

Evaluating Certificate Programs

Introduction

Institutions may offer certificate programs. HLC defines a certificate program to mean an [educational program](#) that culminates in the awarding of a certificate or diploma, but not a degree. A certificate program may require previous college credit for admission and may be at any level.

Effective July 1, 2026, certificate programs may include programs that an institution also intends to be [eligible workforce programs for purposes of Workforce Pell](#).

Depending on the circumstances, an institution may need to [notify](#) HLC prior to offering a certificate program or may need to obtain HLC [approval](#) prior to offering a certificate program.

As applicable, an institution's certificate programs will also be regularly reviewed as part of an institution's ongoing accreditation evaluations.

These guidelines provide information to (1) assist institutions when initially seeking to offer, and then subsequently offering, certificate programs; and (2) assist HLC, including peer reviewers, when evaluating an application from an institution that is seeking to offer a certificate program or when evaluating an institution that is then subsequently offering certificate programs.

The guidelines include examples of relevant evidence that can be used by institutions to demonstrate compliance with HLC requirements in relationship to certificate programs. Institutions are also encouraged to review HLC's paper on [Promising Practices: Certificate Plus Degree Pathways](#) for additional information and examples of evidence.

Not all examples will be relevant in all circumstances. For example, the type of evidence that an institution would provide to demonstrate compliance with HLC requirements will differ depending on the type of certificate program that is being offered.

Additionally, it would not be possible for some evidence to be available until after a certificate program is in operation. Institutions that are seeking to offer a certificate program may use these examples to help guide their plans for the program and could, as applicable, provide evidence of their related plans and development. For example, an institution seeking to offer a certificate program could explain how it plans to review learning outcomes for the certificate program in its

substantive change application. If the certificate program is approved, at its next comprehensive evaluation the institution could then provide evidence demonstrating how it implemented those plans for review of learning outcomes after the certificate program was implemented.

The guidance and examples are not intended to be determinative or conclusive evidence of ongoing compliance with HLC requirements. Additionally, evidence regarding HLC requirements not specified below may also be applicable depending on the circumstances.

Related HLC Requirements

An institution must meet all HLC requirements in order to maintain accredited status. The following HLC requirements are most relevant to the issue of certificate programs:

Criteria for Accreditation

Criterion 1. Mission

The institution's mission is clear and articulated publicly; it guides the institution's operations.

1.A. Mission Alignment

The institution's educational programs, enrollment profile and scope of operations align with its publicly articulated mission.

Criterion 2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

In fulfilling its mission, the institution acts with integrity; its conduct is ethical and responsible.

2.B. Transparency

The institution presents itself accurately and completely to students and the public with respect to its educational programs and any claims it makes related to the educational experience.

Criterion 3. Teaching and Learning for Student Success

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.

3.A. Educational Programs

The institution maintains learning goals and outcomes that reflect a level of rigor commensurate with college-level work, including by program level and the content of each of its educational programs.

3.C. Sufficiency of Faculty and Staff

The institution has the faculty and staff needed for effective, high-quality programs and student services.

3.D. Support for Student Learning & Resources for Teaching

The institution provides student support services that address the needs of its student populations, as well as the teaching resources and infrastructure necessary for student success.

3.E. Assessment of Student Learning

The institution improves the quality of educational programs based on its assessment of student learning.

3.F. Program Review

The institution improves its curriculum based on periodic program review.

3.G. Student Success Outcomes

The institution's student success outcomes demonstrate continuous improvement, taking into account the student populations it serves and benchmarks that reference peer institutions.

Criterion 4. Sustainability: Institutional Effectiveness, Resources and Planning

The institution's resources, structures, policies, procedures and planning enable it to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its educational programs, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

4.A. Effective Administrative Structures

The institution's administrative structures are effective and facilitate collaborative processes such as shared governance; data-informed decision-making; and engagement with internal and external constituencies as appropriate.

4.B. Resource Base and Sustainability

The institution's financial and personnel resources effectively support its current operations. The institution's financial management balances short-term needs with long-term commitments and ensures its ongoing sustainability.

4.C. Planning for Quality Improvement

The institution engages in systematic strategic planning for quality improvement. It relies on data, integrating its insights from enrollment forecasts, financial capacity, student learning assessment, institutional operations and the external environment.

Assumed Practices

B. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources and Support

2. Faculty Roles and Qualifications

- a. 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.
- b. Faculty participate substantially in:
 - i. Oversight of the curriculum offered — its development, vetting and implementation; academic substance; currency; and relevance for internal and external constituencies;
 - ii. Assurance of consistency in the level and quality of instruction and in the expectations of student performance;
 - iii. Establishment of the qualifications for instructors, including instructors provided by third parties;
 - iv. Analysis of data and appropriate action on assessment of student learning and program completion.

3. Support Services

- b. The institution maintains timely and accurate transcript and records services.

C. Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement

1. The institution evaluates all academic credit that it transcripts, including what it awards for experiential learning or other forms of prior learning. The institution has clear policies for evaluating and accepting credits awarded by other education providers and may rely on

credit evaluation undertaken by responsible third parties. The institution refrains from the transcription of credit from other institutions or providers that it will not apply to its own programs.

2. The institution has formal and current written agreements for managing any internships and clinical placements included in its programs.

Federal Compliance Requirements

Assignment of Credits, Program Length and Tuition (FDCR.A.10.020)

Effective September 1, 2026

An institution shall be able to equate its learning experiences with semester or quarter credit hours using practices common to institutions of higher education; to justify the lengths of its programs in comparison to similar programs found in accredited institutions of higher education; and to justify any program-specific tuition in terms of program costs, program length, and program objectives.

Assignment of Credit Hours

An institution's assignment and award of credit hours shall conform to commonly accepted practices in higher education. An institution seeking, or participating in, Title IV programs, shall demonstrate (1) that it has policies determining the credit hours awarded to courses and programs in keeping with commonly accepted practices in higher education and with any federal definition of the credit hour, as may appear in federal regulations; and (2) that it has procedures that result in an appropriate awarding of institutional credit in conformity with the policies established by the institution.

HLC may sample or use other techniques to review selected institutional programs to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the institution's assignment of credit.

Demonstrating Quality

The following sections provide examples of potential evidence that an institution could provide to demonstrate ongoing compliance with HLC requirements with respect to a certificate program.

Criterion 1. Mission

- How the institution's decision to offer certificate programs, including in specific content areas or formats, aligns with its mission.
(Core Component 1.A. Mission Alignment)

Criterion 2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

- The institution's overall approach to communications regarding certificate programs, including the intentional strategies that the institution utilizes to ensure accuracy and completeness regarding policies, procedures, processes and systems that may be particularly relevant to, or different for, students in certificate programs than for students in other educational programs at the institution. This could include but is not limited to: admissions; credit for prior learning policies; and matters such as time to complete the certificate program, total cost of attendance, financial aid eligibility, implications of using financial aid for certificate programs, and refund processes.
(Core Component 2.B. Transparency)
- The institution's communications about stackable credential pathways associated with certificate programs, as well as other factors related to transferability more generally.
(Core Component 2.B. Transparency)

- The institution's communications about related industry-specific credentials that are embedded into certificate programs, as well as associated costs or common testing requirements related to those credentials.
(Core Component 2.B. Transparency)
- The institution's marketing related to outcomes for certificate programs, including as related to matters such as licensure, attainment of industry credentials, and employment outcomes.
(Core Component 2.B. Transparency)
- How the institution explains the difference between clock hours and credit hours.
(Core Component 2.B. Transparency)
- The institution's strategies for ensuring that students in certificate programs, who often have a shorter-term relationship with the institution, are aware of student supports and services such as advising, career services, learning resources and grievance processes.
(Core Component 2.B. Transparency)
- How the institution explains the involvement of third parties in the development and/or delivery of certificate programs, including through contractual or consortial arrangements.
(Core Component 2.B. Transparency)
- The institution's processes for ensuring sufficient transparency to students regardless of the modality of certificate programs.
(Core Component 2.B. Transparency)
- The institution's communications about special considerations that may be relevant in a situation where a student who has already earned a bachelor's degree chooses to enroll in an undergraduate certificate program.
(Core Component 2.B. Transparency)

Criterion 3. Teaching and Learning for Student Success

- The institution's strategies for using workforce, employer or industry information to identify desired competencies for certificate programs.
(Core Component 3.A. Educational Programs)
- If a certificate program is in a field that involves external validation, such as from a programmatic accreditor, state licensing body or industry-credentialing body, the institution's efforts to ensure that the certificate program meets the requirements of the relevant entity.
(Core Component 3.A. Educational Programs)
- How the institution uses an established taxonomy of learning or other accepted method to differentiate program learning outcomes for certificate programs from program learning outcomes for degree programs.
(Core Component 3.A. Educational Programs)
- The ways in which the institution designs certificate programs to foster stackability and transfer pathways, such as through incorporating embedded learning outcomes that translate to degree programs.
(Core Component 3.A. Educational Programs)
- The ways in which the institution systematically ensures that certificate programs provide students with durable skills.
(Core Component 3.B. Exercise of Intellectual Inquiry)
- How the institution validates knowledge, skills and abilities as part of certificate programs.
(Core Component 3.B. Exercise of Intellectual Inquiry)

- How the institution's policies and procedures for determining faculty qualifications include attention to the type of faculty needed for certificate programs.
(Core Component 3.C. Sufficiency of Faculty and Staff;
Assumed Practice B.2.a. reasonable policies and procedures for faculty qualifications)
- The ways in which the institution supports faculty development relevant to faculty in certificate programs, such as currency in a particular field.
(Core Component 3.C. Sufficiency of Faculty and Staff)
- The ways in which the institution maintains flexibility in instructional staffing for certificate programs to be able to quickly adapt to changing needs.
(Core Component 3.C. Sufficiency of Faculty and Staff)
- How the institution ensures that its personnel understand matters related to billing and financial aid that are especially relevant in the context of certificate programs, such as employer tuition payment practices.
(Core Component 3.C. Sufficiency of Faculty and Staff;
Core Component 3.D. Support for Student Learning and Resources for Teaching)
- How the institution adapts student services such as advising and career placement services to be inclusive of the differing needs of students in certificate programs.
(Core Component 3.D. Support for Student Learning and Resources for Teaching)
- How the institution adapts student systems to accommodate shorter cycles of program completion that are common with certificate programs. This could include, for example, modifications to early alert systems or transcription services.
(Core Component 3.D. Support for Student Learning and Resources for Teaching;
Assumed Practice B.3.b. transcript and record services)
- The institution's adoption of transcription processes for certificate programs that foster stackability.
(Core Component 3.D. Support for Student Learning and Resources for Teaching;
Assumed Practice B.3.b. transcript and record services)
- The institution's process for assessing student learning for certificate programs.
(Core Component 3.E. Assessment of Student Learning)
- The institution's disaggregation of assessment data related to certificate programs in order to assess learning in certificate programs in the context of all student learning at the institution.
(Core Component 3.E. Assessment of Student Learning)
- The ways in which the institution's assessment and program review process for certificate programs includes stakeholders, such as employers, and information that allows for an evaluation of ongoing currency, relevancy and workforce demand, given labor market trends and changes.
(Core Component 3.E. Assessment of Student Learning;
Core Component 3.F. Program Review)
- The institution's intentional consideration of designing a program review schedule or practices that allows certificate programs to be reviewed on an appropriately frequent basis to allow for rapid incorporation of needed changes, which may be a shorter cycle than degree programs.
(Core Component 3.F. Program Review)
- How the institution uses program review data to support ongoing program quality with respect to certificate programs.
(Core Component 3.F. Program Review;
Core Component 4.C. Planning for Quality Improvement;
Assumed Practice C.2. transcription of credit)

- The institution's consideration of the need for expanded or different learning resources related to certificate programs, such as library resources for specific professions.
(Core Component 3.D. Support for Student Learning and Resources for Teaching)
- The ways in which the institution incorporates internships, clinical work, practica, apprenticeships or other field work into certificate programs.
(Core Component 3.D. Support for Student Learning and Resources for Teaching; Assumed Practice C.3. internship and clinical placement documentation)
- How the institution incorporates measures of student success unique to certificate programs, such as employer and industry needs, into its policies and procedures.
(Core Component 3.G. Student Success Outcomes)
- Institutional strategies for improving student success outcomes in certificate programs in a timely manner, such as using data from early alert systems and other strategies for quick interventions when needed.
(Core Component 3.G. Student Success Outcomes)
- The institution's efforts to benchmark its progress with respect to student success outcomes for certificate programs with peer institutions.
(Core Component 3.G. Student Success Outcomes)
- The institution's identification and utilization of student success outcomes appropriate to different certificate programs, such as pass rates on licensure examinations or attainment of industry-recognized certifications.
(Core Component 3.G. Student Success Outcomes)
- If the institution intends for a certificate program to be an eligible workforce program for purposes of Workforce Pell, the institution's approach to ensuring the certificate program meets the program accountability requirements with respect to completion, employment and value-added earnings.
(Core Component 3.G. Student Success Outcomes)

Criterion 4. Sustainability: Institutional Effectiveness, Resources and Planning

- How the institution involves faculty in matters such as development of curriculum and learning outcomes for certificate programs, establishing policies for transfer and prior-learning assessment related to certificate programs, and identifying transfer pathways related to certificate programs. This could be through the same structures as for other educational programs or through an alternate structures or practices well-suited to certificate programs.
(Core Component 4.A. Effective Administrative Structures; Assumed Practice B.2.b. faculty roles)
- The institution's use of external advisory boards involving, for example, members of the local business community or industry professionals, to identify needs for certificate programs and then develop certificate programs once a need is identified.
(Core Component 4.A. Effective Administrative Structures)
- The institution's process for initiating and approving certificate programs, including whether such approval processes are separate from or integrated into the institution's approval processes for other educational programs.
(Core Component 4.A. Effective Administrative Structures)
- How the institution shares responsibility among stakeholders for identifying the appropriate lifecycle for certificate programs including when a program should be sunset.
(Core Component 4.A. Effective Administrative Structures)

- The ways in which the institution has included the offering of certificate programs in its overall business planning efforts.
(Core Component 4.B. Resource Base and Sustainability)
- The institution's consideration of capital investments that may be necessary to support certificate programs, including as to equipment and facilities, such as labs, workshops or testing centers for embedded industry credentials.
(Core Component 4.B. Resource Base and Sustainability)
- The institution's plan for sustaining the certificate programs it offers.
(Core Component 4.B. Resource Base and Sustainability)
- The institution's planning regarding whether to increase the number and/or type of certificate programs it offers and, if so, how to appropriately scale the quality assurance mechanisms associated with certificate programs.
(Core Component 4.B. Resource Base and Sustainability;
Core Component 4.C. Planning for Quality Improvement)
- The alignment between the institution's decision to offer certificate programs and other institutional priorities.
(Core Component 4.C. Planning for Quality Improvement)
- How the institution incorporates workforce, employer, or industry information into its overall approach to planning regarding certificate programs in order to identify learning needs and competencies that inform its offerings. Examples could include regional labor market information, local employer feedback, state occupational projections, job posting analytics, and alumni-employment surveys.
(Core Component 4.C. Planning for Quality Improvement)
- The institution's planning with respect to enrollment in certificate programs, including attention to labor data.
(Core Component 4.C. Planning for Quality Improvement)
- The institution's planning processes regarding entering into articulation agreements with other institutions to further stackability and transfer pathways.
(Core Component 4.C. Planning for Quality Improvement)
- How the institution uses data in its on-going planning regarding offering certificate programs, including when to naturally sunset a certificate program based on changing conditions, such as when a targeted need in the institution's local labor market has been sufficiently met.
(Core Component 4.C. Planning for Quality Improvement)
- If the institution intends for a certificate program to be an eligible workforce program for purposes of Workforce Pell, the institution's efforts to develop the necessary institutional processes for reporting and compliance, and the staffing to support such processes.
(Core Component 3.C. Sufficiency of Faculty and Staff;
Core Component 4.C. Planning for Quality Improvement)

Federal Compliance Requirements

- The institution's attentiveness to the calculation and assignment of credit hours and clock hours in certificate programs.
(FDCR.A.10.020 Assignment of Credits, Program Length, and Tuition)

When Certificate Programs Are Reviewed

An institution must notify HLC when starting a certificate program that is a subset of an existing degree program. A certificate program is a subset of an existing degree program if 50% or more of its courses were derived from courses in the existing program.

An institution must obtain prior HLC approval when starting a certificate program that is not a subset of an existing degree program. An application for approval of a certificate program is typically evaluated through a Desk Review and takes approximately three months from the submission of a complete application. However, the timeframe for review may vary depending on the complexity of the request.

HLC will evaluate an institution's delivery of certificate programs as part of regular Assurance Reviews and comprehensive evaluations. A certificate program may also be reviewed at other times if the educational program becomes a matter of concern.

Questions?

Please contact the institution's HLC staff liaison.

Related Resources

[Substantive Change: New Educational Programs](#)

[Criteria for Accreditation](#)

[Assumed Practices](#)

[Federal Compliance Requirements](#)

[Promising Practices: Certificate Plus Degree Pathways](#)