

MSCHE Site Visit Guide

This guide was created to provide information to the Mercyhurst community about the upcoming MSCHE Site Visit that is associated with our octennial Self-Study process. It contains some general information about the Site Visit and what the community can expect, as well as more specific information for those who will be participating in the site visit.

General Information about the Site Visit

What is the MSCHE Site Visit?

We all know that MSCHE – the Middle States Commission on Higher Education – is our institutional accreditor (formerly called a regional accreditor). MSCHE has established a set of quality standards that are used to evaluate member institutions. As part of their 8-year evaluation cycle, MSCHE asks that each institution prepare a written Self-Study that outlines how these standards are met, and further asks for support of those assertions through a set of evidence. During the Site Visit, a team of peers from other institutions have an opportunity to come to campus (this year, virtually) and engage in the last step of this evaluation – to confirm and clarify the written document that we have provided.

So, when is it?

The **Mercyhurst Site Visit is April 3-6, 2022.**

Who participates in the MSCHE Site Visit?

Normally, the answer would be “the whole campus!” Unfortunately, the global pandemic has necessitated a change in the way MSCHE conducts their site visits – as such, we will be hosting a *Virtual Site Visit* this year. There is still an opportunity for the whole community to participate through a set of open forums. In addition, some individuals will be asked to participate in smaller meetings with the Site Visit team members. The Site Visit Team provides us with a list of individuals/groups who they would like to meet with throughout the site visit – the individuals for these smaller meetings were chosen based on their role(s) on campus as related to that visit schedule and the information contained in the self-study.

How was the Self-Study Written?

Mercyhurst has been working on our Self-Study for two full years now. Led by the Office for Institutional Effectiveness and the Office for Academic Affairs, teams of stakeholders from across campus – faculty, staff, and students – served on a set of Working Groups that were charged with building the foundation of the report for each standard. These Working Groups shared their products with a Writing Team who created the first drafts of a full Self-Study Report. Follow up work by the Editing Team, the President’s Cabinet, and others led to the final Self-Study Report that was submitted in February of 2022. The entire team is very proud of the document that we submitted, and we hope you’ll read it!

What did we hope to get out of this process?

All good and deliberate assessment processes have the same end goal: to provide an opportunity for critical reflection which in turn leads to findings that will push the institution forward and guide improvement efforts in

the years to come. Mercyhurst truly believes that it is through such continuous evaluation and growth that we continue to be a university of distinction. In addition to these broader ideals, though, the Steering Committee facilitated the identification of Mercyhurst-specific goals and outcomes that would both guide the self-study and provide an opportunity to look at more specific issues. As part of the effort to engage the campus community early and often in the self-study process, the steering committee provided all faculty, staff, and students with the opportunity to contribute ideas for the intended outcomes of the self-study. After broad participation across campus, themes were extracted to create a set of intended outcomes that address the issues put forward by community members.

By engaging in this self-study process, Mercyhurst intends to:

- demonstrate how Mercyhurst University currently meets the Commission’s Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation;
- focus on continuous assessment and improvement of institutional policies and procedures to better achieve the Mercyhurst Mission and address institutional priorities;
- engage in an inclusive and transparent self-appraisal process that actively and deliberately seeks to involve all campus constituencies and institutional stakeholders;
- identify current and possible future practices of support of the student experience for all students in order to develop more effective, equitable, and sustainable programs, particularly in preparation for consolidation of the North East and Erie campus communities; and
- explore ways in which the Mercyhurst community can actively and authentically engage the Mercyhurst Mission, especially as it intersects with the core values of being Socially Merciful, Globally Responsible, Compassionately Hospitable, Intellectually Creative, and Reflectively Aware Ambassadors of Service.

Through engaging in self-appraisal in this integrated and meaningful way during both the Self-Study and Strategic Plan processes, Mercyhurst University identified the following institutional priorities:

- Engage and invest in academic program development that provides flexible degree pathways and diverse offerings for graduate and professional programs as well as programs in allied health and related disciplines, while maintaining the core liberal arts values of the institution.
- Enhance the effectiveness of our co-curricular programs, in line with the changing needs of the student population, and with special attention to the areas of mental health and non-traditional student services.
- Ensure a strong foundation for the university by focusing on building financial security, stabilizing and augmenting the physical and human resources, and actively engaging with the Sisters of Mercy as we prepare to enter our second century.

What comes next?

After the site visit, our team will finalize a written report. That report will be presented to the Commission – the MSCHE – for review at their next Board meeting. At that time, the Commission will make a final determination about our accreditation. We will receive written notice of their decision late this fall.

Do we HAVE to be accredited?

Yes. Institutional (formerly regional) accreditors like MSCHE have been charged by the federal Department of Education with ensuring that all institutions meet a set of quality standards. By successfully engaging in this process, MSCHE confirms that we are in good standing, which allows to maintain our eligibility to award federal financial aid for students. Our students rely on our accreditation to receive financial aid.

Information for Participants

First, know that we are very grateful for the time that each of the participants will put in to this process. You are the voice of Mercyhurst in those meetings, and we know that the time and energy you put into preparing for these meetings will pay dividends in a successful site-visit, and ultimately, reaccreditation process.

Preparing for the Visit

Most importantly, being prepared for the visit entails being *prepared with information*. Remember that our site visit team members will have spent many hours learning, reading, and researching us – they will be well-prepared, and we should be likewise. How can you prepare? There are a few key things you can do to get ready:

- **Read the Self-Study.** It will be particularly important to read the chapters associated with your standards, as that will be the basis of your discussion with the visiting team. As you read, pay particular attention to the final sections that highlight our strengths, ongoing initiatives, and opportunities for future development.
- **Reflect on your own unit.** Some guiding questions follow in future sections, but the most important thing is that you sign-on to the meetings with a set of examples fresh in your mind. That way, you'll be ready to provide information as requested by the visiting team.
- **Be flexible.** We've done everything we can to help the visit go as smoothly as possible, but there will always be hiccups. Some meetings may end early, some may run late, and the virtual format always adds an element of the unknown. Remember that it is okay – our visiting team members are humans, too, and so we'll all take a breath, laugh it off, and show them our resilient Mercyhurst spirits.

Thinking about your Unit

Whatever specific questions the team members may ask, one thing will be consistent: they'll want to hear about the good things that really are happening at the institution. As such, it's always a good idea to have a set of examples ready for your individual unit. To start thinking of these examples, consider these guiding questions:

- What is your unit/area doing *for students*? What about for the whole university?
- How are you assessing what you are doing?
- What improvements or changes have you made or are you planning to make? It's even better if you can share measurements of the impact that past changes have made!

No matter what examples you come up with and are ready to share, remember that it is important to answer the question that was asked and to do so clearly, concisely, and honestly.

Additional Evidence

If a team member requests additional evidence, please email ie@mercyhurst.edu describing the evidence that was requested, as well as information about the request, including what meeting it was in, who requested, and a short description of why it was requested, if you know it. All additional evidence must be uploaded by the accreditation liaison officer to a special portal, so please do not share it with the team members yourself.

When it comes to the site visit and participating in the team, use the following as a guide for interactions with the team members and our Mercyhurst peers.

<i>Instead of ...</i>	<i>It's Better To ...</i>
Attending the meeting unprepared	Read the standard itself, review the self-study document, and have good examples from your unit ready for discussion
Talking only about the past	Balance the present with the future, and remember that this process is really about continuous improvement
Focusing on one a single unit	Be inclusive of everyone represented in the meeting and allow others to share good examples
Expressing negativity	Be honest, but avoid the urge to “air dirty laundry”
Feeling frustrated by questions that are addressed in the self-study	Remember that the goal of the visiting team is to confirm and clarify , so asking questions like this is expected
Being disengaged	Be mindful of your body language, phone distractions, and other things that can take away from giving our full attention to the visiting team meetings (especially while on Zoom!)
Engaging in hearsay	Stick to what is in the self-study document and what you know to be true from your unit
Making up an answer that you aren't sure of	Tell them that you don't know, and help them know who should be asked instead
Volunteering to send more evidence	Let them request it directly, and send all such requests to ie@mercyhurst.edu

Excerpt from the Self-Study

Chapter 1: Executive Summary

This Self-Study Report serves the pragmatic purpose of demonstrating the University's compliance with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) Requirements of Affiliation and Standards of Accreditation. Through that process we have identified areas of strength and also opportunities for innovation and improvement, many of which we have already started to address. However, the self-study has done something even more important, which is what all good and deliberate assessment processes do: it has provided the University with an opportunity for critical reflection which in turn has led to findings that will push the institution forward and guide improvement efforts in the years to come.

Mission and Goals [Standard I]

The University's commitment to the mission, core values, and Mercy heritage is clear. Mercyhurst's mission and liberal arts tradition come together to create opportunities for a truly transformative education experience, as evidenced through initiatives like outREACH and the ongoing efforts toward supporting diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. As we move forward, Mercyhurst will continue to be guided by the mission in decision making, but with an increased awareness of the importance of operationalizing and documenting those impacts, specifically as they relate to resource allocation.

Ethics and Integrity [Standard II]

In the spirit of our core values, Mercyhurst is committed to upholding the dignity of work through ethical practices, transparent interactions, and the promotion of a culture of care and concern for all members of the university community. As we move forward, Mercyhurst will continue to ensure sustainable human resource practices including a mission-grounded performance review process for all employees and the ongoing review of policies, practices, and procedures relating to ethics and integrity, both formally and informally.

Design and Delivery of the Student Learning Experience [Standard III]

Mercyhurst University continues to demonstrate the foremost importance of learning and education through meaningful student experiences, such as REACH liberal arts curriculum and the mission-centered outREACH experience, global learning opportunities, educational support systems, and the commitment to teaching as the core of the Mercy Mission. As we move forward, Mercyhurst will continue to emphasize programs that integrate the liberal arts with applied fields of study in preparing students for meaningful careers and lives beyond our gates and continue efforts to support the research scholarship of both faculty and students.

Support of the Student Experience [Standard IV]

From matriculation through graduation, the University demonstrates a respect and appreciation for the total student experience and strives to ensure that all students understand what it means to be a "Laker for Life." As we move forward, Mercyhurst will build on progress made in educational effectiveness to understand the value of assessing learning and other outcomes more deeply in the student services areas.

Educational Effectiveness Assessment [Standard V]

Mercyhurst University has made significant progress in the area of educational effectiveness assessment since the last decennial review, and those efforts have manifested a culture of engagement in assessment at the individual, course, program, and university levels. Notably, efforts toward assessing the outREACH program have provided the university with learning outcomes data tied directly to mission that cannot be matched by many institutions. As we move forward, Mercyhurst will continue this positive trajectory as we refine efforts to gain

meaningful assessment of the REACH curriculum as a whole and more clearly document how educational effectiveness assessment is linked to resource and budget allocation.

Planning, Resources, and Institutional Improvement [Standard VI]

The University administration serves as thoughtful stewards of the institution's resources. The new administration has begun the work of budgeting and resource allocation in earnest, with a renewed emphasis on thoughtful and modest budget assumptions, information-rich decision making, and alignment of planning to the mission and core values. As we move forward, Mercyhurst will focus on necessary steps such as continuing to address deferred maintenance and debt service to ensure financial sustainability, as well as developing explicit and transparent means for linking the mission and strategic priorities to resource allocation and communicating with the broader university community.

Governance, Leadership, and Administration [Standard VII]

The governing body of Mercyhurst University serves as committed leaders, functioning to ensure integrity in all operations and with a commitment to shared governance. As we move forward, the president and cabinet will continue to build a culture of transparent and informed decision making, ensure the appropriateness of the organizational structure, and emphasize the value of communication with the university community.