

INTRODUCTION

Creating a New Model of Accreditation

The Changing Context for Institutional Accreditation

Accreditation stands as a distinctive American innovation to assure quality in higher education. It was founded more than 100 years ago on the principle of peer review, meaning that those within the academy are best able to evaluate the quality of higher education institutions. In the past decades, however, both institutions and the challenges of defining and evaluating quality have become significantly more complex and come under increasing scrutiny. Some of the changes that affect our ability to define and evaluate quality in the accrediting process include:

- ☞ Increasing diversity of institutional types, with significant changes occurring within traditional institutions; the development of single-purpose institutions in a wide range of disciplines; and the expansion of profit-centered enterprises into higher education
- ☞ Development and growth of online and distributed learning within traditional institutions and the development of institutions wholly or primarily organized to provide educational services in a distributed environment
- ☞ Increased scale and complexity of institutions, where the majority of students served in higher education attend large, complex, multipurpose universities. The focus of accreditation review grows more critical at these institutions, but traditional frameworks of accreditation have become more cumbersome and less effective at these institutions
- ☞ A shift toward effectiveness and performance indicators beyond inputs and resources as the organizing basis for defining and evaluating quality
- ☞ Higher expectations for the performance of graduates, leading to calls for increased attention to evidence of student learning.
- ☞ A burgeoning focus on the diversity of learners and learning needs in American higher education, along with the increased globalization of curricula, programs, and student populations
- ☞ Higher mobility of students between institutions, changing patterns of institutional attendance, and the de-institutionalization of learning settings leading to a decline in institutional impact and control over the educational experience and curricula of students
- ☞ Concern over the rising costs of higher education and recognition that higher education is a major factor in economic growth and productivity, resulting in an emphasis on the need for greater efficiency and effectiveness in institutional performance
- ☞ The increased impact and workload caused by federal regulations that affect accreditation processes and all institutions of higher education

Principles For the Redesign of the WASC Accreditation Process

The confluence of these forces of change has led the Senior College Commission of WASC to assess the capacity and effectiveness of its processes to serve the higher education community and the public as well as it has done in the past. It is clear that a single approach, characterized as “one size fits all,” no longer is functional or appropriate.

In 1998 the Commission adopted two Core Commitments and six principles to govern the redesign of the WASC accreditation process. The Core Commitments (described more fully on page 5) are to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness. The following principles continue to remain relevant and provide solid foundation for the new model of accreditation outlined in this *Handbook of Accreditation*, and they serve as the basis for interpreting how the Core Commitments, new accreditation standards, and redesigned institutional review process will be implemented.

Principle 1: Significant changes are needed to make the content and process of accreditation more relevant both to institutions and to the public.

Principle 2: The WASC process needs to demonstrably add value and be cost effective.

Principle 3: Greater emphasis is needed on evidence of educational effectiveness and student learning.

Principle 4: The accreditation process needs to shift from an “in/out of compliance” stance on every issue to a recognition that many aspects of quality are best addressed on a continuum basis.

Principle 5: More efficient means are needed to establish that institutions meet basic resource and integrity standards.

Principle 6: WASC needs to maintain a posture of experimentation in the years ahead, leading to the institutionalization of a more adaptive and responsive process of accreditation.

Commission Values for Implementing the New Handbook

The Commission is mindful that the codification of new standards and procedures could lead to early rigidification of emergent and dynamic principles for institutional review and evaluation. We have much to learn in the application of the Core Commitments, new Accreditation Standards, and redesigned institutional review process. There is no single approach that is warranted for all institutions, nor an “orthodoxy” of how all institutions are to respond to this new model of accreditation and definition of “educational effectiveness.” As a result, the Commission has adopted a set of values to inform its own conduct in implementing the new *Handbook* and the conduct of evaluation teams and institutions going through the accreditation process. These key values include the following Commission commitments to institutions that, to the extent possible and appropriate, the Commission will:

- ☞ recognize the diversity of institutions and institutional missions
- ☞ acknowledge that all institutions are located at different places on a continuum of development and adapt the review process appropriately
- ☞ maintain flexibility and adaptability, emphasizing collaboration between institutions and WASC
- ☞ affirm the centrality of educational effectiveness, including student learning, as a common activity of all candidate and accredited institutions (while educational effectiveness may not be the only value for a WASC-accredited institution, its examination and improvement is a core WASC value)

- ☞ focus on institutional purposes and results, not on specific structures or methods for their accomplishments
- ☞ support multiple models of institutional presentation and demonstration of meeting Commission Core Commitments and Standards
- ☞ rely heavily on existing institutional evidence and sampling of institutional exhibits and processes, including as appropriate, student work
- ☞ promote the development and evaluation by institutions of quantitative and qualitative evidence that is used to improve institutional and educational effectiveness

The Commission has also adopted a Code of Good Practice and Ethical Conduct for its relations with institutions in the institutional evaluation and decision making process. This Code is found in the *Handbook* on page 9.

The New Framework for Accreditation

In response to the changing context of higher education, and to reflect the principles adopted by the Commission for accreditation in the WASC region, the Commission has developed a new framework for accreditation. The elements of this new framework align under the core principles called “Core Commitments” to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness which are embodied significantly by revised Accreditation Standards and a three-stage, sequential institutional review process. Each element is described in the following sections of the *Handbook*. Together these components represent a holistic system and process of review that enable WASC to work collaboratively with institutions in a spirit of ongoing experimentation and mutual learning as defined by the Commission values stated above.

Higher education exists in the United States as a public trust and a public good. It is linked to the improvement of individuals, groups, and society as a whole. It provides the basis for conserving and transmitting the values of society and for reflecting on and identifying needed areas of change. Through research, scholarship and creative activity, institutions of higher education also promote the value of discovery and learning. In offering educational programs, institutions prepare their graduates for productive and meaningful lives as citizens and members of society.

The accrediting process functions to promote and sustain this special role for higher education, while providing assurance to the public that institutions of higher education continue to warrant public trust and support. Accreditation evaluation of institutional resources, structures, practices, and results serves an important role for the higher education community and the public in this context. Yet accreditation is not well understood and is too often considered reactive to external minimal standards.

Developing a New Posture of Engagement with Institutions

Under the new framework for accreditation, qualifying institutions are able to consciously and deliberately collaborate with WASC to develop new approaches that are designed to serve institutional priorities in tandem with accreditation requirements. Such an approach opens up tremendous opportunities for creativity and renewal. At the same time, however, experimentation creates risk. Not all the ground rules are known in advance, or are even knowable. We all will need to learn together in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration, sharing the results of these processes to create opportunities for organizational learning.

The implementation of the new model may not initially be as effective as desired, especially in the first round. We believe, however, that accreditation needs to change, and that the kinds of changes needed require an openness to experimentation. We need to consider how the new Standards may accomplish the principles set forth in this *Handbook*. Our goal is a simplified, more usable, and effective process that can be better understood by the many consumers of accreditation.

We also believe that the spirit of experimentation should be embedded in the WASC of the future, leading to a more adaptive and responsive model of accreditation. Such a model would recognize and respond more effectively to the diversity of institutional missions reflected within the region, and reflect the awareness that there is an ebb and flow within each institution that may suggest different approaches each time an accreditation review is scheduled.

Organizing Around Core Commitments

The concept of Core Commitments is intended to move accreditation from a reactive process of something done to an institution, to a proactive commitment of an institution which WASC reviews and validates. Framing accreditation as a commitment makes the act of accreditation more connected to the public accountability role legitimately held by accreditation, and puts the institutional commitment front and center. Given the wide range of institutions currently served by WASC and the likelihood that even newer institutional forms will emerge, there is need for a framing device to enable the Commission to apply the Standards of Accreditation flexibly as means, not ends.

Thus, to become and remain accredited, each institution is expected to demonstrate that it is committed to developing and sustaining Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness.

Core Commitment to Institutional Capacity:

The institution functions with clear purposes, high levels of institutional integrity, fiscal stability, and organizational structures to fulfill its purposes.

The Core Commitment to Institutional Capacity enables the institution to consider resource issues from a holistic perspective, and to consider capacity as an institutional attribute beyond minimum compliance and a review of assets. Looking at itself through a “lens” of institutional capacity enables the institution to reexamine what it *is* in terms of its capacity to fulfill its aspirations, and to integrate and synthesize findings and recommendations for improvement gained through its self review under Commission Standards. While the Standards provide an opportunity to review institutional performance within a defined area, the framework of institutional capacity allows an institution to explore cross-cutting issues such as whether resources, structures and processes are aligned with the institution’s mission and priorities, and whether there is good evidence of effectiveness in their actual deployment. An important dimension of institutional capacity reflected in the Institutional Review cycle is the institution’s potential to define and sustain educational effectiveness.

Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness:

The institution evidences clear and appropriate educational objectives and design at the institutional and program level. The institution employs processes of review, including the collection and use of data, that assure delivery of programs and learner accomplishments at a level of performance appropriate for the degree or certificate awarded.

The Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness provides an opportunity for the institution to explore holistically its approaches to educational effectiveness and assess whether institutional systems, such as course and program design, faculty support, and program review are effectively linked to evidence of student learning and are consistent with the educational goals and academic standards of the institution. By design, elements of educational effectiveness were incorporated into all four Commission Standards, so that institutions would explore the relationships between capacity and educational quality and effectiveness. The Accreditation Standards identify key elements of educational effectiveness. Many institutions have found valuable the framing of educational effectiveness presented in *Invitation to Dialogue II*, a document prepared to assist the region in developing the framework for accreditation described in this *Handbook*. The framing is repeated here to provide one possible set of lenses for institutions to review the broader issue of educational effectiveness and for applying the Standards for Accreditation.

Focusing on Educational Effectiveness

- ❧ **Articulating a Collective Vision of Educational Attainment.** Centers on the degree to which the institution sets goals and obtains results for student learning at both the institutional and program levels that are:
 - clearly stated and widely understood;
 - appropriate for the type and level of the degree or credential offered; and
 - adequately assessed to ascertain mastery of these levels.

- ❧ **Organizing for Learning.** Centers on the alignment of appropriate institutional assets and characteristics with the goal of producing high levels of student learning, consistent with the mission of the institution, including:
 - curriculum, pedagogy, and method of delivery;
 - faculty recruitment, development, scholarship in support of improved teaching and learning, rewards, and incentives;



- organizational structures and processes;
- information resources and planning capacity;
- student services and co-curricular activities; and
- resources and facilities.

☞ **Becoming a Learning Organization.** Centers on the degree to which the institution has developed systems—to assess its own performance and to use information to improve student learning over time—that:

- are systematic and regular;
- reinforce a climate of inquiry throughout the institution;
- reflect the input of stakeholders and an awareness of the distinctive characteristics of its students;
- identify key dimensions of performance that include student learning; and
- are based on standards of evidence that prominently feature educational results.

WASC as a Learning Organization

WASC is interested in gathering feedback on the application of this *Handbook*, and will develop multiple approaches for soliciting information for continual improvement. A survey form can be found in the Appendices and on the WASC website. The Commission, with an expectation of revision and refinement as WASC itself becomes a learning organization, will be continuously reviewing the implementation of the Standards and the Institutional Review Process as institutions deepen their engagement. Let us hear from you.