

Middle States Accreditation FAQ's

1. *What is "Middle States"?* "Middle States" is shorthand for the [Middle States Commission on Higher Education](#) (MSCHE), an institutional accreditor recognized by the U.S. [Department of Education](#). MSCHE is a non-governmental membership association that accredits over 500 colleges & universities. Prior to July 2020, MSCHE was referred to as a "regional" accreditor. However, federal regulatory changes in that year eliminated the traditional geographical boundaries that limited MSCHE accreditation to institutions within that specified region. Middle States accredits institutions largely within the middle Atlantic region, but also in other states, territories, and globally.
2. *What is accreditation?* Accreditation is a process designed to provide assurance to the public that an educational, degree granting institution meets acceptable levels of performance on established standards, requirements, and policies. Although voluntary practice, holding institutional accreditation by a federally recognized accreditor is a requirement for higher education institutions seeking to access federal student financial aid and other funding under Title IV of the Higher Education Act. Accreditation is also a typical prerequisite for transfer of academic credit between institutions.
3. *How long has The University of Scranton been accredited?* The University has held accreditation through Middle States since 1927. Our accreditation was most recently reaffirmed in 2019.
4. *Why is accreditation important?* In addition to being an indicator of institutional quality, maintaining institutional accreditation is necessary for institutions to gain access to Title IV federal financial aid funding. Title IV is part of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (as amended), the law that regulates many aspects of U.S. higher education activities. A number of the practices and policies in place with MSCHE flow from this legislation.

Institutional accreditation is also often a baseline criterion for transferring credit from one institution to another. Many employers look for degrees from accredited institutions, and some will only offer educational benefits to employees if they are seeking education through an accredited institution. State governments may require that an institution is accredited in order for students to access state funds, and some require that students sitting for certain placement or credentialing examinations are coming from accredited institutions.

In addition to institutional accreditation through Middle States, a number of academic programs at the University maintain [disciplinary accreditation](#) at the program level. These are important markers of program quality and rigor. Information about the disciplinary accreditations held by University programs is available in the

University catalog, individual program web sites, and the University's Consumer Information web page. For more information about these accreditations, their cycles, standards, and processes, contact the Dean's Office within each college.

5. *What is the accreditation process? How do we achieve accreditation, and how do we maintain it?*

Once an institution achieves initial accreditation through a robust candidacy process, accreditation status is determined at key points in the accreditation cycle. The MSCHE accreditation process includes institutional self-reflection on how it meets these obligations; peer review; and evaluation of compliance with several federal and other regulatory elements, as part of a process called Self-Study that occurs every eight years. However, there are a number of other milestones in the accreditation cycle, and institutions may be subject to additional accreditation reviews, annual reporting, and sometimes through other interim progress reports as required by the accreditor outside of the standard cycle.

Self-Study: Within Middle States, institutions engage in self-study every eight years¹. Self-study is a significant endeavor, in which institutions conduct detailed self-assessment and document via evidence how and how well they comply with accreditation standards and include recommendations for self-improvement. The culminating report and evidence are then reviewed by a team of peer reviewers from other institutions, who verify these findings and may issue recommendations of their own. The Middle States Commission reviews both the institution's and team's reports & resulting findings and then determines the institution's accreditation action and status. The self-study process also includes a parallel review of the institution's compliance with a set of accreditation-relevant federal regulations.

Annual Institutional Update: Each year, the institution submits an Annual Institutional Update report to MSCHE. This report includes a variety of data about the institution, including enrollment, outcomes, and financial performance. These data are reviewed by MSCHE staff to identify any issues of concern and potential follow up actions.

Substantive Change Requests and Reporting: In addition to these regular milestones, when and if an institution wishes to make certain changes that differ from what is currently approved by the accreditor – for example, adding certain types of new programs, degree levels, modes of delivery, or new sites or locations for the delivery of existing programs - they may be required to complete a proposal for Substantive Change. These proposals serve as the means through which institutions demonstrate the quality of these planned offerings and ensure that they are covered under the

¹ In December 2016, member institutions voted affirmatively on a measure that would change the accreditation cycle from ten years to eight, and made significant adjustments to the accreditation process. Institutions cycle into this new process at the time of their next self-study.

scope of the institution's accreditation. *Middle States must approve proposals prior to the launch of the program or initiative.*

Some type of changes may not require prior approval, but instead prompt required notification to the Commission prior to when they occur.

Policies and Procedures: In addition to these activities, institutions must comply with a number of policies that define good practice shared by member institutions and align their activities with federal standards and definitions, such as transfer of credit, contractual arrangements for educational services, and student identity verification. Verification of these can happen through different levels or reporting, most robustly during the self-study.

Other Actions and/or Reporting: Commission staff also monitor institutions to identify any special circumstances that may require additional evaluation or reporting.

6. *What is self-study?* Self-study is the foundation of Middle States accreditation, and peer-review is its cornerstone. The self-study process gathers persons from across the college or university to prepare a self-study report. Within this document (about a hundred pages) institutions engage in intensive self-reflection, examining and evaluating their programs, services, and operations. The report articulates the institutions' strengths and ability to meet – through documented evidence – MSCHE standards in the context of the institution's mission and goals. In addition to affirming compliance with these standards, institutions make recommendations for self-improvement. Once the self-study report has been reviewed and affirmed by the institution and its leadership, it is submitted to the Middle States Commission.

Also submitted a separate compliance report, documenting those policies and procedures in place that address selected requirements of affiliation and accreditation-relevant federal legislation.

The Self-Study Report is reviewed by a team of peer reviewers selected by MSCHE: faculty, staff, and administrators from other MSCHE member institutions who have expertise in one or more subject areas. This peer team visits the campus about six weeks after receiving the report and engage in discussions with members of the university community to consider and validate its findings. The team then prepares a Peer Review Report of its own, which summarizes its key findings related to the institution's compliance with MSCHE standards, and may make recommendations or suggestions of its own to the institution.

The Middle States Commission then reviews this Peer Review Report, a confidential brief prepared by the chair of the visiting team, and the institution's own Self-Study and Compliance reports. At this time the institution's accreditation status is determined. The commission may require the institution to engage in follow up reporting on one or more standards if additional work is needed.

7. *What are the Middle States Standards?* In 2023, Middle States updated its *Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation*.

There are seven standards:

- Standard 1: Mission & Goals
- Standard 2: Ethics & Integrity
- Standard 3: Design and Delivery of the Student Learning Experience
- Standard 4: Support of the Student Experience
- Standard 5: Educational Effectiveness Assessment
- Standard 6: Planning, Resources & Institutional Improvement
- Standard 7: Governance, Leadership & Administration

Within each standard are a number of criteria intended to guide the institution in realizing its mission and goals.

As part of revision, the previous fifteen ***Requirements of Affiliation*** were condensed to four. Other *Requirements* were embedded within relevant Standards for Accreditation.

View the full Standards document, and learn about the revision process, [here](#).

8. *Who manages all of this?*

Within Middle States, the President of the institution is its official member. However, the President assigns an Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO) to serve as the official contact for the institution and person responsible for managing accreditation activities on its behalf. In addition to supervising and managing the self-study process, the ALO is responsible for preparing and submitting official documents and correspondence, such as Substantive Change applications, notifications, and other reports. The ALO manages day-to-day accreditation operations and leading processes to assure that compliance with Middle States standards and policies are addressed through necessary channels. The ALO works closely with the institution's assigned Middle States staff Vice President to navigate matters of relevance to the institution's accreditation.

The University of Scranton's ALO is Ms. Kathryn Yerkes, Assistant Provost for Planning & Institutional Effectiveness. Kate has served in this role since 2013 and is an experienced peer reviewer.

Contact Kate for more information, questions about Middle States accreditation, or the University's status, via email at: Kathryn.yerkes@scranton.edu.

Visit the MSCHE web site for more information about these and other accreditation topics: <https://www.msche.org/>