

NWCCU

NORTHWEST COMMISSION ON
COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Visit Process Guide

**PREPARING FOR AND CONDUCTING
A SITE VISIT**

Information for the ALO

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PART I. BEFORE THE VISIT

SCOPE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide offers insight into the practices employed by NWCCU and member institutions during the process of an Evaluation Committee visit. The guide focuses primarily on Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability Evaluation visits, Initial Candidacy visits, and Initial Accreditation visits.

TYPES OF EVALUATIONS AND VISIT PROCESSES

NWCCU conducts accreditation visits for the purposes of determining readiness to be granted initial accreditation, to reaffirm accreditation, or to review specific accreditation issues identified by the Commission

Initial Candidacy Self-Evaluation Report

Institutions that have been granted applicant status and have applied for initial accreditation complete a self-evaluation on all standards and are scheduled to receive a Peer-Evaluation Committee visit. Following the visit, the Commission makes a determination on whether to grant candidacy.

Initial Accreditation Self-Evaluation Report

Institutions that have been granted candidacy and have applied for initial accreditation complete a self-evaluation on all standards and are scheduled to receive a Peer-Evaluation Committee visit. Following the visit, the Commission decides whether to continue candidacy or grant initial accreditation.

Mission and Core Themes Self-Evaluation Report

The Mission and Core Themes Report is due eighteen months following a Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability Evaluation. The focus is on Standard One and any revisions to mission, core themes, objectives, and/or indicators. This report is typically brief and no visit is required.

Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report

The Mid-Cycle Evaluation typically occurs in the third year after a Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability Evaluation. The Self-Evaluation report focuses on the institution's assessment process. A visit is scheduled for two evaluators to visit the institution for one and one-half days.

Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability Self-Evaluation Report

The Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability Self-Evaluation Report is due in year seven of the seven-year cycle. A visit is scheduled with a full evaluation committee for a two and one-half day visit to the institution.

Miscellaneous Reports

Ad Hoc Reports To follow up on particular issues of concern, Ad Hoc Report visits may be requested by the Board of Commissioners to take place in addition to other accreditation visits. The scope of these visits is limited to the issues raised by the Board of Commissioners. However, if the review Evaluation Committee learns of other material issues during the visit, the Committee has the authority to explore them.

Special Reports may be requested for the institution to respond to a specific issue raised by the Board of Commissioners. There may or may not be a visit scheduled with a Special Report.

Financial Resources Review

Financial Resources Reviews may be requested for the institution to respond to financial issues raised by the Board of Commissioners. Evaluation visits are not requested.

REPORTS FROM INSTITUTIONS FOR VISITS

In preparation for accreditation reviews, institutions are required to submit a Self-Evaluation report, and supporting materials (if any) in context with the type of visit being conducted. Reports and supporting materials are to be submitted to the Commission office and the Evaluation Committee members as follows:

Initial Candidacy, Initial Accreditation, and Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability Self-Evaluation Reports: Due six to eight weeks prior to the visit.

Mission and Core Themes Self Evaluation Reports: Spring reports are due March 1st; Fall reports are due September 15th.

Mid-Cycle Self Evaluation Reports: Due four to five weeks prior to the visit.

Ad Hoc Self-Evaluation Report with a visit: Due three weeks prior to the visit.

Ad Hoc Self-Evaluation Report without a visit: Spring reports are due March 1st; Fall reports are due September 15th. Alternatively, the Board of Commissioners may specify a date in correspondence to the institution.

Special Report: Due date specified in correspondence by the Board of Commissioners.

Financial Resources Report: Due date specified in correspondence by the Board of Commissioners.

Institutions should consult with their NWCCU Staff Liaison about report submission and follow the appropriate guidelines (available on the NWCCU website).

ALO ROLE

The primary contact between NWCCU and the institution for all matters is with the Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO) of record. If someone other than the ALO is responsible for overseeing the visit, the ALO is responsible for keeping that person updated and forwarding on any information sent by NWCCU to the ALO. Evaluation Committee members serving on reviews will also communicate with the ALO on matters related to visit logistics.

NWCCU STAFF ROLES

Each institution is assigned a NWCCU Staff Liaison and this is the person with whom the ALO primarily deals in all matters related to accreditation. The Staff Liaison is normally a Vice President or other senior NWCCU executive who holds the institution in their portfolio of institutions.

NWCCU Staff work with the ALO to schedule the dates for reviews and visits. NWCCU Staff invite experts to serve on Evaluation Committees; send the final Evaluation Committee roster to the institution's CEO, ALO, and the Evaluation Committee, provides the Evaluation Committee members and the ALO with preparation materials for the visit; collect documents from the Evaluation Committee after the visit; sends the institution the final Evaluation Committee report; and receives the institution's response to the Evaluation Committee report, if provided.

VISIT TERMS AND DATES

NWCCU conducts reviews and visits in Fall (late September through November) and Spring (late March through early May). No reviews or visits are scheduled during the weeks when the Board of Commissioners meets (normally the second week of January and the third week of June). What follows describes a typical initial candidacy, initial accreditation, or Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability evaluation visit.

Visit periods are normally as follows, with the Evaluation Committee members arriving the night prior to the start of the visit:

Initial Candidacy, Initial Accreditation, and Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability Visits:

Initial Candidacy, Initial Accreditation, and Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability visits take place over three days, with the Evaluation Committee spending two full days on campus followed by an exit meeting on the morning of the third day. The Evaluation Committee departs the campus by noon of the final day. The Evaluation Committee Chair has some flexibility in setting the starting and ending time of visits, depending on the nature of the visit and the size of the institution. Evaluation Committees hold a pre-visit session at around 4:00 pm at the Evaluation Committee hotel on the day before the start of the visit.

Mid-Cycle Visit:

Mid-Cycle visits take place over two days, with the Evaluation Committee spending one full day on campus and holding an exit meeting on the morning of the second day. The Evaluation Committee departs the campus by noon of the final day. The Evaluation Committee Chair has some flexibility in setting the starting and ending time of visits, depending on the nature of the visit and the size of the institution.

Ad Hoc with a Visit:

Ad Hoc visits take place during a single day, with the Evaluation Committee or Evaluator on campus and completing the visit the same day.

Evaluation Committees may also schedule additional days in advance of the campus visit to evaluate off-campus sites. These additional dates are arranged between the Staff Liaison, the Evaluation Committee or Evaluator, and the ALO.

NWCCU Staff initiates the date scheduling process by emailing proposed dates to the CEO and ALO of the institution.

The CEO should respond to the proposed dates as soon as possible and suggest alternative dates if the proposed dates are not suitable. For off-site reviews, the CEO and other select key personnel (e.g., ALO, CAO, CFO, Board Chair) must be available to meet via videoconference call with the Evaluation Committee. For campus visits, the institution should be sure that administrators and faculty will be available, students will be in classes, and holidays and previously scheduled campus activities will not conflict with the work of the Evaluation Committee on the visit. The CEO should plan to be on campus and available throughout the visit.

It may be necessary to negotiate alternative dates for the visit once NWCCU begins to invite Evaluation Committee members to suit the schedules of those being invited.

For Initial Candidacy, Initial Accreditation, and Mission Fulfillment and Sustainability reports and visits CEOs are asked to attend the Board of Commissioners meeting that follows the visit. CEOs are asked to block these Board of Commissioners dates in their calendars as well as the visit dates.

THE EVALUATION COMMITTEE

Evaluation Committee Selection and Appointment Process

Comprehensive Evaluation Committees ordinarily consist of seven to eight members and an on-site liaison. Mid-Cycle Evaluation Committees consist of two evaluators and an off-site liaison. Ad Hoc Evaluations are typically done by one or two evaluators, depending on the nature and scope of the issues under review. For comprehensive visits, one member serves as the Evaluation Committee chair, and another member is designated as the assistant chair. For Mid-Cycle and Ad Hoc visits one member will be designated as the chair. Evaluation Committee selection commences once the visit dates have been scheduled with the institution.

NWCCU seeks to compose Evaluation Committees with a balance of backgrounds and experience and the expertise to understand the nature, mission, and context of the institution being reviewed, and to address the issues and challenges facing the institution. Evaluation Committee members are sought who have broad experience in higher education and perspectives that extend beyond their own institution. Factors considered in composing an Evaluation Committee include:

- Role within the home institution (e.g., administrator, faculty member, trustee);
- Type of institution represented (e.g., public, non-profit, faith-based, tribal);
- Academic credentials and experience;
- Expertise in a relevant discipline;
- Expertise in relevant aspects of the Standards, themes, and areas that will be addressed on the visit (e.g., planning, finances, governance, assessment of student learning, physical and learning resources, online and off-campus programs, faculty matters, student services, and general education);
- Balance of experienced and new Evaluators;
- For Ad Hoc Evaluation Committees, members are selected on the basis of their expertise in the areas of focus for the visit

Evaluation Committees members may be asked to return to an institution from a previous visit to provide continuity of review.

Evaluation Committee members are invited to participate in training, which may be at a workshop or by webinar, that covers NWCCU Standards, policies, processes, and visit protocol, and are provided with resources related to these areas if unable to participate.

The NWCCU Policy on Conflicts of Interest prohibits individuals from serving on a Evaluation Committee reviewing an institution with which they have a pre-existing relationship within the past five years that could give rise to a conflict of interest, such as employment, application for employment, close relative working in the institution, or a consulting relationship. Individuals are expected to inform NWCCU if they have or have had such a relationship and to decline service on the Evaluation Committee. The full statement of this policy is available on the NWCCU website.

Evaluation Committee Roster

Once all the Evaluation Committee members have been appointed, NWCCU Staff sends the Evaluation Committee Evaluator notification to the CEO and the ALO. The only matters that preclude appointment to service on a Evaluation Committee are set forth in the NWCCU policy on conflict of interest, as discussed above. The ALO should consult with the NWCCU Staff Liaison if the institution has any concerns. The Commission reserves the right to determine the final composition of the Evaluation Committee.

Late changes may need to be made to an Evaluation Committee due to unforeseen withdrawal of a member, and NWCCU will advise the institution of the change and send an updated roster as soon as a replacement has been appointed.

Role of The Evaluation Committee Chair

The Evaluation Committee Chair is generally a president, provost, or executive with broad oversight experience and perspective in higher education. While institutions are not allowed to choose the Chair of their visit, NWCCU staff may consult with the institution's chief executive officer about comparable institutions from which to select a chair, taking into consideration the experience and ability believed to be appropriate for the accreditation review. The Evaluation Committee Chair is generally from an institution of similar size, mission, and affiliation as the institution being reviewed.

The Evaluation Committee Chair is responsible for transforming a diverse group of people into a functioning Evaluation Committee; assessing the institution's responsiveness to concerns of the Commission and prior Evaluation Committees; and ultimately ensuring the completion and submission of a final Peer-Evaluation Committee report that gives the Commission a clear picture of the institution's strengths and areas that need improvement.

The Evaluation Committee Chair presides over the entire evaluation. It is the chair's responsibility to communicate effectively with the Evaluation Committee members, in order to:

- Coordinate logistics with members of the Evaluation Committee;
- Serve as coach and mentor and answer questions;
- Make Evaluation Committee assignments and elaborate responsibilities;
- Clarify accreditation issues;
- Focus the review on evidence and on the Standards;
- Assess the institution's responsiveness to concerns of the Commission and prior Evaluation Committees;
- Provide options for the Evaluation Committee recommendations; and
- Draft a report that gives the Commission a clear picture of the institution's strengths and areas that need improvement.

To carry out this charge, the Evaluation Committee chair:

- Communicates with the institution on behalf of the Evaluation Committee, establishing a relationship with key representatives of the institution, especially the CEO, and setting the tone for the visit;
- Coordinates logistics with the Evaluation Committee, including holding a pre-visit Evaluation Committee conference call, making assignments to Evaluation Committee members, and adjusting the visit schedule with the ALO;
- Serves as coach and mentor to the Evaluation Committee, answering questions, elaborating responsibilities, clarifying accreditation issues, explaining options for the Evaluation Committee recommendation(s), and building a coherent and motivated Evaluation Committee;
- Focuses the review on the examination and analysis of evidence, on the issues identified by the institution as the foci of the review, and on the Standards;
- Facilitates the identification of key issues and questions;
- Responds to any media inquiries;
- Leads discussions with the Evaluation Committee in executive session;
- Starts and facilitates key meetings and interviews during the visit, such as the meetings with the CEO and governing board;
- Meets privately with the CEO prior to the exit meeting to inform the CEO about key recommendations that the Evaluation Committee will make in its report;
- Ensures that the visit is conducted in a professional and courteous manner and handles any problems that arise during the visit;
- Finalizes the Evaluation Committee report and sends it to the CEO and ALO for factual corrections;
- Sends the final report and confidential Evaluation Committee recommendation to the NWCCU office and is present at the Commission meeting to answer the Commission's questions about the visit and report.

Role of The Assistant Chair

When appointing an Evaluation Committee, NWCCU staff may select one of the Evaluation Committee members to serve as assistant chair. This individual generally has prior Evaluation Committee experience and strong organizational and writing skills. The Assistant Chair provides key assistance to the Evaluation Committee Chair in developing the conceptual framework for the accreditation review and preparing drafts of the Evaluation Committee report.

Specifically, the Assistant Chair:

- Works with the Chair on the organization and structure of the report;
- Takes notes during Evaluation Committee conference calls;
- Records observations, agreements, and decisions made during Evaluation Committee discussions, including additional items to be communicated to the institution's Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO) during the visit;
- Assists the Evaluation Committee Chair with final edits to Evaluation Committee members;
- At the request of the Chair, may draft the introductory sections of the preliminary Peer Evaluation Committee report and develops an outline for the Peer Evaluation Committee report, to be shared with the Evaluation Committee Chair and Evaluation Committee members for their review; and
- Completes a preliminary draft of the Peer Evaluation Committee report, based on submissions from the Evaluation Committee.

The Role of the Evaluation Committee Member (Evaluator)

Members of the Evaluation Committee work together to create an effective and thorough review of the institution. While the Chair and Assistant Chair have additional specific roles, every Evaluation Committee member:

- Participates in Evaluation Committee conference calls;
- Reviews the institutional report and all NWCCU materials;
- Works to develop and utilize appropriate lines of questioning;
- Participates actively in all assigned meetings designated in the visit schedule;
- Attends the exit meeting with the institution on the last day of the visit; and
- Completes assigned sections of the Peer Evaluation Committee report in a timely manner.

Additionally, the following suggestions are provided to assist Evaluators in preparing for an effective evaluation:

- Review all materials sent by the institution and Commission;
- Consult with the Chair if you have questions after you review all information;
- Prior to the visit prepares a general outline of or your section of the evaluation report;
- List documents you want to review in addition to the self-evaluation report and support materials;
- Comment on the quality and usefulness of the institution's self-evaluation report and support materials;
- Focus on the Eligibility Requirements and Accreditation Standards appropriate to the scope of the evaluation;
- Identify problems or deficiencies with respect to the Eligibility Requirements and Accreditation Standards appropriate to the scope of the visit, regardless of the size, characteristics, or reputation of the institution;
- Reviews policies related to the Accreditation Standards under review;
- Respect the confidentiality of the peer review process, including the institution's self-evaluation report, other institutional documents, and any action taken by NWCCU on the institution. Do *not* disclose any information about the institution or evaluation with anyone other than your fellow evaluators on this evaluation;
- Do *not* use your assignment as a vehicle to recruit faculty, staff, or students or suggest your own availability as a consultant or employee;
- Do *not* accept gifts, favors, or services from the institution. Souvenir gifts are permissible, but should be limited to inexpensive items representative of the institution or its geographic location;
- Focus attention on the identification of significant matters. Do not waste time on minor issues;
- Do *not* be prescriptive, as there may be many acceptable ways for an institution to resolve a problem;
- Do *not* engage in discussions or issues that have no relation to the evaluation;
- Do *not* evaluate the institution by your own institution's standards or practices;
- Concentrate on the accuracy and fairness of your findings and judgments;
- Avoid actions and written or verbal comments that may undermine the credibility of the evaluation, the Evaluators, the institution being evaluated, or the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities; and
- Refer all questions and inquiries about the process from the media or institution to the Chair.

Role of the NWCCU Staff Liaison

An NWCCU Staff Liaison is assigned to each institution to work with its ALO and the Evaluation Committee. In preparing for the visit, the Staff Liaison gives guidance to the institution on how to generate its self-study and preparation of its report, as well as to work with the Evaluation Committee Chair on Evaluation Committee organization and assignments.

During the institutional review process, the NWCCU Staff Liaison:

- Communicates with the Evaluation Committee Chair in advance of the review;
- Monitors progress on the milestones and target dates during the review;
- Provides guidance to Evaluation Committee members during conference calls;
- Responds to questions from the institution, Evaluation Committee Chair, and Evaluation Committee members;
- Serves as a resource to the Evaluation Committee throughout the review process;
- Accompanies the Evaluation Committee during the visit; and
- Offers comments to the Evaluation Committee Chair on the draft of the Evaluation Committee report, recommendations & commendations, and the Confidential Recommendation Form.

Finally, the Staff Liaison makes comments to the Evaluation Committee Chair on the Peer Evaluation Committee's draft report and supports the Commission in drafting and forwarding the final Commission Action Letter to the institution.

When there are heavy visit loads or conflicting schedules, an NWCCU associate may be designated as the visit liaison and provide services to the institution on behalf of the Staff Liaison or the Staff Liaison may serve as an off-site liaison during the visit.

TIMELINE FOR THE VISIT PROCESS

The planning for the visit accelerates about twelve weeks before the visit begins. The NWCCU Staff Liaison works with the Evaluation Committee Chair and ALO to outline a timeline for the visit.

MATERIALS PROVIDED

MATERIALS PROVIDED TO THE EVALUATION COMMITTEE

Provided by the institution:

- The institutional report for the visit and supporting materials (if any).

Provided by the Commission:

- The institution's accreditation history, which lists each Commission action pertaining to the institution's accreditation;
- The most recent Commission action letter and visiting Evaluation Committee report from previous visits;
- The institution's latest Annual Report;
- Other reports and correspondence, such as action letters about eligibility, substantive change actions, interim reports, third-party comments, or complaints, where relevant;
- The Evaluation Committee roster;
- Expense voucher to request reimbursement from NWCCU for expenses relating to the visit, and the NWCCU Business and Travel Expense Policy.

MATERIALS PROVIDED TO THE ALO

Provided by the Commission:

- The Evaluation Committee roster; and
- Copy of the letter from NWCCU to the institution's President regarding the visit information and visit logistics.

INITIAL COMMUNICATIONS ABOUT THE VISIT

The Evaluation Committee Chair in conjunction with the NWCCU Staff Liaison establishes communications with the Evaluation Committee members in the weeks before the visit. During this time, the Evaluation Committee has at least one pre-visit conference call, and Evaluation Committee members study the entire report and begin a deep analysis of the area(s) assigned to them.

The NWCCU Staff Liaison and ALO usually communicate at this stage of the process to discuss the ALO's responsibilities for making logistical arrangements for the visit, transportation from airport to hotel and hotel to campus, and equipment for the Evaluation Committee. All hotel arrangements are made by NWCCU. The ALO is asked to develop a draft list of key individuals and groups for the Evaluation Committee to meet, including members of the governing board, faculty, administration and staff, and students. (See below regarding visit schedule for more information about the people and groups with whom the Evaluation Committee should meet.) The start and end times of the visit are confirmed. Additional activities, such as visits to off-campus sites, review of online programs, and the follow-up on any outstanding substantive change-related matters, are discussed.

PLANNING THE VISIT

VISIT LOGISTICS FORM

Approximately six months before the visit NWCCU provides the ALO with a visit logistics form. The ALO completes this form and returns it to the NWCCU office. The form requests details about the most convenient airport, recommended hotels to be used, and transportation available to the hotel and campus, etc. The form also requests information regarding institutional contacts and the work room.

Once decisions are made regarding these logistics, the information is conveyed to the ALO and Peer Evaluation Committee.

Three to four months prior to the visit the institution is required to provide public notification of the upcoming accreditation evaluation visit. Please refer to the "Guidelines for Implementing Third Party Notification."

VISIT SCHEDULE

Prior to the visit, the ALO works with the Chair and Assistant Chair to create a draft visit schedule, including the opening and closing meetings and a list of suggested individuals and groups with whom the Evaluation Committee should meet. The Evaluation Committee will discuss this during a pre-visit conference call, usually held five or six weeks before the visit. On this call, the Evaluation Committee identifies additional documents that it may need and refines the draft visit schedule. This information is passed along to the ALO as soon as possible after the call by the Assistant Chair.

The details of schedules vary substantially from visit to visit, depending on the kind of visit being made, the issues that the Evaluation Committee must address, and the nature, size, and complexity of the institution.

The Evaluation Committee attends opening, closing, and other important meetings as a group, but Evaluation Committee members spend time on their own or in smaller groups in meetings relating to areas assigned to them and reviewing evidence in the Evaluation Committee room.

The following is a basic chronology of the meetings and activities that the ALO will schedule, with a brief explanation of the purpose of each meeting. The ALO does not generally attend the meetings unless he or she is a key member of the group, e.g., the accreditation planning committee or the President's cabinet.

Initial Evaluation Committee meeting: This meeting is usually held at 4:00 pm the afternoon before the visit, at the hotel where the Evaluation Committee is staying, and continues through an Evaluation Committee dinner. The NWCCU Staff Liaison assists with Evaluation Committee orientation and answers Evaluation Committee members' questions about Standards, policies, and processes. Evaluation Committee members review assignments and refine their plans and strategies for conducting the visit.

Meeting with ALO: The Evaluation Committee meets with the ALO in the Evaluation Committee room as soon as it arrives on campus for the first day of the visit. The Evaluation Committee will discuss final logistical arrangements and the organization of the visit with the ALO. Sometimes, last-minute adjustments need to be made to the schedule, though every effort is made to keep these to a minimum. The ALO reviews the schedule with the Evaluation Committee and provides updates and an overview of the documents and resources available in the Evaluation Committee room and elsewhere on campus. The ALO assists the Evaluation Committee in getting internet access.

Meetings with the CEO: An initial meeting with the CEO and/or senior leadership is usually held just after the meeting with the ALO on the first full day that the Evaluation Committee is on campus. This meeting is held to welcome the Evaluation Committee, to introduce key individuals, and to give the CEO a chance to set the tone for the visit and highlight important institutional accomplishments, priorities, initiatives, and challenges.

Meeting with the Governing Board or System Head: Ordinarily, members of the Evaluation Committee meet with members of the governing board of the institution. At the Chair's discretion, a meeting with the governing board may be optional on Special Visits if governance is not an identified issue. If the institution being reviewed is part of a multi-campus public system the Chair may arrange for and hold a conference call with the head of the system office and/or members of the system governing board. The CEO and other members of the administration, faculty, and staff do not participate in the governing board meeting or on the call with the system head.

Meetings with the Accreditation Committee: Early in the visit, the Evaluation Committee meets with the committee or group that is responsible for overseeing the NWCCU review process, preparing the report, etc. to talk about the NWCCU process on the campus and to answer questions from the Evaluation Committee about how the process worked.

Meetings with Faculty, Administrators, Staff, and Committees: Meetings should be scheduled with institutional representatives such as provosts, vice presidents, deans, faculty leaders, librarians, student services personnel, financial and technology personnel, and others whose knowledge and involvement can help facilitate the Evaluation Committee's review. The Evaluation Committee usually splits up to attend these meetings in pairs; hence, more than one meeting can be scheduled at the same time.

Open Meetings with Faculty, Staff and Students: Separate meetings are held with each of these constituent groups. The ALO informs the campus well in advance and invites all members of each group in the campus community to attend.

They should be scheduled at times when constituents are most available. Email reminders, posters, and announcements in meetings and classes are helpful in getting good attendance at the open meetings. Supervisory personnel should not attend these meetings.

The Evaluation Committee Chair may also ask the ALO to schedule meetings with smaller groups of six to eight persons, such as faculty members or students. For example, these sessions might be held with non-tenured faculty, adjunct faculty, or faculty of specific schools or departments, or with leaders of key student organizations.

Evaluation Committee meetings in executive session: The schedule should include some short periods for the Evaluation Committee to meet alone periodically throughout the visit. The Evaluation Committee should meet at around 4:00 pm of the first and second day of campus meetings to discuss findings. The Evaluation Committee needs to meet to share observations on the meetings they have had and to see what findings and recommendations are emerging as they learn more about the institution from evidence and interviews. On the evening of the second full day and on the morning of the third day, the Evaluation Committee members will intensify their writing on assigned sections of the Evaluation Committee report.

Pre-exit Meeting Conference with the CEO: On the last day of the visit, immediately before the exit meeting, the Evaluation Committee Chair meets briefly with the CEO to explain the process for the exit meeting and to inform the CEO about the recommendations that the Evaluation Committee will make in its exit meeting and report. The Chair may also use this time to share sensitive issues, such as personnel matters, that would not be included in the Evaluation Committee's report.

Exit Meeting: Immediately prior to the Evaluation Committee leaving the campus, an exit meeting is held for the Evaluation Committee to provide a summary of its findings and recommendations to the campus community. This meeting is usually open to the campus community and attended by the CEO, key administrators, faculty, staff, and student leaders. The Evaluation Committee Chair facilitates the meeting and delivers the summary. The Evaluation Committee leaves the campus immediately after the conclusion of this brief meeting. The Evaluation Committee's findings and recommendations are not discussed with the institution at the time of the meeting; however, note that the institution has an opportunity later on in the process to respond to the peer-evaluation report in writing and in person. (See below under After the Visit.)

TECHNOLOGY RESOURCES

Most Evaluation Committee members will bring their own laptops with them, but the ALO should arrange for computers to be used by any Evaluation Committee member if requested. The ALO may also be asked to provide USB flash drives for Evaluation Committee members to store and transmit their notes and sections of the Evaluation Committee report.

Evaluation Committee should have access to the Internet on campus and at the hotel.

IT staff should be available in the Evaluation Committee room when the Evaluation Committee first arrives to ensure that Evaluators can fully access the resources available to them. The ALO should alert the institution's IT staff to be on call for assistance and trouble shooting and should give the Evaluation Committee contact information for the IT staff in case any Evaluation Committee members experience computer or printer problems during the visit.

EVALUATION COMMITTEE MEALS AND SPECIAL DIETARY NEEDS

The schedule for the visit will show meal times for the Evaluation Committee. Some meals may be held during meetings with institutional representatives, and some meals will include the Evaluation Committee only, in executive session.

It is preferable for the Evaluation Committee not to have to go off campus during the middle of the day for a meal because of the travel time required. If a meal must be held off campus, the location should be as close as possible to the campus to minimize travel time. The institution is responsible for lunches during the two full days of the visit.

Evaluation Committees usually have breakfast and dinner on their own during the visit. The ALO should discuss restaurant preferences with the Evaluation Committee Chair or Assistant Chair and make recommendations and reservations as needed. The ALO should select restaurants that are quiet, or have a private or semi-private space for the Evaluation Committee, so that the Evaluation Committee can talk in a confidential setting.

As noted in the logistics questionnaire, the ALO should determine if any Evaluation Committee members have food allergies or special dietary needs and make special arrangements for suitable food on campus and recommend restaurants that will be able to cater to these needs.

Evaluation Committee members are often on campus for extended periods, do not always get to eat their entire meals during rushed or working meetings, and are going to back-to-back meetings. Therefore, Evaluation Committees appreciate having mid-morning and mid-afternoon light snacks in the Evaluation Committee room and having a supply of water, soft drinks, fruit, coffee, and tea.

TOKEN GIFTS OF APPRECIATION

Institutions are discouraged from providing gifts and Evaluation Committee members, commissioners, and NWCCU staff are expected to refuse gifts in order to avoid any inferred conflict of interest. This rule does not extend to food for consumption by the Evaluation Committee on the visit or supplies that expedite the Evaluation Committee's work. Provision of token gifts (coffee cups or travel mugs, baskets with fruits or snacks, writing implements, carry bags) can be accepted but are not expected.

HOTEL

NWCCU staff is responsible for making arrangements for single-room accommodations in business-class hotels for each Evaluation Committee member for the entire visit, and for the NWCCU Staff Liaison. The liaison may depart earlier than the Evaluation Committee members.

TRANSPORTATION

The Evaluation Committee and the ALO or individual designated by the institution should work closely together on travel arrangements for the visit. If an Evaluation Committee member is within driving distance, the ALO or individual designated by the institution should provide instructions for reaching the campus by car, taxi, and other forms of transportation. If the Evaluation Committee member travels by air, the Evaluation Committee member will make reservations and give the ALO or individual designated by the institution their flight information. Evaluation Committee members are asked to share their travel itineraries with the institution.

The ALO is responsible for arranging local transportation to and from the airport and to and from the campus. Sometimes one or more Evaluation Committee members travel by car to the institution or rent a car and can transport the Evaluation Committee to and from the campus. Some institutions utilize a van to transport the Evaluation Committee to and from campus each day of the visit.

EVALUATION COMMITTEE ROOM

The institution should arrange for a confidential, on-campus meeting room for the visiting Evaluation Committee for the entire visit. The room should be set up for the exclusive use of the Evaluation Committee members during the visit to review documents, confer among themselves, and continue drafting assigned sections of the Evaluation Committee report. Evaluation Committee members should have access to the Evaluation Committee room during the day and evening hours. No one else should have access to the room without the Evaluation Committee Chair's permission, and the Evaluation Committee members should be able to lock up their personal items, computers and notes in the room. Meetings with institutional representatives should not be held in the Evaluation Committee room.

The ALO should set up the Evaluation Committee room with the following resources:

- Computers for individual Evaluation Committee members, if requested;
- A copier and a printer that the Evaluation Committee can access electronically through their own computers, if requested;
- A paper shredder;
- Technology supplies, such as USB flash drives;
- Telephone with a campus directory of key personnel;
- Office supplies, including pads, scratch paper, pencils and pens, a stapler, paper clips, post-it notes; and
- Beverages, including coffee, tea, soft drinks and water, and snacks as appropriate.

Documents in the Evaluation Committee Room:

A printed copy of the institutional report and exhibits may be placed in the Evaluation Committee room along with documents relevant to any matters in the Evaluation Committee report that are not included with the institutional report. The need for a printed copy should be confirmed in consultations between the ALO and the Evaluation Committee Assistant Chair. Additional documents often include materials requested by the Evaluation Committee as a result of the Evaluation Committee's discussion on its pre-visit Evaluation Committee conference.

Additional documents may be made in either hard copy or electronic format as requested by the Evaluation Committee. Such materials may include: course syllabi; student transcripts; samples of student work, such as portfolios; samples of examinations and assignments; handbooks and catalogs; detailed financial, facilities, and planning material; historical documents; program reviews and supporting documentation; and data analyses that back up strategic and financial plans. Hard copy materials should be organized and labeled so the Evaluation Committee can easily find what it needs. A list of the exhibits is also helpful, with hyperlinks in the case of electronic exhibits.

Some institutions set up the room with posters and other visual presentations that relate to the work that was done for the institutional report.

VISIT INFORMATION TO THE CAMPUS COMMUNITY

The ALO should remind the campus community (administration, governing board members, faculty, students, and staff) about the nature and purposes of the visit at least a month before the visit.

Most ALOs communicate about the visit in a variety of ways, including a posting to the website, emails to various groups, signs and posters on campus, and announcements in classes and meetings. Notices should include information about the open meetings for faculty, staff, and students that will be open during the visit.

Once the Evaluation Committee approves the schedule for the visit, the ALO should invite the key individuals and groups to the specific meetings and interviews and follow up a few days before the visit with reminders.

OFF-CAMPUS LOCATIONS AND DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

EVALUATION COMMITTEE REVIEW OF OFF-CAMPUS LOCATIONS

The Evaluation Committee is provided with information about the number and physical address of off-campus locations and the programs that are offered at each. Under U.S. Department of Education rules, NWCCU must visit off-campus locations periodically.

If an institution has off-campus locations, the Evaluation Committee Chair works with the NWCCU Staff Liaison to determine the number of those locations that should be visited. In general, for locations 25 miles or more from the main campus or teaching locations that offer 50 percent or more of a degree program, a random sampling of those locations will be visited. If an institution has a history of concerns about the quality and functioning of off-campus programs or locations, the Evaluation Committee may visit up to 50 percent of the locations for those institutions with 10 or more locations and 75 percent for institutions with fewer than 10 off-campus locations.

The Evaluation Committee determines the locations to be sampled by considering the type of location, the distance from the main campus, and the type of programs offered and number of students in attendance.

In cases where several off-campus locations will be visited, the visits may be scheduled on dates in advance of the main campus visit.

Evaluation Committee members who are assigned to visit off-campus locations review previous substantive change letters and visit reports to determine if issues have been identified for the Evaluation Committee to review.

On the pre-visit conference call, the Evaluation Committee develops a strategy for reviewing off-campus programs, sets a schedule for interviews with staff, faculty and students, and identifies files and other documents to be reviewed, such as program reviews and samples of student work. The Evaluation Committee will determine whether matters reviewed on visits to the off-campus locations will also be integrated into the Evaluation Committee report.

EVALUATION COMMITTEE REVIEW OF DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

NWCCU Evaluation Committees are also required to evaluate distance education programs during the accreditation process. The Evaluation Committee Chair assigns one or more members to review these programs. If the institution offers a substantial number of distance education programs, the Evaluation Committee will include at least one member with extensive expertise in distance education.

Evaluation Committees are provided with a document that sets forth NWCCU expectations about good practice in distance education. Evaluation Committees use this document as a guide in assessing the quality of online programs. This document was adopted by the seven regional accrediting commissions in the U.S. to provide guidance in reviewing distance education programs.

The Evaluation Committee reviews previous substantive change letters and reports of previous reviews of distance education programs to determine if concerns have been raised.

In planning the visit, the Evaluation Committee develops a strategy for reviewing distance education programs during the visit, including a schedule for interviews with staff, faculty, and students, and review of files and other documents, such as course syllabi, program reviews and student work. Further, the Evaluation Committee member(s) assigned to distance education programs may ‘observe’ online classes, so the ALO should provide a list of courses that can be observed in advance of the visit, and make the necessary arrangements to allow for such observation. The Evaluation Committee decides if any matters raised in the reviews of distance education are integrated into the body of the Evaluation Committee report.

EVALUATION COMMITTEE REVIEW OF COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

NWCCU Evaluation Committees are required to evaluate any Competency-Based Education programs during the accreditation process.

Evaluation Committees are provided with a document that sets forth NWCCU expectations about good practice in Competency-Based Education and are required to use the document to guide their evaluation. This document was adopted by the seven regional accrediting commissions in the U.S. to provide guidance in reviewing Competency-Based Education.

PART II. DURING THE VISIT

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT FOR THE EVALUATION COMMITTEE

Evaluation Committee members are extremely busy during the time they are on the campus. To help make the visit run smoothly, the ALO should create an information packet for them to use while on campus and provide this material on the Evaluation Committee's first visit to the Evaluation Committee room.

The packet could include information such as:

- A copy of the schedule for the visit, including any last-minute changes;
- Names of key staff members available in case of questions or problems with meeting rooms, computer equipment, copiers, printers, etc. including room numbers, campus telephone extensions, and cell phone numbers;
- Information on access to campus buildings and parking;
- 24-hour contact numbers and cell phones for key personnel, including those responsible for handling schedule changes and other matters (usually the ALO);
- Menus from which to order meals that the Evaluation Committee will have brought to them in the Evaluation Committee room; and
- Transportation arrangements between the hotel and campus each day, and to the airport on the final day of the visit, if applicable.

UNDERSTANDING EVALUATION COMMITTEE STRATEGIES

Evaluation Committees use a variety of evidence-gathering techniques during visits. To prepare the campus for the kinds of activities in which the Evaluation Committee will be engaged, the following is a list of some of the techniques that might be employed:

Audits: The Evaluation Committee may examine what led an institution to a new policy or decision or may follow the application of a process. For example, an Evaluation Committee member may follow the handling of a student grievance to see if the institution's policies and procedures were followed. The Evaluation Committee may also examine the methods employed by the institution to study an area of interest and review the documents and data that were examined, e.g., the samples examined, the results generated, and what was done with the results.

Focused Interviews: All Evaluation Committees use various interviewing techniques, often employing a set of previously agreed-upon questions or lines of inquiry to confirm information in the report, to ascertain involvement of constituencies, to gauge the support for undertakings, and to gather evidence pertinent to the review. Some Evaluation Committees use innovative techniques, such as fishbowl exercises, which are generally planned with a specific group in advance of the visit.

Document Reviews: All Evaluation Committees examine original documentation to understand processes, planning, and decision making, and to validate the findings, analyses, and conclusions contained in the institution's reports.

Reviews of Evidence of Student Learning: Evaluation Committees will examine course syllabi to see if student learning outcomes are set forth, look at processes and methods used to assess student learning at the course, program and institutional level, and ascertain the capacity of the faculty to undertake assessment of student learning. Assessment results are examined to find out what students learned, how closely this meets the institution's intended outcomes, and what was done with the results of assessment to improve student learning and to refine assessment tools and processes. Evaluation Committees also look at program reviews, actual student work, standards used to evaluate work, rubrics and other evaluation tools, and written comments about the work, including feedback given to the students.

Review of Student Achievement Metrics: Prior to the visit, the Evaluation Committee is provided with the institution's latest published student achievement metrics (graduation rates, retention rates, and loan default rates) and a set of questions regarding these metrics to guide a conversation with the institution to support the completion of the Evaluation Committee's Final Evaluation Report.

Tips for a Smooth Visit

- Be sure all transportation arrangements are in order so that the Evaluation Committee arrives on time in the right place and starts out the visit without stress.
- Expect a few adjustments to the schedule and requests for additional documents and be ready with staff to implement these requests.
- Help keep the Evaluation Committee on schedule by reminding them at the end of interviews.
- Provide Evaluation Committee members escorts to meetings so they do not have to navigate the campus alone and risk being lost or arriving late.

PART III. AFTER THE VISIT

COMMUNICATIONS AFTER THE VISIT

With the exception of the communication between the Evaluation Committee Chair and the institution to discuss possible corrections of fact in the report, the institution should not contact Evaluation Committee members after the visit to discuss the visit, report, process, or next steps. Evaluation Committee members are bound by a duty of confidentiality not to discuss the visit with anyone except their colleagues on the Evaluation Committee and NWCCU. Once the visit is over and the report is finalized, the Evaluation Committee is disbanded and has no further duties, except the duties of the Chair, noted below. Further, under Commission practice, Evaluation Committee members are not permitted to consult with an institution that they have visited for two years following the visit.

EVALUATION COMMITTEE REPORT

Evaluation Committees are required to follow a specific format in drafting reports. The directions and templates for the reports contain detailed explanations of the format for each type of visit and can be found on the NWCCU website.

Peer Evaluation Committee reports have an introductory section with an overview and context for the visit, and a description of the quality and rigor of the institution's presentation, the visit process and the evidence reviewed by the Evaluation Committee. Peer Evaluation Committee reports may also use this introductory section to address actions taken by the institution in response to the last Evaluation Committee report and Commission action letter.

The focus of the body of the report depends on the type of visit. The final section of the Evaluation Committee report summarizes the key findings and recommendations of the Evaluation Committee.

DRAFT EVALUATION COMMITTEE REPORT

Usually within two weeks of the visit, the Evaluation Committee Chair sends the draft Peer Evaluation Committee report as a pdf document to the CEO and ALO with a copy to the NWCCU Staff Liaison. The Chair asks the CEO and ALO to review the report with other institutional representatives and to respond by email within five business days with any suggestions for corrections of factual errors or redactions of proprietary information.

This initial response to the report is not the formal institutional response to the findings and recommendations of the Evaluation Committee. Rather, this stage is intended to eliminate errors of fact before the report is finalized. The institution should not suggest changes that constitute the addition of information not available to the Evaluation Committee and should not dispute the Evaluation Committee's analyses or conclusions at this stage.

The Chair considers the institution's requests for corrections and makes those corrections that are purely factual in nature, and any necessary redactions of proprietary information. The Chair may consult with Evaluation Committee members and staff, as necessary, to correct or clarify factual matters.

FINAL EVALUATION COMMITTEE REPORT AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

After making any factual corrections and redactions, the Chair submits the final version of the Peer Evaluation Committee report, as well as the Confidential Evaluation Committee Recommendation, to the NWCCU office.

The NWCCU sends the final Evaluation Committee report to the CEO of the institution, usually about eight weeks after the visit. The CEO is invited to submit a letter commenting on or responding to the report and the Evaluation Committee's findings to the NWCCU office. If the institution has serious concerns about the peer-evaluation report, the ALO should notify the NWCCU Staff Liaison immediately. Written submissions from the institution about the report should be conveyed to the NWCCU staff within 10 days of receipt of the report by the institution and no later than fourteen days prior to the Commission meeting.

The written institutional response becomes part of the record of the institution and is considered by the Commission in its deliberations. Please note that the written response must be received in a timely manner. Late submissions will not be included as part of the Board of Commission's deliberations.

COMMISSION MEETING AND ACTION LETTER

Visits that take place in the fall are reviewed by the Commission when it meets in January of the following year. Spring visits are reviewed in June of the same year.

At the meeting, the Commission assigns two commissioners to each institutional evaluation. Commissioners receive the institution's accreditation history, the Peer Evaluation Committee report, the institution's response (if provided), the Evaluation Committee's confidential recommendation, and the institution's report. Additional documents may be provided depending on the type of review.

A portion of the Commission time is dedicated to discussion with the institution's CEO and other institutional representatives as nominated by the CEO. The CEO is normally expected to participate in person. The Evaluation Committee Chair is present for all deliberations regarding the institution.

SCHEDULE FOR THE COMMISSION MEETING

Commission meetings are normally planned over two to three days, depending on the number of institutions being reviewed.

NWCCU staff will inform the institution about the time, date, and location of the meeting and whether the CEO is required to attend in person.

Due to the complexity of scheduling these meetings, it may not be possible to let institutions know the precise time or date of their review until three or four weeks before it takes place.

PROTOCOL DURING THE COMMISSION MEETING

The Commission has a brief discussion about the institution and the Evaluation Committee report prior to the institutional representatives joining the conversation. The Evaluation Committee Chair is present to introduce the institution's CEO and provide context from the visit.

A NWCCU staff member then escorts the institutional representatives into the room. The CEO is invited to make a statement about the institution, to provide updated information about matters that have taken place since the time of the site visit, and to respond to questions from Commissioners.

The institution representatives then leave the room. The Commission may ask the Evaluation Committee Chair for additional comments. The Commission then deliberates and takes an action.

COMMISSION ACTION LETTER

NWCCU sends the Commission action letter to the CEO with a copy to the ALO as soon as possible after the Commission meeting within four weeks. A copy of the letter is subsequently sent to the Chair of the governing board, to the head of the system (if the institution is part of a system), and to the Chair of the Peer Evaluation Committee.

The Commission encourages widespread distribution of the action letter and Evaluation Committee report within the campus community.

The institution will address the recommendations made in the action letter according to the dates stated in the letter. As noted above, a section of the next Evaluation Committee's report will address actions taken and progress made in addressing the issues raised in the letter.

EXPENSES, FEES AND BILLING PROCEDURES

Institutions are billed a fee per Evaluator for each visit. The fees can be found on the NWCCU website. The institution is also responsible for other costs as listed in the letter received from NWCCU. This includes the cost for transportation to and from the airport and to and from the campus. ALOs may contact the assigned NWCCU Staff Liaison to ascertain how many Evaluation Committee members will be appointed to a Evaluation Committee in order to estimate the total review cost.

Evaluation Committee members generally pay their own accommodations, travel and meal costs and are then asked to submit claims for reimbursement of these costs to NWCCU within thirty days of the visit. The NWCCU reimburses the Evaluation Committee members directly.

All claims are carefully vetted by NWCCU. Reimbursement claims and receipts are kept for seven years for audit purposes. NWCCU does not provide institutions with copies of reimbursement claims or receipts.