

## **Accountability, Transparency and Accreditation: What a New Administration in Washington Will Bring**

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### *Introductory Remarks*

On behalf of the WASC Senior Commission, I appreciate the opportunity to attend your excellent conference and to learn more about your work and what you are doing to face today's higher education challenges – from the fiscal crisis to accountability templates to enrollment management. We greatly value the work that you do and are seeking to expand our pool of evaluators to include more institutional researchers, who contribute greatly to the WASC process.

As you know, WASC is made up of all your institutions and all of our decisions – whether about policies or standards of accreditation or the application of those to individual institution – are made by peer reviewers from your institutions.

A number of sessions during this conference highlighted the connection between what you do as institutional researchers and accreditation. Institutions that do not have an IR function, or have an ineffective one, are simply unable to produce data that are required for an accreditation review. Given the WASC Senior Commission's emphasis for the last decade on the "culture of evidence" – with this principle embedded in our standards and processes – collecting, analyzing, interpreting and making meaning out of all kinds of qualitative and quantitative data have become essential in the accreditation process.

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First, be assured that the pressure for greater accountability and transparency will not go away with a new administration. This movement has been in motion for more than a decade and is characterized by deep bi-partisan support.

The movement is bolstered by the frequent release of new data that show that many college graduates cannot read and write at what was once considered the college level and do not know the basics of math or geography.

It is pushed along by an increasingly vocal employer lobby and business community that wants work-ready graduates who can communicate effectively orally and in writing, can work well as members of a team, and have competencies for the diverse and increasingly globalized workplace.

It is also driven in large part by evidence that the US is falling behind in international competitiveness as a result of our declining educational effectiveness as measured by several recognized indicators of educational achievement.

While higher education has responded to the accountability movement by creating “voluntary systems of accountability” that report all kinds of institutional data to the public, when you look outside our borders, you see a different definition of accountability. In “Learning Accountability from Bologna,” Clifford Adelman said:

Our colleges, community colleges, and universities are “accountable” to those who subsidize them or pay their tuition and fees if they make public their graduation rates, demographic mix, and job placement rates, and throw in a test or two to show that a random sample of their students know how to write or solve a problem. Everybody goes home assured that this is what higher education is about.

Adelman goes on to say that the accountability templates and the information they provide are, “[a]t best ... ‘accountability light.’ None of it says what credentials represent or what students must do to earn those credentials. There are no public reference points, and no public performance criteria.”

In contrast, the Bologna process has resulted in agreements among many universities in dozens of countries about the following aspects of higher education:

- “Every degree is publicly defined so that everyone knows what it means in terms of the demonstration of knowledge; the application of knowledge; fluency in the use of information; breadth, depth, and effectiveness of communication; and degree of autonomy gained for subsequent learning.
- Students whose performance does not meet the public definition do not receive the degree.
- Everyone can recite the difference in performance standards for an associate’s degree, a bachelor’s degree, and a master’s degree, and the public language of these standards clearly ratchets up the scope and performance bar at each level.
- Faculty in each discipline agree and publicly state the reference points of knowledge, skills, and competence that define the qualifications for a degree in their field at each level.
- Credits are based on a common standard of student workload, not faculty contact hours, and each course is assigned a level of challenge so that the combination of workload and level guarantees transfer of credits.
- Every student who earns a degree receives, as a supplement to the diploma (and in addition to a transcript), an official documented summary of the setting, nature, purpose, and requirements of the degree and the major program.”

These points reflect a deeper and richer conception of “accountability” than what we have been talking about in this country. This also suggests that we should expand our approach to “accountability” and develop a broader and more

meaningful definition that will not only provide information about higher education to the public (which is really more “transparency” than accountability) but will serve as an explanation and guarantee of the meaning, content and depth of a college education.

The alarm on accountability has been sounded and a new administration is not going to turn it off until we address the concerns that have been raised.

That said, we can expect a change in the tone and nature of discussions about higher education in Washington in the days ahead.

As noted by several speakers at this conference, there is a greater emphasis now on the cost of a college education, in part because of the economic crisis but also because we have not done a good job of explaining to the public why a college education costs what it does and what the value of a college education is.

We can expect that the new administration in Washington will bring a more nuanced and sophisticated view of higher education. The list of candidates for appointment to the Department of Ed is extremely strong, populated with accomplished forward-thinking educators and public intellectuals who should be able to work collaboratively, to seek out the wide range of opinions on reform of education, and to make meaningful change.

The climate in Washington for education and education reform may be more favorable than it has been. This administration sees the need for government to support reforms as opposed to imposing largely ineffective unfunded mandates.

With the new Higher Education Opportunity Act we expect negotiated rule making next spring, which will result in rules that interpret changes to the act.

Finally, we do not expect to see any diminishment in the use of accreditation as a tool for change. Accreditation is our country’s quality assurance process for education. Given the key role that accreditation plays, we will be working to preserve the underlying principles of accreditation, which have been under attack from time to time in the last eight years -- self-regulation, regional (as opposed to national) standards, and peer review.

### *Future Directions for the WASC Senior Commission*

At a recent retreat, the WASC Senior Commission studied and discussed four important environmental challenges. The outcome of the retreat was to set a direction for the Senior Commission during the next three to five years. A statement about the Commission’s findings will be released within the next couple of months.

The areas that the Commission examined, selected out of a list of a dozen, were:

- Globalization
- The Governance of Higher Education
- Student Learning Outcomes
- New Learning Environments

The Senior Commission expects to convene groups of institutions and other stakeholders during the coming year or two to address these important issues and their impact in the region and beyond.

Among the key conclusions of the group, relevant to your work as institutional researchers, are use of comparative data and benchmarking, and a movement toward focusing the educational effectiveness stage of accreditation on the “results” of assessment. Our teams and Commission need to know not only what assessment activity is taking place, but what the findings are: To what extent are students achieving the intended outcomes? At what levels of performance? What is being done to address any shortfalls?

At its retreat, the Senior Commission specifically talked about engaging with CAIR and other similar entities to promote the more effective use of data in the accreditation process, especially in areas like the now-required analyses of retention and graduation. (More on this below.)

#### *New Tools and Requirements at WASC Senior*

Finally, the Senior Commission has just this year made revisions to its Standards and the Institutional Review Process, which will affect upcoming reviews. The changes were effective July 1, 2008 and will be fully implemented in 2009-10. The following changes are highlighted below because they affect directly what you do as institutional researchers.

The first three changes described below are being considered by Task Forces, each of which has three to five experts from our institutions. The Task Forces will be preparing papers that provide guidance to institutions as they explore and seek to address the new provisions. These papers will be presented at the ALO Forum at the WASC annual Academic Resource Conference in April.

#### *Transparency and accountability:*

CFR 1.2 was revised to read: “...The institution develops indicators for the achievement of its purposes and educational objectives at the institutional, program, and course levels. The institution has a system of measuring student achievement, in terms of retention, completion, and student learning. *The institution makes public data on student achievement at the institutional and degree level, in a manner determined by the institution.*”

Student success:

The Institutional Review Process was revised as follows. "...[T]he institution is expected to include in its CPR a study and analysis of student success, drawing from, but not limited to, its data on retention and graduation rates, disaggregated by student type and by program. To the extent possible, the study should include comparisons with similar institutions and, where appropriate, recommendations for improvement."

At the EER, the institution "will be expected to further its analysis of student success, deepening its analysis of its own and comparative data of graduation and retention rates, year to year attrition, campus climate surveys, etc."

Program review:

The Institutional Review Process was revised to require an analysis of the effectiveness of the institution's program review process at the EER as follows: "Institutions should analyze the effectiveness of the program review process, including its emphasis on the achievement of the program's learning outcomes. It is expected that the process will be sufficiently embedded for the institution and the team to sample current program review reports (self-studies and external review reports) to assess the impact of the program review process and alignment with the institution's quality improvement efforts and academic planning and budgeting."

The sustainability of educational effectiveness:

At the EER stage, institutions will be expected to present, "[a] plan, methods, and schedule for assessment of learning outcomes beyond the Educational Effectiveness Review."

Finally, WASC continues to develop tools and methods for teams and institutions, which are being put into a toolkit for use by teams:

- The rubrics: Four rubrics are being used by institutions for self-assessment purposes, and by teams for...: quality of student learning outcomes, assessment of student learning in program review, and capstones and portfolios (which are the most common methods of conducting summative assessment). A new pilot rubric on assessment of general education has also been introduced this fall.
- Educational Effectiveness Framework: In use for more than four years, teams have found this tool very useful in evaluating the development of institution's assessment initiatives. This year, EER teams are being asked to indicate where the institution sits on this framework and to submit an annotated framework with the confidential team recommendation. WASC will study these submissions to further develop this tool for teams.

- Expectations for two reviews regarding assessment of student learning: WASC is developing this document which sets forth on one page the expectations for assessment at the CPR stage (i.e. the infrastructure for assessment) and the EER stage (i.e. the results of assessment).
- Approach to assessment at the EER: The staff is developing an “academic audit”-style approach, which calls for visiting teams to examine selected program reviews and related documents, using the rubrics described above, and to interview the faculty members and administrators involved to ascertain how well assessment is working at the program level and to focus on results.

### *Closing*

In closing, there are challenges ahead in the next three to five years for higher education – not only from the current fiscal crisis but from the ongoing crisis of confidence in higher education and the self-regulation of higher education. Institutional researchers will be called on to produce more and better data and will play a critically important role in assessment, accountability and accreditation. WASC is eager to work with you as we face these challenges.