Chadron State College
Assurance Argument FAQs

We at Chadron State College (CSC) do not claim the expertise to supply HLC approved answers to questions about preparing an Assurance Argument. We can, however, present the questions as we encountered them and share our institution's responses by way of example.   Similar institutions seeking reaccreditation through Open Pathways will likely have some of the same questions. CSC's peer reviewers complimented our Assurance Argument both during the review process and afterwards. We have noted features that our reviewers found helpful. A PDF document of our Assurance Argument has been provided on our website. Questions about our interpretations of and responses to each criterion, component, and subcomponent would best be answered by consulting that document. Here we look at some of the more technical aspects of composition.

Q. Who composed the Argument?

A. In the interest of maintaining a consistent speaking voice throughout the document, one lead writer was responsible for organizing information, editing, and entering the argument into the Assurance System. In our case, that person was a retired member of the CSC English faculty with a background in technical writing. The lead writer collaborated closely with a retired dean, who assisted with preparing evidence documents for the Assurance System. Both writing skills and institutional knowledge are important qualifications for putting together the Argument and evidence documents. Our peer reviewers liked the consistent voice created by one writer.

Q. What about other institutional contributors to the Argument?

A. Persons in key positions across campus supplied the lead writer with responses to components/subcomponents of the Assurance Argument. The form of these responses varied. For example, they included outlines, bulleted lists, brief responses to particular questions, and rough drafts.   Once the lead writer composed a portion of the argument based on these responses, relevant contributors read them for accuracy. Finally, after a draft Argument was completed, many readers across campus reviewed the content. On our website, the **Organization** section discusses the roles of various contributors.

Q. Who entered the Argument into the Assurance System?

A. Only the lead writer, two Assurance System Administrators, and the evidence file "gatekeeper" were assigned roles that allowed them to enter text and upload files into the System. However, the Administrators never edited or entered text/documents. Corrections were given to the lead writer to enter into the System so as to prevent changes that might interrupt the consistency of the narrative.   The evidence "gatekeeper" uploaded all evidence files into the System.

Q. Was the Argument written in a formal, third-person voice?

A. No, the Argument was written in first-person plural ("we," "our"). The choice of a voice is very specific to the institution. While an appropriate level of formality should be maintained, the use of a collective "we" can be effective in several ways. First, if your institution is genuinely student-oriented and collaborative, the collective first-person voice conveys a sense of community. Second, writing with "we" as a subject eliminates a lot of awkward syntax often created by maintaining a rigid third-person voice. However, each institution should find the right voice to communicate its identity. A technical school, for example, might want a different level of formality. Our peer reviewers thought that our Argument's voice accurately represented CSC's identity as a close-knit, learning-centered community.

Q. Did we address every component and subcomponent under each criterion?

A. Yes. Based on years of grant-writing experience, our lead writer thought our main organizational objective should be clarity for the peer reviewer. Therefore, we decided to provide a subheading for each component and subcomponent. If the subcomponent was not relevant to CSC, we briefly stated that fact next to the heading. During the writing process, this strategy kept us on track and aware of anything missing or left unaddressed. Our reviewers especially liked the organization of our Argument. Each reviewer focuses on a particular aspect of the content and appreciates ease in locating the relevant information. Many of the model Assurance Arguments provided by HLC are not organized by labeling all the components and subcomponents. However, as we considered these models, we sometimes had difficulty determining what the institution intended as a response to a particular component or subcomponent, so we chose to be explicit through our headings.

Q. Who wrote the Introduction?

A. In an interview, the President of CSC provided material for our Introduction, which was then ghostwritten by the lead writer. This piece of the Argument (and it IS a piece of the argument) is very particular to the institution. We wanted to convey our overall values in a voice consistent with and supportive of the rest of the Argument. We chose to incorporate a specific story of student success because it allowed us to highlight student centeredness at CSC. We briefly mentioned the services that contributed to his degree completion. We also used a graduation photo of that student with the President for the one graphic allowed by the System. Just as the voice of the Argument helps to establish institutional identity, so does the choice of a graphic.

Q. How did we address apparent redundancies among the components/subcomponents?

A. Sometimes, the Assurance Argument criteria and components do seem to be requesting the same information in different places. In particular, Criterion 5 asks for information discussed elsewhere in the Argument. However, the word limit requires us to make choices about where and to what extent we need to address an item. Here are examples of the strategy we used, which seemed to satisfy our reviewers:

Example 1. Component 5.A.4 states: "The institution's staff in all areas are appropriately qualified and trained." However, we had already provided descriptions of our human resources and qualifications under 5.A.1 and 3.C. 1-6. So we addressed 5.A. 4 in the following manner:

5.A.4.

CSC hires appropriately qualified professional staff, support staff, and faculty. Faculty and professional staff qualifications, training, and professional development are discussed in detail in Component 3.C. 1-6 and support staff in 5.A.1.

Example 2. Component 5.D.1 states: "The institution develops and documents evidence of performance in its operations." We had already discussed and documented various forms of assessment in our operations, particularly in the academic programs. So we referred to the previously discussed examples and gave their locations in the document in this way:

5.D.1.

CSC gathers evidence of performance in its operations. Typically, each unit has collected and archived such evidence; however, the new Campus-wide Assessment Committee is planning to coordinate institutional assessment efforts. Additionally, the Library Learning Commons (LLC) staff has created a SharePoint archive to store documents more efficiently. We have already presented evidence of performance documentation in several areas:

- Annual faculty and staff performance reviews and evaluations are kept in personnel files in the Human Resources Office (3.C.3. and 5.A.1.).
- Annual audit reports on the NSCS website document CSC's fiscal performance. CSC also submits financial reports to HLC documenting the institution's financial health (5.A.1.).
- Annual student learning assessment reports for academic programs are archived on the college SharePoint site (4.B.2.). Also, assessment data is collected and archived in Tk20, our electronic assessment tool.
- Academic programs conduct regular reviews (4.A.1.)

Q. What strategies were used to make sure the Argument did not exceed the word limit?

A. In editing content for the Argument, we first tried to eliminate material redundancies. Second, linked documents (which are not included in the word count) were sometimes used to fill out explanations. Finally, we edited for unnecessary verbiage after the Argument had been completed. At that time, we were about 1000 words over the limit. Our lead writer used a number of strategies familiar to technical writers. For example, we eliminated transitional phrases and changed passages from passive to active voice. Not only did we reduce our word count, but we also ended up with a more concise, straight-to-the-point Argument.

Q. Can specific pages in large PDF documents be linked to the Assurance Argument?

A. Yes. The Assurance System provides a mechanism for linking to specific pages in PDF documents that are in the System evidence files for a particular criterion. The reviewer can look at the specific page and scroll through additional pages in the document if so desired. We used this method numerous times to link to pages in our course catalogs and handbooks.

Q. How was evidence from the college website presented since only a few URLs are permitted in the evidence file?

A. We took screenshots of various webpages on the college website to use as evidence that we publicize our mission and other important information. We also used archived news stories from our website to document co-curricular activities, college outreach efforts, recognition of achievement, etc. Because our screenshots had to match the website at the time of the peer review, nonessential changes to the website were frozen for several months before the visit. This action required the cooperation of the campus, which was informed well ahead of the freeze. In addition, in the month preceding the visit, all screenshots were checked against the website for accuracy.