



ABHE Standards and Institutional Culture: Connecting the Dots

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Session Objectives

This session is designed to equip institutional leaders to recognize, assess, and document institutional culture as an integral component of ABHE accreditation.

By the end of this session, participants will be equipped to:

- **Identify** institutional culture within the ABHE Standards.
- **Assess** culture using mission-aligned indicators.
- **Document** culture-related compliance effectively.
- **Strengthen** institutional alignment in preparation for accreditation review.

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Suspended Language in ABHE Standards (effective June 15, 2025)

Standard 1

EE 5: ~~Institutional values and practices that foster respect for diverse backgrounds and perspectives consistent with the institution's mission.~~

EE 6: A board, faculty, and staff ~~reflective of the diversity of the institution's constituency and the students it serves and consistent with institutional theological distinctives.~~

EE 7: Institutional values and practices that foster an educational community of ~~belonging and service for students, employees, alumni, and other institutional constituents.~~

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Suspended Language in ABHE Standards (effective June 15, 2025)

Standard 6

EE 4: Student recruitment and admissions policies and practices that are directed toward students whose spiritual commitments, educational goals, and interests are consistent with the intended outcomes of the institution, ~~and that promote diversity of ethnicity and sex appropriate to the institution's theological and cultural context.~~

Standard 7

EE 3: ~~Curriculum designed to prepare graduates for effective engagement in diverse and multicultural contexts.~~

Standard 9

EE 2: Services that address ~~diverse student needs [and] abilities, and cultures~~ regardless of location or instructional modality.

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Essential Elements Addressing Institutional Culture

STANDARD 1: Integrity and Mission

Direct, explicit culture language

~~EE 5 – “Institutional values and practices that foster respect for diverse backgrounds and perspectives consistent with the institution's mission.”~~

~~EE 6 – “A board, faculty, and staff reflective of the diversity of the institution's constituency and the students it serves, and consistent with institutional theological distinctives.”~~

~~EE 7 – “Institutional values and practices that foster an educational community of belonging and service...”~~

Culture-forming, mission-guiding language

EE 8 – Mission developed with “broad representation from all sectors of the institution.”

EE 10 – Mission guiding operations, planning, resource allocation, and program development.

Standard 1 explicitly defines institutional culture as mission-shaped values and practices

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Essential Elements Addressing Institutional Culture

STANDARD 2: Institutional Planning and Assessment

Culture-adjacent but explicit

EE 6 – Improvement plans developed with “broad representation from all sectors of the institution and its stakeholders.”

EE 7 – Evidence that assessment data informs ongoing institutional decision-making.

Culture appears through how the institution learns and improves together.

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Essential Elements Addressing Institutional Culture

STANDARD 3: Authority and Governance

Implicit culture of accountability and continuous improvement supported by explicit behaviors

EE 7 – “Effective recruitment, orientation, and development of board members...”

EE 9 – “Ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of the board and its members...”

Culture expressed through governance norms and expectations.

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Essential Elements Addressing Institutional Culture

STANDARD 4: Administration, Staff, and Faculty

Direct, explicit culture language

EE 7 – “Mission-driven values and practices that encourage job satisfaction and employee engagement.”

Faculty culture

EE 11 – “Committed Christian faculty members who engage in the academic, spiritual, and vocational development of students.”

Culture is framed as mission-shaped work life and relational engagement.

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Essential Elements Addressing Institutional Culture

STANDARD 6: Enrollment Management

Explicit cultural alignment

EE 4 – Recruitment practices that align with *spiritual commitments, educational goals, and interests* that are consistent with the intended outcomes of the institution, ~~and that “promote diversity... appropriate to the institution’s theological and cultural context.”~~

Culture is shaped at the front door.

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Essential Elements Addressing Institutional Culture

STANDARD 7: Academic Programs and Policies

Explicit worldview and engagement

EE 2 – “Curriculum designed to support development of a biblical worldview through Bible engagement and theological reflection.”

EE 3 – ~~“Curriculum designed to prepare graduates for effective engagement in diverse and multicultural contexts.”~~

*More about student formation than institutional culture,
but still values-driven.*

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Essential Elements Addressing Institutional Culture

STANDARD 9: Student Development and Success

Direct culture language

EE 1 – “Services that demonstrate a commitment to the holistic development of students... and an educational community of belonging.”

EE 2 – “Services that address ~~diverse~~ student needs, [and] abilities, ~~and cultures...~~”

EE 7 – “Systems that encourage student input for the purpose of institutional decision-making.”

Culture here is holistic, relational, and participatory.

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Explicit Culture Language

“Institutional values and practices” that foster respect, belonging, and service (Standard 1: EE 5, 7)

Educational community of belonging for students, employees, alumni, and constituents (Standard 1: EE 7; Standard 9: EE 1)

Mission-driven values and practices that encourage employee engagement (Standard 4: EE 7)

Respect for different backgrounds and perspectives consistent with mission (Standard 1: EE 5, 6; Standard 6: EE 4; Standard 9: EE 2)

Broad representation in mission development and institutional planning (Standard 1: EE 8; Standard 2: EE 6)

Commitment to spiritual formation and biblical integration (Standard 7: EE 2; Standard 9: EE 5, 6)

Implicit / Foundational Cultural Assumptions

A **culture of trust and integrity** in which ethical behavior is normative, not enforced only through policy (Standard 1:1-4; Standard 5: EE 1-4; Standard 7: EE 10)

A **culture of care and human dignity** that prioritizes safety, equity, holistic development, and protection from harm (Standard 1: EE 4; Standard 4: EE 8; Standard 5: EE 8; Standard 9: EE 1-3)

A **culture of mission alignment** in which decisions, resources, and practices consistently reflect stated mission (Standard 1: EE 10; Standard 2: EE 2; Standard 6: EE 1; Standard 9: EE 1)

A **culture of hospitality and belonging** shaped by theological commitments and institutional context (Standard 1:EE 5; Standard 6: EE 4; Standard 9: EE 2)

A **culture of shared responsibility and participation** among board, faculty, staff, and students (Standard 3: EE 7; Standard 4: EE 14; Standard 9: EE 7)

A **culture of formation and vocation**, in which education is understood as spiritual, moral, and vocational development (Standard 4: EE 11; Standard 7: EE 23; Standard 9: EE 6)

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How Culture Works in the Standards

In the ABHE Standards, institutional culture is not an add-on. Mission gives rise to values, values are expressed through consistent practices, and those practices produce observable outcomes in institutional life and culture.

Mission → Values → Practices → Outcomes

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How Culture Works in the Standards

Mission → Values → Practices → Outcomes

MISSION

A clearly articulated mission appropriate to biblical higher education (Standard 1)

VALUES

Institutional commitments that shape priorities

- Integrity
- Belonging
- Service
- Formation
- Stewardship

(Standards 1, 4)

PRACTICES

Consistent behaviors and systems

- Governance and decision-making
- Planning and assessment
- Faculty life and teaching
- Student services and engagement

(Standards 2, 3, 4, 6, 9)

COMMUNITY OUTCOMES

What people experience

- Trust and transparency
- Shared responsibility
- Student success and formation
- Employee engagement
- Educational community of belonging

(Standards 1, 4, 9)

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Assessing Institutional Culture

1. Assess Culture Through Multiple Lenses

Quantitative indicators

- Climate and engagement surveys (students, faculty, staff)
- Retention, persistence, and completion data
- Employee turnover and length-of-service trends
- Participation rates in governance, formation, and co-curricular activities

Qualitative indicators

- Focus groups and listening sessions
- Exit interviews (students and employees)
- Open-ended survey responses
- Narrative reflections embedded in assessment reports

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Assessing Institutional Culture

2. Embed Culture Assessment in Existing Systems

Integrate cultural indicators into:

- Institutional assessment plans
- Unit-level outcomes and annual reports
- Program review narratives

Use assessment findings to inform:

- Planning priorities
- Budget decisions
- Professional development

Where are we already collecting cultural evidence—without naming it as such?

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Assessing Institutional Culture

3. Document Culture Through Consistent Practices

Examples of documentable practices

- Mission-informed hiring and onboarding
- Regular review of policies through a mission and equity lens
- Faculty and staff development aligned with mission and values
- Student input mechanisms tied to decision-making

Artifacts peer reviewers expect

- Agendas, minutes, and reports
- Training materials and participation records
- Policy review schedules and revisions
- Evidence of follow-through, not just intent

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Assessing Institutional Culture

4. Align Evidence to Mission and Outcomes

When documenting compliance...

- Explicitly connect evidence to:
 - Mission language
 - Institutional values
 - Stated outcomes
- Use narrative to explain:
 - Why evidence matters
 - How it reflects lived culture
 - What has changed as a result

Helpful self-study prompt:

How does this evidence demonstrate an educational community of belonging, integrity, or shared responsibility?

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Assessing Institutional Culture

5. Use Review and Reflection as Cultural Evidence

Document:

- Board self-assessments and action steps
- Institutional reflection on climate data
- Improvements made in response to feedback

Show:

- Learning over time
- Responsiveness to concerns
- Willingness to adjust practices

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Documenting Institutional Culture

How to Read the Evidence Table

- **Essential Element** → What the Standard requires
- **Cultural Indicator** → How culture becomes observable
- **Artifact** → What demonstrates compliance and practice

***Strong documentation shows alignment across all three—
not just activity.***

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Documenting Institutional Culture

Essential Element (EE)

Cultural Indicator (What You Look For)

Possible Artifacts (What You Provide)

1.5 – Institutional values and practices foster respect for diverse backgrounds and perspectives

Respect is embedded in daily institutional life

- Campus climate or engagement survey results
- Professional development agendas
- Policy review documentation
- Narrative examples of practices fostering respect

1.7 – Institutional values and practices foster an educational community of belonging and service

Students and employees experience a sense of belonging and service

- Student satisfaction survey data
- Co-curricular participation data
- Student focus group summaries
- Service-learning or community engagement reports

1.8 – Mission developed with broad institutional representation

Broad participation in mission formation and review

- Mission review committee membership lists
- Meeting agendas and minutes
- Campus-wide feedback summaries
- Board ratification documentation

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Documenting Institutional Culture

Essential Element (EE)

Cultural Indicator (What You Look For)

Possible Artifacts (What You Provide)

2.6 – Improvement plans developed with broad representation

Shared responsibility for institutional improvement

- Institutional improvement plan
- Evidence of stakeholder input
- Annual progress or monitoring reports
- Action steps tied to assessment data
- Employee engagement survey results
- Faculty/staff retention data
- Onboarding and formation materials
- Professional development participation records

4.7 – Mission-driven values and practices encourage job satisfaction and employee engagement

Employee engagement is aligned with mission and values

- Student services assessment reports
- Retention and persistence data
- Advising or mentoring program documentation
- Student reflections or testimonials

9.1 – Commitment to holistic student development and an educational community of belonging

Student services support holistic development and success

- Student government minutes
- Survey results with documented follow-up
- Policy or practice changes linked to student feedback

9.7 – Systems encouraging student input in institutional decision-making

Student voice informs institutional decisions

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ABHE Standards and Institutional Culture: Connecting the Dots

Institutional culture is the connective tissue between mission and outcomes, woven throughout the ABHE Standards and made visible through consistent practice.

Mission → Values → Practices → Outcomes

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