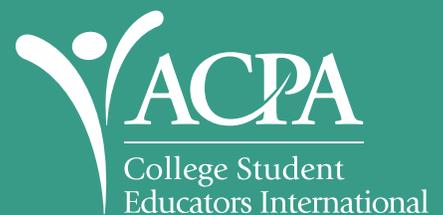


# Accreditation and the Role of the Student Affairs Educator

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# Accreditation and the Role of the Student Affairs Educator

**UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITY** of accreditation, evaluation, and assessment is a shared value for the ACPA Commissions for Administrative Leadership (CAL) and Assessment and Evaluation (CAE). These two commissions are dedicated to providing their constituents with tools to educate and guide the process of regional accreditation. This monograph offers a preliminary structure for student affairs educators on discussion and planning for active participation in assessment prior to the accreditation process, guiding the early development of the self study report, and leveraging the accreditation process.

It is useful to come to a shared understanding of terms. CAL and CAE view regional accreditation as

1. a method of providing public notification that an institution of higher education has complied with established standards of program quality and effectiveness set forth by appropriate regional accrediting agencies, and
2. a commitment to the self study and external peer-review processes seeking not only validation for achieving the standards but also continual ways to improve the quality of education and services provided to students.

The chapters of the monograph explore the accreditation process to broaden readers' understanding of ways in which student affairs educators can contribute and lead. Chapter 1 defines accreditation and introduces roles that student affairs educators might play in the process. Chapter 2 details approaches and considerations divisions of student affairs might consider when creating and documenting a culture of assessment, evaluation, and evidence-based decision-making. Chapter 3 explores the roles that senior student affairs educators might play in leading the division and the institution through the accreditation process. Chapter 4 provides strategies for the process of writing the self study report. Chapter 5 assists in preparing for the accreditation site visit. The Final Word (Chapter 6) offers summary comments and suggestions about steps following the site visit.

# Chapter 1

## What is Accreditation?

### Developing an Understanding of Purpose and Process

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Kimberly R. Allen and Becki Elkins

**FOR MORE THAN** 100 years, U.S. colleges and universities concerned themselves with self-regulation to assure and improve the quality of education. Judith Eaton (2003), President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), listed four pivotal roles for the accreditation process:

1. sustains and enhances the quality of higher education,
2. maintains the academic values of higher education,
3. is a buffer against the politicizing of higher education, and
4. serves public interest and need. (p. 1)

Specifically, CHEA (2002) defined accreditation as the process created to ensure quality control and quality assurance by conducting a critical self-assessment followed by an external peer review. Accreditation involves (a) assessment and evaluation, (b) the self study report, (c) the site visit, and (d) decisions on status. Currently, there are six regional accreditors with specific standards and procedures for the accreditation process, including

- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)
- Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (HLC)
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)

Institutions of higher education must continue to recognize the importance of accreditation in realizing goals, missions, visions, and student learning. Yet even in the 21st century, a majority of university and college employees remain uninformed and inexperienced about the accreditation process (Wood, 2006).

This chapter serves to briefly introduce (a) the role of the student affairs educator, (b) preparation for the accreditation process, (c) evidence of assessment and evaluation, (d) contributions to the self study report, and (e) follow up to the accreditation process. The following chapters will go into greater depth.

#### **Role of the Student Affairs Educator**

Most accreditation documents discuss the importance of a faculty-driven process, as faculty work with students on a daily basis. Student affairs educators also have a responsibility to participate in all aspects of the accreditation process.

According to the ACPA *Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards* (2006), student affairs educators should commit themselves to “contributing to the comprehensive education of students, protecting human rights, advancing knowledge of student growth and development, and promoting the effectiveness of institutional programs, services, and organizational units” (§ 1). The regional accreditation process provides campus communities, including divisions of student affairs, an opportunity to learn about their own institutions, the accomplishments and challenges of other departments, and what others value. This critical self-assessment encourages student affairs educators to measure program effectiveness and to be recognized as part of the cohesive and integrated educational experience for student learning.

#### **Preparation for the Accreditation Process**

Three to five years prior to the regional accreditation process, student affairs officers must devote time and attention to the revision of departmental mission statements, goals and values, strategic plans, and comprehensive assessment and evaluation plans. These four elements have a symbiotic relationship as one element cannot be realized without the defined structure of the others (Loughran, 2004). First, student affairs

educators are charged with promoting the mission and goals of the institution. However, not all student affairs departments operate with identical purposes and practices. Therefore, accreditation commissions look specifically for evidence that institutions have developed, worked to maintain, and value a culture of assessment as it relates to measuring the impact on learning (Komives & Schoper, 2006). Departmental leaders must continuously balance individual departmental purposes with professional goals, values, and best practices for each unit (ACPA, 2006) while demonstrating congruency with the institutional mission. Demonstrating congruency is dependent on continued assessment efforts to revise and realign mission statements, goals and values, strategic plans, and evaluation plans. Broadly stated, assessment encompasses student affairs practitioners' efforts to continuously answer the questions of how it is known and how well, if at all, the department achieves its educational objectives (Maki, 2004).

Next, a strategic plan provides a roadmap to realizing institutional and departmental goals. This plan breaks down departmental goals into specific objectives. The objectives should be SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (University of Central Florida, 2004). A strategic plan can be effectively designed to align vision, mission, goals, objectives, and departmental activities to support student learning. An operative strategic plan along with a continuous plan for improvement demonstrates institutional commitment and accountability for establishing, assessing, and documenting departmental and student outcomes (Keeling, 2006). Therefore the last key component is an assessment and evaluation plan that defines what is to be assessed and evaluated, who is responsible, and when the process is to begin and end. This plan is strategically created to generate information to constructively influence departmental decision-making as well as provide evidence to internal and external stakeholders (i.e., accrediting agencies). In the role of internal stakeholders, student affairs practitioners should be actively involved in the planning process, as an assessment and evaluation plan lends to the credibility of departmental efforts and strengthens accountability to demonstrate progress toward fulfilling the institutional mission, including student learning and program effectiveness.

#### **Evidence of Assessment and Evaluation**

Regardless of region, the overarching outcome of self-assessment for the purpose of accreditation is to gather tangible evidence to foster improvements of departmental/program goals. Evidence is any supporting data such as statistics, records, survey results, expert opinions, or examples that provide proof or confirmation that supports a claim as to how well a department or program is addressing an institutional goal, standard of practice, or

criterion for accreditation.

An assessment and evaluation plan delineates what is to be assessed or evaluated, responsible parties, and a timeline for commencing and ending the process. Explanation of the method used to collect data to measure progress towards defined outcomes should also articulate how results will be published. When the evaluation process has ended, aggregate data of the results should exist. Scholarly documentation of evidence should demonstrate the extent to which departmental/program goals and objectives were met. Chapter 2 provides more detail on designing and implementing an assessment and evaluation plan in student affairs, particularly focusing on student learning and institutional effectiveness.

#### **Contributions to the Self Study Report**

While all student affairs staff should be ready to provide evidence of program and service effectiveness, identified members must also be prepared to write evidence-based portions of the self study report that address requirements of regional accreditation standards and demonstrate alignment with the appropriate regional criteria for accreditation or continued accreditation. In its 2010 accreditation overview, the HLC defined the self study report as a scholarly endeavor that reveals an institution's pursuit of mission, achievement of goals, compliance with regional standards, and analysis of strengths and limitations.

Within the report narrative, it is imperative to include elaboration and analysis. Elaboration provides content that is covered in great depth, cites examples and sources of student learning and institutional effectiveness, and demonstrates significance to the elements embedded in the regional standards. One particular outcome of the self study is to identify necessary improvements. Candid disclosure of shortcomings coupled with a feasible action plan for change reveals a readiness to promote program improvement. Analysis should be succinct and precise, demonstrating insights of expected and actual outcomes of student learning and institutional effectiveness and exhibiting that compliance has been achieved for each standard. Chapters 4 and 5 provide additional information about contributing to the self study report.

#### **Follow Up to the Accreditation Process**

The self study is not a single action that merely meets the requirements of the accrediting bodies but a paradigm shift to support continuous improvement of organizational units. Student affairs departments must begin by making sure a cyclical assessment and evaluation strategy is in place. Continued alignment of professional standards and core competencies to the specific mission of student affairs promotes awareness of self-reflection and evaluation practices.

This monograph provides a perspective on the

accreditation process and the role of student affairs in this process. It is not enough for colleges and universities to participate in self-evaluation for the sole purpose of the accreditation process, nor is it enough for student affairs units to take a back seat to active participation in the self study process. Accrediting bodies are seeking evidence of expected outcomes and aggregate student outcomes (HLC, 2010). The accrediting bodies want to know about student learning and institutional effectiveness and how student affairs educators play a role. Dungy and Keeling (2006) charged, “The time has come for student affairs, in all its various disciplines, to vigorously support the idea (and conviction) that student learning is a broadly shared responsibility of all campus educators” (p. 75).

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## Chapter 2

# Documenting Student Learning and Institutional Effectiveness

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Gavin W. Henning

**A SIGNIFICANT PARADIGM** shift since the last time institutions went through the reaccreditation or reaffirmation process is the increased emphasis on student learning and institutional effectiveness. No longer can student affairs educators simply state that their institutions are fostering student learning. As Schuh (2009) pointed out, “accrediting agencies have increasingly stressed that institutions should provide solid, empirical data that illustrate what students are learning” (p. 5). Now, student affairs educators must document student learning and articulate how assessment results have been used to improve the processes for fostering student learning.

It is helpful to define what is meant by student learning and institutional effectiveness. Student learning is what students should be able to know, do, or value as a result of participating in the activities in higher education institutions. Students learn a great deal of things after interacting with student affairs programs and services. Some learn leadership skills. Some clarify their values. Some act more ethically. Walvoord (2004) defined student learning assessment as “the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available, in order to inform decisions about how to improve learning” (p. 2). In its 2008 accreditation handbook, NEASC defined institutional effectiveness as “the capacity of an institution to assess, verify, and enhance the fulfillment of its mission and purposes, given primary focus to the attainment of its educational objectives” (p. 24). In other words, student affairs educators need to document the extent to which they are achieving their mission, goals, and educational objectives and their work to make improvements.

Linda Suskie (2009), Vice President for Assessment at MSCHE, succinctly captured the relationship between assessing student learning and institutional effectiveness:

*Institutional effectiveness is how well a college or university is achieving its mission and major strategic goals. Since student learning is the heart of most college missions, the assessment of student learning is a major component of the assessment of institutional effectiveness. (p. 15)*

She continued that assessing institutional effectiveness includes assessing other elements of the college mission in addition to student learning, such as research and scholarship and building a diverse community.

There is not enough space in this chapter to discuss how each of the six regional accrediting bodies asks institutional leaders to use assessment to document student learning and institutional effectiveness. However, there are some common features of assessment across the accrediting bodies. Six common themes include that (a) goals and outcomes are articulated and aligned; (b) assessment is used for accountability and improvement; (c) assessment is integrated, ongoing, systematic, and comprehensive; (d) appropriate assessment methods are used; (e) stakeholders are involved; and (f) assessment is assessed (HLC, 2003; MSCHE, 2009; NEASC, 2008; NWCCU, 2003; SACS, 2007; WASC, 2008). It is interesting to note that these common themes may also be described as best practices in assessment. Student affairs educators should be engaging in these assessment practices regardless of an upcoming accreditation or reaffirmation process because they help to improve student learning and institutional effectiveness. Additionally, assessment demonstrates to stakeholders the positive impact student affairs programs and services have on students.

### **Goals and Outcomes are Articulated and Aligned**

To use assessment for both accountability and improvement, student affairs educators must articulate what is intended for students to accomplish or achieve as a result of their involvement in programs or use of services. Goals and outcomes are beneficial because they help staff

be intentional with students. Goals provide guideposts or beacons giving direction and illuminating the end result. Outcomes provide specific milestones, helping staff members understand if they have reached their end goals. Goals for programs and services should be publicly articulated. There should be goals for all levels—the institution, division, department, and program—articulating what each unit of the institution should be doing.

Henning (2009b) suggested that student affairs educators should be able to articulate three types of outcomes: operational, learning, and program. *Operational outcomes*, also called service or administrative outcomes, are metrics that document how well the operational aspects of a program or activity are functioning, but they do not document learning or overall impact of the program or activity. Examples of operational outcomes include the number of programs in the residence halls, number of student contact hours in the counseling center, satisfaction rates with a particular program, or average number of students who use the student union between 10 p.m. and midnight on Friday nights.

*Learning outcomes* describe what students should be able to do, know, or value as the result of a program, service, or intervention, which could include a residence hall program, individual academic advising session, or participation on an intramural team. The learning may be cognitive, affective, psychomotor, or some combination of these.

*Program outcomes* are best thought of as aggregate effects of a program, service, or intervention. Examples may include a reduction in the alcohol binge rate on campus, an increase in the number of students who receive the seasonal flu vaccine, a decrease in damage billing in the residence halls, or an increase in the percentage of students of color graduating in five years.

Simply having goals and outcomes is not enough, however. Goals and outcomes should support the departmental, divisional, and institutional missions and goals as delineated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. *Alignment of mission and goals with institutional mission serving as a foundation for systemic development.*

The institutional mission forms the base of the pyramid upon which everything else stands. The institutional goals flow from that mission. Divisional and departmental goals follow this pattern, each building on the previous iteration. If the divisional mission supports the institutional mission and goals, the departmental mission would support the institutional mission and goals.

Why is alignment important? It helps keep student affairs educators on track and focused. When student affairs educators begin to engage in activities that are not aligned with their department’s mission and goals, the ship begins to move, ever so slightly, from the course. As staff members multiply the times they veer just a little off course, the more off course they actually become. As a result, they are less effective and efficient with the resources they have in reaching the originally intended goals and outcomes.

Accrediting bodies expect that goals and outcomes are publicly articulated and easy to access. If the goals and outcomes are stored away and never considered, they are not very helpful. It is important for constituents to know the educational expectations within the student affairs division (MSCHE, 2009; WASC, 2008).

**Assessment is Used for Accountability and Improvement**

According to Suskie (2009), assessment serves two primary purposes: accountability and improvement. Regional accrediting bodies expect student affairs educators to use assessment results for both of these purposes. Accreditors would rather have a student affairs division collect a little data but use them all to improve practice than collect a large amount of data and not use any of it.

First, accrediting bodies require institutions to document the effectiveness of programs and services in meeting the articulated goals and outcomes. Documenting effectiveness validates those programs and services and holds staff accountable to do what they say they are doing for students. There are two types of accountability that assessment serves: internal and external. Unfortunately, many people view accountability solely as being motivated from individuals or organizations outside of higher education. In the report *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education* (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), the Commission of the Secretary of Education raised the importance of accountability in higher education by promoting legislation making institutions of higher education more accountable to the federal government. In addition to the federal government’s inquiry, parents, state legislatures, employers, and others yearn to know how higher education affects students.

Documenting effectiveness is not enough, however. More important is the use of assessment to improve programs and services. Student affairs educators need to document how assessment data are being used to improve learning,

planning, resource allocation, and decision-making. This use of data is described as *closing the loop* or *integrating results into practice*. Using data for improvement is the essence of assessment.

These dual roles of assessment require staff to assess in different ways as the types of data that support accountability may not be the same types of data useful for continuous improvement. Thus, staff members always need to be thinking of these dual purposes as they design, implement, and report assessment.

Sharing assessment results with appropriate staff and stakeholders is imperative to completing the feedback loop so the information can be used for improvement. If results are not shared, they cannot be used to make improvements, and no one will know that programs are effective in achieving their goals and outcomes.

There are four main reasons for reporting results. First, reporting serves to document what has occurred. Documentation is helpful in keeping an archive for the future. Second, reporting communicates those results to others, which may be helpful in validating student affairs work. Third, reporting informs future planning. Finally, reporting assists decision-making. Without a report, the results cannot be used for planning or decision-making.

When considering how to share results, the important elements to keep in mind are format, audience, content, and timing, or FACT (Henning, 2009a). FACT will help those reporting assessment results remember what to include when sharing this information. Although audience is the second letter in this acronym, it should come first. Format, content, and timing all depend on the audience. Multiple audiences will have multiple needs for information, so reports or presentations should be tailored appropriately. Audiences encompass all stakeholders including students, faculty, staff, senior administrators, parents, state agencies, and federal government. Each audience may prefer a different format for assessment results. Senior administrators will not have time to read a comprehensive report. They need a 1-2 page executive summary. State agency officials would likely prefer a comprehensive report. A YouTube video of an oral presentation may be the best format for sharing assessment results with students.

The content will also differ depending on the audience. Bers and Seybert (1999) outlined some questions to consider when developing report content for various audiences:

- “What do my audiences need to know about this subject?”
- “What do my audiences want to know about this subject?”
- “What do I want to tell them about this subject?”

- “What decisions will or might my audiences make based on this report?”
- “What other individuals might my primary audience send this report to, even if I haven’t intended them to receive the material in this format, or at all?”
- “Who else (other audiences) might be interested in the same subject, and will they see the same documents, or others derived from the same research?” (p. 11)

It is also helpful to consider different types of evidence when deciding which content to include in an assessment report. Will quantitative evidence be more compelling or will qualitative evidence? Report writers should present the type of evidence that will be most convincing. The sophistication of each audience should also be considered. If statistics are included, which elements of the statistics should be reported? Will the audience want to know *p* values or standardized beta weights?

The final consideration is timing. When will the results be disseminated? It is not wise to distribute an assessment report during the summer when most faculty and students are away from campus, especially if there are implications for either constituency. Academic breaks and busy times such as midterms or the beginning of terms are also not good times to send out results.

Given that the format, content, and timing varies by audience, multiple reports may be needed. It is helpful to create one comprehensive report in a basic research paper format—introduction, literature review, method, results, discussion, and conclusion—because this format allows for easy “slicing and dicing” of the report for multiple audiences. A comprehensive report is also useful as it can serve archival purposes. In future years, staff members will want a complete and accurate account of the entire assessment project. If someone else will be implementing a program assessment in the future, the comprehensive report will serve as the blueprint for later efforts, just as journal articles serve as blueprints for researchers replicating studies.

Reporting issues must be considered before implementing an assessment project. Student affairs educators would be wise to take the time to contemplate the reports before beginning an assessment and develop the process to optimize reporting benefits.

#### **Assessment is Integrated, Ongoing, Systematic, and Comprehensive**

Assessment is not an activity. It is a state of mind (Henning, 2009b). Student affairs educators need to promote a paradigm shift so that assessment is not something staff members “remember” to do at the end of a program or activity but rather is part of the entire educational process. All too often, practitioners get to the end of something and say, “Now let’s assess how effective

it was.” Assessment cannot be an episodic, stand-alone activity. It needs to be integrated into every activity, since good planning fosters good assessment and good assessment leads to good planning.

Assessment for both accountability and improvement must be ongoing, not just because accreditation is around the corner. Accreditors are looking to see that institutions have been collecting and using data over time (MSCHE, 2009). In addition to accreditation purposes, Upcraft and Schuh (1996) stated that student affairs practitioners need to engage in assessment to respond to “global pressures of accountability, cost, quality, access, and equity but also to internal pressures to justify allocation of resources to programs and services that appear to be ‘nonacademic’ and therefore ‘less essential’ to the educational enterprise” (p. 9).

A cyclic assessment process does not require staff to assess the same thing all the time or assess everything at once. A department of residence life can assess a residential curriculum in one year, make some changes based on that assessment, and then assess it again to see if the changes have had an impact. Or, after assessing the residential curriculum, the office of residential life may choose to assess the impact of RA training. The point is that assessment should be embedded in everyday practice and not something that just takes place a year before each 10-year accreditation visit.

In addition to being integrated and ongoing, assessment should be systematic (MSCHE, 2009; NWCCU, 2003). Systematic assessment is assessment that is purposeful and intentional and not haphazard. Measures for articulated outcomes are clearly defined. While it is not possible to measure all outcomes, there is a systematic process for measuring those outcomes that are identified in the assessment plan.

Finally, assessment should be comprehensive. There are many variables that affect learning, and students’ experiences overlap and are intertwined. Rarely can it be stated that one experience led to a specific educational outcome. However, the more comprehensive the assessment, the more confident inferences can be regarding educational impact of programs and services. Suskie (2009) said it best:

*Because any one assessment is imperfect and imprecise, collect more than one kind of evidence of what students have learned. The greater the variety of evidence, the more confidently you can infer students have indeed learned what you want them to. (p. 39)*

Maki (2004) suggested identifying the limitations of first assessments and choosing an additional method that compensates for those limitations. Multiple measures are always better than one. Also called triangulation, Maki indicated that using multiple methods has five benefits:

1. Reduces inaccurate interpretations of results based on the limitations of one method,
2. Provides students an opportunity to demonstrate learning that may not be demonstrated through certain methods,
3. Contributes to comprehensive interpretations of student achievement,
4. Values the dimensionality of learning, and
5. Values the diverse ways in which humans learn and represent their learning. (p. 86)

#### **Appropriate Assessment Methods are Used**

Surveys and focus groups are not the only assessment methods that can be used. There are other assessment methods that often are more appropriate and easier to use. Staff members need to consider a variety of assessment techniques to determine which is most appropriate for what they are assessing. Accrediting bodies are expecting institutions to use both direct and indirect evidence, use quantitative and qualitative evidence, and maximize existing data as often as they can.

#### **Direct Versus Indirect Evidence**

Student learning can be demonstrated through either direct or indirect evidence. Suskie (2009) defined direct evidence of student learning as “tangible, visible, self-explanatory, and compelling evidence of exactly what students have and have not learned” (p. 20). An example of direct evidence of student learning is observing how well a student can facilitate an actual meeting after a leadership workshop on meeting facilitation. Below is a list of methods that may, but not always, provide direct evidence of learning, adapted from Suskie (2009, p. 21).

- Capstone experiences
- Checklists
- Concept maps
- Content analysis
- Narrative/journaling
- Observation
- Portfolio
- Ratings of skills by advisor/supervisor
- Rubrics
- Surveys
- Testing instruments
- Visual collection

*Indirect evidence* “consists of proxy signs that students are probably learning” (Suskie, 2009, p. 20). An example of indirect evidence would be a survey of all students attending a leadership workshop and asking them a Likert-type question regarding how much they learned about facilitating a meeting. Indirect evidence is less clear and less convincing than direct evidence (Suskie, 2009). Direct evidence can be described as *demonstrated learning* while indirect can be described as *perceived learning*.

Below is a list of methods that may, but not always, provide indirect evidence of learning, adapted from Suskie (2009, p. 21).

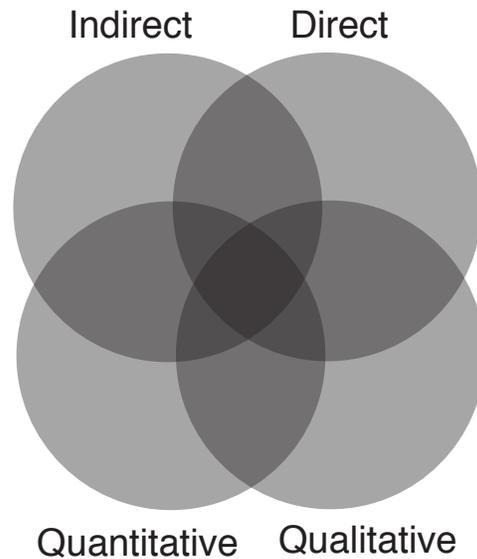
- Checklists
- Experiments
- Narrative/journaling
- Visual collection
- Concept maps
- Focus groups
- Portfolio
- Content analysis
- Interviews
- Surveys

Student affairs educators often rely on indirect evidence because it is difficult to gather direct evidence of the impact of student affairs work with students. Although it is difficult to gather direct evidence, this cannot be an insurmountable barrier. Staff members need to find creative ways to gather direct evidence of student learning to provide more credibility of the effectiveness of student affairs work.

The difference between direct and indirect evidence lies with the data used, not the method of data collection. A survey can be used to gather either direct or indirect evidence. For example, one outcome for students participating in orientation may be to identify at least three academic resources on campus. A survey item could be developed to ask, “After attending orientation, how many academic resources are you aware of on campus?” Responses could include 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 or more. Using this survey item would be indirect evidence since the results do not demonstrate if the student really knows which resources are correct. Students think they know. On the other hand, staff members could construct this question: “In the space below, list the academic resources on campus you learned about during orientation.” The results to this item would provide direct evidence because these responses could be “graded” for accuracy. Students are actually demonstrating their knowledge.

#### **Quantitative Versus Qualitative Evidence**

Student affairs educators also need to use methods that provide quantitative and qualitative evidence, since there are benefits to each. According to Maki (2004), quantitative methods place interpretive value on numbers while qualitative methods place interpretive value on the assessor. These approaches can provide either direct or indirect evidence, depending on the data that are collected. Figure 2 represents the overlap that can exist with these methods.



**Figure 2.** *Representation of overlap between research methods and interpretive values influencing direct or indirect evidence (based on Maki, 2004).*

Assessment methods may provide more than one type of evidence: quantitative, qualitative, indirect, or direct. Observation generally provides qualitative, direct evidence. If patterns of behavior are counted, then it is also quantitative. A survey generally provides quantitative and indirect evidence. Qualitative questions can be added to a survey. Questions that allow students to demonstrate their knowledge can also be added to gather all four types of evidence. Gathering each type of evidence has its own benefits. A research methods book can provide a more extensive discussion of these benefits, but they are briefly summarized here.

Quantitative methods often require fewer human resources than qualitative methods but may require more fiscal resources. Administering a survey, especially electronically, does not take a lot of time. While survey tools such as SurveyMonkey or Zoomerang are relatively cheap, commercial surveys can get expensive. Quantitative methods can allow generalization to large populations, and the results can often be reduced to frequencies or other statistics. However, there are a number of threats to validity that the assessor must consider and attempt to control for. These include history, instrumentation, assessor bias, interaction effects, and the Hawthorne effect to name just a few (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 382). There are many more threats to validity than can be discussed here but are discussed in detail in many quantitative methods textbooks.

Qualitative methods provide depth to better understand the complexity of an issue that quantitative methods do not allow. With interviews and focus groups, a moderator or interviewer can follow up with questions to gain insight that cannot be achieved with quantitative methods. Because numbers are not used, these qualitative methods appear easier to use, but they are no less rigorous as there are systematic processes for analyzing qualitative data. It often takes more time to perform assessment using qualitative methods. Data collection methods such as observation or journaling may take days, weeks, or even months to complete. Data analysis is time consuming because it utilizes many iterations of review and coding of the qualitative data. The assessment question, followed by the benefits of each approach, should drive method selection.

### Existing Evidence

Before collecting new evidence, one should investigate the data that are already collected and available. Existing evidence can be direct or indirect, quantitative or qualitative. However, more often than not existing institutional data will be quantitative. Data that are already collected in a division of student affairs may be useful to measure institutional effectiveness or student learning that relate to the division of student affairs. Kennedy-Phillips and Meents-DeCaigny (2009) provided examples of evidence campuses often collect that are worth exploring:

- National surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the College Senior Survey (CSS), or National College Health Assessment (NCHA);
- Consortium or benchmarking surveys such as EBI Student Activities Assessment or the Campus Climate Diversity and Inclusion Survey through the NASPA/ StudentVoice Assessment and Knowledge Consortium;
- Local surveys such as a post-graduate career survey or residence life survey;
- Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), a federal data set to which all colleges and universities receiving financial aid must contribute data annually. IPEDS allows for reviewing data at one institution or comparing across institutions and is publically accessible at <http://nces.ed.gov/IPEDS/>;
- Common Data Set, which is data that many institutions compile for college guidebooks and post on the college's website;
- Institutional fact book data, often found on an institution's Institutional Research website; and
- Past accreditation reports. (pp. 7-26)

It is helpful to make an appointment with a member of the institutional research office to learn more about available data. Registrar's offices often house data on campus if there

is not an institutional research office. Staff members in these areas can be valuable assessment collaborators, and it is worth developing relationships with them.

There are a few challenges to using existing data.

First, such data may be difficult to obtain on campus. Depending on data-sharing rules, some staff members may not be able to access all of the data in a form that is most useful. Second, the data might measure a variable in a slightly different way than needed. Many outcomes are program- or activity-specific. Often the existing data are part of national surveys or data sets that are more generic to meet the needs of multiple institutions. Student affairs educators must decide if the existing data are "good enough" to use for their purpose or find the resources to collect the data in the form needed. It is important to keep in mind that national surveys and data sets have gone through many iterations of review and revision and are higher quality data collection tools that may also be seen as more valid by some constituents. With any assessment issue, using existing data requires an analysis of the pros and cons for a particular situation.

### Stakeholders Are Involved

It is important to involve stakeholders throughout the assessment and accreditation process as they are partners in the success of students. Banta (2007) suggested, "We must work together with our stakeholders to make assessment for improvement and assessment for accountability complement, even strengthen each other" (p. 12). Students are likely to learn more if learning outcomes are explained to them, because they better understand educational expectations. Parents can be partners in fostering student development if they understand the issues that may affect students' academic success. Donors will likely be more willing to fund programs and services if they help craft the goals and are updated on the progress toward those goals.

Stakeholders play different roles in assessment processes. It is important to know who the stakeholders are, what their stakes are, and how closely connected to the processes they should be. Are stakeholders merely an audience for assessment results or will they be involved in the process?

It is helpful to think about three levels of stakeholders: primary, secondary, and tertiary (Henning & Leary, 2010). In *Good to Great*, Collins (2001) discussed that in order to be great, a leader needs to get people on the bus *and* in the right seats. Simply getting them on the bus is not enough. This is how student affairs educators should be thinking about stakeholders. First, they should consider all of the stakeholders. What is their stake? What questions do they have? As those are identified, staff members should consider how important those issues are to the program or service being assessed or the assessment itself. It is also helpful to think about who needs to be at the front of the bus. Does one of the stakeholders need to be the driver

because of the influence or power she or he has? Does another stakeholder have to be the navigator providing directions to the driver because of the knowledge she or he has? Who should be sitting in the first two rows, close enough to provide feedback to the driver and the navigator? These people are primary stakeholders and may include a department head or the senior student affairs officer. Maybe the primary stakeholders include a faculty member because it is important to have a faculty member as a co-chair on the project. This group may even include a donor who is providing funding for the initiative.

After identifying the primary stakeholders, staff members should identify the secondary stakeholders. Who does not need to be up front but has to at least sit in the middle of the bus to have a good understanding of what is happening? These people do not need to be as actively involved as the primary stakeholders, but they are not totally passive. These riders may be members of the department working on the project or collaborators from other departments.

Who will be sitting at the back of the bus? These people may just need to be part of the process, but they may not play an active role in driving the bus. The staff member who is not the formal leader but an informal leader may be someone who is a tertiary stakeholder because there is an important message sent when this person is involved. A tertiary stakeholder may be someone who is helpful in a crisis in case the bus gets a flat tire.

Finally, there are some stakeholders who do not ride on the bus. There may be people at the departing bus station who helped get the initiative off the ground. They just need to be kept abreast of progress through text messages or Tweets from the bus. There will be others who will be at the next bus station who will help take luggage off the bus and keep the project moving forward. Emailing or providing Facebook updates to these folks during the assessment journey keeps them involved in all stages of the assessment process.

Accreditors are looking for proof that stakeholders have been involved along the way (MSCHE, 2009; SACS, 2007). It is wise to consider who can be most helpful in the assessment processes and get them on the bus *and* in the right seats.

### Assessment is Assessed

Once the assessment has concluded it is essential that the assessment process is reviewed to improve it next time. Some questions to answer include

- Were outcomes clearly articulated?
- Did students understand the goals and outcomes?
- Was the assessment process meant to demonstrate both accountability and improvement?

- Was there a focus on both effectiveness and student learning?
- Was the assessment process integrated, ongoing, systematic, and comprehensive?
- Were existing data maximized?
- Were multiple assessment methods used?
- Were appropriate assessment methods used?
- Were both direct and indirect evidence of student learning collected?
- Were both qualitative and quantitative types of evidence collected?
- Was there evidence needed that could not be gathered from the methods used?
- Was the evidence that was gathered useful?
- Were all stakeholders involved appropriately?
- What changes should be made to the assessment process next time?

Demonstrating that the process has been evaluated and changes were made (by assessing the assessment) will improve assessors' skills and knowledge.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, common themes of what accreditors expect regarding the documentation of institutional effectiveness and student learning were discussed. Student affairs educators need to demonstrate that learning expectations for students are clearly articulated. Once these expectations regarding what students should be learning are expressed, it is important to describe how staff members know that they have achieved those outcomes and goals through an integrated and comprehensive assessment process that utilizes multiple methods and includes stakeholders. The final step is describing how those results were used to improve policy and practice to close the loop.

Many people see accreditation as an 18-month burden to bear every 10 years. Accreditors are not asking anything of institutional administrators that they should not be asking of themselves. Student affairs educators need to understand the extent to which they are helping students learn and develop and how they can become more effective in their policies and practices.

The themes presented here are assessment best practices, not just accreditation standards for assessment. If student affairs staff members engage in these practices for the betterment of the students, documenting student learning and effectiveness for accreditation will be easy because they will already be doing it. Accreditation will simply provide the opportunity to declare to more audiences how effective student affairs programs are.

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# Chapter 3

## Considering the Role of Senior Student Affairs Leaders

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Laura A. Bayless

**THE SENIOR STUDENT** affairs officer (SSAO) and other senior student affairs leaders can serve a number of important roles in the accreditation process, ranging from ensuring a culture of assessment within the division to facilitating the practical preparedness of the division to leading institutional efforts for accreditation. One of the most important roles is intentionally leveraging the accreditation process to achieve departmental and divisional goals on behalf of students. This chapter articulates the roles that the SSAO and other senior student affairs leaders can play within and outside the division of student affairs during the accreditation process in leading the division and serving on or chairing institutional committees, as well as a timeline for the accreditation process.

### Leadership of the Division

#### Creating a Culture of Assessment

The most foundational and fundamental role an SSAO can play in accreditation is creating a culture that documents student learning and institutional effectiveness (L. Suskie, personal communication, January 15, 2010). Chapter 2 of this monograph provides detail about what this culture entails. Conducting assessment and evaluation and then using the results to refine, improve, and create programs is a critical aspect of best practice and quality assurance. In addition, living this kind of culture prepares a division of student affairs for accreditation. An SSAO who ensures that assessment and its results are a normal part of practice has set the division up for success in preparing for and responding to the demands of accreditation. Such a division has defined outcomes (both learning and otherwise) that reflect the institution, division, and departmental missions, and its staff members (a) know how students and others are to achieve the outcomes; (b) review programmatic, departmental, and institutional evidence about the extent to which the outcomes are achieved; and (c) use the evidence to plan. These steps are documented and demonstrable to interested constituents.

Preparing for accreditation will be much easier because of being able to gather—rather than begin to create—these outcomes, data, results, and action plans in a format that is intelligible to an external audience.

#### Preparing the Division

The SSAO and other senior student affairs leaders are responsible for preparing the division for the accreditation process. Although the SSAO may or may not be directly involved with training staff or gathering data, she or he has a vested interest in ensuring that the preparation happens and is often the one in the division who has direct information about the institutional process. It is likely that the staff members of the division have varying levels of experience with the accreditation process. When preparing the staff for accreditation, starting from the most basic information about accreditation with the appropriate accrediting body may be necessary. There are a number of introductory elements that will help the division staff feel more comfortable with the accreditation process:

- Communicate the purpose of the self study and the accreditation process.
- Explore the accreditation standards and identify the standards that apply to student affairs.
- Discuss the campus's process of drafting the self study report, ensuring that the division's process dovetails with the campus process.
- Provide the accreditation process timeline.
- Share previous accreditation reports and recommendations as well as the institutional response.
- Strategize with the division about the role students will play.
- Model transparency and openness.

The accreditation process can be intimidating for campus members. This kind of introduction can help allay fears, particularly if a culture of assessment is already in place.

### Selecting Leadership for Committees

There will likely be a number of committees working on elements of the self study. Campus leaders often have the opportunity to choose a structure based on the criteria provided by the accrediting body, the campus's specific situation, or other factors. It is possible that one committee will be solely focused on "student services" or a similar topic (depending on how the regional accrediting body defines the kinds of services and opportunities provided by student affairs). It is also likely that other committees would benefit from information about the contributions, accomplishments, and challenges of student affairs. There is basic information that illuminates the values, assumptions, and work of student affairs as a whole and as individual departments/functional areas that is often common across institutions. The SSAO may be a facilitator of gathering these data and a conduit to the committees. The suggestions of information to gather below are gleaned from the various accrediting bodies' most recent self study guides (NEASC, 2008; NWCCU, 2003; SACS, 2004; WASC, 2008):

- Mission and values statements;
- Goals and outcomes;
- Programs and services provided in each student affairs department;
- Collaborative efforts with departments across campus;
- Assessment plans;
- Evidence of using goals, outcomes, and assessment results in planning;
- Results of departmental self-studies or accreditation efforts (for example, CAS reviews and subject-area accreditation like International Association of Counseling Services);
- Specific accomplishments, challenges, and ways to address the challenges;
- Student handbooks;
- Policies and procedures for student grievances, with description of how information is disseminated to students;
- Policy for maintaining student records and a published policy on the release of student information;
- Data and reports on athletics;
- Position descriptions; and
- Resumes of current student affairs staff.

If there is a specific student services committee, it may be chaired by someone from another part of the institution and will include one or more student affairs staff members. In addition, student affairs staff may serve as chairs or

members of other committees. SSAOs should think strategically about which student affairs staff members might serve in these roles.

It may be that the student services committee (or any other accreditation committee) would like assistance in the process of drafting this portion of the self study. If so, the SSAO should be prepared to meet with a committee chair or representatives of the committee to help draft the assessment questions, answer questions, provide context, and gather additional data (MSCHE, 2007). These representatives may even want some assistance determining elements to include or an outline of the chapter.

### Preparing for the Site Visit

Once the self study is complete, campus leaders share it with a team of representatives of the accrediting body, who will visit the campus for an onsite visit. SSAOs may be able to influence the composition of the visiting evaluation team, which sometimes includes an experienced student affairs educator. The selection of the visit team generally happens one year or more in advance of the site visit (MSCHE, 2009; WASC, 2009).

The site visit schedule will likely include a combination of scheduled time and free time when the visitors engage students, staff, and faculty in open forums. Team members meet with faculty, students, staff, administrators, trustees, and community members to substantiate the information provided in the report and to gather additional perspectives and sometimes additional information. They also examine the documentation that the institution has assembled (MSCHE, 2007). To help staff members prepare for the visit, the SSAO should make certain she or he

- reads the Self Study Report and the most recent interim report and response,
- is aware of the assessment strategies and activities happening in the division and how the results have been used, and
- knows the key issues on campus that relate to students and student affairs and the best practices to address them—for example,
- Are you using best practices to address this issue?
- If not, why not (e.g., limited resources)?

To help students prepare for the visit, it is important to make certain they (a) have been encouraged to attend introductory sessions about the accreditation process and site visit, framing the process as a way for them to provide feedback to the institution (P. Mills, personal communication, May, 2010), and (b) are aware of the assessment strategies and activities happening at the institution and how the results have been used.

### **Making the Accreditation Process Work for You**

Leadership of the division in the accreditation process involves actively articulating how to leverage the accreditation process to showcase student affairs and make the case for resources and support. This is a prime opportunity to provide visionary leadership in helping student affairs educators see the possibilities of accreditation to meet needs and educate the campus. Astute SSAOs make the most of the accreditation process to accomplish goals.

The process of writing the self study is a wonderful opportunity for others on campus to see evidence of the student affairs educator's role in student learning and contributions to institutional mission, goals, and accreditation standards. It is the perfect chance to educate others about the centrality of student learning in the work of student affairs as well as highlight the evidence used to show how student affairs educators identify the impact of efforts made and how this informs decision-making and program improvements.

In addition, staff members in the division likely know weaknesses in programs and resources. These areas for improvement will and should come out in the self study process. The visiting evaluation team can play a consultative role, recognizing steps to be taken and recommending action. If the evaluators recommend action, institutional leaders are likely to take that feedback seriously and assist the division staff in addressing the issues.

### **Institutional Committee Participation**

The SSAO and other senior leaders may be tasked to lead or serve on accreditation committees. This role requires superlative collaboration and organization skills, particularly when serving in leadership roles. In many ways, student affairs educators' experience with teamwork is preparation for these roles.

There are several overarching elements to keep in mind throughout the process. First, no matter which regional body accredits the institution, it is clear from every region's self study guides that accreditors will be looking for explicit links between the institution's values, goals, and plans and the accrediting body's direction. The self study should make those links clear to the evaluation team. Current trends emphasize student learning and institutional effectiveness, especially the former. In addition, documentation of assessment and using the results is critical. Finally, accreditors are often concerned about process rather than content. Has the institution defined its mission, goals, and outcomes? Does the student affairs division's mission demonstrate compliance with the institution's mission? What data are there to support that goals and outcomes are being met? Are data being examined and used to make changes, closing the assessment loop?

Second, SSAOs may have to spend time educating campus constituents and other communities of interest about accreditation, assessment, documentation, and evidence. Many people do not use these skills on a regular basis and may be unaware about accreditation. The guidelines for introducing accreditation to the division would serve a broader audience as well.

Finally, the accreditation timeline should allow ample time for review and consultation by faculty, staff, students, the board of trustees, alumni, and other stakeholders who are not on the committees. Broad participation is critical to ensure that the self study represents the institution as accurately as possible.

Of course, the SSAO will have influence over the student affairs staff members who are selected to serve on committees. This is an opportunity to broadly seed the committees with student affairs staff; they can substantively contribute to areas outside of their expertise in addition to those that are more closely aligned with their day-to-day work. The SSAO should be intentional about constructing the committee looking at student services, choosing faculty, staff, and students who will be most effective in advancing the work of the division.

### **Accreditation Timeline**

In leading the division through accreditation, it may be helpful to consider this suggested timeline to guide the process.

#### **On-Going**

- Instill a culture of student development that is mission-driven, goal-oriented, assessment-based, and supported with appropriate data. Chapter 2 of this monograph contains additional information on this topic.
- Model transparency and openness throughout the process.

#### **2-3 Years Before**

- Define accreditation and your institution's process.
- Determine which standards apply to student affairs.
- Guide department directors about documents, evidence, and action plans to gather.
- Determine what, if any, data need to be collected in departments and make plans to do it.

#### **1-2 Years Before**

- Develop self study design.
- Begin committee work.
- Build in time for the campus community to provide feedback on drafts.

### During the Accreditation Review

- Submit self study.
- Host site visit.
- Receive the peer review team response.
- Prepare the institutional response.

### After the Visit

- Communicate the response.
- Determine what recommendations or commendations apply to student affairs.
- Address the recommendations raised in the self study and by the accreditors.
- Continue the ongoing culture of student development.

### Conclusion

The SSAO and other senior student affairs leaders can play important roles in an institution's accreditation process. Ensuring that the culture of the division of student affairs is designed for the assessment of student learning and development is critical. Certainly, preparing the division for the process is another key role. The SSAO may also take advantage of the opportunity to provide leadership to the institution during this important time. All of these elements can leverage the accreditation process to facilitate the institutional stakeholders' understanding of the contributions the division of student affairs makes to the institution's mission and goals and to student learning. Finally, the accreditation process can help the SSAO and other senior leaders in the division garner the resources needed to develop programs and create change on behalf of students.

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# Chapter 4

## Writing the Self Study Report

Kimberly R. Allen

**CONSTRUCTING THE SELF** study report gives an institution of higher education the opportunity to understand its past and prepare for its future. Prepared by a team of faculty and staff, the self study report describes the method used to carry out the formal, comprehensive, institution-wide process of self-examination in preparation for the site visit (HLC, 2010). This culminating centerpiece must demonstrate that the institution evaluates all aspects of its programs, services, and governance in relationship to its desired student learning outcomes and defines a clear path towards continuous improvement (HLC, 2010; MSCHE, 2007).

This chapter discusses the generalities of the self study report and provides a method for student affairs educators to use for writing evidence-based portions of the self study report to fulfill partial requirements of a regional accreditation process and to demonstrate alignment with the appropriate regional criteria for accreditation or continued accreditation. The self study report should be considered a scholarly endeavor that reveals an institution's pursuit of mission, achievement of goals, compliance with regional standards, and analysis of strengths and limitations (HLC, 2010).

### General Guidelines for Writing the Self Study Report

Each accrediting agency will establish the requirements and expectations for the self study document, excluding any pertinent supplementary information. For example, MSCHE (2007) delineates the following requests for an Accreditation Readiness Report (self study report):

1. An introduction
2. One section for each of the Commission's 14 accreditation standards
3. A conclusion
4. Appendices of specific supporting documents as appropriate

5. A list of any additional documents that demonstrate the institution's compliance with the standard and its fundamental elements
6. A summary of the institution's analysis of the evidence provided in that documentation
7. A description of the institution's plans to come into compliance or improve beyond compliance, as appropriate. (p. 48)

The self study report serves to demonstrate a link between an institution's commitment to self-examination and to standards set forth by regional and national accrediting agencies (HLC, 2010).

### Shared Responsibility and Structure

Racine (n.d.) stated that the self study process is "a participatory and collaborative process that must be inclusive" (p. 109). As Henning points out in Chapter 2, student affairs educators must come to the collaborative process able and willing to document student learning and to articulate how assessment results are used to improve programs and services supporting student learning and institutional effectiveness.

Common practice for constructing the self study report involves identifying a skilled steering committee, including student affairs educators, charged with documenting the assessment and evaluation activities directly related to regional accreditation standards. Figure 3 demonstrates a model of operation that delineates roles and responsibilities of internal community members for writing the accreditation self study report. The gray boxes indicate specific individuals who are charged with specific tasks (white boxes). The arrows illustrate the flow of the project towards the final draft just prior to submission.

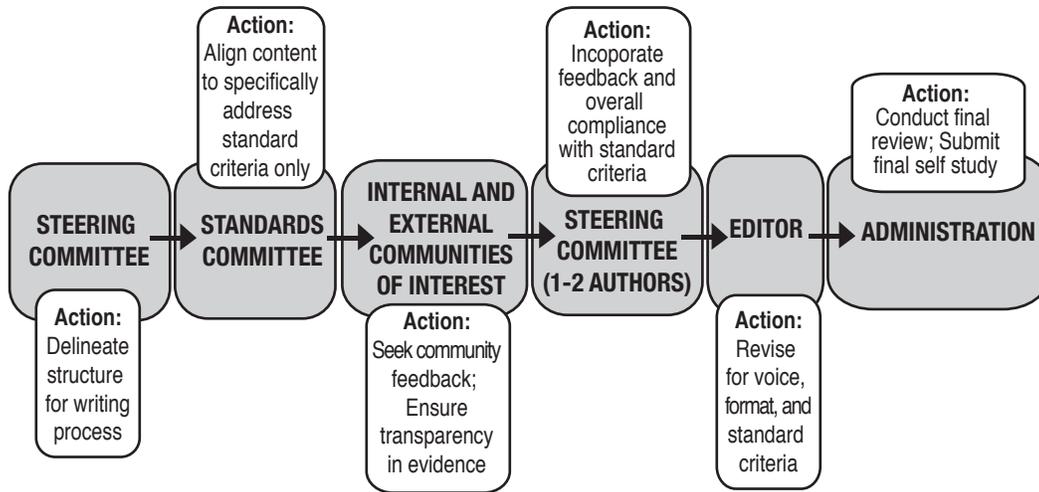


Figure 3. Illustration of project flow, including roles of assigned groups and actions/responsibilities for constructing a cohesive accreditation self study report.

This model is limited to representing the general writing process. The chair of the steering committee has two very distinct responsibilities: process and accountability. The chair must first create a task-specific agenda for each individual or group. Gathering evidence, analyzing data, and writing a cohesive draft of the standard must occur within the boundaries of the established process. This agenda should also be time sensitive. The chair must hold individuals accountable to the proposed process. A breakdown at any given point in the process can compromise the quality and timely completion of the self study report.

A breakdown in the writing process may also occur when the steering committee membership does not represent all internal constituents. As stated earlier, the self study process is a comprehensive, institution-wide method of self-examination. ACPA and NASPA colleagues give much attention to the importance of integrating learning and student development (ACPA & NASPA, 2004). Faculty and student affairs educators need to assess learning in classrooms, programs, and services. Educators must also be prepared to clearly articulate their findings in written reports. Pascarella and Whitt (1999) indicated that student affairs educators must “press for a significant role in institutional assessment plans, whether invited or not” (p. 101). The same remains true for student affairs educators inviting themselves to participate in writing the self study report.

**Student Affairs Involvement in the Feedback Loop**

The self study report-writing process involves understanding the importance of feedback loops. In Chapter 2, Henning discusses the use of data or integrating results of data into practice as “closing the loop.” Engaging in an analysis of teaching and learning practices, expected and actual outcomes point to effectiveness or shortcomings of college programs.

Figure 4 illustrates a feedback loop specifically designed for assessing program effectiveness. A critical step involves a comparison between the expected and actual outcomes. Analysis might confirm continued practice or lead to recommendations for change. Recommendations to maintain current practices or for change must be supported through a plan of action, institutional commitment, and appropriate resources (HLC, 2010).

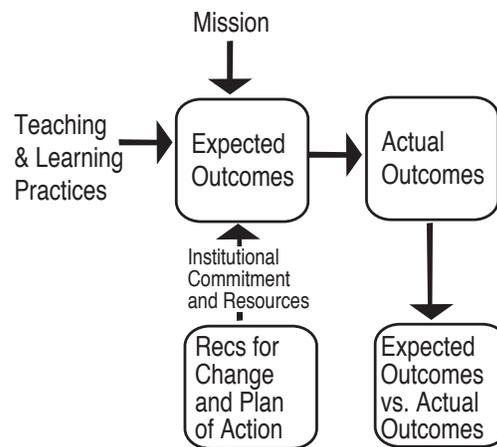


Figure 4. Illustration of a feedback loop specifically designed to demonstrate the process leading to maintaining current practices or implementing program improvement (Adapted from American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2009).

The accrediting agencies require evidence of effective programs and services in direct relationship to institutional goals and outcomes. Once the analysis is complete, proper documentation is necessary to formally address the requirements of the self study report. In order to appropriately participate in the writing of the self study document, student affairs educators must understand how to use the

specific language set forth by the accrediting standards' criteria and supply reliable evidence to demonstrate program effectiveness.

**Alignment of Shared Evidence and Standard Criteria**

Whether student affairs educators serve directly on the steering committee or are assigned to a specific standard/criterion committee, they will be expected to properly assess and document how each department demonstrates compliance with the institution's mission and with regional standards/criteria. More importantly, they will be expected to document how the various departments contribute to student learning (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). Compliance with regional standards is accomplished by *writing to the standard*.

According to the NEASC Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (2011), standards or criteria are "an articulation by the higher education community of what a college or university must do in order to deserve the public trust. They also function as a framework for institutional development and self-evaluation" (p. 1). Writing to the standard simply means breaking down the language within a specific standard/criterion to determine what evidence the accrediting body wants the institution to emphasize to indicate compliance or non-compliance. Most standards are divided into three components: the specific standard, considerations or core components for each standard, and a request for evidence. The following example dissects the standard to create a pathway for effectively demonstrating compliance with the standard.

Criterion (standard) 3 from the *Handbook of Accreditation* (HLC, 2010) states, "The organization provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission" (p. 7). Overall, this standard seeks specific written program goals and assessment of effectiveness. Drilling down into core components, it becomes clear what considerations the institution must address to demonstrate compliance. Following the flow of the bold words in Figure 5 illustrates the connectedness of the accrediting body's expectations of the institution and documentation of successful practice from the university.

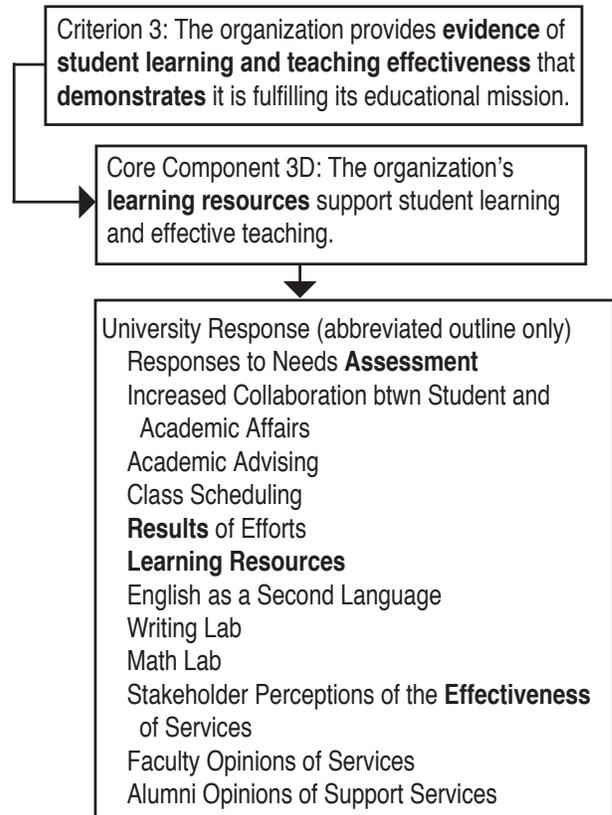


Figure 5. Illustration of university response to HLC accreditation Criterion 3 outlining the connections between the accrediting body's expectations and demonstrated compliance of the university. Excerpt from *University of Missouri-St. Louis's (UMSL, 2008) Self-Study Report*.

**Reliable Evidence Used to Demonstrate Effectiveness**

In Chapter 2, Henning delineates three types of outcomes used to demonstrate effectiveness of programs and services: operational, learning, and program. In order to construct the self study report, committee authors must collect examples of documented evidence and begin to move away from descriptions of processes toward drawing conclusions about an institution's compliance with the standard.

The following example of a university response to a specific core component of a criterion demonstrates an effective program outcome. As defined by Henning (2009), program outcomes are defined as aggregate effects of a program, service, or intervention. The paragraph below highlights a university program that was created to increase the retention rate of at-risk undergraduate students.

*The Center for Student Success (CSS), created in 2006 [as a retention initiative], advises and provides programming for students without a declared major, those admitted conditionally, and those on academic probation. In addition, the center responds to the Academic Alert System*

*described in Core Component 3C. Based on two years of data, CSS has documented that participants performed better if they completed the Academic Alert program. Specifically, if the identified students completed the program, their GPA increased by an average of +0.72. (UMSL, 2008).*

This example begins by briefly describing the program (learning resource), its services, and its intended audience. More importantly, it gives specific aggregate data (+0.72 effectiveness) on the positive effects (results) on student GPA (learning). In addition to this self study report excerpt, an Academic Alert Program Summary Report was made available to site visitors. This example illustrates the connectedness of the accrediting body's expectations of the institution and compliance from the university. Supplying such aggregate data documents success towards goal attainment.

**Assessment of the Self Study Report**

In addition to being able to effectively document compliance with the standards or criteria, student affairs educators must also be responsible for the assessment and evaluation of the individual components of the self study report. Developing a rubric and making it available allows for all members of the self study steering committee to know the criteria and standards for the final written document.

When committee members receive a rubric beforehand, they understand how the written document will be evaluated and can prepare accordingly. Figure 6 provides an example rubric illustrating the scaffolding necessary to improve the quality of the final self study document. Arends (2007) suggested that reviewing a final document from different angles improves understanding, which is also beneficial in preparing for the site visit (discussed further in Chapter 5).

| Standard:                       |   | Core Content:   |  |           |
|---------------------------------|---|---|--|-----------|
| Reviewer:                       |   | Date of Review:   |  |           |
| Criteria/Qualities              | 1   | 2   | 3  | Comments: |
| <b>Introduction:</b>            | Lack of implicit and/or explicit reference is made to the purpose of standard/criterion.                            | Able to distinguish overall core components of the standard.  | Topic is clear and ground-work is laid for the direction of providing evidence for standard  |           |
| <b>Flow of Body:</b>            | Core component appears to have no direction. Subtopics appear disorganized.   | There is basic flow from one section to the next but order of some sections or paragraphs do not follow the established flow. | The self study goes from general information to a specific program detail. Transitions are clear and flow is apparent.                           |           |
| <b>Elaboration of Evidence:</b> | Major topics as defined by accrediting agency appear to be missing to support the specific element of the standard. | Major topics are apparent but not covered in depth.   | The content is covered in great depth, <u>examples</u> and sources are cited, and significance to compliance is apparent                         |           |
| <b>Writing Technique:</b>       | Writing is convoluted and confusing. Several grammer and punctuation mistakes are evident.                          | Writing is clear but several paragraphs are too long include unnecessary information  | Writing is clear and concise. Grammer and punctuation are correct. Ideas are supported with examples.  |           |
| <b>Analysis:</b>                | Analysis of data is not evident. Descriptive only, no indication of program effectiveness is made                   | Concluding remarks indicate basic analysis of specific standard and element and program effectiveness.                        | Succinct and precise conclusion about program compliance has been developed. Insights into analysis of expected and actual outcomes are evident. |           |
| <b>Additional Comments:</b>     |   |   |  |           |

Figure 6. Rubric for self study content assessment. Revised from Curtis (n.d.).

## Conclusion

As stated earlier in this chapter, the self study report “bears the weight of providing evidence” (HLC, 2010, p. 5.2-2) of the connection between an institution’s commitment to self-examination and to standards set forth by regional and national accrediting agencies. Active participation in the writing process on behalf of the student affairs staff ensures that credible evidence of their efforts to support the institution’s mission, the achievement of goals, the commitment to program improvement, and compliance with regional standards is accurately represented.

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# Chapter 5

## Preparing for the Site Visit

Timothy Gordon

**THIS MONOGRAPH HAS** explored and reviewed many issues related to student affairs educators' role in the campus accreditation process. Involvement from various levels of student affairs leadership in the assessment and measurement of student learning and student development has been identified as critical to creating a "culture of assessment" (Banta & Associates, 2002, p. 45). In continuing to create this culture, leaders must remain significantly engaged in developing data points for accreditation and participating in the site visit. Student affairs educators must be intentional about how they prepare for an accreditation visit, including identifying how an institution and the division have developed since the last visit, understanding areas of excellence and challenge, and articulating what has and is occurring related to student learning, institutional effectiveness, and student affairs initiatives.

There are several reasons that preparation for the site visit is an important step in the accreditation process. As noted by Kells (1995), "visits fail because several important elements are missing" (p. 142). One cause of failure is lack of understanding of the visit's purpose and another is that the schedule does not provide time for useful interactions (Kells, 1995). One strategy identified as being able to address these issues is strong communication about the purpose of evaluating college and university programs, especially in communications about the site visit.

It is important to consider organizational structure and environment in relation to accreditation visits. A climate should be established that creates strong acceptance and buy-in from key decision makers, utilizes effective communication, and targets resources effectively (Barak & Breier, 1990). Student affairs educators may be particularly suited to the role of "boundary spanner" (Barak & Breier, 1990, p. 95). In this role, they are expected to "explain the needs of the institution to outside constituents while interpreting

external forces to students and faculty" (Barak & Breier, 1990, p. 97). This is an important consideration related to the site visit as it should remind student affairs educators not only to evaluate their role in previous visits but also to explore ways in which they can be involved in current or future visits. Student affairs educators can use site visit preparation as a way to identify how strongly student affairs is aligned and connected with the institutional mission and areas being evaluated in the site visit.

Understanding how student affairs educators might expand the role of student affairs, assist with greater communication efforts related to site visits, and serve as leaders in managing and approaching accreditation is critical. This understanding can inform the implementation and development of good practices related to preparation for the site visit. Although this monograph focuses on student affairs educators, these practices would benefit any member of the campus community. Some suggestions that can assist administrators in being prepared are

- widely sharing the reviewer schedule (as appropriate) with student affairs teams and students;
- identifying and creating a "resource room" where supplemental items can be explored by reviewers;
- ensuring that all participating staff members understand the self study findings and the process for collecting data in various areas, and, most importantly, their division;
- reviewing and understanding the ways in which student affairs has contributed to the development of growth areas that may have been the focus of previous visits and/or identified in the self study process; and
- providing leadership to ensure that a representative group of students are involved in the accreditation site visit (Accreditation Council for Independent Colleges and Schools [ACICS], 2010; Banta & Associates, 2002; HLC, 2010; Kells, 1995, MSCHE, 2010; SACS, 2010).

Reviewing each of these areas can help the student affairs team prepare for hosting the reviewers on campus. This reflection can also serve as a barometer for continuing to develop a culture of assessment and collaboration related to student development and learning.

### **Schedule for Site Visit**

The schedule for the site visit is generally developed by the faculty member(s) or administrator(s) chairing the institution's accreditation team. In developing this schedule, the chair is likely coordinating with a central area such as the president's or provost's office. However, it is important for staff and students, those actively participating and those not, to understand why specific meetings are scheduled. Sharing the purpose or goal of a particular meeting is certainly helpful for those who are to be interviewed; it also provides transparency and context for people who may be less centrally involved. Finally, broadly sharing the goal and purpose of site visit meetings goes a long way towards building continued commitment to the assessment process. Widely sharing the purpose of meetings during the visit provides opportunities for the entire community to be engaged in understanding the function, purpose, and components of the accreditation visit.

The methods by which this schedule is shared can vary, and social media can be used in support of this purpose. Creating a Facebook group, SharePoint site, or Twitter profile could provide opportunities to share reviewer schedules, reminders to meeting participants, and open-forum plans in real time and in ways that can be accessed beyond email or paper methods. What type of information and how this information is shared will likely vary by institution, but the important point is that understanding and sharing information can assist student affairs educators to be present where needed, develop a familiarity with the process, have access to understanding other discussions and meetings that were held, and be able to view the process and its results in the appropriate context. This strategy of identifying more opportunities for involvement and information sharing communicates the commitment expected of student affairs educators to the ongoing assessment and accreditation processes.

### **Accreditation Team Workroom**

The accreditation review team's workroom, commonly referred to as a resource room, provides an opportunity to share materials that the institution may have updated or added since the self study was completed and submitted. This is a physical space the team uses on campus for its site visit work, but it can also have a virtual presence through software or a web-secured workspace. Provision and development of this space is specifically mentioned on the websites for ACICS (2010) and the HLC (2010). ACICS (2010) noted that these materials can vary depending on

the type of accreditation visit being conducted but that it is important the accreditation team's workroom include information that the institution did not include in the self study or any other information provided previously. The work/meeting room also provides a space in which to share supporting materials in a variety of formats. These may include examples of student work or assessments, binders that contain longitudinal survey data collected and analyzed by student affairs teams, program evaluations, or multimedia (e.g., video, podcasts, webcasts, electronic portfolios) that provide examples of out-of-classroom learning, activities, and impact. This is also a good place to provide information that illustrates key areas that have been addressed or developed since the last accreditation visit or as part of a continuous improvement cycle. Student affairs educators should be in communication with the internal committee and/or designated staff to identify items that might relate to focus areas being used by the external accreditors.

### **Shared Self Study and Supporting Documents**

One of the challenges that can exist for student affairs educators is that they may not be as well connected to the everyday workings of academic departments as faculty or colleagues in academic affairs. The MSCHE (2010) manual and website addressed this in noting that "the level of awareness of the self study . . . is an indication of institutional commitment and integrity in the accreditation process" (p. 2). It is important that student affairs staff familiarize themselves in a comprehensive way with the previous institutional self study. This is a document with an institutional focus and understanding the connection between the findings in the past report and work of student affairs will provide a good foundation for those directly, or indirectly, participating in the current visit. Although the SSAO may have provided information to the internal committee regarding the kinds and amounts of activities associated with supporting student learning, institutional effectiveness, and other institutional priorities, it is important for student affairs staff to have a broad and comprehensive knowledge beyond their functional responsibilities so that they can provide a more global perspective when meeting and talking with external reviewers. It is also important to share information with key student populations and leaders so that they, too, are able to speak about the numbers and measures the institution uses and progress being made in specific areas and in goals set during previous accreditation visits. The accreditation visit certainly provides an opportunity to test student affairs members' knowledge of their institution, but it should not be the only time they engage with this type of information.

### **A Divisional Knowledge Base**

In addition to having a familiarity with important statistics and other information, student affairs leaders should be

familiar with the previous self study and interim report and how it influenced the current self study. If there was an absence of student affairs educators' contributions in previous visits and their involvement has increased in the current visit, this information may be important to highlight to help accreditors identify how the institution is engaging the entire campus community. Additionally, sharing ways in which student affairs involvement has increased at all levels of the division can promote understanding of how their work impacts student learning and institutional effectiveness. It also provides an opportunity to show where student affairs connections can be strengthened and make these connections more transparent and intentional.

Reviewing and understanding ways in which the student affairs division has contributed to the improvement of areas highlighted in the previous visits or the self study process is an important tool that can assist student affairs educators as they prepare to participate in the site visit. The importance of this understanding is echoed in the researchers' provision of a successful program review from the perspective of an academic department dean or senior administrator. Barak and Brier (1990) wrote that there is a "responsibility to ensure that data on the program are accurate" (p. 102). By developing student affairs educators' knowledge base, the student affairs division's contributions and understanding of institutional measurements and priorities can be reflected accurately to visiting agencies.

### Student Engagement in Self Study Process

Working with student organizations is a good way to ensure that students are intentionally involved in the visit. This can be done through inviting their involvement in the visit as well as in more indirect ways such as sharing schedule information. Sharing appropriate schedule information related to the visit as well as the self study is critical for those who will be scheduled to meet with the visiting team. Another way to involve students is to select students to escort the accreditors around campus, providing an opportunity for the team to hear from students informally. SACS's (2010) handbook noted that "committee members thoroughly enjoy . . . meeting students" (p. 4). Preparing students with information is important, especially the data and institutional goals cited in the self study.

### Conclusion

Overall, preparation for the accreditation visit is an important component of the process. Creating an environment in which information is shared and that allows each group to have a common understanding provides an opportunity to identify ways in which the culture does (or does not) engage a broad base of people in ongoing review of the campus's activities and programs. If there was any doubt that campus constituents must share in the effort to articulate and contribute to student

learning, evidence of this is provided in the minutes from the February 26, 2004, meeting of the U.S. Senate. These proceedings noted that one of the goals of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation is to "expand the use of evidence of student learning outcomes as well as institution and program performance in accreditation" (U.S. Senate, 2004, p. 46). Involvement and preparation in the accreditation visit provides a great opportunity for student affairs educators to identify how to most effectively share evidence as well as articulate and measure the contributions student affairs makes to student learning.

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# Chapter 6

## Final Words

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Laura A. Bayless

**THIS MONOGRAPH HAS** explored the accreditation process from the student affairs perspective. If a division of student affairs consistently uses good strategic planning and assessment practices, focusing particularly on student learning and institutional effectiveness, the process of preparing for the self study and site visit will be fairly straightforward. Further, the institutional accreditation process allows a division of student affairs to demonstrate to the campus-at-large the ways it contributes to the institutional mission and to student learning.

What are the next steps for the division of student affairs following the self study and site visit? Each institution receives a report from the review team and the accrediting body in response to the self study and site visit providing observations, feedback, and recommendations. Staff in the division should read the report to determine which comments and recommendations apply to student affairs. This feedback can provide direction for strategic planning, a kind of blueprint for the quality improvement cycle (J. W. de Felix, personal communication, July 2010). Chapters 2 and 3 provide guidance regarding creating and implementing (or strengthening) a culture of assessment to ensure a closed feedback loop. Incorporate the recommendations that apply to student affairs in these plans to ensure not only that your division is doing excellent work with students and providing best practices but also that you will have evidence to demonstrate the progress made on these issues. CAL and CAE members are available to consult about the accreditation process.

Although the accreditation process centers on a decennial, comprehensive self study, institutions must provide interim progress reports at the five-year mark. In these interim reports, progress made on the external review team's recommendations must be addressed, as well as a general update about enrollment and finance trends, any new conditions associated with the institution, changes in institutional status and resources, and challenges and opportunities. The extent to which the division of student affairs is involved with the interim report may depend on the recommendations from the self study. However, even if few or no recommendations target student affairs work, the division should position itself to be part of the process. This can be as involved as co-writing the report or as little as reading drafts and providing feedback. In addition, student affairs educators can help ensure that students have the opportunity to be involved as well.

The mission of any institution of higher education has students at its core. Divisions of student affairs contribute to this mission by creating an environment outside of the classroom in which students learn and develop, actively contribute to the life of the campus, and find the direction and support they need. The accreditation process is one of the ways the higher education community can ensure the quality of institutions. Divisions of student affairs can and should leverage the accreditation process to confirm that students are challenged and supported in ways that set them up for success, evidence that the division is following best practices, and demonstrate the division's contributions to the institution's mission.

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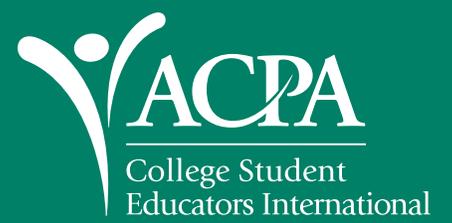
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