assess whether you are meeting your outcomes goals. In areas where you are not, you'll need to plan actions for continuous improvement.

If all this seems daunting, you can rest assured that we built our digital assessment tools to make the assessment process more manageable. Our goal is to free up your time so you can take a deeper dive into your data to gather the insights you need for continuous improvement.

Preparing your HLC reports

Using Watermark's out-of-the-box templates, you can set up and assign narrative responsibilities across institutional teams for creating your HLC reports. Those leading the process will have access to documentation of comments and role assignments of all collaborators. This transparency allows the team to track progress toward completion for each section. As evidence of achievements surfaces, others can embed this documentation into many areas within the reports.

The Bottom Line

Watermark is here to be your partner in the accreditation process, ensuring you can connect the dots between several core components of HLC standards. Our integrated suite of solutions makes data collection and reporting simple, freeing up time for detailed analysis.



At Watermark, insights inspire progress. Watermark's software gives higher education institutions the insights they need to improve, evolve, and empower student success. Watermark's integrated digital solutions support assessment and accreditation, faculty activity reporting, course evaluation and surveys, and catalog and curriculum development for more than 1,700 higher education institutions around the world.

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