



ACCREDITATION INQUIRY PACKET

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 accreditation relationship is a *voluntary association* intended “to engender a willing and cooperative environment for review and improvement of educational programs” at institutions of higher education (July 19, 2022 Department of Education Letter to Institutional Accreditation Agencies).

The Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE) Commission on Accreditation (COA) is recognized as a national, faith-based accrediting agency by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). The official scope of CHEA recognition is as follows: *Institutions and programs in the United States, Canada, and related territories that offer certificates, diplomas, associate, baccalaureate, or graduate degrees aimed at preparing students for Christian ministries through Biblical, church-vocational, and general studies.* The ABHE Commission on Accreditation is also recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a national, specialized, institutional accrediting agency. The official scope of recognition is as follows: *The accreditation and pre-accreditation (“Candidate Status”) of institutions of biblical higher education offering undergraduate certificates, associate degrees, baccalaureate degrees, graduate certificates, and master’s degrees, including the accreditation of educational programs offered via distance education and direct assessment.*

Types of ABHE Accreditation

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

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

Philosophy of ABHE Accreditation

ABHE 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 or programs that satisfactorily demonstrate substantial compliance with the COA’s Conditions of Eligibility and its Standards for Accreditation.

Although accreditation signifies substantial compliance with the Commission on Accreditation’s Standards, it is designed to foster ongoing systematic self-study with the goal of continuous institutional improvement. ABHE-accredited institutions are expected to affirm, updating as needed, their statements of mission; examine the evidence for the achievement of their respective missions and goals; identify areas of strength, weakness, opportunity, or threat; 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 Commission on Accreditation (COA) Manual, available at <https://www.abhe.org/accreditation/accreditation-documents/>. Note especially the Policy and Procedures for Institutional Accreditation.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Institutions holding accredited status with another U.S. Department of Education (USDE) recognized institutional accreditor are required to submit materials to USDE demonstrating reasonable cause for changing their accrediting agency or for having multiple accrediting agencies. Institutions must submit such materials *and* receive DE approval prior to submitting their application to ABHE.

1. Applicant status

Applicant status is granted to institutions that meet the ABHE Institutional Accreditation 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 staff visit by a member of the Commission's professional staff to the institution's campus. This preliminary 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 and decision
- May 15 deadline for June Commission review and decision
- September 15 deadline for November Commission review and decision

After the preliminary consultation visit (or within 24 months), the institution should submit one electronic copy (pdf) of the following documents to 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 ABHE 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. For each Condition of Eligibility, write a short narrative that describes how the institution complies with the COE and provide supporting documentation demonstrating that compliance (including a completed financial audit and management letter).
5. An invoice for the application fee will be emailed once documentation has been received.

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 Commission Staff Representative is required. The institution must also complete an online annual report and submit an annual progress report, final external financial audit with auditor's management letter, 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 Achieving Accreditation Standards Conference (new applicant orientation). The orientation is a two-day, small-group workshop led 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) an institutional improvement plan 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 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 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 at the end of this document 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 (4th year for team visit, COA review at 5th year anniversary), and at a minimum, every 10 years thereafter. Certain changes (adding programs, additional locations, 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.

Begin Your Accreditation Journey with ABHE

Application information, an application, and accreditation manuals are available for download without charge at <https://www.abhe.org/accreditation/accreditation-documents/>. The most important of these documents is the Commission on Accreditation (COA) Manual, which contains all 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.

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, conferences on accreditation, etc.). The institution's budget should reflect the investment in accreditation services. A current fee schedule is provided at the end of this document and at <https://www.abhe.org/accreditation/accreditation-documents/> to help institutions project expenses for Commission on Accreditation dues and fees and ABHE association membership dues.

While this fee schedule is subject to change, a small institution should anticipate \$9,000-\$10,000 per year for ABHE dues and staff consultation visits, plus an additional \$10,000 during the year of an evaluation team visit. Larger institutions pay more in dues (an average of \$8,000 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/or consultants, if desired, 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.

When an institution reaches candidate status, they also become members of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). Institutions are billed directly by CHEA. The membership fee is a variable rate (typically \$300-\$1,500). For more information visit www.chea.org.

Resources for the Journey

Commission on Accreditation Manual (COA Manual) – complete record of ABHE Standards for Accreditation, policies and procedures. The *COA Manual* should be your first stop in looking for answers about ABHE accreditation. Available as a free download at <https://www.abhe.org/accreditation/accreditation-documents/>.

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 <https://www.abhe.org/accreditation/accreditation-documents/>.

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 <https://www.abhe.org/accreditation/accreditation-documents/>. Team training videos are also available to the public at <https://www.abhe.org/accreditation/team-evaluator-training/>.

Accreditation Journey Conference – a 1 ½ day workshop in May intended for institutions interested in starting the accreditation process or those that have recently engaged the process. The conference includes presentations, questions, and discussions 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, chief academic officer, enrollment management, development, assessment, online education). All fall conferences are held at the ABHE Headquarters, one mile from the Orlando International Airport.

Achieving Accreditation Standards Conference – a two-day workshop held in May at ABHE Headquarters in Orlando for new applicants and institutions approaching a reaffirmation review to assist in preparation for conducting a comprehensive self-study. The conference includes an overview of all 11 ABHE Institutional Accreditation Standards, along with the Essential Elements that must be met to satisfy each standard. The presentation-discussion format provides opportunity for participants to explore situations at their institutions and seek advice from the ABHE professional staff and senior evaluators on how to address those situations in the context of the standards. A self-assessment opportunity is included to develop a working agenda for addressing areas that need improvement before hosting an evaluation team. This conference is required for new applicants during the first year of applicant status.

ABHE Annual Conference – the premiere gathering of 500+ 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 information on conferences, please visit www.abhe.org/leadership-development/leadership-development-conferences.



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 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.

President/CEO's Name and Title (please print)

Signature

Date

Institution



ABHE CONDITIONS OF ELIGIBILITY *for Institutional Accreditation*

To be considered for institutional accreditation, an institution must fulfill the requirements stated in the Policy and Procedures for Institutional Accreditation and satisfy the Conditions of Eligibility below.

1. **Tenets of Faith.** The institution's board of control affirms agreement with and commitment to the ABHE Tenets of Faith, as evidenced by a copy of the Tenets of Faith signed annually by the chief executive officer of the institution.
2. **Nonprofit Status.** Evidence that the institution is a nonprofit organization or the nonprofit subsidiary of a parent organization.
3. **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.
4. **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.
5. **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.
6. **Chief Executive Officer.** An institution must have a chief executive officer who has the capacity and authority to lead the institution toward the accomplishment of its mission.
7. **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, nondiscrimination statement, 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.

8. **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.
9. **Learning Resources.** An institution must ensure access to library and learning resources necessary to support courses, programs, and degrees offered.
10. **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.
11. **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.
12. **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.
13. **General Studies.** An institution must meet, in all its programs, the minimum requirement for general studies as specified in the Standards for Accreditation.
14. **Ministry Formation Program.** An institution must require that undergraduate students participate in a program of ministry formation.
15. **Student Body.** An institution must have sustained and viable student enrollment in its education programs over the past two years (typically an FTE of 10 or headcount of 30 students or more).
16. **Program Completion.** An institution must have graduated at least one student in its principal program by the time of the committee's decision regarding applicant status.
17. **Admissions Policy.** An institution must have an admissions policy that is compatible with its stated institutional mission and programs offered.
18. **Institutional Stability and Capacity.** An institution must demonstrate a pattern of stability in enrollment, governing board, administration, faculty, and finances. For new applicants, the institution must demonstrate the capacity for development into an accredited institution within ten years.
19. **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.
20. **Income Allocation.** An institution must devote a substantial and sufficient portion of its generated income to the support of its educational purposes and programs.

21. **Annual Audit.** An institution must have financial records that receive an annual, independent, opinioned audit.
22. **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.
23. **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.
24. **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.
25. **Arbitration.** An institution must agree in writing to submit any dispute involving the final denial, withdrawal, or termination of accreditation to initial arbitration prior to any other legal action.



TYPICAL TIMELINE FOR ACCREDITATION

This timeline does not reflect the result of any deferral or acceleration during the process. By November 15 of each year, an online annual report must be completed and an external financial audit with auditor's management letter and academic catalog(s) submitted to coa@abhe.org.

PRE-APPLICANT:

2023	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 coa@abhe.org
2024	February	Commission decision on applicant status (if approved continue timeline, if not, defer 1 year to restart)

APPLICANT:

2024	May/June	Achieving Accreditation Standards Conference (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
2025	February	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
2026	February	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
2027	February	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
2028	February	Commission decision on candidate status* (Institutional representatives appear before Commission at Feb. meeting)

CANDIDATE:

2028	Spring-Fall	1-day campus visit by a Commission staff representative
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	Nov. 15	First year candidate progress report due
2029	February	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
2030	February	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
2031	February	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
2032	February	Commission decision on initial accreditation status* (Institutional representatives appear before Commission at Feb. meeting)

ACCREDITED (5 years):

2032	Nov. 15	First-year accredited progress report on Commission recommendations due
2033	February	Commission reviews progress, makes recommendations as needed
	Nov. 15	Second year progress report due, if required by Commission
2034	February	Commission reviews progress and makes recommendations if report required
	Spring-Fall	1-day supplemental evaluation visit by a Commission staff representative
2035	February	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
2036	January	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
2037	February	Commission decision on reaffirmation of accreditation

ACCREDITATION REAFFIRMED (10 years):

2047	January	Self-study for 10-year reaffirmation visit due 8 weeks before visit
2047	Spring	3-day comprehensive evaluation team visit to campus for reaffirmation
2047	Summer	Response to visiting team report due September 15
2048	February	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 before 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.*