

A Guide to the First-Time Accreditation Process

After several years of listening to the field through surveys, interviews, and convenings, a new, streamlined *first-time accreditation process* has been created.

- Through a combination of policy, process, and technology changes, the time needed to complete an accreditation review has been reduced by 50% or more.
- More emphasis is being put on institutional impact and less on process/policy.
- The Self-Study has gone paperless.

However, there has been no dilution of the standards, and the core architecture of a Self-Study, a site visit by peers, and review by the Accreditation Commission remains.

Application

- The online application is short and collects enough information to help the Alliance staff determine if the museum is eligible and ready for accreditation.
- There is no application fee.
- Before the museum can apply, it must have taken the Pledge of Excellence and successfully completed the Core Documents Verification Program.

The Self-Study

- Is comprised of the following sections and is completed entirely online:
 - **Organizational Data** – Simple demographic questions, such as museum type, governance, budget, and staff size.
 - **Museum Overview** – Questions that gather more detailed information about the museum's mission, collections, and other certifications; and special questions if the museum is (or part of) a museum system.
 - **Operational Data** – Questions that gather detailed data on finances, facilities, human resources, attendance, and types of collections.
 - **Educational Role** – Questions about how interpretive content is developed, and how the museum carries out its educational role, does research, and evaluates impact and success.
 - **Public Service Role** – Questions about what the museum knows (and how) about the people it serves, and how it reflects/serves its community and audiences.
 - **Collections Stewardship Role** – Questions cover all areas of collections management, including accessioning/deaccessioning and loan practices, environmental conditions and controls, accountability measures, documentation, insurance, and conservation/preservation.
 - **Planning** – Questions address the museum's near-term planning processes and its preparedness for the long-term future, and how it defines and measures success
 - **Organizational Health** – Questions on governance, financial stability, staff, security and emergency planning; and questions that show the museum operates in an accountable and transparent manner.
 - **Wrap-Up** -- An accredited museum is more than the sum of its parts. Here the museum is asked to summarize why it is important, to whom, and how it makes a difference.
 - **Attachments** – A list of documents to upload: 8 required; 2 if applicable; 4 optional.
 - **Help** – Definitions, resources, information on standards, and guidance on how to answer selected questions.
- A review fee, based on the museum's Alliance membership status, is due at the time of submission. Tier 3 Members receive a significant discount.

The Site Visit

- Site visits will happen only during three periods of the year, and will be pre-assigned based on your museum’s Self-Study due date (see the chart below).
- With this approach you will know far in advance the six-week window when your site visit will occur so you can plan accordingly. You will work with your peer reviewers to set the exact dates of the 2-3 day site visit.
- You will have the chance to vet a list of potential peer reviewers; the Alliance staff will select both team members.

Schedule

Applications Reviewed	Begin Self-Study	Self-Study Due	Site Visit	Commission Review
June	July	January	July 15 - Aug 30	October
October	November	May	Nov 1 - Dec 15	February
February	March	September	March 1 – April 15	June

- The time from the Self-Study’s submission to the Commission’s decision will be about 11-16 months, barring any issues you need to remedy during the process. (See below for a detailed timeline.)
- Once accredited, accredited status will expire in ten years. Exceptions to this are:
 - In select cases the Commission may designate a shorter award period due to concerns.
 - Requests (from the museum) for extensions to the Self-Study due date or site visit period will be approved only in rare cases due to highly unusual extenuating circumstances. Any such extension time granted will be deducted from the museum’s next 10-year accreditation period.

Tips for Preparing for Accreditation

- Get informed about the process and the standards!
 - Talk to your colleagues at other accredited museums, or who do accreditation site visits, about their experiences with accreditation
 - Review information on the Alliance website
 - Review the eligibility criteria to determine if your museum can participate
 - Review the Characteristics of Excellence online
 - Read the publication, “National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums”...and share it with the staff and governing authority
- Take the Pledge of Excellence.
- Gain support and commitment from your staff and governing body to seek accreditation.
- Undertake some type of formal assessment to get feedback on operations (e.g., Museum Assessment Program, Conservation Assessment Program, a consultant). . . and implement the recommendations before applying for accreditation.
- Revisit your mission and assess if it still accurately aligns with current operations.
- Build in accreditation preparation steps into your institutional plan.
- Allocate time, resources, capacity (human and financial) you will need to support the accreditation process. Build this into the strategic plan.
- Self-assess, and develop or improve, as needed, your Core Documents using online Alliance Resource Guides. Then apply for Core Documents Verification—successful completion of this program is a pre-requisite for applying for accreditation.
- Review the list of Self-Study attachments to determine what other documents your museum is missing and if any need to be developed or updated.

Accreditation Timeline

PRE-REQUISITE: TAKE THE PLEDGE OF EXCELLENCE	Click a box or send an email	
PRE-REQUISITE: COMPLETE CORE DOCUMENTS VERIFICATION	2 months for Alliance review once all documents submitted*	
THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS	TIME for this phase (months)	CUMULATIVE TIME for the review* (months)
APPLICATION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Once all Core Documents are verified, Museum submits application online. Application reviewed. If accepted, the online Self-Study link is shared and a due date is assigned (6 months). 	2 (weeks)	2 (weeks)
SELF-STUDY <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Museum spends up to 6 months completing online questionnaire and uploading documents. Museum submits all materials by assigned due date. Alliance staff does thorough review of materials for completeness. In 1 month, museum receives review results (Self- Study Review Checklist). Museum responds to any requests for clarification or information, and/or submits any missing documents within 1 month. Program staff determine whether or not the museum is ready for a site visit. 	8	8 ½
SITE VISIT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Process begins when museum submits Self-Study (Site Visit and Self-Study phases run concurrent for two months). Museum receives list of potential Peer Reviewers to approve; museum returns list within 1 week. Accreditation Program staff makes requests to two of the approved individuals to serve as the site visit team (the Visiting Committee). The Visiting Committee coordinates with museum to set visit date within the pre-assigned six-week window. Museum prepares for site visit. Visit occurs. Visiting Committee writes and submits report to Accreditation Commission. Museum placed on pre-assigned Commission meeting agenda. 	2-4	10-12
ACCREDITATION COMMISSION REVIEW & DECISION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accreditation Commission reviews Self-Study and Visiting Committee report. Commission grants or denies accreditation, or tables its decision for up to 1 year so museum can address specific concerns. Museum receives decision letter and a copy of the Visiting Committee report. When accreditation is granted, the next Self-Study due date is stated in the decision letter. Accreditation is granted for 10 years (shorter terms of 5 years are sometimes applied instead). 	1-4	11-16

* Times given are approximate and do not factor in additional time the museum must take to remedy incomplete items throughout the process or tabling actions by the Commission at final decision stage.