



Massachusetts Department of Higher Education

2020

**Public
Program
Review
Guidelines
and
Procedures**

Handbook for Institutions

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I. INTRODUCTION

Background

Beginning in 2016, the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education (BHE) directed staff at the Department of Higher Education (DHE) to engage in a collaborative process of working to improve and make more efficient the process of public higher education institution program review. Many iterations of whether and how to best accomplish the task led to a determination that the BHE would approve public programs at the Letter of Intent (LOI) stage of development, with an exclusive focus on the program's alignment with **Massachusetts goals for public higher education, the campus's approved strategic plan and institutional mission, and the campus's operational and financial objectives**. The Board found its rationale in its fundamental responsibility to coordinate a system of public higher education that provides citizens with opportunities to participate in academic and educational programs, contribute to an existing base of research and knowledge, and add value to the state's future economic growth and development. The BHE's intention is to focus at the level of an LOI rather than at the level of deep academic review of programs. The Board also noted that the process of internal governance on campuses, expert external reviewer of programs, and DHE staff review for completeness already provided a rigorous and proficient validation of program quality. The BHE finds they can add a better and more valuable review of proposed programs by focusing on their alignment with the Commonwealth's overarching goals for public higher education and the campuses' strategic plans.

In June 2018 a related year-long collaboration with campuses included the development of an LOI template that could provide the Academic Affairs Committee (AAC) and entire Board, information that would be timely, relevant and actionable in reviewing proposals. After extensive campus input, the revised review processes were formally approved by the BHE during 2018-2019.

The guidelines and templates included in this document are intended to provide support to institutions, faculty and staff in navigating the revised process. The Department expects that protocols and individual aspects may continue to evolve, and they will be adjusted as needed in collaboration with our public campuses.

What's New in Public Institution Program Review?

The most significant change in the public institution program review process is that the BHE will formally approve a campus Letter of Intent (LOI) at the outset to the development of a proposal. The content of the LOI must reflect campus alignment with the Massachusetts goals for higher education, with the campus strategic plan and mission, and with the operational and financial objectives of the institution.

Another significant change is that while an LOI and a Standard-process proposal must be submitted between **September 15 and May 15** in alignment with the annual BHE meeting schedule, proposals following the Fast Track process may now be submitted year-round.

Governance

The BHE is comprised of politically appointed members, is obligated to analyze present and future goals, needs, and requirements of public higher education, and must establish goals to achieve a well-coordinated, quality system of public higher education in the Commonwealth. The Board adopts policies that further the development of a strongly performing system of public higher education. This governance structure approves campus degree granting authority and works in collaboration with public institutions across the Commonwealth.
(<https://www.mass.edu/bhe/powers.asp>)

Role of the Campus

Each campus will submit a completed LOI or proposal template for staff review. It is acceptable for the campus to submit a near-complete proposal with a few remaining questions. Flexible, ‘serve and return’ timelines serve this purpose. The campus should expect this to be an iterative process, and they may be asked to provide more detailed citations or other data points that staff find necessary in order to deem the LOI or proposal complete and ready to be brought forward for board action. In all cases, campuses should expect technical assistance and guidance from staff.

Role of Staff

Staff in the Academic Affairs and Student Success Division of the Department are assigned to guide campuses through the program review process. Staff are required to review Phase I LOI’s and Phase II full academic proposals submitted by institutions for completeness and to adhere to the timelines detailed below efficiently. Staff must validate that the campus has provided all the information required by the BHE.

Staff must approve external review candidates for proposed programs consistent with BHE guidelines for reviewers. These guidelines are further discussed in the next section of this document under *External Review Approvals*.

Staff work dynamically with each proposal to support the campus, serving as a resource and as ‘critical friends’, ensuring as much as possible, that an LOI or proposal is thorough and aligned with BHE expectations before being brought forward for BHE action.

Time Frames:

Serve & Return

A campus should expect that an LOI or proposal template that is submitted for staff validation and review for completion will be subject to a **15-business-day period of review**. Following this time frame the campus can expect staff to provide information regarding any further data that are needed for the LOI or proposal to be deemed complete. This communication **resets the time frame**. It is important to note that the responsibility rests with the campus to provide data in a timely manner, especially if the campus is working within a targeted timeline. Once the campus has responded to staff by submitting the additional data, **the 15-business-day** clock begins anew.

Once an LOI is validated and deemed complete, it is circulated by the Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success to Academic Affairs Committee (AAC) and Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) members, public campus Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) and to AICUM representatives for comment. The **comment period extends for 20 business days**. At the end of this time frame, all comments are reviewed by staff and sent to the LOI institution's CAO, who then has **20 business days** to submit a written response to the Deputy. Comments and responses are included in the motion brought forward for BHE action. An LOI is brought forward either within **20 business days** of receiving the institution's response or at the next board meeting.

Phase II full academic proposals must be submitted **within two years** of BHE approval of the Phase I LOI.

A proposed program template is validated and reviewed for completion **within 15 business days** of receipt. As noted above, the campus can expect staff to provide information regarding any further data that are needed for the proposal to be deemed complete. This communication **resets the time frame**. Once the campus has responded by submitting the additional data, **the 15-business-day** clock begins anew. Once validated and deemed complete, Fast Track proposals are forwarded to the Commissioner with a recommendation for action **within 20 business days**. The 20-business day timetable begins on the date the application is deemed complete by DHE staff. After the full proposal has been deemed complete, the Board or Commissioner will act on the application in accordance with either the Fast Track or Standard Process.

Implementation

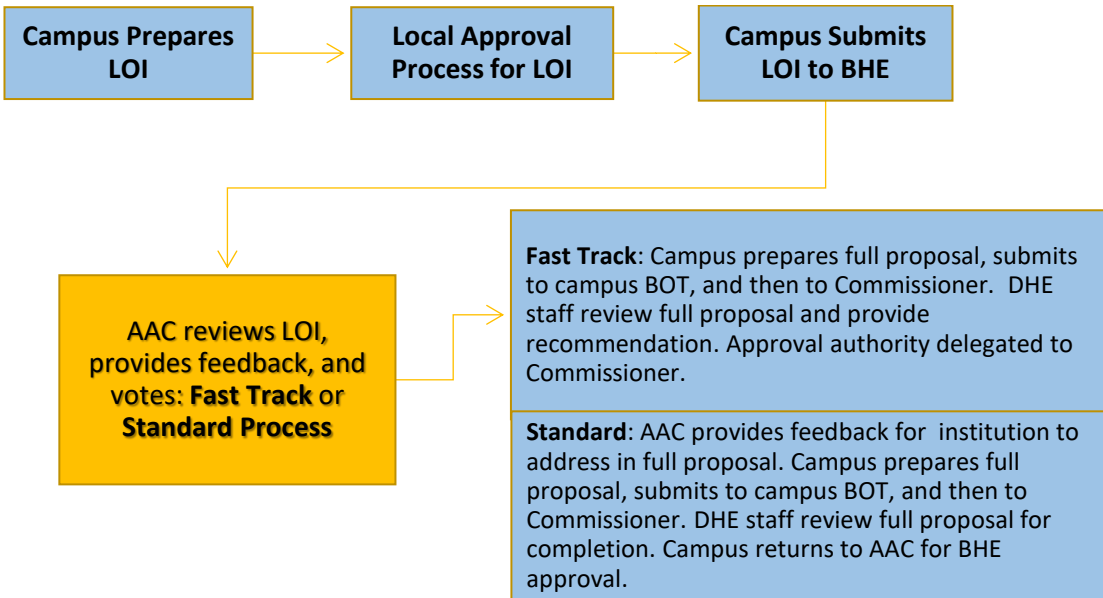
Implementation of a new academic program should occur **no later than the second fall semester following approval**. If implementation is delayed beyond that time, the institution must provide an explanation to the Commissioner and either request a new implementation date or provide a rationale not to offer the program.

Relationship with Accreditation

While NECHE accreditation is earned by the whole institution, BHE authority provides approval for individual certificate and degree programs within institutions. In other words, the institution is the unit of measure for NECHE. The program is the unit of measure for BHE, contextualized within the campus strategic plan.

This distinction is important and underscores the role of the BHE in reviewing programs in terms of the Massachusetts goals for higher education, each campus strategic plan, and each institution's mission. Similar measures and indicators of quality are shared within both the NECHE accreditation study and the program review process. Inasmuch as possible these data can be cross-walked and utilized to avoid unnecessary duplication in documenting the proposed program's assessment and effectiveness. Note that NECHE will not review an institution's program without BHE approval.

II. REVIEW PROCESS



The diagram above indicates the overarching process the institution will follow in the journey from inception to full authority to offer a new academic program of study. Initially a campus will prepare the Phase I LOI. It may be useful to use the LOI template as a guide for developing the content that will be required for submission to the BHE. Once the LOI is developed, approval by the local governing board must be obtained. Following this milestone, the campus will submit the LOI to the BHE via Department staff. The LOI template must be submitted for staff review, along with a cover letter from the President addressed to the Commissioner. (These documents are submitted electronically and directly to staff in Microsoft **Word doc format** – PDF format is not accepted). Once submitted staff follow the procedures and timelines discussed in the previous section of this guide in order to validate and deem the Phase I LOI complete and ready to be brought for BHE action.

A motion for approval is brought forward by staff to the Academic Affairs Committee (AAC). Campus representatives should plan to attend the AAC meeting in the event there are questions from the members. AAC will discuss the motion and determine whether to approve the LOI for a Fast Track process or a Standard process. The Committee will then take a formal vote.

External Review Approvals

As part of the proposal application, the institution must have the proposed program evaluated by at least two qualified and objective external reviewers with no interest in the proposed program or institution. The institution may decide whether the review should be a paper or on-site review. Questions for reviewers are provided by the Board and may be supplemented by the institution. The reviewers' report must be submitted as part of the application, in its exact original form as

the institution received it. The institution's response to the external reviewers' report must also be submitted to Board staff as part of the application.

The institution may submit external review candidates for approval at any time prior to submission of the Phase I LOI or Phase II full academic proposal. This is noted in the guidelines because it can take considerable time for a campus to identify available qualified reviewer candidates, obtain a current resume from them, and then have the candidates approved by DHE staff. The external review is a very significant component of the proposal and staff are diligent in approving an external review team. Senior scholarship in the discipline of study and advanced leadership in the industry or in higher education are heavily weighted by staff when conducting the review and considering the external reviewer's report. As well, the institutional response to the review frequently underscores improvements to the proposal and greater integrity of programs, with reliable fidelity to the discipline.

The following criteria guide the selection of reviewers:

- Reviewers will be selected by the institution and must be approved by DHE staff.
- Reviewers shall be selected from among professionals with appropriate credentials and demonstrated professional experience in college-level teaching, research, and administration within institutions of higher education.
- Reviewers should have senior leadership experience and established scholarship in the discipline or field of study. Prior experience in program review or accreditation will be favorably considered.
- Industry and organizational experts with senior leadership experience as non-educator professionals and practitioners from appropriate fields may also be included.
- Reviewers shall have a disinterested professional commitment to the assignment of evaluation and to the task of rendering objective findings and recommendations based upon empirical evidence and informed judgments.
- Persons affiliated with Massachusetts same-sector public institutions are not eligible.
- No person shall serve on a visiting committee or review team who has a present or recent official or unofficial connection with the institution or program under review, or whom the Board has reason to believe has independent or pecuniary interest in the outcome of the Board's final action.

Phase I: Letter of Intent (LOI)

The LOI application form must be submitted with attachments for staff review. Any LOI must be approved by local authority in order to be eligible for staff review. LOI's may be submitted annually on the BHE calendar from September 15 – May 15. LOI's received outside of this time frame are not accepted. There are three major sections to the LOI proposal in addition to perfunctory details:

- 1. Alignment with Massachusetts goals for higher education**
- 2. Alignment with the current campus strategic plan and mission of the institution**
- 3. Alignment with operational and financial objectives of the institution**

LOI proposals undergo a staff review which is expected to occur within a 15-business-day period. Following this time frame the campus can expect Staff notice if any further data are needed for the proposal to be deemed complete. This communication resets the time frame. Once the campus has responded by submitting the additional data, the 15-business-day time frame is reactivated.

After an LOI is validated and deemed complete it is circulated by the Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success to AAC and SPC members, public campus CAO's and AICUM representatives for comment. The **comment period extends for 20 business days**. At the end of this time frame, all comments are reviewed by staff and sent to the LOI institution's CAO, who must **submit a written response** to the Deputy Commissioner **within 20 business days**. Comments and responses are included in any motion brought forward for BHE action. An LOI is brought forward to AAC in a motion for approval. This occurs either within 20 business days of receiving the institution's response to any comments, or at the next AAC meeting.

Members of the AAC will review the motion alongside the three areas of focus (alignment with Massachusetts goals for higher education, the current campus strategic plan and mission of the institution, and operational and financial objectives). AAC will vote on the motion to determine whether the proposal can proceed along the preferred Fast Track process, or whether more information is needed. Significantly, the BHE prefers that proposals meet the three important criteria noted above. Assigning a proposal to the Standard process provides a second opportunity in instances where the BHE has determined the criteria have not been fully met by the LOI.

Phase II: Fast Track or Standard Review

Fast Track: Campuses with proposals permitted to use the Fast Track review process will complete the expedited application template (<https://www.mass.edu/foradmin/academic/publicprogramapproval.asp>) after the LOI has been approved by BHE. The proposal is submitted with a formal letter from the campus CAO to the Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success. The proposal will be reviewed for completion by DHE staff and brought forward to the Commissioner for approval. Fast Track proposals are open submission and are eligible after the BHE has approved the LOI.

Standard: Proposals assigned to the Standard review process will include a completed, full application template (<https://www.mass.edu/foradmin/academic/publicprogramapproval.asp>) including a detailed response to question 8, which addresses any concerns raised when the LOI was brought forward to the AAC. The proposal is submitted with a formal letter from the campus CAO to the Commissioner and is reviewed by DHE staff for completion before being brought forward for BHE action. Standard Review proposals may be submitted annually on the BHE

calendar from September 15 – May 15. Proposals undergoing Standard review received outside of this time frame are not accepted

III. PROGRAMS UNDER 30 CREDITS, NAME CHANGES, DISCONTINUED

There are no changes to the public program review process for programs with fewer than 30 credits or for programs that are making a name change.

New Certificate Programs

A public college or university expecting to offer either (a) new certificate programs under 30 credits, or (b) new minors, concentrations, tracks, or options within existing approved programs, must notify the Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success in writing at least 60 days prior to announcing such program changes. Notice must include the rationale for the new certificate and a curriculum outline form.

The specific forms and documentation required can be found on the Department website: <https://www.mass.edu/foradmin/academic/publicnewdegrees.asp>

Name Changes

Changes in the name of an existing program require approval by the Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Student Success, as the designee of the Commissioner, upon limited staff review. In submitting a name change request form, the institution should include curriculum information and reason for the request.

In submitting a name change request that would result in renaming an existing concentration (or minor) to a degree, also include for the preceding three years, program enrollment data by concentration, graduation data, alumni outcome data (job placement or enrollment in further study), copy of the accreditation review report received within the preceding three years, and the most recent accreditation status letter. The program accreditation must be from an accrediting body that is a member of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors. A curriculum outline form must also be included with the documentation.

Suspended or Discontinued Programs

An institution is to notify the Commissioner of Higher Education in writing if it suspends, discontinues, or reactivates a suspended or discontinued academic program or a minor, concentration, track, or option within a program. When a program is suspended or discontinued, it will be removed from the Board of Higher Education's inventory of active, authorized programs. A program suspended or discontinued may be reactivated with written notice to the Commissioner of Higher Education and the approval of the Board of Higher Education.

These changes do not require action by AAC, rather they are reviewed and approved internally by DHE staff.