Emerging Accreditation Challenges - What Academic Libraries Need to Know

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- Responsible action
- Equity and participation
- Research impact

Questions, Comments, Concerns in the Chat

Institutional Accreditation

Academic Libraries are Inextricably Linked to their Institutions.

Safeguarding Our Role in Institutional Quality

Accreditation drives institutional legitimacy, funding, and strategic priorities.

Historically, libraries have been embedded in accreditation language as markers of academic integrity, learning quality, and research infrastructure.

But new accreditation standards (HLC 2025, NECHE draft 2026) increasingly dilute or omit this recognition.

This presentation is about how those changes could reshape our ability to serve students, faculty, and the institutional mission - without proper engagement by academic library stakeholders.

What is Changing with Top-Level Institutional Accreditation Standards?

Changes to the Language

- Terminology loss: “library,” “librarian,” “information resources” removed or replaced with “learning resources,” “information services,” or “student support.”

- New standards focus on metrics like retention and completion rather than infrastructure or academic services.

- Governance implications from the removal of libraries from shared governance or resource allocation sections.

Changes to the Federal and Regional Policy Frameworks

Executive Order 14279 of April 23, 2025

- Directs federal agencies to review and potentially reject accreditation standards deemed politically biased.
- Undermines independent accrediting agencies by introducing federal override authority.
- Threatens institutional eligibility for federal funding if policies related to DEI, free inquiry, or “anti-American instruction” are present.
- Targets shared governance structures, academic freedom, and institutional autonomy.

New Regional Accreditation Agency

- New “ Commission for Public Higher Education (CPHE)” being created in response to Florida and North Carolina laws requiring new accreditors every cycle.

Language Analysis

HLC 2025 Standards and NECHE Draft 2026 Standards

Higher Learning Commission (HLC) revised its standards in 2024 for implementation in September 2025, removing **Standard 3.D.4**, which had previously listed libraries alongside infrastructure like laboratories and performance spaces.

In its place, a broader provision under **Standard 3.D** requires institutions to provide support services and infrastructure “necessary for student success,” without naming libraries.

Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Sept 2025 Example

The **Draft 2026 NECHE Standards** eliminates all references to libraries, librarians, and library services.

Key terms such as “library,” “librarians,” and “information resources,” which were present in multiple sections of the 2021 standards, are entirely absent from the 2026 draft.

New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) Draft 2026

Current NECHE 2021 Standards and the Draft 2026 Standards

Term	2021 Standards	Draft 2026 Standards
“Library” / “Libraries”	6 occurrences	**0**
“Librarian” / “Librarians”	1 occurrence (6.2)	**0**
“Library and information resources”	2 occurrences (7.22, 9.20)	**0**
“Information resources” (standalone)	3 occurrences (4.19, 7.21, 7.22)	**0**
“Learning resources” / “support resources”	2 occurrences	**0**

The elimination of library-related language in the draft 2026 NECHE standards is a semantic shift that represents a structural change in how accreditors will understand institutional quality.

When “library” and “librarian” appear in accreditation standards, they describe a service and affirm the necessity of that service for institutional legitimacy.

Their removal shifts libraries from being required components of accredited institutions to amenities, dependent on campus leadership priorities rather than systemic expectations.

Semantic Actions

Across the seven accreditors:

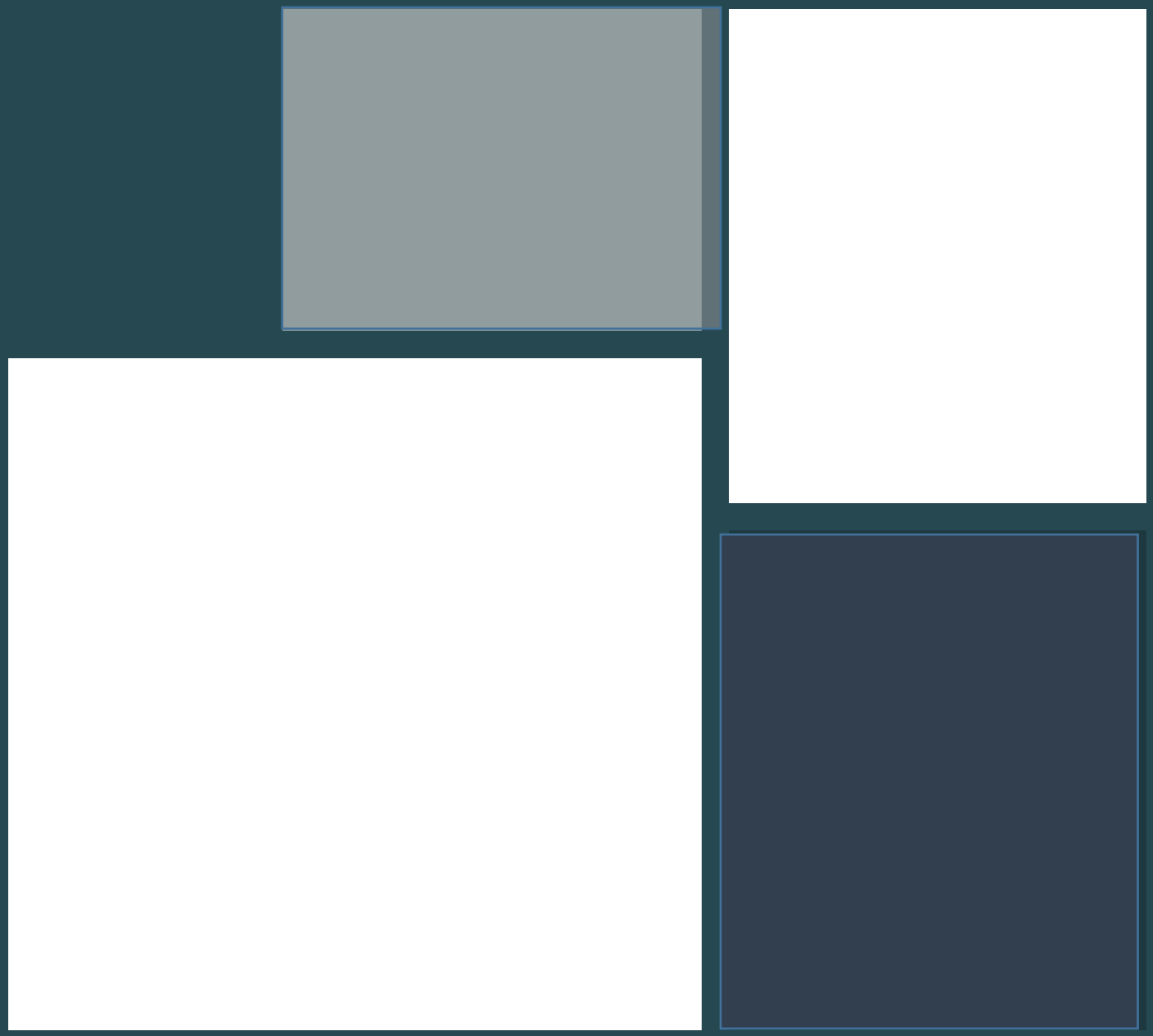
SACSCOC and NWCCU preserve strong, explicit standards naming libraries, staff, and resources.

HLC, MSCHE, WSCUC, and ACCJC have generalized or diluted references, focusing instead on outcomes, competencies, or support services.

NECHE is evaluating significant changes that depreciate libraries.

Language about Libraries

Questions, Comments, Concerns in the Chat



How Accreditors Listen

Holding the line or setting new standards?

Every accreditor revises its standards on a set cycle to maintain alignment with institutional quality, federal regulations, and higher-education trends.

Feedback mechanisms are consultative, not political, and open to all member institutions.

Accreditation reform is participatory. Academic library systems and consortia can shape future standards by monitoring review calendars, submitting formal comments, and nominating librarians for advisory and peer-review roles.

A Non-Political Process that is Set by Law

Internal governance: review committees or work groups of commissioners and institutional representatives draft revisions.

Public transparency: most agencies post proposed language and timelines, hold listening sessions, and issue open calls for comment.

Adoption process: revised standards undergo multiple readings or votes before full implementation.

Public Process

HLC – at least every 5 years

MSCHE – typically every 10 years, with updates as needed

NECHE – about every 5 years

NWCCU – about every 8 years

SACSCOC – about every 3 years (via its Principles Review Committee)

WSCUC – about every 10 years, though revisions can occur sooner

ACCJC – every 10 years, with pilot implementation phases

Regular, scheduled review cycles

Public comment periods when agencies publish draft standards and invite written institutional and individual feedback.

Listening sessions and town halls which are held virtually or at annual meetings for direct dialogue.

Surveys and pilot testing when institutions, peer reviewers, and evaluators provide structured responses on clarity, feasibility, and effectiveness.

Membership votes or delegate assemblies where final approval rests with reps from member institutions.

Ongoing comment portals, where some (e.g., NWCCU, NECHE) accept feedback year-round, not just during revision cycles.

The Systems are in Place to Engage

Culture of Readiness

Download the Paper and Engage the Process

Building Long-Term Advocacy Capacity

1. Develop a standing accreditation watch within library systems and consortia.

2. Establish liaison relationships between systems and consortia with regional accrediting commissions.

3. Create a shared comment-response repository within systems and consortia for future revision cycles.

4. Promote policy literacy among library leaders to strengthen representation in governance discussions.

If it Has Moved Away from Libraries…

Start Where the Metrics Are

If your accreditation language emphasizes retention, persistence, and completion over inputs like library facilities, collections, or staffing, prepare your comments to show that libraries already produce measurable impacts:

- Course-embedded instruction leads to higher GPA and persistence.
- Research support leads to faculty productivity and student engagement.
- OER and textbook-affordability programs leads to improved course completion.
- Reframe evidence around these institutional metrics to stay visible in outcomes-based standards reviews.

Download the Paper:

"Institutional Accreditation and the Academic Library"

everylibraryinstitute.org

Comparative Analysis of Regional Accreditors: Examines all seven U.S. regional accreditors addresses libraries, how standards have evolved, and where opportunities remain.

Case Studies and Consequences: Uses examples to show how generalized standards or administrative restructuring can endanger professional librarianship and student learning.

Professional Frameworks and Engagement Models: Positions the ACRL *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education* as a bridge between library practice and accreditation policy, outlining a phased model for consortia-driven engagement in standards reviews.

Policy Environment and Future Risks: Explores Executive Order 14279 and the pending Higher Education Act reauthorization, analyzing how federal intervention could politicize accreditation and what libraries must do to protect their standing.

Questions, Comments, Concerns in the Chat

Libraries sustain the research enterprise through open access, data stewardship, and preservation of the scholarly record.

If accreditation and federal policy redefine “quality” to exclude inquiry, DEI, or intellectual diversity, library collections and professional judgment become targets.

The #DefendResearch coalition strengthens our case that libraries are not neutral facilities but active guarantors of academic freedom and institutional credibility.

We encourage academic library leaders to sign the declaration at DefendResearch.org and include its principles in institutional policy statements and self-studies.

#DefendResearch

- Register for **updates from the EveryLibrary Institute** www.everylibraryinstitute.org
- **Sign/follow the Declaration to #DefendResearch** Against U.S. Government Censorship at www.defendresearch.org

#DefendResearch

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