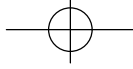




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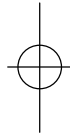
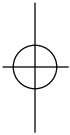
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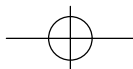
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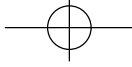
# Improving Institutional Practice



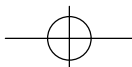
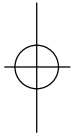
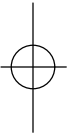
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Western Association of Schools and Colleges:  
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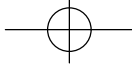
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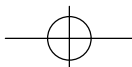
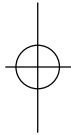
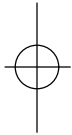
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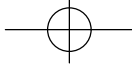




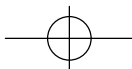
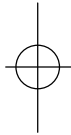
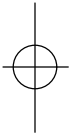
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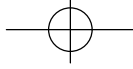
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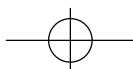


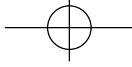
## PREFACE

In 2003 the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (CRAC) adopted two sets of principles governing the use of student learning data in institutional accreditation. One set dealt with what a regional accrediting Commission should reasonably expect of its institutional members; the other addressed what an accrediting Commission should reasonably expect of itself.

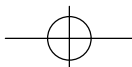
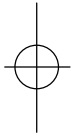
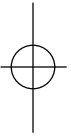
This guide explores how institutions might prepare for accreditation in ways that best adhere to these principles. It is a more detailed version of *Regional Accreditation and Student Learning: A Guide for Institutions and Evaluators*. As with other materials prepared under the auspices of CRAC, this guide is not intended to supplant in any way the materials and guidelines prepared by regional Commissions for their institutional members. Nor should there be any inference drawn that following the suggestions made in this guide will provide sufficient grounds for accreditation, irrespective of the standards of a particular region. Instead, the purpose of this guide is to provide a framework within which institutions, regardless of regional affiliation, might follow through on a shared commitment to the principles, and thus to give a central focus to student learning as a demonstration of institutional quality. Excellent advice is available already in the form of resource materials prepared by regional accreditation staff as well as by other experts in institutional and student assessment. These are noted throughout the text, and the reader is referred to an extensive bibliography at the end of the guide for additional information about these resources.

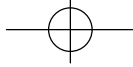
Suggestions for institutional practice are organized on a principle-by-principle basis.





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# Student Learning Principles

## **Principle 1: The role of student learning in accreditation.**

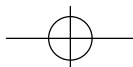
**The institution defines educational quality—one of its core purposes—by how well it fulfills its declared mission on student learning.**

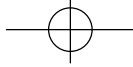
“Educational quality” refers to the quality of student learning itself: both the extent to which the institution provides an environment conducive to student learning, and the extent to which this environment leads to the development of knowledge, skills, behaviors, and predispositions of value to students and the society they are preparing to serve. Educational quality cannot be measured solely by retention rates, graduation rates, or graduates’ GRE scores, but rather by evidence of impact on students themselves. An institution’s “learning mission” reflects its aspirations for students, and is stated in terms of how students are expected to benefit from its course of study.

A significant cultural shift has taken place in how colleges and universities think about their learning missions. Ever since the mid-1980s, and especially since Barr and Tagg’s seminal article “From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education” (1995), institutions have been encouraged by regional accrediting Commissions and others to shift from a focus on “delivering quality instruction” to “designing a climate most conducive to student learning.” Numerous studies have examined what it means for an institution to be centered on learning in this way. All agree that a true “learning-centered” institution thinks first about what students need to learn, then organizes itself in ways designed to bring this about most effectively. As Tagg points out in his most recent book (2003), “the mission of colleges and universities is to produce student learning. This end is primary; means are secondary and are to be judged by how well they achieve the end” (p. 31).

The literature on collegiate student learning is remarkably clear on what it takes to produce quality learning. Based primarily on two landmark works, Pascarella and Terenzini’s *How College Affects Students* (1991) and Astin’s *What Matters in College* (1994), the Education Commission of the States (1996) produced a report detailing what these attributes of quality are, namely:

- “Quality begins with an organizational culture that values high expectations, respect for diverse talents and learning styles, and an emphasis on early years of study [i.e., recognizing the importance of the





student's first years in college].

- "A quality curriculum requires coherence in learning, synthesizing experiences, ongoing practice of learned skills, and integrating education and experience.
- "Quality instruction builds in active learning, assessment and prompt feedback, collaboration, adequate time on task, and out-of-class contact with faculty."

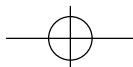
A number of other studies, beginning in the mid-1990s and continuing to the present, have built upon frameworks such as these to develop more specific and detailed characteristics of "learning-centered" institutions. Krakauer (2000), for example, produced an extended definition of a "Learning College," defined in terms of one hundred criteria organized into such categories as "the learning process," "learning content," "learning outcomes" (i.e., demonstrated change in knowledge, competence, and behavior), and "college culture." O'Banion (2000) produced a similar "Inventory for Learning-Centered Colleges," one focused on community college environments. According to O'Banion, a learning college:

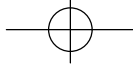
- engages learners as full partners;
- creates and offers as many options for learning as possible;
- creates substantive change in individual learners;
- assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities;
- defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners; and
- defines success by documenting improved and expanded learning.

According to O'Banion, the key marker of a learning college is the frequency with which the following question is asked and answered: "How does what we are doing promote student learning?"

Recent attempts to define more precisely the characteristics of a learning-centered institution have been undertaken by McClenny (2002) and Tagg (2003). McClenny suggests that "learning-focused" institutions share six characteristics:

- clearly defined outcomes for student learning;
- systematic assessment and documentation of student learning;
- student participation in a diverse array of engaging learning experiences that are aligned with required outcomes and designed in accord with good educational practice;
- institutional and individual reflection and action typically prompted and supported by data about student learning and institutional performance;
- an emphasis on student learning in processes for recruitment, hiring, orientation, deployment, evaluation and development of personnel; and





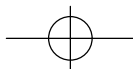
- a focus on learning consistently reflected in key institutional documents and policies, collegial effort, and leadership behavior.

Tagg, in his book *The Learning Paradigm College* (2003), suggests that a “hot cognitive economy” leading to deep and substantial learning by students:

- emphasizes students’ intrinsic goals;
- elicits a high level of student activity;
- has a high ratio of feedback to evaluation;
- has a long time horizon, thus promoting long-term investment;
- has a strong support community which encourages students to take risks, try new things, and persist; and
- promotes institutional behavior that is consistent and aligned with the learning mission of the institution.

Staff of the Alverno Institute (2002) examined 26 institutions, large and small, public and private, all of which had made a commitment to student learning as their central focus. Investigators found four common attributes across these diverse institutions:

- First, they had *achieved clarity about learning outcomes*, defined by the authors as “how students think and understand and what they are able to do with what they know.” They had made educators “responsible for articulating student learning outcomes and making them public in ways that were clear, appropriate, and meaningful for students” (p.4). The authors found that institutions determined these learning outcomes in a wide variety of ways, ranging from college-wide faculty committees to more inductive approaches based upon individual courses. In all cases, faculty had taken on a sense of collective responsibility for student learning.
- Second, they *coordinated teaching and assessment in ways that promote student learning*. They encouraged faculty members to “think pedagogically” about their disciplines, that is, to use their disciplines as a framework for applying principles of learning theory, with learning outcomes as focal points. They also encouraged faculty to share course designs with each other and to approach the assessment of student learning as integral to learning and to making judgments about how to improve it.
- Third, they *aligned structures and resources to serve student learning*. They paid attention to faculty “reward systems” to encourage sustained attention to curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment; they designated time for faculty collaboration regarding teaching, learning, and assessment; they allocated resources in ways that demonstrated a priority for making student learning central; and they sought ways of reinforcing important student learning in virtually every area of campus life.



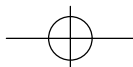


- Fourth, they *worked continuously to improve the environment for learning*. They had processes in place for program, curriculum, and institution-wide assessment; they generated multiple forms of feedback about patterns of student and alumni performance; they encouraged dialogue about the meaning of assessment data among constituencies both on and off campus; and they sought to make evidence-based judgments about institutional effectiveness in ways that would guide improvement.

The commonalities—across both theoretical and empirical domains—defining the characteristics of a “learning-centered” institution should be obvious. An institution that takes its learning mission seriously and views the quality of student learning as one of its core purposes, is *clear and public about the learning outcomes to which it aspires for its students*; it *uses these learning goals as well as knowledge about learning as drivers for organizing instruction*; it *provides an environment that signals support for student learning at all levels*; it *promotes an atmosphere of critical reflection about teaching and learning*; and it *ensures that its behavior as an institution is aligned with its learning mission*.

This last point is perhaps most crucial. Banta (1999) has written that the most important function of regional accreditation is to assist member institutions in establishing the integrity of the degrees they offer. The most recent edition of Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (2001) gives three definitions of integrity: 1) “a firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values”—or *honesty*; 2) “an unimpaired condition”—or *soundness*; and 3) “the quality or state of being complete or undivided”—or *wholeness*. As Tagg (2003) suggests, all three meanings of the term apply to institutions of higher learning. The integrity of an institution’s degrees depends upon the commitment of an institution to stand behind its learning goals (honesty), the consistency with which it organizes and delivers instruction (soundness), and the extent to which it aligns its work to accomplish its learning goals (wholeness).

Doing this is extraordinarily difficult, especially in complex institutions like universities, which are “loosely coupled” systems composed of semi-autonomous academic units (Birnbaum, 1989). It is neither possible nor desirable in most institutions to organize instructional processes so that they are all perfectly aligned with one another. It would be ludicrous to expect that all students should have equivalent learning obtained in equivalent ways. As Tagg (2003) points out, “colleges that are rooted in a vision of learning for real students will realize different visions for different students. While instruction is a unitary concept, learning is not. There is no single learning, fitting for all people at all times. Learning is fundamentally a process of changing to adapt to a changing environment, so we cannot prescribe in advance what everybody will need to learn” (p. 34). “Alignment” requires not learning equivalence, but that an





institution's teaching and learning processes be roughly synchronous. McMillin and Berberet (2002) suggest that a useful way of thinking about this is to consider how various levels of the academic organization "add value" to the one above it. In this context the most useful way to frame the alignment question is as follows: "How does student learning in individual courses add value to the learning goals for the program of study? How does student learning in the program add value to the learning goals for the school and/or larger institution? How do co-curricular and extra-curricular resources add value to the formal curriculum?"

### **Principle 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 setting clear learning goals which speak to both content and level of attainment; collecting evidence of goal attainment using appropriate assessment tools; applying collective judgment as to the meaning and utility of the evidence; and using this evidence to effect improvements in its programs.**

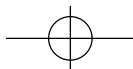
### **Principle 3: Compilation of evidence.**

**The institution derives evidence of student learning 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 demonstrates the impact of the institution as a whole on the student.**

These two principles are inter-related and so will be discussed together.

***"Setting clear learning goals, which speak to both content and level of attainment."***

Useful guidance is available from numerous sources (see Bibliography). The Alverno College Institute (2002) notes that expectations for learning should be described in specific and developmental terms—that is, faculty should "articulate criteria and rubrics that they and their students can use in determining whether students are meeting the expected outcomes at different phases of their learning" (p. 6).





***“Collecting evidence of goal attainment from multiple sources using appropriate assessment tools.”***

One often hears the lament that the reason institutions do not assess student learning, or not very well, is that reliable and valid assessment tools simply do not exist. As noted above under Principle 1, human learning is extraordinarily complex, and even in colleges with clear learning missions and core learning requirements, their impact on students’ knowledge, skills, and habits of mind will vary. Thus, instead of assuming that an institution’s most important task is to search for the “best” measure, a better tack is to begin with core learning goals, then to identify potential *sources of evidence* that may be used to help determine the degree to which students are learning in ways consistent with these goals.

“Evidence” is not the same as “data.” Treating these terms as synonymous has led to the dubious practice of collecting any and all kinds of information that *might* be relevant to the learning goals, and presenting these data *en masse*, expecting that somehow an invisible hand will help the reader sort through it all and find the truth. Consider, for example, the volumes of data collected for institutional self-studies, or as part of various strategic planning initiatives. How much of this information is deliberately organized to support a claim or to help reconcile competing claims? In other words, how much of this information is used as *evidence*? Peter Ewell (2002) has noted that evidence has five distinguishing characteristics:

- *Evidence is intentional and purposive.* It is used to advance an argument. Just as in a courtroom, evidence is presented to make a case. A college’s “fact book” is not, by itself, evidence; while a profile of entering students, compiled to show how student characteristics have changed over time, is. Evidence is always contextual to the argument being made.
- *Evidence becomes “evidence” only as a result of interpretation and reflection.* As Ewell notes, evidence does not “speak for itself,” but rather implies that there has been an attempt to make meaning of the data—to show how the evidence leads to a better understanding of an issue or phenomenon.
- *Evidence is integrated and holistic.* Individual bits of data only take on meaning within the context of the larger case. Thus, one speaks of the “body of evidence,” or the “weight of the evidence.” The evidence for quality in an institution may take many forms; but all of these need to hang together to support the claim being made.
- *Evidence can be both quantitative and qualitative.* Neither type is inherently superior to the other: it all depends upon the uses to which the evidence is put. Numbers can be quite useful to cut through specious thinking and fuzzy rhetoric; text can be most useful to tell the story of a program and to help readers draw connections to their own situations.



- *Evidence may be either direct or indirect.* Sometimes it is neither feasible nor desirable to measure a quality directly, but to employ surrogate or proxy measures instead. For example, one might consider a comprehensive examination to be the most direct source of evidence of student learning in the major but because of its narrow focus, other more indirect measures, such as student focus groups and acceptance rates into graduate school, may be needed to round out the portrayal.

Contrary to popular belief, potential evidence of student learning is quite plentiful. A thorough search of each Commission's formal documents—including standards, guidelines, and other materials—revealed a wide variety of evidence institutions could use to demonstrate the quality of student learning. These criteria, categorized and edited to eliminate duplication, are provided in full in the Appendix to this guide. The categories used and samples of evaluation questions pertinent to each one are given below.

#### **I. Fulfillment of institutional purposes in student learning outcomes**

- A. *Accomplishment of institutional learning goals:* the extent to which students accomplish the learning goals set for them by the institution. Sample questions: What evidence is provided about student mastery of program goals and course objectives? Graduates' mastery of college-level competencies? Employment prospects of graduates?
- B. *Demonstration of specific student proficiencies:* the extent to which students have gained certain knowledge, skills, or attitudes from their college experience. The focus here is on judgments not constrained by institutional learning goals. Sample questions: What evidence exists that students have developed skills in: written and oral communication? Scientific and quantitative reasoning? Critical analysis and logical thinking? Analysis and integration of concepts? Ways to identify, access, retrieve, and apply relevant content? Technology appropriate to the program of study?
- C. *Certification of learning:* the extent to which the institution is able to document individual as well as group learning data. Question: What evidence exists that the institution is able to back up degrees awarded with a certification that learning goals have been achieved?

#### **II. Institutional capacity for quality student learning**

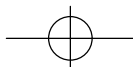
- A. *Clear institutional purposes regarding student learning:* evidence regarding the centrality of student learning to the institution's mission and goals, and the influence of key constituencies. Sample questions: What commitment to learning is evident in the institution's mission



- statement? How does institutional mission influence curricular objectives, and how do curricula in turn influence course objectives?
- B. *Policies supporting student learning*: the extent to which a commitment to student learning is evident in the institution's way of doing business. Sample questions: What measures does the institution take to assure equitable access to students? What does the institution do to assure that its services and academic resources afford all admitted students the opportunity to succeed?
- C. *Leadership for student learning*: demonstrable evidence that student learning is a high priority among the academic leadership. Sample questions: What support for assessment of student learning is evident by the governing board, senior executive officers, and unit heads? How does the institution determine that facilities and learning resources are adequate to meet student learning goals?
- D. *A quality environment for student learning*: evidence that the institution has taken steps to provide a setting that supports positive learning outcomes. Sample questions: What does the institution do to provide an environment that: is actively conducive to student learning? Where library, information resources, and co-curricular programs actively support student learning? Serves as a shared learning community in which students are encouraged to explore and express a diversity of ideas and opinions? Encourages personal and civic responsibility, as well as intellectual, aesthetic, and personal development for all of its students?
- E. *Adequate resources to support student learning*: evidence that the institution allocates resources in a way that demonstrates a high priority given to student learning. Sample questions: What resources are provided to support educational programs and to facilitate student achievement of program objectives? What does the allocation of resources among programs, units, and individuals reveal about institutional priorities regarding student learning?

### **III. Effective teaching and learning practices**

- A. *Curricular design and integration*: evidence that learning experiences for students are consciously linked to institutional learning goals and to each other. Sample questions: To what extent are programs characterized by appropriate breadth, depth, continuity, sequential progression, and time to completion? How consistent are goals, structure, content, and methods of instruction?
- B. *Student learning goals*: the extent to which the institution has articulated clear learning goals for all programs, including general



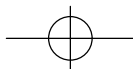


education. Sample questions: Does each program have learning objectives, and to what extent do these include knowledge, intellectual skills, and methods of inquiry to be acquired? Does the institution have high standards without standardization, i.e., does it allow multiple pathways to achievement?

- C. *Student learning experiences*: the extent to which students are engaged in their learning, and in ways consistent with sound educational practice. Sample questions: To what extent do educational offerings provide an atmosphere of inquiry that values diversity of backgrounds and perspectives? An opportunity for students to engage each other and their teachers in a free exchange of ideas and attitudes? A course syllabus that specifies learning objectives consistent with published course descriptions? Experiences relevant to student aspirations and interests? Adequate time on task to learn and practice? Evaluation of student learning based upon clearly stated criteria that reflect learning objectives?

#### **IV. Institutional processes for evaluating educational effectiveness**

- A. *Defining educational goals and objectives*: the process by which the institution develops its educational mission and goals, and the role these play in institutional decision making. Sample questions: What institutional policies and procedures lead to the development, approval, and evaluation of its educational purposes and learning goals? To what degree are educational goals derived from and based on the mission?
- B. *Assessing student learning*: the ways in which the institution collects and uses information on student learning outcomes. Sample questions: How does the institution ensure that its programs can be completed in a timely manner, are configured to meet student needs, and lead to retention and graduation rates appropriate to the type of institution and student population? To what extent does the institution regularly collect and analyze retention and attrition data for the student body as a whole as well as for major subgroups, and explore the implications of the data to be assured that the institution is being responsive to the needs of all of its students?
- C. *Using evaluative data for institutional change*: evidence that the institution is moving from an assessment culture to a learning culture. Sample questions: What evidence exists of an institutional commitment to making meaningful use of student achievement data for the purpose of enhancing educational effectiveness? To what extent does institutional inquiry into teaching and learning affect the





design of curricula, the design and practice of pedagogy, and the improvement of evaluation?

- D. *Assessing usefulness of evaluation:* Evidence that the institution's ways of knowing about learning quality are themselves assessed periodically. Sample questions: In what way and how often is the assessment program reviewed for usefulness and cost-effectiveness? How does the institution determine that its decision-making processes are appropriate to its stated mission and purposes?

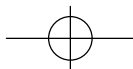
Just as evidence of student learning can take many forms, it can also be obtained from many different sources: institutional databases and archival data; documents (policies, strategic plans, fact books, etc.); surveys, and focus groups; assessment results; special studies and reports; sample learning products; licensing/credentialing exams; and course and institutional portfolios.

All evidence is not of equal quality. Ewell (2002, pp. 9-12) posits five principles of good evidence:

**Relevant.** Any evidence advanced ought first to be demonstrably related to the question being investigated. While this principle may seem obvious, it is frequently violated in practice. In fact, institutions sometimes produce reams of statistics that are only marginally related to the questions they are trying to answer. It should be clear, instead, exactly what any advanced information is *supposed to show*, and why it was chosen over other potential sources of information. In practical terms, this means that institutions need to select carefully the kinds of evidence they use to make their case, according to either the specific standards set forth by the accrediting commission, or questions of importance to the institutions themselves. It means they not only should present the evidence, but also should set forth a clear rationale for why they think the evidence is related to the intent of the standard.

**Verifiable.** The validity of any evidence advanced must be verifiable. This is partly a matter of whether the process of assembling the evidence is replicable, and if repeating the process would yield a similar result. This property corresponds directly to the concept of *reliability* in measurement. Verifiability, however, is also a matter of *documentation*—whether sufficient information is available to enable a reviewer (or any third party) to corroborate independently what was found. Because these concepts constitute fundamental principles of scholarship, they should already be familiar to college faculties.

**Representative.** Any evidence advanced must be *typical* of an underlying situation or condition, not an isolated case. If statistics are presented based on a sample, therefore, evidence of the degree to which the sample is





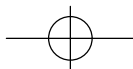
representative of the overall population ought to be provided. Furthermore, it is helpful to present such statistics *over time* (three to five years, for example) to check for inevitable variation and to make any underlying trends apparent. If the evidence provided is qualitative—for instance, in the form of case examples or documents—multiple instances should be given or additional data shown to indicate how typical the cases presented really are. In advancing this principle, commissions need to make it clear that sampling is generally useful and desirable. Sampling procedures can save considerable energy and allow for much more in-depth analysis and interpretation than would be possible when trying to gather data about all cases. But in both sampling and reporting, care must be taken to ensure that what is claimed is typical.

**Cumulative.** Evidence gains credibility as additional sources or methods for generating it are employed. Conclusions also become more believable when they can be independently corroborated by quite different sources. In evaluation, using multiple methods is often termed *triangulation* and helps guard against the inevitable flaws associated with any one approach. The same principle applies to qualitative evidence whose “weight” is enhanced both as new cases or testimony are added and when such additions are drawn from different sources. While not every statement advanced by an institution needs to be backed by information drawn from multiple sources, the entire body of evidence should be mutually reinforcing when presented to address a particular standard.

**Actionable.** Good evidence should provide institutions with specific guidance for action and improvement. This means that both the analysis and presentation of evidence must be *disaggregated* to reveal underlying patterns of strength and weakness, or to uncover specific opportunities for intervention and improvement. The evidence provided must be *reflectively analyzed and interpreted* to reveal its specific implications for the institution.

### Ewell's criteria imply the following guidelines for practice:

- Look for congruence between potential evidence and the institution's values and goals. Obtain judgments from stakeholders (faculty, administrators, and students) about the evidence's credibility (see discussion under Principle 4, below).
- Specify reasons for selecting data to be used as evidence and show the link between the evidence and the questions and issues being addressed. Avoid selecting information just because it is quantifiable or readily available.



- Be especially careful when adopting new instruments or instruments originally developed for another purpose. Do not rule them out but view them as exploratory and interpret them with caution and within strictly defined contextual limits.
- Compile evidence using multiple sources of data, but do so in as nondisruptive and parsimonious a manner as possible.
- As implied by the previous two guidelines, avoid imposing measures strictly for the purpose of evaluating student learning for accreditation. Instead, look for evidence that is embedded in the teaching/learning process itself—performance in capstone courses, for example, or learning artifacts such as student portfolios.
- Assess the comprehensiveness of the evidence as a set, relative to the information needed to address the standards. Ask, “Will all this information together tell us what we need to know?” Consider potential courses of action in advance of reviewing the data. Prepare to answer a series of “what if” questions: “What will we do if the evidence shows...?”

*“Applying  
collective  
judgment as to  
the meaning  
and utility of  
the evidence.”*

Data are transformed into evidence by means of human interpretation. Thus, determining what constitutes “evidence”—or, more important, what the data might be evidence *of*—is a highly judgmental process. This is why the same set of data can often be used to drive contrary arguments. For example, do high GRE scores earned by graduates constitute evidence of an institution’s success in educating majors? Or do they show departmental bias toward preparing students for graduate school, at the expense of other career options? Or, if the institution is highly selective in the first place, do they show not much of anything at all, other than the high predictability of academic ability upon admission? Evidence does not speak for itself. What good evidence does, or should do, is engage the institution and Commissions in a useful, more informed dialogue. The question then becomes: How to take raw, uninterpreted information and transform it into useful evidence? In the words of the Knight Higher Education Collaborative:

All too seldom do institutions make data the instruments of strategy in the fullest sense—to gauge the capacity of an institution to fulfill current commitments or pursue new opportunities, to understand external markets and the competition for new or existing programs and services, to analyze the opportunities for new ventures through collaboration among departments and centers, or to explore the prospect of even broader collaboration with other colleges and universities. While higher education exhibits a preoccupation with numbers like never before, institutions find themselves oddly

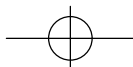


stretched to both extremes of a spectrum expressed by these two [contradictory statements]: “we deferred any decision for want of sufficient data.” And on the other, “we made the decision, data be damned.” The ironic result is an institution that uses data extraordinarily well when rendering scholarly judgment but too often fails to use data effectively to improve its own operations, processes, and prospects (2000, pp. 1-2).

Decisions about *evidence* do not lead directly to decisions about *value*. A mountain of evidence about student learning will not by itself lead to the “truth” about the quality of that learning. No matter how good it is, evidence will not by itself lead to answers to two questions which bedevil institutions and Commissions alike: What is a ‘good’ learning outcome? When is an outcome “good enough”? The search for learning quality is ultimately a highly personal and interpretive act. Quality is never defined by numbers and statistics, at one extreme, or by stories and testimonials, at the other. The act of judging value occurs as individuals gather information, make meaning of it by filtering it through their own perspectives and value orientations, and then render a judgment, one that is often tacit and unconscious.

Nevertheless, explicit standards are critical in high-stakes exercises like accreditation, even in regions that have recently placed more emphasis on the importance of “professional judgment” in the interpretation of relevant evidence. Just as evaluators cannot assume that judgments of quality will become obvious once the evidence is in, they also cannot assume that the standards used to make these judgments will be absolute and held by all. For example, one form of evidence might be “accomplishment of learning objectives in the major.” This information is of little use by itself. What is considered “acceptable” performance? Sixty percent of objectives by 80 percent of the students? Seventy percent by 90 percent? Eighty percent by 80 percent? Higher than last year? At the fiftieth percentile of “peer” institutions? In other words, what is the standard to be used? A “standard” is a level of performance against which evaluative evidence might be compared and judgments about value drawn. There are several ways of framing standards:<sup>1</sup>

1. ***Standards as goals.*** This is very familiar. Performance goals are set, annually or for some other time interval. Actual performance is compared to intended performance and a judgment is made. If only the world were that simple! The limitations of goals as standards are serious. As useful as performance goals may be as tools for organizing thinking and focusing on results, they pose serious problems for making judgments of value:
2.
  - They assume perfect information and total predictability. A host of unexpected problems or opportunities can arise, even in the relatively stable rhythm of academic life, and these can make the clearest and best thought-out goals less important, if not irrelevant. Further, because the





future is so hazy and unpredictable, numbers are often just pulled out of the air in an attempt to make the goals look more precise. How attainable is an 80 percent retention rate in five years? No one really knows.

- They pose conflicts of interest. Evaluator Michael Quinn Patton reports seeing the following poster on an office wall: “The greatest danger is not that we aim too high and miss, but that our goal is too low and we attain it” (1997, p. 154). In other words, setting low expectations is good if you want to appear successful, but bad if you want to achieve real quality. Goal-setters are confronted with this dilemma all the time.
- An obsession with “measurable” goals can deflect an institution from its real purposes, leading to what Blau and Scott (1962) have termed “goal displacement.” It is one thing to consider certain quantitative indicators such as admission and retention rates, pass rates on certifying examinations, and so on, as evidence of learning quality, but it is quite another to fix on these indicators as goals themselves. Institutions must ask themselves repeatedly: “What will be the consequences of accomplishing this goal? How will that contribute to our core purposes?”

None of this is meant to imply that setting learning goals is a bad idea. Quite the contrary: an institution’s learning goals form the heart of Principle 2. Learning goals reflect, in a results-oriented, forward-looking way, what the institution stands for and what it intends to accomplish. Goals as performance targets are good. Problems arise only when goals shift from being used not as tools to focus energy and commitment, but as standards by which the program is to be held accountable. Regional accrediting Commissions, in particular, have recognized the dangers of limiting value judgments to the extent to which the institution accomplishes its learning objectives: while such information is critical, to be sure, of equal importance is how these objectives were derived and what the institution does with the results.

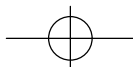
3. ***Standards as history.*** An institution can compare its performance to outcomes of previous years or collections of years—the longer the trend line, the better, to help distinguish real trends from temporary aberrations. Obvious candidates for this kind of analysis include enrollment and retention data, alumni surveys, NSSE results, and so forth. Looking at current performance as part of a long-term trend has the additional advantage of acknowledging change by accretion, which may not be noticeable in the short run. The problem with history as a standard is, of course, history itself. Looking backward doesn’t always help an institution look forward, or an accreditation team assess potential.
4. ***Standards as tacit judgments.*** This approach to standards comes from a different perspective altogether. It assumes that student learning qualities are not easily amenable to analytic approaches that result in specific outcome statements, but rather are far more ineffable than that. Value judgments,



therefore, should be made on the basis of a more holistic assessment, undertaken by those who are thoroughly steeped in the subject matter. This perspective undergirds the use of high-profile colleagues from other institutions as peer reviewers of specialized curricula. While they may be given a great deal of information about program purposes and goals, their main concern is in looking at the program as a whole and delivering an assessment of it from their position as “experts.” There’s a lot to be said for this approach: obtaining an external perspective on the value of the program, filtered through the lens of an “educational critic” (Eisner, 1991), can be hugely valuable as a way of challenging assumptions and getting academic programs and their faculty to see themselves differently. As Eisner points out, “We need to learn to see what we have learned not to notice” (1991, p. 77). But there are some obvious drawbacks, as well. Chief among these is that standards used by critics are never explicit, by definition. They depend entirely upon the expert making the judgment.

5. **Standards as benchmarks.** In its broadest sense, benchmarking simply refers to the practice of identifying peer institutions who engage in “best practices” (however defined), and using these practices as standards for comparison. What other institutions do can be very useful as a source of aspiration, especially for those who might otherwise be cynical or pessimistic about the institution’s own potential. For example, the Alverno Institute’s report, *Student Learning: A Central Focus for Institutions of Higher Education* (2002), contains case studies of how institutions ranging from small liberal arts colleges to flagship research universities have developed a stronger student learning focus. Those who doubt the ability of a large, complex university to get a handle on student learning outcomes can see there what the University of Washington did with its Study of Undergraduate Learning project. An over-reliance on standards as benchmarks has clear liabilities, however. “Peer” institutions, no matter how similar they appear, are different in innumerable and important ways – structurally, culturally, financially, and historically, not to mention differences in personalities and leadership styles. Outcomes that fit the University of Washington may simply be unrealistic for UCLA, and vice versa.
6. **Standards defined by accreditation guidelines.** Institutions ignore standards set by external bodies at their peril, and few do. Therein lies the problem, of course: institutional *obsession* with accreditation standards leads to a compliance mentality and a neglect of using student learning evidence as a way of building commitment to improvement.

Clearly, each of these five sources of standards has serious limitations. None seems capable of driving “objective” (that is, unbiased) judgments of value— unless, of course, one tried to make accreditation standards so detailed and





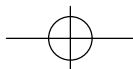
prescriptive as to make human judgment unnecessary, but even here one could question the selection of some standards and not others. In complex social systems such as colleges and universities, just as evidence alone cannot drive decision-making, neither can standards, regardless of source. The way out of this box is to be reminded that judgments of value are always subjective; and that what constitutes a “good enough” learning outcome depends on the set of values against which evidence is to be compared. Different stakeholders and stakeholder groups will have different value sets; thus, they will arrive at independent, and sometimes contrary, judgments when presented with exactly the same data.

#### **Principle 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.**

A stakeholder is anyone who stands to gain or lose by what the institution does. As noted earlier, the integrity of an institution is defined by multiple stakeholders: faculty, administrators, students and their parents, Board members, other external interests. Judgments about institutional integrity are value judgments, the result of stakeholders attempting to make meaning of what they observe. Diverse stakeholders, because they have diverse interests, will interpret the same set of “facts” in different ways. No matter how persuasive the evidence may *appear* to be, interpretations will inevitably depend on the value perspectives of those reviewing the data. Judgments of value are highly personal. This is why the collection, interpretation, and use of student learning evidence must be a collective endeavor. Institutional integrity, in all three senses of the term—honesty, consistency, and wholeness—depends on the degree to which diverse interests are negotiated among multiple stakeholders.

The principal reason why so many accreditation self-studies are so widely ignored on campus can be traced to a singular focus by the institution on “pleasing the accreditors.” The data are collected and the case is made with only the interests of the regional commission in mind: Commission staff members are questioned repeatedly about what they really want and whether the institution is doing “enough.” Other interests in student learning outcomes that are more internal to the institution—those held by faculty, staff, and students—are left behind, as are interests held by such stakeholders as parents and board members. Only when these interests are identified and addressed will the self-study reflect much beyond a compliance mentality.





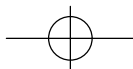
*Identifying interests can be done in several different ways:*

- Using either intact groups, such as departments or other program units, or ad hoc focus groups, ask one or more straightforward questions, such as: What would you most like to know about how our students are learning? Or more specifically: What would you like to know about how well our students are achieving the university's learning goals? These deceptively simple questions can harvest a surprisingly rich set of responses (Patton, 1999; Light, 2000). Inventory responses and identify those that cut across the institution, such as, how well we prepare students for careers in the professions, whether students leave us with a commitment to the public good, or whether students have achieved a basic quantitative literacy.
- Engage existing campus groups in a discussion of the chronic issues about student learning—those which seem to surface over and over again. Ask, What concerns do you hear most frequently? What form do these concerns take? What do they suggest about what we might need to know more about? Inventory responses as above.
- A fourth approach is to use the results of a institution-wide survey, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2002), as a tool for provoking campus discussion about the effectiveness with which it is fulfilling its learning mission. Data could be presented to various constituency groups with minimal interpretation, and participants could be asked, What do you make of these findings? What do they suggest about student learning and what the institution might do to enhance it?
- A related strategy would be for the institution to pull together profiles of student learning evidence and ask constituency groups, Here's what we know about what our students learn—where are the gaps? What do we most need to discover that we don't know already?

Obviously, these are not mutually exclusive strategies, nor do they exhaust the possibilities. The point is that in order for the institution to create the sort of “buy-in” that promotes authentic engagement with the self-study, it must ensure that the questions addressed by the study are those held internally, not limited to those held by representatives of the regional accrediting commission.

Engaging stakeholders extends beyond issues of how to focus the self-study. Engagement also requires that key stakeholders participate in the interpretation and use of student learning evidence.

Prior to reporting the evidence, invite those representing various interests to reflect on what various findings might mean to them. Ask, What do you make of these data? What is suggested here about how we're doing as an institution? These



questions encourage reflective thinking before positions become solidified, and result in a richer conversation about important issues. The interpretation of data about student learning should not simply be delegated to those in institutional research, just as the use of student learning evidence should not be delegated to those in academic administration.

Involving stakeholders in the use of evidence to make changes helps connect reflective thinking to action in a way that maintains their investment in improvement. Connecting reflection to action suggests the following steps:

- Doing something useful with new insights requires, first, that the institution take stock. What does the evidence suggest about our collective strengths and weaknesses? Does the evidence suggest that our mission has evolved, maybe in imperceptible ways? What appears to be our niche? How comfortable are we with that? How does what we have learned about ourselves affect who we are and what we aspire to become?
- Then the institution can revisit its claims and concerns and see what they add up to. Do claims and concerns reflect the central values of the institution? If the claims continue to hold and the concerns successfully addressed, will the institution become what it aspires to become? If not, what's missing, and how might the gaps be redefined as opportunities?

### Principle 5: Capacity building.

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

The most significant barrier to the usefulness of accreditation for the institution has been the existence of what might be termed a “compliance mentality”: the natural impulse to treat virtually any externally imposed mandate—including accreditation requirements to assess student learning outcomes—as a burden to bear, a necessary evil, a task to undertake as quickly and efficiently as possible so that the institution may again focus on the “real work” of the academy. This occurs despite the best efforts of accreditation agencies to stress that what they *really* want is evidence that the institution has internalized assessment of student learning, that it collects and uses student learning evidence as a way to monitor its own quality, and that it does so in a manner that befits its mission and purposes. A compliance mentality will not change until the institution develops what regional Commissions have variously called a “culture of inquisitiveness,” a “spirit of inquiry,” or a “culture of evidence.” These terms are treated here as synonyms and the latter term is used for convenience. Scores of studies have been done on how to shift from a compliance culture to a culture of evidence, including one completed



recently for The Pew Charitable Trusts (Wergin and Swingen, 2000). Following is a synthesis of institutional qualities most likely to lead to and support a culture of evidence:

***A leadership of engagement.*** Leaders frame issues clearly, put clear choices before the faculty and other stakeholder groups, and are open to negotiation about what will inform these decisions. They also provide incentives for reasonable risk-taking by academic programs.

***A culture of peer collaboration and peer review.*** Criteria and standards for evaluation—of both faculty and programs—are based on a shared understanding of faculty work.

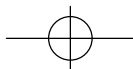
***Flexible and decentralized evaluation policies.*** Units and programs are invited to define for themselves the critical evaluation questions, the key stakeholders and sources of evidence, and the most appropriate analysis and interpretation procedures.

***A willingness to make assumptions explicit and to question them.*** The institution recognizes that asking questions that challenge existing perspectives is central to institutional vitality.

***A recognition that most of the information required to make informed judgments is already available, and that expert knowledge lies mostly inside the institution.*** As noted earlier in this guide, a widespread myth exists in colleges and universities that assessment and interpretation of student learning outcomes requires comprehensive and standardized assessment instruments, and external consultants to implement them.

***Significant opportunities for critical reflection on student learning data.*** Faculty members and academic staff are given the time and resources to make meaning of student learning evidence, including opportunities for discourse and an invitation to adopt new and different perspectives on what the data suggest. There is widespread recognition that data take on meaning only when they become part of the institution's story.

***An acceptance of the need for evidence as a tool for decision-making.*** There is a recognition that just because decisions are congruent with institutional mission or have been reached through collegial consensus, they should not be accepted on faith.



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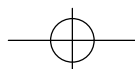
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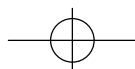
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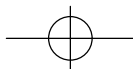
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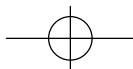
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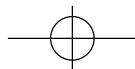
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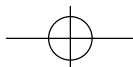
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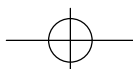
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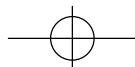
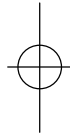
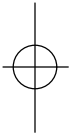
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## APPENDIX

### Criteria for the Evaluation of Student Learning

[NOTE: Entries shown in regular font were derived from standards or guidelines produced by one or more of the regional Commissions. Entries given in italics were derived from other sources, as noted at the end of the outline.]

- I. Fulfillment of institutional purposes in student learning outcomes
  - A. **Accomplishment of institutional learning goals**
    1. What evidence is provided about:
      - a. student mastery of program goals and course objectives?
      - b. graduates' mastery of college-level competencies?
      - c. employment prospects of graduates?
    2. Does the institution award degrees and certificates based on student achievement of a program's stated learning outcomes?
  - B. **Demonstration of specific student proficiencies. What evidence exists that students have attained the following:**
    1. Developed an inclination to:
      - a. understand their values through self-assessment?
      - b. consider divergent views?
      - c. pursue intellectual interests through structured inquiry?
      - d. *become intentional learners, purposeful and self-directed in multiple ways?* [3]
    2. Developed skills in:
      - a. written and oral communication?
      - b. scientific and quantitative reasoning?
      - c. critical analysis and logical thinking?
      - d. analysis and integration of concepts?
      - e. ways to identify, access, retrieve, and apply relevant information?
      - f. technology appropriate to the program of study?
      - g. *deriving meaning from experience?* [3]
      - h. *transforming information into knowledge and knowledge into judgment and action?* [3]
      - i. *managing change?* [3]
      - j. *working well in teams?* [3]
    3. Gained knowledge and appreciation of:
      - a. the complex structure of knowledge germane to an area of inquiry and its interrelatedness to other areas?
      - b. aesthetic and ethical dimensions of humankind?





- c. scientific, historical, and social phenomena?
- d. *the values and histories underlying U.S. democracy?* [3]
- e. *civic values?* [3]
- 4. *Engaged in both broad and deep learning?* [7]
- 5. Mastered competencies for independent learning—a self-awareness about the reason for study, the learning process itself, and how education is used?
- C. **Certification of learning.** *What evidence exists that the institution is able to back up degrees awarded with a certification that learning goals have been achieved?* [4]

## II. Institutional capacity for quality student learning

### A. Clear institutional purposes regarding student learning

1. What commitment to learning is evident in the institution's mission statement?
2. *Have discussions been held among key constituents regarding the relevance of the current mission statement to student learning? How have stakeholder interests been incorporated into **revisions**?* [1]
3. How are an institution's educational mission and goals disseminated to constituencies?
4. What does the institution do to assure that students and prospective students receive clear and accurate information about educational courses and programs and transfer policies?
5. To what extent are the expected learning outcomes of the institution's programs made public, including to prospective students?
6. How does institutional mission influence curricular objectives, and how do curricula in turn influence course objectives?
7. What is the match between:
  - a. attributes of admitted students and the mission and goals of the institution?
  - b. the institution's programs and its mission and objectives?

### B. Policies supporting student learning

1. *How much emphasis is given to commitment to student learning as part of faculty hiring?* [1]
2. What policies and procedures are in place to assure effective instruction?
3. How does the institution support freedom of inquiry for faculty and students?
4. What measures does the institution take to assure equitable access to students?
5. What does the institution do to assure that its services and academic resources afford all admitted students the opportunity to succeed?
6. What information is provided to students to help them make informed choices about their education?





7. In what ways do institutional policies serve the learning needs of adults and other non-traditional learners?
8. How much of an institution's articulation and transfer policies focus on student learning rather than on content or delivery?
9. What resources are provided to sustain and improve programs and instruction?
10. In the evaluation of faculty, how much importance is given to their effectiveness in producing learning outcomes?  
What is the role of peer review?
11. *What evidence exists that teaching is taken seriously as a scholarly activity?* [4]
12. What is the alignment of faculty and staff recruitment, workload, incentive, and evaluation practices with institutional purposes and educational objectives?
13. *How often are institutional policies screened for the extent to which they support student learning?* [2]

**C. Leadership for student learning**

1. *Does the institution have a visible institutional leader committed to creating a climate for learning?* [1]
2. What evidence exists to indicate that this commitment extends beyond rhetoric to actions in resource allocation, policy making, and data-driven decision-making?
3. How does the institution align and coordinate vision, strategy, and planning?
4. How explicit is the process of change and its anticipated impact?
5. Who is involved in institutional planning efforts? What is the extent of their involvement?
6. What support for assessment of student learning is evident by the governing board, senior executive officers, and unit heads?
7. How does the institution determine that facilities and learning resources are adequate to meet student learning goals?
8. How does the institution balance energy focused on accomplishing its stated mission with flexibility to a changing environment?
9. *Who in the institution is sufficiently knowledgeable about student learning to provide the leadership required?* [1]

**D. A quality environment for student learning**

1. What does the institution do to provide an environment that:
  - a. is actively conducive to student learning—where library, information resources, and co-curricular programs actively support student learning?
  - b. serves as a shared learning community in which students are encouraged to explore and express a diversity of ideas and opinions?
  - c. encourages personal and civic responsibility as well as intellectual, aesthetic, and personal development for all of its students?





2. *Where is a focus on learning evident in key institutional documents, such as the college catalog, program descriptions, and personnel policies?* [4]
3. *How flexible is the scheduling of learning options and activities, i.e., year-round operation, frequent entry points and flexible exit?* [2]
4. *In what ways does the institution encourage and disseminate innovations in teaching and learning, and discuss their implications for curriculum and pedagogy?*
5. *What evidence exists of a “culture of inquisitiveness” about student learning, including:*
  - a. *a need for information and an urgency to act?*
  - b. *a focus on current issues or problems?*
  - c. *a willingness to make assumptions explicit and to question them?*
  - d. *a recognition of the value of past experiences?*
  - e. *opportunities to reflect?*
  - f. *shared understandings that “learning to learn” is as important as what is learned?*
  - g. *support of reasonable risk-taking by academic units?*
  - h. *opportunities to share results of experimentation in learning?*
  - i. *a climate of trust?*
  - j. *widespread generation of, access to, and use of information about student learning?*
  - k. *collective interpretation of information?*
  - l. *an established process for planning and decision making?*
  - m. *tangible rewards for determining what worked and what did not?* [8]
6. *How much consensus exists across the institution about the importance of documenting and assessing student learning outcomes?* [1]
7. *In what ways have community resources been tapped to help the institution become more learning-centered?* [1]
8. *On campuses that are unionized, how consistent are union agendas with a focus on student learning?* [2]

**E. Adequate resources to support student learning**

1. *What resources are provided to support educational programs and to facilitate student achievement of program objectives?*
2. *What does the allocation of resources among programs, units, and individuals reveal about institutional priorities regarding student learning?*
3. *What kinds of access and training are provided to students so that library and other learning support services may be used effectively and efficiently?*
4. *To what extent are student support services appropriate to student strengths and needs, reflective of institutional mission, consistent with student learning expectations, and available regardless of place or method of delivery?*
5. *In what ways do student support services contribute to the*



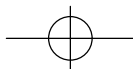


- achievement of student learning outcomes?
6. What is the institution's plan for acquiring and replacing learning resources, including technology, and how is this aligned with educational goals and objectives?
  7. What is the alignment between faculty qualifications and the courses they are expected to teach?
  8. How much support is provided for evaluation of instructional effectiveness?
  9. What resources and programs for professional development are made available to faculty, staff, and administrators and how much are they used?
  10. To what extent are these programs based on identified teaching and learning needs?
  11. How does the institution ensure that fiscal stability is not attained at the expense of educational quality?

### III. Effective teaching and learning practices

#### A. Curricular design and integration

1. How does the institution identify the varied educational needs of its students, and how does it seek to meet these needs?
2. What evidence is given that educational programs have been developed to promote curricular coherence and integration and synthesis of learning?
3. What evidence exists of coherence, continuity, and integration of students' educational experience?
4. How does the institution connect its curricula to its defined communities, through such initiatives as development of available field settings, service learning, or similar opportunities for practical student engagement?
5. What is the availability of such co-curricular offerings as out-of-class lectures and exhibitions, study abroad, civic involvement, independent learning and research, and opportunities for informal student-faculty contact?
6. What is the congruence between institutional descriptions of degrees and certificates and program content, degree objectives, and student mastery of knowledge?
7. Does each instructional program have a clearly stated rationale?  
How do these align with institutional mission and purposes?  
How public are they?
8. How consistent are curricula with the abilities and scholastic preparation of the students admitted to the programs?
9. To what extent are programs characterized by appropriate breadth, depth, continuity, sequential progression, and time to completion?
10. How consistent are goals, structure, content, and methods of instruction?





11. How diverse are the methods of instruction and points of view to which students are exposed?
12. How much of the evaluation of program effectiveness centers on student learning outcomes?
13. Do programs of study:
  - a. include courses and/or activities that stimulate the examination and understanding of personal, social, and civic values?
  - b. require faculty and students to use scholarship and/or participation in research?
  - c. require intellectual interaction among students and between students and faculty?
14. For the institution's general education program:
  - a. What is the balance it offers among the arts and humanities, sciences, and social sciences, including their relationships to one another?
  - b. To what extent does the general education program contain:
    - i. a clearly defined statement of philosophy and objectives?
    - ii. courses that stimulate the examination and understanding of personal, social, and civic values?
    - iii. courses that ensure proficiency in skills and competencies essential for all college-educated adults?
15. How much opportunity do students have to pursue knowledge and understanding through unrestricted electives?
16. What percentage of students' studies is devoted to general education?
17. For the institution's professional education programs:
  - a. What role do practice communities play in curricular decisions?
  - b. How are learning goals linked to professional standards of practice?
  - c. *How does the institution assure professional competence of its graduates?* [6]
18. *What strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations has the institution forged with employers and other organizations to develop and improve educational opportunities for learners?* [5]

**B. Student learning goals**

1. Are expected student learning outcomes articulated at the course, program, and institutional levels?
2. *Are these outcomes articulated in a developmental way—that is, expressed at beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels?* [4]
3. Does each program have learning objectives, and to what extent do these include knowledge, intellectual skills, and methods of inquiry to be acquired?
4. Does the institution have high standards without standardization—i.e., does it allow multiple pathways to achievement?
5. To what degree do the institution's learning goals for general education include the following:
  - a. an understanding of the basic content and methodology of the major areas of knowledge: the humanities and fine arts, the natural sciences,



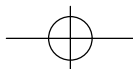


and the social sciences?

- b. a capacity to be a productive individual and lifelong learner: oral and written communication, computer literacy, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis/logical thinking, and the ability to acquire knowledge through a variety of means, including information technology?
  - c. a recognition of what it means to be an ethical human being and effective citizen: an appreciation of ethical principles; civility and interpersonal skill; respect for cultural diversity; historical and aesthetic sensitivity; and the willingness to assume civic, political, and social responsibilities?
  - d. *reinforcement of the above throughout the curriculum?* [3]
6. Do requirements for the major include clearly defined learning objectives, and do these objectives include an expectation of mastery of the knowledge, methods, and theories pertinent to a particular area of inquiry?

**C. Student learning experiences**

1. How congruent are instructional techniques and delivery systems with the mission and purposes of the institution? With students' capabilities and learning needs?
2. In what ways are faculty members incorporating research on student learning in their teaching?
3. What is the range of methods of instruction and viewpoints to which students are exposed?
4. What learning options are available to learners to help them meet their learning goals? *Are these options offered in varying lengths, at graduated levels of complexity, and clustered in different configurations?* [2]
5. To what extent do programs and courses ensure an opportunity for reflection and analysis of subject matter?
6. How does advising or mentoring help students benefit from available educational opportunities and resources?
7. To what extent do educational offerings provide:
  - a. an atmosphere of inquiry that values diversity of backgrounds and perspectives?
  - b. an opportunity for students to engage each other and their teachers in a free exchange of ideas and attitudes?
  - c. a course syllabus that specifies learning objectives consistent with published course descriptions?
  - d. experiences relevant to student aspirations and interests?
  - e. adequate time on task to learn and practice?
  - f. an opportunity to integrate instructional and non-instructional experiences?
  - g. active student engagement in learning?
  - h. an opportunity for collaborative learning?



- i. evaluation of student learning based upon clearly stated criteria that reflect learning objectives?

#### **N. Institutional processes for evaluating educational effectiveness**

##### **A. Defining educational goals and objectives**

1. What institutional policies and procedures lead to the development, approval, and evaluation of its educational purposes and learning goals?
2. To what degree are educational goals derived from and based on the mission?
3. How does the institution ensure that the degrees it offers are aligned with its core purposes?
4. How does the institution ensure that its educational objectives are appropriate for its students, given their particular backgrounds and their intended objectives?
5. To what extent are mission, goals, and objectives:
  - a. a guide to decision making?
  - b. the product of a collaborative effort?
  - c. related to external as well as internal contexts and constituencies?
  - d. focused on student learning and institutional improvement?
6. How are goals applied within the institution and how is implementation coordinated?
7. *What is the congruence between learning goals and assessment practices?* [3]

##### **B. Assessing student learning**

1. What is the role of faculty in assuring academic quality?
2. In what ways does the institution gather, analyze, and use information about the needs and preferences of students and the values they place on programs and services? Is this information effectively used to create an overall climate conducive to student and institutional learning?
3. How does the institution ensure that the organization and delivery of its services to students are appropriately aligned with its educational objectives and its particular approach to teaching and learning?
4. How does the institution ensure that its programs can be completed in a timely manner, are configured to meet student needs, and lead to retention and graduation rates appropriate to the type of institution and student population?
5. To what extent does the institution regularly collect and analyze retention and attrition data for the student body as a whole as well as for major subgroups, and explore the implications of the data to be assured that the institution is being responsive to the needs of all its students?

6. How does the institution review and modify its courses and programs to reflect new knowledge and changes in the needs of society?
  7. To what degree is the institution's assessment program marked by:
    - a. a structure with institutional mission and educational purposes at the center?
    - b. measurable learning objectives for courses of study?
    - c. a strong, readily-identifiable relationship between overall institutional mission and objectives and the specific educational objectives of individual departments or programs?
    - d. faculty ownership, and use in ways that lead to educational improvements?
    - e. support and collaboration of faculty and administration?
    - f. incentives, recognitions and rewards for faculty efforts in assessment?
    - g. shared authority, including a strong campus-wide coordinating or steering committee?
    - h. an individual responsible for oversight?
    - i. feedback to the faculty on a regular basis useful for the improvement of instruction and learning?
    - j. student understanding of the purposes of assessment?
    - k. systematic use of multiple measures, drawn extensively from existing sources?
      - l. results useful for decision making?
      - m. realistic goals and timetable and appropriate investment of resources?
      - n. periodic evaluation of the plan's effectiveness?
  8. To what degree is assessment both an institutional priority and a way of life?
  9. How are such factors as available resources, faculty expertise, student needs, and academic planning taken into account for curricular decisions?
  10. How does the institution ensure that its curricula transcend a simple collection of courses?
  11. How does the institution ensure comparable quality regardless of delivery mode?
  12. How does the institution assure in-depth integration of general education and study?
  13. How does the institution demonstrate commitment to excellence in both the teaching provided by faculty and the learning expected of students?
  14. *What does the institution know about the educational experiences and learning patterns of individual students?* [3]
  15. *To what degree does the institution engage in "assessment as learning," that is, ongoing assessment with feedback to help students improve?* [4]
- C. Using evaluative data for institutional change**
1. What evidence exists of an institutional commitment to making meaningful use of student achievement data for the purpose of

- enhancing educational effectiveness?
2. To what extent does institutional inquiry into teaching and learning affect the design of curricula, the design and practice of pedagogy, and the improvement of evaluation?
  3. In what ways does the institution ensure that assessment outcomes are actively used as guides for decision-making, resource allocation, and action?
  4. What record exists of institutional and unit improvement? What improvements in teaching and learning are evident as a result of assessment?
  5. How are documented evaluation results communicated to appropriate constituencies?
  6. How often does the institution systematically review and modify all parts of the planning cycle, including institutional and other research efforts?

**D. Assessing usefulness of evaluation**

1. In what way and how often is the assessment program reviewed for usefulness and cost-effectiveness?
2. How does the institution determine that its decision-making processes are appropriate to its stated mission and purposes?
3. *To what extent has the institutional focus on assessment been a matter of commitment rather than compliance?* [4]

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