

CONFERENCE *for* MERCY
HIGHER EDUCATION

MISSION SELF-STUDY & PEER
REVIEW PROCESS GUIDE

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CMHE Mission Self-Study & Peer Review Process Guide

The purpose of the Mission Self-Study Peer Review is to explore the presence, expression, and effectiveness of the core mission of a Mercy college/university as this mission is informed by its Catholic identity and Mercy charism. This is an important aspect of our Covenant and is a required component to affirm continued sponsorship by the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas as a Catholic and Mercy college/university. The CMHE Board of Directors intends for this process to strengthen the presence of the Catholic identity and of the Mercy charism in the policies, programs, curriculum, practices, and relationships of the college/university.

The CMHE Mission Self-Study and Peer Review were informed by *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, the Institute Leadership Conference Statement on Catholic Identity and Mercy Charism, as well as the CMHE Statement on Our Catholic Identity and Mercy Charism. See Appendix A.

The Peer Review Process consists of the following elements, with an additional description of each on the subsequent pages:

1. **Preparation** – CMHE meets with the college/university’s president and mission officer one semester prior to the site visit, which in most cases will be virtual. At this meeting the overall process is described and mutual expectations for the process and visit are shared. CMHE will ask leadership if they are looking for peer reviewers with particular expertise, and all begin to focus on possible dates for the site visit. CMHE provides sample reports and schedules for the college/university to reference in their preparation.
2. **Report Submission** – The Mercy institution submits its Mission Self-Study one month in advance of the peer review team visit. It is recommended that this report be 30 pages or less. It should include an introduction/brief history, context of the institution, responses to the five main Self-Study questions, next steps, and any necessary addendums.
3. **Site Visit** – A peer review team visits the Mercy campus – attending meetings with broad and diverse stakeholders including, but not limited to: board of trustee chair and members, senior leadership, faculty, staff and students. The peer review team will offer an initial oral report to the campus community to complete the visit.
4. **Post-Visit** – Upon further reflection, the peer review team drafts its written report, which is then sent to the college/university president and mission officer usually within three weeks of the team visit. This is an opportunity to correct factual errors, suggest something the peer review team may have missed or misunderstood in error, as well as respond in general. The peer review team will take any comments under consideration and finalize the report.
5. **Approval and Affirmation of Sponsorship** – The final team report and institutional response (if applicable) is shared with the CMHE Board for approval and following CMHE Board approval, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas’ Institute Leadership Team (ILT) receives the Mission Self-Study and Peer Review Team Report for their review along with the board’s recommendation regarding sponsorship. The ILT generally writes a letter to the CMHE Board that is also forwarded to the college/university.

6. **Certificate** – Upon completion of the process and confirmation of sponsorship, a certificate of continued sponsorship by the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas is sent to the Mercy institution with the ILT letter. At this time, the team report should be shared broadly at the college/university as well as the affirmation of continued sponsorship.
7. **Ongoing Communication** – After the Mission Self-Study and Peer Review, each institution will follow a schedule that includes biennial conversations (two years post site visit) and a mid-point review (halfway between the previous Mission Self-Study and the next Mission Self-Study).

Preparation

The Mission Self-Study and Peer Review Process works best when it precedes the institution's regional accreditation self-study. The Mission Self-Study and Peer Review are intentionally scheduled in this order so that the mission self-study can complement and inform the overall regional accreditor self-study. The CMHE process gives schools the opportunity to use this complimentary process as an assessment and evidence to discuss mission in the accreditation self-study.

Engaging Stakeholders at College/University

Colleges/universities will design a process to engage a diverse and broad range of stakeholders in their community from Board of Trustees to students. CMHE strongly encourages each institution to consider inclusiveness, opportunity for reflective dialogue and broad input from various stakeholder groups in their self-study design. The CMHE Mission Self-Study and Peer Review is an important and required process to be reaffirmed as a sponsored Catholic, Mercy institution by the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

Many schools create a steering committee (or use an existing mission committee) to 1) design and coordinate the self-study process; 2) engage stakeholders across the broad community; 3) facilitate dialogue and listening sessions; 4) synthesize information, and 5) write the final Mission Self-Study report. Whatever processes are used to gather evidence, it should be briefly documented in the final report and the committee should be identified. It is suggested that institutions use a design similar to their regional accreditation design in developing the Mission Self-Study and in preparing for the site visit.

Writing the Mission Self-Study

The Mission Self-Study should include an introduction/brief history, context of the institution, address each of the five main self-study questions (below) and offer a conclusion that reflects an honest assessment of areas that may need enhancement or improvement. Appendices should be organized at the end of the report with numbered references within the report. It is strongly recommended that appendices include: an organizational chart and the strategic plan. Institutions may choose to offer a link to a cloud-based folder that includes appendices and evidence.

CMHE encourages responses to the five key questions that provide evidence of *what* is being done regarding a certain topic/question and *how* particular measures are being carried out, as well as critical reflection on the impact this has had on the institution's educational mission.

1. **What does the Covenant mean for your institution?** (*intended particularly for Trustees, President and Senior Leadership*)
2. **What does the Mercy, Catholic mission mean for your institution?**
3. **How does the institution focus and apply mission within each of the [Mission Core Integration Areas](#)?**
4. **What does the collected evidence demonstrate and tell about the vitality and effectiveness of mission at this institution?**
5. **In terms of mission, what is the “take away” from this self-study?**

Appendix B gives additional probing questions that could be asked under each of the five main questions.

Confirming Site Visit Dates

One semester prior to the Peer Review Site Visit, CMHE will ask the college/university mission officer to work with senior leadership to provide two or three options for Peer Review Site Visit dates that are suitable for their institution. The options should include three consecutive days. Generally, the schedule consists of an opening dinner the evening of Day 1, a full day of meetings with various stakeholders on Day 2, and one half-day on Day 3 concluding with the team's initial oral report to the college/university community. The team departs immediately after the oral report, taking no questions, generally by 12 noon.

Peer Review Team Named

Once CMHE and the college/university have agreed on the dates, CMHE will work to identify a team of three-to-five peers that will visit the campus. CMHE will communicate the finalized team to the president and mission officer at least three months prior to the scheduled site visit.

CMHE is responsible for preparing the team of peers for the self-study review and their visit to the college/university.

Mission Self-Study Report Submission & Draft Site Visit Schedule

The Mission Self-Study should be submitted via email to CMHE **one month** prior to the Peer Review Site Visit. Based on the self-study, the institution should provide a draft schedule for the site visit. Stakeholder groups always include the following: Board of Trustees chair, senior leadership, faculty, staff, and students; however, the self-study content should guide the scheduling of additional stakeholder groups for the peer review team.

Once received, the CMHE Executive Director will distribute the Mission Self-Study and draft schedule to the team of peer reviewers. The peer review team will meet at least two times prior to the site visit. During these meetings the team will discuss initial reactions to the self-study and gather additional questions that will be asked during the site visit meetings. Following the preparation meetings and prior to the visit, the peer review team could ask the college/university to tweak the schedule of meetings if necessary.

Site Visit

The site visit is three calendar days. The first day begins with the visiting team having dinner with the president. This can also be the opportunity for the peer review team to have a conversation with the board of directors. Invitation to this dinner is the decision of the president.

The second day is scheduled with meetings with various constituency groups (especially individuals and/or offices that are critical pieces in the self-study) including an open faculty and staff forum. It is preferable that these two groups will have their own sessions. The visiting team meets with stakeholders scheduled over the course of day two.

The third day will include a wrap-up meeting with the president and mission officer, time for the peer review team to meet, as well as the exit oral report to be read to the community. The team will depart campus by 12 noon.

The college/university should designate an area/room where the site visit team can consider its home base during the site visit. Access to wifi is required as well as access to a restroom. This will give the team a space to discuss their various conversations and work to draft the team report.

Post-Visit

Within three weeks of the peer review team site visit, the President and Mission Officer will receive a written team report. This is an opportunity for revision giving the president and mission officer the chance to correct factual errors, suggest something the peer team may have missed or misunderstood in error, as well as respond in general. The peer review team will take any comments under consideration and finalize the report. CMHE will give the institution a deadline to submit a formal response. Any formalized response will be included with the Mission Self-Study and team report submitted to the CMHE Board of Directors for review, approval, and recommendation to the ILT for continued sponsorship.

Approval and Affirmation of Sponsorship

The final team report and institutional response (if applicable) is shared with the CMHE Board for approval at their next scheduled meeting. Following CMHE Board approval, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas' Institute Leadership Team (ILT) receives the Mission Self-Study and Peer Review Team Report for their review along with the board's recommendation regarding sponsorship. The ILT generally writes a letter to the CMHE Board that is also forwarded to the college/university.

Depending upon the timing of the Peer Review Site Visit and the next scheduled CMHE Board meeting there could be the potential for a few months to elapse before the college/university is notified of the outcome of the Board meeting. The CMHE Executive Director will be in communication with the mission officer.

Certificate

Upon completion of the process and confirmation of sponsorship, a certificate of continued sponsorship by the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas is sent to the Mercy institution with the ILT letter. At this time, the team report should be shared broadly at the college/university as well as the affirmation of continued sponsorship.

Ongoing Communication

After the Mission Self-Study and Peer Review, each institution will follow a schedule that includes biennial conversations (two years post site visit) and a mid-point review (halfway between the previous Mission Self-Study and the next Mission Self-Study). These opportunities for dialogue and reflection allow each college/university to continually keep mission as a focal point.

Here is a sample of the rhythm of CMHE peer review activities:

Peer Review	Scheduled Semester	Mode
Self-study	Spring 2024	On-site
Biennial conversation	Spring 2026	Zoom
Mid-point review	Spring 2028	On-site & Zoom (hybrid)
Biennial conversation	Spring 2030	Zoom

Appendix A – Key Documents

Essential Characteristics of a Catholic college/university from *Ex corde Ecclesiae* :

1. A Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such;
2. A continuing reflection in light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research;
3. Fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church;
4. An institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life.

Institute Leadership Conference Statement on Catholic Identity and Mercy Charism for CMHE Colleges and Universities

The Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas recognizes that higher education is integral to the mission of the Church and is an effective expression of our Mercy mission. The ministry expresses our commitment to the pursuit of truth and knowledge and to the furtherance of the social, political, economic, and spiritual well-being of the human community. We encourage collaboration among Mercy institutions, regional communities and sisters in ministry.

- Institute Leadership Conference, Statement on Mercy Higher Education, 1993

CMHE Statement: Our Catholic Identity and Mercy Charism

A Mercy institution of higher education stands within the lineage of the Catholic intellectual tradition in its pursuit of truth and integration of knowledge for the common good. It participates in the Church's mission under the sponsorship of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas through the ministry of education, giving tangible evidence to its mission through ongoing teaching, scholarship and service. It demonstrates the values of mercy, justice and compassion as communicated through the traditions of the Sisters of Mercy. These common characteristics are uniquely given expression within each campus community.

Graduates of Mercy institutions are informed and shaped intellectually, socially and spiritually through a faith-inspired education. The academic study of the liberal arts and sciences and mastery of the professional disciplines enable Mercy graduates to be responsible leaders in their communities and professions. They appreciate and are informed by a Christian commitment to mercy and justice in the world. The living tradition of a Mercy college or university is sustained by a strong collegial community, with hospitality to new ideas and energies, and through collaboration within the Conference of Mercy Higher Education.

- Statement approved by the CMHE Board April 20, 2010

Appendix B – Key Questions

1. What does the Covenant mean for your institution?

This section is intended particularly for Trustees, the President, and senior leadership.

Ideas for probing questions to invite your college/university into reflection and dialogue:

- The Preamble to the Covenant explicates the understanding of the Sisters of Mercy relative to the mission and identity of their sponsored colleges and universities. How does this understanding inform and form the culture and the lived experience of the Catholic/Mercy mission and identity of the institution?
- How does the institution experience their relationship with the Sisters of Mercy and the CMHE? In what ways does this support, sustain and enhance the mission?

2. What does the Mercy Catholic Mission mean for your institution?

Ideas for probing questions to invite your college/university into reflection and dialogue:

- What does Mercy, Catholic mean for the institution's academic mission?
- What does Mercy, Catholic mean when it is embraced personally and collectively as an institution of higher education?
- Name the gifts and challenges to an active mission-focus that guide the institution?
- Give examples of where mission and identity are experienced and engaged at all levels of the community. Where would the community desire to see greater attention given to these?

3. How does the institution focus and apply Mission within each of the Mission Integration Core Areas?

Ideas for probing questions to invite your college/university into reflection and dialogue:

- How does the institution utilize the supporting documents and other resources provided by the CMHE to inform and shape its policies, practices, and programs? Give evidence and reflect on the impact on the institution.
- How effective is ongoing assessment of mission in further integrating the Mission Integration Core Areas in the work of the institution?

4. What does the collected evidence demonstrate and tell about the vitality and effectiveness of Mission at this institution?

Ideas for probing questions to invite your college/university into reflection and dialogue:

- Based on data, provide analysis and reflection on how effective Mission integration has proven to be in terms of inspiration and animation relative to mission, its foundational elements, common characteristics of the Mercy Way and mission assessment guidelines.

- How does the institution integrate mission and identity into the strategic planning process?
- Based on analysis of data and appropriate material, and experience, provide reflection regarding some of the challenges and opportunities that are manifested presently and maybe on the horizon in terms of Mission.

5. In terms of Mission, what is the “take away” from this Self-Study?

Ideas for probing questions to invite your college/university into reflection and dialogue:

Reflecting on the various aspects of *Ex Corde*, the *Mercy Way* and the Mission Integration Core Areas as a whole,

- What do you as an institution need to raise up, cherish and celebrate?
- What in this Self-Study can you replicate, enhance or carry into other areas?
- What in this Self-Study would be best described as surprises?
- What are areas that need attention, changes, or support?
- What are plans for going forward?