

Unified Accreditation FAQs

The University of Maine System unites Maine's seven public universities with a mission of education, research, and service for the State of Maine's citizens, communities, and businesses. To provide our students and State with the highest quality academic programs and create knowledge through research and innovation, we need to consider all options that will allow us to act proactively and sustainably despite limited resources spread across a large rural state with a small population. Recognizing Maine's challenging demographics and their state-wide mission, Maine's public universities need to share resources and programs to maintain access to vital programs at every one of our universities and the local communities they serve, leveraging those resources and advances in technology across traditional university boundaries to increase access and attainment across the State.

Following his September 2019 recommendation to the UMS Board of Trustees that UMS universities unify their institutional accreditations, the Board directed Chancellor Malloy to develop a framework and planning process for Unified Accreditation for the University of Maine System and provide a report for the November Board meeting for how to successfully transition to a unified accreditation. The Board also directed the Chancellor to seek input from every campus to prepare the report, and to that end, the Chancellor committed to visiting each campus at least three times this semester and next. Starting September 30, the Chancellor and his team have visited each campus to discuss and gather feedback from faculty, staff, students, administrators, and Board of Visitor members about how to pursue Unified Accreditation to ensure that it allows Maine's public universities to work together to better meet their education, research, and service mission to the State of Maine and its citizens. All campus community members have been encouraged to respond to an [online survey](#) regarding unified accreditation as well.

The following list of "Frequently Asked Questions," with answers, is part of that effort. Faculty Representatives to the Board of Trustees compiled a list of Comments, Concerns, and Questions that were submitted to the Board's Academic and Student Affairs Committee for its October 28, 2019 meeting. This "FAQ" document responds to the Faculty Representatives' Concerns and Questions, noting each to which the answers below are responsive. The FAQ answers below also respond to questions posed during the Chancellor's campus visits, as well as to issues raised to date in the online unified accreditation survey.

Thank you to all university community members who raised the issues and asked the questions thus far, to which the following "FAQs" respond.

FAQs

1) What is “Unified Accreditation”?

The University of Maine System is a single legal institution and instrumentality of the State of Maine that is made up of the University of Maine, the University of Southern Maine, the University of Maine at Augusta, the University of Maine at Farmington, the University of Maine at Fort Kent, the University of Maine at Presque Isle, and the University of Maine at Machias. Maine’s seven public universities are not separate legal institutions themselves -- no one university can own property or sign contracts by itself, for example -- but they have historically each been separately accredited by the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) and recognized as separate accredited institutions by the U.S. Department of Education for purposes of federal financial aid. Since July 1, 2018, the University of Maine at Machias is no longer separately accredited, but is nevertheless fully accredited as a regional campus of the University of Maine and encompassed in the University of Maine’s institutional accreditation.

Unified Accreditation will be exactly what the term “unified” means: *a unification of each UMS university’s separate accreditation into one state-wide institutional accreditation covering all UMS universities*. Unified accreditation does not require or result in any university losing its accreditation -- quite to the contrary, it means that all currently separate NECHE accreditations will be joined together at the System level, with the University of Maine System recognized by NECHE and the U.S. Department of Education as one accredited institution made up of the current seven UMS universities. NECHE has committed to listing the individual institutions on its roster.

The Guiding Principles set the parameters for how unified accreditation would be implemented and how UMS universities will retain their identities and missions. New programs and curriculum will continue to be driven by campuses and their faculties, singly and in collaboration with each other and under the coordination of System leadership through the Chief Academic Officers Council and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs.

NECHE and UMS will determine how each university can inform the public that it remains fully accredited under a unified accreditation model, including by listing the individual institutions on its roster.

Responsive to Concern 17 (This is too rushed and poorly defined)

2) How long has Unified Accreditation been under consideration?

A state-wide, System-level accreditation has been under consideration in one form or another since 1986, when the UMS Board of Trustees accepted an independent review panel’s recommendation and voted that UMS should “seek accreditation for the System in an appropriate time frame” as a way to “pioneer in the pursuit of excellence.”

UMS began serious discussions with NECHE in 2015 about how to transition to what was then called a “single accreditation,” except that at the time NECHE did not believe a state-wide system of several universities could be accredited and recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as an institution of higher education under federal law. Since then, with input from a former U.S. Department of Education attorney, NECHE and UMS have worked with the U.S. Department of Education, which has confirmed that the University of Maine System itself can be accredited and recognized on behalf of its universities as an institution of higher education under federal law.

All of the relevant correspondence between UMS, NECHE, and the U.S. Department of Education since 2015 can be found here: [Unified Accreditation Historical Documents](#).

Responsive to Concern 17 (this is too rushed and poorly defined)

3) How will Unified Accreditation benefit students?

With Unified Accreditation, UMS universities and their faculties will be able to work out seamless ways for students to take courses from other UMS universities without having to transfer them back in, with their financial aid following them when they do, and with the credits they earn from other UMS universities applying to their qualification for Dean’s list status. Over time, with UMS universities working out the details in coordination with System leadership, UMS students could have access to the full array of courses and programs across the entire System.

Many Maine families already think we are acting as one institution and become confused and frustrated by barriers that prevent us from fluidly serving students. Unified Accreditation will simplify processes and make them more transparent, bring greater opportunities, facilitate more timely degree completion, and remove key barriers to student success.

4) How will individual campuses retain their voice and standing under Unified Accreditation?

UMS Presidents and provosts will retain their roles, and will continue to serve on the existing Presidents Council and Chief Academic Officers Council, respectively. Campuses will retain their faculty and student representatives to the Board of Trustees, as well as their internal mechanisms for ongoing engagement. The Board will continue to rotate its meetings among the campuses, and individual Boards of Visitors will continue to both serve their universities and meet with each other and the Trustees as they do now.

UMS universities will retain their already-established missions in coordination with the state-wide System mission. In fact, Maine’s universities, whether large or small, coastal or inland, *should* retain their distinct personalities because that will benefit students and local campus communities, and lend distinction to the whole System.

Additionally, faculty would be encouraged to develop System-wide programs, certificates, or minors, along with multi-campus System-wide academic governance policies, in keeping with their existing shared governance responsibilities. New multi-university programs can reflect the

tone and essence of the universities from which they draw, and will be created by those involved in coordination with System leadership.

While the Board maintains governance authority and fiduciary responsibility for the System as a whole, there will be no top-down directive or mandate from the System or Chancellor's office about how unified accreditation must be implemented. Working with the System's leadership, each UMS university and their faculty will help to determine the proper implementation over a two-year period that will lead to NECHE's first comprehensive visit to assess the implementation of unified accreditation.

Responsive to: Concerns 5 (small campuses will lose their voice), 6 (we will lose mission differentiation of smaller campuses), and 15 (not enough clarity of leadership and decision-making between UMS and campuses)

5) How will Unified Accreditation affect small campuses?

Regardless of size, in a Unified Accreditation model, any UMS university will be able to share resources, positions, and programs with any other UMS university without being forced by NECHE to merge with whatever other university it chooses to share resources or programs. This will allow UMS universities to increase their programmatic options, which would improve retention and graduation of their own students, as well as welcome students from across the state into their programs and courses. Programmatic and campus admissions standards may remain the same, unless the faculty and admissions staff decide to change them within parameters established by UMS Board policy. Furthermore, Unified Accreditation will provide some protections for campuses that may not be able to meet every one of the individual accreditation standards and their requirements on their own.

Responsive to Concern 7 (small campuses will become satellite/feeder campuses to larger ones and will only get the less prepared students)

6) Will all academic programs be expected to collaborate? How would we assess program outcomes?

Under our current model, with each university being separately accredited, NECHE cannot permit the scope and scale of truly collaborative programs offered jointly by two or more UMS universities that will be necessary to meet state needs. Unified Accreditation will allow more programs to collaborate for a number of reasons, including to achieve greater efficiency, share faculty expertise, respond creatively to advances in technology and the economy, reduce internal competition, preserve programs that may be too small at any one university, and provide more options for students. Programs offered individually by a single university that have sufficient enrollment and resources and quality outcomes will not be expected to combine with another program at another university unless faculty and academic leaders at both the involved universities and System think that makes sense as an opportunity to provide some of the benefits listed above or dwindling resources dictate the necessity of doing so.

Programmatic collaboration is an option that will benefit students and better serve the state through sharing resources and reducing unnecessary duplication of effort. There may be cases where it is not needed or desirable, but there may be other situations where it is a way to safeguard vulnerable (e.g., under-enrolled or under-resourced) programs and diversify curricular offerings. Unified Accreditation eliminates the primary impediment to collaboration so that faculty and academic leaders can explore those options and take advantage of the opportunities they present more nimbly.

Collaborative multi-university programs may need to be assessed differently than single-university programs, and multi-campus representative teams of faculty and academic leaders, including the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs office, will determine how best to coordinate program assessment across the System's universities in coordination with standard practices already in place at every university and in light of the Programs for Examination policy and process as well. It may become desirable for program assessments to become more standardized over the next few years, but that will be determined in a fully consultative fashion over time for NECHE's first comprehensive evaluation visit under a unified accreditation.

Responsive to Concerns 9 (this may limit campus based curriculum development if all similar programs across the system must collaborate), 11 (assessments of course and program outcomes are difficult as is, it would be unmanageable for an entire system. We would lose the granular information), and 12 (individual accredited programs being forced to combine/collaborate with other non/differently accredited programs on other campuses), and to Question 26 (Is collaboration going to be mandated?)

7) How will Unified Accreditation affect the general education curriculum?

While we don't want general education requirements to create a barrier to student retention and achievement, there is no need to unify the current model at this time; a transition to unified accreditation does not require doing so. There is a block transfer agreement already in place that could form the basis of a shared general education curriculum if that is something the faculty believe would benefit UMS students.

Responsive to Question 23 (How will UA affect the general education – will it become unified?)

8) How will shared governance be maintained?

Shared governance is a core value of the System and its campuses, and faculty and staff have expressed their thoughts, ideas, and concerns on this and other major endeavors that affect the System. While the Board of Trustees has the deciding authority, Unified Accreditation is designed to be an open and transparent process throughout, with faculty having the same input and voice from a System shared governance perspective as they do within their own universities now. As stated in the Guiding Principles, "faculty will retain all rights to academic freedom and shared governance to develop academic policy, curriculum, and faculty appointment and promotion and tenure standards on their campuses and as necessary for multi-campus programs developed under a unified accreditation."

Any changes determined to be necessary to the University of Maine System's shared governance policies to achieve a unified accreditation, such as multi-campus or system-wide curriculum committees, faculty bodies, or academic governance standards, will be determined by faculty system-wide and reviewed and approved by the Chief Academic Officers Council, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, and UMS Board.

Responsive to Concern 18 (only lip-service is given to shared governance – recent experiences (Academic Partnerships, Academic Integrity Policy, System Research Plan) tell us faculty will not really be included)

9) What are the implications for the faculty peer review process?

We need faculty with multiple areas of expertise, including subject matter and teaching practices, aligned with university and student needs. There is no need to change the peer review process at the university level, which will remain flexible enough to recognize and honor distinctive faculty contributions. Subject to UMS policy and approval, faculty will themselves determine appropriate standards as deemed necessary on a System-wide basis for faculty engaged in programs offered by two or more universities.

Responsive to Concern 8 (There are big implications on the peer review process – we have different standards across campuses (research vs teaching vs service))

10) What happens with each campus's current re-accreditation schedules and timelines?

Universities that are currently nearing completion of their 10-year re-accreditation review will continue those efforts. As stated in the Guiding Principles, UMS leadership, NECHE, and the involved universities will determine an appropriate unified accreditation transition schedule that takes into account the individual university's accreditation status and schedule. Once a unified accreditation is achieved, UMS universities will not have to separately manage accreditation reviews on their own, although they will retain the opportunity to have NECHE teams visit their campuses as part of future System-wide accreditation reviews, and it is expected that NECHE teams will visit every university through the implementation of a unified accreditation model.

The current schedule of UMS university accreditation reviews can be seen here.

Responsive to Question 21 (If UA takes 2-3 years to develop, what about current timelines for each campus within their own re-accreditation schedule?)

11) Who will be responsible for collecting the necessary data for accreditation? How would NECHE conduct its visits?

Both campuses and System staff will have a role to play. System IR will work closely with campus IR and experienced accreditation personnel to assure the self-study has sufficient data and other information for Unified Accreditation evaluations and reviews. Once NECHE has the self-study, we expect they would send a System-wide team, with sub-teams visiting individual universities. Individual universities can also request a visit, which NECHE will accommodate.

Responsive to Question 29 (Who will collect the accreditation data? Where will the voice of the small campuses be in that data collection?) and 30 (How could NECHE do a visit?)

12) Campuses have had some bad experiences in the past with the early stages of centralized services; why should they trust the System in this instance?

Trust is the foundation to any successful collaborative endeavor; to not invest time in building trust could negatively impact this work, which is so important to our future and that of our state. Transparency is also key, and the Chancellor has repeatedly stressed his commitment to transparency.

But Unified Accreditation is only the beginning. It is a mechanism by which to enhance campus-driven opportunities to work together to better serve our state, and, in cases where it makes sense, will allow interested provosts and faculty to partner on high-impact goals and multi-campus programs. The actual change, with Board approval, would take place over time by UMS universities working together to respond to their own needs in coordination with UMS leadership.

Responsive to Concern 10 (we have ongoing serious trust issues with any BoT/Chancellor/UMS office initiatives because of bad experiences in the past with top down change)

13) What can be achieved by Unified Accreditation that we cannot do now by cross-listing courses or by using MOUs? Why not just have centralized IR help smaller campuses gather data for their own accreditation?

Separate university NECHE accreditation is the main barrier to the scope and scale of meaningful collaborations that would allow us to best serve our mission and preserve all of our universities where they are. With separately accredited universities, NECHE will accept only a limited number of cross-listed courses and collaborative (multi-university) programs, as the accreditation process must hold the accredited institution accountable for the academic experiences of its students. Unified Accreditation removes that barrier so that faculty-driven programs and other academic collaborations across the system can be implemented to fully realize their potential and best meet our public mission all across the State.

The issue is more complex than the ability of any one university to get the data and related resources it needs for accreditation. Some of our universities, as they are currently configured, are in clear danger of not meeting all of the accreditation standards now. Because it draws on all of the resources of the entire System, and holds the entire System accountable and responsible, Unified Accreditation relieves those individual campuses of the burden for meeting each of the standards on their own, and reduces the expenses associated with undergoing individual accreditations.

Responsive to Questions 24 (What can be achieved by UA that we cannot do now by using Cooperating Departments (and MOU's if needed)? We can get collaborative programs this way. Also if we implemented the BoT cross-listing policy that would remove another roadblock to collaboration) and 25 (Why not just have a centralized IR to help smaller campuses gather data

for their own accreditation? Putting resources into IR would seem to be more cost effective and timely than pursuing UA)

14) Could problems in one program or one campus hold up accreditation for all?

While the UMS will need to demonstrate system-wide compliance for each standard for continued unified accreditation, it will not depend on any individual program or university for doing so. Local problems will still need to be solved locally, but there will also be System and other university assistance and resources if needed, including adopting a collaborative program model if it makes sense to do so to preserve access to an otherwise under-resourced program. The preamble to NECHE's standards speaks to this: "Each of the Standards articulates a dimension of institutional quality. In applying the Standards, the Commission assesses and makes a determination *about the effectiveness of the institution as a whole...* The Commission recognizes that some aspects of an institution are always stronger than others. Meeting the Standards does not guarantee the quality of individual programs, courses, or graduates, but serious weaknesses in a particular area may threaten the institution's accreditation." (italics added)

Responsive to Concern 14 (one serious issue in one program or one campus could hold up accreditation for all)

15) Will Unified Accreditation save money? How will it impact campus budgets?

Some, as there will be savings in NECHE dues and the time and resources committed to preparing for six separate, uncoordinated university site visits and 5- and 10-year reviews. But Unified Accreditation is not being pursued as a cost savings initiative. It is, first and foremost, a mechanism to allow the universities and the UMS to better serve the State of Maine, and as a way to protect programs and campuses by giving UMS universities the ability to develop and offer shared programs, which is not possible in the current separate accreditation model.

The UMS already has a unified budget process and allocation model in place, and campuses have benefited accordingly as they are gradually being brought into closer alignment with their peers. The implications of Unified Accreditation on individual budgets will vary depending on how each campus approaches the opportunities available to them in a unified accreditation model. At the very least, there will be some savings as campuses will no longer handle the full re-accreditation process and related expenses themselves.

Responsive to Question 28 (What is the actual cost savings?) and 27 (How will this impact campus budgets)

16) What impact will Unified Accreditation have on competition between UMS programs and campuses?

Right now, our universities are competing for the 30% of Maine high school college-going graduates who end up matriculating at one of UMS's universities. This ignores our more serious competition with some of the state's private schools, where most of the other 70% go. Collectively, with a unified accreditation, we can be more outwardly-focused and better

coordinate our marketing and outreach efforts, thus reducing internal competition. We can also offer greater access to the System's academic portfolio no matter where a learner resides.

Responsive to Question 32 (How will this end competition between programs and campuses?)

17) What will the impact of Unified Accreditation be on Financial Aid?

Our Guiding Principles state that individual universities will continue to manage financial aid locally, and a UMS model for doing so already exists between the University of Maine and the University of Maine at Machias. Even though the Machias campus is accredited together with the University of Maine, the U.S. Department of Education has permitted UMM to continue to administer financial aid for its students.

Responsive to Question 22 (Will we have unified Financial Aid?)

18) We will be able to share library and other resources?

In a Unified Accreditation model, UMS expects to reduce the number of licenses required for library and IT materials so that these resources can be shared more broadly across our universities, rather than being forced to maintain separate licenses and subscriptions by separately accredited universities.

Responsive to Concern 13 (Resources across campuses are not equal (ie library) – NECHE will be looking at that.)

19) How prepared is the Board of Trustees for something of this magnitude?

The Board of Trustees has the legal and fiduciary responsibility to oversee the University of Maine System. Board and System leaders, including Presidents and Chief Academic Officers, have met with Dr. Barbara Brittingham, president of the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), and understand their responsibilities in the context of the challenges the System's universities face. They may have a better perspective than those who have never participated in accreditation efforts, since they have engaged directly with NECHE on this question.

Responsive to Concern 20 (The Trustees are probably not familiar with the complexity and nuances of the academic accreditation process, it does not make sense to have them be making this decision just based on recommendations from the Chancellor's office)

20) How much time and effort will this take? Will it be worth it? How will we meet all the outcomes identified in the Chancellor's recommendation to the Board?

There is no doubt that this endeavor will require concerted effort and commitment from all of us. The Board has asked the Chancellor to submit a framework for moving this forward, and expects to vote on whether to pursue unified accreditation at its January 2020 meeting. The System would then submit a substantive change request to NECHE that the Commission would consider in late spring or early summer 2020. If the Commission accepts the request, the System as a whole would effectively become accredited at that point, would be subject to an

initial implementation visit from NECHE (likely within 6 months), and would then have two years to prepare for NECHE's comprehensive evaluation visit, during which time faculty and academic leaders at UMS universities will determine with UMS leadership how best to satisfy NECHE's standards in a unified way and best permits UMS to meet its state-wide public mission.

UMS and university leaders will also work with U.S. Department of Education staff to ensure proper financial aid administration at each university in a unified accreditation model.

Not pursuing Unified Accreditation, however, may well result in the need to make some very hard decisions about eliminating unsustainable programs and practices. Given the known demographic threats, and the economic uncertainties we face, there may also be campus closures or reorganizations. If successfully realized, Unified Accreditation will allow us to better prepare for those challenges and, ideally, avoid them altogether.

At base, Unified Accreditation will give us the space and coordination we need to secure the futures of our smaller universities, respond more nimbly to market demands, serve the state more effectively, and, most importantly, better support our students and their success. It will require all of us working together to realize the potential of this initiative.

Responsive to Concern 19 (another UMS initiative that will require extensive investment of time and resources for what might possibly be an abandoned pursuit – resulting in lowered morale), and Question 31 (How (specifically) will you reach the outcomes stated in the UA Recommendation document?)