

The WASC Reaccreditation Process: What's New?

The University of California, Irvine is fully accredited by the Senior Commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), California's regional accrediting agency. The campus was reaccredited in 2001 and is currently preparing for the next review in 2012. Since our last review, WASC has adopted a new review process and a new set of standards. The emphasis has shifted from "in/out of compliance" to an emphasis on educational effectiveness. The new process also allows more flexibility in how institutions respond to the new process and standards, based on its own mission and goals.

The new key words are "**educational effectiveness**," "**evidence**" and "**demonstrates**." That is, the institution must go beyond a description of its institutional resources and provide evidence that it has met its own institutional goals and objectives. WASC will be looking for data, analysis of data, and use of the results to promote improvement, both institutionally and educationally. It looks for a "culture of evidence" based on articulation of educational objectives, organizational support for learning, and becoming a learning organization.

This document describes the three most important changes of the new process: 1) new standards, 2) the three-stage review process, and 3) assessment of student learning outcomes.

1. New Standards

One of the primary changes from the old accreditation process is that the nine WASC standards have been replaced by two very broad core commitments and four more global standards. Its new emphasis on student learning outcomes is noted by underlining the relevant sections. Under the new process the campus will need to address the following:

Core Commitment to Institutional Capacity: The institution functions with clear purposes, high integrity, fiscal stability, and organizational structures to fulfill its purposes.

Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness: The institution evidences clear and appropriate educational objectives at the institutional and program level, and employs program review to ensure student accomplishments at a level appropriate to the degree awarded.

To ensure that these commitments are demonstrated in meaningful ways, WASC adopted the following four standards which the campus must address during the review process. Again, the sections relating to educational outcomes are underlined.

"Standard 1: The institution has defined its purposes, mission, and educational objectives consistent with its purposes and mission. The institution is dedicated to higher learning, the search for truth, and the dissemination of knowledge. It has a clear sense of its essential

values, its distinctiveness, and its place in the higher education community and society at large. It functions with integrity and autonomy."

"Standard 2: The institution achieves its purposes and attains its educational objectives through teaching and learning, scholarship and creative activity, and support for student learning. It demonstrates with evidence that these functions are performed effectively."

"Standard 3: The institution sustains its operations and supports achievement of its educational objectives through its investment in human, physical, fiscal, and information resources and through an appropriate and effective set of organizational and decision-making structures."

"Standard 4: The institution is committed to learning and improvement. It conducts sustained, evidence-based evaluation of its purposes and achievement of educational objectives, and uses the results for strategic planning and for review and improvement of its purposes, structures, and approaches to teaching, learning, and scholarly work."

2. New 3-Stage Review Process

The last review process lasted approximately 2-3 years and included a self-study and a single visit from an external review team. Under the new WASC guidelines, the process has been expanded to a three-stage process which lasts approximately 4-5 years. During that time, the campus prepares a proposal and two reports, and has two external review visits.

Stage 1 is the development of a proposal which outlines how the campus will approach the rest of the review process. The proposal includes a preliminary review of the campus under the new standards, the identification of institutional issues or themes and the approach for addressing these, and a review of the adequacy of existing data gathering and analysis systems. Specific data tables and a Web-based institutional portfolio are required at this stage. The campus will spend about one year developing the proposal. The proposal is reviewed by a WASC-appointed proposal review committee which accepts the proposal or asks for revisions.

Stage 2 consists of the capacity and preparatory review. This stage includes a report that demonstrates the core commitment to institutional capacity, reviews capacity and infrastructure to support student learning, and includes a data portfolio and reflective essays. It also includes required data tables and an updated Web-based institutional portfolio. The report is due two-and-a-half years after the proposal. After the report is received, there is a visit from a team of external reviewers. The team recommends to WASC whether or not the campus is ready to continue to the next stage of the review.

Stage 3 is the educational effectiveness review which includes another campus report and a visit from an external review team. At this stage, the campus demonstrates the following: 1) its core commitment to educational effectiveness, 2) assessment of student learning outcomes, 3) faculty use of the learning results for the improvement of teaching and learning, and 4) an institutional portfolio that includes student learning outcomes. Again, tables and an

institutional portfolio are required. The external team either reaffirms accreditation or recommends monitoring or sanctions. This stage takes place 18 months after the capacity and preparatory review.

3. New Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

As noted earlier, under the new standards, WASC requires evidence that the campus has identified educational objectives at the institutional and program levels, conducts periodic assessments of those objectives, and uses the results for the improvement of teaching and learning. That is, the new WASC process requires the campus to articulate student learning outcomes and to collect evidence regarding how well students are achieving those outcomes.

Faculty are used to doing this at the course level. Although goals and objectives might not be written down or shared directly with students, faculty have a good idea of what topics need to be covered and the general types of achievement that students must demonstrate in order to assign grades. Similarly, faculty designing new majors know the types of courses that should be offered and to topics they will address in order to form a degree program. And recently, the Committee on Educational Policy has identified goals for its revised general education program.

However, with the exception of engineering majors, there are no stated learning outcomes for majors. Nor have the goals for general education been written in the form of student learning outcomes. In anticipation of the new WASC requirements in this area, staff from the Office of Research and Evaluation in the Division of Undergraduate Education (DUE) have started developing resources that will help faculty with these tasks. Some of the resources being discussed at this time include workshops for faculty and staff, funding for school or department-based assessment projects, consultants with expertise in assessment, and Web-based resources and links. Additional assistance will come from the Teaching, Learning and Technology Center, also in DUE.

Although in the initial stage of helping faculty with assessment activities, we have already identified some guiding principles for assessment based on good practices at other colleges and universities. First and foremost, assessment must be both meaningful and manageable. It should address important questions that faculty have about teaching and learning, and it must not be burdensome in terms of time and effort. That is, not every outcome needs to be assessed every year, and whenever possible use data that is already available through the normal teaching and learning process. Secondly, it is important to explain what assessment is not. It is not a mandate for more testing, for example. It is not used to evaluate individual students, individual faculty members or to compare academic programs. It is not a process to do once and then forgotten; it should be on-going. Finally, the primary purpose of assessment is to improve both our institution's teaching and learning efforts and our students' academic performance -- all things that our faculty care deeply about.

Focusing on student learning outcomes and their assessment will be a new challenge for the campus. However, it will have important benefits for both students and faculty, and the campus is committed to supporting assessment efforts.