

Accreditation of New Mexico Junior College under the new *Pathways* process of the Higher Learning Commission

What is *Pathways*?

The *Open Pathway* model proposes to separate the continued accreditation process as currently carried out through PEAQ into two components: the Assurance Process and the Improvement Process. For most institutions on the *Open Pathway* the Assurance Process will involve the review of information and data the institution already collects or prepares and contributes to an Evidence File, together with an Assurance Argument that makes the case that the institution continues to meet the Criteria for Accreditation and the federal requirements. This process will take place twice in a ten year cycle. As part of the Improvement Process, the institution will undertake a Quality Initiative as something that it elects to do for substantial institutional improvement.

When fully implemented, the *Pathways Process* will be conducted in a ten year cycle. However, institutions nearing their deadline for continued accreditation will transition into *Pathways* in an abbreviated form. That is the situation of NMJC. Our accreditation is set for review and continuation in 2015/2016. Thus, NMJC will transition into the *Pathways* process over the next four years.

The following activities will take place as part of our abbreviated process –

NMJC Accreditation Activities 2012 - 2016:

- *Contribute to Evidence File*

The Evidence File comprises two sections. In section one, the Commission contributes to each institution's Evidence File: recent comprehensive evaluation and interim reports, a summary from the Annual Institutional Data Update (AIDU), copies of official actions or correspondence, any public comment received, and other information deemed appropriate.

In section two of the Evidence File, the institution provides its own evidentiary materials. The understanding is that an institution will have a variety of materials relevant to its processes that serve as appropriate evidence. Evidentiary material may apply to multiple Criteria for Accreditation or Core Components. Every evidentiary item uploaded by an institution must be specifically linked to at least one Criterion or Core Component and must be referenced in the analysis to which it is linked.

The Evidence File is maintained on a dedicated server based at the Commission offices.

- *Quality Initiative – Degree Qualifications Profile*

The Improvement Process, a central part of the *Pathways* accreditation activity, consists of a major Quality Initiative that the institution undertakes. This process is required for continued accreditation in conjunction with the Assurance Process. The Improvement Process is intended to allow institutions to take risks, aim high, and if so be, learn from only partial success or even failure.

In NMJC's case, the college has been invited by the Commission to be part of a major national evaluation of the Degree Qualifications Profile developed by the Lumina Foundation. As part of the cohort group, NMJC will undertake an evaluation of the profile, determine if the profile is relevant to NMJC and our students, and provide a comprehensive report of our evaluation to the Commission and the Lumina Foundation. This formal portion of this Quality Initiative will be completed during 2012-2013.

- *Prepare Assurance Argument*

The Assurance Argument is organized by the Criteria and their Core Components. For each Criterion the argument articulates how each Core Component is met. Links are to be noted between materials in the institution's Evidence File and the statements made in the Assurance Argument. The Assurance Argument replaces the Self Study document of past accreditation processes. The argument is limited to a maximum of 35,000 words.

Higher Learning Commission Actions:

- *Review Assurance Argument*

The Commission will create a panel of peer reviewers who will be responsible for analyzing the Assurance argument submitted by NMJC. This review will take place off campus. Members of the panel will have full access to all parts of the Evidence File as well as the formal Assurance Argument document.

- *Conduct Campus Visit*

Following the panel review of the NMJC Assurance Argument and materials in the Evidence File, the HLC will dispatch a small team (probably 2-3 members) on a campus visit. The visiting team will be charged with evaluating the validity of key representations in the Assurance Argument, verifying campus compliance with key federal requirements, and on-site review of any issues raised by the panel evaluation of assurance documents.

- *HLC Committee Action to Continue Accreditation*

The Commission staff brings together the reports from the Assurance and Improvement Processes and prepares a summary based on the findings and recommendations from both. The reports from the Assurance and Improvement Processes, together with the staff summary, are reviewed for final action regarding NMJC's accreditation status, including any follow-up requirements or sanctions as recommended by the Assurance Review and any change in the *pathway* for the next Improvement Process as recommended by the Quality Initiative Review. The Commission will formally act on the recommendations and announce its decision on NMJC's continued accreditation. It is expected that this decision will be announced in early 2016.

NMJC *Pathway* to Continued Accreditation 2012 - 2016

