



AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR LIBERAL EDUCATION  
CHARTER SCHOOL ACCREDITATION

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# AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR LIBERAL EDUCATION SELF-STUDY GUIDE

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## Overview

The American Academy for Liberal Education (AALE) is the only organization explicitly authorized by the US Department of Education to accredit undergraduate liberal arts institutions and programs on a national basis. As the only national charter school accreditation agency in the country AALE offers its certification to those schools showing the highest levels of commitment to liberal arts, academic excellence, and outstanding student achievement.

Public charter schools applying for accreditation by the American Academy for Liberal Education are required to prepare a self-study. A self-study is an applicant's formal, comprehensive, and rigorous examination of performance in light of the Academy's *Standards for Charter School Accreditation*.

The Academy has designed its *Standards*, which serve as the basis for the self-study, to be comprehensive in that they account for all educational and institutional components of elementary and secondary school operations. They are especially focused, however, on those elements that comprise and support high quality academic learning and achievement. A charter school engaged in AALE accreditation joins a select group of schools that consistently demonstrate characteristics that promote academic excellence, intellectual development, and outstanding achievement.

Any school engaged in an AALE self-study agrees to inform all stakeholders that it is engaged in the AALE accreditation process. It also agrees to make AALE's mailing address, e-mail address, website, and telephone number available to its stakeholders and constituents and to permit AALE to review stakeholder comments on matters related to

## Introduction

The self-study process involves participation by a representative range of individuals and school subunits providing ample opportunity for conversation and reflection on the nature, aims, and performance of the applicant school. A well-executed self-study for accreditation will serve the interests of the applicant school as well as the reporting requirements of the Academy by drawing a clear, concise, and truthful picture of its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement. Ideally, the self-study will be an extension of an applicant's regular, internal processes for review and improvement.

*Public charter schools applying for re-accreditation have the option of either preparing a self-study or submitting a revised version of their original self-study. If a revised version of the self-study is submitted it should consist of the original self-study document and include addenda to those sections of that self-study where there have been substantial changes. The addenda should describe the changes and their impact on the essential school components as detailed in AALE's standards – mission, curriculum, etc. For sections where there have been no changes, the revised self-study should simply note there are no changes to report.*

## Purpose and Aims of the Self-Study

The AALE self-study process is the first step a school takes to engage a broad range of stakeholders in the accreditation process and it is an important opportunity for self-reflection and examination. It also can be seen as having aims in addition to its principle purpose of being a step forward in the accreditation process, however. It can provide the school with:

### A Comprehensive View

The self-study should paint a coherent picture of the *whole* institution. Although many of the Academy's *Standards* necessarily focus on particular features of applicants' academic, administrative, or financial operations, the self-study should discuss these features in relation to the overarching mission of the school. It is important to relate operational and procedural issues to educational functions and goals.

### An Objective Appraisal and Assessment

A self-study involves concise *description* of programs, structures, and operations, but the self-study process, as well as the resulting report, should emphasize frank *appraisal* and *assessment* of the applicant's performance in meeting the Academy's *Standards* as well as its own mission and educational aims.

## A Realistic Self-Evaluation and Framework for Improvement

The self-study process should draw on the internal, on-going efforts of a school to evaluate and improve its own performance. The self-study should demonstrate an applicant's willingness to subject itself to critical self-examination, as well as its ability to devise effective plans and strategies for addressing areas of weakness and for developing areas of strength.

### **Preparing to Write the Self-Study**

Once Academy staff have reviewed an application for accreditation and determined that the school meets the Academy's eligibility requirements, the applicant's designated accreditation liaison will be notified formally to proceed with the self-study process.

#### Role of Presiding Officers

The primary role of the charter school's presiding officer(s)-the Principal and/or Board Chair-in the self-study process is to ensure widespread awareness of and participation in that process. Although the presiding officer(s) may or may not take a leading role in implementing or supervising the self-study process, their ability to encourage interest and participation is vital to its success. The presiding officer(s) are also responsible for appointing a steering committee that will plan, implement, and supervise the self-study process and edit the resulting report.

#### Appointing a Steering Committee – The Role of the Chair

The first practical step for an institution or program preparing to write a self-study for accreditation is to name a steering committee responsible for designing, implementing, and overseeing the self-study process. The chair of the steering committee is responsible for ensuring that the efforts of the various individuals, committees, and offices involved in drafting the self-study are well-coordinated and efficient. The chair is also responsible for the final edited report. The steering committee is charged with these tasks:

**Identify** issues or questions of special interest or concern to the school that will serve as unifying themes for the self-study. Careful attention to this matter will greatly increase the value of the self-study to the school.

**Assign** responses to the various *Standards* to appropriate individuals, committees, and offices in the school. The steering committee may wish to make use of existing bodies or processes that regularly deal with the matter or questions raised by the *Standards*. This will minimize the creation of new and ad hoc committees, and maximize the use of existing knowledge, experience, and information.

**Coordinate** the work of the various individuals, committees, and offices so as to maximize school-wide understanding of the nature and purposes of the self-study. For example, it may be helpful first to address the more comprehensive or fundamental standards-those dealing with mission and educational aims. Edited drafts of responses to these may set a useful context for those drafting responses

to standards dealing with more particular questions, such as curriculum structure, library resources, or student admission and retention.

**Oversee** the self-study process and ensure that the final document reflects a school wide review of the nature, purposes, and performance of the educational enterprise.

### The Role of Academy Staff

Once a steering committee has been appointed and a chair designated, the school should schedule a formal consultation with a representative of the Academy to provide assistance as they develop a plan for the self-study. Academy staff also is available for consultation at any point during the application and self-study preparation process.

### Adopting a Timetable

A self-study for accreditation is a complex project involving cooperation and coordination between many parties over an extended period of time. The steering committee should set a timetable that allows sufficient time for collecting and preparing information, drafting and completing each part of the self-study, as well as for integrating the final document. Academy staff can assist in developing a timetable, and should be informed once a timetable has been formally approved. Once assignments for responding to the *Standards* have been made, the steering committee should ensure that a regular schedule of progress reports and meetings is established and kept.

The steering committee itself should issue periodic progress reports to the broader school community on the self-study process as a whole. The timetable adopted should create occasions for conversation among the individuals, committees, and offices responsible for drafting the self-study. This will encourage reflection on the relations between the parts of the school and their roles in fulfilling overall objectives, and will contribute to the coherence and usefulness of the self-study.

It is advisable that target dates for completing different parts of the self-study be staggered, with the most fundamental and general topics (mission, educational aims) completed before more specific topics (library resources, student services). Time should be allowed for school-wide dissemination and discussion of a full draft of the report before it is submitted to the Academy. This will help ensure that the entire community, including faculty, administration, and governing board, understand and benefit from the self-study effort.

### Length of the Self-Study Process

Depending on the size and complexity of the school applying for accreditation, the timeframe for completing the self-study may range from as few as six (6) months to as many as eighteen (18) months. How long the self-study development process takes depends largely on time, staff, and other resource issues and the school leadership ultimately must make the determination.

## Target Dates and Benchmarks

Target dates for completing the self-study and submitting a final version to the Academy are very important, and should be observed closely. Other aspects of the accreditation process, notably the required site visit by the AALE Site Visitors, depend on timely completion of the self-study process. Therefore it is advisable that benchmarks for indicating progress toward completion be established as well as a timetable.

***Please note:*** Site visits may be postponed or canceled if a complete self-study (with all supporting materials) is not made available to the Site Team members at least four weeks before the Site Team visit. The applicant institution or program is responsible for all costs associated with site visits cancelled for this reason.

## **Structuring the Self-Study**

The Academy's *Standards for Charter School Accreditation* documents provide a framework for the self-study report. The self-study process should result in a document that responds to each of the various standards as specifically, clearly, and concisely as possible. However, the *Standards* need not be seen as a limiting template for the final report. The framework provided by the *Standards* should be seen primarily as a guide for composing a narrative that provides in-depth exposition, analysis, and evaluation rather than as a checklist or questionnaire to organize information. The final, edited self-study should contain the following elements:

1. *Title Page*

2. *Table of Contents*

3. *Preface Describing the Self-Study Process*

The chair of the self-study committee should very briefly describe the nature and extent of participation in the self-study process, and certify that a copy of the report has been sent to the head of the school's governing board. A roster of the self-study steering committee's members should be included.

4. *Overview*

The overview should present a brief history and factual description of the school (including accreditation history), and concisely introduce any salient themes or issues that received special focus in the self-study process or report.

5. *Narrative*

The main body of the self-study should contain the school's description of how it reflects each of the Academy's accreditation standards and criteria. The order of presentation should follow that of the enumerated *Standards*. Formats for the narrative portion of the self-study that depart from that of the Academy's *Standards* should include an index showing where each item is addressed.

The narrative responses should briefly explain or describe how the school meets or falls short of meeting each standard. It is important that the narrative responses go beyond mere description and focus on analysis, interpretation, and projections. The responses should place special emphasis on areas needing to be strengthened or changed, and should briefly describe a plan for addressing these needs.

It is important to include only an appropriate level of detail. Narrative responses should provide sufficient information and analysis to be comprehensive and thorough, but no more. All references made in the narrative to school publications should cite specific documents, and give page numbers and any applicable section or paragraph numbers. These supporting publications should be included as appendices to the self-study.

#### *6. Conclusion*

The narrative should conclude with a concise discussion of the school's priorities and its recommendations and plans for achieving these (including, where appropriate, descriptions of available resources for accomplishing these priorities as well as timetables).

#### *7. Appendices*

Any material that is used to back up or stand instead of descriptions appearing in the narrative section of the self-study should appear in the appendices. The appendices should be divided and labeled according to the standard the backup material applies to either by number or title. If there are no backup materials for a particular standard, a numbered or titled divider still should be included with a note indicating there is no backup for that particular appendix.

## **Distribution of Copies and Next Steps**

Once the self-study has been completed five copies should be sent promptly to the Academy: a final draft plus four (4) copies. All should include all supporting documents. The Academy will forward copies to three (3) site reviewers and retain two copies. The school also should keep at least one copy on-site as a reference for the site reviewers to use during their visit.

With the receipt of the five copies of the school's self-study, AALE will forward all self-study materials to the site reviewers. They and representatives from AALE will review the self-study materials in preparation for the site visit, using them as a point of reference for that visit. AALE will retain all self-study materials for the term of the school's accreditation.