

# Self-Study Guidelines

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## Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools

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# Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools

## Self-Study Guidelines 2019

Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS) is recognized by the United States Department of Education (ED), the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), and International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) as a national accrediting agency for Christian postsecondary institutions that offer certificates, diplomas, associate, baccalaureate, and graduate degrees, including distance education.



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## Introduction

Accreditation, through the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS), involves an on-going process designed to stimulate continuous self-assessment that allows an institution to analyze its functions, appraise its performances in accomplishing objectives, review its planning procedures, and discover means by which there may be institutional improvement.

Accreditation is simply a determination that an institution is providing the quality of education that society and an institution's peers have a right to expect. This is accomplished by comparing the performance of the institution against its mission and a set of established Standards.

This manual is intended to serve as a guide for institutions engaging in the self-study process with the aim of producing a *Self-Study Report*, including supporting documentation, to be used by TRACS staff and an Evaluation Team in determining the institution's level of compliance with TRACS accreditation Standards. This manual, along with the TRACS publication, *Resource Manual*, will guide institutions in this process.

## What Is Self-Study?

Self-Study is a process whereby an institution assesses and describes its current state and subsequently improves the quality of its efforts in all areas. Self-assessment involves the identification of the institution's strengths and deficiencies and the delineation of the steps necessary to correct those deficiencies. Self-Study requires a commitment on the part of the institution to change rather than simply maintain the status quo.

Through the self-study process, an institution conducts a systematic and thorough examination of all its components in light of its stated mission and against an established set of TRACS Standards. Such an evaluation allows an institution to determine the success it is having in accomplishing its self-established goals and objectives through careful evaluation of input obtained from all internal and external constituents of the institution.

Self-Study, as a process, should be ongoing. Active and continuous involvement in self-assessment reflects a commitment to the concept of providing students with a quality educational experience.

## How Is Self-Study Accomplished?

There is no single way to complete an institutional Self-Study. It may take from 6 to 18 months to complete the initial phase of assessments. At the end of that period, a working document, a *Self-Study Report*, will have been developed that facilitates further review. This document should be an accurate statement of the status of the institution at that point in time.

In order to complete the various tasks involved in the complex effort of conducting an institutional self-study, many larger institutions establish an overall steering committee and smaller subcommittees for each major area of operation. Smaller institutions may have a single committee and assign a project director to be responsible for the self-study process.

Regardless of how the study is coordinated, if it is to be successful, it must be systematic. For this reason, a *Self-Study Proposal* should be developed before initiation of the full self-study

process. If properly developed, the *Self-Study Proposal* guarantees that the self-study will be comprehensive.

The *Self-Study Proposal* should identify the various components to be assessed, indicate how data will be collected and measured, detail the review process, determine the decision making process, delineate areas of responsibility for each task, and layout the general timelines for the process.

A well-planned and successfully executed self-study must involve collection of data from individuals representing all internal and external constituent groups (administration, instructional staff, support staff, student body, and governing body-as well as alumni, graduates, employers, and other appropriate constituencies).

Self-study goes beyond mere data collection. A comprehensive self-evaluation further requires an institution to evaluate the processes it uses to address any institutional deficiencies which come to light.

## What Is the Relationship Between Accreditation And Self-Study?

The accreditation process serves to assure the public that the institution's programs and services are at the high professional quality which is expected in American higher education. One of the most effective means by which this can be met is through the establishment of high standards and the assessment of institutions against those standards. This assessment is both internal to the institution (the self-study) and external (the involvement of a peer review process).

Thus, the self-study process is a self-generated evaluation of the institution by the institution, whereas the accreditation process involves external peer review through the Evaluation Team visit and Accreditation Commission review.

## General Outline Of Steps In The Accreditation Process

1. The *Self-Study Proposal*
2. TRACS Staff Visit
3. Organization of Self-Study Team
4. Identification of Timeline and Budget
5. Assignment of Administrative Tasks
6. Institutional Self-Assessment
7. Preparation of a Draft of the *Self-Study Report*
8. Review and Finalization of the *Self-Study Report*
9. Approval of *Self-Study Report* by the Institution's Chief Executive Officer and Board
10. Submission of final *Self-Study Report* to the TRACS office for review and approval
11. Submission of approved *Self-Study Report* to Evaluation Team members
12. Evaluation Team visit
13. Accreditation Commission consideration for Candidate, Accredited or Reaffirmation status

NOTE: Detailed steps in the various stages of the accreditation process are provided in the TRACS publication *Steps Toward Accreditation*, which is available on the TRACS website.



## The Self-Study Proposal

A *Self-Study Proposal* is completed and submitted to the TRACS office for review and approval prior to initiating the official self-study process. **POINT OF EMPHASIS: The appropriate Change of Status Review Fee (see Fee Schedule) is required to be submitted along with the Self-Study Proposal.**

The *Self-Study Proposal* format is as follows:

- Introduction and brief history of the institution
- Purpose of the Self-Study (obtaining Candidate, Accredited, or Reaffirmation status)
- Goals of the Self-Study
- Proposed Self-Study timeline
- Organization of the Self-Study
  - Membership, role and scope of the Steering Committee
  - Membership, role and scope of the sub-committees
  - Role and scope of the chairs of the sub-committee
- Gathering appropriate materials and resources
- Budget for the Self-Study
- Response to any/all previous noted areas of unresolved non-compliance, either by TRACS or other accrediting agencies as applicable
- Response to any/all unresolved adverse actions imposed by other accrediting agencies or governmental agencies as applicable
- Copy of the Institution's *Assessment Plan* and *Strategic Plan* (including but not limited to the five-year financial projections) as currently implemented

## TRACS Staff Self-Study Visit

Once the *Self-Study Proposal* has been received in the TRACS office and approved by staff, a staff Self-Study visit is planned. During the visit, TRACS staff and the institution will review and finalize the timetable for the remainder of the Self-Study process including the submission of the final *Self-Study Report* to the TRACS office, the submission of the required deposit for the Evaluation Team visit, the dates for the Evaluation Team visit, and the time of the Institution's appearance before the Accrediting Commission for consideration of the status sought by the institution.

The following documents should be made available for staff review during this visit:

- Completed portions of the *Self-Study Report*
- *Board Manual* or *Board Handbook*
- Current *Academic Catalog(s)*
- *Faculty Handbook*
- *Student Handbook*
- *Policies and Procedures Manual*
- Organizational Chart
- Job descriptions
- *Strategic Plan*
- *Assessment Plan* with sample Instruments
- Board minutes for the last 12 months
- Instructional Staff Listing (ISL) for most recent fall and spring
- Copy of the three (3) most recent external financial audits

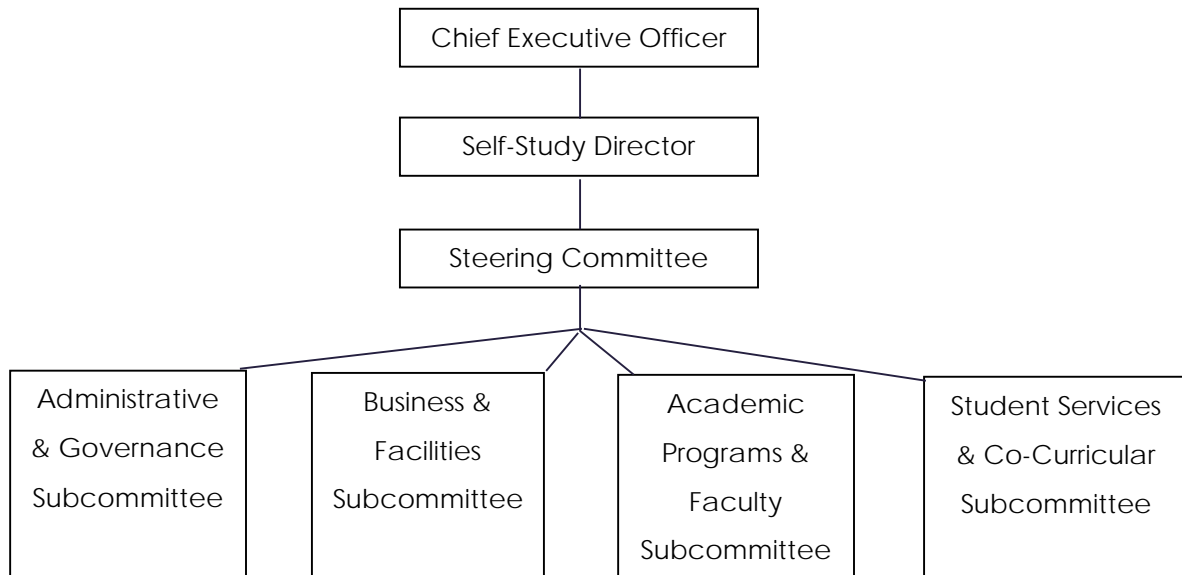
- Samples of promotional material
- Samples of assessment results over the past year
- Mission Statement
- Institutional Objectives
- Most recent budget
- Monthly financial reports for the last year
- *Library Manual*
- Investment Policy
- Advancement Plans (Student Recruitment and Fundraising)
- Evidence of sufficient contingency reserves or lines of credit
- Evidence that library collection supports the curriculum
- Evidence of required fire, health, and safety inspections

In addition, the following individuals will need to be available for a brief interview:

- Chief Executive Officer
- Chief Academic Officer
- Deans of Schools or Directors of Academic Programs or Program Heads
- Chief Financial Officer
- Director of Planning, Assessment, or Institutional Effectiveness
- Librarian
- Self-Study Director
- Director(s) of any Branch Campus(es) or Teaching Site(s)

The institution and/or TRACS staff may schedule other interviews as deemed appropriate.

## Sample Organization Of The Self-Study Team



NOTE: Small institutions may combine the sub-committees, as appropriate.

## Responsibilities Of Self-Study Participants

### Chief Executive Officer

Generally, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), which is most often the President of the institution, has final responsibility and authority in the self-study process. This requires that he or she be informed regarding the progress of the self-study process. For this reason, it is important that the individual selected by the CEO as the Self-Study Director should not only be an individual who can organize people within the campus community into a cohesive and focused team, but should also be someone who possesses the authority within the institution to direct the activities of the self-study process. In order to assure that the institution as a whole participates in the process, it is essential that the CEO not serve as the Self-Study Director.

It is also important for the CEO to assure that all members of the various committees are trained in the accreditation process, including a clear understanding of the TRACS Standards for the area(s) for which they are responsible.

The CEO should provide general direction to the self-study committee with regard to the timelines for the process and assure that the *Self-Study Report* is completed in time for the review and approval by the Board. In addition, the CEO is responsible to see that the *Self-Study Report* is available in time to meet the dates established for the materials to be sent to the members of the Evaluation Team and that the institutional response to the *Evaluation Team Report* is completed before the institution's appearance before the Accreditation Commission.

The CEO should work with the financial team well in advance of the self-study process to assure that the financial resources are available to complete the study.

It is the responsibility of the CEO to assure that the *Self-Study Report* is both accurate and comprehensive.

After the self-study committee has completed the *Self-Study Report*, the CEO will submit the *Self-Study Report* to the institution's Board for approval and submit the *Self-Study Report* to the TRACS office.

Finally, the CEO will work with the TRACS office to make the arrangements required for the Evaluation Team visit, host the Evaluation Team, respond to the draft *Evaluation Team Report*, and appear before the Accreditation Commission with other leadership team members

### Self-Study Director

The role of the Self-Study Director is critical to the institutional self-evaluation which takes place during this process. The Self-Study Director works closely with the CEO and takes the primary lead in the selection of the Steering Committee, gives direction to the self-study team, and keeps the process on a detailed timeline.

The Self-Study Director serves as Chair at regularly called Steering Committee meetings, oversees the schedule of the various sub-committees for the purpose of keeping them on task and provides technical assistance as needed.

Finally, the Self-Study Director leads the process of preparing the *Self-Study Report* and submits the draft report to the CEO.

## Editor

One important question that each institution should ask early in the process is, “Do we need to have an editor for the process?” The answer to this question will vary from institution to institution. The problem that is addressed by an editor is that each sub-committee is preparing a document for their assigned area(s). An editor helps to establish an appropriate cohesive style for the report and assures that as the various sections are prepared by sub-committee members all the sections flow together smoothly. Many times the editor will proofread the report, review it with the Self-Study Director, and prepare the final draft of the *Self-Study Report*.

In a smaller institution, the Self-Study Director often serves as the editor.

## The Steering Committee

Each steering committee member will act as a Chair of a sub-committee.

The Steering Committee will:

- Direct the actions necessary to complete the self-study of the institution relative to the institutional mission and each of the TRACS Standards
- Determine the timeline and the budget necessary to complete the self-study process
- Identify individuals within the institution who are responsible for each area of the self-study and the means of determining that the tasks assigned have been completed
- Complete a first draft of the *Self-Study Report* based on input from the sub-committees, including plans for coming into compliance for any Standard with which the institution’s self-study determines non-compliance
- Coordinate the documentation to be submitted establishing compliance with the TRACS Standards
- Edit the first draft narrative along with the documents to be submitted and plans for coming into compliance based on input of the editor and any modifications determined on the second read
- Compile the final draft of the *Self-Study Report*
- Forward the *Self-Study Report* to the CEO

## Sub-Committees

- Depending on the size of the institution, a subcommittee may be responsible for more than one of the areas of review.
- The sub-committees review assessment data for each of the areas assigned to their committee.
- The sub-committees identify and review all documents necessary to determine compliance with the TRACS Standards pertaining to their area of review.
- The sub-committees conduct additional research and review as requested by the Steering Committee.
- The sub-committees prepare a narrative of the institution’s compliance with the TRACS Standards pertaining to their area of review to be submitted to the Steering Committee.

- The sub-committees identify the documents to be submitted to TRACS which verify compliance with the TRACS Standards pertaining to their area of review.
- The subcommittees determine, based on the review for their area, whether the institution is in compliance with the TRACS Standards for that area.
- The subcommittees recommend to the Steering Committee the plans for coming into compliance for any Standard with which they determine the institution is not in compliance.

## Sample Self-Study Timeline

The CEO and Self-Study Director will develop a general time-line based on conversations with TRACS staff. After the Steering Committee members have been selected, the committee's first task will be to create a detailed time-line for the process based on that which is agreed upon with the TRACS office. The proposed timeline should be included in the *Self-Study Proposal*. Following is a sample Self-Study timeline:

Activity	Date
Steering Committee will meet to agree on the self-study process	
Appointment of the Self-Study Director	
Appointment of Steering Committee and Sub-Committees	
<i>Self-Study Report</i> first draft—Committees investigate, interview, analyze, and develop preliminary reports	
Steering Committee reviews the first draft and gives feed back to the sub-committees	
<i>Self-Study Report</i> second draft—sub-committees incorporate input from the Steering Committee and prepare a second draft of their section of the <i>Self-Study Report</i>	
Steering Committee reviews the draft of final <i>Self-Study Report</i>	
Editor reviews and edits the draft of final <i>Self-Study Report</i>	
CEO receives and reviews copy of the draft of final <i>Self-Study Report</i>	
Steering Committee compiles documentation necessary for submission to TRACS	
After receiving input, the Editor prepares the final <i>Self-Study Report</i> for publication	
CEO submits the final <i>Self-Study Report</i> to the Board for approval	
CEO sends copies of the <i>Self-Study Report</i> to TRACS for staff review along with the Travel Expense Advance for an Evaluation Team visit ( <i>See Fee Schedule</i> )	
Institution responds to any suggestions received from the TRACS Staff review	
President sends copies of the final <i>Self-Study Report</i> to TRACS and members of the Evaluation Team	
Evaluation Team visit takes place	
Institution Identifies any potential errors of fact in the <i>Evaluation Team Report</i>	
Institution Responds to the determinations contained in the <i>Evaluation Team Report</i> (Institutional Response Matrix)	
Institution appears before Commission for consideration of status	

## Sample Self-Study Budget

Another section to be included in the *Self-Study Proposal* is a detailed projected budget for the costs of the self-study process which should include such things as the costs of consultants, printing of the *Self-Study Report*, the TRACS Self-Study staff visit, the Evaluation Team visit, etc. The Self-Study budget should be reflected in the institution's general budget.

Item	First Year	Second Year
<b>TRACS RELATED VISIT(S)</b>		
Staff Representative*	1,900.00	
Evaluation Team**		7,525.00
Board / Team Dinner		1,800.00
<b>SELF-STUDY AND RESPONSE</b>		
Training & Lunch (30 people)	2,000.00	
Materials	1,000.00	
Publicity	100.00	
<b>COMMISSION APPEARANCE</b>		
CEO++	.00	2,700.00
CAO++	.00	2,700.00
Two Additional Person(s)++		5,400.00
<b>FEES (per Fee Schedule)</b>		
Application Fee	7,000.00	
Change of Status Review Fee		10,000.00
1 <sup>st</sup> Year Membership Dues		9,000.00
<b>Total</b>	12,000.00	39,125.00

\* Includes Travel (700), Lodging (100), Meals (100), and Fee (1,000).

\*\* Includes Travel, Lodging, Meals, and Stipends for five people. Estimated: Travel = 4,000, Lodging = 2,250, Meals = 1,000 and Stipend = 275.

+ It is estimated that an average of five hours per week will be needed in additional secretarial time for 24 months. (5 hours x \$12.00 = \$60.00 x 52 weeks = 3,120).

++ Includes Travel, Lodging and Conference Cost, and Meals: Estimated per person: Travel = 1,000, Lodging and Conference Cost = 1,600, Meals = 100, for a total of 2,700 per person.

## Format Of The Self-Study Report

### COVER MATERIALS

#### Cover Letter

Provide a cover letter from the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) indicating the institution's Board has approved for the institution to request consideration for the level of recognition desired. The CEO of the institution should *certify that all information and data submitted are correct*.

The introductory pages of the *Self-Study Report* should contain the following:

- I. Purpose of the Self-Study  
Provide a general introduction to the institution including the status being sought (Candidate Status, Accredited Status, Reaffirmation), the pertinent institutional characteristics such as types of programs offered, type of calendar system, enrollment figures, and any church affiliations (if any), etc.
- II. History of the Institution  
Provide a narrative history of the institution highlighting key events that provide a good perspective of the institution.
- III. Relationship with TRACS  
Provide a narrative of the institution's relationship with TRACS, such as when applied, when application approved, when received (or when appearing to receive) Candidate Status, Accredited Status or Reaffirmation. Include the initial contact with TRACS, the approval of the application, and any applicable dates for recognition for candidacy, accreditation or reaffirmation.
- IV. Response to any/all previous noted areas of unresolved non-compliance, either by TRACS or other accrediting agencies as applicable  
Institution should provide detailed narrative on the response and date of compliance with previous TRACS Team Visit Recommendations and/or Steps taken in response to any actions taken by any previous accrediting agency.

The *Self-Study Report* narratives should address each Standard detailed in the *Accreditation Manual*. They should 1) reference the assessment data and analysis that has been used to arrive at the conclusions, 2) include all documentation used in the self-study process to verify that the institution is in compliance with each Standard, and 3) provide the plans for coming into compliance for each area where non-compliance was determined.

Each section of the *Self Study Report* will include narrative statements regarding the findings of the sub-committee assigned to review that area relative to the TRACS Standards. These narratives should be supported, as appropriate, by charts, graphs and tables. The *Self-Study Report* should reflect the current status and planning processes of the institution. Statements in the *Self-Study Report* should be documented and be supported by assessment data as appropriate. The TRACS publication, *Resource Manual* provides the necessary guidance to institutions concerning the types of documentation that should be submitted in support of compliance with the various TRACS Standards.

Additionally, TRACS makes available a *Self-Study Report* template for those who wish to utilize it. This template is available on the TRACS website. However, each institution will determine the actual *Self-Study Report* format it chooses to use.



## Institutional Approval Of The Self-Study Report

The institution's CEO and Board must review and approve the *Self-Study Report* prior to submission to the TRACS office. Questions raised by the CEO or the Board need to be sent back to the Self-Study Director and Steering Committee for clarification. The Board minutes indicating the approval of the *Self-Study Report* should be included with the *Self-Study Report* as supporting documentation.

## Submission Of The Self-Study Report

Prior to submission of the final *Self-Study Report*, an electronic copy of the final draft should be sent to the TRACS office. Upon receipt of the documents, the TRACS office will review the materials and, as appropriate, make suggestions for the finalization of the document. The final *Self-Study Report* and all supporting documentation, along with payment for the travel advance for an Evaluation Team visit, should be sent to the TRACS office no later than six weeks prior to the Evaluation Team visit or according to the established and approved time-frame presented in the *Self-Study Proposal*. Once the *Self-Study Report* and supporting documentation has been approved by TRACS staff, the institution will be instructed to send the materials to the Evaluation Team members. When submitting the *Self-Study Report* and supporting documentation to either the TRACS office or the Evaluation Team members, all materials should be sent on a flash drive or CD. Some team members may request a hard copy of certain portions of the *Self-Study Report*.

## Evaluation Team Visit

Information concerning the details and necessary preparations for the Evaluation Team visit will be sent to the host institution's CEO prior to the visit. Additional information concerning the responsibilities of the various parties involved in the Evaluation Team visit are also detailed in the TRACS publication, *Evaluation Team Procedures Manual*. This document is available by contacting the TRACS office.

## Appearance Before The Accreditation Commission

The TRACS Accreditation Commission meets twice each year, in April and in October/November, to review materials relevant to their deliberations for consideration of granting status. The items that the Accreditation Commission reviews include: the institution's *Self-Study Report*, the *Evaluation Team Report*, the Evaluation Team's confidential recommendation concerning the granting of status, the institution's responses to the determinations of the Evaluation Team, the TRACS staff recommendation concerning the granting of status, the assigned Accreditation Commission reader's recommendation(s), and the institution's responses during its appearance before the Accreditation Commission. Institutions are required to send at least one representative, usually the CEO/President to appear before the Accreditation Commission.