

Regional Accreditation and Student Learning: Principles for Good Practices

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Accreditation through peer review is the principal method of quality assurance in U.S. colleges and universities. The regional commissions responsible for accrediting more than 3500 American colleges and universities maintain their public trust by upholding standards with which all member institutions must comply, while also respecting these institutions' autonomy and honoring their rich diversity. Years ago the assessment of institutional quality was a relatively straightforward matter, focusing on such tangible characteristics as fiscal solvency, library resources and faculty credentials. While capacities such as these continue to be important in accreditation, today there is wide recognition that "capacity" is simply insufficient as evidence of institutional effectiveness. Having abundant resources does not guarantee effective student learning. As college costs have skyrocketed, and demands for nearly-universal student access to higher education have become more pronounced, the questions asked of colleges by consumers and lawmakers have become more strident: "What are students learning? Is it the right kind of learning? What difference are you making in their lives? What evidence do you have that you're worth our investment?"

The emerging focus on student learning has created new challenges for regional institutional accreditation. The diversity of America's colleges and universities provides a public access to higher education unequalled anywhere in the world. Thus commissions have largely avoided dictating what the learning outcomes of individual institutions ought to be. Instead of insisting on blind compliance to standardized learning goals, they have promulgated quality standards which, in addition to assessing institutional capacity, also assess the congruence between an institution's mission and learning goals, its curricular offerings, and student learning outcomes. They also require institutions to use student learning data to enhance organizational self-reflection, and to show how they have used these data to improve their educational programs. In essence, they ask institutions to be clear about their mission and educational purposes, and to demonstrate how well they are accomplishing these purposes. In this way accreditation is able to focus on the quality of student learning without specifying, beyond general categories, what that learning should be – in short, to promote *standards* without *standardization*.

The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (CRAC) has adopted two sets of principles governing the use of student learning data in institutional accreditation. One set deals with what a regional accrediting commission should reasonably expect of itself, the other with what an accrediting commission should reasonably expect of its institutional members. These two sets of Principles are presented in the pages that follow.

Several key purposes of these Principles are important to emphasize.

- ❖ First, as core values, they exist to *help guide the work of all regional commissions*. They are intended both as a framework upon which to build policies and practices, and as a collective vision to which regional commissions and their member institutions should aspire.

- ❖ Second, they *demonstrate the commissions' shared commitment to student learning*, and thus are not intended to supplant the standards of individual commissions in any way. They do not conflict with existing standards but highlight and complement them.
- ❖ Third, these Principles *provide a basis for assessing accreditation practice* across the regions. They make available, for the first time, a national benchmark for individual commissions, one that will not only promote the importance of student learning to member institutions, but also help commissions evaluate their own work.

Principles for Good Practices: Regional Accrediting Commissions

What an accrediting commission should reasonably expect of itself:

1. *Role of student learning in accreditation.* Evaluation of an institution's success in achieving student learning is central to each Commission's function and public charter. The focus on student learning is conducted within the context of the mission of the institution, the suitability and effectiveness of processes designed to accomplish institutional goals, and the institution's continued ability to fulfill its purposes.
2. *Evidence used for accreditation.* Commissions focus on the strength of the institution's claim that it is fulfilling its declared educational mission, and give particular attention to how the institution's collection and use of student learning evidence helps to achieve its learning goals.
3. *Forms of appropriate evidence.* Evidence examined by Commissions for the purpose of evaluating the quality of student learning may include:
 - a. fulfillment of institutional purposes in the form of evidence of *student learning outcomes* appropriate to its educational goals;
 - b. institutional *processes* for evaluating educational effectiveness, in the form of student learning goals appropriate to its mission, procedures for collecting data on student achievement of these goals, and evidence that these data are used to effect improvements in educational offerings;
 - c. effective teaching and learning *practices*, including such characteristics as academic challenge, engagement of students with faculty and each other, active and collaborative learning, and enriching educational experiences; and
 - d. institutional *capacity* in the form of a climate conducive to educational and academic freedom, and appropriate and sufficient resources for effective teaching, learning, and assessment.

4. *Role of commissions in improving student learning.* Commissions not only evaluate and affirm educational quality but also help institutions build capacity for documenting and improving student learning.

5. *Training.* Evaluation teams, commissions, and staff are trained in skills needed for effective accreditation practice, and operate within the spirit expressed by these principles.

What an accrediting commission should reasonably expect of an institution:

1. *Role of student learning in accreditation.* Educational quality is one of the core purposes of the institution, and the institution defines quality by how well it fulfills its declared learning mission.

2. *Documentation of student learning.* The institution demonstrates that student learning is appropriate for the certificate or degree awarded and is consistent with the institution's own standards of academic performance. The institution accomplishes this by:

- a. setting clear learning goals, which speak to both content and level of attainment;
- b. collecting evidence of goal attainment using appropriate assessment tools;
- c. applying collective judgment as to the meaning and utility of the evidence; and
- d. using this evidence to effect improvements in its programs.

3. *Compilation of evidence.* Evidence of student learning is derived from multiple sources, such as courses, curricula, and co-curricular programming, and includes effects of both intentional and unintentional learning experiences. Evidence collected from these sources is complementary and portrays the impact on the student of the institution as a whole.

4. *Stakeholder involvement.* The collection, interpretation, and use of student learning evidence is a collective endeavor, and is not viewed as the sole responsibility of a single office or position. Those in the institution with a stake in decisions of educational quality participate in the process.

5. *Capacity building.* The institution uses broad participation in reflecting about student learning outcomes as a means of building a commitment to educational improvement.

-- Adopted by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2003.