

Commission Values for Implementing the 2012 Handbook

After ten years of operating under the Standards and Review Process first presented in the *2001 Handbook of Accreditation*, the Commission believes that it is proper to revisit the Values for Implementing the New Handbook that were established at that time. Much has changed in the context for accreditation since 2001. First, the growing importance of higher education for citizens and the nation as a whole has yielded a new emphasis on accountability for results and a new suspicion of accreditation's claims about institutional quality. Second, there is a growing revolution in how collegiate learning is conceived and is provided. Finally, a new fiscal reality means that considerations of cost-effectiveness have become paramount for both WASC and its constituent institutions. Ten years of history also reaffirms the need to guard against reification and orthodoxy in the applying the Standards and engaging in review.

But revisiting the Standards and Review process, above all, requires the Commission to raise the question of WASC's ultimate purposes. Here, three fundamental value positions stand above all. First, the institutions comprising WASC strive to achieve mutual and collective accountability for academic quality. As an integral part of this, they seek to assure the public about academic standards and provide the public with appropriate information about institutional performance. Second, their view of quality centers irrevocably on students—student success in attaining degrees, student learning, and the academic and co-curricular experience. Finally, this commitment is not just about demonstrating quality but upon using evidence to improve it on a continuous basis. These key values imply that, to the extent possible and appropriate, the Commission will:

- Continue to recognize the diversity of institutions and institutional missions. The Commission acknowledges that institutions are located at different places on a continuum of development above the minimum threshold of quality that accreditation represents, so should adapt the review process accordingly.
- Recognize the responsibility of accreditation to provide information to inform and protect consumers and the public and ensuring that institutions are not engaged in fraudulent or harmful practices as part of student recruitment or the teaching/learning process.
- Maintain flexibility, adaptability, and a continuing posture of experimentation that emphasize collaboration between institutions and WASC. This value served WASC well in the period 2001-2011 and means that multiple models for institutional presentations and of organizing evidence to demonstrate meeting the Standards should continue to be encouraged. This posture of experimentation should also position WASC well to effectively assess the many new organizational forms for teaching and learning that the current revolution in instruction is generating.

This draft statement was prepared by Peter Ewell in response to discussions in April and June of 2010, to create an overarching frame that would guide the Handbook revision process.

- Affirm the centrality of students and student learning as a common activity of all candidate and accredited institutions. This means collecting direct evidence about student learning outcomes and determining the extent to which this evidence demonstrates that the level of performance is adequate.
- Affirm the obligation of institutions to expect and support the success of *every* student once admitted, recognizing that there are factors affecting progress toward degree completion that are beyond institutions' ability to control. This, in turn, means collecting and reflecting upon concrete data about graduation and retention rates.
- Promote the continuing development and use by institutions of quantitative and qualitative indicators of performance, wherever possible benchmarked against national, regional, or peer comparisons. Benchmarking is an essential ingredient of accountability by allowing stakeholders to judge where actual institutional levels of performance stand and it is also important to continuous improvement because it allows members of an institutional community to identify best practice—at their own institution or elsewhere—and to learn from it.
- Rely heavily on existing evidence already available to institutions, as well as readily-available non-institutional sources of evidence such as valid national surveys or assessment instruments. This means that the accreditation process should not represent an “add-on” to the kinds of evidence—including the results of assessment and student work—that the institution routinely collects to examine its own effectiveness.
- Continue to press toward more cost-effective ways to accomplish the goals of accreditation without sacrificing the quality and integrity of the process.

Purposes of Accreditation

Voluntary, non-governmental, institutional accreditation as practiced by WASC and the other regional accrediting commissions is a unique characteristic of American education. In many other countries the maintenance of educational standards is a governmental function. No institution in the United States is required to seek accreditation, but because of the recognized benefits of the process, most of the eligible institutions in this and other regions have sought to become accredited.

The WASC accreditation process helps institutions in developing and sustaining effective educational programs. At the same time, it assures the educational community, parents, students, employers, policymakers, and the general public that an accredited institution has met high standards of quality and effectiveness.

The Commission primarily accredits institutions although individual programs are sometimes examined through substantive change and granting institutions a new degree-

level authority). While the highest priority is accorded to demonstrating high and acceptable levels of student learning and other results, the Commission also examines the effectiveness of curriculum structure and delivery, administrative processes, and resources.

The accreditation process is aimed at:

1. Assuring the educational community, parents, students, employers, policymakers, and the general public that an accredited institution has been reviewed under Commission standards and that the level of student academic achievement—as well as other institutional outcomes—meet or exceed the levels demonstrated by comparable peer institutions.
2. Promoting deep institutional engagement with issues related to teaching and learning and its results, and developing and sharing good practices in assessing and improving the teaching and learning process.
3. Developing and applying Standards to review and improve learning outcomes and institutional performance, and validating these Standards through ongoing research and mutual feedback.
4. Promoting within institutions a culture of evidence where appropriately benchmarked indicators of performance—especially with respect to student success and levels of academic achievement—are regularly developed and data collected to inform institutional decision-making, planning, and improvement.
5. Developing systems of institutional review and evaluation that are adaptive to institutional contexts and purposes as well as new organizational approaches to instruction, that at the same time reflect aligned expectations for institutions with similar contexts and purposes, that build on evidence and support rigorous review, and that reduce the burden and cost of accreditation.
6. Promoting the active interchange of ideas among public and independent institutions that furthers institutional performance, better learning outcomes, and the process of peer review.