
Policy on Preaccreditation

June 2025

Background

The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) accredits institutions in the United States, its territories and affiliates, with a primary mission of granting associate degrees; institutions accredited by ACCJC may also award certificates and other credentials, including bachelor's degrees, if those credentials are within the institution's mission and authorized by their governmental authorities. ACCJC may also accredit non-domestic institutions, which have as a primary mission the granting of associate degrees.

The purpose of this policy is to establish the parameters for qualified institutions interested in seeking accreditation with the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACCJC). An institution must first demonstrate that it meets all of the Eligibility Requirements in order to be eligible to apply for Candidacy status (also referenced as "preaccreditation" in federal regulations).

Definitions and Policy Elements

A. Eligibility

Eligibility or eligible refers to a determination by ACCJC that an institution meets the Commission's Eligibility Requirements and may apply for Candidacy status. Eligibility is not preaccreditation; rather it is a pre-condition for preaccreditation. The term eligibility may also refer to the process through which an institution demonstrates that it complies with Eligibility Requirements.

The Commission's Eligibility Requirements represent the minimum qualifications for institutions seeking an accredited status with ACCJC. Institutions wishing to pursue ACCJC accreditation must demonstrate their eligibility to apply for Candidacy status from the Commission. The process for demonstrating eligibility assures that interested institutions fall within ACCJC's scope of authority and federal recognition, and allows for an assessment of the degree to which the institution complies with all ACCJC Eligibility Requirements (ERs) for Accreditation.

Eligibility is not a formal affiliation with the Commission. An eligible institution must not make any representation which claims or implies any relationship or standing with ACCJC, even as it seeks Candidacy status. ACCJC does not list eligible institutions in its directory of member institutions.

Institutions may maintain eligibility for up to three years as they seek Candidacy. If the institution has not achieved Candidacy status within this time, its eligibility lapses. If an eligible institution changes its state of incorporation, its mission, or ownership or control during this three-year period, eligibility may be voided, necessitating a new eligibility application.

B. Candidacy Status (Preaccreditation)

Preaccreditation is a term defined in federal regulations as: “the status of accreditation and public recognition that a nationally recognized accrediting agency grants to an institution or program for a limited period of time that signifies the agency has determined that the institution or program is progressing toward full accreditation and is likely to attain full accreditation before the expiration of that limited period of time (sometimes referred to as “candidacy”).”¹

ACCJC uses the term Candidacy in its policies and manuals to reflect the status and state of preaccreditation. ACCJC policies and procedures related to Candidacy are subject to federal regulations pertaining to preaccreditation.

Candidacy refers to a status granted by ACCJC, or to the process through which institutions attain this status. ACCJC grants Candidacy status to eligible institutions that demonstrate the ability to meet all the Accreditation Standards and Commission policies, or to fully meet them within the two-year candidate period.

The Commission only awards Candidacy to those institutions it determines are likely to be successful in obtaining accreditation and sustaining compliance with the Commission’s Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Policies (hereafter referred to as the Commission’s Standards).² Therefore, ACCJC requires institutions to demonstrate eligibility through a rigorous screening and application process before they may apply for Candidacy status.

In addition, because federal regulations require that institutions with Candidacy status have a teach-out plan, institutions applying for Candidacy must submit the teach-out plan at the time of their comprehensive review in accordance with the Commission *Policy on Teach-Out Plans and Agreements*.³

Candidacy status represents a formal association with ACCJC. Institutions with this designation are listed in the ACCJC directory as member institutions, and an institution must identify itself to the public in accordance with the Commission’s *Policy on Represented Status*.

All credits and degrees earned and issued by an institution or program holding Candidacy status are considered by the US Department of Education to be from an accredited institution or program.⁴

In accordance with the Commission’s *Policy on Commission Actions on Institutions*, ACCJC grants Candidacy Status for a two-year period, and if conditions warrant, ACCJC can extend Candidacy for a maximum of four years. If the Candidacy period lapses or is withdrawn, the institution may not reapply for Candidacy for at least two years and must reestablish its eligibility before reapplying.

In accordance with Commission’s *Policy on Institutional Appeals*, an institution may file a request for an appeal if the Commission takes an adverse action to deny or withdraw Candidacy.

¹ § 600.2

² § 602.16; § 602.23 (f)(1)(i)

³ § 602.23 (f)(1)(ii)

⁴ § 602.23 (f)(2)

If ACCJC denies initial accreditation to an institution that has been previously granted Candidacy status, the institution may maintain Candidacy status for currently enrolled students until the institution has had a reasonable time to complete the activities in its teach-out plan to assist students in transferring or completing their programs. This extension of Candidacy status shall last for no more than 120 days unless approved by the agency for good cause.⁵

The Commission may not move an accredited institution to Candidacy status unless, following the loss of accreditation, the institution applies for initial accreditation and is awarded Candidacy status under the new application. Institutions that participated in the Title IV, HEA programs before the loss of accreditation are subject to the requirements of 34 CFR § 600.11(c).⁶

Institutions with Candidacy status may apply for initial accreditation following the process in the ACCJC's guides and manuals. Initial Accreditation is granted if the institution demonstrates that it is in compliance with the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies.

Commission Review of Eligibility and Candidacy Applications

ACCJC's guides and manuals provide instruction and description on the requirements for the application process, as well as the Commission review procedures for applicants seeking Eligibility, Candidacy, and Initial Accreditation. Institutions will be notified in writing of decisions affecting their eligibility or Candidacy status.

The Commission shall consider the decisions of States and other accrediting agencies per federal regulations § 602.28 when considering applications for Eligibility or Candidacy. In accordance with *the Commission's Policy on Relations with Federal, State, and Other Accrediting Agencies*, adverse action by another institutional accrediting agency may be sufficient grounds to deny an Eligibility or Candidacy application. Title IV participating institutions that are seeking to change primary accrediting agencies or are adding multiple accrediting agencies must obtain the Department of Education's approval prior to submitting an application in support of Candidacy.⁷

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⁵ § 602.23 (f)(1)(iii)

⁶ § 602.23 (f)(1)(iv)

⁷ <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/dear-colleague-letters/2025-04-30/changes-approval-process-changing-accrediting-agencies>