

# The Iowa Community College State Accreditation Guide

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# Iowa Community College Accreditation

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In the United States, the intent of higher education accreditation is to ensure quality through the involvement of non-governmental accrediting organizations, the federal government and state governments. This collection of entities is known as the Triad.

In Iowa, state accreditation is an evaluation process that seeks to confirm that Iowa's community colleges offer acceptable levels of quality programs and services consistent with state standards and needs. Relying on institutional self-evaluation and Iowa Department of Education staff and external community college peer review, the accreditation process also evaluates educational programs and activities essential to the effectiveness of a college, including outcomes-based planning, governance and financial stability. Accreditation assures the public that its tax-supported educational institutions operate at expected levels of quality and compliance with state code especially given the community college mission to address the economic well-being of Iowa through workforce education and training and preparing community college students for additional educational opportunities.

Iowa Code and Iowa Administrative Code (also called administrative rule) provide the legal framework for community college accreditation:

- Accreditation of community college programs, [Iowa Code section 260C.47](#)
- Standards for accrediting community college programs, [Iowa Code section 260C.48](#)
- Quality Faculty Plan, [Iowa Code section 260C.36](#)
- Community College Accreditation, [Iowa Administrative Code rule 281.21](#)
- Career and Technical Education, [Iowa Code section 256.130\(7\)](#) and [Iowa Administrative Code rule 281.46.6](#)
- Senior Year Plus Program, [Iowa Code section 261E](#)

This guidance document, intended for community college administrators and faculty participating in the accreditation cycle, serves to provide further information related to state accreditation standards and processes.

## Accreditation Overview

The Iowa State Board of Education (State Board) authorizes community college state accreditation. The accreditation process is jointly developed and agreed upon by the Iowa Department of Education (Department) and community colleges. Guidance and recommendations for improvement are gathered from the Iowa Community College Accreditation Advisory Committee (AAC) and community college stakeholder groups including presidents, chief academic officers and chief student services officers. The AAC is charged with reviewing the state accreditation process and making recommendations to the Department annually. The committee includes a representative of one of the functional areas of presidents, chief academic officers, non-credit administrators, institutional research, student services administrators, human resources and finance administrators and faculty from arts and science and career and technical programs from each of the 15 community colleges.

The state process integrates the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) accreditation process with the standards for community colleges identified in law and addresses the needs of the state not met by HLC's accreditation process. In 2025, House File 295 replaced specific reference to the Higher Learning Commission in Iowa Code with "any federally recognized accreditor of postsecondary education institutions." Currently all community colleges are accredited by HLC, so it is identified and referenced as the federal accrediting agency in this guide. If a community college seeks accreditation with another federal accrediting agency in the future, the Department requests notification so accreditation processes can be aligned with the additional accrediting agency prior to state accreditation cycles.

The state accreditation process includes two components:

1. Submission of required data to the Department by the community colleges and annual monitoring by the Department of all community colleges for compliance with state program evaluation requirements adopted by the State Board.

2. A comprehensive, on-site evaluation conducted every ten years and an interim evaluation conducted midway between the comprehensive evaluations, which is typically at year five. The format, length and scope of the interim evaluation is determined by the Department based on the results of the most recent comprehensive evaluation, an analysis of Desk Review materials and annual outcomes data prepared by the Department.

The evaluation component includes: assurance of compliance with state statute and college outcomes at both the comprehensive and interim cycles and continuous improvement efforts at the comprehensive cycle only. The evaluation component is conducted by a review team of Department staff and community college peer reviewers. The evaluation process includes:

- A Desk Review of written materials submitted by the college. [Iowa Code section 260C.47](#) uses the term “program audit report,” which is traditionally referred to as “Desk Review” during the accreditation process.
- Assurance interviews conducted at an on-campus site visit for comprehensive evaluations or an on-site, virtual, or Desk Review-only visit for interim evaluations.
- A final report that includes compliance findings, if applicable, strengths and recommendations for improvement for each accreditation standard and component.
- State Board action on reaccreditation. Prior to the State Board’s vote on reaccreditation, the Department presents a summary of the accreditation report and college leadership presents a short overview of the college’s strategic initiatives and outcomes priorities. The college may also respond to the accreditation report.

Additional information about the state standards and accreditation process is provided throughout this guide.

# Standards for Accrediting Iowa's Community Colleges

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State law establishes the accreditation standards for Iowa's community colleges. These standards include maintaining accreditation with the Higher Learning Commission, the college's outcomes related to state needs and priorities and nine additional state standards pertaining to [281 IAC 21](#):

1. Quality assurance standards for faculty (faculty qualifications)
2. Faculty load
3. Special needs and protected classes
4. Career and technical education program evaluation
5. Facilities, parking lots and roads
6. Institutional effectiveness and outcomes-based planning
7. Quality Faculty Plan
8. Senior Year Plus programs
9. Student services

## Higher Learning Commission Accreditation (281 IAC 21.61)

To be accredited by the State Board, a community college must meet the accreditation criteria, assumed practices and federal compliance requirements of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Colleges may choose the type of HLC accreditation review that best applies to their institution. Details about the HLC accreditation process are available at [www.hlcommission.org](http://www.hlcommission.org). The state accreditation evaluation reviews the documentation and decisions of HLC to determine whether HLC standards are met and to identify any areas of strength, weakness or opportunities for improvement that may be required to maintain HLC accreditation and to fulfill state accreditation standards and state needs.

Documents and materials provided in accordance with the accreditation requirements of HLC will also be provided to the Department for the state accreditation process which may include but is not limited to:

- Institutional Update including Composite Financial Index (CFI)
- Assurance Arguments, Interim Monitoring Reports, Quality Initiative Reports or other accreditation reports
- Comprehensive and Interim Peer Review Team final reports
- Correspondence with the Institutional Actions Council and HLC Board including Action Letters
- Institutional response correspondence
- Federal Compliance filing
- Multi-Campus Visit report
- Compliance with Assumed Practices form
- Substantive Change applications

## Standard 1: Faculty Qualifications (281 IAC 21.62(1) and Iowa Code 260C.48)

Instructors who teach college credit courses shall meet minimum qualifications. The Faculty Qualifications Guide located on the Department's [accreditation website](#) and Iowa statute outline the qualifications standards.

During the accreditation evaluation process, Department staff will review a random subset of credentials and related documentation from faculty teaching courses in arts and science, career and technical education and developmental education. This includes both full-time, part-time, adjunct and concurrent enrollment instructors.

## Standard 2: Faculty Load (281 IAC 21.62(2))

The teaching loads of full-time instructors must not exceed the faculty load limits set forth in Iowa law as follows:

- a. Arts and sciences. The full-time teaching load of an instructor in arts and sciences courses will be 15 credit hours per traditional semester or the equivalent and will not exceed a maximum of 16 credit hours per traditional semester or the equivalent. An instructor may also have an additional teaching assignment beyond the maximum academic workload, provided the instructor and the community college administration mutually

consent to this additional assignment and the total workload does not exceed the equivalent of 22 credit hours within a traditional semester or the equivalent.

b. Career and technical education. The full-time teaching load of an instructor in career and technical education programs will not exceed an aggregate of 30 hours per week or the equivalent. An instructor may also teach the equivalent of an additional three credit hours, provided the instructor consents to this additional assignment. When the teaching assignment includes classroom subjects (nonlaboratory), consideration will be given to establishing the teaching load more in conformity with that of paragraph 21.62(2)“a.”

During the accreditation evaluation process, Department staff will review a random subset of load documentation from faculty teaching courses in arts and science and career and technical programs.

### **Standard 3: Special Needs and Protected Classes (281 IAC 21.62(3))**

Community colleges shall provide students with special needs, and those protected by state and federal civil rights regulation, with equal access to the full range of program offerings and services including but not limited to recruitment, enrollment and placement activities. Students with disabilities shall be given access to the full range of program offerings at a college through reasonable accommodations.

The primary requirements associated with this standard are the publication of both an annual and continuous notice of nondiscrimination as part of the Office of Civil Rights Memorandum of Agreement and the college’s policies and procedures related to this standard, including those related to a grievances and complaints policy. The nondiscrimination statement guidance is located on the Department’s [accreditation website](#).

During the accreditation evaluation process, the accreditation review team will review policies, procedures and services related to the college’s nondiscrimination statements and services for students with special needs.

### **Standard 4: Career and Technical Education (CTE) Evaluation (281 IAC 21.62(4))**

There are a variety of state requirements related to offering CTE programs including [Iowa Code chapter 256](#), [281 IAC 46](#) and [281 IAC 21.62\(4\)](#). During the accreditation evaluation process the CTE program review and evaluation system is reviewed for CTE program catalog alignment with STICS, CTE advisory councils, and CTE program review. Documentation of policies and processes will be requested and a subset of programs will be identified for a detailed review to ensure that the CTE program evaluation meets state minimum standards, including that a minimum of 20% of programs are reviewed annually and that all state CTE program review standards are addressed during program review including an assessment of the extent to which the competencies in the program are being mastered by the students enrolled, the costs are proportionate to educational benefits received, the career and technical education curriculum is articulated and integrated with other curricular offerings required of all students, the programs would permit students with career and technical education backgrounds to pursue other educational interests in a postsecondary institutional setting and the programs remove barriers for all students to access educational and employment opportunities.

The Department provides additional resources on the [accreditation website](#) related to CTE programs including:

- Community College CTE Program Review Toolkit
- Program Approval Guidelines for Iowa Community Colleges
- Advisory Council guidance

### **Standard 5: Facilities, Parking Lots and Roads (281 IAC 21.62(5))**

Each community college shall present evidence of a board-approved infrastructure plan that includes facilities, technology and campus safety. Plans, at a minimum, will include scheduling periodic maintenance, planning for facilities and infrastructure expansions and renovations, major equipment upgrades and processes for continuity of service and instruction. Facilities shall be made functional and usable for persons with special needs, and shall comply with [Iowa Code chapter 104A](#) and the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (OCR Guidelines Sections IV.N and VI.A; 34 C.F.R. §104.4(a) and §104.33-104.36; 28 C.F.R. §35.130).

During the accreditation evaluation facility adequacy, accessibility and safety, libraries or learning resource centers, student centers and laboratories will be reviewed. Additional resource guidance for this standard is available on the Department’s [accreditation website](#).

## **Standard 6: Institutional effectiveness and outcomes-based planning (281 IAC 21.62(6))**

Each college is expected to demonstrate institutional effectiveness and outcomes-based planning through:

- A high-quality, board-approved strategic plan developed with input from internal and external stakeholders that guides decision making; is regularly reviewed and revised at least once every five years; contains a list of goals, objectives and metrics; includes regular progress tracking and communicates progress toward meeting plan goals.
- Reviewing outcomes data regularly provided by the Department and illustrating how the data informs institutional decision making in order to meet the college's strategic plan.

During the accreditation evaluation process, the accreditation review team will review plans and planning processes related to the college's approach to institutional effectiveness and the incorporation of outcomes, both provided by the state and institutionally identified, into strategic planning, annual priorities, and action plan execution and measurement.

## **Standard 7: Quality Faculty Plan (QFP) (281 IAC 21.62(7))**

Iowa law establishes the process for community colleges to plan for the hiring and professional development of faculty. College QFPs must meet the standards outlined in [Iowa Code section 260C.36](#) including:

- QFP committees
- New faculty orientation
- Professional development opportunities for faculty
- Recordkeeping
- Demonstration of instructional competency
- Demonstration of subject matter competency
- Development of faculty potential activities

During the accreditation evaluation process documentation of policies and processes will be reviewed by the review team and a subset of faculty plans will be identified for a detailed review by Department staff. Additional information may be found on the Department's on the Quality Faculty Plan on the [accreditation website](#).

## **Standard 8: Senior Year Plus (SYP) (281 IAC 21.62(8))**

There are a variety of requirements for SYP programs offered to high school students jointly enrolled in community college. Many of the statutory requirements are maintained through the National Alliance for Concurrent Enrollment Partnership's (NACEP) accreditation process. Beginning in fall 2025, colleges have the option to choose a state process that is aligned with NACEP standards in lieu of formal NACEP accreditation.

During the evaluation, NACEP documentation and college policies and processes will be reviewed and Department staff will evaluate a subset of concurrent enrollment instructors against the faculty qualifications, load, and QFP standards. The Department provides additional guidance on the [accreditation website](#).

## **Standard 9: Student Services (281 IAC 21.62(9))**

A program of student services will be provided to meet the needs of students in the community college. Services will be reviewed periodically and incorporated into the college's planning for effectiveness. The program of student services, at a minimum, will include the following functional areas:

- A systematic onboarding process that includes recruitment, evaluation and support of college readiness, orientation to college processes and policies, and initial program and course selection.
- Programs and resources to help students understand how to finance college, including access to federal, state and local financial aid to facilitate community college enrollment and completion.
- A student-centered advising program related to career and academic goals focused on persistence, retention, completion, and transition to further education or employment.
- Campus safety and security as required by [Iowa Code chapter 260C](#); the federal Clery Act, 20

U.S.C. §1092(f); and 34 CFR Section 668.46.

- Opportunities for students to participate in experiences and programs that supplement classroom learning experiences and provide an optimal climate for social and academic development.

During the accreditation evaluation process, the accreditation review team will review policies, procedures and services related to the college's student services program.

## **Outcomes, Other Requirements and Focus Visits**

College outcomes are evaluated in two ways during state accreditation. First, as part of standard 6: institutional effectiveness and outcomes-based planning and second, as outcomes data results based on state-identified needs related to state and national benchmarks.

[Iowa Administrative Code rule 281-21.62](#) authorizes, as needed, any other items referenced in Chapter 21 related to Iowa's community colleges as eligible to be considered as part of state accreditation. The Department may also review compliance with other requirements in state and federal law; however, any issues identified will not impact the college's accreditation status provided they do not affect the college's fulfillment of state standards and HLC accreditation requirements.

Other requirements that may be reviewed include, but are not limited to college curriculum aligned with STICS, MOA Civil Rights requirements, data reporting requirements, student and public complaints and financial reporting.

The Department has the authority to conduct focused evaluation visits as needed and approved by the director of the Department ([281 IAC 21.63\(4\)](#)). Focused evaluations may result from compliance findings during comprehensive and interim accreditation cycles, state reporting issues, complaints submitted to the state, adverse HLC actions, fiscal reports or other issues of state interest.

# Overview of Accreditation Evaluation Process

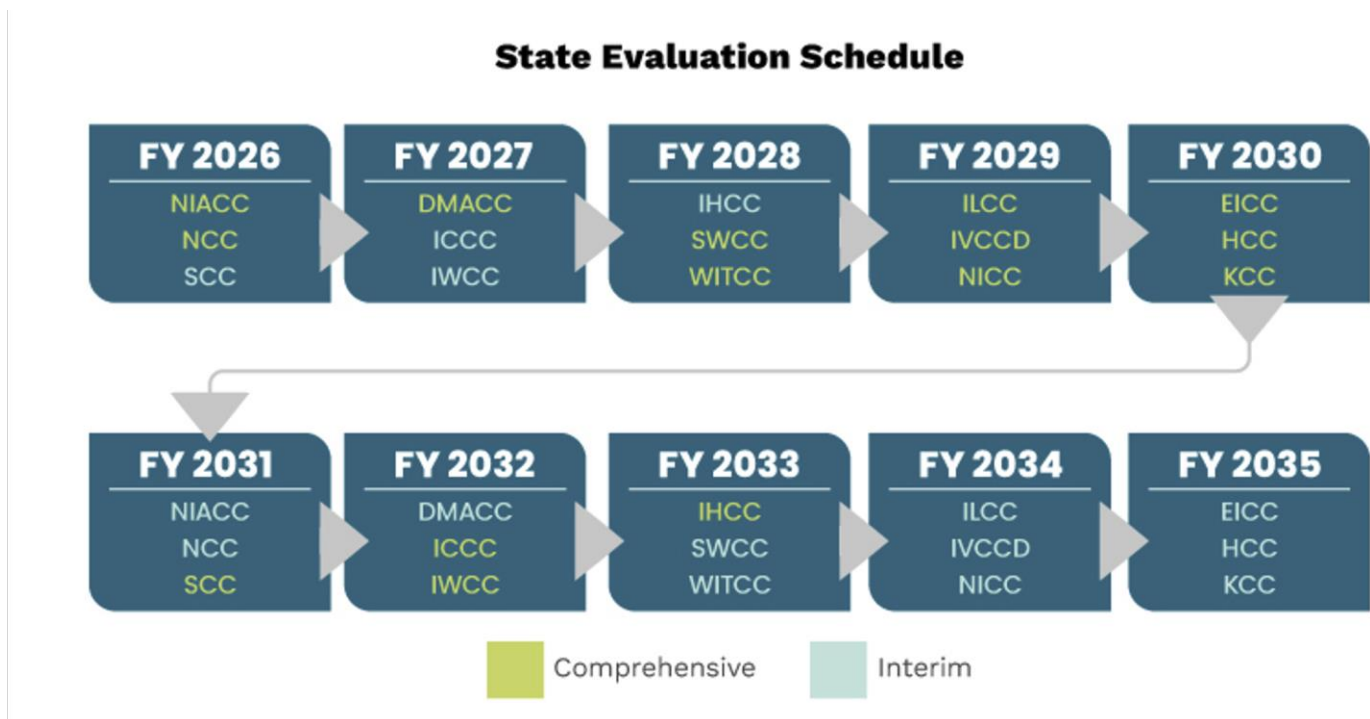
The accreditation evaluation process includes three elements:

1. Assurance: reviews compliance with HLC accreditation processes and criteria and the nine state standards through Desk Review and assurance interviews.
2. Outcomes: reviews the college's outcomes results related to state-identified needs in relation to state and national benchmarks.
3. Continuous improvement: included only in comprehensive evaluations, involves feedback and recommendations from peer colleges related to an institution-identified special topic.

Both the comprehensive and interim evaluations include the assurance element, the outcomes element, and a review team composed of Department staff and administrators and faculty members from peer institutions. The comprehensive evaluation which occurs every ten years includes an assurance Desk Review element, continuous improvement special topics element and assurance interviews for each of the standards at a two-day site visit. The interim evaluation which occurs at year five in between comprehensive evaluations includes an assurance Desk Review element, but may have modified treatment for assurance interviews that could result in no interviews required (Desk Review only), virtual interviews, one-day site visit or traditional two-day site visit. Decisions about interim assurance interviews are based on the results of the outcomes and Desk Review phases. Colleges are notified after the Desk Review phase is completed about any modifications to the accreditation visit schedule.

## Evaluation Schedule

The Department will prepare a staggered evaluation schedule that sets no more than three comprehensive or interim evaluations in any one year.



## Phases of the Evaluation Process

### Preparation phase for comprehensive and interim visits

- The Department schedules an orientation meeting with the college, generally 3 months prior to the scheduled evaluation.
- College identifies an accreditation point of contact.

- The Department convenes the review team which is staff from the Bureau of Community Colleges and Bureau of CTE and Postsecondary Readiness and up to three peer administrators and faculty from college scheduled for a review by the Department the following year. Additional technical experts may be included as needed. The college checks for conflicts of interest within the review team and notifies the Department of concerns. All peer reviewers participate in the Desk Review phase, and peer reviewers participate in the comprehensive site visits. The college is responsible for paying the travel expenses of the external peer reviewers and the Department covers the Department staff travel expenses.
- The Department annually prepares and distributes a Community College Profile Report based on summative data extracted from the Community College Management Information System (MIS) and Outcomes Data reports.
- The Department MIS generates sample lists of faculty members for the qualifications, load, and professional development (QFP) standards reviews and sends them to the college.
- The Department sends the CTE programs that have been sampled for the CTE evaluation standard to the college and the school district partners selected for the SYP standard.
- Comprehensive only: The college identifies and informs the Department of the continuous improvement special topic that it would like to cover during the accreditation site visit.

### Typical evaluation process schedule

Step	Who is Responsible?	Visit Type	Timeframe
Identify accreditation evaluation site visit dates	Department Accreditation Lead	Comprehensive/Interim	February prior to year of evaluation
Identify MOA Civil Rights college	Department OCR Lead	Comprehensive/Interim	March prior to year of evaluation
Orientation meeting	Department Accreditation Lead	Comprehensive/Interim	4 months prior to evaluation site visit
Determine tentative State Board agenda date	Department Bureau Chief	Comprehensive/Interim	4 months prior to evaluation site visit
Desk Review opened for college submitting materials	Department Accreditation Lead	Comprehensive/Interim	1 week after orientation meeting
Desk Review materials due to Department	College Lead	Comprehensive/Interim	2 months prior to evaluation site visit
College history submitted to Department	College Lead	Comprehensive/Interim	2 months prior to evaluation site visit
Special Topic submitted to Department	College Lead	Comprehensive	2 months prior to evaluation site visit
Interim visit treatment decision	Department Accreditation Lead	Interim	1 month prior to evaluation site visit
Site visit schedule drafted	Department Accreditation Lead	Comprehensive/Interim	3 weeks prior to evaluation site visit
Faculty qualifications/load review and dialogue	Department quality faculty Lead	Comprehensive/Interim	Prior to visit

Catalog/STICS review and dialogue	Department program quality Lead	Comprehensive/Interim	Prior to visit
Draft Report sent to college	Department Accreditation Lead	Comprehensive/Interim	2 months prior to State Board meeting
Draft Report college response due to Department	College Lead	Comprehensive/Interim	6 weeks prior to State Board meeting
College materials for State Board meeting due to Department (handouts, power point)	College Lead	Comprehensive/Interim	4 weeks prior to State Board meeting
State Board of Education meeting	Department accreditation Lead	Comprehensive/Interim	4-5 months after evaluation site visit
Notification of Accreditation	Department Bureau Chief	Comprehensive/Interim	After State Board meeting
MOA Civil Rights site visit scheduled	Department OCR Lead	MOA Civil Rights	Fall semester
MOA Civil Rights Letter of Finding	Department OCR Lead	MOA Civil Rights	4 months after evaluation site visit or MOA facilities visit whichever is later
MOA Civil Rights Voluntary Compliance returned to Department	College Lead	MOA Civil Rights	30 days after Letter of Finding
Accreditation findings follow-up	College Lead/Department Bureau Chief	Comprehensive/Interim	Generally, 6 months after evaluation site visit
MOA Civil Rights follow up	College Lead/Department OCR Lead	MOA Civil Rights	Generally, 6 months after Voluntary Compliance

## Desk Review phase for comprehensive and interim evaluations

The Desk Review phase allows review teams to conduct as much of the evaluation as possible prior to the site visit and assurance interview phase.

- Unless specifically identified, all documentation for the evaluation is provided by the college.
- Desk Review materials are uploaded into a document management system provided by the Department (Google docs for general Desk Review materials and Web MIS for documents with personally identifiable information) by the college. The materials are due 60 days prior to the scheduled site visit.
- Specific standards may require a survey or narrative summary provided by the college. Those requiring a summary are identified within the Google docs folder for that standard. (e.g. outcomes-based planning, student services, STICS/Curriculum, etc.)
- Other special instructions, if applicable, are also included in the Google docs guidance folder.
- The review team conducts an evaluation of each standard against the documentation provided by the college. Initial strengths and recommendations for improvement are drafted and potential compliance findings are identified. This process is concluded approximately 30 days prior to the site visit.

- Assurance interview questions are drafted to verify and clarify the preliminary evaluation identified during Desk Review.
- Interim evaluations only: a decision-making process is applied and the college is notified a few weeks prior to the site visit of the format, length and scope of the site visit and assurance interview treatment.
- The Department drafts a proposed interview schedule, including suggested participants, and sends it to the college for scheduling conflicts and room or virtual assignments. The schedule should be finalized one week prior to the site visit.

### Site visit phase for comprehensive and interim evaluations

The site visit phase is intended to conduct assurance interviews with college administrators, faculty and students to evaluate standards that cannot be reviewed through the Desk Review only. The length of the site visits generally lasts two days for comprehensive evaluations and may be shorter or virtual for interim evaluations depending on the results of the college's outcomes data and Desk Review.

- The review team follows up on issues identified during previous state accreditation evaluations and documented concerns.
- Comprehensive evaluation assurance interviews focus on each standard and the interim evaluation interviews focus on the standards identified with potential compliance findings and recommendations.
- Additional documentation may be requested either prior to or during the site visit.
- Site visit includes a campus tour where Perkins-funded equipment is audited.
- Comprehensive only: Continuous improvement special topic meeting.
- The Department may schedule the Faculty Qualifications and Faculty Load standards interviews outside of the site visit dates.
- The Department may schedule the college catalog and STICS alignment meeting outside of the site visit dates.

The college orientation session provides a sample of a typical site visit.

### Comprehensive evaluation: Continuous improvement special topic

The comprehensive evaluation includes a continuous improvement component which is referred to as the "special topic." The college identifies a special topic that aligns with an area it has identified for continuous improvement. The Department provides technical assistance during the site visit to support the college's continuous improvement initiative. Generally, a panel of peer-college subject matter experts is convened to answer questions, offer best practice examples and suggest feedback on the initiative. The dialogue is intended to facilitate consultative advice that is valuable to the college's continuous improvement process.

The review team offers recommendations to the college during the site visit exit interview and briefly describes the topic in the final report, but no accreditation compliance findings are attached to the continuous improvement component.

The Department, if warranted, may identify additional special topics based on compliance findings. A list of potential special topic areas is available on the Department's [accreditation website](#).

### Reporting and State Board approval phase for comprehensive and interim evaluations

An oral preliminary report is presented to the college at the conclusion of the site visit which includes the review team's observations, recommendations and anticipated compliance findings.

After the site visit phase, the review team evaluates whether the accreditation standards have been met and presents a report with a recommendation as to whether the community college shall remain accredited to the director of the Department and the State Board.

The report includes:

- Brief college history

- Institutional profile
- Strengths and opportunities for improvement, if any, for each of the assurance standards and outcomes and advises the community college of available resources and technical assistance to further enhance strengths and address areas for improvement
- Compliance findings and required follow up
- Continuous improvements summary, comprehensive cycle only
- Review team's recommendation regarding continued accreditation status

The community college may respond to the accreditation team's report, and has an opportunity to review the draft report for corrections to errors of fact. Errors of fact are statements in the report that are factually incorrect and can be demonstrated as such by evidence available to the team. Examples of this are typographical errors or other mistakes, such as incorrect enrollment numbers, job titles, or program names. The team may accept or decline any corrections provided by the institution before submitting the final report to the director of the Department and State Board.

The final report is submitted to the State Board for approval. The State Board agenda item includes a presentation by the Department on the standards and outcomes reported, a brief presentation by college leadership about its students and region, strategic initiatives and a response to the accreditation report, if warranted. The State Board agenda allocates approximately 20 minutes for the Department report, college presentation, questions, and vote on re-accreditation. Any visual aids (PowerPoint slides or handouts) must be submitted to the Department three weeks prior to the State Board meeting.

# Community College Accreditation Status

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The State Board will determine whether a community college remains accredited. The State Board may grant accreditation, deny accreditation or authorize conditional accreditation ([Iowa Code 260C.47](#)).

- Granted continuation of accreditation is for a ten-year term with an interim evaluation at the midway point. If the State Board determines that conditions warrant, a lesser term may be granted.
- Denied or conditional accreditation involves cooperation between the Department director and community college board of directors to establish a plan for correcting deficiencies.
- The plan which is due to the director within 45 days following notice of accreditation denial or conditional accreditation describes the procedures for meeting the standards and criteria and establishes a deadline which is no later than June 30 of the year following the evaluation team site visit for correcting deficiencies, sharing or merger options, discontinuance of specific programs or courses of study, and other options proposed by the State Board or evaluation team to allow the college to meet accreditation standards and criteria. The plan is subject to State Board approval.
- The college remains accredited during the time specified in the plan for its implementation.
- The evaluation team revisits the college to evaluate whether deficiencies have been corrected and presents a report and recommendation on accreditation to the director and State Board.
- The State Board determines whether the deficiencies have been corrected.
- A college that fails to meet accreditation standards will receive official notice at least one year prior to removal of accreditation. If the college remedies the reasons for removal of accreditation and offers assurances for compliance with standards and criteria in the future, the director will continue accreditation.
- Failure to correct deficiencies will result in one of the following actions by the community college board: merging the deficient program(s) with a program(s) from another accredited community college, contracting with another education institution for the purpose of program delivery, or discontinuing the program(s) which have been identified as deficient.
- The action of the director to remove state accreditation may be appealed to the State Board.

# Appendix 1: History of Iowa's Community College Accreditation Process

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The state accreditation process for Iowa's community colleges has evolved since its establishment in 1990. Developed collaboratively with the colleges and continuously evolving, the process ensures state standards are satisfied while avoiding duplication with regional and federal accreditation processes. The changing role of community colleges in higher education and increasing emphasis on institutional effectiveness led to the passage of legislation in 1990 requiring the creation of a state accreditation process for Iowa's community colleges. The legislation outlined requirements for new standards and an accreditation process to address the issues of quality, access, accountability and institutional improvement.

In the spring of 1991, the Iowa Department of Education established a cross-departmental work team to coordinate development of the accreditation process and standards. Rather than being prescriptive, the team held the philosophy that the new standards should provide goals toward which colleges should strive, including those qualities that characterize the best in community college education. Understanding that community involvement was essential to the success of this project, the team organized a task force on accreditation and program review made up of community college chief academic officers. An accreditation advisory committee of representatives from business and industry, government and other stakeholder groups was formed to gather broad community input.

By October 1992, the work team and the task force reached consensus on a preliminary set of 47 standards and accompanying rationale for each. Feedback was sought through 15 open forums conducted across the state in late 1992. Based on this feedback, the work team and task force revised the standards and changed the name from "Preliminary Accreditation Standards" to "State Criteria for Evaluation of Iowa Community Colleges" in order to better reflect the institutional improvement focus of the accreditation process.

The State Board of Education approved 36 state criteria and authorized a pilot process in June 1994. Based on the pilot process conducted in 1995 and 1996, community college personnel recommended reducing the number of criteria by consolidating similar standards. In August 1997, the State Board of Education adopted 18 criteria. The rules for community college accreditation became effective on October 1, 1997.

The development of the Higher Learning Commission's (HLC) Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP), and a major revision of HLC's accreditation criteria in early 2005, prompted extensive changes to both Iowa's community college accreditation guidelines and the administrative rules governing community college accreditation. Most significant was the new alignment of Iowa's accreditation criteria and core components with those of HLC. For more than a decade, the accreditation cycles of HLC and the Department were coincidental. The content of the respective accreditation process was the same regardless of whether the college had adopted HLC's AQIP process or continued to use the traditional Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ).

Since the inception of the state accreditation process, the state has set standards in addition to those set by HLC. These standards have changed over time. For example, in 2003 the state eliminated community college faculty licensure and implemented the Quality Faculty Plan (QFP) process to ensure the competence of instructors. In 2007 and 2008, legislation was passed expanding state accreditation standards for faculty qualifications and the QFP process.

In 2008, the 82<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly mandated a comprehensive study of accreditation and accountability mechanisms. The Department was directed to review the accreditation process and the compliance requirements contained in the accreditation criteria. The review requirements specified for the Department to consider measures to ensure: statewide consistency in program quality, adequate State Board of Education oversight of community college programming; consistency in definitions for data collection, identification of barriers to providing quality programming, identification of methods to improve compensation of faculty and development of system performance measures that adequately respond to needs and concerns. The bill also required the Department to look at accreditation processes and system performance measures from other states and regions.

The Iowa Community College Accreditation Advisory Committee was reconvened to conduct the mandated review. The committee included individuals representing the various functional units of community colleges, including presidents, chief academic officers, faculty, human resource administrators, business officers, student services administrators and academic deans. Membership included at least one member from each college and was balanced between PEAQ and AQIP institutions.

To manage the wide scope of the study, specialized work teams were established to address program quality, data quality and reporting, faculty remuneration and national review of state accreditation and review processes. In conducting the review, the Department collaborated with community college Quality Faculty Plan committees.

The Iowa Community College Accreditation Advisory Committee developed recommendations, which the Department included in the final report to the legislature in January 2010. The report recommended an overhaul of the state accreditation process to make it more focused and efficient while reaffirming Iowa's approach to ensuring state standards are met through peer review. Recommendations included removing duplication with HLC accreditation process by focusing state reviews on standards in state law not reviewed by HLC, as well as issues identified by the state or colleges. Additionally, enhanced pre-visit Desk Reviews and streamlined interim visits were recommended to reduce the time and cost of site visits.

The Department accepted the report recommendations, and those of the advisory committee, and began overhauling the state accreditation process and review protocol. In 2020, the legislature mandated the Department review its implementation of the recommendations and present findings and recommendations to the legislature by December 31, 2010.

The rules for the state accreditation process, set the standards for Iowa's community colleges as HLC's five criteria and a number of additional state requirements, including minimum faculty standards, faculty load, special needs, career and technical program review, strategic planning, physical plant and facilities, Quality Faculty Plan and Senior Year Plus standards.

While the state accreditation process was being modified, HLC released information about its intent to transition to a new model for continued accreditation. The new model separated threshold standards from continuous improvement and was intended to increase public confidence in accreditation as a mechanism for quality assurance. In 2015-16, under a new model, PEAQ transitioned to a new Open Pathway while AQIP was planned for phase out. The Standard Pathway remained a third option. As under the previous model, HLC standards and criteria continued to remain the same, regardless of the model selected.

In September 2024, the State Board directed the Department to review accreditation standards and processes and to make suggestions for modernization and improvement. During the modernization process the state standards were reviewed against HLC criteria to identify if they were discrete, duplicative or complementary to HLC criteria for accreditation. No state standards were identified as duplicative. Four areas for improvement of state standards and evaluation processes were identified:

1. Emphasize outcomes-based planning focused on student outcomes and institutional effectiveness.
2. Leverage state data systems to identify benchmarks for college and state-level outcomes.
3. Make meaningful accreditation evaluation process differentiations based on benchmarking outcomes.
4. Maintain the assurance component and ensure state priorities are met effectively through revisions to [Iowa Administrative Code rule 281.21](#).

The Department worked with the Iowa Community College Accreditation Advisory Committee, the Community College Advisory Committee and various community college leadership stakeholder groups including presidents, chief academic officers, and chief student services officers to recommend changes.

Rule changes for [IAC 281.21](#) were drafted and went through the administrative rulemaking process including public comment. The major changes to IAC 281.21 include outcomes-based planning in institutional effectiveness activities, rescinding the Quality Faculty Plan rules and referring to the faculty quality standards in [Iowa Code 260C.36](#), modernizing the facilities section to include technology and safety infrastructure, adding a student services standard and revising the interim evaluation visit by providing alternatives to the format, length and scope of the visit. During the stakeholder input process, improvements to the CTE program review standards located in [IAC 281.46\(6\)](#) were also identified for modernization. The State Board adopted the

recommendations for improvement and modernization in March 2025. The rules were enacted in May 2025 for implementation with the 2025-2026 evaluation cycle.

As the Department implements changes to the accreditation process, it will continuously seek feedback from stakeholders. The Iowa Community College Accreditation Advisory Committee will continue to play an important role in assisting the development of review protocol and providing feedback to the Department.

## Appendix 2: Review Team for State Accreditation Evaluation

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The state accreditation evaluation teams are composed of Department staff and external peer reviewers. Typically, teams include up to six Department staff and up to three external reviewers. Review team members are assigned by the Bureau Chief of Community Colleges and approved by the Department director [per Iowa Code 260C.47\(1\)\(b\)](#).

Department reviewers are staff from the Bureau of Community Colleges and Bureau of CTE and Postsecondary Readiness, but if warranted, may be staff from the Division of Higher Education.

External reviewers both provide perspectives from across the community college field during the evaluation process and receive experience with the state accreditation process to offer their home colleges who are preparing for state accreditation. Potential reviewers are recommended by the college leadership of those colleges scheduled to undergo accreditation evaluation in the next year's cycle. Ideally, the external reviewers on a review team represent different colleges and different positions (administrator/staff and faculty).

Each college undergoing state accreditation may submit conflict of interest concerns about a review team member to the Bureau Chief prior to the Desk Review period.

Review team members receive training about the state accreditation standards and evaluation process prior to beginning Desk Review. All members of the review team attend the site visit for comprehensive evaluations and only members of the Department team attend interim evaluation site visits.

Focus review teams include at least two Department staff and may include one or more external reviewers with expertise in the focus issue.

Travel expenses are reimbursed by the college undergoing evaluation for members of the external review team. Travel expenses for Department staff are covered by the Department.

# Appendix 3: Methods of Administration (MOA): Civil Rights Review

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The purpose of the Methods of Administration (MOA) program is to ensure that all students, regardless of race, color, national origin, sex, or disability, have equal access to high-quality career and technical education programs. Through its Methods of Administration authority, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), in partnership with the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE), oversees the civil rights compliance programs of state agencies that administer career and technical education. The state agencies' responsibilities under the MOA program are set out in the Guidelines for Eliminating Discrimination and Denial of Services on the Basis of Race, Color, National Origin, Sex, and Handicap in Vocational Education Programs (Appendix B of the Title VI regulation and the Section 504 regulation, and Appendix A of the Title IX regulation).

<https://cte.ed.gov/legislation/methods-of-administration>.

The Iowa Department of Education is the state agency responsible for overseeing civil rights compliance, which is facilitated via the MOA Civil Rights Review. The MOA Civil Rights review process is aligned with the state's community college accreditation cycle, but generates a separate report from the state evaluation report.

One college is identified to participate in the MOA review each year. Alignment with the five-year state accreditation cycle results in each community college undergoing a MOA Civil Rights review at least once every 15 years. The process to select the identified college applies targeting criteria to each of the three colleges scheduled to participate in the state accreditation evaluation process. The targeting criteria are scored based on the weighted criteria identified in the targeting plan that has been approved by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR). In the event that two colleges receive the same score, then both will participate in the MOA Civil Rights review.

## MOA Civil Rights Review targeting criteria

The Department considers the following criteria when selecting a college for a focused MOA Civil Rights review visit:

- Enrollment patterns by sex. The percent of CTE programs that have 80 percent or more students of one sex enrolled, and the variance of the percent of students enrolled in CTE programs by sex compared to the percent of students enrolled at the college by sex.
- Enrollment patterns by race/ethnicity. The variance of the percent of minority students enrolled in CTE programs compared to the percent of minority students enrolled at the college.
- Enrollment patterns by disability. The variance of the percent of students with disabilities enrolled in CTE programs compared to the percent of students with disabilities enrolled at the college.
- College demographics. The demographics of students enrolled at the college.
- Change in minority student enrollment. The change in the percent of minority students enrolled over the past five years.
- MOA civil rights related complaints. The MOA civil rights-related complaints received through the Department's complaint process.
- Time elapsed since the previous MOA Civil Rights Review. Due to the cyclical nature of the Bureau's accreditation/MOA Civil Rights review cycle, the time-elapsed criterion is more heavily weighted than the others.

The Special Needs and Protected Classes standard of the state accreditation evaluation covers some components of the MOA. Therefore, all colleges will receive feedback and guidance on MOA Civil Rights components to ensure ongoing compliance with OCR regulations. Any compliance issues identified will appear in the state accreditation evaluation report.

The MOA Civil Rights review process consists of a Desk Review, on-site interviews and visit and reporting process. The Desk Review process originates with the Department requesting evidential documentation from the community college. Following the data analysis and Desk Review process, the on-site visit involves interviews with select community college stakeholder groups that may align with state evaluation assurance

interviews, which to the greatest extent possible, will coincide with accreditation assurance interviews, but MOA Civil Rights components tangential to the accreditation standards may require additional MOA interviews.

After the Desk Review and site visit, the Department drafts the MOA report. The college reviews the report for factual errors. The final report is sent to the college president. If required, the college submits a Voluntary Compliance Plan (VCP) addressing its plan for addressing any compliance issues to the Department. The Department then submits the report and the VCP to the OCR.

A college may be subject to an off-cycle MOA Civil Rights review if the need to investigate a report of serious MOA Civil Rights concerns arises or if the college has significant changes in its racial/ethnic demographics. An off-cycle review does not preempt the regular review cycle, so there may be instances where two colleges are reviewed in a year.

MOA Civil Rights reviews are conducted by the same evaluation team assigned to the college for state accreditation. An off-cycle review will be conducted by Department staff and, if warranted, at least one external peer reviewer.

Additional guidance related to MOA Civil Rights reviews and compliance with OCR regulations is available on the Department's [accreditation website](#).