



Chief Legal Officer and General Counsel

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) seeks applications and nominations for the position of Chief Legal Officer and General Counsel (CLO). This new position reports directly to President Selena M. Grace and serves as NWCCU's most senior legal executive, providing legal strategy, oversight, and accountability for all legal and regular functions across the agency.

Position Overview

The CLO directly supervises the Senior Vice President, Legal & Regulatory Affairs, sets legal strategy and risk tolerance in partnership with the President and Commission, personally handles or directly oversees the agency's highest-risk and highest-complexity legal matters, and serves as the final quality-control checkpoint for legal work product before it reaches the President, Commissioners, or external parties. Success in this role will be measured by the soundness, timeliness, and reliability of U.S. Department of Education (USDE) recognition, complaints oversight, By-Laws, Standards, and Policies (BSP) governance, and legal and regulatory risk management, as well as by the performance and development of the legal function as a whole.

Key Responsibilities

Legal Leadership & Supervision

- Overall accountability for the organization's legal function with direct supervision of the Senior Vice President, Legal & Regulatory Affairs, responsible for setting clear priorities, reviewing work product, review turnaround times and deadlines, quality standards, escalation triggers, and cadence for reporting the legal function's performance to the President.
- Maintain ultimate responsibility for contracts, intellectual property, legislative analysis, policy guidance, and other legal work product, serving as the final review and quality-control authority before matters are presented to the President, Commissioners, or external parties.
- Establish and maintain a documented quality assurance process for all legal work product across the legal function, including a defined escalation path for matters exceeding current staff capacity or expertise.
- Evaluate and optimize the legal department's structure, processes, and capabilities to support desired organizational outcomes, including establishing clear operating standards for timeline management, risk escalation, accountability, and identification of skill or capacity gaps.

Legal Strategy & Risk Management

- Advise and make recommendations on overall legal strategy and risk tolerance for the agency in partnership with the President, Commission, and leadership team.
- Personally handle or directly oversee the agency's highest-risk, highest-complexity, or highest-visibility legal matters, including significant contract disputes, regulatory enforcement actions, and matters involving material reputational risk.
- Anticipate and mitigate organizational legal risk across all agency functions, ensuring timely escalation of emerging issues to the President.
- Oversee the selection, management, and budgeting of outside counsel for matters requiring specialized expertise or exceeding internal capacity.
- Demonstrate self-awareness and candor regarding areas of expertise and knowledge.

Regulatory Oversight

- Provide executive-level oversight of USDE recognition, ensuring the agency's collection, accuracy, and timely submission of all required documentation.
- Provide executive-level oversight of complaints oversight and BSP governance, ensuring consistency, timeliness, and regulatory compliance across both functions.
- Ensure the legal and regulatory functions maintain alignment between federal regulations and NWCCU's handbooks, manuals, eligibility requirements, standards, and policies.

Executive Partnership & External Representation

- Partner with the President, leadership team, and Commission committees on governance decisions, policy development, and organizational strategy involving legal or regulatory considerations.
- Represent NWCCU on legal and regulatory matters with regulators, policymakers, and national higher education organizations as delegated by the President.
- Support the President's preparation for Commission and National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) engagements on all matters with legal or regulatory dimensions.

Confidentiality

This position requires the highest level of confidentiality and ethical standards. The incumbent must maintain attorney-client privilege, handle sensitive institutional information appropriately, and demonstrate unwavering integrity in all professional dealings. Compliance with professional responsibility rules and continuing legal education requirements is mandatory.

Qualifications

Minimum Qualifications

- Juris Doctor from an accredited law school; active bar membership in good standing.

- Expert knowledge of administrative law, regulatory compliance, and federal oversight processes.
- Deep understanding of higher education law, including accreditation, Title IV, FERPA, ADA, and related statutes.
- 12+ years of progressively responsible legal experience, with significant expertise in higher education law, non-profit governance, corporate law, and tax-exempt organizations.
- Experience in senior legal leadership roles with direct supervisory responsibility over other attorneys or senior legal staff.
- Demonstrated experience managing organizational legal risk, compliance functions, or accreditation-related legal issues at an executive level.
- Demonstrated experience building and enforcing quality assurance/quality control processes for legal work product across a team.
- Excellent advisory and interpersonal skills, with the ability to translate and interpret complex legal and regulatory issues into clear, practical guidance for the President, Commissioners, and senior leadership.
- Demonstrated experience managing complex litigation and regulatory investigations, including selection and oversight of outside counsel.
- Ability to take the lead in initiatives and work independently and remotely.
- Possesses project-based leadership skills in working with colleagues who do not report to the CLO.
- Demonstrated ability to manage multiple responsibilities and priorities on a timely basis.
- Ability to be a public spokesperson on regulatory issues.

Preferred Qualifications

- Demonstrated experience with institutional accrediting commissions.
- Experience working in an executive environment that moves quickly.
- Demonstrated knowledge of the federal recognition process and oversight by the U.S. Department of Education.
- Hands-on experience with accreditation appeals, adverse actions, institutional closures, and related compliance proceedings.
- Understanding of the broad range of higher education legal issues.
- Prior experience as a General Counsel, Chief Legal Officer, or equivalent at a nonprofit, association, an institution of higher education, a law firm or regulatory agency.
- Exhibits excellent team member skills and the ability to build highly productive and trusting relationships with the Commission, the President, and colleagues.
- Experience reviewing contracts, emphasizing risk and compliance.
- Demonstrated experience working with a board or commission and understanding of board operations and procedures.

Key Priorities

The Chief Legal Officer and General Counsel will:

- Stay current with existing USDE requirements and rapidly evolving USDE developments to ensure compliance and maintain federal Recognition under the Higher Education Act.
- Monitor federal negotiated rule making developments, offer comments on proposed rules and ensure NWCCU's compliance with final rules.
- Conduct a Commission policy review to ensure compliance with federal regulations and NWCCU policies.
- Advise the President on state law requirements and potential growth into new states.
- Collaborate with the Senior Vice President, Finance & Administration on the Commission's pending name change and ensure that all logistical issues are handled smoothly.
- Advise and support the Commission on all applicable regulatory and compliance matters.
- Take the initiative in responding to complaints against the Commission and member institutions and recommend appropriate changes in complaint procedures.
- Coordinate with colleagues on accreditation and regulatory developments that will be communicated to member institutions.
- Establish a cooperative relationship with member institutions.

Working Conditions

This is a senior leadership role with a remote work arrangement, with periodic travel to Commission meetings, site visits, national conferences, and the NWCCU's Redmond, WA office. The NWCCU operates on Pacific Time.

About NWCCU

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities is a Washington nonprofit corporation, recognized as a 501(c)(3) organization by the Internal Revenue Service. The Commission is recognized by the United States Department of Education as an accreditor of higher education institutions throughout the United States.

NWCCU provides institutional accreditation for public and private institutions of higher education, including Tribal and Faith-Based institutions, throughout the United States and internationally.

In deep partnership with member institutions, NWCCU creates the conditions that allow colleges and universities to advance student achievement, student learning, and student success for every student; strengthens educational quality and institutional effectiveness; facilitates rigorous self-assessment and collegial peer review; and upholds public trust through accountability and transparency.

The purpose of NWCCU accreditation is to assure students, communities, and the public that an NWCCU-accredited institution has been rigorously evaluated and meets the standards required to deliver on its commitments to learners. NWCCU pursues this through continuous

improvement grounded in data and evidence, genuine partnership with member institutions, and an accreditation process that is transparent, accountable, and open to ongoing feedback.

The NWCCU Board of Commissioners authorized the agency to begin exploring options to change its name to better reflect its national scope and the evolving landscape of higher education accreditation. The agency is committed to moving thoughtfully and efficiently through this process with an anticipated final decision by the July 2026 Commission meeting, allowing sufficient time for thorough research, meaningful stakeholder consultation, and careful consideration while maintaining momentum toward this important strategic step.

NWCCU Vision

Elevating higher education. Transforming learning.

NWCCU Mission

Through deep partnership with member institutions, we create the conditions that allow colleges and universities to deliver on commitments made to their students, their communities, and the next generation of learners and leaders.

NWCCU Core Values

Students First
Partnership
Continuous Improvement
Public Trust

NWCCU Board

The NWCCU Board consists of twenty-six Commissioners, serving staggered three-year terms without compensation, with a majority representing institutions accredited by NWCCU, at least one representing tribal colleges, six representing the general public, and two members from institutions outside the region.

History

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities was founded in 1917 as a voluntary, nongovernmental organization for the improvement of educational institutions. Originally known as the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Colleges and Universities, the Commission on Colleges and Universities separated from the Association of Secondary Schools in 2002. On May 7, 2003, the Commission was renamed the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

Since 1952, the U.S. Department of Education has listed the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities and its predecessors as a nationally recognized accrediting agency for institutions offering programs at the postsecondary level of at least one academic year in length. The Commission was re-recognized by USDE in 2023 and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation in 2018.

Selena M. Grace, Ph.D., NWCCU President

Dr. Grace was appointed President of NWCCU in July 2025, after a national search. She previously served as Executive Vice President for NWCCU and provided strategic counsel on internal affairs and engagement with external state and federal regulatory agencies such as the Council of Recognized Accrediting Commissions, NACIQI, and state/federal legislators. Previously, she served as Vice Provost for Academic Strategy & Institutional Effectiveness at Idaho State University. Her earlier experience includes serving as the Chief Academic Officer at the Idaho State Board of Education, where she was the primary author and manager of the Complete College Idaho Plan. A first-generation college graduate. Dr. Grace received her B.A. in English with a writing emphasis and minor in Native American Studies from Boise State University, her M.F.A. in creative writing, non-fiction from George Mason University, and her Ph.D. in public policy and administration from Boise State University. Her research focused on representation of American Indian teachers in public K-12 education and how that impacted access and performance of American Indian students.

Organizational Values

- Continuous Improvement: We strive for excellence, using data and reflection to drive growth and development.
- Respect: We value every individual's voice, perspective, and expertise.
- Collaboration: We work together to support internal and external stakeholders, achieving the best outcomes for all.
- Integrity: We operate transparently, holding ourselves accountable, and learning from mistakes.
- Stakeholder Focus: We recognize our work is driven by our members, and we are committed to excellent service and consistent decision-making.

Applications and Nominations

AGB Search is pleased to assist NWCCU with this leadership search.

To apply for the Chief Legal Officer and General Counsel position, candidates are requested to submit the following:

- (i) resume;

(ii) a letter of interest that addresses how the candidate's experiences and qualifications connect with the required/preferred characteristics and priorities as expressed in this position profile; and

(iii) contact information for five references (to be contacted with candidate's permission at a later date).

For best consideration, applications should be submitted by **October 23, 2026**, to the AGB Search portal at: [Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities](https://northwestcommissiononcollegesanduniversities.org/agbsearch). The search will remain open until an appointment is made.

Nominations and expressions of interest in the Chief Legal Officer and General Counsel position are encouraged. Please direct them to NWCCUGenCounsel@agbsearch.com or the AGB Search consultants listed below:

Kimberly Templeton, JD
Principal
Kimberly.templeton@agbsearch.com / 540.761.9494

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Equal Employment Opportunity & Reasonable Accommodation

NWCCU is an equal opportunity employer and prohibits discrimination or harassment based on race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, gender identity, and sexual orientation), national origin, age, disability, genetic information, veteran status, marital status, or any other status protected by applicable federal, state, or local law. NWCCU provides reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals with disabilities and applicants with disabilities. If you require assistance or an accommodation during the application or employment process, please contact Human Resources.