

Commission Guidance on Determining Qualified Faculty

As noted in various sections of the third edition of the *Handbook of Accreditation*, in order to be responsive to rapid change, the *Handbook* was structured so that it could be quickly modified and updated through print replacement sections and through new and improved Web-based materials. The following information is intended to provide additional guidance to higher education organizations and to peer reviewers in determining and evaluating faculty qualifications in various higher education contexts. The guidance offered here serves to illuminate the Criteria for Accreditation and Core Components that speak to the importance of higher education organizations employing a qualified faculty for the varied and essential roles faculty members play.

The Commission's *Handbook* states that a "qualified faculty" consists of "people who by formal education and tested experience know what students must learn." It goes on to say that such faculties "create the curricular pathways through which students gain the competencies and skills they need." (Core Component 3b)

Knowing What Students Must Learn

- Within a specific discipline or field of study, "knowing what students must learn" refers to a faculty member's ability to understand and convey the essentials of the discipline that a student should master at various course and program levels. Qualified faculty are able to engage professionally with colleagues in determining the specific, stated learning objectives for all graduates of a specific program, as well as the full scope of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions appropriate to the degree awarded.
- In addition to knowing what students should learn within specific disciplines, qualified faculty also know the broad learning objectives of the college or university for all of its students. Criterion 4 states that an organization should create an academic environment that promotes "inquiry, creativity, practice, and social responsibility in ways consistent with its mission." The Commission expects that, through the higher education curricula that faculty develop, students gain "a breadth of knowledge and skills and the exercise of intellectual inquiry." Further, qualified faculty are able to determine "the usefulness of curricula to students who live and work in a global, diverse, and technological society." (Core Components 4b and 4c.)
- Qualified faculty not only know what students should learn but *whether and how much* they learn, since an organization should be able to provide "evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission." (Criterion Three)

Using Credentials or Degrees Earned as a Basis for Determining Qualified Faculty

- Faculty credentials generally refer to the degrees faculty have earned at certain levels that provide a foundation for knowing what students should learn in a specific discipline or field. Over the years, some hallmarks and common expectations for faculty credentials have emerged within the higher education community, such as:
 - Faculty teaching in higher education organizations should have completed a significant program of study in the discipline they will teach and/or for which they will develop curricula, with substantial coursework at least one level above that of the courses being taught or developed. Further, it is assumed that successful completion of a coherent degree better prepares a person than an unstructured collection of credit courses;
 - Faculty teaching in undergraduate programs should hold a degree at least one level above that of the program in which they are teaching, and those teaching general education courses typically hold a master's degree or higher and should have completed substantial graduate coursework in the discipline of those courses;
 - Faculty teaching in graduate programs typically hold the terminal degree determined by the discipline;
 - Faculty overseeing doctoral education should know how to conduct research appropriate to the program and degree.

These continue to be basic expectations adhered to by many colleges and universities and, therefore, most colleges and universities will integrate most of them into their faculty handbooks and hiring policies.

- Qualified faculty are identified *in part* by credentials, but there are limitations to considering only the degrees earned. For example,
 - Besides credentials, other vital attributes are necessary to qualify someone to teach, such as being able to design curricula, to develop and implement effective pedagogy, and to appreciate the breadth of knowledge so vital in quality undergraduate and graduate education;
 - Knowledge of a specific discipline as indicated by the credential is not all that is required, since faculty carry other significant responsibilities, such as conducting research, advising students, participating in co-curricular activities, and contributing to shared governance;
 - An earned degree does not necessarily attest to a faculty member's ongoing professional development in the field. Knowing what students should know is dependent upon the discovery of new knowledge and "keeping up in the field";
 - Academic disciplines, degree programs, and curricula are not static. Because of changing academic, societal and workforce needs, colleges and universities are developing interdisciplinary and other non-traditional programs that require faculty to think beyond their own disciplines and traditional academic programs to determine what students should know and to design curricula accordingly;
 - In some cases, such as in practice-oriented disciplines or programs, tested experience in the field may be needed as much or more than formal educational preparation at a prescribed level in determining what students should know to practice.

Using "Tested Experience" as a Basis for Determining Qualified Faculty

- The value of using tested experience to determine faculty qualifications is largely dependent upon the relevance of the experience both to the degree level and to the specific content of the course(s) for which the faculty member is responsible. Tested experience implies that some objective measure ensures that the individual's knowledge and expertise are sufficient for determining what students must learn and have learned. For example:
 - A faculty member teaching baccalaureate-level courses in human resources or business ethics might not have a degree in business, but can provide evidence of effective work as a practicing labor relations attorney;
 - A faculty member who teaches courses for a pre-associate information technology, may not possess a graduate degree, but this person might have the industry certification and years of experience successfully working in the field;
 - A faculty member teaching the clinical courses in a master's program in education might not have a doctorate in education but, instead, might have documented recognition of excellence in teaching;
 - A faculty member teaching creative writing, painting, or music may have had his/her expertise, ability, and talent validated through publication or through wide critical and public acclaim;
 - A faculty member teaching conversational courses in a Native American or foreign language may demonstrate his/her qualification through formal recognition of competence by tribal elders or through a nationally recognized rating of proficiency in foreign language.

Following Good Practices in Determining Qualified Faculty

- The Commission expects that an “organization’s resource base supports its educational programs and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future.” This requires that organizations have, and plan for, a sufficient number of qualified faculty to ensure educational quality. While not all faculty will possess the credentials that are regarded as “hallmarks,” the overall mix of the faculty, within a given program and/or organization, should establish a foundation for maintaining and strengthening educational quality (Core Component 2b. In short, colleges and universities will value in each individual member credentials and/or experience, but the most important consideration is whether all of the members of the faculty together represent the breadth of skills, talents, and knowledge needed by the institution and the program.
- Higher education organizations typically establish and periodically review the minimum qualifications and expectations of faculty teaching in different disciplines and at different levels. Policies and practices are codified and widely shared to ensure consistency and diligence in any review of qualifications for making hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions. An organization’s policies should make clear how educational preparation and professional experience are validated and weighed in determining faculty qualifications. While policies might differ among colleges, they should be clearly tied to how each institution determines “who by formal education and tested experience knows what students must learn.”
- Generally, the same guidelines and principles should be used for employing part-time, adjunct, temporary, and/or non-tenure track faculty as are used in employing full-time tenure-track or tenured faculty, whose primary responsibility is teaching. Although some institutions place a heavy reliance on adjunct faculty, or give graduate teaching assistants the predominant responsibility for instruction in many course sections, an organization committed to effective teaching and learning in all courses and programs will be able to demonstrate consistent procedures and careful consideration of qualifications for all instructional faculty.
- A college or university should assist a productive member of the faculty in implementing a useful program of professional development. For a faculty member with minimal credentials but considerable tested experience, that program might well involve completion of degrees, particularly graduate degrees, appropriate to that faculty member’s work. As U.S. higher education addresses the call for the academy to provide education that prepares graduates for demands of the workplace, it is possible that acceptable professional development might include internships or other opportunities to practice in the profession.

The Commission does not dictate hiring standards to be applied to each member of the faculty. In providing this guidance, the Commission reflects its long-standing understanding that it is the responsibility of a college or university to establish and implement its own policies regarding faculty qualifications. The Commission’s concern is about the overall capacity of the faculty to achieve the educational goals of the institution, and to do that, the faculty must be made up of “people who by formal education and tested experience know what students must learn.”