

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Educational Effectiveness: A Guide for Institutions and Teams

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NOTE:

This draft was approved by the Commission in November 2004 for distribution to the region for comment.

This document neither adds to nor replaces any Standards or Criteria for Review (CFRs). It is provided as a resource to institutions as they prepare for the Educational Effectiveness Review and as they evaluate their own progress in applying the CFRs, especially under Standards Two and Four.

Site teams may also find the document useful in understanding and evaluating institutional practice.

As an organizing framework for educational effectiveness, the document should be used to view holistic and multi-tiered systems of good practice and is not meant to be applied by institutions or teams as a mechanical measurement.

Introduction

Evaluation teams and the Accrediting Commission have long had experience reviewing, recommending, and taking action with respect to institutional capacity issues. With the adoption of the Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness and the Standards of Accreditation focusing so centrally on student and organizational learning, the Commission has received a number of questions regarding the meaning of educational effectiveness, how institutions should address this emphasis within the Standards of Accreditation, how evaluation teams should review educational effectiveness leading to team recommendations, and what is the range of actions the Commission might take based on educational effectiveness reviews.

The Commission now has more than three years of experience implementing the new Standards under the *2001 Handbook*, and it is positioned to answer these questions in a formative way. The Commission has developed this guide regarding Educational Effectiveness in the format of answers to most-frequently-asked questions. It has also prepared an accompanying developmental framework for educational effectiveness that can serve as a guide for team and Commission consideration of institutional educational effectiveness efforts. The attached *Framework for Evaluating Educational Effectiveness* is drawn entirely from Commission Standards, Criteria for Review and Guidelines. It is organized to assist institutions and teams understand that the kind of institutional commitment to student and organizational learning developed by the Standards is a multi-dimensional process that will require several years of serious development and engagement. At the same time, the process of development and engagement should be anchored in each institution's mission and context. Thus, while each institution's journey may be different, all are expected to be well underway.

In working with these materials, the Commission cautions that institutions and teams should avoid using them in any mechanical or formulaic way. They are in draft form at this stage to invite comment and improvement. There is always the risk with any framework that an institution may locate itself at a particular place and assume that they have "made it." It is designed to suggest that there is always room for learning and improvement, and the framework is designed to suggest areas of inquiry and assessment and not become, in and of itself, the basis of accreditation review. The Commission is interested in seeing that these materials, and their emphasis on educational effectiveness, will lead the entire higher education community in the WASC region into a meaningful dialogue that will improve the quality of education provided to students, and enrich the quality of discourse in the accreditation review process.

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Educational Effectiveness:

- **Is Educational Effectiveness to be given the same weight as Institutional Capacity?** In creating two Core Commitments as well as two site reviews, the accreditation review process sets forth the important principle that Educational Effectiveness is to be given equal weight in the accreditation process. Indeed, because so many institutions need to develop and implement the infrastructure to address both student and organizational learning, and undertake activities to gather and analyze student learning results, even greater emphasis may be needed on Educational Effectiveness issues over the next several years. The attached *Framework for Evaluating Educational Effectiveness* and other resources developed by the Commission are designed to assist institutions assess their current status and develop plans for address Commission expectations for Educational Effectiveness. (See, for example, *Worksheet for Preliminary Self-Review Under the Standards* and *Data Table 7.1*)
- **Does the Commission expect all institutions to use the same or similar approaches to Educational Effectiveness?** The Commission states in the *Handbook* that each institution is to define and address Educational Effectiveness in its own terms and within the context of its mission. Thus, the Commission does not have a single approach or method that all institutions are expected to follow. Within each institution's context, the Standards set forth common expectations for team reviews. The Standards and Criteria for Review call for each institution to define learning outcomes at the program and institutional levels, to develop indicators of performance and effectiveness, to embed these outcomes in curricula and program reviews, and to develop a "culture of evidence" that leads to improvement of learning. These efforts form a *Core Commitment* of the institution both to the public and to the Commission regarding the educational effectiveness of the institution and its programs.
- **How are student learning results to be reviewed?** Each institution is expected to move beyond surveys and self-reports to consideration of appropriate forms of evidence of learning results. The forms of evidence may vary, but it is expected that faculty and others, as appropriate, evaluate evidence of student learning to assess "what level of learning is good enough?" The Commission holds that, while such judgments are best made at the institutional level, Educational Effectiveness Review Teams are to consider whether each institution is gathering, reviewing and assessing learning results to be able to make such determinations. In some instances as well, teams may call upon institutions to establish more effective benchmarks for making such judgments or to improve the level of performance. The Commission has produced the *Guide to the Use of Evidence in the WASC Process* to assist institutions develop and review effective evidence of student learning, and offers an extensive series of workshops at the Annual Meeting and throughout the year to assist institutions.
- **Will the Commission expect more than that institutions are "getting started" with assessment of student learning?** The Commission started to emphasize the assessment of student learning with the 1988 *Handbook of Accreditation*, and it published a resource manual, *Achieving Institutional Effectiveness Through Assessment*, in 1992. That Manual established expectations for all institutions with respect to assessing student learning that were to be achieved by 1995. The 2001 *Handbook of Accreditation* continued this emphasis and significantly reframed the Standards of Accreditation and the accreditation review process to be organized more directly around student and organizational learning. The three-year process of Proposal development to the Educational Effectiveness Review also is designed to provide institutions the opportunity to develop a systematic approach to Educational effectiveness and to analyze evidence of learning results throughout the institution. Given this history, therefore, all institutions are expected to be well underway in their programs of outcomes identification, assessment of student learning, review of evidence, and organization of institutional systems of quality and learning improvement.
- **How should teams approach making recommendations following the Educational Effectiveness Review?** The stance of the Commission is that the entire region needs to work collaboratively, and in good

faith, to make significant progress in responding to Commission expectations for educational effectiveness. It is the responsibility of each institution to know whether its students are achieving intended program, and institutional learning outcomes. In evaluating institutional performance in this area, the Commission is fulfilling a key area of its public accountability. Thus, in making recommendations to the Commission and to the institution, teams are to consider a number of factors regarding institutional commitment, performance, leadership, likely momentum, and the sustainability of actions underway. These are further described in the attached Framework for Evaluating Educational Effectiveness.

How will the Commission take action in the area of Educational Effectiveness? The multi-stage accreditation process calls for the Commission to take a preliminary action following the Capacity and Preparatory Review, and then a summative action following the Educational Effectiveness Review. Thus, the action taken following the Educational Effectiveness Review incorporates findings from both reviews, progress made since the Capacity and Preparatory Review, and the overall judgment of the Commission regarding the institution's accreditation. Rather than making these issues typically ones of basic *accreditability*, the Commission has initially applied the Standards with a more *developmental* stance. This developmental stance is reflected in the Framework for Evaluating Educational Effectiveness. At the same time, the Commission recognizes that the Standards of Accreditation have been in effect for more than three years, and institutions have three years within the accreditation review process to prepare for their own Educational Effectiveness Reviews. In addition, the Commission has offered, and continues to offer, a significant number of workshops and learning opportunities for institutional teams at the Annual Meeting, throughout the year, in the production of new materials and in the development of supplemental resources now available on the Commission's website (www.wascweb.org/senior).

Thus, the Commission now believes it is appropriate to consider, where appropriate, the full range of institutional actions available to it regarding educational effectiveness, including in rare cases, the possibility of a sanction. In its first several rounds of review under the *2001 Handbook*, the Commission has found that there is often a need for follow up visits and/or reports to assure sustained attention to educational effectiveness as institutions early in the review cycle have demonstrated beginning efforts without significant evidence of student learning results or demonstration of an institution-wide program. Now that the Standards and support activities have been in place for several years, the Commission hopes that institutions can use the Framework for Evaluating Educational Effectiveness, and other materials prepared by the Commission, in deepening its understanding of the Standards of Accreditation, improving the preparation for Educational Effectiveness Reviews, and using its assessment efforts to develop greater learning-centeredness.

During the period of development of the *2001 Handbook* the Commission understood that everyone involved in the accreditation process in the region – institutions, teams, staff and the Commission itself – would need a period of time to become oriented to the heightened emphasis on Educational Effectiveness. It wished to encourage good faith efforts by the sharing of good practices and not use the threat of sanctions to induce compliance and institutional engagement. And over the past three years the Commission has been highly encouraged by the extensive engagement of so many institutions in addressing issues of Educational Effectiveness, even outside of the accreditation review cycle. The Commission continues to prefer to work collaboratively with institutions and believes that the Standards (including the Criteria for Review and Guidelines) are one of the best articulations of Educational Effectiveness available in the country. Now that there have been an effective transition into the *2001 Handbook* and so many instances of effective institutional approaches to Educational Effectiveness, there is now an adequate basis for the Commission to treat the Standards and CFRs relating to Educational Effectiveness the same as any other Standards.

- **How will the Commission Weigh Multiple Considerations to Ensure Fairness and Consistency in its Decision Making?** The Commission considers the considerable information in addition to the evaluation team reports. For example, each institution is given the opportunity to respond to any evaluation team report and there is opportunity for the president of each institution to interact with the Commission following both

the Capacity and Preparatory Review and the Educational Effectiveness Review. In reviewing the entire body of evidence, decisions are based on a number of factors being weighed and, in each case, weighted appropriately to the context of the institution. Thus, there is no rigid set of metrics applied to form the basis of each action. Consistency and fairness of decision making is a result of balancing these factors within each institution's context, and in using the extensive process of coming to judgment, including the ability to get the most information possible.

Over the years, several factors have been most commonly applied by the Commission in determining both the accredited status of institutions and the type of future follow up:

- The *context* of the institution in relation to accreditation—its accrediting history, past performance and current trajectory, and the quality and likely sustainability of leadership's understanding of the issues and commitment to address them.
- The *nature of the evidence* provided by the institution during the review. Performance supported by evidence is weighted much more heavily than promises of future action.
- The *consistency* of this action with previous actions taken by the Commission.
- The *fairness* of the decision in relation to this and other types of institutions. Are the same levels of performance being applied across different types of institutions?
- The *strategic direction* the Commission wishes to establish for both the individual institution and for the region as a whole in defining and setting expectations for Educational Effectiveness.

Framework for Evaluating Educational Effectiveness

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Key Descriptive Terms → ↓ ELEMENT & DEFINITION	INITIAL	EMERGING	DEVELOPED	HIGHLY DEVELOPED
Learning Outcomes: A. Are established, referenced in publications, cited and used by faculty and advisors:	For only a few programs and units; only vaguely (if at all) for GE; not referenced in publications; only a few faculty know and use for designing curriculum, assignments, or assessment	For many programs and units, and most GE aspects; beginning to be referenced in basic documents; beginning to be used by some faculty as reference for design of curriculum, assignments, and assessment	For all units (academic & co-curricular), and for GE; cited often but not in all appropriate places; most faculty cite; used in most programs for design of curriculum, assignments, and assessment	For all units (academic and co-curricular), and for GE; cited widely by faculty and advisors; used by all faculty to design curricula, assignments, and assessment
B. Outcomes are assessed:	Occasionally, using surveys and self reports; seldom using direct assessment; rarely leading to revision of pedagogy	Occasionally, principally using surveys; beginning to move beyond self reports toward some direct assessment; seldom leading to revision of pedagogy	Periodically, sometimes using authentic and performance-based methods; may lack documentation; pedagogy is occasionally reviewed and revised	Regularly; using multiple methods, including authentic and performance-based; pedagogy systematically reviewed and revised based on assessment data
C. Learning is demonstrably achieved:	At levels that may not be up to standards; concerns that standards set by institution are too low for a baccalaureate-level institution	For most students at levels set by the institution; faculty are beginning to discuss results	For all students at or above levels set by institution; results discussed periodically by most faculty	For all students at or above levels set by institution; results are discussed regularly and deliberatively by all faculty
Teaching and Learning Processes: A. Curricula & pedagogy are:	Not visibly aligned with outcomes; few programs have evidences of achievement beyond mere completion of designated courses	Beginning to be aligned with established learning outcomes, with achievement demonstrated in some areas beyond mere completion of designated courses	Broadly aligned with learning out-comes; in most programs, student achievement beyond the mere completion of designated courses is demonstrated in most areas	Highly visible, fully aligned with learning outcomes; in all programs, achievement beyond mere completion of designated courses is demonstrated at both the program (comprehensive) & course levels
B. Curricular processes are:	Rarely informed by good learning practices; few curricula reviewed, mostly without reference to evidences of student learning	Informed in a few instances by good learning practices; some curricula reviewed and improved but with little reference to evidences of student learning	Informed in many cases by good learning practice; reviewed and improved by relevant faculty; often based on evidences of student learning	Regularly informed by good learning practice (such as employing assessment-as-learning), consistently the result of scholarly reflection by relevant faculty based on evidences of student learning
Organizational Learning: A. Indicators of educational effectiveness are:	Not effectively in place	Found in some areas; dissemination of performance results is beginning; no reference to benchmarks	Multiple, with data collected regularly, disseminated; some performance benchmarks set and used for comparison	Multiple, with data collected regularly, disseminated widely, compared to program benchmarks in all programs
B. Program Review is:	Rare, if at all, with little or no useful data being generated	Occasional, in some departments or units, with the results being infrequently used to suggest process improvements	Frequent, in most divisions or units, with results being used at the departmental level to reflect on effectiveness	Deliberate, systematic, and institution-wide, with results being broadly disseminated and used to improve the processes
C. Faculty, staff, and institutional leaders are:	Not visibly committed to a culture of evidence except in isolated cases	Supportive at top levels only, or sporadically and unevenly, for the development of a culture of evidence	Supportive of a culture of evidence at top levels, by most mid-level personnel, and some faculty and staff	Visibly committed to creating and sustaining a "culture of evidence" in planning at all levels
D. Performance data are:	Not in evidence in any decision processes or used for improvement in any programs	Beginning to be considered in making improvement decisions at institutional level and in some program levels	Frequently considered by decision-making bodies at all levels, but with few documents of data use or outcomes	Consistently obtained, used and documented by decision-making bodies for program improvement at all levels
E. In reference to accreditation processes, the institution is:	Apparent indifference to Commission actions or expectations and/or failure of leadership to resource and expect such implementation; little, if any, momentum	Hesitant or partial implementation of prior Commission actions, some concerns whether momentum can be sustained after Commission review	Has taken formal actions and/or begun processes to implement prior Commission actions in most programs; momentum and impact need to be verified	Promptly and fully incorporates prior Commission actions, showing forward momentum and a positive trajectory in virtually all programs and units
Overall: The institution can best be described as follows:	Committed to some aspects of Educational Effectiveness; if other areas are not addressed, continuing reaffirmation of accreditation is threatened	Promising commitments to Educational Effectiveness in most areas; significant number of areas noted for improvement	Mostly well-established commitments to Educational Effectiveness; some areas for improvement	Operates at an exemplary level in addressing its Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness

