

**THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL MISSION AND INSTITUTIONAL
EFFECTIVENESS IN SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES
AND SCHOOLS REAFFIRMATION OF ACCREDITATION**

by

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PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF SACS ACCREDITATION

The purpose of accreditation from SACS view is as follows:

Accreditation by the Commission on Colleges signifies that an institution has a purpose appropriate to higher education and has resources, programs, and services sufficient to accomplish and sustain that purpose. Accreditation indicates that an institution maintains clearly specified educational objectives that are consistent with its mission and appropriate to the degrees it offers, and that it is successful in achieving its stated objectives. ... It provides an assessment of an institution's effectiveness in the fulfillment of its mission, its compliance with the requirements of its accrediting association, and its continuing efforts to enhance the quality of student learning and its programs and services. Based upon reasoned judgment, the process stimulates evaluation and improvement, while providing a means of continuing accountability to constituents and the public. (SACS/COC 2001, p. 3)

The scope of SACS accreditation can be stated simply as:

The Commission on Colleges accredits the entire institution and its programs and services, wherever they are located and however they are delivered. (SACS/COC 2001, p. 10)

OVERARCHING FOCUS ON QUALITY ENHANCEMENT

SACS accreditation has a decided focus on improving the quality of the institution, its programs, and the services that support those programs. Indeed, the accreditation criteria are now titled "Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement," and the General Overview describes the first task of the Commission of Colleges when considering accreditation status is to determine its commitment to quality enhancement and the institution's integrity as the basic contract between the institution and the Commission.

Quoting from the "Principles" again,

The Commission on Colleges expects institutions to dedicate themselves to enhancing the quality of their programs and services within the context of their missions, resources, and capacities,

and to create an environment in which teaching, public service, research, and learning occur. ... The concept of quality enhancement is at the heart of the Commission's philosophy of accreditation; this presumes each member institution to be engaged in an ongoing program of improvement and able to demonstrate how well it fulfills its stated mission. Although evaluation of an institution's educational quality and its effectiveness in achieving its mission is a difficult task requiring careful analysis and professional judgment, an institution is expected to document quality and effectiveness in all its major aspects. (SACS/COC 2001, p. 5)

APPROACH TO PLANNING AND EVALUATION

The quality enhancement focus of the SACS/COC "Principles" criteria is revealed in Core Requirement 2.5 which deals with institutional planning evaluation and states that:

2.5 *The institution engages in ongoing, integrated, and institution-wide research-based planning and evaluation processes that incorporate systematic review of programs and services that (a) results in continuing improvement and (b) demonstrates that the institution is effectively accomplishing its mission. (Institutional Effectiveness)*

There are several key parts to this criterion, namely, that planning and evaluation must be:

1. Ongoing (not just once each accreditation period);
2. Integrated (academic, support services, facilities, finances);
3. Institution-wide;
4. Incorporates systematic review of programs; and
5. Incorporates systematic review of services;

and that it:

1. Results in [demonstrable] continuous improvement; and
2. Demonstrates the institution is effectively accomplishing its mission.

The major components of a basic approach to planning and evaluation include: (1) development of a clearly defined statement of institutional purpose; (2) formulation of educational goals; (3) development of procedures for evaluating the extent to which those goals are being achieved; and (4) the use of evaluation results to improve educational programs, services, and operations (SACS/COS 1996). The Penn State Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment uses a slightly different model with the following steps: (1) Where are we now (current state, future trends, stakeholder needs)? (2) Where should we be in the future (mission, vision, and goals)? (3) How will we know when we get there (performance indicators that align with mission, vision, and goals to measure outcomes)? (4) How far do we have to go (gap analysis)? and (5) How do we get there (process improvement, action plans to close gaps)? Both focus on institutional purpose or mission, and that is where SACS/COC begins its accreditation approach.

Institutional Mission

The SACS/COC criteria require the following regarding an institution's mission:

1. The institution has one;
2. The mission statement is specific to the institution;
3. The mission statement is appropriate to an institution of higher learning;

4. It is clearly defined and comprehensive;
5. It is published;
6. It addressed teaching and learning and, for research institutions, research, and public service;
7. It is approved and periodically reviewed by the governing board;
8. It is communicated to the institution's constituencies;
9. The institution has the legal authority and operating control related to its mission;
10. The institution employs competent faculty qualified to accomplish the mission and goals of the institution's mission;
11. The institution demonstrates that it is accomplishing its mission;
12. Course completion, state licensing examinations, and job placement rates may be used to show that the institution's mission is being achieved;
13. The institution publishes admissions policies consistent with its mission;
14. The institution has a defined and published policy for evaluating, awarding, and accepting credit for transfer, experiential learning, advanced placement, and professional certificates that is consistent with its mission.

The relevant criteria from the "Principles" are as follows:

- 2.4 *The institution has a clearly defined and published mission statement specific to the institution and appropriate to an institution of higher education, addressing teaching and learning and, where applicable, research, and public service. (Institutional Mission)*
- 3.1.1 *The institution has a clear and comprehensive mission statement that guides it; is approved by the governing board; is periodically reviewed by the board; and is communicated to the institution's constituencies.*
- 3.2.2 *The legal authority and operating control of the institution are clearly defined for the following areas within the institution's governance structure:*
 - 3.2.2.1 *institution's mission*
- 3.7.1 *The institution employs competent faculty members qualified to accomplish the mission and goals of the institution.*
- 2.5 *The institution engages in ongoing, integrated, and institution-wide planning and evaluation processes that incorporate systematic review of programs and services that (a) results in continuing improvement and (b) demonstrates that the institution is effectively accomplishing its mission. (Institutional Effectiveness)*
- 4.1 *When evaluating success with respect to student achievement in relation to the institution's mission, the institution includes, as appropriate, consideration of course completion, state licensing examinations, and job placement rates.*
- 3.4.3 *The institution publishes admissions policies consistent with its mission.*
- 3.4.4 *The institution has a defined and published policy for evaluating, awarding, and*

accepting credit for transfer, experiential learning, advanced placement, and professional certificates that is consistent with its mission and

Not only does the institutional mission play a pivotal role in institutional accreditation, but it does as well in program accreditation by professional accreditation entities. These entities insist that the mission of the department/school/college in which the program is found be consistent with that of the institution. If continuous improvement activities throughout the institution are to help the institution better achieve its mission, then such alignment is critical.

For reference, the University's mission as stated in the 2005-06 General Information Catalog is as follows:

The mission of the University is to achieve excellence in the interrelated areas of undergraduate education, graduate education, research, and public service. The University provides superior and comprehensive educational opportunities at the baccalaureate through doctoral and special professional educational levels. The University contributes to the advancement of society through research, creative activity, scholarly inquiry, and the development of new knowledge. The University preserves and promotes the arts, benefits the state's economy, serves the citizens through public programs, and provides other public service.

Improving Academics and Operations

The SACS/COC "Principles" expand on Core Requirement 2.5 in Comprehensive Standards 3.3.1 and 3.4.1. Standard 3.3.1 states that the outcomes-based approach is to be used for evaluating both educational programs as well as administrative and educational support services. (The core of the planning and evaluation program to be used in SACS/COC accreditation includes steps 2 through 4 of the SACS/COC (1996) approach.) In both cases, outcomes (or goals) are to be established for each program or each support service and then assessments used to show whether those outcomes are being achieved at the desired levels. Changes in these programs are assessed to determine if improvements have resulted. Standard 3.4.1 reiterates this approach but goes further to say that learning outcomes are to be established, and these are interpreted to be learning goals that faculty have for individual classes.

The relevant criteria from the SACS/COC "Principles" are as follows:

- 3.3.1 The institution identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs and its administrative and educational support services; assesses whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of those results.*
- 3.4.1 The institution demonstrates that each educational program for which academic credit is awarded (a) is approved by the faculty and the administration, and (b) establishes and evaluates program and learning outcomes.*

To elaborate, outcomes-based criteria are based on continuous improvement. One of the consequences of this approach is a continuous effort to show that the Outcomes/Learning Goals are being achieved through information gathering, determination of areas of improvement needed, making changes to achieve those improvements, and then showing that those changes were effective. This “closing the loop” approach takes time (about two years per “loop”), but at accreditation review time, the program evaluators will want to see evidence that assessment processes are in place and that the program has cycled through this loop a couple of times at least.

In a nutshell, this is outcomes-based assessment applied to academic programs, and it works in the following way. Faculty within a program (e.g., a degree-granting program) establish Program Educational Objectives (PEOs) which describe what graduates of that program are able to do several years after graduation (e.g., be productive members of society, be able to pursue advanced work in graduate programs, be employed by industry – perhaps particular industry important to the region, and so forth). The faculty then determine what knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, behaviors, and/or capabilities their students should be able to demonstrate at the time they graduate; these are the Program Outcomes (POs) and these Outcomes are ones that students need to have to be able to achieve the Program Educational Objectives. The curriculum for that program, which the faculty also develop, must provide students the education they need to achieve the POs at the time they graduate and the PEOs several years later. By gathering and analyzing various types of data, the program must demonstrate that POs are being met. Faculty decide how those Objectives and Outcomes will be measured and how high the bar is set for students to show that they have achieved them. Where Outcomes and/or Objectives are not being achieved, it is the task of the faculty to find out why they are not being achieved, what to change in the curriculum or other activities so they can be achieved, to make those changes, and then to gather further data to show that the Outcomes and Objectives are being achieved. This “closing the loop” approach takes time (about two years per “loop”), but at accreditation review time, the program evaluators will want to see evidence that assessment processes are in place and that the program has cycled through this loop a couple of times at least. This improvement cycle can also take place in response to changes in the field, etc. so that improvements might occur in the absence of any explicit problems.

Quality Enhancement Plan

Although discussed separately, the Quality Enhancement Plan (or QEP) is very much part of the section on Improving Academics and Operations. This Plan is required as part of Core Requirement 2.12 which states:

2.12 The institution has developed an acceptable Quality Enhancement Plan and demonstrates that the plan is part of an ongoing planning and evaluation process. (Quality Enhancement Plan)

Note the explicit requirement that it be part of an ongoing planning and evaluation process. *Engaging the wider academic community, the QEP is based upon a comprehensive and thorough analysis of the effectiveness of the learning environment for supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution. It is used to outline a course of action for*

institutional improvement by addressing one or more issues that contribute to institutional quality, with special attention to student learning. ... The Plan, submitted six weeks in advance of the on-site review by the Commission, describes a carefully designed and focused course of action that addresses a well-defined issue or issues directly related to improving student learning. The development of the QEP involves significant participation by the institution's academic community. The plan should be focused and succinct (no more than seventy-five pages of narrative text and no more than twenty-five pages of support documentation or charts, graphs, and tables). (SACS/COC 2001, p. 8-9)

General Education Criteria

Lastly, there are General Education criteria which complement to a great extent the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Core Curriculum assessment requirements. The pertinent Standard criteria are:

3.4.10 The institution defines and publishes general education and major program requirements for all its programs. These requirements conform to commonly accepted standards and practices for undergraduate programs as well as graduate and post-baccalaureate professional degree programs.

3.5.1 The institution identifies college-level competencies within the general education core and provides evidence that graduates have attained those competencies.

It is the second criterion that is most relevant to this document. Our current General Education competencies are those listed on page 12 of the 2004-06 Undergraduate Catalog, and this criterion would require that we develop ways to show that graduates have attained these competencies by the time they graduate. Coordination with Coordinating Board requirements will be important here to ensure that we are achieving both sets of criteria.

REFERENCES

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools/Commission on Colleges. 2001. Principles of Accreditation: Foundations of Quality Improvement.

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools/Commission on Colleges. 1996. Resource Manual of Institutional Effectiveness.