



## Overview of Accreditation with ABHE

Accreditation is a process by which an institution evaluates its educational activities and seeks an independent judgment to confirm that it achieves its mission and goals and is generally equal in quality to comparable institutions or specialized units.

The ABHE Commission on Accreditation (COA) is recognized as a national, faith-based accrediting agency by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) to accredit institutions and programs that offer certificates, diplomas, associate, baccalaureate, or graduate degrees aimed at preparing students for Christian ministries through biblical, church-vocational, and general studies. COA is also recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a national, institutional accrediting agency specializing in biblical higher education for both campus-based and distance education programs. At the present time, U.S. Department of Education recognition extends to undergraduate studies only.

Application information, an application, and accreditation manuals are available for download without charge at [forms.abhecoa.org](http://forms.abhecoa.org). The most important of these documents is the *Commission on Accreditation Manual*, which contains all of the Standards, policies, and procedures of the COA. Most questions can be answered by reviewing the *COA Manual*. If you have additional questions, please contact the Commission office at [coa@abhe.org](mailto:coa@abhe.org).

### Types of ABHE Accreditation

*Institutional Accreditation:* Review and recognition of an entire institution, both undergraduate and graduate programs.

*Programmatic Accreditation:* Review and recognition of particular programs within an institution that currently holds institutional accreditation with another recognized accreditor.

### Affiliation without Accreditation

Credible institutions of biblical higher education seeking to benefit from ready access to services and networking of the Association, but presently lacking either readiness or inclination to seek ABHE accreditation may affiliate with the ABHE Association. Affiliates, however, do not hold status or recognition with the COA. For more information, visit [www.abhe.org/affiliation](http://www.abhe.org/affiliation).

### Philosophy of ABHE Accreditation

COA offers accreditation to institutions that are in accord with the Association's Tenets of Faith and that have mission statements appropriate to biblical higher education. Accreditation is granted to institutions that satisfactorily demonstrate substantial compliance with the COA's Conditions of Eligibility and its Standards for Accreditation.

Although accreditation signifies substantial compliance with the Association Standards, it is designed to foster ongoing systematic self-study with the goal of continuous institutional improvement. ABHE accredited institutions are expected to validate mission (and update as needed); examine evidence for the achievement of the mission and goals; identify areas of strength and weakness; and develop plans to address issues identified. The ultimate goal of this process is to better equip institutions to prepare students for a life of service to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Stages of ABHE Accreditation**

*The following information highlights elements of the accreditation process and is not intended to be a comprehensive description. Additional detail is found in the COA Manual, available at [forms.abhecoa.org](https://forms.abhecoa.org). Note especially the Policy and Procedures for Institutional Accreditation.*

### **1. Applicant status**

Applicant status is granted to institutions that meet the COA Conditions of Eligibility and evidence the potential to achieve candidate status within a maximum of five years.

An institution desiring applicant status with the COA should contact the Commission office to schedule a one-day consultation visit by a member of the Commission's professional staff to the institution's campus. This preliminary consultation visit is required and must be completed during the 24 months *prior* to submission of an application. The purpose of the visit is to assist the institution in understanding the accreditation process and conduct a preliminary assessment of the institution's achievement of the Conditions of Eligibility.

The Commission considers applications on a rolling basis as follows:

- December 15 deadline for February Commission review
- May 15 deadline for June Commission review
- September 15 deadline for November Commission review

After the preliminary consultation visit, the institution should submit one electronic copy (pdf) of the following documents to [coa@abhe.org](mailto:coa@abhe.org) for consideration:

1. A completed ABHE application form
  2. An official letter from the chief executive officer stating the board of control's desire for the institution to pursue accreditation with the Commission
  3. An official statement from the chief executive officer reflecting a board of control decision to affirm support of the ABHE Tenets of Faith
  4. A document demonstrating compliance with the Conditions of Eligibility. The document should describe the institution's compliance with each requirement and provide documentation of compliance in appendices at the end of the narrative.
- A check for the application fee should be sent by postal mail when the application is submitted.

The Commission's Committee on Applicant and Candidate Status (APCAN) will review these materials, and the COA will determine whether to grant or deny applicant status or defer action. An institution must substantially meet the Conditions of Eligibility and evidence the potential to achieve candidate status within a maximum of five years to be granted applicant status. An institution denied applicant status must wait one year before reapplying. An institution may voluntarily withdraw its request for applicant status, without prejudice, at any time prior to the decision of the COA.

Once granted applicant status, an institution must annually demonstrate timely progress toward candidate status. To support this expectation, an annual consultation visit by a member of the COA professional staff is required. The institution must also complete an online annual report and submit an annual progress report, financial audit, and academic catalog(s) for review by the COA.

During the first year of applicant status, the institution is expected to send one or more representatives to the New Applicant Orientation, held at the ABHE Headquarters in Orlando in May or June. The orientation is a two-day, small-group workshop lead by COA staff to help institutions understand the expectations and common understanding of the Standards and Essential Elements within each Standard. Each of these will be reviewed during the workshop, and participants will complete an initial self-assessment of the institution's compliance with the Standards/Essential Elements as a baseline for determining where energy needs to be invested in the coming years. The format of the workshop provides a question-answer component with each Standard, and opportunity for institutions to share their experiences and challenges to help one another progress toward accreditation as rapidly and effectively as possible. The cost of the workshop is partially underwritten to encourage institutions to send the primary people who will be working on accreditation (the accreditation team), rather than just one representative.

In November of the third year of applicant status, the institution prepares and submits a self-study for review by the COA. This rigorous self-analysis consists of (1) a compliance document (normally not exceeding 100 pp. text plus exhibits) analyzing and documenting the extent to which the institution meets the Standards and Essential Elements; (2) an assessment plan describing systematic and ongoing assessment processes to evaluate student learning and institutional effectiveness; (3) a planning document showing how the institution plans to address weaknesses or take action to advance quality performance outcomes and/or meet ABHE Standards; and (4) a brief statistical abstract overviewing the most recent four-year trend in enrollment, library, finances, and other data. The COA reviews the self-study at the following February meeting.

If the institution's self-study shows sufficient progress to warrant a team review, an evaluation team will be authorized by COA to conduct a three-day visit to the institution in the upcoming fall. This five-member team will interview various personnel (including faculty, board, and students), examine documents, and submit a report for review by the institution and the COA. The institution is expected to provide a response to the evaluation team report, indicating steps taken or to be taken to address areas where the team found compliance with the Standards and Essential Elements has not been adequately demonstrated.

The COA will review these documents and interview institutional representatives at the February COA meeting before making a decision on candidate status. This review by COA is approximately 15 months after initial submission of a self-study.

## **2. Candidate Status**

Candidate status is granted to institutions that have been reviewed by an evaluation team and determined by the COA to be making sufficient progress as to achieve accreditation within a maximum of five years.

The process for candidate institutions is virtually identical to that of applicant institutions, but the expectations are at a higher level. Candidate institutions will prepare annual reports and host staff visits to assist the COA in evaluating annual progress toward initial accreditation. In November of the third year of candidate status, the institution will prepare and submit a second self-study for review by the COA. If approved, the institution will host a visiting team for initial accreditation in the coming fall, and appear before the COA in February of the next year for consideration of initial accreditation.

Where review for candidate status looked at whether or not the institution showed promise of substantial compliance with all Standards and Essential Elements, the review for initial accreditation carries the expectation that substantial compliance will be fully achieved by the time of this review.

### **Accelerating or Decelerating the Process**

The COA strongly recommends that institutions plan for a four-year progression from applicant to candidate status and from candidate status to initial accreditation—saving the fifth year as a contingency to accommodate any unexpected delays that may occur. Where an institution is not ready for candidate status or initial accreditation, the COA may defer action to give the institution an additional year to address concerns, but only where a contingency year is available. If an institution fails to achieve the next level of accreditation status (candidate or initial accreditation) within five years, the COA must remove the institution's current status, and the institution must wait at least one year before seeking reinstatement; therefore, the contingency year should be reserved for unexpected crises that might make delay in the process unavoidable.

Nearly all institutions seek to accelerate the process, but for most institutions, the process realistically takes four years from application to candidate status and four years from candidate status to initial accreditation. An institution must document that it meets both the overall Standards as well as all of the Essential Elements within each Standard to pursue a shorter timeline. When the institution can do that, it must submit a written request for acceleration and a progress report documenting satisfaction with the Standards and Essential Elements. This will be reviewed by the APCAN to determine whether or not progress is sufficient to warrant authorizing submission of a self-study early. The COA does not wish to obligate an institution to the cost and time involved in a self-study and evaluation team visit unless the prospect of a successful visit is likely. A suggested [timeline](#) is attached to assist institutions in planning.

### 3. Accredited Status

Accredited institutions submit to periodic review as part of their recognition. The institution's first review after initial accreditation will be in 5 years (4<sup>th</sup> year for team visit, COA review at 5<sup>th</sup> year anniversary), and every 10 years thereafter. Certain changes (adding programs, teaching sites, etc.) are significant enough that institutions must submit a substantive change proposal for COA review, and some changes require a staff or focused team visit for verification.

### Expenses

Expenses related to pursuit of accreditation take three forms: (1) direct expenses paid to ABHE for membership dues and accreditation services, (2) indirect expenses for institutional personnel devoting time to preparations for accreditation, and (3) expenses for professional development (ABHE annual meeting, workshops on accreditation, etc.) and private accreditation consultants (if so desired) to assist in developing policies, materials, and processes needed for accreditation review. The institution's budget should reflect the investment in accreditation services. A current [fee schedule](#) is attached to help institutions project expenses for COA services and ABHE membership dues.

While this fee schedule is subject to change, a small institution should anticipate \$7,000-\$8,000 per year for ABHE dues and staff consultation visits, plus an additional \$9,000 during the year of an evaluation team visit. Larger institutions pay more in dues (up to \$4,300 additional dues). Indirect expenses are dependent on the capacity of current personnel to absorb additional responsibilities related to accreditation. If capacity is at maximum, the institution should anticipate the equivalent of one additional full-time person (with workload spread across various individuals and committees) to engage the process. Expenses for professional development and consultants are dependent on the level of assistance needed and may range from \$1,000 per year for limited professional development to \$12,000 or more for a consultant offering monthly services.

### Resources for the Journey

***Commission on Accreditation Manual*** – Complete record of ABHE Standards for Accreditation, policies and procedures. The *Manual* should be your first stop in looking for answers about ABHE accreditation. Available as a free download at [forms.abhecoa.org](https://forms.abhecoa.org).

***Self-Study Guide*** – A step-by-step guide to the preparation of a self-study and hosting an evaluation team visit. The *Self-Study Guide* suggests strategies, processes, and organization to make the preparations for a team visit easier. Available as a free download at [forms.abhecoa.org](https://forms.abhecoa.org).

***Evaluation Team Handbook*** – Intended primarily for evaluators, this tool can be a helpful reference in understanding what teams are instructed to look for when conducting an on-site visit. Available as a free download at [forms.abhecoa.org](https://forms.abhecoa.org). Team training videos are also available to the public at [www.abhe.org/accreditation/team-evaluator-training](http://www.abhe.org/accreditation/team-evaluator-training).

***Accreditation Journey Conference*** – A two-day workshop (usually late Sept.) intended for institution interested in starting the accreditation process or those that have recently engaged the process. The conference is organized with time built in for presentations, questions, and discussion in a small-group setting (10-20 people from institutions with similar accreditation needs and desires). ABHE also hosts similar two-day workshops for leaders in specific roles (e.g., president, academic dean, enrollment management, development). All fall conferences are held at the ABHE Headquarters, one mile from the Orlando International Airport. For information, contact [info@abhe.org](mailto:info@abhe.org) or visit the ABHE website at [www.abhe.org](http://www.abhe.org).

***ABHE Annual Conference*** – The premiere gathering of 400+ leaders engaged in biblical higher education. The February conference in Orlando offers plenary sessions around a central theme, concurrent workshops organized into multiple professional tracks, fellowship times to network with other ABHE institutions with mutual interests, pre-conference workshops and training opportunities for more in-depth professional development, and an exhibit hall to explore resources and services across the spectrum of institutional operations. For more information, contact [info@abhe.org](mailto:info@abhe.org) or visit the ABHE website at [www.abhe.org](http://www.abhe.org).



## **ABHE Tenets of Faith**

According to the Constitution of the Association for Biblical Higher Education, the following statement of faith is to be subscribed to annually by each member institution.

- *We believe that there is one God, eternally existing in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*
- *We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.*
- *We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious death and atonement through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal and visible return in power and glory.*
- *We believe that man was created in the image of God, and that he was tempted by Satan and fell, and that, because of the exceeding sinfulness of human nature, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely necessary for salvation.*
- *We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life, and by Whom the Church is empowered to carry out Christ's great commission.*
- *We believe in the bodily resurrection of both the saved and the lost; those who are saved unto the resurrection of life and those who are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.*

On behalf of the institution's governing board, I affirm that the institution subscribes to the ABHE Tenets of Faith as stated above.

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Signature of CEO

Date

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Institution



## **ABHE CONDITIONS OF ELIGIBILITY** *for Institutional Accreditation*

The Committee on Applicant and Candidate Status of the Association's Commission on Accreditation will grant applicant status to those institutions that (1) document compliance with the Association's Conditions of Eligibility and (2) appear, in the committee's judgment, to be able to achieve candidate status within a maximum of five years.

To be considered for applicant status by the committee, an institution must provide the Commission with (1) an official statement from its chief executive officer reflecting a decision of its board of control to pursue accreditation, (2) a completed application form providing both essential data and a trend analysis of that data, (3) an official statement from the chief executive officer reflecting a board of control decision to affirm support of the ABHE Tenets of Faith, and (4) a document demonstrating specific compliance with the following Conditions of Eligibility.

1. **Authorization.** An institution must document authorization from the appropriate governmental agency (if required) to operate as an educational institution and to grant all degrees, certificates, and diplomas that it awards.
2. **Institutional Mission.** An institution must have a clear statement of mission as well as formally adopted and widely publicized institutional goals that are in accord with the Association's definition of biblical higher education.
3. **Governance.** An institution must have an external governing board of at least five members that has the authority to oversee the accomplishment of the mission, goals, and objectives of the institution.
4. **Chief Executive Officer.** An institution must employ a chief executive officer whose major responsibility is to the institution and who possesses appropriate authority.
5. **Catalog.** An institution must have available to students and the public a current and accurate catalog setting forth the institution's governance, mission, institutional goals, specific objectives, academic program requirements and courses, learning and educational resources, admissions policies and standards, rules and regulations for conduct, full- and part-time faculty rosters with faculty degrees, fees and other charges, refund policies, a policy defining satisfactory academic progress, and other items related to attending, transferring to, or withdrawing from the institution. Claims regarding educational effectiveness must be supported by appropriate data.

6. **Assessment and Public Accountability.** An institution must make information available to the public concerning student achievement and institutional performance outcomes, including graduation rates and rate of recent graduate employment in program related occupations.
7. **Learning Resources.** An institution must ensure access to resources necessary to support courses, programs, and degrees offered.
8. **Faculty Qualifications.** An institution must have qualified academic leadership and at least one qualified faculty member for each major or program offered. The oversight of the program may be by the same individual as the faculty member.
9. **Academic Programs.** An institution must offer one or more educational programs that are at least two academic years in length and are consistent with the mission of the institution and appropriate to higher education.
10. **Biblical/Theological Studies.** An institution must meet, in all its programs, the minimum requirement for biblical/theological studies as specified in the Standards for Accreditation.
11. **General Studies.** An institution must meet, in all its programs, the minimum requirement for general studies as specified in the Standards for Accreditation.
12. **Ministry Formation Program.** An institution must require that undergraduate students participate in a program of ministry formation.
13. **Student Body.** An institution must have students enrolled in and pursuing its educational programs.
14. **Program Completion.** An institution must have graduated at least one class in its principal program by the time of the committee's decision regarding applicant status.
15. **Admissions Policy.** An institution must have an admissions policy that is compatible with its stated institutional mission and programs offered.
16. **Institutional Stability and Capacity.** An institution must demonstrate a pattern of stability in enrollment, governing board, administration, faculty, and finances, and the capacity for development into an accredited institution within ten years.
17. **Financial Base.** An institution must have a financial base indicating that the institution can achieve its mission and goals within a balanced budget and at a safe level of debt.
18. **Income Allocation.** An institution must devote a substantial and sufficient portion of its generated income to the support of its educational purposes and programs.

19. **Annual Audit.** An institution must have financial records that receive an annual, independent, opinioned audit.
20. **Agency Disclosure.** An institution must agree to disclose to the association any and all such information as it may require to carry out its evaluation and accreditation functions.
21. **Compliance.** An institution must commit itself to comply with the Association's Standards for Accreditation, either current or as hereafter modified, during the period of its affiliation.
22. **Public Disclosure.** An institution must attest in writing that it understands and agrees that the Association may, at its discretion, make known to any agency or member of the public the nature of any action, positive or negative, regarding the institution's status with the Association.

## TYPICAL TIMELINE FOR ACCREDITATION

*This timeline does not reflect the result of any deferral or acceleration during the process. In addition, by November 15 of each year, an online annual report must be completed and a financial audit and academic catalog submitted (electronically) through the ABHE Commission on Accreditation Portal ([www.abhecoa.org](http://www.abhecoa.org))*

### PRE-APPLICANT:

2018	Summer/Fall	1-day preliminary visit to campus by a Commission staff representative to review the Conditions of Eligibility and assess the institution's readiness for the accreditation process
	Dec. 15	Application and supporting documents submitted to <a href="mailto:coa@abhe.org">coa@abhe.org</a>
2019	Feb.	Commission decision on applicant status (if approved continue timeline, if not, defer 1 year to restart)

### APPLICANT:

2019	May/June	New Applicant Orientation at ABHE headquarters in Orlando, followed by 1-day staff visit prior to submission of the first year progress report
	Nov. 15	First year applicant progress report due
2020	Feb.	Commission reviews progress, makes recommendations to be addressed in the next progress report
	Spring-Fall	1-day campus visit by a Commission staff representative
	Nov. 15	Second year applicant progress report due
2021	Feb.	Commission reviews progress, makes recommendations for next report
	Spring-Fall	1-day campus visit by a Commission staff representative
	Nov. 15	Self-study for candidate status review due
2022	Feb.	Commission reviews self-study, approves team visit*
	Spring-Sum.	Update self-study due 8 weeks prior to evaluation team visit
	Fall	3-day comprehensive evaluation team visit to campus
	Late Fall	Response to team visit report due 6 weeks after report is received
2023	Feb.	Commission decision on candidate status* (institutional representatives appear before Commission at Feb. meeting)

### CANDIDATE:

2023	Spring-Fall	1-day campus visit by a Commission staff representative
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	Nov. 15	First year candidate progress report due
2024	Feb.	Commission reviews progress, makes recommendations for next report
	Spring-Fall	1-day campus visit by a Commission staff representative
	Nov. 15	Second year candidate progress report due
2025	Feb.	Commission reviews progress, makes recommendations for next report
	Spring-Fall	1-day campus visit by a Commission staff representative
	Nov. 15	Self-study for initial accreditation review due
2026	Feb.	Commission reviews self-study, approves team visit*
	Spring-Sum.	Update self-study due 8 weeks prior to evaluation team visit
	Fall	3-day comprehensive evaluation team visit to campus
	Late Fall	Response to team visit report due 6 weeks after report is received
2027	Feb.	Commission decision on initial accreditation status* (institutional representatives appear before Commission at Feb. meeting)

### **ACCREDITED (5 years):**

2027	Nov. 15	First year progress report on Commission recommendations due
2028	Feb.	Commission reviews progress, makes recommendations as needed
	Nov. 15	Second year progress report due, if required by Commission
2029	Feb.	Commission reviews progress and makes recommendations, if report required
	Spring-Fall	1-day supplemental evaluation visit by a Commission staff representative
2030	Feb.	Commission reviews progress and makes recommendations for self-study
	Spring-Fall	Work on self-study for 5-year reaffirmation visit
	Nov. 15	Supplemental progress report due, if required
2031	Jan.	Self-study for 5-year reaffirmation visit due 8 weeks before visit
	Spring	3-day comprehensive evaluation team visit to campus
	Summer	Response to visiting team report due September 15
2032	Feb.	Commission decision on reaffirmation of accreditation

### **ACCREDITATION REAFFIRMED (10 years):**

2041	Jan.	Self-study for 10-year reaffirmation visit due 8 weeks before visit
2041	Spring	3-day comprehensive evaluation team visit to campus for reaffirmation
2041	Summer	Response to visiting team report due September 15
2042	Feb.	Commission decision on reaffirmation

(reaffirmation cycle repeats every 10 years)

\* Institutions are strongly encouraged to plan for a four-year progression from applicant to candidate status and candidate to accredited status, rather than the maximum of five years. If the institution must address issues before receiving a visiting team or the Commission defers a decision for moving to the next level, the fifth year is available as a contingency year. An extension beyond five years in applicant or candidate status is not possible.



## Commission on Accreditation

### **COA Dues** (billed in **March**; due and payable within 30 days):

- **Accredited, Candidate, Applicant Institutions:**  
Variable rate of \$10.25 multiplied by the unduplicated headcount enrollment (all students in all deliveries, last fiscal year, as reported on the Fall Annual Report) **Minimum:** \$950 **Maximum:** \$5,900
- **Accredited Programmatic Institutions:** \$1,200

### **Evaluation Fees** (billed when visit is scheduled; due and payable within 30 days):

- **Candidate Status, Initial Accreditation, Reaffirmation Team Visit (4-6 persons):**  
Evaluation team fee of \$5,000 plus evaluator travel expenses
- **Focused Visit (2-3 persons):**  
Evaluation team fee of \$2,500 plus evaluator travel
- **Additional Location/Relocation Visit (1 person):**  
Evaluation visit fee of \$750 plus evaluator travel

### **Staff Visit Fees** (billed when visit is scheduled; due and payable within 30 days):

- **Pre-Applicant Staff Visit:**  
Fee of \$1,800 plus travel expenses for a 1-day visit by a Commission staff representative (required during the 24 months prior to submission of an application)
- **Staff Visit:**  
Fee of \$1,800 plus travel expenses for a one-day visit by a Commission staff representative; \$700 per subsequent day (follow-up visit, if requested), plus travel expenses

### **Substantive Change Fee** (Accredited and Candidate Institutions)

- \$400 per submission, \$50 for resubmission, non-refundable. The fee will be invoiced to the school after the substantive change proposal has been received and recorded. All fees are due 30 days from the invoice date.

### **Annual Report Late Fees** (Accredited, Candidate and Applicant Institutions)

- \$25 per business day for late or incomplete reports. The Online Annual Report, final external financial audit with auditor's management letter (draft audits are not acceptable), and academic catalog(s) are due November 15 annually. Progress reports are due as specified in the Commission Action Letter. **An additional \$500 penalty will be charged to any institution that has not fulfilled reporting requirements by December 31, and failure to comply with reporting requirements may result in negative Commission action or sanction.** See the Report Guide at [forms.abhecoa.org](http://forms.abhecoa.org).

### **Application Fee**

- \$3,000, non-refundable (no application will be processed prior to application fee payment).

### **CHEA Membership Fee**

- Variable rate fee is billed directly by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation to all ABHE member institutions (typically \$275-\$600). For more information visit [www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org).

### **Termination of Status**

- The Commission on Accreditation may terminate Accredited, Candidate or Applicant status for failure to pay membership dues within 30 days of invoice. In extenuating circumstances, a grace period of up to six months may be requested in writing.