



Self-Study Guidelines

2024 Edition

**Transnational Association of
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The Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS) is recognized by the United States Department of Education (ED), the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), and International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) as a national accrediting agency for Christian postsecondary institutions that offer certificates, diplomas, associate, baccalaureate, and graduate degrees, including Distance Education.

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Introduction

Accreditation, through the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS), involves an on-going process designed to stimulate continuous self-assessment that allows an institution to analyze its functions, appraise its performances in accomplishing objectives, review its planning procedures, and discover means by which there may be institutional improvement.

Accreditation is simply a determination that an institution is providing the quality of education that society and an institution's peers have a right to expect. This is accomplished by comparing the performance of the institution against its mission and a set of established Standards.

This *Self-Study Guidelines* manual is intended to serve as a resource for institutions engaging in the Self-Study process with the end goal of producing a Self-Study Report, including supporting documentation, to be used by TRACS staff and an Evaluation Team in determining the institution's level of compliance with TRACS Accreditation Standards. This manual, along with the TRACS publication, *Compliance Resource Manual*, will guide institutions in this process.

Self-Study Defined

Self-Study is a process whereby an institution assesses and describes its current state relative to compliance with a set of expectations and subsequently improves the quality of its efforts in all areas. Self-assessment involves the identification of the institution's strengths and deficiencies and the delineation of the steps necessary to correct those deficiencies. Self-Study requires a commitment on the part of the institution to change, as necessary, rather than simply maintain the status quo.

Through the TRACS Self-Study process, an institution conducts a systematic and thorough examination of all its areas of operation in light of its stated mission and against an established set of TRACS Accreditation Standards. Such an evaluation allows an institution to determine the success it is having in accomplishing its self-established objectives through careful evaluation of input obtained from all internal and external sources.

Self-Study, as an evaluative process, should be ongoing. Active and continuous involvement in self-assessment reflects a commitment to the concept of providing students with a quality educational experience.

Self-Study Process

There is no single way to complete an institutional Self-Study. It may take from 6 to 18 months to complete the initial phase of assessments. At the end of that period, a working document, a Self-Study Report, will have been developed that facilitates further review. This document should be an accurate statement of the status of the institution at that point in time.

In order to complete the various tasks involved in the complex effort of conducting an institutional Self-Study, many larger institutions establish an overall steering committee and smaller subcommittees for each major area of operation. Smaller institutions may have a

single committee and assign a project director to be responsible for the overall self-study process.

Regardless of how the study is coordinated, if it is to be successful, it must be systematic. For this reason, a Self-Study Proposal is developed before initiation of the Self-Study Report. If properly developed, the Self-Study Proposal ensures that the Self-Study Report will be comprehensive.

The Self-Study Proposal should identify the various components to be assessed, indicate how data will be collected and measured, detail the review process, determine the decision making process, delineate areas of responsibility for each task, and layout the general timelines for the process.

A well-planned and successfully executed Self-Study process will involve the collection of data from individuals representing all internal and external constituent groups (administration, instructional staff, support staff, student body, and governing body-as well as alumni, graduates, employers, and other appropriate constituencies).

Self-Study and Accreditation

The accreditation process serves to assure the public that the institution's programs and services are at the high professional quality which is expected in American higher education. One of the most effective means by which this can be met is through the establishment of high standards and the assessment of institutions against those standards. This assessment is both internal to the institution (the Self-Study) and external (the involvement of a peer review process).

Thus, the Self-Study process is a self-generated evaluation of the institution by the institution, whereas the accreditation process involves external peer review through an Evaluation Team visit and Accreditation Commission review.

Steps in the Self-Study and Accreditation Processes

1. Submission of the Self-Study Proposal
2. Self-Study Staff Visit (in-person or virtually)
3. Organization of a Self-Study Team
4. Identification of Timelines and Budget
5. Assignment of Administrative Tasks
6. Institutional Self-Assessment
7. Preparation of the Self-Study Report
8. Approval of Self-Study Report by the institution's Chief Executive Officer and Board prior to its official submission
9. Submission of the Self-Study Report and supporting documentation
10. Review of the Self-Study Report by TRACS staff and Evaluation Team members
11. Evaluation Team visit
12. Institutional response to Evaluation Team determinations noted in the Evaluation Team Report via a TRACS initiated Compliance Report
13. Accreditation Commission consideration for Candidate, Accredited or Reaffirmation of Accredited status

NOTE: Detailed information regarding the steps in the various stages of the accreditation process are provided in the TRACS publication Steps Toward Accreditation. This publication is available on the TRACS website.

Self-Study Proposal

A Self-Study Proposal is completed and submitted via the TRACS portal for review and approval prior to initiating the official self-study process.

The various areas to be addressed in the Self-Study Proposal are as follows:

- Introduction and Brief History of the Institution
- Purpose of the Self-Study (obtaining Candidate, Accredited, or Reaffirmation status)
- Goals of the Self-Study
- Self-Study Implementation
- Self-Study Team
 - Team Member Names
 - Team Member Roles
 - Team Member Areas of Responsibility
- Self-Study Timeline
- Resources Needed
- Self-Study Budget

NOTE: The following fees are submitted via the TRACS portal as a part of the Self-Study Proposal submission process: (1) appropriate Change of Status Review fee, (2) Self-Study Staff Visit fee, and (3) Self-Study Staff Visit travel deposit. (see Fee Schedule) In the event the Self-Study Staff Visit is conducted remotely, the Self-Study Staff Visit travel deposit will remain as a credit on the institution's account and will be applied to future invoices.

Self-Study Staff Visit

Once the Self-Study Proposal has been submitted and approved by staff, a Self-Study Staff visit (either in-person or virtual) is scheduled. During this visit, TRACS staff and the institution will review and finalize the timetable for the remainder of the Self-Study process including the submission of the final Self-Study Report, the dates for the Evaluation Team visit, and the time of the institution's appearance before the Accrediting Commission for consideration of the status sought by the institution.

The following documents should be made available for staff review prior to or during the visit:

- Board Manual or Board Handbook
- Current Academic Catalog(s)
- Faculty Handbook
- Student Handbook
- Policies and Procedures Manual
- Strategic Plan
- Assessment Plan with sample instruments
- Samples of assessment results for the past year
- Board meeting minutes for the last 12 months
- Instructional Staff Listing (ISL) for most recent fall and spring terms

- Most recent budget

In addition, the following individuals will need to be available for a brief interview:

- Chief Executive Officer
- Chief Academic Officer
- Deans of Schools or Directors of Academic Programs or Program Heads
- Chief Financial Officer
- Director of Planning, Assessment, or Institutional Effectiveness
- Librarian
- Self-Study Director
- Registrar
- Director(s) of any Remote Locations, if applicable

The institution and/or TRACS staff may schedule other interviews as deemed appropriate.

Self-Study Team

Chief Executive Officer

Generally, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), which is most often the President of the institution, has final responsibility and authority in the Self-Study process. This requires that he or she be informed regarding the progress of the Self-Study process. For this reason, it is important that the individual selected by the CEO as the Self-Study Director should not only be an individual who can organize people within the campus community into a cohesive and focused team but should also be someone who possesses the authority within the institution to direct the activities of the Self-Study process. In order to ensure that the institution as a whole participates in the process, it is essential that the CEO not serve as the Self-Study Director.

It is also important for the CEO to ensure that all members of the various committees are trained in the accreditation process, including a clear understanding of the TRACS Standards for the area(s) for which they are responsible.

The CEO should provide general direction to the Self-Study committee with regard to the timelines for the process and ensure that the Self-Study Report is completed in time for review and approval by the Board. In addition, the CEO is responsible to see that the Self-Study Report is submitted in time to meet the dates established for the materials to be reviewed by the members of the Evaluation Team and that the institutional response to the Evaluation Team Report is completed before the institution's appearance before the Accreditation Commission.

The CEO should work with the financial team well in advance of the Self-Study process to assure that the financial resources are available to complete the study.

It is the responsibility of the CEO to ensure that the Self-Study Report is both accurate and comprehensive.

After the Self-Study committee has completed the Self-Study Report, the CEO will submit the Self-Study Report to the institution's Board for approval and then see to it that the Self-Study Report is submitted via the TRACS portal.

Finally, the CEO will work with the TRACS office to make the arrangements required for the Evaluation Team visit, host the Evaluation Team, respond to the draft Evaluation Team Report, and appear before the Accreditation Commission with other leadership team members.

Self-Study Director

The role of the Self-Study Director is critical to the institutional self-evaluation which takes place during this process. The Self-Study Director works closely with the CEO and takes the primary lead in the selection of the Steering Committee (if applicable), gives direction to the Self-Study team, and keeps the process on a prescribed timeline.

Finally, the Self-Study Director leads the process of preparing the Self-Study Report and submits the draft report to the CEO for submission to the institution's Board for approval.

Editor

One important question that institutions should ask early in the self-study process is, "Do we need to have an editor for the process?" The answer to this question will vary from institution to institution. The challenge that is addressed by the use of an editor is that each sub-committee is drafting narratives and coordinating supporting documents for their assigned area(s). An editor helps to establish an appropriate cohesive style for the Self-Study Report and supporting documents and assures that as the various sections are prepared, the various sections flow together smoothly. Many times, the editor will proofread the narratives and supporting documents review them with the Self-Study Director and prepare the final draft of the Self-Study Report.

The Self-Study Director often serves as the editor.

If a Steering Committee and Sub-Committees are utilized in the self-study process, the following guidelines may prove helpful.

Steering Committee

Each steering committee member will act as Chair of a sub-committee. The Steering Committee will:

- Direct the actions necessary to complete the Self-Study of the institution relative to the institutional mission and each of the TRACS Standards
- Determine the timeline and the budget necessary to complete the Self-Study process
- Identify individuals within the institution who are responsible for each area of the Self-Study and the means of determining that the tasks assigned have been completed
- Complete a first draft of the Self-Study Report based on input from the sub-committees, including plans for coming into compliance for any Standard with which the institution's Self-Study determines non-compliance
- Coordinate the documentation to be submitted establishing compliance with the TRACS Standards

- Edit the first draft narrative along with the documents to be submitted and plans for coming into compliance based on input of the editor and any modifications determined on the second read
- Compile the final draft of the Self-Study Report
- Forward the Self-Study Report to the CEO

Sub-Committees

- Depending on the size of the institution, a subcommittee may be responsible for more than one of the areas of review.
- The sub-committees review assessment data for each of the areas assigned to their committee.
- The sub-committees identify and review all documents necessary to determine compliance with the TRACS Standards pertaining to their area of review.
- The sub-committees conduct additional research and review as requested by the Steering Committee.
- The sub-committees prepare a narrative of the institution's compliance with the TRACS Standards pertaining to their area of review to be submitted to the Steering Committee.
- The sub-committees identify the documents to be submitted to TRACS which verify compliance with the TRACS Standards pertaining to their area of review.
- The subcommittees determine, based on the review for their area, whether the institution is in compliance with the TRACS Standards for that area.
- The subcommittees recommend to the Steering Committee the plans for coming into compliance for any Standard with which they determine the institution is not in compliance.

Self-Study Timeline

The CEO and Self-Study Director will establish a general timeline for the various activities involved in the self-study process. A template for the Self-Study timeline is provided on the Self-Study Proposal document on the TRACS portal. It is understood that some of the activities listed on the timeline may not be applicable to all institution depending on the structure of the institution's Self-Study team.

Self-Study Budget

Another area that is addressed in the Self-Study Proposal document on the TRACS portal is a projected budget for the costs associated with the self-study process. Self-study budget considerations should include such things as the costs associated with the Self-Study Staff visit, the Evaluation Team visit, the institution's appearance before the Accreditation Commission, etc. Self-study budget considerations should be reflected in the institution's general budget.

Self-Study Report

The introduction section of the Self-Study Report contains the following:

1. Purpose of Self-Study - Provide a general introduction to the institution including the status being sought (Candidate Status, Accredited Status, Reaffirmation), the pertinent institutional characteristics such as types of programs offered, type of calendar system, enrollment figures, and any church affiliations (if any), etc.

2. History of the Institution - Provide a narrative history of the institution highlighting key events that provide a good historical perspective of the institution.
3. Relationship with TRACS - Provide a narrative of the institution's relationship with TRACS, such as when applied, when application approved, when received (or when appearing to receive) Candidate Status, Accredited Status or Reaffirmation. Include the initial contact with TRACS, the approval of the application, and any applicable dates for recognition for candidacy, accreditation or reaffirmation.
4. Response to the previous Evaluation Team Report and/or other accrediting agency actions. - The institution should provide a detailed narrative on the response and date of compliance with the previous TRACS Evaluation Team visit determinations and/or any steps that have been taken by the institution in response to any actions taken by any other accrediting agency.

Each subsequent section of the Self Study Report requires the institution to write a compliance narrative regarding the institution's compliance with the various TRACS Standards. Documents supporting the compliance narratives will be downloaded to the TRACS portal as a part of this process. The TRACS publication, *Compliance Resource Manual* provides guidance to institutions concerning the types of documentation that might be submitted to support the compliance narratives.

The institution's CEO and Board must review and approve the Self-Study Report prior to its submission. Any questions raised by the CEO, or the Board should be forwarded to the Self-Study Director for clarification. The Board minutes indicating the approval of the Self-Study Report should be included with the Self-Study Report as supporting documentation to the "Purpose of the Self-Study" narrative in the introduction section.

Once the Self-Study Report has been submitted, the TRACS staff representative assigned to the institution will review the Self-Study Report and supporting documents and, as appropriate, will make suggestions for improvement. Once the Self-Study Report is approved by TRACS staff, the members of the Evaluation Team are granted access to the Self-Study and supporting documentation via the TRACS portal. Some team members may request a printed copy of certain portions of the Self-Study Report or supporting documentation. If such requests are made, the institution will be informed and is responsible to act on such requests. The required Evaluation Team visit deposit is submitted via the TRACS portal as a part of the Self-Study Report submission process.

Evaluation Team Visit

Information concerning the details and necessary preparations to be undertaken by the institution for hosting the Evaluation Team visit will be provided to the host institution's CEO prior to the visit. Additional information concerning the responsibilities of the various parties involved in the Evaluation Team visit are also detailed in the TRACS publication, *Evaluation Team Procedures Manual*. This document is provided to the institution prior to the visit.

Institutions utilizing Distance Education exclusively for delivery of instruction should note the following guidelines for hosting the Evaluation Team:

1. If the institution's facilities are insufficient to allow the Evaluation Team to function properly, the institution is required to secure adequate space for the team to use during the on-site visit.
2. The institution is required to have the following personnel available in-person during the on-site visit: CEO, CAO, CFO, Distance Education Director, and Institutional Effectiveness/Assessment Director. Others may participate virtually, if necessary.

Accreditation Commission Appearance

The TRACS Accreditation Commission meets twice each year, in April and in October/November, to review materials relevant to their deliberations for consideration of granting status. The items that the Accreditation Commission reviews to inform its decision regarding the granting of a particular status include: the institution's Self-Study Report and supporting documents, the Evaluation Team Report, the Evaluation Team's confidential recommendation concerning the granting of the specified status, the institution's Compliance Report containing responses to any Findings and Recommendations noted in the Evaluation Team Report, the TRACS staff recommendation concerning the granting of the specified status, the assigned Accreditation Commission reader's recommendation(s) concerning the granting of the specified status, and the institution's verbal responses to any questions raised during its appearance before the Accreditation Commission. Institutions are required to send at least one representative, usually the CEO/President to appear before the Accreditation Commission when its status is under consideration.