

Unified Accreditation FAQs *Version 2: Post Resolution*

On January 27, 2020 the University of Maine System's Board of Trustees directed the Chancellor and UMS University Presidents to prepare and submit an appropriate substantive change application to the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) to transition the separate UMS university institutional accreditations to a unified institutional accreditation for the University of Maine System, covering all of its universities. The full Board resolution can be found [here](#).

This document is a followup to the [FAQ](#) posted on October 30, 2019.

1) Chancellor Malloy has spoken about our need to prepare for a possible economic downturn. How will unified accreditation help during a recession?

It will allow us to provide the highest quality academic programs and research opportunities at the lowest possible cost. Our state is small. Our system is small. We need to act proactively and sustainably, which at times means we will want to share resources and combine efforts in order to maintain access to vital programs at every one of our universities and the local communities they serve.

Spring 2020 finds us in the midst of a pandemic, and we do not yet know what the economic impact will be on our System. Unified accreditation, however, will allow us to share our resources -- programs, services, expertise, technology, and more -- to better serve our state and stabilize our institutions, even in the midst of unprecedented challenges. By removing the primary barrier to extensive inter-institutional academic collaboration -- individual institutional accreditation -- we can work more effectively and expeditiously to provide workforce development and educational opportunities for all Mainers even as we face economic uncertainty.

2) Will this mean more administrators should be centralized? For example, will there be fewer deans?

The fourth Guiding Principle addresses part of this concern. UMS presidents will preside over the day-to-day operation of their respective universities, as well as the development of their university's academic, research, service, and extracurricular programs within the limits defined by the Board of Trustees and Chancellor. While some services are already centralized, it is too early to say whether fewer or more administrators will be needed in the future. Those decisions will be based -- as they always have been -- on programmatic needs and availability of resources. Given the current economic uncertainties, however, we are unlikely to add more administrators at this time. Additionally, the Board's resolution approving unified accreditation requires that UMS not substantially increase System administration at the expense of university governance and academic program and student support resources.

3) Who else is doing something similar?

There are several models of consortia, mergers, and other institutional combinations in higher education, but the UMS is the only one of its kind considering a full unification of its individual institutional accreditations in this way. Three campuses of the University of South Florida are in the midst of consolidating their accreditations. The University System of Georgia merged 18 of its universities into 9. The University of Alaska System considered unified accreditation last year in response to a System-threatening state budget cut. For the first time in the nation, however, we have the opportunity to attain an institutional accreditation model that will consider how well all of our public universities work together in meeting the nine NECHE standards: mission; planning and evaluation; organization and governance; academic programming; students; teaching, learning and scholarship; institutional resources; educational effectiveness; and integrity, transparency, and public disclosure.

4) How will we balance the resources that go to campuses in the system? Will there be internal competition for finances?

Tuition and fees generated on a campus will continue to stay on that campus, unless specific program agreements call for an alternative revenue sharing model. The System's budget allocation model will also continue to be used to distribute the state's investment in the University of Maine System. That model, developed in consultation with each campus, allocates resources based on a series of data points involving peer institutions identified for each of our universities.

5) What will this mean for both existing and new programs?

Unified accreditation will allow more programs the ability to collaborate with other UMS universities for a variety of reasons: to achieve greater efficiency, to share faculty expertise, to respond creatively to advances in technology and changes in the economy, to reduce internal competition, to preserve programs that may be too small at any one university, and to provide more options for students. Programs offered individually by a single university that have sufficient enrollment, resources, and quality outcomes will likely not combine with a program at another university unless they want to. Faculty and academic leaders at the participating universities, working with System leadership, would determine if collaborating makes sense as an opportunity to provide some of the benefits listed above, or if dwindling resources suggest a necessity for doing so. The System and campuses will collaboratively and strategically address program gaps and explore new opportunities.

6) Will all universities now be allowed to offer graduate programs?

Yes. Unified accreditation presents unprecedented opportunities for developing collaborative graduate programs between two or more universities in new and emerging fields. New graduate programs will still need to follow the established approval processes, including

working with other UMS leaders, and will then have to file substantive change requests with NECHE.

7) Will tuition rates be the same across the system?

No. Tuition rates are set by the Board and vary greatly across UMS. In-State rates are consistent across 3 separate tuition bands with UMFK/UMPI/UMM/UMA at one level, USM/UMF at another, and UM with its own rate. Out-of-State rates vary by campus. Going forward, unified accreditation may present us with greater opportunities to use differential tuition rates at the program level that align with costs, demand, or potential career earnings for students.

8) How will unified accreditation help us improve graduation and retention rates?

Because it will allow the System to be more innovative and responsive in delivering programs and curricula, unified accreditation will foster improved retention and time to graduation. Unified accreditation on its own is not the full answer to these issues, but it will position us to better address state and student needs, and to pursue needed innovations more nimbly and creatively than we can within the current structure.

9) How will this make it easier to work with other universities in the System?

Unified accreditation is a tool that will allow us to simplify processes between our universities and make them more transparent, bring greater opportunities, facilitate more timely degree completion, and remove key barriers to student success. Unified accreditation alone will not solve all of the challenges we face when trying to partner with each other, but it will allow us to collaborate in ways we haven't been able to due to the restrictions of individual institutional accreditation *and* will allow us to improve and streamline processes and create better experiences for students.

10) Will unified accreditation affect academic freedom?

As addressed in the second Guiding Principle, faculty will retain all rights to academic freedom and shared governance. They will continue to inform academic policy, develop the curriculum, pursue their own research agendas, and set faculty appointment, promotion, and tenure standards on their campuses. They will similarly govern and support multi-campus programs developed within unified accreditation. At the Chancellor's invitation, a committee of faculty senate and assembly leaders has already begun meeting to discuss and develop System-wide shared academic governance protocols.

11) How will unified accreditation improve overall quality?

Unified accreditation will allow us to draw on faculty expertise from every university in the System to enhance academic quality, particularly in collaborative programs. Faculty oversight,

including System-level faculty leadership, will maintain that quality, while collaboration will expand opportunities and access for students.

12) How will the campuses be involved? What are the next steps?

Although we each play distinctive roles on our campuses, we are also part of a larger whole -- the University of Maine System -- and are responsible for the success of those broader efforts. Unified accreditation will be a cooperative venture involving all campuses and System staff. In that spirit the University Presidents and UMS leadership have collaboratively identified the appropriate timing and process for engaging stakeholders for implementation. We anticipate a 2 - 2 ½ year planning and implementation process with several benchmarks along the way (please see the UA timeline).

There are three groups now working on the Substantive Change Request for NECHE: Academic and Student Affairs and Advising (ASAA, co-chaired by Presidents Joan Ferrini-Mundy of UM/UMM and Ray Rice of UMPI), Finance, Administration, and Student Services (FASS, co-chaired by President Becky Wyke of UMA and UMS Vice Chancellor Ryan Low), and a Unified Accreditation Coordinating Council (CC, co-convened by Chancellor Dannel Malloy and his Chief of Staff and UMS General Counsel Jim Thelen). These workgroups have organized their efforts around addressing specific NECHE Standards: ASAA (Standards 4, 6, 8, and parts of 5); FASS (Standard 7 and parts of 5); and CC (Standards 1, 2, 3, and 9). A faculty leadership group, consisting of the presidents of faculty senates and assemblies and the faculty representatives to the Board of Trustees, will provide input into the final document and will be heavily involved in addressing those standards related to academic programs, shared governance, educational effectiveness, and teaching, learning, and scholarship. Each workgroup has been reaching out to a variety of subject matter experts across the System to help inform the work, and there will also be a comment period for all stakeholders to provide suggestions and feedback on the draft.