Criterion 2

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1 Resource Guide for HLC Criterion 2 (2025): Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

Overview: Criterion 2 focuses on the institution's commitment to integrity in all its operations. It encompasses ethical behavior, transparency in communications, effective governance, protection of academic freedom, and responsible practice in research and knowledge creation. Meeting this criterion requires institutions to demonstrate ethical conduct at every level, honest and clear disclosure of information, independent and capable board oversight, a climate that supports free expression, and adherence to high standards in scholarship. This guide breaks down each Core Component (2.A through 2.E) of Criterion 2, providing interpretation, types of evidence, example practices, reflection questions, and cross-references to comparable SACSCOC standards. The official Criterion 2 statements are not duplicated here; instead, the guide offers support for understanding and documenting how an institution fulfills these components.

1.1 Core Component 2.A: Integrity

Focus: Institutional Ethics and Policy Adherence. Core Component 2.A emphasizes that the actions of the governing board, administration, faculty, and staff consistently adhere to the institution's established policies and procedures. In practice, this means the institution has a strong culture of integrity – from governance decisions down to daily operations – and can demonstrate fairness, ethical behavior, and compliance with internal policies and external regulations. All members of the institution are expected to act ethically and responsibly, following codes of conduct and institutional policies that uphold integrity in academics, finance, human resources, and other functions.
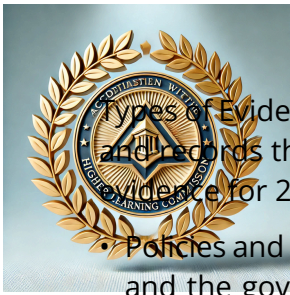
Types of Evidence to Demonstrate Compliance: Institutions should gather documents and records that show policies exist and are being followed at all levels. Examples of evidence for 2.A include:

- Policies and Codes of Conduct: Published codes of ethics or conduct for faculty, staff, and the governing board; policies on conflicts of interest, nepotism, non-discrimination, anti-harassment, academic integrity, etc., and evidence these policies are communicated and enforced (e.g. in handbooks or policy manuals).
- Compliance and Audit Reports: Internal and external audit reports (financial audits, compliance audits) since the last comprehensive evaluation or review (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation), demonstrating oversight of finances and operations.
- Governing and Advisory Bodies: Schedules and minutes of meetings for decision-making bodies or committees (e.g. board audit committee, finance committee, strategic planning committee, facilities committee) showing regular oversight activity (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation).
- Hiring and HR Processes: Documentation of fair hiring processes and qualifications for faculty/staff (such as search committee procedures, HR hiring policies) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation).
- Training on Ethical Practices: Records of ongoing training or professional development related to ethics and integrity for employees and board members (e.g. training on sexual harassment, Title IX, research ethics, campus safety) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation).
- Conflict of Interest Disclosures: Signed annual conflict-of-interest disclosure forms by board members and senior administrators (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation), and a conflict-of-interest policy with evidence of enforcement.
- Institutional Handbooks: Faculty, staff, and student handbooks that outline expected ethical behaviors and policies, along with evidence that these are updated and accessible.
- Grievance and Complaint Records: Published grievance policies for faculty, staff, and students (if not included in handbooks) and logs or summaries of complaints/resolutions, showing the institution addresses concerns fairly (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation).
- Regulatory Compliance Evidence: Documentation of compliance with federal and state requirements – for example, records related to FERPA, Title IX, Clery Act, etc., and how the institution implements these regulations (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation).
- Risk Management Policies: Policies or plans for risk mitigation in events like public health crises, natural disasters, or technology disruptions, illustrating preparedness and responsible management (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation).

Example Effective Practices: Institutions meeting Core Component 2.A typically foster a campus-wide culture of integrity and accountability. Some effective practices include:

- Strong Policy Framework: Establishing clear policies on ethics and conduct (covering academic honesty, financial integrity, conflicts of interest, harassment, etc.) and regularly reviewing these policies to ensure they remain effective and up-to-date.
- Leadership Tone and Training: Leadership sets an ethical "tone at the top" by communicating expectations for integrity. Regular training sessions and refreshers (e.g. annual ethics workshops, compliance trainings) are provided for faculty, staff, and board members to reinforce ethical standards.
- Transparent Hiring and HR Processes: Using transparent, merit-based hiring practices (e.g. search committees with documented procedures) and verifying credentials and qualifications for all employees to ensure fairness and competency.
- Accountability Mechanisms: Implementing measures like annual conflict of interest disclosures for trustees and senior officers, and having these reviewed for any necessary recusals or actions. Likewise, establishing confidential channels for reporting unethical behavior or policy violations (whistleblower mechanisms) and protecting those who report.
- Routine Audits and Reviews: Conducting regular independent financial audits and internal audits of key functions. Audit findings are reported to the governing board and acted upon, ensuring financial integrity and compliance with laws and regulations.
- Accessible Policies and Enforcement: Making sure all community members (including students) have access to handbooks and policy documents. The institution consistently enforces its policies – for example, documented processes exist for handling academic misconduct or employee misconduct, with records showing cases were addressed per policy.
- Ethical Decision-Making Culture: Encouraging an environment where ethical considerations are part of decision making. This might include ethics officers or committees, integration of ethics in leadership evaluations, and recognition of integrity in employee performance.

Reflection Questions for Institutions: When evaluating integrity and ethical conduct, institutional leaders and self-study teams might ask:

- Policy Environment: Do we have comprehensive policies in place that define ethical conduct for all members of our institution? How are these policies (e.g., codes of conduct, conflict of interest, non-discrimination) communicated and ingrained in daily practice?
- Training and Awareness: What training or orientation do we provide to ensure everyone understands and follows our ethical standards? Are new employees and

board members educated about expectations for integrity (such as academic honesty, research ethics, financial ethics)?

Monitoring and Accountability: How do we monitor compliance with our policies and address lapses in integrity? For instance, do we conduct regular audits and reviews? Do we track and resolve ethics complaints or grievances effectively, and is there evidence of improvements made from those processes?

- Institutional Culture: In what ways do institutional leaders (board, administration, faculty) demonstrate a commitment to integrity? Consider whether the governing board's actions and institutional decisions reflect ethical principles and transparency. Also, how do we promote a culture where faculty, staff, and students feel responsible for upholding integrity (e.g., honor codes, ethics pledges, open dialogue about ethics)?

- Continuous Improvement: Are there any recent incidents or challenges (e.g., a compliance issue, scandal, or crisis) that tested our integrity, and how did we respond? What did we learn, and what improvements have we made to prevent future issues?

Corresponding SACSCOC Standards (2018): Principle of Integrity (SACSCOC 1.1); Governing Board Responsibilities (SACSCOC 4.2.a, 4.2.d, 4.2.e, 4.2.f); and aspects of standards on institutional policies, procedures, and integrity (e.g., 5.5, 6.3, 12.3, 12.4, 13.6). These SACSCOC standards likewise expect ethical integrity in governance, administration, and dealings with students and the public.

1.2 Core Component 2.B: Transparency

Focus: Clarity and Honesty in Communications. Core Component 2.B is about the institution being transparent and truthful in representing itself to students and the public. Institutions must present information about their educational programs, costs, requirements, services, and institutional status accurately and completely. This includes everything from academic offerings and admissions criteria to faculty qualifications, tuition and fees, governance structure, and accreditation status. Additionally, any claims the institution makes about its contributions to students' education or to society (for example, claims about research excellence, community engagement, student outcomes, or unique educational experiences) should be supported by evidence. In summary, 2.B expects institutions to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in publications, websites, and communications, so that stakeholders are not misled.

Types of Evidence to Demonstrate Compliance: To show transparency, an institution will compile its public-facing information and how it ensures accuracy. Examples of evidence include:

- Up-to-Date Catalogs and Websites: An accurate and current academic catalog (online or print) that clearly describes all programs (with requirements for each degree level), academic policies, and student rights. Likewise, an updated institutional

website that provides honest information about admissions, programs, faculty, support services, etc., and is regularly reviewed for accuracy (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation).

- Public Disclosure of Costs: Transparent posting of tuition, fees, and financial information – for instance, a publicly accessible tuition and fee schedule and a net price calculator to help students estimate the full cost (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation).

- Course and Program Information: Published course schedules for all offered programs and terms, and descriptions of general education or core curriculum requirements (ensuring students see the range of course options available) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). Programs should have clear descriptions of outcomes and any unique learning opportunities.

- Accreditation and Licensure Status: A list of all current accreditations (institutional and programmatic) and their status, plus any professional licensure pass rates or qualifications if the institution claims strength in those areas (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). This includes truthful statements about the institution's accreditation by HLC and other bodies, abiding by HLC's requirement to accurately represent accreditation status.

- Admissions and Educational Requirements: Recruitment materials and admissions brochures that state candidly what the entry requirements are for the institution and specific programs (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). Any prerequisites, GPA/test score requirements, application procedures, and deadlines should be plainly available to prospective students.

- Governance and Oversight Information: Information that identifies who is responsible for the institution's oversight – e.g., listing of the governing board members or ownership if applicable, and explanation of the governance structure (public, private, part of a system, etc.) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). This might be in the catalog or on a "About Us" web page.

- Student Enrichment Opportunities: Documentation or publications highlighting educational enrichment the institution offers, such as study abroad programs (with details on destinations and academic integration) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation), internships, community service or service-learning partnerships (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation), research opportunities, student organizations and clubs (demonstrating a range of co-curricular options) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation), fine arts or cultural events, and any other aspects the institution touts as part of its educational experience.

- Campus Life and Support Services Info: Public information about student life and support services – e.g., descriptions of housing, dining, student health, counseling, athletics academic support, library services, tutoring, career services, etc., especially if the institution highlights these as benefits. This could include agendas/minutes

from student government or student advisory committees showing student involvement in campus life (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation).

Media and Publications: Examples of campus media (student newspapers, magazines, radio, or TV programs) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation) if relevant to claims about student engagement or communication. While not an accreditation requirement per se, showcasing them can support claims about a vibrant campus environment or free expression climate.

- Evidence Supporting Institutional Claims: If the institution makes specific claims (e.g., "90% of our graduates find jobs within 6 months" or "we are a leader in community service"), it should have data or reports to back those claims. For example, graduate outcome surveys, reports of volunteer hours, economic impact studies, or other assessments that substantiate any boast or promise made in official materials.
- Guidance Contact Information: Clear guidance on how the public or students can contact faculty or staff for more information (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). (For instance, directories or contact emails for program coordinators, advising offices, etc.) This shows openness and availability rather than obscuring access to personnel.

Example Effective Practices: To embody transparency, many institutions implement practices that ensure information is accurate and readily available:

- Routine Audits of Public Information: Establishing a regular review cycle for all public-facing information (webpages, catalogs, brochures). For example, an institution might task a committee or staff to annually verify that program descriptions, faculty listings, tuition rates, and policies on the website and catalog are up to date and correct.
- Version Control for Catalogs: Using a policy that once a catalog is published for an academic year, it is archived and easily accessible, and any updates are documented. Students and the public should always be able to find the requirements that apply to their cohort. Having an online archive of past catalogs or a change log is a good practice.
- Comprehensive Disclosure: Going beyond minimum requirements to ensure nothing is hidden – for instance, providing net price calculators, detailed breakdowns of fees, expected additional costs (books, equipment), and clear information on refund policies. This comprehensive approach builds trust by avoiding surprises for students.
- Accuracy in Marketing: Training admissions and marketing staff to emphasize accuracy over hype. Effective practice includes cross-department fact-checking of any statistic or claim used in marketing. If an institution highlights job placement rates or research achievements, those figures are verified and the source data is available on request.

Inclusive Public Reporting: Publishing an annual report or "Fact Book" on the institution's website that includes key data (enrollment, graduation rates, outcomes, accreditation status, strategic plan progress, etc.). This not only helps with transparency but can serve as compiled evidence during accreditation reviews.

- Engagement with Student Voice: Including student representatives in committees that discuss institutional communications or reviewing transparency (for example, involving student government in reviewing the clarity of the student handbook or website content). Students can highlight information gaps or confusing content, which the institution can then improve.
- Clear Channels for Questions: Providing easy ways for prospective or current students and the public to get accurate information – for instance, a dedicated email or hotline for inquiries about academic programs or a well-maintained FAQ section. Prompt, honest responses to questions build a reputation for transparency.

Reflection Questions for Institutions: To self-assess transparency, consider questions such as:

- Accuracy of Information: How do we ensure all published information about our programs and services is accurate? Do we have a process for fact-checking and updating web content, catalogs, and promotional materials? Who is responsible for this oversight?
- Completeness: Are we telling the "full story" to students and the public? For example, do we disclose all costs (tuition, fees, incidental expenses) clearly? Do we publish retention/graduation rates and learning outcomes openly? Are our accreditation status and any sanctions or probationary status (if applicable) disclosed per HLC policy?
- *Supporting Claims: If we make qualitative claims (like being a leader in research or having a vibrant campus life), what evidence do we have to support those claims?** Would an external reviewer find data or documentation on our website that backs up our assertions about ourselves?
- *Communication Channels: How do we correct misinformation or outdated content?** If a faculty member or student spots an error on our website, is there an easy way for them to alert the administration and get it corrected? Likewise, if we discover that prospective students have misconceptions about us, how do we address that?
- *Perspective of Audience: From a student or public point of view, is our published information user-friendly and clear?** This might involve asking: Can a prospective student easily find program requirements and understand them? Can a parent find what support services exist? Is our messaging free of jargon and truthful about the student experience?

Corresponding SACSCOC Standards (2018): SACSCOC emphasizes transparency through standards such as 9.7, 10.1, 10.2, 10.3, 10.5, 14.1, and 14.4. These include requirements for publishing accurate catalogs, academic policies, admissions policies,

and truthful representation of accreditation status. Just as HLC Criterion 2.B expects clear and complete information, SACSCOC Standard 10.2, for example, requires that an institution "makes available to students and the public current academic calendars, grading policies, and refund policies" (a facet of transparency), and Standard 14.1 requires disclosure of accreditation status ([PDF] Criteria for Accreditation: Proposed Policy Changes Approved on …).

1.3 Core Component 2.C: Board Governance

Focus: Effective and Independent Governing Board. Core Component 2.C centers on the governing board's autonomy and responsibilities in ensuring the institution's integrity. The institution's governing board (e.g., Board of Trustees or Regents) must be able to make decisions in the best interest of the institution, free from undue influence from outside parties (such as donors, political bodies, or other external entities). The board is expected to be educated and informed about its role so that it can provide appropriate oversight of the institution's financial and academic policies and uphold its legal and fiduciary duties. In practice, 2.C is about demonstrating that the board is structured and operates in a manner that preserves institutional integrity: it has appropriate independence, follows its bylaws and conflict of interest policies, focuses on the institution's long-term sustainability, and delegates day-to-day management to administrators and academic matters to faculty. (Note: Some specific expectations previously under old Criterion 2.C – such as detailed provisions for board autonomy and delegation – have been moved to HLC's Assumed Practices A.11–A.12 effective 2025. Those are baseline requirements, while Core Component 2.C evaluates how the board's governance is carried out in practice.)

Types of Evidence to Demonstrate Compliance: Evidence for 2.C should document the board's structure, policies, and actions that reflect effective governance and independence. For example:

• Board Bylaws and Charter: The board's bylaws, charter, or policy manual, including provisions that outline the board's authority, duties, terms of membership, conflict of interest policy, and processes (like how meetings are conducted, committees are formed, etc.). Evidence that these governing documents are up-to-date and that board members have formally acknowledged or received them (e.g., signed statements indicating receipt of the bylaws) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation).
• Conflict of Interest Policy and Disclosures: A specific conflict-of-interest policy for board members and senior administrators, along with annual disclosure forms signed by each board member (showing any potential conflicts are disclosed and managed). Documentation of how conflicts are handled when they arise (for instance, meeting minutes might note recusals when a member had a conflict).

Board Membership and Composition: A roster of current board members with brief bios or credentials. This shows that the board has the appropriate expertise and no single interest group dominates. Evidence of consideration of diversity and balance in board composition (skills, background, gender, etc.) can also be relevant.

- Selection and Evaluation of the CEO: Documentation that the board selects, evaluates, and if necessary can terminate the chief executive (President or CEO of the institution) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). This could include the contract or policy outlining the President's accountability to the board, recent evaluation reports or letters, and any procedures for presidential search and selection.

- Board Training and Development: Evidence that new board members receive orientation or on-boarding (such as orientation agendas, handbook for new trustees), and that ongoing professional development is provided (workshops, retreats, attendance at trustee conferences, etc.). Well-informed boards are better able to govern effectively.

- Board Meetings and Minutes: Minutes of governing board meetings (and key committee meetings) over multiple years (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). These minutes should reflect that the board reviews institutional finances, strategic plans, academic reports, and other high-level matters. They should also show votes and discussions, indicating active participation. (Having a schedule of regular meetings, e.g., quarterly, is also evidence of consistent governance.)

- Board Agendas and Materials: Samples of board agendas and packets provided to the board for decision-making. This can show that the board is given sufficient information on institutional performance (budget reports, audit findings, assessment data, etc.) to make informed decisions.

- Financial and Strategic Oversight: Records of board approval of major items like the annual budget, capital projects, the strategic plan, or key policies (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). If the board has committees (audit, finance, academic affairs), evidence of their reports or recommendations being reviewed by the full board can illustrate oversight.

- Board Self-Evaluation: Evidence that the board conducts periodic self-evaluations or assessments of its own performance. For example, a survey instrument used to poll board members on governance effectiveness, and a summary of results with improvement steps. This shows a commitment to good governance practices.

- Insulation from External Influence: Any documentation that underscores the board's independence – for instance, policies that board members must be free of employment or financial ties that could influence their decisions (aside from their role as trustees), or statements that board members act in a fiduciary capacity. If the institution is part of a larger system or has a religious or corporate sponsor, evidence of
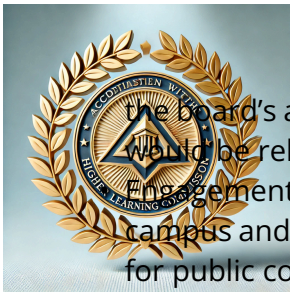
the board's autonomy in critical areas (like an operating agreement or legal charter) would be relevant.

Engagement with Constituencies: Records of how the board considers input from campus and external stakeholders. For example, meeting minutes might show time for public comment, or there may be reports to the board from a faculty senate or student representative. This can evidence that the board is attentive to the interests of the communities it serves (without being controlled by them).

Example Effective Practices: To fulfill 2.C, institutions often adopt the following practices to strengthen board governance:

- Maintaining Board Independence: The board's membership selection process avoids undue influence by any single stakeholder. Effective practice might include having clear criteria for board member appointments (e.g. not all members from the same industry or not all major donors) and policies to remove or recuse members if conflicts arise. A truly independent board culture is one where tough questions are asked and decisions are made in the institution's interest, even if that means pushing back on external pressures.
- Comprehensive Orientation and Ongoing Education: When new trustees join, they undergo a thorough orientation covering the institution's mission, finances, academic programs, and the board's legal responsibilities. Additionally, boards that excel often schedule retreats or workshops on topics like governance best practices, changes in higher education, or accreditation obligations. This continuous learning helps the board stay effective over time.
- Regular Policy Review: The board periodically reviews its own bylaws and key institutional policies (especially those related to governance and ethics). For instance, an effective board might update its conflict of interest policy every few years or review the institution's mission and strategic priorities on a set schedule, demonstrating active stewardship.
- Evidence-Based Decision Making: Board decisions (such as approving budgets, programs, or policies) are informed by data and analysis provided by the administration. A best practice is when board meeting materials are sent well in advance and include dashboards or reports on finances, enrollment, assessment of student learning, etc. This enables the board to ask informed questions and make decisions based on evidence rather than anecdote.
- Self-Regulation: Strong boards hold themselves accountable. They not only evaluate the president, but also evaluate their own performance as a governing body. For example, a board might have a governance committee that facilitates an annual self-review, and they use results to make improvements (perhaps adjusting committee structure or setting goals for the board itself).
- Transparent Communication: While boards often meet in closed session for sensitive topics, an effective practice is to be as transparent as possible about board

decisions. This could include publishing board meeting minutes or summaries publicly, communicating rationales for major decisions to the campus, and ensuring that constituents feel the board is listening. Open forums or town halls with board participation can bridge gaps between trustees and the broader college community.

- Delegation with Accountability: The board delegates day-to-day management to the president and administration (and academic matters to faculty governance) – as is expected – but pairs this with accountability measures. For example, the board sets clear expectations and goals for the president and monitors progress, rather than micromanaging. This balance ensures the board focuses on strategy and oversight, not daily operations, yet the institution's leadership remains answerable to the board for results.

Reflection Questions for Institutions: When reviewing governance under 2.C, questions to consider include:

- Board Autonomy: Is our governing board sufficiently independent and free from undue external influence? How do we know this? (Consider if any external party – like a political body, parent corporation, or single donor – has the ability to sway board decisions inappropriately. What safeguards are in place to prevent that?)
- Board Expertise and Training: Do our board members collectively have the knowledge and training needed to govern effectively? What orientation do new members receive, and do returning members get updates on areas like academic quality, student success, or financial management?
- Engagement in Oversight: In what ways does the board actively exercise its fiduciary duties? For example, does the board review financial statements and audits thoroughly? Does it discuss academic quality (through reports on assessment or accreditation)? Are meetings well-attended and do minutes reflect substantive discussion and strategic questions?
- Conflict of Interest and Ethics: How does the board handle conflicts of interest and ensure ethical behavior among its members? Are conflict disclosures up to date, and have there been any instances of recusal or policy enforcement we can document?
- Delegation and Evaluation: How does the board delegate authority to the administration and faculty, and do they respect those boundaries? Conversely, how does the board evaluate the president's performance and hold the institution's leadership accountable for progress on goals? Also, does the board periodically review its own performance and that of its members (peer evaluations or self-assessment)?
- Documentation and Transparency: Do we have thorough documentation of board actions (bylaws, minutes, resolutions) to demonstrate compliance and integrity? If an HLC reviewer looked at our board minutes, would they see evidence of the board's focus on student success and mission, not just finances or trivial matters? And do we communicate board decisions and priorities to the campus community to build trust in governance?

Corresponding SACSCOC Standards (2018): SACSCOC addresses governing board independence and effectiveness primarily in Standard 4.1 (governing board characteristics) and 4.2 (board responsibilities). Relevant sub-sections include 4.2.b (which ensures a clear distinction between board policy-making and administration, akin to delegation), 4.2.d (conflict of interest policies for board members), and 4.2.f (external influence on the board). These align closely with HLC 2.C's focus on an empowered, autonomous board acting in the institution's best interest.

1.4 Core Component 2.D: Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression

Focus: Commitment to Academic Freedom. Core Component 2.D underscores the institution's commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression as fundamental to the pursuit of truth in teaching, learning, and research. This means the institution values and protects the open exchange of ideas, even those that may be unpopular or controversial, and supports faculty, staff, and students in exploring knowledge wherever it may lead. An institution meeting 2.D will have policies affirming academic freedom, will encourage diverse viewpoints, and will ensure that members of the campus community can engage in debate and inquiry without fear of censorship or retribution (within the bounds of law and safety). In essence, a healthy academic environment requires that intellectual freedom is integral to institutional culture.

Types of Evidence to Demonstrate Compliance: To show a commitment to academic freedom and free expression, an institution might provide evidence such as:

- Academic Freedom Policy: A clear policy statement on academic freedom for faculty (and often for students and staff as well) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). This could be in the faculty handbook, collective bargaining agreement, or board policy, and should affirm the freedom to teach and research truthfully and to discuss ideas openly. Similarly, a freedom of expression policy covering the campus community (sometimes a separate statement or included in student conduct policies) would be evidence.
- Freedom of Expression Guidelines: Policies for peaceful assembly or demonstrations on campus (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation), which indicate that students and campus groups are allowed to express views publicly (e.g., time, place, and manner regulations that are content-neutral). This shows the institution has thought through how to support expression while maintaining order.
- Anti-Censorship Statement: Any official statement on censorship (for instance, an intellectual freedom statement in the library's policy or in IT usage policies regarding internet access) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). If the institution has faced incidents (like controversial speakers or publications), evidence of how it responded in line with protecting expression is valuable.

Training and Communication: Documentation that information about academic freedom is conveyed to the campus community – for example, workshops, orientation sessions, or materials for new faculty and staff that include discussion of academic freedom principles (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). Including academic freedom in new faculty orientation or graduate student TA training would be a positive indicator.

- Campus Events Encouraging Discourse: A list of events or initiatives the institution sponsors that promote open discussion of varying viewpoints (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). For instance, guest speaker series, debates, panel discussions on controversial topics, student club activities around political or social issues, etc., demonstrating that a range of perspectives is welcomed.

- Grievance or Incident Reports: If applicable, records of any grievances or complaints related to academic freedom (e.g., a faculty member alleging interference in research or a student group claiming free speech was curtailed) and how the institution addressed them. A lack of such incidents can be good, but if they occurred, showing they were handled consistent with policy is key.

- Published Materials: Campus publications like student newspapers or literary journals which operate with editorial independence can serve as evidence of freedom of expression in action. The presence of diverse or dissenting opinions in these outlets (and no indication of institutional suppression) can be indirectly relevant evidence.

- Board or Administrative Endorsements: Official endorsements of academic freedom, perhaps in the preface of the faculty handbook or a message from leadership reaffirming commitment to free expression (especially after a national event or controversy). These can show the tone from the top supports the principle.

Example Effective Practices: To truly foster academic freedom and expression, institutions might:

- Institutional Culture of Openness: Create venues for open dialogue – for example, regular "Campus Forums" where current issues (even contentious ones) are discussed openly by panels of faculty/students with moderated Q&A. This normalizes respectful debate and shows institutional support for free exchange of ideas.

- Protecting Classroom Freedom: Encourage pedagogical innovation and controversial topic exploration in the classroom, as appropriate to the subject, without fear. Effective practice is to have a process (and policy backing) that if a student or external party challenges what is taught (for being "too political" or "against beliefs"), the institution defends the faculty's right to include that material, provided it's academically relevant.

- Clear Policy and Training: Ensure that the academic freedom policy is not just on paper but understood. Orientation for new faculty explicitly covers their rights and responsibilities under academic freedom. Similarly, student orientation or handbooks might explain freedom of expression on campus (and how to disagree

civility. Some institutions even ask faculty to sign that they have read the academic freedom statement, underscoring its importance.

Handling Controversial Speakers: Have a protocol for guest speakers or events that may be controversial – one that aims to allow the event but also ensure safety and open dialogue. Best practices can include requiring a neutral moderator for Q&A, providing alternative programming for those who want to express opposing views, and clearly communicating the institution's stance that while it doesn't endorse all invited speakers, it upholds the platform for free speech.

- Support for Scholarly Independence: If faculty engage in research that might be sensitive or if they make public statements as experts that are unpopular, the institution publicly supports their right to do so (within the limits of their discipline and truth). This can be evidenced by leadership communications defending a faculty member's academic freedom when, say, external pressure mounts to discipline that individual for their research findings or comments.

- Encouraging Diverse Voices: Intentionally supporting student organizations and activities across the ideological spectrum – e.g., having both a College Democrats and College Republicans club and treating them equally, supporting cultural clubs that bring different worldviews, etc. The institution might also monitor campus climate through surveys to ensure students and faculty feel free to express their viewpoints in class and on campus without self-censorship. Addressing any climate issues (like one political view feeling silenced) is part of continuous improvement.

Reflection Questions for Institutions: Questions to guide evaluation of this component include:

- Policy and Understanding: What formal policies affirm academic freedom and freedom of expression, and do our constituents know about them? Are these principles articulated in faculty and student handbooks? Do faculty feel secure in their academic freedom, and do students understand their free speech rights (and responsibilities) on campus?

- Evidence of Open Discourse: Can we point to recent examples where diverse opinions were expressed and respected on campus? For instance, did we host events or encourage discussions that brought in different perspectives? How did the campus respond? This helps illustrate our commitment in practice.

- Addressing Challenges: How have we handled situations where academic freedom or free expression was tested? (E.g., a controversial speaker, a classroom conflict over viewpoints, external criticism of a faculty member's research or statements.) Did we uphold our principles and follow our policies in responding? What did we learn from those incidents?

- Education and Training: Do we actively educate our community about freedom of expression and how to engage in constructive dialogue? This might include training on civil discourse, inclusion (so that freedom of expression does not turn into

harassment), and understanding the difference between free speech and disruptive behavior.

- Balancing Act: How do we balance protecting free expression with maintaining respect and inclusion? While not explicitly asked in the core component, accreditors recognize the tension that can exist. Reflect on whether your institution has found a good equilibrium – for example, supporting the right to speak while also supporting those who may feel hurt by certain speech through counseling or open forums. Ensuring academic freedom does not mean allowing harassment; how do your policies delineate this line?

Corresponding SACSCOC Standards (2018): The theme of academic freedom is directly reflected in SACSCOC Standard 6.4 (which expects an institution to have appropriate policies and practices for academic freedom). HLC's focus on freedom of expression broadly complements SACSCOC's principle of fostering an environment where academic inquiry is unfettered. Both accreditors require evidence that institutions value and protect the free pursuit and dissemination of knowledge.

1.5 Core Component 2.E: Knowledge Acquisition, Discovery, and Application

Focus: Ethical Scholarship and Research Practices. Core Component 2.E deals with the institution's commitment to responsible acquisition, discovery, and application of knowledge by its faculty, staff, and students. This component expects that when an institution engages in research and scholarly activity (whether basic or applied research, creative work, etc.), it does so ethically and in compliance with professional standards and regulations. It also covers teaching students about the ethical use of information and fostering academic honesty. In simpler terms, 2.E is about research integrity and academic integrity: having policies (like academic honesty policies, IRB protocols for human subjects research, guidelines for using information technology and AI responsibly) and support systems (like offices of sponsored programs, research ethics training, libraries, etc.) that ensure knowledge is pursued and used in a principled way.

Types of Evidence to Demonstrate Compliance: To show it meets 2.E, an institution may provide evidence such as:

- Research Ethics Policies: Documented policies on research practices, e.g., an official Research Policy or a statement of principles for research integrity. If the institution has significant research activities, this could include policies on misconduct in research (how plagiarism, falsification, etc., are handled in faculty research) and adherence to federal research standards.
- Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Equivalent: For institutions that conduct research with human subjects (or animals), evidence of an active IRB or ethics review committee is key. This might include the IRB charter, protocols, minutes or reports, and

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training materials for IRB members and researchers (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). If applicable, evidence of an Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) for animal research (including the policy and any inspection reports) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). Smaller institutions that don't have their own IRB might show agreements with an external IRB or use of a peer institution's IRB.

- Academic Integrity Policies for Students: The institution's academic integrity or honesty policy for students (often found in the student handbook or catalog) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). This should outline what constitutes plagiarism, cheating, etc., and the consequences. Also, evidence that this policy is enforced – for example, records from a student conduct office about academic misconduct cases, or honor council reports (without violating FERPA, summaries or redacted info can be used).

- Academic Integrity Policies for Faculty/Staff: If separate from student policies, evidence of policies addressing scholarly integrity for faculty and staff. This might be in a faculty handbook, covering expectations for original work, avoiding plagiarism in research, appropriate authorship, data management, etc.

- Training in Responsible Use of Information: Examples of training programs or workshops provided to students and faculty on topics like plagiarism prevention, proper citation practices, research methodologies, and use of library and online resources (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). Many institutions, for instance, require students to complete an online academic integrity tutorial or have librarians give information literacy sessions on how to find and credit sources. Given modern challenges, training might also cover artificial intelligence (AI) tools and their ethical use in coursework (as noted in HLC's examples, training on AI and related technology is now a consideration) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation).

- Support Services for Research: Information about offices or services that support research integrity, such as a Sponsored Programs Office (which helps with grant compliance, budgeting, and regulations) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation), or a Research Office that oversees faculty research and ensures ethical guidelines are followed. Documentation could include organizational charts or descriptions of these offices' functions, and examples of guidance provided (e.g., a handbook on grant management or emails reminding faculty of protocol).

- Evidence of Enforcement: Records from judicial affairs or student conduct offices relevant to academic honesty cases, including how cases are processed and resolved (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). Also, any faculty committee on academic misconduct minutes. These demonstrate that when violations occur, the institution responds appropriately, underscoring the seriousness of integrity.

Showcasing Research and Scholarship: Programs from research symposiums, student research days, or faculty lecture series that highlight original research (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation). While this primarily shows a culture of inquiry (more a Criterion 3 topic), it can tie to 2.E if accompanied by statements on how research presented adhered to ethical standards (for example, noting IRB-approved student projects).

- Use of Technology Ethically: Policies or guidelines on the ethical use of information technology in learning – e.g., policies on using plagiarism detection software, rules for using AI writing tools, data security policies for research data. Including the mention that the institution has considered modern issues like AI-assisted writing (as HLC explicitly noted in evidence examples) shows responsiveness to evolving aspects of knowledge acquisition.

Example Effective Practices: Institutions excelling in 2.E tend to:

- Foster an Ethical Research Climate: They set a tone that research and scholarship are done with integrity. This might involve having a Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) training requirement for anyone involved in research (common at institutions with federal grants). Even if not required, offering regular RCR workshops for students and faculty (covering topics like research ethics, data management, mentor/mentee responsibilities, etc.) is a best practice.
- Integration of Academic Integrity into Curriculum: Embedding instruction on academic integrity and proper research practices into the curriculum. For instance, first-year seminars might include a module on avoiding plagiarism, or graduate programs might have a course on research ethics. This ensures students repeatedly encounter these concepts, not just in a one-off orientation.
- Robust Academic Support: Providing strong support through libraries and writing centers to help students do research correctly. The library might have a well-developed information literacy program, teaching students how to evaluate sources and cite them. Writing centers might help students paraphrase and quote properly. By proactively educating, the institution reduces integrity violations.
- Proactive Use of Tools: Utilizing tools like plagiarism detection software (e.g., Turnitin) or verification systems for research data, but framing them as educational tools rather than just punitive. Leading practice includes informing students about these tools and using results to teach them how to improve, rather than only to catch wrongdoing.
- Clear Consequences and Consistency: Ensuring that when academic dishonesty or research misconduct does occur, consequences are applied consistently. For example, having a tiered penalty system that is published (first offense might be a zero on assignment, second leads to failing the course, etc., or for faculty, following a formal investigation procedure). Consistency across different departments or instructors is monitored by a central office to avoid any perception of leniency or favoritism.

Celebrating Ethical Scholarship: Shifting culture from seeing academic integrity as merely avoiding the negative, to celebrating the positives of original work. Institutions might have awards for outstanding student research or publish undergraduate research journals, emphasizing original scholarship. They highlight faculty who secure grants or publish, noting compliance with ethical standards. All this reinforces that integrity and excellence go hand in hand.

- Staying Current with Compliance: If the institution is involved in research with external funding, it stays current with all compliance areas – e.g., Institutional Review Board protocols are updated with latest federal guidelines, the business office ensures grant expenditures are monitored (to prevent misuse of funds), and any required reports to agencies (like NSF or NIH on research misconduct) are handled properly. Being ahead of the curve on new areas (like managing conflicts of interest in research or data privacy laws) is also an effective practice.

Reflection Questions for Institutions: To evaluate this core component, consider:

- Academic Integrity Culture: How does our institution promote academic integrity among students and faculty? Do we explicitly discuss it during orientations, include honor codes or pledges, and do faculty reinforce it in classrooms? What trends do we see in academic misconduct cases – are they increasing, decreasing, what do they typically involve, and what are we doing about it?
- Research Oversight: If our institution conducts research, especially involving human subjects or animals, what oversight mechanisms are in place? Is our IRB functioning well with appropriate expertise and regular meetings? Do researchers (including student researchers) understand the IRB process and comply? Similarly, how do we oversee grant management and ethical use of grant funds (financial compliance)?
- Training and Resources: What training do we offer in responsible research and information usage? For example, do we have library instruction sessions on avoiding plagiarism? Do we train faculty on guiding student research ethically? Are there accessible resources (web pages, tutorials) on citing sources, using AI appropriately, and understanding copyright and intellectual property?
- Policy Enforcement: Are our policies on academic honesty and research misconduct enforced consistently? If a student is caught cheating in one class vs. another, are the outcomes equivalent? Is there a centralized tracking to identify repeat offenders? For faculty/staff research misconduct, do we have a clear procedure to investigate and report (if required by funding agencies)?
- Continual Improvement: How do we evaluate and update our approach to knowledge integrity? Perhaps through analyzing misconduct cases or feedback from faculty, have we adjusted policies or added new training (for instance, recently adding guidelines on AI tools or social media use in research) (Providing Evidence for the Criteria for Accreditation)? Demonstrating that we adapt to new challenges shows our commitment to upholding integrity in all knowledge-related endeavors.
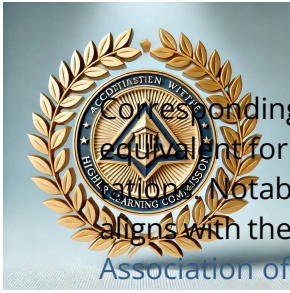
Corresponding SACSCOC Standards (2018): There is no exact one-to-one SACSCOC equivalent for HLC's Criterion 2.E, but elements of it relate to various SACSCOC expectations. Notably, Standard 13.5 on control of sponsored research and external funds aligns with the requirement to responsibly manage research activities ([PDF] Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on ...). SACSCOC also requires academic policies that typically encompass academic integrity (Standard 10.1), and student rights and responsibilities (which can include academic misconduct procedures) in Standard 12.3. In general, while SACSCOC doesn't have a single standard for "research and knowledge acquisition," it expects institutions to uphold integrity in all academic endeavors – a principle shared with HLC Criterion 2.E's focus on ethical scholarship.

Each Core Component of Criterion 2, as outlined above, helps ensure that an institution not only espouses integrity and ethics in its mission but demonstrates it through concrete evidence and practices. By gathering the suggested evidence and reflecting on the questions provided, institutions can identify strengths and gaps in their fulfillment of Criterion 2. This proactive approach will aid in preparing a thorough assurance argument for HLC and simultaneously improve the institution's own ethical standards and transparency. Each Core Component also includes SACSCOC references to assist schools in the transition from SACSCOC Standards to HLC Criterion. Use this guide as a roadmap for internal review and improvement as you document Criterion 2: Integrity in action at your institution.

Bibliography