



## **Middle States Commission on Higher Education**

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### **Frequently Asked Questions About Penn State's Accreditation**

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***On August 6, 2012, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education Warned The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) that its accreditation is in jeopardy because of a lack of evidence that the University is in compliance with two of the Commission's Requirements of Affiliation and two of the Commission's Accreditation Standards. Penn State remains accredited while it is on Warning.***

#### **What is the Middle States Commission on Higher Education?**

The Commission is a non-governmental, voluntary membership association that promotes educational excellence across institutions with diverse missions, student populations, and resources. It examines each institution as a whole, rather than specific programs within institutions. The Commission consists of 26 individuals, representing the various types of institutions within the Middle States membership, and includes several representatives of the public.

#### **What authority does the Commission have to judge colleges and universities?**

The Commission is recognized by the United States Secretary of Education to accredit degree-granting colleges and universities in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The Commission also accredits select institutions that are based in other countries. Middle States currently accredits nearly 525 colleges and universities, including large public and private universities, numerous community colleges, private liberal arts colleges, church-related seminaries, several federally-sponsored institutions, and a number of private, for-profit institutions.

#### **Is Middle States accreditation voluntary?**

Accreditation by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, and thus membership, is voluntary. Although MSCHE accreditation can provide eligibility for federal student aid, not all member institutions elect to use MSCHE accreditation for that purpose. Many institutions go beyond their institutional accreditation by Middle States and seek programmatic accreditation through specialized accreditors. Examples of programmatic accreditors include the National League of Nursing, the American Bar Association, the Accrediting Board for Engineering Technology (ABET), and the Liaison Committee for Medical Education.

Prior to being considered for accreditation and later to maintain their accreditation, all Middle States institutions agree to comply with the Commission's 10 Requirements of Affiliation and 14 Accreditation Standards. The Requirements of Affiliation and Accreditation Standards cover academic areas as well as all other aspects of the institution. Middle States expects every one of its accredited institutions to comply with the Requirements of Affiliation and Accreditation Standards within the context of their institutional mission, regardless of the institution's size.

### **What does a Warning really mean?**

The Commission places an institution on Warning when, in the Commission's judgment, the institution is not in compliance with one or more of the Commission's Requirements of Affiliation and Accreditation Standards. When the Commission warns an institution, it believes that, although the institution is out of compliance, the institution has the capacity both to make appropriate improvements within a reasonable period and to sustain itself in the long term. A follow-up report, called a monitoring report, is required to demonstrate that the institution has made appropriate improvements to bring itself into compliance. A small team visit also is conducted to verify institutional status and progress. ***A warning does not indicate that the loss of an institution's accreditation is imminent.***

Two national leaders in the field of higher education were recently quoted in a Philadelphia Inquirer article about Penn State's accreditation situation. Dr. Judith Eaton, President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), noted, "Warnings from an accrediting organization to an institution it accredits are serious and the issues that are the basis for the warning must be addressed. With that said, it would be extraordinary for a university of the stature and strength of Penn State to lose its accreditation." Molly Corbett Broad, President of the American Council of Education, commented, "It's a great university. Its academic quality is superb. If I were a mother of a youngster who had been accepted to Penn State, there is nothing in this set of events that would cause me to have second thoughts about the choice of school."

### **What does the Warning mean for current students?**

The Warning should have no impact on Penn State students, especially since the loss of accreditation is unlikely. Most institutions that are placed on Warning by the Commission typically return to compliance within 6-18 months. The Commission's goal when it places an institution on Warning is to help it meet the Requirements and Standards established by the institutions within the higher education community. It is not the Commission's intent to punish institutions or their students, but it is the Commission's obligation to ensure that the institution has the capacity to meet its goals and the expectations of the constituents it serves.

Under federal regulations, once an institution is placed on Warning by its accreditor, it has a maximum of two years from the date of the Warning to return to compliance.

Special note: Pennsylvania College of Technology in Williamsport, PA, although part of Penn State, is separately accredited by Middle States and is not affected by the Warning. The accreditation Warning has no impact on Pennsylvania College of Technology or its students.

### **What does the Warning mean for alumni and their degrees?**

The Warning should have no impact on alumni or the degrees they have earned from Penn State. In the unlikely event that the University lost its accreditation, under federal regulations any credits and degrees earned up until the last effective date of accreditation will be considered as having been earned at an accredited institution. Further, under Middle States standards, an institution may not base decisions on the acceptance of transfer credit exclusively on the accreditation status of a student's previous institution.

### **Is Penn State being treated fairly?**

It is the Commission's obligation to act when it lacks evidence of compliance with the Commission's Requirements of Affiliation or Accreditation Standards. Within the context of their individual missions, the Commission expects each of its accredited institutions to comply with all 10 Requirements and the 14 Standards. During the past two years the Commission issued Warnings to 24 institutions and removed Warnings from 19 institutions. As noted above, institutions typically take 6-18 months to return to compliance. Some are able to do so in a shorter period of time, while a few take longer. Under federal regulations, once an accreditor places an institution on Warning, the institution has a maximum of two years to return to compliance.

### **What are the Requirements of Affiliation and Accreditation Standards?**

The Requirements of Affiliation define conditions that must be met in order for institutions of higher education to be eligible for Middle States accreditation. The 14 Accreditation Standards are divided into two areas—Institutional Context, which addresses mission, planning, financial and organizational resources, governance, integrity, etc., and Educational Effectiveness, which covers all aspects of the educational offerings. The Requirements and Standards can be viewed at [www.msche.org/publications/CHX-2011-WEB.pdf](http://www.msche.org/publications/CHX-2011-WEB.pdf).

### **Where do the Requirements and Standards Come From?**

The 10 Requirements of Affiliation and 14 Accreditation Standards were developed and approved by the accredited institutions that comprise the Middle States membership. The current Accreditation Standards came into effect in 2002 and underwent minor revisions in 2006.

### **What is the Commission's most recent action involving Penn State, and what does it really mean?**

Since the Commission first learned of the various investigations into the University's conduct regarding the Sandusky scandal, it has been in regular contact with University officials. While receiving regular reports from the University, the Commission reserved judgment. After review of the special investigative counsel's report (Freeh Report) and the binding Consent Decree imposed by the NCAA, and the University's apparent acceptance of both, the Commission determined there was insufficient evidence that Penn State is in compliance with Requirements of Affiliation 5 and 9 and Accreditation Standards 4 and 6.

- **Requirement of Affiliation 5** requires that an institution comply with all applicable federal and state policies, regulations, and requirements.
- **Requirement of Affiliation 9** requires that Middle States-accredited institutions have a governing body with responsibility for the quality and integrity of the institution, for ensuring that the institution's mission is being carried out, and for making freely available to the Commission accurate, fair, and complete information on all aspects of the institution and its operations.
- **Accreditation Standard 4: Leadership and Governance** requires the institution's governing body to assure institutional integrity and requires the body to certify to the Commission that the institution is in compliance with the Requirements of Affiliation and Accreditation Standards.

- **Accreditation Standard 6: Integrity** requires that in the conduct of its programs and activities involving the public and the constituencies it serves, the institution demonstrated adherence to ethical standards and its own stated policies.

**Many of the investigations into Penn State pertain to the actions of individuals who were associated with the football program. What does this action have to do with football?**

The Commission's actions are not directly related to the football program. They concern actions and inactions within the institution's governance and leadership and the impact of the NCAA sanctions.

**Why should the actions of the football program impact the accreditation of the institution and its academic programs?**

As noted above, Middle States accreditation is not limited to academics. It encompasses all aspects of the institution. The 10 Requirements of Affiliation and the 14 Accreditation Standards, as well as the accreditation process, include the review of mission, strategic and financial planning, institutional resources, institutional governance and administration, student services, integrity, educational offerings, general education, institutional assessment, assessment of student learning, and more.

An institution's accreditation can be affected by non-compliance with one or more of any of the Requirements of Affiliation or Accreditation Standards.

**What are the next steps involving Penn State's accreditation?**

The University will submit a "monitoring report" to the Commission on or before September 30, 2012. This report will document steps that have been taken and are planned to ensure the institution's full compliance with Requirements of Affiliation 5 and 9 as well as Accreditation Standards 4 and 6. In addition, the Commission has requested that the monitoring report also address Accreditation Standard 3 (Institutional Resources) with regard to Penn State's capacity and plans for addressing financial obligations. Following receipt of the monitoring report, a small team of peer evaluators will visit the University to verify the contents of the report. The team will then submit a report to the Commission's Committee on Follow-up Activities on the institution's status with regard to the Commission's Requirements of Affiliation and Accreditation Standards. The Committee will review the monitoring report, the team report, and any response by the University leadership to the team report, and will then make recommendations regarding the University's accreditation status to the full Commission.

**How can I see the specific wording of the Middle States Warning action regarding Penn State?**

Click on [http://www.msche.org/institutions\\_sas\\_pds.asp?idInstitution=351](http://www.msche.org/institutions_sas_pds.asp?idInstitution=351).

**How can I learn more about the Middle States Commission on Higher Education?**

Visit [www.msche.org](http://www.msche.org). This website contains Commission policies, publications, accreditation resources, contact information, and much more. Under the "About Us" button, there is a link to Frequently Asked Questions about Middle States and accreditation.

**How can I learn more about accreditation in general?**

The website of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation ([www.chea.org](http://www.chea.org)) contains resources on accreditation, descriptions of how accreditation works; lists of regional, national, and specialized accreditors; and information about degree mills and accreditation mills.

**How can I learn more about federal regulations pertaining to accreditation?**

Visit the website of the United States Department of Education: [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov).