

## OPEN PATHWAY

The Open Pathway follows a 10-year cycle, with an Assurance Review in Year 4 and a comprehensive evaluation in Year 10. The Open Pathway also includes a separate improvement component, the Quality Initiative, that affords institutions the opportunity to pursue improvement projects that meet their current needs and aspirations.

### ASSURANCE REVIEW

In Year 4, institutions complete Assurance Reviews to ensure they are continuing to meet the Criteria for Accreditation. The institution submits an Assurance Filing that demonstrates the institution is in compliance with the Criteria and has pursued institutional improvement efforts. A peer review team evaluates these materials and makes a recommendation to the Institutional Actions Council on whether the institution is eligible to continue on the Open Pathway if monitoring is required. Year 4 Assurance Reviews do not typically include an on-site visit, unless requested by the peer review team.

Note: HLC provides guidance for preparing institutional materials and conducting the Assurance Review at [hlcommission.org/open](http://hlcommission.org/open).

### QUALITY INITIATIVE

Between Years 5 and 9, institutions on the Open Pathway undertake a Quality Initiative. The Quality Initiative may be designed to begin and be completed during this time, or an institution may continue a project that is already in progress or achieve a key milestone in the work of a longer initiative.

Institutions submit a proposal for the project, which is reviewed and approved by a panel of peer reviewers. At the end of the Quality Initiative period, institutions then submit a report on the results of the project. Peer reviewers evaluate the report and determine whether the institution has made a genuine effort to achieve the goals of the Quality Initiative. In Year 10, this recommendation is sent to the Institutional Actions Council along with the results of the institution's Reaffirmation of Accreditation in order to determine its continued eligibility to choose its pathway. Quality Initiative samples are available at [qi.hlcommission.org](http://qi.hlcommission.org).

### Demonstrating and Recognizing “Genuine Effort”

Quality Initiatives are formalized by a peer review evaluation of the institution's proposal and report. The proposal guidelines establish the criteria for peer reviewers in evaluating the institution's project. These include:

1. An evaluation of the project's scope and significance (for example, as demonstrated by its alignment with the institution's mission; or its connection to the campus's Strategic Plans; or in relation to its relevance or timeliness for the institution);
2. A clear expression of the purpose of the project (for example, as demonstrated by clearly set and explicit goals; the identification of important milestones; the presence of effective processes to evaluate the outcomes);
3. Evidence of the institution's commitment and capacity (for example, by the presence of key personnel and the appropriate allocation of resources);
4. An appropriate timeline that is consistent with the project's goals, aligned with the institution's other priorities, and reasonable within existing constraints.

The Quality Initiative Report documents how the institution has pursued its activities, allocated its resources, and collected sufficient evidence to demonstrate its effort to accomplish the goals outlined in its Quality Initiative proposal. Peer reviewers evaluate the report in relation to the institution's proposal, whether or not those objectives were actually realized. A positive evaluation of the institution's efforts will be designated as “genuine effort,” which conveys HLC's recognition of the project's value in relation to the effort made to improve quality at an institution.

### COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION

In Year 10, institutions on the Open Pathway undergo a comprehensive evaluation that results in an action regarding the reaffirmation of the institution's accreditation and a determination regarding its pathway eligibility. The comprehensive evaluation includes an Assurance Review, a review of Federal Compliance requirements, a student opinion survey and an on-site visit by a team of HLC peer reviewers. The evaluation may also include a multi-campus visit, if applicable.



**Find It Online**

[hlcommission.org/open](http://hlcommission.org/open)

## **INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES**

### **Sample Quality Initiative Proposals**

[qi.hlcommission.org](http://qi.hlcommission.org)

The sample proposals provided on this website illustrate the wide range of projects that can be used as Quality Initiatives and demonstrate the information and level of detail that HLC's peer reviewers need when evaluating submitted proposals.

### **Sample Assurance Arguments**

[hlcommission.org/assurance-samples](http://hlcommission.org/assurance-samples)

Institutions can access demonstration sites that present full Assurance Filings, with Assurance Arguments and Evidence Files. They are intended to help institutions become familiar with the Assurance System and provide examples of how evidence may be organized and linked in the Assurance Argument.

## **Assurance System Training Resources**

[hlcommission.org/assurance-system](http://hlcommission.org/assurance-system)

This webpage provides a general overview of accessing and using the Assurance System, as well as links to the user manual, training webinar and frequently asked questions.



# OPEN PATHWAY

YEARS  
1-3

## PREPARE ASSURANCE FILING

**Institution:** May contribute documents to Evidence File and begin writing Assurance Argument for Year 4 Assurance Review.



YEAR  
4

## ASSURANCE REVIEW

**Institution:** Submit Assurance Filing (Assurance Argument and Evidence File).

**Peer Review:** Conduct Assurance Review (no visit).

**HLC Decision Making:** Acceptance of or action on Assurance Review.



YEARS  
5-7

## QUALITY INITIATIVE PROPOSAL

**Institution:** Submit Quality Initiative Proposal no later than August 31 of Year 7. May also begin preparing Assurance Filing for Year 10 comprehensive evaluation.

**Peer Review:** Review Quality Initiative Proposal.



YEARS  
7-9

## QUALITY INITIATIVE REPORT

**Institution:** Submit Quality Initiative Report no later than August 31 of Year 9. May also continue preparing Assuring Filing for Year 10 comprehensive evaluation.

**Peer Review:** Review Quality Initiative Report.



YEAR  
10

## COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION FOR REAFFIRMATION

**Institution:** Submit comprehensive evaluation materials.

**Peer Review:** Conduct comprehensive evaluation (with visit).

**HLC Decision Making:** Take action on comprehensive evaluation and Reaffirmation of Accreditation.



Institutions may choose any pathway at the time of reaffirmation, unless they meet one or more of the conditions that would require placement on the Standard Pathway.