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### Training for HLC Peer Reviews

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## Training for HLC Peer Reviews

December 4, 2018 | By Yuerong Sweetland  
Assessment/Evaluation

In this article, I would like to share my experiences from the HLC (Higher Learning Commission) Peer Review training that I completed in October 2017.

HLC, founded in 1895, currently accredits about 1,000 post-secondary institutions in the 19 states in the North Central region of the U.S. Franklin University, where I serve as the Director of Assessment, is one of the institutions accredited by HLC. It was a great honor for me to be invited to join HLC's Peer Corps. As a Peer Corps reviewer, my essential responsibility is to contribute to the HLC mission of "serving the common good by assuring and advancing the quality of higher learning" (HLC, 2018). At the same time, it provides a unique opportunity for me to broaden and deepen my experiences as a higher education professional through the institutional reviews that I will be conducting.

All peer reviewers must participate in a comprehensive training program after being accepted into the HLC Peer Corps. As a new reviewer, I eagerly seized the opportunity to engage in the HLC's 2.5-day training program.

The training consisted of presentations from HLC staff and experienced peer reviewers as well as breakout case study discussions about a fictional university named Neverland University. The presentations covered multiple aspects of the institutional review process, such as creating evidence statements on the evaluation criteria and interpreting financial statements. What was especially interesting to me was a mock open forum created by HLC staff and experienced reviewers. This mock forum was both enlightening and entertaining! It highlighted some of the do's and don'ts in conducting open forums while on accreditation visits.

In addition to the presentations and mock open forum, trainees were engaged in case study discussions and hands-on activities. In groups of 4-6 individuals, we reviewed the assurance argument for Neverland University and practiced writing evidence statements on all five HLC criteria. The criteria address and measure an institution's mission, integrity, teaching and learning, resources, and planning and institutional effectiveness.

I was not new to accreditation. Working in assessment at Franklin University, I have had opportunities to participate in two major HLC site visits that led to our reauthorization and reaccreditation. Furthermore, I have been involved in multiple change requests that have been submitted to HLC (e.g., the addition of doctoral programs). This HLC training program further enhanced my perspectives on accreditation. I would like to share three of them here:

(1) A strong focus on student learning that includes every aspect of a student's experience at an institution, from recruitment and admission to graduation, from the depth, breadth, currency and relevancy of learning to curricular and co-curricular offerings.

(2) A continuous improvement culture, which emphasizes assessing and using assessment findings to inform continuous improvement strategies. Note that assessment here does not only pertain to student learning outcomes but to overall institutional effectiveness. Institutions need to conduct regular program reviews and seek external judgement, advice or benchmarks in assessments.

(3) A heavy emphasis on evidence. Institutions must have evidence to support their claims and statements. In fact, we first watched an entire presentation on constructing evidence statement; afterwards, we worked in our small groups to write and discuss evidence statements for the case of Neverland University, which we later presented.

These are my major personal takeaways and do not represent the full range of content covered during the training. Now that I have completed this training, I cannot wait for my first site visit as a reviewer!

### **References**

HLC (2018). retrieved November 26, 2018 from <https://www.hlcommission.org/About-HLC/about-hlc.html>