

Wyoming Community College Commission

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Creation of New College District

Process Description

Updated July 31, 2020

Overview

Wyoming Statute 21-18-312 allows for the formation of new community college districts. The County Commission(s) for the prospective district must complete a complex and lengthy process to obtain **approval** from the Wyoming Community College Commission (WCCC), **authorization** from the Wyoming State Legislature, and **accreditation** from the institutional accrediting body—the Higher Learning Commission (HLC).

- **Approval** is obtained when the WCCC validates the state and local need for a new district, the financial ability of the district to support the college, and the educational soundness of the proposed college plan.
- **Authorization** is provided by the state legislature and county election and provides the legal grounding for a new college district to collect mill levies, to grant degrees, and carry out general operations.
- **Accreditation** is required to allow for transferability of credits, certificates and degrees, to receive federal funds, and to participate in intercollegiate athletics, among other things.

This document is intended to provide an overview of the process for those interested in pursuing the creation of a new community college district. Because colleges require approvals/authorizations from state entities as well as institutional accreditors, both are included in the process outlined below. Creation of a new, accredited community college typically takes 4-6 years, and for the purposes of this document has been divided into three phases.

- **Phase One** - State Authorization
- **Phase Two** - Establishing Eligibility for Accreditation
- **Phase Three** - Candidacy for Accreditation

Phase One – State Authorization (WCCC and Legislature)

(Duration: minimum of 6-12 months)

State authorization is required to receive state funds, to establish a county mill levy, and to provide the foundational legal authority to grant degrees—although these degrees are not transferable without accreditation (Phase Three). The state authorization process begins with **an initial statement of interest** from the County Commissioners to the WCCC. The WCCC will then begin working with the county to ensure they are aware of the requirements involved in creating a new community college district. These include the completion of the **WCCC’s Application for Creation of a New Community College District** and a successful county-wide **Petition** that includes signatures of either 500 or 25%, whichever is less, of qualified electors within the county.

Upon receipt of an application and verified petition, statute requires the WCCC to carry out a comprehensive feasibility survey for the proposed community college district. The WCCC may contract with an outside firm to carry out the survey, both to guarantee objectivity as well as ensuring that such a large study can be accomplished within the 90 days required by state statute. The applying county is responsible for the costs associated with the survey. Upon completion of the survey, the WCCC will hold a formal meeting to review the findings and vote to approve/disapprove the application.

If approved by the WCCC, the request will be submitted to the Legislative Services Office (LSO) for the Legislature to take up the authorization request. If the Legislature authorizes the creation of a new community college district, the County or Counties encompassing the proposed district must hold an election to approve both the taxing component (no less than 4 mills) and election of the initial Board Members. The county is responsible for all costs incurred in the ballot measure. Upon approval by the county/counties of the district, in addition to the prior approval of the WCCC and the State Legislature, the community college district’s state authorization will be complete.

Phase Two – Eligibility for Accreditation (Duration: approx. 2 years + 8-12 months)

Overview of Accreditation: Accreditation is a formal, independent verification that an Institution of Higher Education (IHE) meets established quality standards, and is required for the transferability and formal recognition of the credits, certificates and degrees it produces. The US Dept. of Education has granted authority to multiple institutional accrediting bodies to evaluate and monitor IHE’s — for Wyoming this body is the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Only after receiving accreditation can an IHE do the following:

- Provide federal financial aid (Pell Grants) to students. *Note: this is subject to federal policies and in some instances Title IV eligibility may be granted at the Candidate stage.*
- Participate in intercollegiate athletics
- Allow students to transfer credits, certificates and degrees to other IHE’s
- Provide appropriate professional licensures through their coursework

Accreditation cannot be granted until a college has operated for several years and can demonstrate its academic effectiveness, its financial sustainability, and its effective governance structure among many other criteria. Therefore, new Wyoming community colleges created through this process would need to operate as unaccredited institutions for approximately 4-5 years before they would have the necessary evidence to demonstrate their qualifications for formal accreditation. It may be possible for extension campuses within existing districts to apply their duration of operations towards these accrediting requirements with the approval of the institutional accreditor. Furthermore, a college cannot publicly describe itself as a candidate for accreditation, or any implication that it is currently working with an institutional accreditor, until it has been granted candidacy by HLC.

Demonstrating Eligibility: Before pursuing candidacy for accreditation, an IHE must establish its eligibility to pursue accreditation in the first place. HLC has established 19 categories of requirements to obtain eligibility, including an established educational program, administrative structure, stability of operations, well-qualified faculty and staff, and financial stability and capacity. An IHE cannot apply for eligibility until it has been in operation for two years, and the process itself can take 8-12 months.

Phase Three – Candidacy
(Duration, approx. 3-4 years)

Once eligibility is established the IHE can apply for candidacy through HLC. This process involves submitting a Comprehensive Evaluation for Candidacy and typically takes a year to complete, submit and receive a decision. If approved, the IHE is granted a 4-year term of candidacy, during which it operates as a candidate for accreditation. Although still not eligible for intercollegiate athletics, federal student aid, and other programs associated with accredited schools, it can publicly declare its status as a candidate while it collects data and prepares its Comprehensive Evaluation for Initial Accreditation.

Most IHE’s will undergo a Biennial Evaluation by HLC two years after establishing their candidacy, although colleges can apply for Early Initial Accreditation. If granted, this allows the Biennial Evaluation to count for their Comprehensive Evaluation for Initial Accreditation. Otherwise, the Comprehensive Evaluation would take place 1-2 years after the Biennial Evaluation. In either case, the Comprehensive Evaluation involves a rigorous application with significant evidence to support the college’s alignment with the 19 requirements, as well as a multi-day visit from HLC.

If the Comprehensive Evaluation is successful, HLC will award Initial Accreditation to the IHE, at which point it is fully recognized by the higher education community and is eligible for the benefits established for accredited institutions. This phase typically takes 3-4 years.

Timeline

The timeline below identifies many of the key milestones in the creation/accreditation process for new community colleges. This process typically takes 4-6 years if all milestones are met and the applicant is not required to correct or revisit aspects of the application. Phases are color-coded in the first column, and approval/rejection decision points are indicated yellow. Note: for most decision points, a rejection will send the institution back to the beginning of that phase, with a resulting extension of the overall timeline for the process.

Note on Costs: Below are listed minimum anticipated costs, actual costs may vary significantly. HLC fees are updated on an annual basis and those listed below are accurate as of July 31, 2020.

Phase	Timeframe	Action	Resp. Party	Costs
State Authorization		Initial Interest sent to WCCC ED	County Commission	0
		Review of Initial Interest for minimal prerequisites	WCCC	0
		Application and petition	County Commission	Varies
		Evaluation Survey	WCCC	\$10-50K

	Within 90 days of Application	Approve/deny	WCCC	0
	Determined according to Legislature	Legislative Approval	Legislature	0
	Next election date	County Election	County Clerk	Varies
		Begin Offering Instruction (unaccredited)		
HLC Eligibility	Two years after Instruction begins	Letter of Inquiry & Preliminary Evidence	College	\$6000
	90 days	Evidence Review & Response	HLC	
	2-4 months	Pre-application Interview	HLC/College	\$3000
		Post-Interview letter	HLC	
	Within 2 years of post-int. letter	Letter of Intent to Submit Eligibility Filing	College	
	Within 1 year of Letter of intent	Eligibility Filing	College	\$6000
	3-5 months	Eligibility Review	HLC	
		Letter on Eligibility	HLC	
Candidacy	Within 90 days of Letter	Letter of Intent to Pursue Candidacy	HLC	\$6000
	Usually 1 year	Comprehensive Evaluation for Candidacy	College	\$7000 + exp.
		Award of Candidacy	HLC	
		Board of Trustees Action	College	
		Begin 4-year Term of Candidacy	College	
	2 years	Biennial Evaluation*	HLC	\$3500 + exp.
	2 years	Comprehensive Evaluation for Initial Accreditation*	College	\$7000 + exp.
Accreditation		Award of Initial Accreditation	HLC	
		Board of Trustees Action	College	
Total	6.5 years			\$60K-150K

* Colleges can apply for Early Initial Accreditation. If application is approved, the Biennial Evaluation can be replaced with the Comprehensive Evaluation for Initial Accreditation.

Go/Stop Step	Accreditation Phase	State Authorization Phase	HLC Eligibility Phase	Candidacy Phase
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