Educational institutions seeking initial accreditation must first establish their institution's commitment to pursuing the accreditation, determine if they are eligible, and then formally apply. To determine the institutional commitment, it must be emphasized to the educational community applying for accreditation that the effectiveness of self-regulatory accreditation depends largely upon an institution's acceptance of certain responsibilities, including involvement in and commitment to the accreditation process (NASC 2002). An institution is expected to apply and then conduct a self-study within the interval specified by the accrediting body. At the conclusion of the self-study, the educational institution must be willing to accept an honest and forthright peer assessment of institutional strengths and weaknesses. For regional accreditation, the self-study will assess every aspect of the institution; involve personnel from all segments of the institution, including faculty, staff, students, administration, and the governing board; and provide a comprehensive analysis of the institution, identifying its strengths and weaknesses.

An institution must be committed to participation in the activities and decisions of the agency. This commitment includes a willingness to participate in the decision-making processes of the commission and adherence to all policies and procedures, including those for reporting changes within the institution. Only if institutions accept seriously the responsibilities of membership will the validity and vitality of the accreditation process be ensured.

Because institutions of higher education are usually committed to the search for knowledge and its dissemination, integrity in the pursuit of knowledge is expected to govern the total environment of an institution. Each member institution is responsible for ensuring integrity in all operations dealing with its constituencies, in its relations with other member institutions, and in its accreditation activities with the regional accrediting association. Applicants for accreditation are expected to provide access to all parts of their operation and to provide accurate information about the institution's affairs, including reports of other accrediting, licensing, and auditing agencies. In the
spirit of collegiality, institutions are expected to cooperate fully during all aspects of the process of evaluation: the preliminary visit in preparations for an evaluation visit, the evaluation itself, and any follow-up to the evaluation visit. Institutions are also expected to provide the accreditors with information requested during evaluations, enabling evaluators to perform their duties with efficiency and effectiveness. Once these expectations are accepted and understood, then it must be determined whether the institution is eligible before the formal application can proceed.

The regional accrediting bodies in the United States normally accept applications from educational institutions that are concerned predominantly with secondary or higher education; have characteristics commonly associated with higher education; and meet the eligibility requirements. For higher education, the principal programs of eligible institutions will be degree related and will be built upon knowledge and competencies normally obtained by students through a completed high school or secondary school program, or its equivalent. Such programs will be based on verifiable knowledge that has been subjected to examination by competent academic persons and by established practitioners of the arts, sciences, crafts, and professions. Although diversity of requirements is expected among candidate and member institutions, the course and degree requirements of an applicant institution must also be congruent with those of the broader higher education community that the regional accrediting agency represents.

Eligible institutions may properly offer programs that the accrediting body would not define as higher learning (e.g., introductory courses in subjects that some students may have missed in high school, and courses and special programs specifically constructed to assist students to be successful with college-level coursework), but these are offered in addition to the courses and programs relevant to their mission.

The characteristics of an educational institution and the conditions required by a typical regional accrediting association as a candidate for accreditation, for initial accreditation, and for continued membership are listed in Appendix C. Each characteristic or eligibility requirement is an expected level of performance or precondition that relates to the appropriate standard shown in parenthesis. These are essential eligibility requirements that must be met for consideration of candidacy for accreditation status. Once the educational institution has determined that the eligibility requirements are met, the institution can pursue its candidacy for accreditation status. This offers developing postsecondary institutions the opportunity to establish a formal, publicly recognized relationship with the regional accrediting organization. It should be noted that operating nonaccredited higher institutions that meet the basic eligibility requirements may normally apply.

The candidate for accreditation status is an affiliated institution with a nonaccredited relationship with the commission or accreditation agency. Only accredited institutions are normally members of the accrediting association. Candidacy indicates that an institution is progressing toward accreditation, and attainment of the affiliate status does not ensure accreditation. Attainment of candidacy status is the usual outcome of approval by the regional accrediting body after two separate, sequential stages. Usually these steps are the application for Consideration and a Self-Study and Evaluation Committee Visit for Candidacy (NASC 2002).