DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 476 564 HE 035 888

AUTHOR	Van Kollenburg, Susan E., Ed.
TITLE	A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement, 2003. Volume 4: The Self-Study Process for Commission Evaluation. 2003 Edition.
INSTITUTION	North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Chicago, IL. Higher Learning Commission.
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	104p.; Prepared for the Annual Meeting of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (108th, Chicago, IL, April 13-16, 2003). For volumes 1 through 4, see HE 035 886-888. For the 2002 edition, published in a single volume, see HE 035 309.
AVAILABLE FROM	North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, 30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400, Chicago, IL 60602-2504. Tel: 312-263-0456; Tel: 800-621-7440 (Toll Free); Fax: 312-263-7462; Web site: http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Proceedings (021) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC05 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Accreditation (Institutions); Accrediting Agencies; Evaluation Methods; *Higher Education; *Institutional Evaluation; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Strategic Planning
IDENTIFIERS	*North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

ABSTRACT

Papers in this collection were prepared for the annual meeting of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. This volume contains papers related to the self-study process for Commission evaluation. Papers in chapters 1, "Self-Study and Commission Evaluation: Coordinating the Self-Study," are: (1) "Initiating the Self-Study Process: Practical Suggestions" (Marilyn Nelson Carroll); (2) "On Herding Ducks: Ways To Keep a Big Project Going without Being the Gunslinger" (J. Thomas Howald); (3) "Initiating the Self-Study Process: Planning for Success" (Thomas Botzman and Carol Canavan); (4) "Self-Study in a Small, Single-Purpose Institution" (Kay Luft); (5) "'The Importance of Being Earnest" and "The Color Purple": Purpose and Structure in the Self-Study Process" (Michael L. Banks, Jacqueline Gray, and Karen Jones); (6) "Only 120 Days Remain, the Clock Is Ticking" (Dunn T. Faires); (7) "Preparing Trustees, Faculty, Staff, and Students for the Team Visit" (David McFadden and Mary Lahman); and (8) "The Eight Weeks Prior to the Higher Learning Commission Visit" (Kelly K. Brinkman and William L. Ramsey). Chapter 2, "Self-Study and Commission Evaluation: Practical Advice," contains: (9) "Deciding How To Approach the Self-Study: Three Campuses, Three Choices" (Gil Atnip, Marilyn Vasquez, and Susan Kahn); (10) "Utilizing Online Course Software To Prepare a Higher Learning Commission Self-Study" (Donna L. Askins); (11) "What Did and Did Not Work during the Self-Study Process" (Terri Wenzlaff); (12) "Sustaining Communication and Involvement throughout the Self-Study" (Paula M. Glover and Kristin B. Wilson); (13) "Obtaining Complete Campus Participation: A Strategy for Self-Study" (James C. Foster); (14) "Engaging in Accreditation: Using Staff Development To

Achieve Total Participation" (Randall Van Wagoner and Sharon Cole Hoffman); (15) "Preparing for the Visit While Focusing on Institutional Improvement" (Sherril Hoel and Peggy Simpson); (16) "Continuity, Coordination, and Change: Planning, Assessment, and Higher Learning Commission/NCATE Reviews" (Elizabeth H. Davis and Suzanne Jessup); (17) "Data, Data, Data! How To Collect What You Need" (David Cook and Carol Nelson); (18) "An Employee Satisfaction Survey Designed for Accreditation Self-Study" (Mary Ellen Wacker and Robert E. Dunker); (19) "The Ingredients for Preparing a High-Quality Self-Study Report" (Donald Bennion and Michael Harris); (20) "Lessons Learned from Years of Reviewing Self-Study Reports: Advice on Writing and Editing the Self-Study" (Norma C. Noonan and Kathryn Heltne Swanson); and (21) "Strategies for Developing a Comprehensive Resource Book" (Shanna Legleiter, Jackie Elliot, and Cathie Oshiro). Chapter 3, "From the Eligibility Process through Initial Affiliation," contains: (22) "From PIF to Initial Accreditation: A Case Study" (Laurie Pemberton and Gil Linne). Many chapters contain references. (SLD)

ED 476 564

A ... n of ... n Self-Study an ... iona ... ement, 2003

V lume 4:
e Se -Study
Commission Ev

2003 Edition

Higher Learning Commi

NCA

A Collection of Papers on
Self-Study and Institutional Improvement
2003

Volume 4
The Self-Study Process for Commission Evaluation

Prepared for the program of
The Higher Learning Commission
Restructured Expectations: Building New Partnerships for Learning
at the 108th Annual Meeting of the North Central Association
April 13–16, 2003 • Hyatt Regency Chicago

A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement
2003

Volume 4

The Self-Study Process for Commission Evaluation

Susan E. Van Kollenburg, Editor

The papers included in this collection offer the viewpoints of their authors. The Commission highly recommends them for study and for the advice they contain, but none represent official Commission directions, rules, or policies.

This publication is part of a set of four volumes:

Volume 1: **Establishing and Sustaining Effective Connections**
- Building New Partnerships for Learning
- State, Regional, and National Initiatives

Volume 2: **Organizational Effectiveness and Future Directions**
- Mission, Planning, and Organizational Change
- Quality Improvement in Higher Education
- Using New Technology to Enhance Student Learning
- Effective Learning Environments

Volume 3: **Promoting Student Learning and Effective Teaching**
- Developing and Sustaining a Culture of Assessment
- Assessment Processes
- Assessment Tools and Measures
- General Education: Assessing Outcomes, Reforming Programs
- Assessing and Supporting Effective Teaching

Volume 4: **The Self-Study Process for Commission Evaluation**
- Self-Study and Commission Evaluation: Coordinating the Self-Study
- Self-Study and Commission Evaluation: Practical Advice
- From the Eligibility Process through Initial Evaluation

 Additional copies of this publication can be ordered from: The Higher Learning Commission: 30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400, Chicago, Ill 60602; e-mail: pubs@hlcommission.org. Price: $15.00 per volume; complete set (four volumes) $50.00.

The Higher Learning Commission
A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
NCA

THE HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION
a commission of the
North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400
Chicago, Illinois 60602
(312) 263-0456 (800) 621-7440
fax: (312) 263-0460
web site: www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org

A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement

Volume 4: The Self-Study Process for Commission Evaluation

Contents

6

Foreword

It can be argued that the word "partnership" should be used cautiously and with care. After all, it does have a specific legal meaning about a shared, contractual business venture. The theme of this 108th Annual Meeting program was chosen with a much broader appreciation for the term: through partnerships "partners" share a common activity or interest. In fact, this *Collection of Papers* is testimony that both types of partnerships are growing in importance to our membership.

We claimed in the 1990s that higher education was undergoing a major transformation. Technology fueled much of the change. So also did the changing demographics of our students. Today finances have come to be another very significant driver for change. Effective learning environments demand more and more use of technology; services to diverse students require a richer array of programs and support services; at the same time funds from states dwindle and investment portfolios fail to perform. If higher education is going to meet growing demands, it inevitably must turn to new and different organizations to help share the design, support, and costs. New business partnerships, some among colleges and universities but many with private corporations, come into play. These are, in fact, partnerships in the legal, contractual understanding of the word. We need to know more about these, to identify what the appropriate quality assurance interests might be in them, and to disseminate best practices in them. Several of the papers presented in this *Collection of Papers* give us significant help in all these matters.

We have an even larger growth of partnerships that emerge from sharing of common interests. How do colleges and universities work together and with the K-12 sector to create effective educational pathways for students? How do groups of institutions create ways to share the endeavors of creating effective e-Learning courses and programs? What issues must be solved for two or more colleges to create a shared degree or a shared set of student services? These types of partnerships figure prominently in many papers in these volumes.

Accreditation is really a tremendous exercise in creating partnerships as well. Within any given college, the success of a self-study process engages the Commission, the self-study team, and all the constituents of that college. The Commission's peer review processes depend on the willingness of its members to share the talents of site visitors and decision-makers. The Commission strives to build and maintain good relationships with state and federal governments also concerned about the quality of colleges and universities. Several of the papers in these volumes speak to these partnerships.

A considerable number of papers focus on two major Commission projects involving partnering with affiliated institutions. AQIP constitutes the most path-breaking experiment in recasting accrediting relationships, relationships of institutions to the Commission and institutions to each other. From these essays we learn about the power of this new approach. Effective and meaningful assessment of student learning still stands as an unmet goal of many colleges. These essays are the richest collection to date of accounts of the successful efforts of some institutions to create a new culture supportive of assessment.

Last, but not least, with the adoption this February of the new Criteria for Accreditation, the Board of Trustees not only integrated institutional and business partnerships into accreditation standards but also challenged its affiliated organizations to focus on the future, on their support for learning, on their connectedness, and on their attention to their own distinctivenesses. Not many papers in this volume speak to directly to this new partnership meant to "serve the common good by assuring and advancing the quality of higher learning." But discussion about it will be central to the Annual Meeting itself and the fruits of the new partnership inevitably will fill pages of future editions of the *Collection of Papers*.

Steven D. Crow
Executive Director

March 1, 2003

Preface

On behalf of the Commission, I am pleased to present the 2003 edition of the Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement. Now in its nineteenth year, the Collection of Papers has moved beyond a supplement to the Meeting presentations to be a remarkable resource throughout the year for all who are interested in issues of higher education quality. We are grateful to our speakers for their generous contributions to the work of the Commission through these papers as well as through their presentations at the Annual Meeting.

With this edition, the Collection of Papers moves into a new phase of publication. The contributions of our speakers have grown in both number and substance. Topics once addressed in two or three papers, are now featured in twenty or more. It is no longer practical or useful to publish these papers in a single volume. Therefore, this Collection is presented as follows:

Volume 1. Establishing and Sustaining Effective Connections flows from the theme of this year's meeting, providing a wide variety of examples of new partnerships being forged by higher learning organizations and highlighting some state, regional, and national initiatives.

Volume 2. Organizational Effectiveness and Future Directions focuses on the relationships among mission, planning, and organizational change; quality improvement in higher education, including a number of papers from institutions participating in the Commission's Academic Quality Improvement Project; the various challenges and opportunities offered by technology; and the role of effective learning environments in achieving institutional goals.

Volume 3. Promoting Student Learning and Effective Teaching features three chapters on the role of assessment in the improvement of student learning; a fourth chapter is devoted to assessing and reforming general education; the fifth chapter focuses on assessing and supporting effective teaching. For the fourteen years of the Commission's Assessment Initiative, the Collection of Papers has highlighted institutional efforts to assess student academic achievement. It is important to note that discussions of assessment efforts are not limited to this volume, but appear in numerous papers throughout the four volumes.

Volume 4. The Self-Study Process for Commission Evaluation, offers useful advice on organizing and conducting self-study and undergoing a team visit based on actual experience; it includes one case study on seeking and attaining initial status with the Commission.

Producing a book of this size in five weeks requires significant team effort. Special thanks are given to the following individuals who made the 2003 Collection possible: Larissa Kessler, for her help in processing initial submissions and preparing files; Sybil Sosin, for her valuable editorial assistance; Gerald Van Kollenburg, for his extraordinary assistance with the layout, particularly the charts and graphics; Kathleen Herring, for the beautiful cover designs; and Aaron Marsh of Honi Graphics, for always getting the book printed in time for the Meeting.

The Commission invites your comments about the Collection of Papers and welcomes your suggestions for future topics for the Annual Meeting program. I hope that you will consider participation as a speaker at a future Meeting. The strength of the Annual Meeting lies in the willingness of our institutions to share their experiences with others. I look forward to seeing you in at the Meeting.

Susan E. Van Kollenburg
Editor
Associate Director for Programs, Publications,
and Member Services

March 1, 2003

Ed. note: The name of the Commission was changed from the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education to The Higher Learning Commission effective January 1, 2001. In their papers, authors may have referred to this organization as the North Central Association, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, or The Higher Learning Commission. Information about the name change is available on the Commission's web site: www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org.

A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement, 2003

Volume 4: The Self-Study Process for Commission Evaluation

Chapter 1: Self-Study and Commission Evaluation: Coordinating the Self-Study

The Higher Learning Commission

A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

NCA

Restructured Expectations: Building New Partnerships for Learning

Program of
The Higher Learning Commission

108th Annual Meeting of the North Central Association

April 13 – 16, 2003 • Hyatt Regency Chicago

Initiating the Self-Study Process: Practical Suggestions

Marilyn Nelsen Carroll

You have recently been appointed to the position of self-study coordinator and, perhaps, are beginning to wonder what evil deeds you did in this or some past life that led you to this. Undoubtedly, you did do something: you impressed the president of your university that you are a competent person who has the ability to actually do this task. Trust me. The president was correct. You will survive this experience, and you will succeed.

Having served twice as a self-study coordinator and for ten years as a consultant-evaluator, I can offer a few suggestions that I hope might ease some of your fears and make your job a little easier. You, too, may find that you enjoy it enough that you decide to apply to become a consultant-evaluator. If you become one, I can almost guaranteed that you will be asked to serve as self-study coordinator again the next time around.

The Most Important Things I Have Learned

- **There is no one right way or even best way to do anything connected with the self-study process.** The size of the steering committee, whether or not subcommittees are used, how the self-study is organized, the length of it, and so on, can all vary significantly depending upon what will work best for you and your institution. You must show that the institution fulfills the five criteria, but how you do this is up to you.
- **Protect yourself.** This is a big job. Determine what you need (e.g., released time, summer pay, expenses to attend the Higher Learning Commission's annual meeting, a new computer) and specify this at the beginning. Remember that you will continue to need some extra time even after the self-study is completed, as you will be gathering documents for the resource room, publicizing the visit, and more. In my case, I received a reduced teaching load (one course for each of two semesters and two courses for another two semesters), summer pay (two courses each for two summers at the maximum summer pay), a very fast laser printer, and expenses to attend the Higher Learning Commission meetings for three years prior to our visit.
- **If you have questions, contact your institution's Higher Learning Commission staff liaison.** S/he will even visit your campus, if you think that would be useful. Keep in mind that the liaison does not meet with the team or participate in making recommendations about accreditation. The liaison's suggestions are just suggestions. If you have no questions, do not feel that you must contact the liaison for political reasons.
- **Constantly remind the entire campus that the purpose of the self-study process is to help the institution improve, not just get reaccredited.** Do not be afraid to discuss the institution's problems and challenges as honestly as possible. Inevitably, someone on campus will assert, "We don't want to air our dirty laundry in public" or "Let's not be too open about this; we don't want to jeopardize our accreditation." Assure these individuals that very few challenges or problems are so severe that they will threaten the outcome of the accreditation process and that, if they are, the visiting team will undoubtedly discover them irrespective of what is in the self-study.

Questions to Ask at the Beginning

- Will it be possible to use existing committees, or will the steering committee do most of the data collection and writing? I think that it is preferable to use existing committees and departments, since most institutions have more than enough committees already in place.
- Will the steering committee generate any studies or surveys, or do enough data already exist? Is the institution data rich or data poor?
- What evaluative practices are already in place that can be utilized?

- Can the self-study process be used for some purpose other than accreditation? Is there some question the president or a group on campus would like to have answered? Can the process be used to reevaluate the mission or some other major aspect of the institution? The self-study process is expensive. It makes sense to use it to benefit the institution in some way other than just to attain continued accreditation, as important as that is.

The Steering Committee

- **There is no "one size fits all."** I know of one institution that had a three-person steering committee and another that had a steering committee of twenty-eight members. One college with a student body numbering 650 had a fifteen-member steering committee, several consultants, and eighteen self-study committees. My first committee had five members, and the second had ten; both sizes worked. I found it easier to work with a smaller committee.
- **Who picks the members?** Ideally you will help select the members, but be certain that you at least have veto power. Keep in mind that it is often difficult to determine in advance who will be a good committee member. I had some disasters both times, and I am not at all certain how they could have been prevented. I do know that when this happens, it is best to replace the person immediately, if you have that option.
- **Who should ask them to serve?** My first time, I decided that I should ask the prospective members. I wanted only people who were willing to serve, and I was afraid that they might be reluctant to refuse the president. I learned that it was all too easy to say no to me. The second time I relinquished the task to the president and academic vice president, and, as I feared, some members were less than enthusiastic participants. Nonetheless, I would opt for the second method if I were doing it again.
- **Do not have meetings just for the sake of meeting!** It is possible to do much of the work of communication via e-mail and phone calls.

Self-Study Process

- **Read the Handbook of Accreditation very carefully before you begin work.** Refer to it frequently during the self-study process.
- **Attend as many Higher Learning Commission meetings and self-study workshops as possible.**
- **It takes eighteen to twenty-four months to do a good self-study.** Ideally, you were appointed self-study coordinator at least a year before that and have had the opportunity to attend a Higher Learning Commission annual meeting and to think about the project before beginning work.
- **Include as much extra time as possible in your self-study time schedule.** There will always be unexpected delays.
- **Write as you go along.** Do not leave all the writing until the end. Some chapters can be drafted early in the self-study process. You will have to update numbers and some other information later, but this is much easier than writing everything at the last minute. Some of our chapters were written using 2000 or 2001 data and then updated in fall 2002.
- **Constantly emphasize to everyone that the self-study must be evaluative, not just descriptive.** Be aware that people writing reports will tend to emphasize strengths and ignore the challenges—other than the challenge of requiring more funding. It is always better for the institution to discuss its challenges than for the visiting team to discover them. If the latter happens, it may suggest that the self-study process was less thorough than desirable. Also, if you present the challenges yourself, you can present them in a "glass is half-full" rather than a "glass is half-empty" manner.
- **Encourage report writers to indicate what is being done or will be done to address the challenges.** Include this in the self-study.
- **What if an important committee, office, or person does not submit a report or chapter when it is requested?** Various tactics are possible, and don't hesitate to use them. As a last resort, I sent reminders with copies to the president and academic vice president. In one case (assessment), I wrote a very inadequate draft and implied that this would be included in the self-study unless the assessment committee revised it. The chair of the committee was also told that, in all probability, the visiting team would be interviewing him. I eventually received an excellent chapter.
- **Communicate, communicate, communicate!**

How Should the Self-Study Be Organized?

- **There is no particular way that is required or that is necessarily best.** The most commonly used approach is to organize it around the five criteria, but this isn't necessary. If you choose some other plan, be certain that you deal with the criteria.

- **Although C-E teams always consider how well the institution fulfills the criteria, typically they do not divide up assignments that way.** Generally, different team members are assigned various organizational units (e.g., student services, finances, library, computer services), so it is useful if every major organizational unit has a section someplace in the self-study. Academic areas are usually divided up so that all team members are responsible for some. Since the team members almost always meet with the chairs and/or other members of departments, it is not necessary to include detailed information about each department in the self-study. My suggestion is to write about schools or divisions within schools and then have departmental reports available in the resource room.

Writing the Self-Study

- **As a newly appointed self-study coordinator, you are not ready to begin writing, but it is not too early to think about how it will be done and by whom.** Sometimes steering committee members are responsible for getting the relevant information from departments and then writing the chapters. In other cases the departments, committees, and so on write reports and then one person (the self-study coordinator or a writer) does the final writing. On my first go around, I used the first method, and the second time I used the other. I preferred the second method. The first method added another group of people with deadlines to meet—or not. Despite the fact that they did not really have much writing to do (they could use large chunks from the committee and department reports), some apparently found this to be too big a burden. With either of these methods and any other that you try, there is an advantage to having one person do a final editing.
- **Provide a style sheet for those who are writing, and use it yourself.** In addition to items such as font size and style, include preferred spellings (e.g., "advisor" or "adviser"), abbreviations that will be used for campus entities, and words that will always be capitalized or not (e.g., "University" but not "college" when referring to a school within the University). For the most part, these are arbitrary decisions, but you should be consistent.
- **Do not include material from other sources, such as the catalog and handbooks, that the team members will receive prior to the visit. On other hand, do not constantly refer the reader of the self-study to important items that are in the resource room but that are not discussed in the self-study.** As a C-E, I do not want to spend most of my on-campus time in the resource room. Also, remember that members of the readers' panel or review committee will not have access to the resource room.
- **Actively look for challenges as well as strengths, and include them in the self-study.** The self-study is not meant to be a public relations document.
- **Watch for inconsistencies in the data.** Data come from multiple sources. They are not always the same from day-to-day, and departments do not always compile statistics in the same way. Pick an official set of numbers, and use them consistently.
- **Spell out all acronyms in the initial presentation in every chapter.** It can become very confusing to C-Es if the acronyms are explained only when they are first used in the self-study. By the end of some self-studies, I have sometimes been lost in a sea of acronyms.
- **Use active language.**
- **Make several back-up copies.** Initially, I had a floppy disk and a Zip disk, stored together in a locked filing cabinet. One day the Zip disk was completely blank. Computer services had no explanation. I then began keeping copies on my hard drive and on three disks, all stored in different places.
- **Update the data.** Do not use data that are a year or two old if you can possibly avoid it. Generally, it is not that difficult to update the data in the self-study.
- **There is no required maximum or minimum length for the self-study.** It is possible to write a self-study in fewer than 200 pages, and, perhaps, this is can be a goal. However, as a C-E, I prefer to have too much rather than not enough information. I do not want to spend my on-campus time in the resource room.
- **Submit relevant sections of initial draft chapters to departments as they are written.** It may be necessary to do this several times. When this has been done, submit the drafts to the steering committee members and to top administrators for their critiques. Do not wait to do this until the entire document is finished. These individuals will feel overwhelmed and may not take the time to read and critique it all.
- **Put the final draft online for internal campus use and critique.** Also place a few hard copies around campus for those who do not like to read from computer monitors or who do not have access to computers.
- **Also put the final version of the self-study online and place some paper copies around campus.** Provide all top administrators, steering committee members, and perhaps board members with their own paper copies.

- **Provide an executive's summary for board members, or refer them to summary chapters in the self-study.** It is unlikely that most of them will have the time to read the entire self-study.

- **Communicate at the end of the process as well as during it.** If any outstanding issues have been raised by the self-study, consider scheduling a campus meeting to discuss them.

Resource Room

At this point in the process, you are not really thinking about the resource room, but you should be. It will make your work easier later on. As you write, keep a list of items that will be in the resource room. As documents come into your office, organize them for the resource room immediately. This will definitely save you work in the future. Unfortunately, this is a case of "do as I say, not as I do." My own system is to "file by pile."

Last Words

Relax. This does not have to be an overwhelming, ulcer-inducing experience. It may even prove to be enjoyable; it was for me (really!). You will learn a tremendous amount about your institution (possibly quite eye-opening if you are a faculty member) and will meet and communicate with many individuals on campus who you may not have previously known. When it is finally over, you will have a tremendous sense of accomplishment. Unlike many university activities, this one not only has an important purpose, but also has tangible results.

Marilyn Nelson Carroll is Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Division of Behavior and Social Sciences at Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Missouri.

On Herding Ducks: Ways to Keep a Big Project Going Without Being the Gunslinger

J. Thomas Howald

Preface

If you are just beginning your institutional self-study, you know that the Higher Learning Commission provides you with lots of supporting materials, including its *Handbook of Accreditation* and *Addendum*. One item in those materials is the "Sample Timeline for the Comprehensive Evaluation Process" (*Handbook*, pp. 137ff.).

At Franklin College of Indiana (private, co-ed, liberal arts, about a thousand students), we have just finished our evaluation process, and, as we are pretty happy with the results, we thought we might share with you an amplified version of the timeline, one that details the steps we took, by which you might choose to pace your own process.

This timeline is included in the handout I have provided, and it is based on a year-and-a-half process. If you have less time, or more time, you can telescope or expand the schedule accordingly. I know of one person who was given the assignment of writing an entire institutional self-study in five months; I hardly recommend that.

This paper presents information on organizational needs, which are to be addressed as early in the process as possible. A schedule for composing the document and a schedule of non-compositional tasks will be provided as handouts. If your self-study proceeds as ours did, you will find that the actual composing of the main document is the proverbial tip of the iceberg in your major chores.

Organizational Needs

A. Institutional Support

1. You will find that your job is significantly simplified if you have institutional support, clearly and forcefully articulated by the *president* or corresponding officer of your institution, with a clear understanding by the *trustees* of your school that this task is important. It will be very much to your advantage if that articulation can come in the form of a letter or other campus-wide announcement, and it certainly helps if that announcement clearly articulates the advantages to your institution of the accreditation process. If the president were to announce that you were about to undertake "a necessary evil," I am sure you would get much less cooperation than if she or he were to announce that you are about to undertake a self-examination that will prepare you to meet your institutional future. What the president says matters. It also matters that the president believes what he or she says and endorses it by actions.
2. Institutional support should also include a budget, with clear understandings about who controls that budget. Early clarity will prevent later misunderstandings.
3. I also recommend dedicated space and dedicated time, namely office space where the project can remain undisturbed, and compensatory time away from other duties so that the coordinator of the self-study can perform his or her function.
4. Finally, institutional support should include the opportunity for you to be at conferences such as the Higher Learning Commission Annual Meeting.

B. Equipment

1. Items we found very useful for our self-study process include "standard" computing software—an integrated word processing, spreadsheet, and database package. "Integrated" is used in two senses here. First, these software packages must be compatible. Second, the materials prepared for your document should be easily integrated into the campus e-mail system, so that the members of the campus community have "integrated" access.

2. Also useful but less crucial, we had a Zip drive, which, because of its enhanced storage, greatly facilitated handling files, editing the document, and so on.

3. We had a scanner, which allowed incorporation of documents not easily digitized, such as materials that had signatures.

4. We established a Web site for the whole campus community, on which we posted the latest versions of chapters as they were composed. The Web site was read-only: Imagine the complications of a hundred simultaneous "editors"! I believe that the Web site was only rarely visited. Many members of the community waited until near the end of the process to involve themselves (if then!). But having the Web site created an atmosphere of openness.

C. **Skilled help.** It is difficult to be very precise about skilled help, because institutions have different needs, different distributions of tasks, and different goals for their self-study. Here is what we found useful.

1. The campus historian. Fortunately, we had good institutional memory, in persons of long tenure, historians who had examined our institution from the point of view of their discipline, and persons who had made a hobby of institutional history.

2. Computer center personnel. The computing needs of this process grew throughout the whole task. We needed people who could understand the organization of the document and get us expertise quickly.

3. The director of institutional research. Invaluable.

4. The self-study committee. We looked for

   a. Demographic variety

   b. Obsessive-compulsive types

   c. A principle writer, since the document needed to "speak with one voice"

   d. A very good editor

   e. We also needed a group that could quickly come to consensus about

      1) Roles—who is secretary, who is in charge, what are expectations

      2) Procedures—how (and by whom) is the online document to be modified, how is the campus to be kept up to date on the process

      3) Strategies—this topic is elaborated in the next section

D. **Strategies.** The following are things we did to keep the project running smoothly.

1. **Inform everyone**—let the whole campus community know that the self-study process is occurring, has institutional endorsement, and that all are expected to cooperate.

2. Update. Frequently let people know what is happening. In particular, keep anyone from whom you might expect data, documents, information, assistance, etc., aware of the process.

3. Provide early warnings about needs. I find it annoying to receive a request for information with an immediate deadline, and I find it annoying (discourteous) even if I have time to provide the materials requested, because it seems to say that "My time is your time" to commandeer. Extend the courtesy to others of letting them know well in advance that you will be needing materials from them. Otherwise, you have created an occasion for them to be dissatisfied with the process, and this may come back to haunt you.

4. Another courtesy involving requests also has to do with timing. Keep a list of what you've requested and from whom so that you don't unnecessarily repeat requests you have already made. People don't like to be nagged.

5. Solicit information institution-wide. This keeps people involved, helps them contribute, and makes them aware of the ongoing process. It leads to a better self-study. Neither the self-study committee nor (certainly) the coordinator of the process knows all the information. So a campus wide request, such as "What are all the sets of professional standards to which we hold ourselves accountable?" will harvest lots of good data that you might never have considered.

6. Make periodic requests about changes that are underway. Our organizational chart of the campus administration changed five or six times during the creation of the self-study process. People involved in such changes are probably very focused on the changes themselves, and may neglect to report them to you.

7. Thank people for their contributions. Inform them that you have incorporated (or at least considered) their suggestions. Cite them publicly for their cooperation. This will build consensus and help maintain a positive attitude through a demanding process.

8. Keep a daily log of tasks performed. This will help keep you energized. It is also useful to remind yourself frequently about how much time remains. These benchmarking tasks will remind you that you **are** making progress, despite what it feels like on Friday nights.

9. Hire a gunslinger. Occasionally it may be necessary to more than remind people of the materials you have repeatedly requested. Making insistence the job of, for example, the academic dean will help protect the process from resentment and help protect you from subsequent car bombings.

E. **Lists.** The task you are undertaking is undeniably complex. You need something to help you keep a clear road map of what you've accomplished and what remains ahead. My preferred method is lists. You may have another approach. Here is a list of lists—the things we tried to keep track of, in order to benchmark our process.

1. Document needs. As soon as we became aware of any item needed for the document, no matter how trivial, no matter how obvious, we logged it, so as not to forget.

2. We kept a list of items awaited—what we had requested, from whom, and when.

3. Chapter status. We logged each chapter when completed. We're bluffing here. No chapter was really absolutely completed until they all were. But we needed to know which chapters were largely done, which needed only editorial changes, which needed more information, which were done, which needed pagination, etc. We wanted never to say, "Oh, yeah, we were gonna do that."

4. Topics to address, as they arise.

5. Tasks to perform, as they occur to you. For example, at some point you'll recognize the need to select someone to print your document. On campus? Kinko's? As soon as you recognize this or any other need, log it.

6. Tasks accomplished. This will help you recognize, when the light at the end of the tunnel turns out to be the headlamp of an oncoming train, that you actually are getting somewhere.

7. Items for your resource room and for your appendices.

8. Contacts you make with the Higher Learning Commission, and the results of same.

9. Items that have to be last-minute. In our case, the organizational chart fell into this category. Because of changing pagination, final versions of the table of contents and the index will no doubt be last-minute items. Trustee membership may also change frequently. What are the items at your institution that are difficult to keep current?

10. Updates you have provided, so that no one can say that they were not informed.

11. Ways to make the document user-friendly. You will not know until far into the process, too far to adapt to it, who your visiting consultant-evaluators are. How can you make the document user-friendly to people you don't know? You might start by making it user-friendly to your whole campus, including students. This will go a long way toward making it usable by the consultant-evaluators. Some examples of user-friendliness include consistent fonts, consistent folio placement, correct internal references (so that if you refer to a chart on page 112, the chart really is on that page), and correct citations for the resource room (so that if you say that a document is to be found in section six of the resource room, it really is there, and is clearly labeled).

F. **Problems.** Oh no, you're not going to have problems; this will run smoothly. Your dean will not resign three months after assigning you the role of self-study coordinator. Your president will not announce his resignation just months before the scheduled visit. Your trustees will not decide to review the announced institutional values just after you've written the appropriate chapter on this topic. Your computer center will not decide one year into the writing that WordPerfect will no longer be supported on campus. No one on your campus will connive to use the review process for his or her institutional political advantage. And everyone on your campus who you'd like to send to the movies while the Higher Learning Commission is visiting will cooperate. Keep a list of problems, big and small, and check them off as you eliminate them. You will eliminate them.

J. Thomas Howald is Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Franklin College in Franklin, Indiana.

Initiating the Self-Study Process: Planning for Success

Thomas Botzman and Carol Canavan

This paper provides practical insights on how to prepare for and successfully manage the self-study process at a small liberal arts college. Examples from Mount Union College's recent experience are related to planning, organizing, and building the self-study. Mount Union's self-study process began in April 2000, and the site visit took place in March 2002.

The self-study process is a learning opportunity for both the self-study chair and the institution. Early preparation for changes that may occur during the self-study process aids in maintaining the focus on evaluation. Examples will be given of how Mount Union College took steps early in the self-study process that kept the team on track over the two-year self-study period. This paper clarifies the role of the self-study chair in developing a comprehensive self-study plan with respect to selecting and organizing the steering committee, establishing a timetable, and communicating progress on the self-study to the campus community.

- ☐ **How are the self-study chairs and steering committee members selected? What are some examples of how to organize the committee?**

Mount Union began preparing for the 2002 visit immediately following the 1992 team visit. Faculty and administration leaders reviewed the concerns of the visiting team and began to study and address them immediately. In particular, it became clear that assessment of student learning would be a major focus of the 2002 visit. The college worked to create a focused structure for assessment activities during the decade.

The co-chairs for the self-study were selected in September 1999, thirty-two months before the site visit and seven months before the kickoff of the self-study. The early selection of the co-chairs provided sufficient time for planning and attendance of the chairs at the Higher Learning Commission Annual Meeting. The chair of the assessment committee was selected as one of the co-chairs for the self-study, guaranteeing that the substantial amount of work on assessment would be highlighted in the final report. The other co-chair was selected from the tenured faculty, reflecting a need for institutional memory in the self-study process.

The steering committee and criterion subcommittees need to represent the various constituencies across campus, including administrators, faculty, staff, students, and trustees. Some will be very familiar with the self-study process. Most, however, will know little about the process and need the chair's support in understanding its importance. The self-study chairs should work to educate the campus about the accreditation process in preparation for selecting the steering committee. In our experience, it is best to seek out members of the campus community who are willing to undertake a specific role in the self-study process.

Each institution will have different structures for the steering committee. Some institutions, especially larger universities, will have large steering committees to coordinate the activities of each of the colleges. At a smaller institution, it may be more pragmatic to have a smaller committee. At Mount Union, we decided to use co-chairs for each of the five accreditation criteria. The self-study co-chairs took responsibility for the introduction, general institutional requirements, and other general tasks. Looking back, this was a good structure for our committee in that each member knew what tasks needed to be done and could easily identify members of the steering committee who had access to needed data.

We also included three at-large members of the steering committee. The vice president of public relations served as a source of institutional history and coordinator of public relations efforts. The chief academic officer helped in recruiting subcommittee members and in general consultation with the working drafts. The third at-large member was the director of institutional research, who served as the chief data consultant and analyst for the committee. This was an effective structure in that each of the at-large steering committee members was able to help all of the criterion subcommittees on an as-needed basis. Another key player was not a member of the steering committee. We were very fortunate that a professor of English volunteered to serve as proofreader for the final drafts. The proofreader, in particular, can greatly reduce the anxiety and time pressure at the stage of final document preparation. Since this job is very time-intensive, it was better, in our opinion, not to assign the proofreader other duties on the steering committee.

Also, this structure helped us adapt to a change in leadership early in the self-study process. Mount Union's long-time president retired soon after the formation of the steering committee. Since the new president was going to be heavily involved in the development of a new strategic plan, he was named a co-chair of the subcommittee examining Criterion 4, institutional ability to accomplish its purposes and strengthen educational effectiveness. Most presidents are not involved in one section of the self-study in this manner. However, given the timing of our activities, this greatly aided in evaluating both the mission and the vision of the college as they related to the strategic planning process.

☐ **How does the self-study chair establish a timetable for the self-study?**

The self-study timeline is constructed to provide adequate time for analysis, reflection, discussion, and a few surprises along the way. It is not uncommon to generate a considerable amount of detail during the self-study that must then be focused on the criteria. This was particularly important because Mount Union College had been successful in most all of its initiatives over the prior decade. The college had experienced substantial growth in the size of the student body and faculty, large increases in private financial support, and notable success in athletics and co-curricular programming. The numerous successes made it relatively easy to describe the college. However, we needed to focus on evaluating the potential for continued success in fulfilling our mission, vision, and educational programs.

The *Handbook of Accreditation*, Second Edition (pp. 137–140) provides a sample timeline. We found this timeline to be very useful in that it was realistic in the sequencing of events for our self-study. As we crossed the milestones on our timeline, the steering committee gained confidence that we were attending to our needs appropriately. For example, we noted that the chapter on assessment was, as expected, the most difficult to draft. We were writing the chapter at the same time as the collective sense of what assessment meant to our campus community changed. To gain additional insights, we asked each faculty member to read a section of the chapter on accomplishing educational purposes (Criterion 3) prior to our faculty conference in August 2001. The faculty members were able to provide copious suggestions on how to improve the chapter. More importantly, several faculty members alerted the steering committee to additional studies and surveys that were not included in the early draft of the chapter. In the end, as a result of this active participation across the faculty, the chapter on accreditation became one of the strengths of the written self-study.

A key consideration in holding to the timeline is to have steering committee members who fully understand the sequence of events in the self-study process. The *Handbook of Accreditation* is an invaluable source of information. The best educational experience, if possible, is to select members of the steering committee early enough so they can attend the Higher Learning Commission Annual Meeting. The team will begin to work informally at the meeting and will be able to learn from others how to successfully orchestrate the self-study.

☐ **When should key milestones be accomplished, and how should the milestones be communicated to the campus community?**

It is best to begin the process of informing the campus community about the self-study immediately upon naming the chair. The president and the vice presidents can be effective in highlighting the importance of the self-study. We also developed a comprehensive plan for the self-study and provided it to faculty and staff very early in the self-study process. The plan contained our self-study mission, a list of committee members, the timeline, and a detailed list of the items to be covered in the self-study. The plan was instrumental in gaining support from the campus community in that they could see what we were doing and why we were doing it. Most importantly, the campus community could focus on the site visit as a time when we could celebrate our many successes over the past decade and prepare for success down the road.

The self-study steering committee met periodically so committee members could give progress reports on their areas of responsibility. This helped in facilitating adherence to our timeline. The meetings also identified the areas where we would need to look for more data or, more importantly, clarify how to analyze and evaluate the data that had been collected. The steering committee meetings were particularly useful in helping the subcommittee chairs find alternative sources of data, particularly with respect to assessment of student learning.

We made extensive use of an internal Web location to archive and distribute information, including chapter drafts, to the committee. Committee members were encouraged to make suggestions on the content, reserving corrections of grammar and punctuation for the later drafts. The discussion of content of each section aided in cutting out those portions of the self-study that were redundant. The resulting final product was then both shorter and clearer than the earlier draft documents.

The self-study chair will need to build familiarity with sources of data early in the self-study process, resulting in a process that focuses on evaluation of the institution. Several offices on campus, such as business affairs and institutional research, will be able to provide detailed data needed for the teams working on accreditation criteria. The chairs can begin to build materials for the resource room from the beginning. The committee will be aided by the creation of a master list of documents showing the source and the location where each can be accessed. Electronic documents are particularly useful if they are archived in a "virtual resource room" that can be accessed by all committee members.

We also paid particular attention to the materials for the resource room to be used during the site visit. Following the list of required materials in the *Handbook of Accreditation*, Second Edition (p. 143), we assembled a list of documents that fit in each category and gave it to the visiting consultant-evaluators. This reduced the need for the visitors to hunt for information, and also provided them with assurance that we had the required documentation prepared.

As the self-study progressed, we posted announcements of milestones on the Web site. When the final draft was prepared, we posted the entire study on the Web. To save resources, the final post was broken into the constituent chapters so those printed versions would be shorter. In the end, we found that it was reassuring to both the steering committee and the campus community to have frequent announcements of progress. As a result, we sensed that the entire campus community had an opportunity to have input into the self-study.

Thomas Botzman is Professor of Economics and Business Administration at Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio, and is currently an American Council on Education Fellow at St. Mary's College of Maryland.

Carol Canavan is Assistant to the Dean of the College at Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio.

Self-Study in a Small, Single-Purpose Institution

Kay Luft

Background

Saint Luke's College, a single-purpose, upper-division institution of higher education, awards the bachelor of science in nursing degree. The college is affiliated with Saint Luke's Hospital of Kansas City, and together they are part of a large health system that includes other hospitals, clinics, home health services, and related ventures. Saint Luke's College currently has 120 nursing students and admits 55 to 60 students every fall semester.

Throughout the self-study process for our NCA site visit in fall 1998, faculty members at Saint Luke's College maintained their usual teaching, advising, and committee responsibilities. Two full-time faculty members served as NCA co-coordinators, while several other faculty members served as task force members. As a small college with limited human and financial resources, it was not possible to offer additional time or monies to committee members. However, our hard work was rewarded when we received continued accreditation with the next comprehensive evaluation in ten years. In addition, Saint Luke's College was commended by our site visitors for the evaluative manner in which our self-study report was written.

Planning the Self-Study

☐ **Identify Your Resources**

- ◇ **Human.** Identifying available human resources is an important first step in the planning process. Once the task force members are identified, responsibilities can be delegated to individuals with special skills or knowledge related to the tasks. For instance, your financial aid officer should be a member of the team, since he or she can effectively address the financial aid resources available to students. We found that having two people share the task of coordinating the self-study process lessened the stress on both individuals, who were already carrying full-time responsibilities.
    - Co-coordinators
    - Team members (faculty, student services staff, registrar, etc.)
    - Dean
    - Students
    - NCA staff liaison
    - Secretarial staff
    - Alumni
    - Community members
- ◇ **Technological.** Conducting a successful self-study report and site visit would have been very difficult without adequate technology and equipment. Technological support greatly enhanced the capabilities of team members and helped them complete their tasks in an efficient and timely manner. In addition, access to an individual with special technological skills was invaluable, and in this manner human resources interfaced with technological support. Technology utilized in the self-study process included
    - Computers for writing, storing, and retrieving data, and producing graphic designs
    - Email, fax machine, and Internet access for communication
    - Binding machine

◇ **Financial.** Other than monies used to send the co-coordinators to two Higher Learning Commission Annual Meetings and for producing hard copies of the self-study report, there were essentially no major expenses incurred. In retrospect, we could have better anticipated financial needs to support the self-study and site visit. For instance, we should have budgeted funds for more editorial and secretarial assistance and some compensation for those faculty members who gave many hours of non-contract time to produce the self-study report.

- Annual budget
- St. Luke's Hospital Foundation

☐ **Develop and Stick to Your Timeline**

- Start early. Allow yourself plenty of time—at least two years before the visit, if possible.
- Take advantage of networking opportunities at the Higher Learning Commission meeting. Plan to attend the self-study fair. Consider purchasing sample self-study reports.
- Make your timeline work for you. Take into consideration team members' individual schedules, the institution's planned break times, and deadlines for assignments set by the Higher Learning Commission.
- Allow buffer time. Expect the unexpected!

Conducting the Self-Study

☐ **Gathering/Organizing Data**

- Match assignments to the special skills and knowledge of your team members.
- Utilize the Higher Learning Commission criteria as a framework for delegating tasks and organizing information.
- Make your institution's assessment plan work for you. This was our most valuable tool for retrieving data necessary for the report.

☐ **Writing the Report**

- Select one writer in order to maintain consistency and flow.
- If funds are limited, utilize your coordinators as editors.
- Make certain that data presented in the self-study report contain evaluation.
- Take advantage of the opportunity to have the Higher Learning Commission staff liaison preview your self-study report draft. Heed her or his recommendations!

Orchestrating the Site Visit

☐ **Getting Ready**

- Identify documents that will be needed in the resource room as the self-study report is written. Don't wait until the last minute.
- Assign an individual with a special talent for organizing and an eye for detail to be in charge of the resource room.
- Clarify who will make arrangements for air travel, hotel, and ground transportation.
- Prepare staff, faculty, and students for the site visit. Be creative, but informative!

☐ **Comfort Measures: Remember Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

- Anticipate the comfort and work needs of your site visitors. Clarify what supplies and equipment will be needed, such as telephones, computer outlets, and fax machines.
- Provide adequate workspace in a well-lighted and comfortable area.
- Provide refreshments for the site visitors.
- Assign a contact person from the task force to be available if additional items or resources are requested. Make sure faculty members are accessible.

- [ ] **Survival Skills for the Site Visit**

  - Relax! If you are well-prepared and well-informed, the visitors will recognize this.
  - Support each other. Debriefing periods allow for release of stress throughout the visit.
  - Let the visitors get to know you. Impress them with what you have accomplished as a small institution with limited resources.
  - Be honest, not evasive.
  - If your report is complete, the site visitors will primarily be looking for confirmation. Ensure that what they see at your institution is congruent with what you have described in your report.

Challenges: The Pros and Cons of Being a Small Institution Striving for Successful Accreditation

- [ ] **Pros**

  - There was ready access to the people in our department and institution.
  - The co-coordinator approach worked well.
  - The co-coordinators communicated with the NCA staff liaison when there were questions and had her review a draft of the report before it was finalized. The staff liaison was very helpful.
  - Writing our own self-study report greatly enhanced our knowledge of what the self-study report included.
  - The achievement of continued accreditation with the next review in ten years was widely celebrated. All faculty and staff experienced a sense of personal accomplishment.

- [ ] **Cons**

  - The time involved in the self-study and preparing for the site visit was added to a full teaching load. This made for a stressful two years.
  - Planning meetings for times when all task force members were able to attend was a challenge in itself!
  - Many extra hours were needed to complete the final steps of the self-study process and site visit preparations.

Kay Luft is an Assistant Professor of Nursing at Saint Luke's College in Kansas City, Missouri.

The Importance of Being Earnest and *The Color Purple*: Purpose and Structure in the Self-Study Process

Michael L. Banks, Jacqueline Gray, and Karen Jones

Introduction

Oscar Wilde's 1895 masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, carries the subtitle, "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People." Those who find themselves in the midst of preparations for a visiting team from the Higher Learning Commission are serious people indeed, and we offer our comments in the sincere, earnest, hope that a little trivial comedy will be instructive in the months leading up to the site visit.

Wilde's first act includes an exchange in which Algernon discovers that his friend Jack has another identity—he is known as "Ernest in town and Jack in the country." Colleges and universities often act the same way, presenting a kind of dual identity whereby there is the college as it really is and the college as it ought to be—at least, as well-intentioned individuals believe the consultant-evaluators think that it ought to be. Institutions may be tempted to dress up as one thing and go back to being another after the accreditation process is completed.

But, just as Jack Worthing discovers the true meaning of the importance of being earnest in Wilde's final act, we at St. Charles Community College (SCC) discovered that an open, "earnest" process, in which every member of our community was engaged and invested in the self-study, was what the evaluators hoped to find, and that the self-study report produced by that process continues to be useful to our institution, now that the visit has come and gone. As described in our *self-study plan*, "The focus of this study will be a comprehensive examination of the institution within the context of its stated mission, as well as the guidelines established by the NCA, in the interest of achieving a shared vision for the next ten years." The fruition of the study is most gratifying.

We found that it is one thing to talk about the importance of being earnest and quite another to be—to really be—earnest. But the structure that had been carefully laid out supported our efforts in the year leading up to the visit.

So much for *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Why, then, *The Color Purple*? Late in Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning epistolary novel, Celie complains in a letter to her sister Nettie that she has been so busy that she has failed to notice important things around her:

> Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple
> (where it come from?). Not the little wildflowers. Nothing. (Walker, 1982, p. 179)

We chose purple, or NCA lavender as it came to be called, as the paper color for all Higher Learning Commission-related correspondence on campus, hoping that our messages and notices would get some level of special handling in the paper storm we all move through. We knew that the idea was taking hold when the steering committee member responsible for the chapter on physical resources, a rather distinguished science professor, showed up at one of our meetings wearing a purple shirt!

Maintaining a clear sense of purpose and keeping the process structured helped a great deal as we moved into the final year of preparation between summer 2001 and March 2002. For self-study co-chairs, this is the time when the loose ends have to be pulled together, and the responsibility for the finished product—the self-study report—rests squarely on their shoulders.

Our goal was to prepare a preliminary draft of the report by August 2001, with a final draft ready for publication by the end of the semester. The final deadline for publication of the self-study report was mid-January 2002 in order to meet the Higher Learning Commission's six-weeks-prior-to-the-visit deadline.

Writing the Chapters: Style, Form, and "Voice of the College"

We found that matters of style and form could be addressed by looking at examples of self-study reports from other colleges as well as by examining more advanced drafts from other sections of our own document, but, needless to say, shaping semi-formal report chapters from subcommittee reports has the potential for tension and drama. We found that much of this could be dispelled by asking that comments and observations be translated into what came to be known as the "Voice of the College."

The self-study report was structured by functional area within the Higher Learning Commission's five criteria, and the subcommittees were purposely assigned to research, analyze, and report on a functional area in which they did not work and with which they were not necessarily familiar. This was done to maintain some level of objectivity in evaluating all of the areas of the college. As the reports came back from the subcommittees, we had the task of shaping them into chapters, and here we were faced with a critical decision: whether to rewrite the work ourselves, to allow area leaders—administrators in charge of specific areas—to rework the reports, or to engage in a lengthy and earnest exchange with steering committee members as they moved their reports toward the form they would assume in the final self-study document. With the approval of the college president, who had worked as a consultant-evaluator, we chose the latter—allowing a measure of autonomy for steering committee members and their subcommittees.

Sorting Through the Data: Charts, Graphs, and Narrative

Any self-study process produces more data than can possibly be included in the final report. We were fortunate to have members of the office of institutional research on the steering committee to serve as a resource to all other subcommittees. Keeping in mind the Higher Learning Commission's desire for the self-study to be more than just a collection of charts, graphs, and tables, we were careful to ensure that the data fully supported and clarified the narrative analysis. Balancing the descriptive and evaluative narrative was a challenge, but one that was accomplished, as noted by both the Higher Learning Commission liaison and the visiting team members, who indicated that the report was one of the most evaluative they had ever reviewed.

Collaborative Input: Steering Committee, Faculty, Staff, Administrators, and Board

While the co-chairs did an enormous amount of writing, rewriting, and editing, a large and very important part of our work was in meeting with individuals and groups to discuss the self-study document, reminding all college employees and students that their participation was essential in making the project work. It was gratifying to talk with staff members who spoke proudly of having drafted sections of the report. Functional area chapter drafts moved from subcommittees to vice presidents or directors in charge of the area being evaluated throughout most of the fall 2001 term, with final drafts edited by the co-chairs. The involvement of the college president was also important in the collaborative process at this point.

Throughout the two-year self-study process, we also made regular visits to the board to keep them informed of the project status and ongoing communication with the Higher Learning Commission. We met regularly with the college president as well.

Academic Program and Institutional Assessment

Since academic program and institutional assessment are key to any institutional self-study, we relied on the skill of the faculty director of the college's academic assessment program to pull the final draft of this section together. As academic assessment at SCC had been embedded in the general education program and courses as of fall 1998, this discussion was included in the educational programs chapter of the report.

Serving as a collaborative model for the earnest approach to the self-study, SCC's academic assessment program had been restructured in 1998 to be a more effective, faculty-driven process that actually produced usable data and had a direct impact on curriculum and learning at the college. In fall 1998, assessment was turned over to faculty. A faculty task force with members from all of the academic divisions of the college began by engaging the entire faculty in a dialogue. The campus curriculum committee had just reviewed the general education requirements for the AA transfer degree. As a part of that review, the committee had developed a goal statement for general education and for each category of general education. During AY 1998–1999, faculty began reviewing and revising the general education assessment process, using the general education philosophy and goals recommended by the curriculum committee in spring 1998.

Each of the areas represented in general education created a locally developed assessment project with a goal of improving coherence in curricula and student learning. Assessment projects were developed in writing, speech, humanities, social science, science, mathematics, and computer literacy.

The broader category of institutional assessment was covered in a separate chapter. Through the efforts of the college's office of institutional research, we have developed a college-wide program of assessment using a performance indicator approach that allows us to look at all functional areas of the college in terms of key indicators of successful performance. The academic assessment program produces data and analysis that serve as one of the performance indicators of the broader college-wide program.

Working with the Higher Learning Commission Staff Liaison

Our decision to sponsor a campus visit with the Higher Learning Commission staff liaison during the first year of the self-study process proved to be a good one. Steering committee members were empowered by the exchange with him. He provided helpful feedback to the committee early in the self-study process, and as co-chairs we became increasingly comfortable in communicating with him after his visit. When he reviewed a late draft of the document in November 2001, we were grateful for his careful reading and the lengthy telephone conference with the co-chairs and college president, during which he reviewed strengths and weaknesses of the draft.

Compromise, Editing, and Rewriting

Compromise in drafting the Constitution—isn't that what gave us the Civil War? Fortunately, we didn't have one, and, on reflection, the structure is what prevented it. The twelve members of the steering committee had been carefully chosen—four administrators, four staff members, and four faculty members—to represent the college, and we co-chairs each worked closely with six of them through the editing process. The tension, of course, came when area supervisors read the drafts of subcommittee reports, which had been prepared, intentionally, by individuals outside their area of expertise.

Steering committee members and their subcommittees had taken us at our word and set about, in earnest, to evaluate the college and prepare reports with an eye to our growth and development over the next ten years. In the process, they were able to document many positive developments on campus since the previous accreditation visit, and some of what they found pointed to, and even underscored, room for improvement.

Even with careful discussion during the drafting stage and a commitment to the process from college officers, the frank unpolished verbiage of the first compilation of reports was difficult, even alarming, for some. The distribution and subsequent discussion of that draft became the most critical point in preserving the open process we had established. But our commitment to the process prevailed, and it allowed us to reassure concerned individuals and make progress even at this most vulnerable stage.

As revision continued, drafts were made available to staff, faculty, and administrators at several stages and were available on the college's home page as well. We received numerous suggestions, both general and specific, which was evidence of a wide and growing campus involvement and interest in the process.

In the final weeks before the holiday break, with the printing deadline looming, we worked day and night to produce a finished text. For some area supervisors, the scrutiny inherent in the self-study process was very difficult. Late in the process, one well-meaning vice president offered a completely new chapter describing his work area. Saying no to a vice president while juggling the proofreading of three hundred pages and sifting through suggestions offered by dozens of caring readers—these are just a few of the things to expect when conducting a self-study that is genuinely open.

Publishing the Self-Study Report

At SCC we are fortunate to have an in-house graphics and publications office, which made the final production and publication of the self-study report easier. While we did contract out the final printing, we were able to work with the form and format on an in-house basis to get the report the way we wanted before sending it off for printing. Working with our marketing and purchasing departments on the details of the final product provided an additional opportunity to engage more college community members at a higher level.

Working with suggestions from the academic vice-president (a consultant-evaluator) and impressive examples of final reports from previous NCA meetings, we chose a format that made the report manageable and easy to read. The final report, including appendices, was just under three hundred pages as recommended, and readers had ample space for taking notes on the pages. Supporting charts and graphs were worked into the body of the document. The appendices were kept minimal, containing the General Institutional Requirements (GIRs) and only a few other basic supporting documents. The remaining documents were referenced alphabetically in the text and made easily accessible in the resource room for the site visit. We also decided to go with a spiral binding and chapter tabs (in purple, of course) to make reading and working with the report as easy as possible for the visiting team members whether they were on the plane, in the hotel room, or at their desks.

Keeping the College Community Informed

After final printing, we quickly distributed copies of the document throughout the campus and followed up with a series of visits to every work area, where we discussed the document and the forthcoming visit with campus employees. For these meetings, we produced a ten-page (purple) handout that covered the basics of what to expect when the visiting team was on campus. We used the opportunity to focus the college community on the findings of the self-study and to respond to questions about the overall process. With the cooperation of key administrators, these meetings were given priority, which proved to be critical in the level of campus-wide investment and understanding that we were able to achieve and maintain. As we worked through this stage of the process, we were impressed with the level of college involvement and interest in the self-study. That they were actually reading the report was evident in the informed level of discussion during the meetings.

The third party comment requirement was addressed in a couple of different ways. The college received good press coverage about the accreditation process and site visit, reinforced by a series of press releases and advertisements in local newspapers. The drafts of the self-study were also published on the college's Web site, which provided easy access for faculty, staff, students, and the wider community.

Preparing for the Team Visit

The final stages of preparation for the team visit are always chaotic, but, once again, structure and coordination paid off as we made the final arrangements and worked to set up the resource room. It was tempting to send a few, shall we say, rather freethinking college employees off for some professional development during the visit, but we had, after all, made that promise about being in earnest.

We used the college's board room for the team resource room since it provided ample workspace and easy access to top administrators. Coordinating and sorting through all of the documents and data that had been collected during the two-year self-study process was assigned back to the steering committee members. This process was made easier, however, because of some coordination and thought at the beginning of the self-study. As steering committee members began their tasks of evaluating all functional areas of the college, each subcommittee was provided with a file crate to serve as the repository for all of the data and supporting materials they produced. Therefore, at this final stage of resource room preparation, it was a fairly simple task for each subcommittee chair to work back through the collected data and organize the file crate according to how the exhibits were referenced in the final edition of the self-study report. These crates were then transferred to the resource room and labeled appropriately by chapter. The additional required resource room materials indicated in the *Handbook of Accreditation* were also clearly organized and labeled for easy access by the team. More than once during the visit, members of the team commented on how appreciative they were that supporting data for the report and the college were so readily accessible.

Regular communication with team chair was also important during these final weeks of preparation prior to the visit. The self-study coordinator assumed this responsibility and worked with the team chair via telephone and e-mail to finalize team members' travel plans and hotel reservations, and preliminary meeting schedules with various offices and groups of college personnel and students. The co-chairs also took responsibility for meeting team members at the airport and provided multiple ways for them to contact us.

Conclusion

The result of the careful preparation and the earnest approach to the self-study process at SCC was what we hoped for—continued accreditation with the next comprehensive evaluation in ten years and one progress report due on strategic planning. In addition, the open process also achieved the other purpose, producing a self-study that will serve the college well in achieving a shared vision for the next ten years. While it is often the practice of institutions to shelve the self-study report once reaccreditation is achieved, we have found the report useful in informing several new initiatives since the visit, specifically as we work to improve our strategic planning process.

Particular strengths that were cited by the visiting team in the final report point to the success of this structured and earnest approach to reaccreditation. The team report indicates that "Major strengths of the institution are the professional qualifications and student centered attitudes of the faculty, staff, auxiliary staff, administrators, and trustees" (p. 25). SCC's academic assessment program was also cited as one of our strengths: "The college continues to make progress on assessing student academic achievement as evidenced not only in the documentation found in the Assessment Manual and the Annual Assessment report, but also by faculty and administrators who are conversant about assessment and understand the meaning, goals, characteristics, and value of the assessment program" (p. 25).

When the days of the visit finally came, we felt ready. Bows (purple, of course) had been tied on baskets full of welcoming gifts for the consultant-evaluators. Hotel reservations had been confirmed, and there was an unusual late-spring snow that landed one team member in a ditch. Did it delay his coming? No, he cancelled altogether; but we survived. The team took it in stride and reassigned the areas he was to have evaluated to other team members. Halfway through the visit—of course, we couldn't know what the result would be, but we did know that we'd been successful in conducting an open process with a high level of investment—a recently hired custodian stopped one of us in a hallway and asked, "How do you think we're doing?" Was it the color purple that had gotten her attention, or was she moved by the importance of being earnest? Some of each, perhaps.

References

DeCabooter, Arthur, et al. 2002. Report of a visit to St. Charles Community College. Chicago: The Higher Learning Commission.

Walker, Alice. 1982. *The color purple.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Wilde, Oscar. 1999. *The importance of being earnest.* In David Damrosch, ed., The Longman anthology of British literature. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.

Michael L. Banks is Dean of Arts and Humanities at St. Charles Community College in St. Peters, Missouri.

Jacqueline Gray is an Associate Professor of English at St. Charles Community College in St. Peters, Missouri.

Karen Jones is a Professor of English and Department Chair at St. Charles Community College in St. Peters, Missouri.

Only 120 Days Remain, and the Clock Is Ticking!

Dunn T. Faires

Introduction

At least every ten years, all member institutions accredited by the Higher Learning Commission must undergo a comprehensive site visit to renew their accreditation. Essentially, all institutions follow the procedures outlined in the Commission's *Handbook of Accreditation* when preparing for the visit. One aspect of the process that is left to participating institutions is the coordination of the visiting team's itinerary. This presentation will provide institutions preparing for a comprehensive site visit with an overview of the activities that Northeastern State University in Oklahoma used to help the consultant-evaluators utilize their time effectively and efficiently. The activities related to

- Communication
- Travel arrangements and accommodations
- Logistics and time constraints
- On-site arrangements
- Preparing the university community
- Proactive contingency planning for last-minute changes

Background

Northeastern State University, a public, regional, multi-campus institution located in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, and with campuses in Broken Arrow and Muskogee, underwent a comprehensive site visit in February 2002. A seven-member team visited the university for two-and-a-half days and, following a thorough review, recommended that the university be granted continued accreditation with the next comprehensive evaluation in ten years. A follow-up report on the level of state funding of the institution on an annualized basis is to be filed with the Higher Learning Commission in 2007. While the comprehensive self-study effectively showcased the work of the university, many of the activities associated with the development of the consultant-evaluators' on-campus itinerary were not identified in the report. The institution took very seriously the development of an itinerary with specific daily activities that would maximize the opportunity to showcase the three campuses and our constituents. The successful implementation of these activities helped ensure not only that the consultant-evaluators' time on campus was used effectively and efficiently, but also that they had a gratifying experience.

Communication

Communication is perhaps the most important activity that institutions need to address. All members of the university community must be well informed about the site visit. It is extremely helpful to the community if a thumbnail biographical sketch and photograph of each consultant-evaluator are made available in a quick-print booklet format. The cost of producing such a document is minimal, and the return on investment is immeasurable. The biographical data and photos were also placed in the self-study section of the institution Web site. The self-study coordinator at Northeastern State University ensured that the faculty, staff, and students on all three campuses were informed about the site visit by giving presentations and disseminating information to the administrative council, the council of academic administrators, the dean's council, the chair's council, the university's various colleges and departments, the student association, the inter-fraternity council, and community groups.

Beginning in August 1999, the campus newspaper published two student articles each semester reporting on the progress and status of the self-study and related accreditation activities. During the thirty days immediately preceding the site visit, an article was published each week in an attempt to keep everyone focused on the importance of continued accreditation to the university and its students and the role of the consultant-evaluators who would conduct the site visit.

Solicit and prepare for third-party comment. This responsibility falls to the self-study coordinator who will work with the institution's public information officer in preparing and placing the necessary ads in local papers. Adhere to the time frame prescribed by the Commission. Plan for dissemination of the self-study report. Making printed copies available in offices across campus as well as placing the report in the self-study section on the institution's Web site provides access to individuals, education partners, and stakeholders beyond the campus. Members of the campus community need to know what is in the report before the evaluation team arrives. Prepare and disseminate an executive summary of the self-study report to encourage those individuals unwilling to read the entire self-study to at least be familiar with the strengths, challenges, action plans, and recommendations outlined in the complete report.

During the ninety days preceding the team's visit, continuous contact with the team chair was essential. The methods used to communicate with the team chair and his administrative assistant included telephone calls, written correspondence, email messages, faxes, and teleconferencing. A positive, professional working relationship between the self-study coordinator and the team chair was established. Regular contact was also maintained with the institution's Commission staff liaison and proved invaluable in assisting with problems, concerns, and unexpected last-minute changes.

Travel Arrangements and Accommodations

It is important for the self-study coordinator to assist the team in securing accommodations that are convenient and secure, and provide a comfortable environment. The Higher Learning Commission is responsible for all team members' expenses on a cost-plus basis. NSU provided transportation from Tulsa International Airport to the hotel in Tahlequah, approximately seventy miles. Only two team members arrived within a few minutes of each other and could be transported together. The others were transported individually as soon as they arrived and claimed their baggage. Each trip from Tulsa included a driving tour of the Broken Arrow and Muskogee campuses. Return transportation was also provided. To ensure that the team members had all the things they needed to fulfill their responsibilities, a meeting room was reserved at the hotel. Each consultant-evaluator was provided with a notebook computer for use during the site visit. They were notified in advance this equipment would be provided, thereby eliminating the need to transport their own computers unless they chose to do so. Each consultant-evaluator was contacted for his or her preference of a smoking or nonsmoking room and any special accommodation needs or dietary requirements. A welcome basket, snack food, and beverages were also provided, and replenished daily, in each team member's suite as well as the hotel meeting room.

The team began arriving on Sunday morning and left at noon on the following Wednesday. On Sunday evening, a formal dinner was hosted at the president's home. Invitees included the university officers, the chancellor and executive vice chancellor representing the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, the chairwoman of the Board of Regents of Oklahoma Colleges, and the eighteen-member self-study steering committee. Cocktails and hors d'oeuvres were served in the family room before dinner, which was a great way for the team members to gain familiarity with members of the college community in an informal manner. Since no suitable restaurants in Tahlequah were open on Sunday night, the team chair agreed to attend the gathering hosted by the university president and first lady, but only after being assured it would conclude by 8:30 P.M. Be sure to check with the team chair before scheduling a social event on the evening the team arrives.

In an attempt to aid the team in identifying key personnel on each of the three campuses, a quick-print handbook (*Who's Who at NSU*) was included in a folder of materials placed in team members' suites prior to arrival. The handbook provided the name, the title, and a photo of each individual. The folder also contained letters of welcome from the self-study coordinator, the Tahlequah mayor, and the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, as well as a guest pass to the NSU fitness center.

Logistics and Time Constraints

Developing a schedule that affords the flexibility and structure essential to a successful site visit is a challenge and often a delicate balancing act. The team will need time to peruse the materials in the document room and meet with various individuals they identify at the beginning of each day. In order to provide the necessary flexibility while making the greatest use of every hour, the team would be on campus, and, with the approval of the team chair, working breakfasts and luncheons were organized on Monday and Tuesday. The team met with the university's three executive officers for breakfast on Monday. Immediately following breakfast, one team member was transported to the Broken Arrow and Muskogee campuses. The remainder of the team met with various individuals or worked in the document room. The team had a working luncheon with business, community, and education leaders and partners from throughout the region. On Tuesday, the team had a working breakfast with the current officers and four past presidents of the NSU faculty association and a private working luncheon with the chairwoman of the Board of Regents of Oklahoma Colleges. At each of the working luncheons, the self-study coordinator was in the room only long enough to make the necessary introductions and welcoming remarks. To encourage open dialogue, no university personnel attended these functions.

On-Site Arrangements

The university decided to designate an existing academic affairs conference room as the resource room. The room was in serious need of being remodeled and updated. It was felt that perhaps there would be no better time for such a project. The old furniture was transferred to an academic department, and the room was stripped to the bare walls and floor. Additional computer network and telecommunication connections were installed. New wall and floor covering color selections were made. The existing lighting was upgraded, and the climate control system enhanced. New modular furniture was selected and ordered. Modular conference room furniture was chosen to permit easy reconfiguration of the room following the site visit.

The resource room was reserved for the exclusive use of the team during the visit. The room was secure while the team was on campus. A secretary and the university archivist were sworn to strict confidentiality and were available to provide support to the team as needed. The room was equipped with a telephone, fax machine, networked high-speed laser printer, seven networked computers, a full complement of office supplies and equipment, university materials (e.g., catalogs, program brochures, class schedules, discipline-specific accreditation reports), and five ranges of shelving for the self-study documents and supporting documentation. Refreshments were provided in the room throughout the day.

The self-study office, located adjacent to the resource room, was used by students, faculty, and staff who had been identified to serve as courtesy corps members during the visit. Their primary purpose was to assist the team members. Some of the activities assumed by the volunteers were escorting team members to meeting rooms and offices and driving them to off-campus locations. Comments from the team members indicated that they genuinely appreciated the extra accommodations the university provided.

Preparing the University Community

The entire university community must be fully aware of the importance of the site visit and know what to anticipate when the team arrives on campus. It is imperative for all involved with the university to be up-to-date on the role and responsibilities of the team. When all university constituents understand that the team is on campus to validate the findings reported in the self-study and to determine whether the action plans and recommendations in conjunction with the challenges identified in the self-study are congruent with the goals of the institution as identified in the university's strategic plan, the visit should go smoothly.

From April 1999 when I was appointed by the president to serve as self-study coordinator and chair of the steering committee, the self-study project was regularly cited as the institution's highest priority. The project was marketed to the university community as an absolutely essential activity, the commitment to and backing of which was unquestioned. Mementos consisting of a screen-printed plastic tumbler, a custom printed sticky-note pad, and an imprinted pencil were designed, produced, and distributed to all university employees. The self-study coordinator distributed mementos to the officers, senators, and representatives of the Northeastern student association during its regular meeting four days prior to the visit.

Eighteen days prior to the visit, the staff was encouraged to attend one of four meetings to receive a final update about the site visit. After consulting with staff supervisors, these meetings were scheduled near morning and afternoon break times, and refreshments were served. The need for professional decorum in all meetings with the team was stressed repeatedly. When the team arrived, the campus was energized. Faculty, staff, students, community and business leaders, and education partners were fully aware of the visit and the responsibility each had to assume to ensure a successful outcome. The open meetings for faculty, staff, and students were well attended. More than 350 students attended the open meeting for students. Following the meeting, a reception with refreshments was hosted by the Northeastern student association, thereby enabling the consultant-evaluators and students to have additional informal dialogue.

Proactive Contingency Planning for Last-Minute Changes

Prepare all the stakeholders (faculty, students, staff, administration, alumni, foundation officers and contributors, community members, business leaders, and education partners) for the evaluation team's visit. Your goal is to have no surprises. If something doesn't proceed as initially planned or if meetings run longer than planned, you must be sufficiently resilient and flexible to accommodate the variation without letting it show externally. During the ninety days prior to the site visit and during the visit, the self-study coordinator would benefit by being provided with a cellular phone. Make certain it is programmed with the appropriate office and cellular numbers for all key personnel you may need to contact on a moment's notice. At times it was annoying to be interrupted—even when it was the president calling; however the cell phone was a communication tool that saved thousands of steps.

Formulate an action plan, test the plan, revise the plan, and continue testing and revising the plan until you have identified contingencies for almost any unplanned event that might occur during the team's visit. Contingencies should include plans if medical emergencies interfere with your or other's ability to perform a task. If it should happen, who steps in, and will that person be adequately prepared and equipped to take over? Insist that all site visit logistics be coordinated through the self-study project office, and work closely with your staff so they know when, and when not, to get you involved.

Summary

When the consultant-evaluators depart the campus, most steering committee members find great satisfaction in completion of such a mammoth project. The activity has its own rewards. You will have learned much about your institution that you never knew before, and you will have had the opportunity to work closely with individuals far outside your regular circle of colleagues and friends. The solid satisfaction of doing a task well is commensurate with the quality and depth of strategic and logistical planning given the project. When done well, the self-study document that your hard work has created will serve as a guide for your institution in the next few years. The action plans and recommendations contained in your self-study report will provide direction for the future course of your institution. Thus, the process comes full circle, and the ticking clock is reset.

Dunn T. Faires is Professor of Industry at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

Preparing Trustees, Faculty, Staff, and Students for the Team Visit

David McFadden and Mary Lahman

Drawing upon our experiences as co-coordinators of a participatory self-study process, we will share how we created a variety of opportunities for constituents to become familiar with the findings of the self-study process and to be prepared for the team visit. Specifically, we will discuss the format of the presentations and small group activities developed for board and faculty workshops, in addition to a convocation presented to staff and students.

This paper focuses upon how to encourage more trustees, faculty, staff, and students to grapple with the results of the self-study process and take ownership of the strengths, challenges, and action steps outlined in the self-study report. We anticipate that our thoughts will serve as a catalyst for envisioning activities on your campuses that will help your community look forward to learning from the expertise of the consultant-evaluators during your team visit.

Background

In fall 2000, two years before the anticipated team visit, we established a steering committee and selected twenty-five people, representing a variety of constituencies, to fill five task groups. Each task group corresponded to one of the five Higher Learning Commission criteria and consisted of five members: a coordinator, a writer, a data collector, and two additional members. By spring 2001 each task group identified relevant indicators for its individual criterion, gathered initial data, identified gaps in the data, and submitted requests for additional data.

Working with units across campus during summer 2001, we secured additional data for the task groups so that they could begin organizing material and composing rough drafts of their findings in fall 2001. In January 2002 we began a synthesis of material to compose a self-study draft. Writing continued through April 2002, when the draft was made available to the task groups and the larger community for comment. During this time, we identified a number of ways to involve constituents so that they could intentionally discuss the preliminary findings of the self-study process and take ownership of the strengths and challenges that related to them.

Preparing Trustees and Faculty for the Team Visit

Throughout the self-study process, faculty and trustees were briefed on accreditation, the self-study process, and central elements of the assessment plan during their regularly scheduled meetings. During a June 2002 retreat, trustees reviewed key sections of the self-study draft with particular attention to the conclusions regarding the board itself. In August, during its fall workshop, the faculty did the same. Moreover, Cecilia López, staff liaison with the Higher Learning Commission, enlightened the faculty about what to expect from the team visit and the new team report, stressing the importance of the advancement section for more detailed expertise from the team members.

The objectives of these workshops were twofold: to familiarize the trustees and faculty with the key conclusions of the self- study, including the conclusions regarding the trustees and faculty themselves, and to gather trustee and faculty input about institutional strengths and challenges as part of the self-study process. Moreover, some of the insights gathered at these workshops could be incorporated into the final version of the report.

The workshop format included small group discussions focusing on each of the five criteria. Participants were asked to identify, without prompting, strengths and challenges in each area. They then reported three top strengths and challenges, which were typed into a presentation software slide next to the preliminary findings of the self-study. When the small groups finished their conversations and moved back to the larger group for open discussion, the entire group discussed differences in the two lists. Both trustees and faculty provided insights that reflected their unique perspectives. At the same time, they heard about broad institutional issues and issues representing perspectives of other groups on campus. Both groups were able to draw new insights due to the visual representation of the data for comparing and contrasting.

Following the workshops, trustees and faculty alike shared their appreciation of the time dedicated to this discussion and the insights generated during their time together. Both groups are utilizing their findings to further conversation and to dedicate themselves to meeting the challenges identified. For example, after hearing about issues reflecting Manchester's position in the higher education marketplace, the faculty invited the president to talk about the challenges facing higher education in general and Manchester in particular.

Preparing Staff and Students for the Team Visit

In fall 2002, we continued to prepare the college community for the team visit, utilizing a variety of mediums and venues. Specifically, we will discuss how we created a variety-show format for a Monday morning convocation program, a printed executive summary of the self-study report for all constituents, and table tents for public dining spaces on campus. These activities were designed to help augment constituents' understanding about the accreditation process and the conclusions of the self-study report.

First, we chose to present a Monday morning convocation because it is the largest weekly gathering of a number of Manchester College constituents—students, faculty, staff, alumni, and North Manchester residents. Commonly called "Convo," this weekly event is part of the *value, arts, and ideas* (VIA) requirement in the general education program. Convocation programming is advertised in local papers, so it also attracts a number of local alumni, retirees, and friends of the college. Students must attend eighty lectures, concerts, classic films, and other comparable presentations on campus in order to meet the VIA requirement to graduate; the weekly Monday morning convocation is the heart of this program.

Because we are both Manchester alum and remember well what is was like to sit in Convo at 10 A.M. on Monday mornings, we decided upon a variety-show format to hold student attention and provide valuable information. We called our program "The Dave and Mary Show," and involved a number of talented faculty *and* staff colleagues. The pacing was upbeat, and the variety show announcer (the director of career services, who had previous broadcasting experience) bantered with the hosts about the content of the program. He insisted that our first guest, the president, was boring and that the audience wanted something more exciting. He suggested that we hear from a professional musician and actor (an assistant professor of communication who is a Convo favorite) who parodied a popular song using lyrics about accreditation.

From a "human polling" activity facilitated by another favorite professor, who involved the first of row of students in guessing how Manchester faculty ranked on a national Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) survey and comparing those results favorably to national results, to a game called "Two Truths and a Lie" hosted by the campus pastor to highlight the strength of Manchester's programs, we kept students entertained while they learned. A brief "we need to do something serious" segment presented by us—again ultimately interrupted by the announcer—gave us a chance to present information about the Higher Learning Commission and the goals of the self-study process. The audience gained knowledge about the importance of accreditation for their financial aid and the ultimate value of their degrees, and also learned how well Manchester meets each of the five criteria required for reaccreditation and what challenges remain.

The second way we prepared the college community for the team visit was to create an executive summary to distribute to a variety of constituents—those who attended the Monday morning convocation, department chairs, middle managers, and board members. We included details about how the self-study process had been participatory and outlined the patterns of evidence for each criterion. The document was self-explanatory, defining each criterion and following the definition with the strengths and challenges.

Finally, we developed a list of bullet points about the team visit and had them printed on table tents for use in dining areas around campus. These table tents included specific information about the accreditation process: "Accreditation is important to the College community because it ensures federal financial aid for students, allows students to transfer academic credit to other institutions, provides access to institutional grants and federal funds, and recruits excellent students and faculty." The table tents also included specific information about how constituents would be involved in the November 11–13 visit: "The team will meet with groups of staff, faculty, and students, eat lunch in the cafeteria, and study college documents assembled in the Winger 111 during the three-day visit."

Conclusion

Because we have been both humbled and inspired by the reaccreditation process, we trust that our experiences might encourage you to create a variety of opportunities to open dialogue and continue the self-study process long after your team visit. We enjoyed creating and learning from those involved in our workshop and convocation programs. We look forward to hearing about the activities you envision for your campuses as you think about the best ways to use a variety of media and venues to prepare your constituents take advantage of the team visit.

David McFadden is Vice President for Enrollment and Planning at Manchester College in Manchester, Indiana.

Mary Lahman is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Manchester College in Manchester, Indiana.

The Eight Weeks Prior to the Higher Learning Commission Visit

Kelly K. Brinkman and William L. Ramsey

Introduction

The last eight weeks before the Higher Learning Commission evaluation team arrives on campus can be very hectic. Not only are you preparing to mail the self-study to the team, but coordinating all the logistics of the visit can be very complex. With so many people involved, this visit requires all the skills of an experienced event planner. Logan College of Chiropractic recently completed the self-study process in April 2002.

The issues that will be addressed in this summary include putting the final touches on your report, developing daily schedules for each of the evaluation team members, creating the team resource room, and preparing the various college constituencies for the visit. In the overall plan for this event, coordinating the logistics of the visit begins the month before the report is due and the following four weeks prior to the team arrival.

Timeline for the Self-Study Process

The overall game plan or timeline for the Higher Learning Commission visit for Logan College of Chiropractic was the following:

1. The board of trustees approves the initiation of the process for reaccreditation in February 2000.
2. The kick-off for the application process for reaccreditation is held on April 26, 2000.
3. Self-study coordinators and the steering committee are established.
4. A Higher Learning Commission staff member is assigned to the institution.
5. Dates for the visit are determined: April 1–3, 2002.
6. A self-study plan is developed and forwarded to the Higher Learning Commission staff member for approval. This includes a preliminary outline of the self-study report.
7. The self-study process begins in mid-2000 and is completed in January 2002. The steering committee meets regularly to discuss the process and to create a draft of the self-study report.
8. The self-study coordinators present the final draft to the steering committee for approval as well as to the board of trustees in January 2002.
9. The final assignment of an evaluation team by the Higher Learning Commission is made.
10. Submission of the self-study to the staff liaison for acceptance: February 2002
11. The self-study and other materials are sent to the team members: February 2002.
12. A self-study coordinator speaks with the team chair to organize the visit.
13. Daily schedules for each team member are sent to the team chair.
14. The team chair returns the schedules with changes.
15. The evaluation team arrives on April 1, 2002, and meets with the board of trustees and others over the three days.
16. The evaluation team conducts the exit interview on April 3, 2002.
17. A draft team report is sent to Logan for correction of facts.
18. Logan responds with a report.
19. A final report is sent to Logan.

20. Logan responds to the report with agreements and/or disagreements. Logan chooses one of the two review processes, the review committee or a readers' panel.
21. If necessary, Logan and the team chair appear before a review committee of seven persons.
22. Commission action reaccredits Logan College of Chiropractic and schedules the next comprehensive evaluation in ten years.

Finishing Touches on the Self-Study Report

Because various people complete different sections of the self-study report, the self-study coordinators pull together all the pieces to create one fluid document. This can be quite a task, as each person has his or her own style of writing.

In addition to writing the report, pulling together the appendix can be mind-boggling, especially since you are very tired of the report by this stage. As you go through the report identifying documentation that has been referenced and giving it a label such as "from A to Z," it is a little like those "seek and find" puzzles. Invariably, you get everything labeled and then you find one you missed, which throws off your labeling system. You end up repeating the process several times before you are finished.

At Logan College, the closest person we have to an English major is the head librarian. This person edits the document, correcting all the grammatical flaws you spent hours trying to locate. Once all the edits are completed, the final copies are made and distributed to all constituencies: the president, administration, steering committee, board of trustees, and department heads. In addition, copies are put on reserve in the library for any student or employee who wishes to review it.

When sending copies of the self-study to the Higher Learning Commission staff liaison and the team members, it is important to include the student and faculty handbooks as well as a copy of the college catalog. These additional materials assist the team members when they are reading the self-study prior to coming to campus and helps them prepare for their visit.

The Team Resource Room

The team resource room (TRR) is the room where the team is based while on campus. This room will act as the team's office and will be used to review documentation, write reports, and meet with various college constituencies. Because each team member will have his or her own schedule and is responsible for researching different areas of the college, team members will come and go throughout the day.

The TRR room should be equipped with materials that will make it easy for team members to do their work efficiently and without the assistance of the hosting institution. Besides a conference table and chairs for the team members, additional tables will be needed to house documentation and other materials. Team members will arrive with just their copies of the self-study. Items that they will need include pens, pencils, white-out, paper clips, sticky notes, scissors, highlighters, yellow legal pads, and other supplies. In addition, a photocopier as well as a desktop computer system with printer may be of value to some team members. Because the team members may need to contact the Higher Learning Commission while they are on campus, an email account can be set up on the computer and/or a telephone with long distance service should be available in this room. Placing an extra self-study report in the room will assist a team member who may have forgotten to bring it or who lost it in transit.

Team members frequently have to review various institutional documents while on campus and, if the documents are located in this room, the team is able to work efficiently and does not have to spend time locating the person on campus who has custody of these documents. The documents that should be included in the resource room are those referenced in the institution's self study as well all the handbooks, committee meeting minutes, policy manuals, financial reports, and other documents that reflect how the college operates. Examples include articles of incorporation and bylaws, minutes of board meetings, division chair meeting minutes, curriculum committee minutes, student handbooks, faculty handbooks, college catalog, academic division meeting minutes, faculty development committee meeting minutes, long-range strategic plan, financial audits, revenue and expense charts, endowment and investment graphs, a list of standing committees, administrative policy manual, campus crime report, manual of organizational charts, job description manual, campus newsletters, academic adviser's manual, research publications and activities, financial aid policy manual, alumni surveys, community service activity, faculty council meeting minutes, cooperative agreements with other universities, class syllabi, ranking and evaluation committee minutes, library statistics, ICAR annual reports, list of student clubs, and current operating budget.

It is very helpful for the team if these documents are indexed and the index placed in the room alongside the documentation. During our visit, the index was taped on the wall above the documents. When the documents are indexed (sequentially numbered), the team member can quickly locate the document he or she desires.

Because team members will be coming and going throughout the day, a small refrigerator with snacks and beverages helps accommodate their varied schedules.

In addition, team members may want to visit with various constituencies (department heads, faculty council executive committee), so the room should be able to accommodate more people than just the evaluation team. For this reason, the room should be located somewhere on campus that provides a level of confidentiality for those who visit with the team. Therefore, it should not be located near the president's or other executive offices. Frequently, team members will meet various employees in their offices, but sometimes for logistical reasons meeting in the TRR is best. In addition, usually one team member will be scheduled for an open-door session at least once or twice during the visit to be available to any student or employee who wishes to speak with the team without an appointment. Therefore, extra chairs will be needed.

It is never too early to notify employees whose assistance in setting up this room is needed. If you have a goal of finishing the set-up of this room several days prior to the team's arrival, this will allow you plenty of time to solve last-minute problems.

Daily Schedules for Team Members

It is the responsibility of the self-study coordinator to initiate a draft of a daily schedule for each team member. Usually, the self-study coordinator speaks with the chair of the team on the phone to determine what areas of the college each team member is assigned to review. Based upon this information, the self-study coordinator develops a preliminary schedule for each team member. This draft is then sent to the team chair, who makes any desired changes. This process continues until the team chair and the self-study coordinator finalize the schedules. Despite the fact that these schedules are done ahead of time, it is important to be flexible; team members may make changes once they are on campus. Don't forget to make arrangements for the team members to get back and forth between the campus and their hotel. It is customary for the team to meet with the president for a short time upon their arrival on campus.

Most evaluation team members will spend part of their day meeting with employees or students and part of their day reviewing documentation in the TRR or hosting an open-door session. Some meetings can be held over lunch, such as a meeting with members of the board of trustees or members of the faculty council. It is best to schedule just one or two team members for these group lunches, as other team members may want to have lunch on their own in the cafeteria in order to have impromptu discussions with employees or students.

Examples of persons on campus with whom a team leader will want to have meetings lasting thirty to forty-five minutes include department/academic division chairs, student council representatives, administrative officers, directors (long-range planning, community service, recruitment) and department heads (student services, registrar, general support services, purchasing).

Communications and Campus Involvement

Preparing faculty, staff, students, and administrators for the team visit begins at the same time the preliminary meetings begin for writing the self-study. The steering committee meets regularly until the report is completed, and the self-study coordinators meet weekly, then daily, making sure all loose ends are tied. As the visit draws near, communication with all constituencies of the college should become more frequent so as to raise their level of awareness. Meetings, email messages, and memos are just a few ways of communicating the status of the institution with regard to the visit.

The more familiar the employees and students are with the details of the team visit, the more cohesive the institution seems to the team members. Passing out the team's daily schedules gives employees a feel for the how the visit will unfold, and highlighting the purpose of the self-study helps them understand the importance of the visit. Faculty, staff, and students are asked to wear their ID badges so that team members can recognize names and faces.

Conclusion

The eight weeks prior to the arrival of the Higher Learning Commission team are exciting and challenging. Coordinating this event with so many people keeps the self-study coordinators busy throughout the entire day. Taking the time to handle the small details helps make the Higher Learning Commission visit successful.

Kelly K. Brinkman is Education Coordinator at Logan University in Chesterfield, Missouri.

William L. Ramsey is Vice President of Academic Affairs at Logan University in Chesterfield, Missouri.

A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement, 2003

Volume 4: The Self-Study Process for Commission Evaluation

Chapter 2: Self-Study and Commission Evaluation: Practical Advice

The Higher Learning Commission

A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

NCA

Restructured Expectations: Building New Partnerships for Learning

Program of
The Higher Learning Commission

108th Annual Meeting of the North Central Association

April 13 – 16, 2003 • Hyatt Regency Chicago

Deciding How to Approach the Self-Study: Three Campuses, Three Choices

Gil Atnip, Marilyn Vasquez, and Susan Kahn

Which Self-Study Approach Shall We Use?

Three Indiana University (IU) campuses recently had to decide how to approach their reaccreditation self-studies. Each made a different choice. Key players from each institution talk about their decisions and what they have learned as they implemented the decisions. The three campuses are Indiana University Northwest, a campus with 4,900 students, located in northern Indiana; Indiana University Southeast, a campus of 6,700 students located in southern Indiana; and Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI), a campus of 29,000 students located in the center of the state. These nonresidential campuses enroll many first-generation students.

☐ What Can You Expect to Learn?

1. Participants will learn about key elements of three self-study approaches: the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP), traditional self-study based on a strategic plan, and Web-based self-study.
2. Participants will learn what experienced leaders in each approach consider the most important insights they gained as they developed their self-studies.
3. Participants' thinking about self-study will be sharpened because at the beginning of the session they will be asked in a short questionnaire about their previous and current self-study experiences; following the presentations, the discussion will focus on relating the material presented to participants' experiences.
4. Participants will be given printed materials to take back to their institutions to share with colleagues.

☐ The Questionnaire

What are your experiences with self-studies?

1. Indicate the types of self-studies in which you have participated.
2. List the most important thing you learned from that process.
3. List the greatest challenge you encountered.

The AQIP Approach

Vice Chancellor Marilyn Vasquez from IU Northwest (IUN) describes how her campus developed a successful application to participate in AQIP, the alternative reaccreditation process. The campus has identified and committed to three action-improvement projects that are currently underway and will be addressed over the next three years. These projects are (1) Intervention for First-Year Students: The Freshman Experience, (2) Beyond the Freshman Year: Improving Academic and Career Advising, and (3) Increasing the Technological Capabilities of Faculty, Staff, and Administrators. She will share her insights about the strengths and challenges encountered during this early phase of the continuous improvement process.

As a novice in the continuous quality improvement arena, IUN has encountered a few challenges early in the process. Some of the concerns that we have had to address include the use of a new vocabulary, the amount of emphasis placed on processes and systems, and the uncertainty that comes with being a pioneer in a new reaccreditation process where there are no precedents and in which procedures and processes are evolving. There have also been advantages of participating in AQIP. Decision making is becoming more data-driven; in our decision-making, we are thinking more systemically in the identification of issues and solutions, and we are better able to actively relate the reaccreditation process to the strategic and operational plans of the campus.

The Traditional Approach

The IU Southeast self-study for its 1999 comprehensive evaluation took place along traditional lines but incorporated three noteworthy elements that were somewhat different from the usual practices. Gil Atnip's presentation describes each element and discusses the advantages and disadvantages, as well as modifications that would be considered if the campus had it all to do over again.

First, the campus organized its self-study process and report around major campus goals that had been established as the result of a strategic planning process, rather than around the NCA criteria. The principal reason for this decision was the desire to integrate the self-study process into the ongoing operations of the campus, rather than to make it a separate undertaking. The intent was for the planning and the self-study processes to mutually reinforce each other, and for faculty and staff time and energy to be used in the most effective ways possible to advance both processes. The approach was successful in getting units on the campus to examine their operations in terms of the strategic goals. The goals also provided a logical and workable framework for organizing the self-study report. However, as the report developed, the self-study committee decided that an explicit statement of how the material in the report addressed the NCA criteria was needed. A chapter that summarized the evidence relevant to each criterion was added to the report.

Second, a small steering committee (of nine persons) was formed to structure and manage the self-study process and preparation of the report, while existing campus committees were given responsibility for studying and evaluating specific content areas. The motivations for this decision were similar to those above: to integrate the self-study within existing processes and to make best use of faculty and staff time and energy. A set of reports was generated, and the steering committee was able to use them to produce the self-study. However, the quality of these reports varied widely among units and committees and many required fairly extensive follow-up efforts. It was apparent that several of the existing committees did not place a high priority on responding to the requests of the steering committee. The result was that a substantial burden for managing the process was placed on the self-study coordinator and the other steering committee members. In addition, the evaluation team expressed concern about a perceived lack of broad participation in the self-study process that seemed to grow out of the relatively small size of the steering committee.

Finally, an external consultant was hired to help write the report. He had been a part-time faculty member and was familiar with the campus. He was involved in the self-study process from the beginning and served actively on the steering committee. He worked quite well under often difficult circumstances to craft a coherent report from a set of sub-reports of widely varying quality. Two principal issues arose in the course of his work that should have been addressed and clarified before he was hired. First, there was some ambiguity about the extent of his role, particularly about how actively he would be involved in the self-study process itself, rather than confining his work to writing the report. This resulted in some confusion about his status on campus. The second issue was that he worked on a Macintosh computer, while everyone else used PCs. The resulting problems in converting files slowed down the process of preparing the final report and caused anxiety in a deadline-driven process. Ideally, all participants should be able to exchange electronic files seamlessly.

The Web-Based Portfolio Approach

Susan Kahn describes why IUPUI chose its approach. This self-study has two notable features. First, it is a special emphases self-study focused on teaching and learning and on civic engagement, two of IUPUI's mission priorities. Second, it is presented in electronic form on the Web, as part of the electronic institutional portfolio that the campus has been developing since 1998. The written report includes both the traditional sections on the GIRs and the Criteria for Accreditation and extended narratives on each of the two special emphases. These written materials were provided to the NCA evaluation team both on paper and as part of the portfolio Web site, where the essays provide a pathway, using menus and hot links, through extensive additional information. Information on the Web site includes evidence for assertions made in the self-study, numerous examples of authentic student and faculty work in various media, detailed information on topics raised in the written report, and performance indicators derived from priorities established during a 1999–2002 strategic planning process.

The special emphases focus and the use of the Web made for an especially labor-intensive self-study process. But the approach also had significant advantages. For example, placing the developing self-study on the Web, where it was accessible to all interested parties on and off campus, made for a more transparent and inclusive self-study process. In addition, because reviewers could access most relevant campus documents, policies, and data through the Web site, they were able to spend more time interacting with key campus leaders and stakeholders during the visit. The team praised IUPUI for the commitment to accountability evidenced by making information on institutional effectiveness, including performance indicators, available to all on the Web. Disadvantages of the approach included the challenge of keeping every link on a large Web site working correctly and a sense among some team members that the Web self-study lacked "boundaries."

Moreover, the Web is not an ideal medium for transmitting the lengthy analytical narrative materials called for by current NCA guidelines. In the end, the self-study thus turned out to be a hybrid—or possibly an evolutionary step—between a traditional paper narrative self-study and one more fully adapted to the specific medium of the World Wide Web.

The Discussion

The participants will be asked to talk about how the observations of the presenters relate to their responses to the questionnaire given to them at the beginning of the session. Following the discussion, each participant will be given an integrated set of materials that describe in greater detail the information presented during the session and provide contact information for the presenters and others on their campuses who can serve as resources.

Gil Atnip is Vice Chancellar for Academic Affairs at Indiana University Southeast in New Albany.

Marilyn Vasquez is Interim Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at Indiana University Northwest in Gary.

Susan Kahn is Director of Institutional Effectiveness at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis.

Utilizing Online Course Software to Prepare a Higher Learning Commission Self-Study

Donna L. Askins

The Challenge

In fall 2002, the Northern Illinois University (NIU) provost's office faced the challenge of writing the Higher Learning Commission self-study in preparation for a spring 2004 site visit. The university desired a mechanism that could help to efficiently coordinate a dozen teams of faculty and staff, and considerable amounts of data. The teams needed to gather information, communicate, manage the workflow, and hand in their drafts. The mechanism in question would ideally be online, in a password-protected, dedicated environment.

Blackboard

The university decided to utilize Blackboard, NIU's online course software, for several reasons. Blackboard is already in place; many faculty and staff have already used it to teach and so are familiar with its strengths and limitations. Blackboard is essentially ready to use right out of box, yet can be customized almost endlessly to meet the user's needs. Its prefabricated structure saves the headache of developing a Web site from scratch. Blackboard provides

- A means to gather internal information via special postings and customized links
- A means to gather external information via the resources feature
- Multiple communication options, both synchronous and asynchronous
- The ability to easily target communications to virtually any combination of groups or individuals
- Virtual locations where teams may share and work on drafts internally before submitting their final effort

Developing the self-study in terms of a course in Blackboard automatically led to a password-protected, dedicated environment.

☐ Part One: Assembling the Personnel

First, the university identified a volunteer to chair the steering committee responsible for writing the self-study. Twelve subcommittee chairs were selected to head the respective teams, each of which was responsible for producing one self-study chapter. (Note that the following terms are used synonymously: *group, team, subcommittee*). The steering committee was composed of the chair, all subcommittee chairs, and ex officio academic staff. Hundreds of faculty and staff members around campus were solicited for participation as subcommittee members and consultants. Participants were electronically enrolled in the "course" at the following levels of participation:

Instructors:	the associate vice provost, the steering committee chair, the research associate in charge of technical infrastructure
Teaching assistants:	all subcommittee chairs
Students:	subcommittee members

Special participants were enrolled at levels according to tasks they needed to perform. For example, NIU's president was enrolled as a student. This enabled him to view the course at any time, including the course information and course document sections. In this way he could informally monitor the progress of the self-study via the Internet.

On August 19, 2002, the steering committee underwent training on Blackboard in general and on the course structure in particular. Not all participants were familiar with Blackboard. Subsequent training sessions were offered to subcommittee members. Attendance was not mandatory.

☐ **Part Two: Meetings**

All groups could use the course calendar to schedule meetings as desired. Many subcommittee chairs preferred to simply email their groups with meeting information. Groups could meet in the virtual classroom or asynchronously, using the discussion forum. The virtual classroom requires same-time but not same-location participation (a very attractive option in bad weather on a large campus). The virtual classroom offers chatting, a white board that can be drawn or typed on, and an Internet portal so that the moderator can direct the group's attention to a specific Web site. This option might also prove useful for overcoming spoken language barriers, provided the group can agree to chat in one language.

Blackboard's discussion forum works like a listserv, with discussion threads. Often subcommittee chairs would direct group members to check in on a particular topic or thread within a specified period of time. Files can also be attached to messages in this context.

☐ **Part Three: Managing Data**

Each subcommittee chair needed considerable amounts of data about the university to write his or her chapter. Two basic mechanisms were used to facilitate this process.

First, the Web sites area of Blackboard was customized with links to several key NIU Web pages. In this one resource area, subcommittee chairs could quickly find everything from the academic policies and procedures manual to the chancellor's committee on the status of women. This resource was highly fluid in nature; links could be added or removed in about ten seconds or less, so, anyone could suggest a useful link that could be shared with the community immediately, but not intrusively.

Second, to "gate" statistical and demographics requests to the office of institutional research, the provost's office posted a data request form under course documents that any participant could download, complete, and electronically submit. Downloading was quick and easy because the form was a one-page Microsoft Word document. All requests could then be managed effectively via email. If the information requested proved valuable for more than one group, it was posted under course documents so that everyone could use it.

☐ **Part Four: Managing Documents**

For the most part, two kinds of documents were posted. The course documents area was devoted to raw evidence, in order to function as the electronic version of the resource room or evidence room. These are the documents that support the facts presented in the self-study. Subcommittee chairs were instructed on posting protocol to this area at the outset. It should be noted that not all evidence is available online.

The second kind of posting was the drafts of self-study chapters. At the very rough phase, subcommittee chairs could use the file exchange, digital drop box, or assignments features to work on the drafts with some or all team members. A key point to note is that Blackboard's small groups feature allows those enrolled in the group to work on documents privately, and the instructor cannot access the documents unless and until he or she is enrolled in the group. The small groups can therefore work on documents freely until they feel ready to share their creations with the community at large.

Completed drafts were housed under course information. Again, Blackboard allows a considerable degree of customization, and each group was assigned a specific place to post its chapter. This means that the steering committee chair, or anyone else, could quickly and easily find any chapter draft.

Once the groups submitted their chapters, the steering committee chair assembled and edited them into the final self-study. Blackboard's purpose at this point was essentially two-fold: to house the documents in a central location, and to ease communication.

Ultimately, consultant-evaluators from the Higher Learning Commission can be granted password-protected access to the "course." They will be able to see raw data and other documents posted as evidence, as well as the self-study. Blackboard provides meta-level tracking, too, so reviewers will actually be able to follow the "paper trail" of the self-study's development. Virtual meetings, automatically recorded and archived, will also show the groups' progress.

☐ **Part Five: Tips for Success**

This effort is *unlikely to succeed* on a campus of very technologically resistant faculty and staff. A certain amount of willingness to follow directions is also very important. Technical support is important. While Blackboard is not especially difficult, having one central designee can go a long way toward minimizing participants' frustration. Blackboard is *unlikely to be necessary* if the campus climate swings too far in the opposite direction—that is, if the faculty, staff, and administration are all extremely adept at creating Web sites and are naturally very team-oriented, to the point of already having many good infrastructures in place.

Large universities can obviously benefit from a system that pulls together people and information that may be scattered hither and yon. It may appear that smaller institutions do not need a system like this to coordinate self-study efforts. However, Blackboard creates a central nexus, or hub, that can be used to coordinate personnel, data, communications, and reports in a dedicated environment. It exists online very nicely with portals to the outside world (multiple points of Internet access) and, at the same time, is easily customized to organization-specific needs. One can look out as well as in.

Therefore, Blackboard is recommended for many organizations. Most of us are not virtual virtuosos; nor are we complete Luddites. Most of us can use a program that is fairly easy to operate; and a prefabricated structure that can, to a large degree, be customized is generally more useful than not. Blackboard can do the job.

Donna L. Askins is Research Associate for the Office of the Provost at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb.

What Did and Did Not Work During the Self-Study Process

Terri L. Wenzlaff

Introduction

Western State College of Colorado is located in Gunnison, an agricultural and resort community on the western slope of Colorado. The college is a rural, comprehensive campus. The nearest major city, Denver, is two hundred miles to the east over several mountain passes. Western State College has approximately 2,300 students from all fifty states and a hundred faculty members.

The main issues to be addressed in this paper focus on steering committee and subcommittee member selection and organization of the five Criteria for Accreditation in the most efficient manner for the steering committee members to facilitate the self-study. Additional issues arose during the course of the self-study, such as how to make the best use of the steering committee members when writing the self-study report, and communication on campus regarding the self-study report.

Steering Committee Member Selection

Members of the steering committee were chosen to provide institutional perspective based on their positions or responsibilities at the time of the self-study or in the past. It was critical for steering committee members not only to think "outside the box" but also to be visionary and to understand the institution as it relates to the local community, region, and state. The steering committee was made up of nine members who represented faculty, staff, administration, and alumni. At least one steering committee member acted as a liaison to each subcommittee. Specifically, the steering committee was made up of the following individuals.

- The self-study coordinator, who was appointed as the associate vice president for academic affairs just prior to the beginning planning stages of the self-study and had been a professor of biology
- Three associate and full professors from the biology, business, and teacher education areas
- Two student affairs members, one in an administrative position overseeing residence life services and the other serving as the director of campus life and orientation
- The customer support coordinator in the computing, media, and technology department
- The director of accounting
- A program assistant for academic affairs and Western alum

Organizing the Self-Study

Organizing a self-study on a small campus can be difficult, given the limited number of faculty and staff members and already full schedules. The steering committee decided to organize the self-study around the five Criteria for Accreditation. The steering committee numbered the criteria and patterns of evidence for ease of reference. Essentially this numbering system aligned each criterion to the patterns of evidence. For example, the first pattern of evidence (*long and short-range institutional and educational goals*) for criterion number 1 (*The institution has clear and publicly stated purposes consistent with its mission and appropriate to an institution of higher education*) was numbered 1.1. This system created a common language for self-study subcommittee members to discuss their work and findings. The steering committee planned the self-study, coordinated its implementation, monitored its progress, and provided continuous monitoring as the self-study report was being written. At the onset the self-study report was intended to be used as the springboard for the next strategic plan.

Subcommittee Member Selection

There were six subcommittees, three of which were identified based on existing campus structure. The subcommittees were charged with focusing on the Criteria for Accreditation with the intent of promoting ongoing evaluation and planning beyond the life of the self-study. At least one steering committee member was a liaison on each subcommittee. The steering committee coordinator appointed each subcommittee chair. Subcommittee chairs, not liaisons, documented their findings and prepared reports for their respective committees; the members of each subcommittee discussed and approved the report before it was sent to the steering committee. The six subcommittees, which included nearly fifty administrators, faculty, staff, students, and community members, were as follows.

1. The **subcommittee for assessment** was composed of five members from an existing campus assessment committee. The campus curriculum committee has primarily focused on general education; this subcommittee took a broader perspective and evaluated assessment of student learning. Due to the importance of the topic, assessment of student learning was the sole charge of the subcommittee; it was also one of the charges given to the subcommittee for learning. The subcommittee on assessment was given the charge to evaluate
    - Assessment of student learning
2. The **subcommittee for facilities** was composed of nine members from an existing campus facilities master planning committee. The subcommittee for facilities was charged with evaluating
    - Physical plant and its effectiveness in enhancing education
    - Instructional technology infrastructure
    - Program relocation and space renovation to enhance institutional function
    - Facilities master plan
3. The **subcommittee on financial management** was made up of five members from an existing budget committee. Its charge was to evaluate
    - Current and potential sources of revenue
    - Expenditures and funding allocation
    - Auxiliary program funding
    - Enrollment management
4. The seven-member **subcommittee on governance** was a newly formed subcommittee of seven members for the self-study. The subcommittee on governance was charged with evaluating
    - The college's relationships with the Colorado Commission on Higher Education and the board of trustees of the State Colleges of Colorado
    - Shared governance and decision making
    - Student governance
    - Effectiveness of the administration
    - Statutory and operational missions
    - Institutional planning
    - Integrity with internal and external entities
5. The **subcommittee on learning** was also newly formed for the self-study. Its nine members were responsible for evaluating
    - Curriculum
    - Assessment of student learning
    - Instructional technology
    - Distance education
    - Academic policies and practices
    - Enrollment management
    - Freshman-year experience
    - Interdisciplinary programs
    - Faculty and instructional support staff

6. The **subcommittee on student development** and support was newly formed for the self-study. The subcommittee had eleven members and was given the charge to evaluate

    - Diversity
    - Residential life
    - Campus programming and activities
    - College union
    - Academic support services
    - Leadership programs
    - New student programs
    - Library services
    - Instructional technology
    - Registration services
    - Financial aid
    - Athletics
    - Enrollment management
    - Freshman-year experience
    - Student judicial processes

Writing the Self-Study Report

The steering committee members, as liaisons to the subcommittees, did not take leadership roles on the subcommittees, but instead acted as committee members, researching and studying information and reporting back to the subcommittee. As liaisons they reported subcommittee findings to the steering committee by providing a synthesis of subcommittee work. Early in the self-study process the steering committee discussed the possibility of having subcommittee liaisons be responsible for analyzing, synthesizing, and writing their sections of the self-study report. After discussion it was decided that the self-study report would be a clearer and more smoothly flowing document if one person were the sole author of the document as long as the steering committee had constant input. The steering committee coordinator accepted the responsibility for synthesizing each of the subcommittee reports and writing the self-study report.

The Steering Committee Role in the Self-Study Report

As the self-study report began to take shape, steering committee members were asked to review the document for accuracy, spelling, grammar, and clarity. As each chapter was written, the steering committee met to discuss its contents. Depending upon the criteria addressed in a particular chapter, subcommittee members were reconvened to discuss and provide input on the self-study report draft.

Given the wide use of electronic communication, it seemed obvious to the steering committee that email would be an easy method to seek input and suggestions from the larger campus community. The steering committee set up an email address solely for collecting information. The steering committee members quickly learned that the use of electronic communication was stressful for some faculty members; they felt that a face-to-face dialogue was a much more appropriate way to discuss contents of the self-study report. As the self-study was nearing completion, the steering committee held two campus-wide meetings to discuss the draft. These roundtable discussions were hosted by both the steering committee liaisons and the subcommittee members, who were seated at round tables with copies of the self-study draft and note pads for collecting changes and corrections to the self-study document. Faculty, staff, and students were able to visit each table and interact with the liaison and subcommittee members.

As complete drafts of the self-study were written and perused by steering committee members, the drafts were made available to the campus community on the campus Web site. Copies of the self-study draft were also placed in the library for check out.

Conclusion

In a small college in which individuals have many responsibilities, we learned that it was key not to reinvent the wheel but instead to use existing committee structures as subcommittees where possible. It was also discovered early in the self-study process that an efficient numbering system for the Criteria for Accreditation made it easier for steering committee and subcommittee members to refer to the criteria. It was critical to create and maintain open lines of communication during the self-study process, yet to have one author responsible for writing the self-study report.

Terri L. Wenzlaff is Self-Study Coordinator, Academic Affairs at Western State College in Gunnison, Colorado.

Sustaining Communication and Involvement Throughout the Self-Study

Paula M. Glover and Kristin B. Wilson

Introduction

Employees of an institution attach not only their training, knowledge, and effort to their positions but also their person and identity. Acknowledging this reality during the editing process in the creation of the self-study report is critical to writing a document that has veracity and identity. Encouraging and acknowledging the personal investment of each college employee by inundating the campus with information about the visit gives all employees a sense of responsibility and ownership. When real people visit an institution to confirm the words in its self-study report, other real people at the institution need to confirm those words. Recognizing the humanness of the process is critical to keeping people interested and motivated during down times and ensuring that the polished self-study report is useful to the team and to the home institution.

It is important to plan, divide tasks into parts, and delegate responsibility, but finally it is the level of ownership and enthusiasm felt by the faculty and staff during preparations and the visit that carry the institution to its final report.

Brief Background

An accreditation team from the Higher Learning Commission visited Moberly Area Community College (MACC) in March 2002. The institution and the team enjoyed a highly successful visit; MACC was granted continued accreditation with no follow-up visits or reports. As the co-chairs overseeing the process, we couldn't have been more elated.

The successful outcome is not to say the process was always trouble-free. We had inherited our roles as co-chairs of the self-study steering committee midway through the process. Personnel in these key positions changed three times during the self-study. Along with some superbly written, comprehensive draft chapters, we also inherited incomplete chapters and a quiescent committee. It was never our task to envision a process. Rather, it was our task to make the vision of previous co-chairs, who were gone, work.

With one of us serving as the director of institutional effectiveness and planning and the other as an English instructor, we decided the best approach was to take advantage of our positions. The director of institutional effectiveness would primarily be a liaison with administration and staff, while the English instructor would primarily be a liaison with faculty. Each of us claimed responsibility for sections of the self-study draft report with which we felt most comfortable. Both of us had backgrounds in English, which proved to be extremely advantageous when it came to verbalizing, writing, and editing the final report.

Personal Presence in Words

Our first objective was simply to compile a readable, comprehensive draft from the somewhat incomplete and unconnected information we had received from the self-study subcommittees, who had previously been assigned selected topics. As co-chairs, we worked throughout the summer to pull together the pieces of the draft, and by early fall it was ready for editing.

The director of institutional effectiveness met with president's council in several editing sessions. The administration was eager to portray an accurate representation of the college in the self-study report as well as cautious about the picture it would paint. Both chairs met with the self-study steering committee to edit the report. At times the editing became bogged down in surface-level comments about commas and semi-colons. We worked hard to encourage members to concentrate on the substantive issues rather than the surface problems. We were confident that we could correct the grammatical and punctuation errors in the final polishing stages, so we asked the committee to focus on the meaning of the draft.

At first the committee tried editing in one- or two-hour sessions. It became apparent that we needed to devote a longer expanse of time to editing, which we had previously avoided because of the difficulty of coordinating the schedules of the nineteen committee members. We asked the administration for approval for the entire committee to devote a day to editing. Faculty found alternative arrangements for their classes, and staff made arrangements to be away for the day.

During this marathon editing session, we discussed the draft—chapter by chapter, page by page, word by word. With each changed sentence and added detail, the nineteen members of the committee became owners of the text. This process is vital to a successful visit. The text must become the place. If the team finds that the text doesn't represent place, then the institution hasn't demonstrated veracity in its reporting.

We understood the visit to be a process of verifying what we had said in the self-study report. So, our institutional presence in the document was critical. The document needed to be a worded picture of MACC. Since MACC is the people who work here, the reader needed to feel the personal presence of the faculty and staff in the text. Everyone wanted to see the issues of their departments and areas represented correctly, fully, and truthfully.

Self-Discovery at Center

The process of preparing for the visit trained new leaders and refreshed experienced leaders at the college. Most importantly, the editing process provided opportunities to understand the views of others. When dissension occurred within the committee, between the committee and external groups, or between faculty, staff, and administration, dialogue and compromise became crucial. At one point, one surprised faculty member exclaimed, "The administration actually has ears!" It was a moment of self-discovery.

The process of self-discovery must be about the institution as a whole, not about individual members. Personal agendas become the voice of the self-study when institutions fail to involve multiple views in the editing process. Institutions can use the editing of the study to discover language that fairly represents them.

Veracity in Editing

Most leaders in the accreditation process will probably encounter some negative sentiments on their campus about the validity of what will be included in the final report. Although the members of the committee were well-respected, committed, and involved MACC faculty and staff, an air of distrust was present initially—not because it was a reality, but because of a lack of communication. When the administration did not bowdlerize the self-study report, when disagreements were worked through in the editing process, and when a commitment was made to tell the institution's entire story, the air of distrust was replaced with an air of trust and improved communication. Wide publication and easy availability of the report on the MACC Web site also sent a message of open communication.

We wanted everyone on the self-study steering committee to feel some ownership of the final report. We wanted it to be a document that reflected MACC truthfully, not a public relations tool. During the self-study process, the document came to be owned by the nineteen members of the self-study steering committee and president's council. As it came to be owned, it came to be veracious.

Thinking About the Long-Term While Acting in the Short-Term

In the down time between the completion of the final report and the arrival of the team, it is important to keep a clear focus on the impending visit. Although interest heightens in the few weeks prior to the visit, communication and involvement strategies are critical to sustain momentum throughout the "in-between" stages as well.

From the beginning, we decided that this visit could be fun as well as meaningful. The self-study process was kicked off with a fiesta party and concluded with a post-visit barbeque for employees and their families. To initiate the process, the college purchased "NCA T-Shirts," which employees wore on designated "NCA Days" peppered throughout the two-year process. These shirts were in an uncomplimentary shade of lime green and often became the butt of many jokes. (We often joked we would gladly burn them in a celebratory bonfire after the visit.) A few days before the visit, the college hosted an employee luncheon. The centerpiece was an immense cake frosted in the same unappealing shade of green.

We gave continued focus to communicating what accreditation was all about. As co-chairs, we offered in-house staff developments. Newsletters were periodically distributed college-wide with updates on the progress and the timeline of expected events. In the final weeks, daily emails were sent out containing an "NCA Question of the Day," often about the content of the final report, five Criteria for Accreditation, General Institutional Requirements, or MACC facts.

Students, too, were targeted in the information mill. In the days just prior to the visit, faculty and staff wore lime green buttons that read "Ask Me About NCA." Steering committee members staffed information tables across campus and distributed candy bars wrapped in lime green paper (of course) with the dates of the impending visit. Articles about accreditation and assessment appeared in the campus student newspaper, and flyers were posted in high-traffic areas around the campus.

The director of institutional effectiveness and planning met with the board of trustees to highlight the final report and to answer any remaining questions. The president was a key figure in keeping board members informed of their role in the self-study process and team visit. Additionally, a board member served on the self-study steering committee.

The wider college community must not be overlooked, as the visiting team will want to converse with a variety of constituents. MACC published an executive summary of the self-study report, which was sent to all members of college advisory committees and placed in information packets for college events. Multiple copies of the executive summary were also available in highly visible places at each of the college's seven sites.

The resource room should be considered as the self-study report is being drafted, not one or two weeks before the visit. As we drafted, we found it helpful to make notations about items to place in the resource room that would support the chapter's content. Because the resource room was a rather large project, we asked each subcommittee to note, request, and/or find documentation for their assigned chapters. The co-chairs then organized the room.

An addendum to the self-study final report was also drafted by the co-chairs and approved by the steering committee. This addendum highlighted noteworthy progress occurring since the publication of the report. We highly recommend an addendum. We found that because of ever-changing circumstances, no self-study report is ever "final." The addendum is an institution's opportunity to show the evaluation team that the institution is responsive to the needs of the organization and the community it serves.

Making the Visit Meaningful

Because employees often do not know what to expect from the visit, co-chairs field many questions regarding these expectations. Employees should be expected to discuss their departments, positions, and responsibilities honestly and to seek the council and advice of the team members when appropriate. When they are given an opportunity to be heard, they should consider that their comments represent the institution as a whole. The visiting team will be able to see through personal agendas and recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the institution. For the most part, they are people similar to us, working through similar experiences at their own institutions. The evaluation team is a resource to forward-looking institutions.

When the eventful day finally arrived, MACC was ready. Over two years of planning had gone into the three-day visit. The administration and the self-study steering committee in general believed in the veracity of the report and a positive outcome to the visit; therefore, the exit interview was open to the entire college. The visit was an affirmation of what we knew were our strengths and encouragement in meeting our challenges.

Lessons Learned

With the accreditation visit behind us, we have had time to reflect upon the self-study process. We offer the following suggestions.

- At least two people should be named to guide the self-study process. At least one of the co-chairs should be a faculty representative, and both co-chairs should be present during all editing sessions, with both the administration and the steering committee.
- Co-chairs need release time from other responsibilities to accomplish the huge tasks linked with accreditation.
- The institution will need to make a financial commitment to the process. There will be many expenses for copying and printing, release time or extra pay, attendance at the Higher Learning Commission Annual Meeting, the team visit, and so on.
- Co-chairs and committee members who have a composition background are helpful in creating a polished self-study report.
- Large chunks of uninterrupted, focused time should be devoted to editing sessions. These sessions should be given priority status because they are central to creating an owned document.
- Outside resources exist and are helpful. Some of the ones we found most helpful came from neighboring institutions that had recently undergone accreditation. We invited guest speakers from these institutions to our opening fall workshop and to a mock accreditation visit four months preceding our scheduled visit. We also studied several team reports given to other institutions, looking closely at the mostly commonly cited strengths and weaknesses and discussing our own institution in light of those comments.
- A data collection team is helpful. One subcommittee should be given the responsibility of compiling and collecting supporting data needed for the writing of the chapters. It is overwhelming to a committee faced with writing a document, sometimes with no clear parameters, to also be faced with researching and collecting source information. The data collection team should include a programmer to extract supporting data.

- It is important to give the primary responsibility to trusted employees. The self-study steering committee should consist of a cross-categorical swath of administration, faculty, and staff. However, we found there was more open and honest discussion without upper-level administration leading the charge.

- Institutions should continue with improvements initiated by the self-study process. Immediately following the visit, work should begin on the concerns and recommendations laid out by the visiting team. This demonstrates the validity of the accreditation process.

W. Scott Olson writes, "As the world becomes more problematic, it is in the little excursions and small observations that we can discover ourselves, that we can make an honest connection with others, that we can remind each other of what it means to belong to one another." The people in an institution belong to one another through a mission that is their common ground and belief. We believe that community colleges are filled with faculty and staff committed to their mission and institution. Making this quotation a description of an institution's self-study process is the secret to a successful visit.

Paula M. Glover is Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning at Moberly Area Community College in Moberly, Missouri.

Kristin B. Wilson is Chair of the Humanities and Fine Arts Division and English Instructor at Moberly Area Community College in Moberly, Missouri.

Obtaining Complete Campus Participation: A Strategy for Self-Study

James C. Foster

From a practitioner's point of view, the hardest part of the self-study process is getting whole-hearted faculty cooperation. While the process itself is relatively uncomplicated and well-understood by the faculty, it is extremely time-consuming and, as importantly, yields no academic rewards. Moreover, the entire idea of self-study smacks of institutional planning, a particularly thankless task that consumes enormous faculty effort, the paper output of entire states, and the aspirations of all. Very few planning efforts or self-studies seem to have had much positive or immediate impact at the departmental level. Thus, when the subject of accreditation or planning arises, experienced faculty members have become quite adept at minimizing their participation. The question is how a self-study can avoid such mass desertion. The Mount Marty College (MMC) self-study process of 2001–2002 addressed this problem directly.

Committees and Chairs

When Mary Miller began her duties as the director of the Higher Learning Commission self-study at Mount Marty, she divided the task into committees, each devoted to one of the major criteria for accreditation. Each committee, in turn, would be responsible for one chapter of the final self-study. A single editor-author would then be assigned the task of writing an introduction and a conclusion. The same person would edit the entire work to give it a coherent style and a single voice. This was not an unusual approach to self-study. A quick review of Higher Learning Commission self-study reports in the document room suggests that such a course is probably the norm. However, Mary believed that the success of her venture depended upon her committee chairs.

As Mary later noted, "I chose committee chairs for two reasons: their work ethic and their knowledge of the content area that the committee would survey. Thus, I chose S. Sharon Ann Haas to head the committee on criterion one (mission) because she was the chair of Mount Marty's mission effectiveness committee. Her knowledge of the work of that committee and her dedication to living our mission made her the logical choice." She made similar choices as she staffed the rest of her committees. The chair of the criterion four committee (planning) was the director of the library, a person who had served on a number of planning committees and who had worked for the college for more than a quarter of a century. The chair of the criterion five committee (integrity) was the director of financial aid, a person of such personal integrity that he was admired by the entire campus. But the committee chairs were just the start.

In 2001 Mount Marty College was a small college that had just gone through the trauma of replacing a president. Thus, there was a danger that the self-study could turn into a political vehicle. That was one reason that Chairman Miller placed board of trustee members on each committee. The presence of a board member would not only add diversity to the committee, but would also encourage the committee to stay on task. The rest of the committee membership followed Higher Learning Commission recommendations and included a full complement of students, faculty, and staff. The idea, from the beginning, was that the self-study would be a campus-wide process that involved every constituency and that, when complete, it would represent the views of all parts of the campus community. Yet, once this process was completed a problem arose. After a month of meetings, the committees began to wonder what exactly they should be doing. There was a clear need for focus. It was then I suggested we use a planning guide that I had developed.

Robert Cope and the Theories of Planning

What we used to refocus the committees and the self-study process was a guide that owed its origin to the NCA of 1990. As a means of helping colleges focus their self-study efforts in the 1988–1990 era, several NCA staff members created a short questionnaire that illuminated the essence of the criteria for accreditation. While there were only four criteria in 1990 and many of the questions seemed irrelevant a decade later, I updated the questionnaire in 1997 to help the faculty of Walsh University in Ohio organize its self-study. As the Mount Marty committees entered the same stage of searching, I once again updated the questionnaire in 2001 to help the process regain its momentum. What the questionnaire really addressed was a problem first noted by Robert Cope almost two decades previously, a problem of departmental strategic planning.

What Robert Cope of the University of Washington noted in the 1980s was that strategic planning made absolutely no sense for most faculty members. Traditional planning efforts were too theoretical and too remote from the needs of the individual academic departments. What Cope suggested instead of traditional planning (here we could substitute the term *self-study*) was a shorter and more focused process. A good planning effort, he argued, should not consume an entire academic year. Further, he proposed that all strategic plans be accompanied by what he termed a "quick start," a program that would demonstrate immediate results to the faculty and staff who participated in the planning process.[1] This became the basis for an extremely successful series of academic management seminars in the late 1980s and early 1990s at Snowmass, Colorado. However, as useful as Cope's work was for institution-wide strategic planning, it did not answer questions of assessment and departmental direction. These he addressed in another series of planning papers in the 1990s.

As before, Cope emphasized the value of speed. This time, he linked speedy decision making to his long-term work on environmental scanning and, at that time, the new concept of total quality management. His study, *Total Management for Organizations: Concepts and Tools*, was published in 1991. He also added a departmental perspective to strategic planning in an intriguing article he wrote for the *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*. While both were written for institutional planners, they gave departmental planners a number of new tools.[2] All of which leads us to the question of researching and writing a departmental plan in such a manner that it includes not only an accurate environmental scan, but also simple assessment strategies and, most importantly, the dedicated efforts of the entire faculty. That was the question that concerned Walsh University in 1997–1998 and Mount Marty College in 2001–2002.

As the dean and academic vice president who introduced new ideas in planning to both Walsh and Mount Marty, I am the first to admit that many of Walsh's 1997 efforts and Mount Marty's 2001 efforts were tentative at best. While the chairs and I discussed issues of assessment and planning, our focus at the outset was too theoretical. Furthermore, both the Walsh president of 1995 and my predecessor at Mount Marty had instituted planning processes that had transformed planning from a departmental issue into an arcane and highly sophisticated matter that consumed infinite time and was understood by almost no one. If an accreditation visit had not loomed on the horizon, both Walsh and Mount Marty would still be struggling with excessively complex planning and assessment processes.

Self-Study and Departmental Planning

What the immediacy of a site visit did for both campuses was to switch planning emphasis away from the abstract world of the statisticians to the practical reality of the academic departments. Real issues of budget priorities, faculty lines, and program assessment came back to the fore. Furthermore, the new fifth criterion made the departments even more aware of their responsibilities in the area of semi-independent external units. Both Walsh and Mount Marty had branch campuses. Still, the departmental planning world began with the issue that I had first raised with the chairs in 1995, that of simplifying assessment.

For those of us who remember the time before the North Central Association spoke actively of assessment, the evaluation of student learning was always a threatening cloud that hung low on the horizon. We knew it was coming, but not when. Like most deans, I attended virtually every American Association of Higher Education assessment workshop and discovered a number of ways to assess everything from learning in the major to the mastery of English composition. A number of these tools were relatively easy to implement, and I promptly did exactly that at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and, later, at a branch campus of Penn State University. Since that time in the early 1990s, I have discovered the work of Zoula Huffman, who rather neatly summarizes many of the issues of academic measurement. Although Huffman was writing about community colleges, many of the departmental issues addressed were vitally important to four-year schools. For example, her paper gave concrete guidance on how a department should incorporate data on the percentage of adjuncts teaching courses, on the progress of transfer students, and on the constant problem of retention.[3] Still, the emphasis at both Walsh and Mount Marty was not on the theoretical work of anyone, but rather on how best to grow our own useful assessment measures. This we did at Walsh with the 1995 assessment plan we submitted to the NCA. Perhaps the most important part of the plan was that it relied almost exclusively on departmental measures rather than on neatly prepared commercial assessment packages. Six years later, I drew upon that plan as I worked with the Mount Marty assessment committee to devise a MMC assessment plan. Our areas of emphasis were peer review by similar departments at well-regarded small colleges; careful alumni surveys; employer surveys for business, education, and nursing; and the judicious use of the field examination for other departments. Mount Marty had already discovered the problems posed by commercial assessment when it abandoned the academic profile in 1997.

Back at Walsh, planning had lagged until the chairs asked for a departmental plan template. This would not be a model plan (what several probably wanted), but rather a series of questions that the faculty and chair could address as they prepared a plan. This had been the approach adopted in 1988–1989 when the North Central Association had last visited Walsh. Then, the association had actually printed a guide listing critical questions for departmental planning. However, the guide had been written before assessment and before the NCA adopted its fifth criterion. It became the dean's job to create a 1997 and then a 2001 adaptation.

The Planning Guide

While the questions originally posed by the NCA staff in 1988 were still useful, there were a number of pieces of data missing. For example, if the long-term result of departmental planning is resource allocation, what data should be used to compare departments? Further, in the allocation of new programs, lines, and equipment, what criteria should be used to rate various plans? Is a heart monitor for the nursing program more important than a marketing faculty member for the business division? These were questions that the chairs and I would have to answer annually. They were questions that would have to be answered in an equitable, non-political manner that would hold up to the scrutiny of the losing departments as well as the winners. To answer such questions in a rational manner, I turned to several sources.

First, I used the work of Sydney Walston and Jerry Misner published in the *Journal of Higher Education Management*. They had suggested a model of decision making based upon such factors as enrollment, credit-hour production, program quality, and external support. The two authors also noted the importance of a department's political influence, something we were trying to avoid.[4] Second, I reviewed the work of Dona Fountoukidis and Martin E. Hahn on their experience in departmental strategic planning at William Paterson College in New Jersey. While they followed the ideas of Robert Cope, the process seemed excessively complex for the small departments of Walsh University and even more so for Mount Marty College.[5] Thus, with great trepidation, I ventured into the unknown with a "A Guide to Preparing a Departmental Plan." Much to my relief, the reaction of the chairs was generally positive. That was in 1997. A further revision of the guide came in 2001 for use by Mount Marty College in its self-study.

The Implementation Process

While planning is no doubt a good exercise for any department, it would not fulfill its larger purpose at either Walsh or Mount Marty unless it became the cornerstone of resource allocation. At Walsh, once the department plans were readied in late 1997, the chairs and I had a series of meetings to allocate faculty lines and departmental budgets in January 1998. While the chairs as a group were skeptical (after all, they had always depended upon allocation from above), they entered into negotiations in an open and positive manner. Our first meeting was dedicated to the issue of allocating new faculty lines.

How should faculty lines be allocated? Our first decision was what criteria should be used to judge the various departmental requests. After perhaps an hour of give and take, we settled upon the following criteria.

1. **Demonstrated programmatic need:** if a departmental plan had clearly demonstrated the need for a faculty line and that need had been verified by external assessment data (example, business had a marketing minor, but no full-time marketing faculty)

2. **Excessive reliance on part-time faculty:** if a department could show excessive reliance (more than 40 percent of classes) on part-time faculty and that part-time faculty had poorer academic preparation than full-time faculty (we treated the core curriculum as a department in this review)

3. **Growth in numbers of majors:** if a department could demonstrate a multi-year trend of increasing numbers of students majoring in the discipline without an increase in faculty resources

4. **External accreditation issues:** if a department could show that its accrediting body demanded more faculty resources than were currently available

We did not rank the criteria. Rather, we asked every department to use the four criteria as they presented their cases. Far from the confusion and political posturing that had been predicted, the ten chairs unanimously backed three new faculty positions in the first year (1998) and an additional three in the subsequent year (1999). Reasons varied from the programmatic need of the business division for a marketing faculty person (a need verified by an extensive external review) to the communications department's rapid growth in the number of majors combined with a new program. The unanimity of the decision spoke well not only of the process but also of the maturity of Walsh University's department and division chairs. It also was a classic Cope "quick start."

Two weeks after the faculty lines were allocated, the Walsh chairs met to review departmental budget requests. There were marked similarities in the criteria. As a group, we again decided upon the issues that each department would have to address. The results of deliberations were again unanimous. Our prime expenditure in the first year was a heart monitor for the nursing program, while in 1999 we opted for a general upgrade in computing resources for faculty to prepare for online course work. Again, the decisions led to quick, measurable actions.

What we had done in the relatively short period of two years was to create a planning model that had real budget implications. It was done without rancor and with almost complete faculty support. While a few departments were still clinging to the hope that "all that assessment stuff" would go away, some judicious change in departmental leadership helped bring serious planners to the fore. Most importantly, the change took place only after it was demonstrated that planning required neither arcane statistics nor a long-term commitment to a mind-dulling task. In the same manner, simple assessment methods proved that the outcomes assessment[6] was really not that difficult.

The Mount Marty Experience

As Mary Miller and I began to plan the Mount Marty College self-study in 2001, I was assuming that the Walsh model would work in this new environment. However, there were serious questions about the efficacy of the model in a college that had not had the advantage of five years of careful preparation. With only eighteen months to implement the model, both Mary and I proceeded with some trepidation.

To summarize twelve months of very hard work, the Walsh model performed quite well. First, the planning guide took Mary's carefully selected committees and put them to work on a series of simple plans that demonstrated real progress quickly (Cope's "quick start"). This proved to be extremely important as the committees had begun to flounder in their deliberations before they were given the guide. The guide helped each department— academic and nonacademic—develop a plan. The plans, in turn, helped guide the committees in their review of the college. Consider, for example, the work of two of the committees.

The mission committee, which had the advantage of working with a well-developed mission effectiveness program, was able to spend its time making certain that mission effectiveness had indeed penetrated into the academic units. This aroused a very healthy dialogue between mission effectiveness and the science division, where a few faculty members had difficulty seeing the connection between the college mission and the preparation of science students. The planning committee, often sidetracked by the political battles of the past, was able to review both campus-wide planning schemes of the past and the departmental initiatives of the present. Its conclusions about the importance of grassroots planning were one of the great revelations of the entire self study. Could this wonderful committee process be translated into academic budgets? Did department self-studies really work?

In both November 2001 and November 2002, the academic divisions met in an effort to reach a consensus on budget priorities that were, in turn, linked to the departmental self-studies. To the surprise of all, the chairs reached unanimity even faster than their Walsh colleagues had. In 2001 a prioritized list of eleven faculty, equipment, and supply needs was decided within an hour and a half. These were then added to the college-wide plan and resulted in the hire of a new faculty member in 2002 (another "quick start"). A year later, the prioritizing process took less than an hour. Again, the decisions were incorporated into college plans and were seen immediately when advertisements for new faculty lines were placed in national journals. In both cases, decisions were reached by consensus and resulted in quick action at the college level. Even more surprising, from a dean's perspective, is the long-term boost the process gave to strategic planning. The departments and divisions have continued to plan even after they completed their Higher Learning Commission obligations. And, to my delight, their work is increasingly rooted in assessment.

In conclusion, our experience proved that simplicity and a series of modest aids transformed a daunting task routinely avoided by faculty into a short, rewarding experience with real and demonstrable results. In Robert Cope's terms, it provided a series of "quick starts" that showed that change was possible, even in academe.

Notes

[1] See Robert G. Cope, Strategic Planning, Management and Decision Making, AAHE-ERIC Research Report No. 9 (Washington, DC: American Association of Higher Education, 1981).

[2] Robert G. Cope and Lawrence Sherr, Total Management for Organizations: Concepts and Tools. A Handbook for Tertiary Education (ERIC Clearinghouse CE059771, 1991); Robert G. Cope and George Delaney, "Academic Program Review: A Market Strategy Perspective," Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, vol.3. no.2 (1991), pp. 63–86.

[3] Zoula Huffman et al., "Program Review: A Critical Analysis of Departmental Effectiveness. Revised," Paper presented at the Consortium for Community College Development Annual Summer Institute on Institutional Effectiveness and Student Success, Tempe, AZ, June 22–25, 1997. The MMC approach is seen in footnote 6.

[4] Sydney Walston and Jerry Misner, "Implications of Program Review for Academic Departments in the 90's," Journal of Higher Education Management, vol. 8, no. 1 (fall 1992), pp. 35–42.

[5] Dona Fountoukidis and Martin E. Hahn, "Taking Charge of Change Through Strategic Planning in Academic Departments: The Case Study of a Biology Department," Paper presented to the Society for College and University Planning, San Francisco, CA, July 25, 1994. The department in question used a rather involved series of department retreats to plan.

[6] Walsh used four simple measures: (1) regular external peer review by other colleges; (2) regular alumni surveys; (3) employer surveys, where appropriate; and (4) the field examination in certain departments (primarily business).

James C. Foster is Academic Dean at Mount Marty College in Yankton, South Dakota.

Engaging in Accreditation: Using Staff Development to Achieve Total Participation

Randall Van Wagoner and Sharon Cole Hoffman

Background

Metropolitan Community College (MCC) is a comprehensive community college consisting of three campuses and three centers throughout its four-county service area in the Omaha metropolitan region of Nebraska, which has an estimated population of 646,641. As the third largest postsecondary institution and one of six community colleges in the state, MCC offers more than a hundred one- and two-year career program options, a wide array of student support services, developmental and adult education, and continuing and noncredit education, as well as customized training for local employers. MCC serves 7,444 full-time equivalent (FTE) credit students and 334 FTE noncredit students.

Context

One of the many challenges in conducting a successful self-study is to engage all employees in the process. Some institutions try to address this by documenting the participation of each individual in the self-study process, from committee membership to moving a file cabinet for the resource room. Many institutions are able to achieve 100 percent employee involvement through this loose interpretation of the term *involvement*. The real challenge is to actively engage employees in the self-study process. MCC addressed this challenge through a three-hour required professional development course that was very well received.

Professional Development at MCC

MCC's professional development program requires all full-time regular employees to participate in a minimum of twenty-one contact hours of approved professional development activities per fiscal year. Although individualized development from book reports to professional conferences are accepted, the majority of employees fulfill this requirement by enrolling in professional development courses on site. Employees can review the in-house professional development offerings, course descriptions, facilitator biographies, time, location, and seat availability online via the college intranet. They register through the same telephone or Web registration processes students use to register for classes. All activity is tracked by the Professional Development department, which provides monthly transcript updates to employees and supervisors. One of the most important benefits of the extensive staff development offerings consistently cited by MCC employees is the opportunity to interact with staff from other departments and sites in the college's multi-campus environment.

In the twenty-one contact hours, all full-time employees are required to take one designated three-hour core course. This core course provides an opportunity for all full-time college employees to have a shared experience related to a major initiative underway at MCC. Previous core courses have focused on teamwork, organizational change, systems thinking, and communication. As preparations were being made for the self-study process, accreditation was identified as a major topic, worthy of being the focus of the core course. During the 2001–2002 academic year, 709 full-time regular employees participated in twenty-nine sections of the core course, *Daze of Our Lives: Then, Now, and Later,* which was the college's approach to reaching 100 percent participation in the self-study process. Members of the self-study steering committee and the criterion committee chairpersons volunteered to facilitate these core sessions.

What follows are segments of the required course. Even if a college lacks the infrastructure to implement a required course, one or more aspects of the course contents could be included in any institution's approach to reaching 100 percent employee involvement in the self-study process.

Course Segments

- **MCC timeline and employee history.** As an introductory activity and to get a historical perspective of who was in each session, participants placed their names and a color-coded dot corresponding to the campus or center where they worked on Post-It notes. They placed the notes on a large timeline and told the group when they began working at MCC. This brief activity gave way to extemporaneous storytelling about the early days of the college, which was wonderful for the new employees to hear. Participants then identified one significant change that occurred at the college in the past ten years or since they were employed and discussed their perspectives in small groups. For new employees, this activity served as a means to increase their institutional knowledge and better understand current organizational realities in context.

- **Student learning as the center.** After reflecting on MCC's mission, participants answered the question, "What is one thing that must happen at the college for MCC to fulfill its mission?" Through discussion, the participants were guided toward the idea that if students don't learn, the college is not fulfilling its mission. The manner in which the Higher Learning Commission holds the college accountable for student learning through the accreditation process was then presented and discussed. The group subsequently brainstormed answers to why it is important to be accredited. This was a particularly meaningful segment for participants to actively review the centrality of accreditation to the operation of the organization.

- **Organizational contrast.** Participants were placed in groups and asked to discuss one change listed on the distributed "Then and Now Fact Sheet." The fact sheet contained information pertaining to general fund expenditures, employees, enrollment profile, tuition charges, and graduates and awards, comparing data for each category in the previous ten years. Each group identified and discussed benefits and drawbacks to any changes. One person recorded the group's points, and another reported its conclusions. Large group discussions were generated with reports from the groups. Conclusions usually were that the college had significantly changed in the last ten years, which had positively and negatively impacted the organization in many ways. Good discussions and new perspectives were generated through this activity.

- **Degrees of connection to student learning.** Participants were invited to identify the number of people, steps, layers, or degrees between their jobs and student learning. For example, a faculty member is closest to student learning, a direct connection. On the other hand, janitors and some administrators may be three to four steps away from student learning but still play a vital role in creating an environment so students learn.

  After this discussion, participants watched ten-minute videos of two case studies in which students shared barriers to their learning and ways that college employees had helped them through these difficulties or supported them. In most cases, the employees named were not directly connected to student learning but contributed in some way through their job responsibilities. Facilitators had the choice of seven different testimonials with summaries of college departments and functions that were mentioned. This flexibility allowed facilitators to tailor the videos to the composition of the groups. Discussions pertaining to how all employees in some way influence student learning followed. This activity demonstrated the power of the college's mission in transforming lives through the dedication of all employees.

- **Self-study and employee input.** The self-study evaluation process, including the five criteria along with the purpose of the evaluation team's visit, was explained to participants. The idea that the college completes a self-study report first was also explained. A draft of the strengths and challenges for each criterion identified through the self study was shared. Participants were asked to review those strengths and challenges and comment on their validity. Did they reflect the institution's reality? Was there anything missing? Large group discussions addressing these questions generated much thought among participants, who were then invited to write down any comments or suggestions to improve the strengths and challenges. The comments were turned in at the end of the session or were later sent to the self-study coordinator. Employee input was utilized in revising MCC's self-study report, provided that patterns of evidence were present. Some refreshing perspectives helped clarify and fine-tune a number of report areas.

- **Hallway questions.** Participants were told that any MCC employee could be asked questions by the visiting evaluation team to ensure that all employees were part of the self-study process. Employees were encouraged to answer all questions honestly and were told that it was acceptable to say they didn't know an answer if they didn't.

  In order to provide guided practice for employees in answering questions, each participant drew a question from a hat. Employees could answer the questions themselves or choose someone else to respond. This activity was a fun close to the session. Interest was piqued, and new information was shared by those who did have answers.

Conclusion

Not only did this mandatory professional development course prepare all employees for the evaluation visit, but it also initiated some powerful discussions about student learning and the role of all employees in creating a positive learning environment. Thoughtprovoking discussions of the college's strengths and challenges emerged from these sessions. The goal of obtaining 100 percent employee participation was achieved. However, the real benefit was the provision of an avenue for meaningful discussions among all full-time employees. People felt engaged in the accreditation process, could see their input taken seriously in the changes made to the self-study report, and had a chance to gain a variety of perspectives on the complex mission and operation of the college.

Randall Van Wagoner is Vice President of Educational Services at Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, Nebraska.

Sharon Cole Hoffman is Planning Coordinator at Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, Nebraska.

Preparing for the Visit While Focusing on Institutional Improvement

Sherril Hoel and Peggy Simpson

DeVry University

DeVry University (DVU) is a multi-site university offering undergraduate and graduate programs in business and technology at twenty-two campuses and thirty-six stand-alone adult learning educational centers located throughout the United States and an online education center operated out of the DeVry University central headquarters in Oakbrook Terrace, Illinois. DeVry University was accredited in February 2002 as a result of the approval to transfer the SASs of two DeVry Inc.-owned institutions, Keller Graduate School of Management (NCA-accredited in 1977) and DeVry Institutes (NCA-accredited in 1981), to DeVry University.

The Visit

The first comprehensive evaluation visit of DeVry University was conducted from August 5 to 15 and November 20 to 22, 2002. The visit included a fifteen-member Higher Learning Commission team and representatives from four of the five other regional accrediting bodies—Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (NWASC), Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), and Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSACS). Higher Learning Commission teams of two to six members were assigned to conduct visits to ten of the university's locations. During the week of August 5, teams visited campuses and centers located in Washington, California, and Colorado; representatives of WASC and NWASC participated in the Washington and California visits. On Monday, August 12, teams visited campuses and centers in Ohio, New Jersey, and Illinois; representatives from MSACS participated in the visit to New Jersey. The entire fifteen-member Higher Learning Commission team participated in the August 13–15 visits to DeVry University Online and to DeVry University's central offices in Oakbrook Terrace, Illinois. The comprehensive evaluation visit was concluded in November when a Higher Learning Commission team, accompanied by representatives from SACS, visited a campus and adult learning center in Texas.

The Focus: Institutional Improvement

An institution's readiness for the team visit is a demonstration of its commitment to the accreditation process, and the preparations for hosting a team are critical to the success of the visit. Given the then "newness" of DeVry University, the complexities of a multi-site visit, and the length of time to prepare for the visit, many discussions were held on how to maximize the use of time and resources that would be required in helping campuses and centers prepare for the August visit. The decision was made to conduct activities and apply a strategy that would not only assist campuses in preparing for the visit but, more importantly, would focus more broadly on institutional improvement. The strategy agreed upon encouraged participation by administrators and faculty and staff at all DeVry University locations, including those not scheduled to be visited by the Higher Learning Commission team.

☐ **Institutional Improvement Focus No. 1. Individual Campus and Graduate School Self-Study Reports and Evaluations of Implementation of the Institutional Assessment Plan**

The first institutional improvement focus was one common to all institutions preparing for a comprehensive evaluation and had actually taken place by the time DeVry University, as a new institution, was accredited in 2002. While a single DeVry University self-study report was required in 2002, from early 2000 to the end of 2001 each of DeVry University's twenty-two campuses and the graduate school conducted a campus-specific self-study and completed a self-study report using a consistent format organized around the five evaluative criteria. Special attention was directed to each campus' evaluation of its progress in implementing the university's assessment plan. These self-studies were organized by local steering and assessment committees.

In January 2002 the DeVry Institutes and Keller Graduate School of Management steering committees were combined into a single steering committee and began meeting to write the DeVry University self-study report, using information taken from the individual campus and graduate school self-study reports. The integrated self-study report was completed in June 2002.

☐ **Institutional Improvement Focus No. 2. Faculty and Academic Leader Assemblies (FALAs)**

During the months of May and June, one-day faculty and academic leader assemblies (FALAs) were held in the fourteen metropolitan areas in which DeVry University operates. The theme for these FALAs was *DeVry university: changes, opportunities, and challenges.* Sessions led by local administrators and senior managers from DeVry University central administrative offices included the following.

- Strategic plan for DVU (general session)
- Assessment revisited (breakout sessions)
- Faculty opportunities (breakout sessions)
- NCA Accreditation visit (general session)

These assemblies gave academic staff members throughout the system an opportunity to seek clarification and to contribute in small-group breakout sessions on issues critical to the successful evolution of DeVry University. Also of value was the opportunity for graduate and undergraduate faculty to interact and to participate jointly in discussions related to faculty and assessment. Moreover, a cross-pollination of ideas between the undergraduate and graduate organizations began occurring. A Web site accessible to all DVU faculty and staff members was created for the FALAs; there the schedule and general program information was posted, individuals registered, and summaries of the notes and issues presented by participants from sessions at all FALAs were posted.

☐ **Institutional Improvement Focus No. 3. Internal Visits to All DeVry University Locations**

In July and August, teams of two or three DeVry University consultant-evaluators conducted visits to all DeVry University locations, including those not scheduled to be visited by the Higher Learning Commission comprehensive evaluation team. Subteams of a total team of twenty-nine internal consultant-evaluators conducted nineteen one- and two-day visits. The campuses and centers were given a handbook to guide them in preparing for the visit, and C-Es were given a guidebook for conducting these internal visits. Small-group interviews were scheduled with academic and student service staff members, an open invitation was extended to faculty and to students to meet with the DeVry University C-Es, and classroom observations were conducted.

As explained in the introduction to the *Handbook for Evaluation Visit* and in the *Guidebook for DeVry University Consultant-Evaluators,*

> These one-day visits will mirror as much as possible our understanding of what the NCA evaluation team site visits will consist of. While one of the purposes of these visits is to raise the "comfort level" of staff at the campuses/centers, another, more important, long-range objective is to provide opportunities for **institutional learning** that will lead to **institutional improvement** as we continue to evolve as DeVry University. It is for this reason that we are conducting site visits at all locations.

Members of the DVU steering committee and senior managers from DVU's central offices conducted the visits. Two handbooks were prepared by the NCA visit task force and distributed to appropriate staff. The campus presidents and center directors were provided a *Handbook for Evaluation Visit*, and the DeVry consultant-evaluators were provided a *Guidebook for Consultant-Evaluators*. One or both of the documents included the following.

- Letter from the DeVry University president
- Schedule of visits, including team assignments and travel plans
- Agenda for visits including an annotated agenda for the C-Es with suggested questions
- Samples of letters to use to announce the visit and instructions for inviting faculty and students to meet with the team
- Instructions for logistical arrangements and team room requirements
- Role of C-Es and the lead C-E responsibilities
- Resource room requirements
- Instructions for file review and interviews
- List of contents for Campus Profile Book
- Criteria for Accreditation and Patterns of Evidence
- Evaluation form for classroom observations
- Team report format and instructions for submitting

In addition to providing the *guidebook,* two teleconferences were held to "train" consultant-evaluators on the techniques for conducting a successful visit. Because the C-E team did not include individuals from the campus/center visited, those interviewed were not reluctant to share sensitive information or negative comments. Focusing on institutional improvement requires a commitment to listen to all constituencies and an assurance that their recommendations for improvement will be heard by those responsible for decision making.

The feedback from the campuses and centers on the value of conducting these visits was very positive. The consensus was that in a geographically distributed, multi-site institution, it is important for central administrators and staff from other campuses and centers to visit locations on a periodic basis with a system-wide objective in mind and with a focus on specific academic and operations goals. Given the agreed-upon value of these visits, the plan is to conduct system-wide, organized, internal evaluation visits to all campuses again in 2005. Visit teams will use the reports prepared from these 2002 visits and the information in the campus three-year plans to assess progress made in addressing opportunities for improvement.

☐ **Institutional Improvement Focus No. 4. Evaluation Team Reports**

One of the responsibilities of the lead consultant-evaluator was to ensure that a team visit report would be produced following a consistent format—beginning with the campus visited, the date of the visit, the team members, a summary of the visit, and findings reported under the following headings:

- Institutional Mission
- Academic Quality Assurance Processes
- Student Services, including Admission Standards and Practices
- Curriculum/Course Development Process
- Planning, Finances, Information Technology
- Library Services and General Education
- Resource Room Materials
- Faculty Interviews
- Student Interviews
- Facility "Check"
- Student and Faculty Files
- Opportunities for Improvement—Local
- Opportunities for Improvement—Central and System-wide
- Strengths/Best Practices

The team reports were shared with the campuses and centers and provided to the appropriate senior and regional managers. Every campus is required to prepare a rolling three-year plan in which it will report its progress in addressing the opportunities for improvement identified by the pre-visit team.

Much institutional learning was facilitated in these institutional improvement activities. By engaging the entire geographically disparate organization in the same activities at the same time to achieve a successful common goal, DeVry University, an institution of graduate and undergraduate programs and faculty, began building a common culture. The combined steering committee worked with multiple internal self-study reports to integrate the contents into one cohesive document, which brought the commonalities and differences in policies and practices to the forefront. At the FALAs, campus and center faculty and staff members were given an opportunity to ask questions about the strategic direction of DeVry University, and graduate and undergraduate faculty came together to focus on assessment and expanded opportunities for all faculty. The internal visits to all locations provided campus and center staff members with a way to provide feedback that would be heard by senior management, to share best practices that could have value system-wide, and to learn more about the upcoming Higher Learning Commission visit. Additionally, the internal C-Es engaged in institutional learning by observing the academic environment and practices at locations other than their own and by hearing how central administration could best support local operations. The information gleaned from the internal visit team reports and the campus and graduate school self-study reports are proving useful in planning institutional improvement activities.

☐ Owning Your Own Visit. Successful Visit Contributing Factors

The team chair for DeVry University's comprehensive evaluation visit was Dr. Richard Gowen, president of South Dakota School of Mines and Technology. Dr. Gowen developed a Web-based tool to use in managing a multi-site comprehensive evaluation visit. On this Web site were posted (1) information about DeVry University, including our self-study report, the programs offered, and a directory of university staff with whom team members would want to visit; (2) information about the Higher Learning Commission and the accreditation process; and (3) information about the visit itself, including the assignment of team members to campus and center visits, their travel plans, and the agendas with assigned team members and institutional staff for each of the campuses scheduled to be visited. All individuals listed in the DeVry University directory and all team members had access to this Web site and could monitor the team's preparations and plans for conducting the visit. The team chair used this site to make team assignments for focus areas and interviews, to communicate with the team, to collect input for the team report, and to post the team report itself. This Web-based tool proved to be very effective both for DVU and for the evaluation team, especially for managing this type of comprehensive evaluation visit given the number of team members involved, the visits to disparate locations, and the participation of the other regional accrediting bodies.

As noted on page 105 of the *Handbook of Accreditation*, (Second Edition):

> The institutions that derive the greatest benefit from evaluation visits are those with a clear and accurate sense of their strengths and their challenges. They are also the institutions that have prepared the total institutional community for the visit.

The institutional improvement activities detailed above focused the entire organization on the strengths of the organization and the challenges that were ahead in a context that increased the comfort level of the campuses and centers in preparing for **the visit.** With this objective met, central and local staff members could focus on the details of facilitating a successful visit with a higher level of confidence. Central and campus/center administration proceeded in a parallel and consultative fashion.

The detailed visit preparation activities were led by the assistant to the DeVry University president. It was her responsibility, as project manager, to coordinate all information for the Web site, to communicate regularly with the team chair's assistant, to work with designated local campus coordinators to provide guidance for local preparations, and to manage the full team's visit to the central offices. The following logistical items were mirrored at each visited site.

- Team travel arrangements to and from the airport, hotel, and campus
- Welcome letter at hotel for each team member upon check-in, detailing key hotel contacts, first meeting and its location, logistics for travel to campus/center
- Resource rooms containing
  - Common organization-wide documents (e.g., university-wide strategic plan, central administration organizational chart)
  - Locally specific reports (e.g., local three-year plan, local organizational chart)
  - Team room network connections and computers for each visitor
- Personnel with parallel duties (e.g., escorts, meeting timekeepers)
- Signage outside group meeting rooms, with beginning and ending times listed
- On-site and off-site meal arrangements as requested by the team chair

The project manager for the visit also worked closely with the dean of academic administration and accreditation to ensure that all requests from the team chair were met in a timely and accurate manner. The dean had unfettered access to all members of the university's senior management during the visit preparation period, and all members of senior management made the visit preparations their highest priority and responded in a timely fashion to her requests. Finally, the dean worked very closely with the team chair and the team chair's assistant to be sure that, as questions and concerns became evident, they were answered in a timely way. As plans for the visit evolved over a several-month period, the relationship of the team chair and the dean became one that allowed the university to respond to emerging and/or unanticipated questions and concerns in ways that were helpful to the team.

DeVry University's focus on institutional improvement activities in the midst of preparing for a comprehensive evaluation visit to its multiple locations and its ability to *own its visit* were contributing factors leading to a successful visit.

Sherril Hoel is Dean of Academic Administration and Accreditation at DeVry University in Oakbrook Terrace, Illinois.

Peggy Simpson is Director of Graduate Student Services at DeVry University in Oakbrook Terrace, Illinois.

Continuity, Coordination, and Change: Planning, Assessment, and Higher Learning Commission/NCATE Reviews

Elizabeth H. Davis and Suzanne Jessup

Southern Arkansas University (SAU), Magnolia, is a regional institution in southwest Arkansas with a headcount enrollment in fall 2002 of 3,025. Accredited by the North Central Association since 1929, SAU offers associate's, bachelor's, and selected master's degree programs and is proud of its dedication to teaching; its supportive and caring atmosphere; and its recent increases in enrollment, preparedness of the entering freshman class, and diversity of the student body.

Between spring 2000, when Southern Arkansas University began preparations for a review for continued accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission, and November 2002 when the team visited the campus, the institution experienced many changes and challenges.

- In this thirty-month period, the university had three presidents and three vice presidents for academic affairs, and all four academic schools had new deans.
- SAU's assessment plan, approved by the North Central Association in 1995, had been slow in implementation as of spring 2000. Thus, significant and immediate progress on assessment was essential.
- SAU's vital review by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education was also scheduled for 2002–2003. Three successive faculty members held the post of NCATE coordinator between spring 2000 and fall 2002.

Administrative changes, assessment needs, and multiple accreditation reviews are common challenges. SAU's integration of planning, assessment, and simultaneous self-study processes may provide a useful example for other institutions.

Symbiosis of Strategic Planning and Self-Study

The structures of strategic planning, developed through two successive cycles at SAU (1995–2000 and 2000–2005) assisted greatly with the Higher Learning Commission self-study throughout the administrative changes between 2000 and 2002. In turn, the self-study process for the Higher Learning Commission assisted in ensuring the continuity of strategic planning.

- ◇ **Contribution of strategic planning 2000–2005 to the Higher Learning Commission self-study 2000–2002**
  - *Record of data:* The previous round of strategic planning had established some structures—in particular, the office of institutional research and institutional data books providing an accurate, accessible record of basic data since 1995.
  - *Orientation of coordinator:* The newly appointed self-study coordinator served as an *ex officio* member of the strategic planning 2000–2005 steering committee. The established planning procedures, process, and structures provided an invaluable orientation to the university-wide responsibility of self-study.
  - *Inclusion of accreditation and assessment in plan:* Specific strategic planning objectives in 2000–2005 included a successful accreditation review and an effective assessment program.
  - *Analyzable data in measures:* The self-study report integrated many measures developed as part of the strategic plan. These measures enabled analysis of data in relation to goals and objectives to create an analytical, not just a descriptive, self-study. The strategic plan identified such analyzable data as
    - Amount of money expended in research grants
    - Number and percentage of international students enrolled
    - Retention rates of African American students

- Percentage of full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty
- Number of students processed early for financial aid
- Retention rates of students with scholarships

◇ **Contribution of the Higher Learning Commission self-study 2000–2002 to strategic planning 2000–2005**

- *Contribution of previous team report:* The candid external assessment from the most recent NCA accreditation visit team report in 1992 usefully augmented the analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the first stages of strategic planning 2000–2005. The previous strategic plan of 1995–2000 had, in fact, addressed many recommendations of the 1992 report, but the team report itself had not been brought forward so explicitly in 1995 as in 2000. At SAU in 2000, the 1992 report highlighted both progress since 1992 and areas still requiring attention, like assessment.
- *Implementation of measures:* The self-study process also actually implemented several strategic planning measures. For example, rather than the method of data collection originally envisioned, a self-study questionnaire in fall 2001 asked the faculty several questions related to such strategic planning objectives as collaborative learning, interaction between faculty and students outside of class, discussion of contemporary problems in classes, inclusion of multicultural materials, and cross-disciplinary activities.

Assessment of Student Learning: How to Get It Going

As acknowledged in the self-study, in fall 2002 SAU was at Level 2 on the Higher Learning Commission levels of implementation, with an emerging program of assessment. A fair evaluation in spring 2000 would have placed SAU at Level 1. Although some assessment activities were occurring (for example, the state-mandated administration of the CAAP exam to all rising juniors), an ad hoc assessment committee had become inactive, and the only current assessment report was a 1999 notebook of planned assessment procedures for each department, which included no references to learning goals. Progress to an emerging program by 2002 necessitated major efforts. SAU's experience suggests the following specific advice for rapid progress under pressure.

◇ **Integrate assessment with strategic planning, and get support from the highest levels of the administration.**

◇ **Ensure permanent institutional structures.** At SAU, the inactive ad hoc assessment committee became a standing academic committee chaired by a permanent assessment coordinator with released time.

◇ **Facilitate efficient but inclusive discussions by the use of models.** At SAU in spring 2000, few departments had identified learning goals, and the faculty had not revised the general education learning goals since the 1980s. In fall 2000, the SAU faculty began the revision of general education goals by using models from other institutions as starting points for discussion. The process included several email questionnaires, general faculty meetings, a curriculum-mapping project involving most departments, and many meetings of the general education committee. In spring 2001, with the university-wide revision of general education goals nearing completion, departments developed learning goals for major and minor programs, again beginning with a packet of possible learning goals collected from other institutions, completing the process by the end of spring 2001.

◇ **Develop reporting schedules.** At SAU, deans and department heads monitor annual assessment reports from each department, including course-embedded assessment projects from faculty, based upon the model in *Effective Grading* by Barbara E. Walvoord and Virginia Johnson Anderson (1998).

◇ **Provide rewards, even if they are modest.** At SAU, the assessment committee tried several strategies to develop the course-embedded assessments. However, the project received wide notice only after a mini-grant opportunity in which faculty members volunteered to write a "classroom assessment report" for $100, a publication in a small booklet, and a free lunch at which they made a presentation about their project. The assessment committee has published a second volume of the booklet, and faculty enthusiasm for and creativity with the projects is often surprising. The classroom assessment reports not only measure learning but also serve as vehicles for sharing ideas about teaching and learning. As they become more scholarly in collection and analysis of data, the classroom assessments can contribute to faculty achievements in pedagogical research. The SAU faculty still must better integrate these classroom projects within a structured framework that documents, over time, the achievement of learning goals and the systematic, unified analysis of data in a feedback loop, but very modest rewards led to positive celebrations of teaching and learning across the curriculum.

◇ **Maintain published records, utilizing the potential for universal access through technology.** At SAU, a continually updated Web page maintains a living document of the assessment of student learning that is much easier to access than notebooks, which are expensive to print, difficult to update, easily lost, and limited in their visual capabilities. At SAU, some classroom assessment reports—for example, those from art, theater, and computer classes—include color displays of student work. See SAU's assessment Web page is at <http://www.saumag.edu/assessment/assessment.htm>.

◇ **Do what you can, when you can, even if you don't follow the usual expected procedures.** Assessment programs should start with a plan, identifying in advance how and when to measure goals. However, situations differ. To take an analogy from English composition, some composition theorists require students to create a detailed, formal outline before drafting; others recognize that coherent texts sometimes develop differently, through a discovery draft and a recursive process of revision that returns to planning after drafting. Between 2000 and 2002, using as much as possible from the 1995 plan, the SAU faculty developed goals and implemented assessment procedures for those goals. Now, SAU must more clearly articulate the coherent, permanent structures of assessment activities. Nevertheless, between spring 2000 and fall 2002, SAU drafted assessment reports for all departments—with information for 1999 (collated from the notebook of planned assessment procedures for each department), 2000, 2001, and 2002. At SAU, assessment efforts, as a discovery draft, are truly emerging, and there is even some enthusiasm for the process.

Multitasking and Making Lemonade: NCA, NCATE, or NCA/TE

For any institution, multiple major reviews within a single year present special challenges. On the very same day SAU sent its self-study to the team from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association (NCA), several units were completing rejoinders to program reviews for the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Even though it is decidedly a lemon to have virtually simultaneous high-stakes visits, there are some possibilities of lemonade. SAU's experience suggests the following advice about collaboration:

◇ **Share committee memberships and information.** At SAU, the coordinators of both the Higher Learning Commission and NCATE reviews served as *ex officio* members of the steering committees for both self-studies, the data management team, and the assessment committee. The collaboration went beyond just sharing information. Through committee discussions, mutual needs helped construct review processes.

◇ **Collaborate on data collection.** With a little planning, a single survey can prepare data for both reviews.

◇ **Share data electronically.** At SAU, the most effective electronic communications were online files and email attachments.

◇ **Learn from one another about assessment.** At SAU, assessment efforts by the teacher education faculty for NCATE helped the university as a whole (particularly the unit's experience with learning goals, curriculum mapping, and assessment planning). In turn, university-wide efforts assisted teacher education (particularly in course-embedded assessments and online reports).

◇ **Cooperate in providing information to the campus.** Information disseminated for one review can prepare the university for the other review as well—for example, knowledge of the university mission and goals, awareness of the university's strengths and challenges, and advice about how to meet with visiting team members. Although confusion between NCA and NCATE (or is it NCA/TE?) presented a continuous challenge at SAU, the coordinators collaborated on distinctions—such as incorporating the NCATE logo for visual contrast with NCA and presenting electronic messages in different formats (email updates with online links for NCA, items in the weekly online faculty/staff bulletin for NCATE).

◇ **Collaborate on motel and resource room arrangements.** Visiting teams' needs may differ, but information can be shared about such motel amenities as Internet connections and meeting rooms. At SAU, selected documents already collected in a resource room for the NCA Higher Learning Commission visit—as well as computers, printers, and the general space environment—remained in place for the NCATE visit three months later.

◇ **Consider the benefits university-wide of the model that unit accreditation provides.** At SAU, the NCATE process is continuous, with a permanent documents room and a permanent coordinator. While the customary Higher Learning Commission ten-year cycle does not necessitate a permanent coordinator, a more continuous approach to university-wide accreditation will provide clearer direction about important data to maintain and about permanent structures like a data management team.

Though the preceding points were the most significant factors in meeting SAU's major self-study challenges, the following tips—for the most part gleaned from previous Higher Learning Commission conferences—were especially helpful in SAU's self-study process:

- Take the opportunity for assistance from the Higher Learning Commission staff liaison, particularly advice about information the team expects to find in the self-study.
- Take the opportunity for assistance from a consultant-evaluator.
- Use an executive summary to communicate the main points of the self-study. At SAU, the steering committee distributed draft executive summaries to invite comments and then final summaries in various formats within the two months immediately

prior to the visit: full hard copy to faculty, staff, and the board of trustees; a bookmark version for students; and PowerPoint® presentations for faculty, staff, and the board of trustees.

- Prepare faculty, staff, and students for what to expect in the team visit—with possible questions— and advise them to select a portion of the self-study to become an "expert" in, even if they do not have time to study the entire document. At SAU, the steering committee used weekly emailed updates for this advice.
- Begin the resource room early, and seek assistance from library staff, professionals with special expertise in cataloging, shelving, and displaying documents.
- Choose a simple layout for the self-study to facilitate the revision of both print and online versions, and publish the final version on the Web (as an HTML file rather than a PDF file) to enable easy access both by the institution and the visiting team.

SAU's experience demonstrates the importance of structures like strategic planning to foster an institutional viability that exists apart from individuals who hold key positions. It also demonstrates the continuing contribution of accreditation to institutional improvement—at SAU, through self-study collaboration on multiple accreditation reviews, assessment efforts, and, finally, the excellent and detailed advice from the visiting team.

Southern Arkansas University's 2002 self-study and other documents, such as the updates to faculty and staff, are available online at <http://www.saumag.edu/academics/northcentralassn.html>.

Reference

Walvoord, Barbara E., and Virginia Johnson Anderson. 1998. *Effective grading: A tool for learning and assessment.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Elizabeth H. Davis is Professor of English and Chair of the Department of English and Foreign Languages at Southern Arkansas University, Magnolia.

Suzanne Jessup is Professor of Education at Southern Arkansas University, Magnolia.

Data, Data, Data! How to Collect What You Need

David Cook and Carol Nelson

Increasing expectations of teams and available technology have caused reliable and valid data to be on center stage for most self-study processes. A self-study coordinator must find ways to collect information and data from faculty, students, staff, and the community. Every committee wants to survey everyone with a detailed questionnaire. Everyone on a self-study committee wants to meet with every member of all areas of the college to gather data. A self-study coordinator must develop organized and creative ways to meet the self-study committees' needs for data without inundating the college community with requests and endless questionnaires.

Organization of Data

As a self-study and requests for information begin, the self-study can quickly become a multitude of separate tasks rather than a series of interdependent activities unless the self-study coordinator maintains the cohesiveness of the study as it evolves. The coordinator must organize the data gathering so that the college remains committed to supporting the activities of the self-study. Imagine how one would feel if ten different people from ten separate committees asked for interviews and requested the same information and facts that you had given to the first person. The left hand must remain aware of the activities of the right hand. After gathering the same information for yet another committee several times, one might begin to be resentful and frustrated, and refuse to cooperate. The self-study coordinator should be responsible for organizing data collection so that it is a burden to no one.

Sources of Data

One must remember that people believe that rumors are facts and assume that anecdotes equal information. Someone will want to attribute merit to any rumor or anecdote that is not too far-fetched. Data, not supposition, must guide the self-study. How to do that often becomes problematic. The self-study coordinator should work with the office of institutional research to gather information to distribute to committees before they start requesting information. The self-study coordinator should send a request college-wide for any research or studies. Once these are received, packets of any information should be prepared for each committee. Possibly an online or hard copy data book could be prepared for the committees. The institutional research office is invaluable to a self-study coordinator.

During Illinois Central College's self-study, the office of institutional research acted primarily as a repository for institutional and external data throughout the self-study process from which the various criterion committees could draw information in order to complete their charges. Additionally, as the committees addressed their charges, they were able to consult with IR office staff for advice and guidance on proper data-collection techniques and the appropriateness of suggested evaluation measurements, and for communication and interpretation of the steering committee's requests. At the same time, the IR office made a point of routinely collecting the work in progress from the various criterion committees in order to augment its own data resources and to ensure that efforts were not being duplicated across committees.

Perhaps one of the most valuable assets to the IR office in these endeavors was the experience of the self-study coordinator with regard to the accreditation data-gathering process. The coordinator provided the IR office with a more realistic picture of what to expect in the way of information requests from committee members than the office staff initially had. The number of requests would be greater, the breadth more expansive, and the time to address them more limited. Furthermore, there existed an inverse relationship between the length of time over which the committee members worked to address their charges and the level of cooperation those committee members would be willing to offer.

Given these inevitable issues, the IR office's strategy was to offer the committees as much potentially useful information as possible prior to the commencement of their work, chiefly by way of an institutional data book. The data book consisted of current and historical trend information on student and faculty demographics, academic programs, and physical and financial resources; general organizational data; and summary information on relevant research projects conducted by the IR office. IR staff members also made a point of attending each criterion committee's first meeting so that the institutional data book, as well as the IR office's additional resources, could be properly introduced to committee members.

Data Collection

However, not all of the criterion committees' informational needs could be easily fulfilled by the secondary data resources available through the IR office. In many cases, evaluations of attitudes and opinions held by staff, faculty, students, and community constituents addressing a host of issues relevant to the college were required. Once again, the self-study coordinator and administrative liaison foresaw the need to centralize this data-gathering component, rather than allowing the committees to develop, on a piecemeal basis, a series of unquestionably redundant surveys. From each of the criterion committees, a list of potential survey questions was solicited and reviewed. These were categorized according to the intended survey audience: part-time and full-time faculty, part-time and full-time staff, administration, the ICC board of trustees, students, and community members. The IR office staff and coordinator reviewed and edited the questions for their appropriateness to the survey format.

Despite the explicit request from the IR office staff to keep the number of proposed survey questions reasonable, several hundred questions were received from the various criterion committees. Attempts to send back the proposed questions to the committees for revision and reduction were for naught; each committee felt that its respective contributions to the surveys were, without question, not to be omitted. Since responsible survey design dictates that, in general, survey instruments not exceed approximately two to three pages in order to not create an onerous situation for the respondent, the IR office faced a dilemma—one that many coordinators have experienced: how to please the committees, get needed information, and avoid overtaxing the college community with questionnaires. As a result the IR office, lacking the possibility of limiting the survey to what it felt was a reasonable length, gave attention to eliminating as much redundancy in the questions as possible, and making sure each question was carefully crafted. Questions needed to be as brief as possible, be direct in asking the respondent only one question, use easily understandable language, have as much precision as possible, be easy to answer, be interesting to the respondent, and be free of as much potential bias as possible.

Since much of the information desired by the committees was chiefly opinion-oriented or attitude-oriented, an important factor in crafting the survey questions was to eliminate as much ambiguity as possible. This was done by creating a frame of reference that allowed respondent to more easily respond to the questions. Items addressing attitudes and opinions were focused more on behaviorally related, or tangible, examples. For example, rather than asking staff and faculty members the broad questions of how they felt about the usefulness of written communication methods at the college, respondents were asked to evaluate how often they read specific communication formats such as departmental memos, board of trustees' minutes, and policy statements. Focusing the respondents' cognitive efforts on behaviors produced more reliable answers.

Procedure

Once the questions were gathered, they were crafted and organized into separate surveys. Ten groups were to be surveyed:

- Full-time faculty
- Part-time faculty
- Part-time staff
- Full-time staff/administration
- Board of trustees
- Full-time and part-time students
- Advisory committees
- The community at large
- College committees
- Employers

Every faculty member, staff member, trustee, advisory member, and committee member received a questionnaire in the mail. Even though the questionnaires were lengthy, we had a good response because each respondent was assured that he or she would need to complete only one for the self-study. Students were surveyed in randomly selected classes. Community members were contacted by phone.

Once the surveys were analyzed, all were sent to every committee. Even though a committee did not submit a certain question for a particular survey, often the results were usable data for the committee's report. Often, self-study committees are not fully aware of all the data that they need to fully evaluate the institution. As a result, they want to ask for it constantly and piecemeal. Limiting the number of questionnaires or surveys forces committees to be organized and prevents information-gathering from being a burden.

Once the overwhelming amount of information and data are compiled, the coordinator must remember to caution the committees to use it to evaluate, not describe, the institution. If committees are given organized and succinct data, it will be easier for them to prepare cohesive comprehensive committee reports for the self-study coordinator to use in preparing the self-study report.

David Cook is Institution Research Coordinator at Illinois Central College in East Peoria.

Carol Nelson is Faculty, Title III Coordinator, and Assessment Coordinator at Illinois Central College in East Peoria.

An Employee Satisfaction Survey Designed for Accreditation Self-Study

Mary Ellen Wacker, Joseph E. Nitzke, and Robert E. Dunker

Introduction

While abundant survey instruments for testing organizational climate are available on the research method market, none are suitable for generating patterns of evidence for accreditation self-study. It is also very difficult to find pre-existing instruments designed by other higher education institutions specifically for this purpose. Consequently, when our community college was engaged in the self-study process, it was necessary to create and administer an original survey.

The Western Iowa Tech Community College Employee Survey© was developed in 1999 and consists of items closely related to the five criteria that appear in the second edition of the *Handbook of Accreditation* (1997, 64–67). As of January 2005, institutions seeking reaccreditation will use revised criteria. We "mapped" the old and new criteria and concluded that the instrument is and will remain a useful tool for self-study. The instrument also includes items designed to measure attitudes toward assessment and general satisfaction with the institution.

The purpose of this paper is to present our employee satisfaction survey. This is a methodological paper in which we present the survey instrument, describe data collection, and summarize steps for data analysis to optimize its value. This includes scaling the survey items into self-study criteria measures and scaling them differently into organizational climate measures. Finally, although the instrument and analytical tools are copyrighted, we offer its not-for-profit use to other institutions of higher education.

The Instrument

The instrument was developed by Western Iowa Tech's institutional research and institutional effectiveness departments by soliciting items from self-study steering committee members, the assessment committee, and the college's executive staff. These contributions were supplemented by items developed by the institutional research and institutional effectiveness directors.

The instrument is comprised of fifty-seven items presented in Likert format, with response options of strongly agree (coded 4) to strongly disagree (coded 1) and no response (coded missing). An additional six close-ended items offer a variety of responses and were utilized primarily to break "response set," as were three "skip" items. These sixty-three items were intended to measure

1. Attitudes toward assessment
2. Opinions about the college's performance on various dimensions of the five criteria to be addressed in self-studies
3. General satisfaction with the organization

A number of demographic items were also presented, and respondents were also asked to provide written comments.

Validity and Reliability

Throughout its design, the instrument was reviewed internally by college staff persons. Three outside researchers in higher education research institutions evaluated the face validity of a near-final draft. The specificity of the survey precluded external pre-tests, and our wish to not bias our own respondent pool limited internal pre-testing of the instrument to two of the college's employees.

Five items were post-tested to assess internal consistency and criterion validity. Correlations were moderate to strong. Criterion validity of demographic data was assessed using data from the human resources office. Responses to other items were compared to results of student surveys (Faces of the Future and Student Satisfaction Inventory) and a 1999 survey of the college district's residents ("Western Iowa Tech Community College Six-County Attitudes Survey: A Comparative Report"). Standardized residual plots were examined for normality.

Data Collection

We recognized that surveys of this nature must be administered in a way that does not raise participants' concerns with anonymity and confidentiality. This was a study of the institution's population. The survey was administered to all employees assembled for staff development activities. Following verbal instructions, survey instruments and return envelopes were distributed, and respondents were provided with about thirty minutes to complete the anonymous survey. At the end of the assembly (approximately two hours), completed surveys were placed by respondents in boxes as they exited the meeting place.

Employees who were absent from the first administration of the survey were encouraged to request surveys to complete at their job sites. Those who did so were given written instructions and copies of the instrument in envelopes and were asked to place completed surveys in a box in the institutional research office. The response rate was ultimately 74.24. Sixty-four respondents, or 25.6 percent, added written comments.

Analysis

An independent contractor entered and cleaned the data. This further reduced concerns about anonymity. Data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Cases having responses to at least two of three "skip" items ("Please leave the answer to this item blank") were deleted, as were cases with over 50 percent of responses "missing" or marked "no response."

The raw data file was imported from Excel into SPSS, a statistical software package for analyzing quantitative data. Items were recoded to create consistency in the direction of responses. Some categories of job function may need to be collapsed if too few cases compromise anonymity.

Analyses of frequencies, distributions, and measures of central tendency were conducted on all items. Each item in the instrument (excluding demographic variables) is related to one or more of the five criteria and is subsequently referred to as a Criteria item or, specifically, for example, a Criterion One item. These items were organized into the five conceptual categories, or criteria, to be examined for the self-study. Additive computation of the raw scores was used to create scales for each criterion from its relevant variables. Assessment and "general satisfaction" scales were similarly constructed. So, for example, instead of twenty-five items, as was the case for Criterion Two, scaling produced one composite variable, which is a singular measure of Criterion Two.

Reliability tests were performed on the scales for construct validity. Cronbach's Alpha calculations revealed that two scales (Criteria One and Four) "cluster" less satisfactorily than hoped. One item was consequently deleted from the Criterion Four scale. Alpha coefficients ultimately ranged from .5473 to .8702.

One result of scaling is to transform scores on individual items from their original discrete-like form (e.g., 4 [for strongly agree], 3 [for agree], etc.) to a continuous range of scores on the new composite variable, or scale. The range of scores appears as decimals (e.g., 1.84–3.72). This complicates describing the scale's distribution of scores. Scales are more easily understood by their "grand means," and these and standard deviations were calculated on all scales. The original response options (4 = strongly agree, etc.) were useful for interpreting them.

Individual criterion, assessment, and general satisfaction items were analyzed by demographic variables with cross-tabulations and Pearson correlations. To learn how responses to general satisfaction (scaled) varied by demographic characteristics, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed to regress the general satisfaction scale on five of these variables (dummy variables were created on gender [male is the omitted category] and function [clerical is the omitted category]; "status" was not included because the vast majority [94 percent] of our employees fall into one category, full-time).

The final step of the quantitative data analysis was an exploratory factor analysis to ascertain what factors or constructs would emerge on their own from the data. An analysis of all but the demographic yielded a pattern of six factors that measure organizational climate. The constructs are

- Human resources utilization and development
- Leadership/administration
- Institutional decision making
- Learning teaching environment
- Curriculum: content and structure
- Communication of purpose and process

Responses to the open-ended item placed at the end of the survey were typed verbatim and analyzed using HyperResearch, a software package for analyzing qualitative data. Patterns emerged from the data and were coded accordingly. These data were used in the interpretive report to supplement the responses to closed-ended questions.

Using the Data

The survey presents staff and faculty with a unique and broad-based opportunity to confidentially communicate their views of the institution. Much of the information provided from the survey confirmed what top administrators of the organization already suspected. There have been, however, a few surprises, and these have led to changes in three areas that we will describe as examples of how the data have been used.

First, top administrators were unaware of the level of dissatisfaction felt by staff and faculty toward staff development activities. A second administration of the Employee Satisfaction Survey one year later confirmed the previous year's results. The college's staff development committee investigated this issue more closely with a survey focusing solely on staff development, and the college consequently made dramatic changes in its approach to development activities.

The survey was also a vehicle to communicate dissatisfaction with the college's management style. Top administrators were unaware of the level of discontent with a style perceived by employees as "top down." Considerable progress has been made in shifting the management style to a more participatory approach, and the survey is the key instrument to measure success in that area.

In a third area, a large majority of survey respondents indicated great dissatisfaction with the institutional software used by the college. Since we are committed to this product, the IT staff needed to ascertain what it could do to improve the situation. Consequently, a series of focus groups were conducted, providing end users of the software with an opportunity to confidentially describe their experiences and express their views,. Practices and policies intended to respond to users' needs were put into place.

Because the Employee Survey is multi-dimensional, with items addressing almost every area of our institution, results are gross indicators of organizational climate. The survey may, thus, be viewed as an exploratory research tool, requiring subsequent research to investigate problem areas.

Conclusion

Our report of the project was quite detailed, but it was written for audiences with a wide range of technical knowledge. We also made presentations of our results at meetings of the academic council, the executive council, and the entire employee population. The results were cited in the document prepared for the accreditation visit, and the entire report appeared in a compendium of college research made available to the visiting team. Finally, the college readministers the survey every two years in order to collect data for trend analysis.

Note

Our special thanks to Dr. David B. Bills, the University of Iowa; Dr. Michael J. Leiber, the University of Northern Iowa; and Dr. William Kinney, the University of St. Thomas, for reviewing the survey instrument and offering suggestions for improvement.

Mary Ellen Wacker is Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment at Western Iowa Tech Community College in Sioux City.

Joseph E. Nitzke is Consultant for Tri-State Research in Newcastle, Nebraska.

Robert E. Dunker is President of Western Iowa Tech Community College in Sioux City.

Western Iowa Tech Community College

Employee Survey©

This survey of WITCC employees provides you with an opportunity to share your perceptions of the college and evaluate how it is doing in fulfilling its mission. Your participation is voluntary. Your responses will be anonymous and confidential; there is no way to link you and your responses. The information you provide will become part of the Western Iowa Tech Institutional Effectiveness data and will support future planning, as well as aid the institution in the NCA self-study accreditation process.

Please read each statement carefully and indicate the strength of your agreement or disagreement in the boxes to the right of each statement. SA indicates that you Strongly Agree with the statement, and SD indicates that you Strongly Disagree. Use NR (No Response) if you are not familiar enough with an area to rate it. For multiple-choice items, fill in the bubble that corresponds to the one answer which most closely represents your views. Please answer on the basis of your experience, not your assumptions. Use the back of the last page if you would like to add comments.

The survey focuses on four main areas: teaching and student learning, support services, administration, and your daily work experiences. First, please give us your impressions of teaching and student learning at WITCC.

	SA	A	D	SD	NR
Excellent teaching is expected at this college.	o	o	o	o	o
Faculty are qualified to teach the courses to which they are assigned.	o	o	o	o	o
The college supports freedom of inquiry by faculty.	o	o	o	o	o
The highest priority among faculty and staff is promoting student success.	o	o	o	o	o
Students experience intellectual growth here.	o	o	o	o	o
Library resources here meet the teaching needs of instructors.	o	o	o	o	o
Institutional publications reflect diversity in the student body, faculty, and staff.	o	o	o	o	o
Faculty demonstrate integrity in their daily work.	o	o	o	o	o
Assessment of student learning outcomes is important for curriculum improvement.	o	o	o	o	o
This college currently has adequate resources overall to accommodate increased enrollments.	o	o	o	o	o
The college provides appropriate services to meet the needs of students.	o	o	o	o	o

How would you rate the level of competence of the faculty at the college?

o very competent o fairly competent o somewhat competent
o not very competent o not at all competent o can't choose

	SA	A	D	SD	NR
The process of student learning outcomes assessment is faculty-driven.	o	o	o	o	o
Instructional program objectives (credit and non-credit) relate to the college's purpose.	o	o	o	o	o
The college catalog accurately depicts academic life at this college.	o	o	o	o	o
Institutional improvements occur in this college as a result of academic assessment.	o	o	o	o	o
Academic program requirements are clear and reasonable.	o	o	o	o	o
The curriculum is appropriately related to program objectives.	o	o	o	o	o
Adequate resources exist for academic advising.	o	o	o	o	o

On the whole, do you think we fulfill our promise to provide quality education to our students?

o definitely o probably o not really
o definitely not o can't say

Next, please respond to the following stotements obout support services.

	SA	A	D	SD	NR
This college has viable plans in place for replacing physical plant items as they are needed.	o	o	o	o	o
I am pleased with the appearance of the campus grounds.	o	o	o	o	o
Use of the five-column model by non-academic departments results in improved services to students.	o	o	o	o	o
My physical work space is conducive to a good working environment.	o	o	o	o	o
Leave the response to this item blank and skip to the next item.	o	o	o	o	o
Students are able to obtain essential study materials through our college library.	o	o	o	o	o
The purchasing procedures for goods and services for my program are generally satisfactory.	o	o	o	o	o
The Datatel system is an efficient way of maintaining institutional data.	o	o	o	o	o
College administrators do a good job in allocating resources to meet employees' equipment needs.	o	o	o	o	o
My working environment is physically comfortable most of the time.	o	o	o	o	o
Not counting the Datatel system, I have numerous problems using the computer applications/software supported by the college.	o	o	o	o	o
The college bookstore effectively meets the coursework needs of students.	o	o	o	o	o

In the next section, please indicote your impressions of odministrotive ospects of the college.

	SA	A	D	SD	NR
Qualified administrative personnel oversee institutional activities.	o	o	o	o	o
I am confident of the board of directors' ability to govern this institution.	o	o	o	o	o
I am unclear of what persons comprise the formal chain of command here.	o	o	o	o	o
Administrators demonstrate integrity in their daily work.	o	o	o	o	o
Changes in the administrative structure result in improved programs and services.	o	o	o	o	o
Advisory committee members provide useful insights about improving programs of study.	o	o	o	o	o
Generally speaking, there is a high level of cooperation between academic departments.	o	o	o	o	o
The organizational structure of the college is clearly defined.	o	o	o	o	o

How would you rate the level of competence of the administrators at the college?

θ very competent θ fairly competent θ somewhat competent
θ not very competent θ not at all competent θ can't choose

	SA	A	D	SD	NR
Long-range planning has a direct effect on my department.	o	o	o	o	o
The year-to-year planning for my department is closely related to the overall planning process at the college.	o	o	o	o	o
College policies are well-defined.	o	o	o	o	o
The college's relationships with other institutions of higher education are conducted ethically and responsibly.	o	o	o	o	o
Representatives of employee groups actively participate in the college's long-range planning process.	o	o	o	o	o

The management style in this organization can best be described as

θ "team-based"/participatory θ "top down"
θ "hands-off"/free rein θ can't choose

	SA	A	D	SD	NR
College policies contribute to the effective functioning of the institution.	o	o	o	o	o
Leave the response to this item blank and skip to the next item.	o	o	o	o	o
College management of financial resources maximizes the college's ability to achieve its mission.	o	o	o	o	o

This institution relies too heavily on grant funding.	o	o	o	o	o
When the budget for my department is developed each year, my professional needs are considered.	o	o	o	o	o

How much confidence have you in the college leadership overall?

o complete   o quite a lot   o some
o not very much   o none   o can't say

The following items relate to your daily work experiences and activities.

	SA	A	D	SD	NR
I receive adequate training to stay up-to-date for my job.	o	o	o	o	o
My supervisor annually conducts formal evaluations of my work.	o	o	o	o	o
I do not understand how my job contributes to the college's purpose.	o	o	o	o	o
Leave the response to this item blank and skip to the next item.	o	o	o	o	o
I am involved with the student learning outcomes assessment process at this college.	o	o	o	o	o
Campus-sponsored employee development programs assist me in my professional growth.	o	o	o	o	o
I regularly receive information that supports the teaching-learning process.	o	o	o	o	o
I understand the goals of this college.	o	o	o	o	o
I have the proper equipment to adequately perform my job.	o	o	o	o	o
I receive adequate financial support from the college for my professional development.	o	o	o	o	o
I am familiar with the board policy which prohibits sexual harassment at work.	o	o	o	o	o
I know where to get information about the process for handling a grievance.	o	o	o	o	o
My supervisor has evaluated me in a fair manner.	o	o	o	o	o
In general, this college functions very effectively.	o	o	o	o	o

How satisfied are you with the overall quality of this institution?

o very satisfied   o fairly satisfied   o somewhat satisfied
o not very satisfied   o not at all satisfied   o can't choose

So that we can see how your responses compare with those of other people, we'd like a few facts about you. Please answer the following demographic questions.

Demographics

Gender

o Female   o Male

Age

o 18-24   o 25-34   o 35-44
o 45-54   o 55-64   o more than 64

Highest Grade/Year of School Completed

o less than high school   o high school   o Voc/Tech Diploma
o Associate's Degree   o Bachelor's Degree   o Master's Degree   o More than Master's Degree

Job Tenure

o Less than 1 year   o 1 to less than 5 years
o 5 to less than 10 years   o 10 or more years

Job Status

o Full-Time   o Part-Time

Principle Activity (Service Support = maintenance, custodial, security, food, grounds, etc)

o Clerical/Secretarial Support   o Service Support   o Administration
o Technical Support   o Instruction (including Department Chairs)

Use the back of this page if you would like to add comments.

Western Iowa Tech Community College

EMPLOYEE SURVEY©

CRITERIA SCALES

CRITERION ONE

"The institution has clear and publicly stated purposes consistent with its mission and appropriate to an institution of higher education."

Alpha Coefficient = .5463

The college supports freedom of inquiry by faculty.
The year-to-year planning for my department is closely related to the overall planning process at the college.
I do understand how my job contributes to the college's purpose.
I understand the goals of this college.

CRITERION TWO

"The institution has effectively organized the human, financial, and physical resources necessary to accomplish its purpose."

Alpha Coefficient = .8702

Faculty are qualified to teach the courses to which they are assigned.
Library resources here meet the teaching needs of instructors.
This college currently has adequate resources overall to accommodate increased enrollments.
The college provides appropriate services to meet the needs of students.
Adequate resources exist for academic advising.
I am pleased with the appearance of the campus grounds.
My physical work space is conducive to a good working environment.
Students are able to obtain essential study materials through our college library.
The purchasing procedures for goods and services for my program are generally satisfactory.
The Datatel system is an efficient way of maintaining institutional data.
My working environment is physically comfortable most of the time.
Not counting the Datatel system, I do not have numerous problems using the computer applications/software supported by the college.
The college bookstore effectively meets the coursework needs of students.
Qualified administrative personnel oversee institutional activities.
I am confident of the board of directors' ability to govern this institution.
I am clear of what persons comprise the formal chain of command here.
Changes in the administrative structure result in improved programs and services.
Advisory committee members provide useful insights about improving programs and services.
The organizational structure of the college is clearly defined.
College policies are well-defined.
College policies contribute to the effective functioning of the institution.
College management of financial resources maximizes the college's ability to achieve its mission.
When the budget for my department is developed each year, my professional needs are considered.
I receive adequate training to stay up-to-date for my job.
I have the proper equipment to adequately perform my job.

CRITERION THREE

"The institution is accomplishing its educational and other purposes."

Alpha Coefficient = .7882

Excellent teaching is expected at this college.
Students experience intellectual growth here.
Instructional program objectives (credit and non-credit) relate to the college's purpose.
Academic program requirements are clear and reasonable.
The curriculum is appropriately related to program objectives.
Generally speaking, there is a high level of cooperation between academic departments.
Campus-sponsored employee development programs assist me in my professional growth.
I regularly receive information that supports the teaching-learning process.
I receive adequate financial support from the college for my professional development.

CRITERION FOUR

"The institution can continue to accomplish its purposes and strengthen its educational effectiveness."

Alpha Coefficient = .6601

This college has viable plans in place for replacing physical plant items as they are needed.
College administrators do a good job in allocating resources to meet employees' equipment needs.
Representatives of employee groups actively participate in the college's long-range planning process.
Reliance on grant money is okay.
The management style in this organization can best be described as... (deleted from scale)

CRITERION FIVE

"The institution demonstrates integrity in its practices and relationships."

Alpha Coefficient = .7282

The highest priority among faculty and staff is promoting student success.
Institutional publications reflect diversity in the student body, faculty, and staff.
Faculty demonstrate integrity in their daily work.
Administrators demonstrate integrity in their daily work.
The college catalog accurately depicts academic life at this college.

The college's relationships with other institutions of higher education are conducted ethically and responsibly.
I am familiar with the board policy which prohibits sexual harassment at work.
I know where to get information about the process for handling a grievance.
My supervisor has evaluated me in a fair manner.

ASSESSMENT

Alpha Coefficient = .6738

Assessment of student learning outcomes is important for curriculum improvement.
The process of student learning outcomes assessment is faculty-driven.
Institutional improvements occur in this college as a result of academic assessment.
Use of the five-column model by non-academic departments results in improved services to students.

GENERAL SATISFACTION

Alpha Coefficient = .8217

How would you rate the level of competence of the faculty at this college?
On the whole, do you think we fulfill our promise to provide quality education to our students?
How would you rate the level of competence of administrators at the college?
How much confidence have you in the college leadership overall?
In general, this college functions very effectively.
How satisfied are you with the overall quality of this institution?

Western Iowa Tech Community College

Employee Survey©

ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE SCALES

Human Resources Utilization and Development

Representatives of employee groups actively participate in the college's long-range planning process.
Campus-sponsored employee development programs assist me in my professional growth.
I regularly receive information that supports the teaching-learning process.
In general, this college functions very effectively.

Leadership/Administration

Administrators demonstrate integrity in their daily work.
College administrators do a good job in allocating resources to meet employees' equipment needs.
How much confidence have you in the college leadership overall?
How satisfied are you with the overall quality of this institution?
How would you rate the level of competence of administrators at the college?
I am confident of the board of directors' ability to govern this institution.
In general, this college functions very effectively.
Qualified administrative personnel oversee institutional activities.

Institutional Decision Making

College policies are well-defined.
College policies contribute to the effective functioning of the institution.
Representatives of employee groups actively participate in the college's long-range planning process.
The year-to-year planning for my department is closely related to the overall planning process at the college.
This college currently has adequate resources overall to accommodate increased enrollments.

Learning/Teaching Environment

Faculty are qualified to teach the courses to which they are assigned.
Faculty demonstrate integrity in their daily work.
Students experience intellectual growth here.
The college supports freedom of inquiry by faculty.
The highest priority among faculty and staff is promoting student success.

Curriculum: Content and Structure

Academic program requirements are clear and reasonable.
Instructional program objectives (credit and non-credit) relate to the college's purpose.
The curriculum is appropriately related to program objectives.

Communication of Purpose and Process

College policies are well-defined.
I know where to get information about the process for handling a grievance.
The college's relationships with other institutions of higher education are conducted ethically and responsibly.
The organizational structure of the college is clearly defined.

The Ingredients for Preparing a High-Quality Self-Study Report

Donald Bennion and Michael Harris

Introduction

Eastern Michigan University (EMU) recently completed a successful self-study process that culminated in the award of continued accreditation with the next comprehensive evaluation in ten years and approval of a doctoral program in clinical psychology. Although there are many reasons for the success of the self-study effort, we believe that two key ingredients are that we successfully organized the report and that we wrote it in a way that made clear to the members of the visiting team that our self-study efforts were both comprehensive and evaluative in nature.

In the following pages, we explain the key factors that we employed in organizing and writing our self-study report in order to maximize the ability of the report to clearly communicate Eastern Michigan University's ability to meet the Higher Learning Commission's Criteria for Accreditation and General Institutional Requirements and to critically evaluate our strengths and weaknesses and develop strategies for overcoming the weaknesses.

Organizing the Self-Study Report

There were five key factors that we considered in organizing our self-study report. We believe that, although self-study reports from other colleges and universities will vary in how they are organized, consideration of these five factors will help lead to the production of a report that is readable and communicates the institution's character, its strengths and weaknesses, past and present efforts to eliminate its weaknesses, and how it meets the Higher Learning Commission criteria. These factors are presented below.

First, the self-study report must be tailored to the needs of the institution. In EMU's case, several members of our self-study steering committee attended a Higher Learning Commission Annual Meeting. At the meeting we reviewed and sent for copies of self-study reports from several colleges and universities. We then reviewed the organization of these reports and selected an organization that we believed would allow EMU to present the clearest view of how we are organized, what we have identified as key issues to study, and how we would address those issues. In our case, we concluded that organizing report chapters by Higher Learning Commission criteria would be the most effective method for communicating to the visiting team.

Second, we concluded that the most effective self-study reports included a meaningful preface, written by the president or an appropriate person. In our case, the president was new to the university, so we had the preface written by the provost. The provost was charged with the self-study, knew the institution well (having been provost for more than fifteen years and at the institution for more than thirty years), and had worked closely with the self-study coordinator and members of the steering committee. In reviewing self-studies that had prefaces (most did not), we found that the vast majority were written by the president and contained only boilerplate language. They really did not say anything. In the preface in our self-study, in contrast, Provost Ronald Collins describes the ways in which each chapter of our self-study report highlights our strengths, identifies our concerns, and describes how the institution is addressing, or plans to address, each of the concerns. He concludes by summarizing the ways in which EMU is a better institution in 2000 than it was in 1990 and the plans in place to make it an even better institution by the time the Higher Learning Commission returns in 2010.

Third, our self-study report includes an easily understood table of contents and an index that makes it easy for the team members to find whatever they are looking for. Many self-study reports we examined had poor tables of contents and no indexes. This made it very difficult for anyone to find specific information. Although there are computer programs that can be used to create an index, we found that the index produced through this method needed to be supplemented by a skilled professional publisher who also was familiar with the university.

Fourth, our review of representative self-study reports convinced us that key information should be included in the bound self-study report rather than appear as free-standing documents. At the same time, we wanted the appendices to include only essential information that visiting team members needed to read prior to arriving on campus. We therefore excluded material from the appendices that did not need to be examined until the team arrived on campus. These items were placed in the on-campus resource room and were readily available to the visiting team. The appendices in our self-study report were limited to four: (1) General Institutional Requirements; (2) Basic Institutional Data Forms; (3) EMU's Self-Study Process; and (4) Organizational Charts.

Finally, we concluded that, like many institutions of higher education, EMU uses an inordinate number of acronyms. Although we defined each acronym the first time it was used, we realized that subsequent uses might occur several pages later in the report. We therefore included two copies of the "Index of Acronyms and Initials." One copy was bound into the self-study report, and the other was free-standing. The latter could be easily used by the reader when reviewing the self-study report.

Writing the Self-Study Report

Once we had determined how we wanted to organize the self-study report, we determined that there were seven factors to consider when writing the report.

First, and primary, the appropriate people need to be selected to write each chapter. In our case, the self-study coordinator concluded that each chapter writer needed to be a member of the thirty-member steering committee. This guaranteed that the chapter writers were aware of how their chapters fit into the entire report and understood the discussions that occurred at each of the self-study steering committee meetings. In addition, each chapter writer needed to write well and have a track record of completing assigned tasks. Because each chapter writer was allowed to select, from the faculty, staff, and students, a committee to prepare that writer's chapter, the writers also needed to be individuals who commanded respect and could get good people to join their writing teams and complete their assignments in a timely manner.

Second, in order to prepare a consistent report, we developed a set of writer guidelines. These guidelines included instructions to standardize the chapter by doing the following: (1) begin by stating the Higher Learning Commission criterion being addressed in the chapter; (2) provide an initial summary of the chapter; (3) use section headings that are consistent with the initial summary; (4) if the chapter is long, use one or more internal summaries; (5) write a summary paragraph; and (6) conclude the chapter by stating that the specified criterion had been met.

Third, we clarified the role of the self-study coordinator. In EMU's case, we determined that the chapter writers would be responsible for taking the material given to them by their working committee members and writing their chapters. The self-study coordinator would then be responsible for editing all chapters. We also indicated that, if for any reason a chapter writer could not complete the chapter, the self-study coordinator would assume responsibility for writing that chapter.

Fourth, we decided that the self-study report would be more effective if headings and pull-out quotations were used to highlight key points and to effectively tell the story that we were trying to communicate. Therefore, each chapter writer was responsible for using descriptive headings and for identifying chapter content that they believed would make effective pull-out quotations. The self-study coordinator was in turn responsible for reviewing all of the headings and identified quotations and revising them to make the total self-study report consistent. The self-study coordinator worked with a professional editor on this task.

Fifth, we worked with a professional editor and a graduate writing student to prepare the final text. The graduate student served as a graduate assistant to the self-study coordinator. One of her roles was to work closely with each of the chapter writers and to help them edit their chapters. She also edited chapters once the self-study coordinator had completed his editing. The final step was for the professional editor and desktop publisher to edit the material and put it into final shape. We were fortunate to have had an editor/desktop publisher who was not only very skilled but had previously worked at EMU and knew the personnel, policies, procedures, and nuances of the institution. The response of the members of the visiting team to our self-study report was very positive.

Sixth, because of some internal issues, we had our self-study report printed by an outside professional printer. Because our editor/desktop publisher had worked closely with the printer on many previous projects, she knew the printer was able to deliver a high-quality document in a timely manner.

Finally, we produced a separate executive summary of our self-study report. We did so because we wanted faculty, staff, alumni, and student leaders to all be familiar with the content of the self-study report. Whereas we published 250 copies of the 450-page (8 1/2 x 11 inch) self-study report and distributed copies to all major offices on campus, we published 2,500 copies of the 51-page (5 1/2 x 8 1/2 inch) executive summary and distributed copies to all faculty and senior administrators, to many members of the staff, and all student leaders. The executive summary was written by the graduate assistant and edited by the self-study coordinator and the professional editor.

Conclusion

Many ingredients go into preparing a high-quality self-study report. At Eastern Michigan University, we relied on five key elements in organizing our self-study report and seven key elements in writing it. We believe that the effort expended in carefully planning both the organization and writing of the report was rewarded when members of the visiting team and EMU faculty, staff, students, and alumni found the report and its corresponding executive summary to be very helpful in understanding the institution's goals, successes, and concerns, adherence to Higher Learning Commission criteria, and plans for the future. Because the self-study report is the first view that visiting team members have of a college or university, it is of utmost importance that the quality of this document be high and that it present a clear picture of the institution and its self-assessment.

Donald Bennion is Director of Academic Assessment, and served as the NCA Self-Study Coordinator, at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti.

Michael Harris is Associate Provost at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti.

Lessons Learned from Years of Reviewing Self-Study Reports: Advice on Writing and Editing the Self-Study

Norma C. Noonan and Kathryn Heltne Swanson

General Insights on Preparing the Self-Study: Some Dos and Don'ts

☐ Introduction

Consultant-evaluators (C-Es) read many self-study documents. After a while, it becomes routine to evaluate them as one reads. After time, C-Es can become among the best analysts of the self-study report. The purpose of the panel is to share insights on the preparation of the self-study from the perspective of experienced C-Es who have read many reports in their roles as team members, readers, and a member of the Accreditation Review Council. Although no one can offer error-proof advice on writing a self-study, the session will offer useful advice on how to compose and edit the self-study into a coherent document easily understood by the multiple audiences that read it in the accreditation process: team members, readers, review committee members, Institutional Actions Council members, and the Commission itself.

Among the key elements in preparing the self-study are

1. Ease of comprehension
2. Comprehensiveness
3. Minimal repetition
4. Careful editing
5. Writing/speaking with one voice
6. Preparing a self-study for a focused review

☐ Ease of Comprehension

The self-study will be read by multiple audiences. It is important to address each topic so that someone unfamiliar with the college or university can understand it the first time he or she reads it. There will always be points that require further amplification when the visiting team comes to campus, but if too many points fall into that category, the visiting team will devote too much time to clarification of the written report and not enough time to examining information available only on campus and by interviewing key personnel. The readers and review committee are even farther removed from the process, and it is critical for the report to be sufficiently clear for them to grasp the essential characteristics of the college exclusively through the documents furnished by the institution and the visiting team.

Self-study committees at times forget that "strangers" are going to read the self-study and write as if members of their own institution are the principal readers. For example, abbreviations and the use of special names for campus processes and organizations should be avoided unless followed by a clear description and definition. Organizational charts can help, but they should also be clear and not in conflict with the narrative. Sometimes an old organizational chart is included, while the description in the narrative suggests that changes have occurred that are referred to only in passing. At times, changes and new policies recently adopted by the trustees are alluded to without any evidence about when formal approval took place.

☐ Comprehensiveness

The people writing and editing the self-study often ignore the basic advice that faculty members give to students writing term papers: Write as if the reader knows nothing about the subject matter, and introduce each topic to the reader. The self-study coordinator might ask one or more people who are not involved in the self-study process to read the draft documents to make sure key points are not omitted or glossed over in such a way as to puzzle the reader. Various subgroups within the institution are normally asked to write self-descriptions and analyses that others condense and summarize. It is important to have each subgroup or program review its summary for accuracy.

The self-study should include all important new developments, whether positive or negative. There is perhaps nothing more frustrating to C-Es than to get a big surprise when they arrive on a campus even though the self-study may have been completed only six weeks earlier. The self-study must also demonstrate progress in areas that were noted in the prior visit as needing improvement. These sections need not be long, but they should be clear, not evasive, in providing evidence.

☐ **Minimal Repetition**

Although it is important to be comprehensive, it is also necessary to avoid repetition. A certain amount of repetition is unavoidable, since the nature of the criteria and questions about prior evaluation visits may require including the same points more than once in the course of a self-study. One institution included its mission statement again and again in response to various questions, occasionally providing a little amplification. By the time the CE finished reading the self-study, she knew the institution's mission statement better than her own. The institution had a clear sense of mission, but the writers seemed to be unable to find alternative ways to answer some of the questions.

☐ **Careful Editing**

The co-presenter will talk about writing and editing in some detail but it important to keep in mind that editing is a crucial part of the self-study process. As the drafts are written, one or two people should be appointed as editors to review the content and style and look not just for grammar errors but also for repetition, errors of content and style, and so on.

☐ **Writing with One Voice and with Coherence**

The co-presenter will comment on the importance of one voice. Another part of the editing function is not just to look for grammar, spacing, and minor typos and so on, but to assess whether the entire document is coherent. After reading the whole self-study, is something missing? Is there some important information that the consultant-evaluators, the readers' panel, the Institutional Actions Council, and the Higher Learning Commission need to know that is not clearly stated or has been omitted by accident?

Does the report read as if it were written by one person, or does it look like a piecemeal document that has been cut and pasted from several sources? When the report is near completion, someone who has not been intricately involved in the process should be asked to read it., looking at coherence and determining whether it speaks with one voice or is a cacophony of different voices. If it does not speak with one voice it should be fine-tuned until it does read like a smoothly and clearly written document.

☐ **The Self-Study Written for Focused Visits**

At times the self-study for a focused visit may err by being too narrow or too broad. It should not be a slightly shorter version of a self-study for a comprehensive visit. Nor should it be a brief discussion only of a narrow interpretation of the two or three focal areas.

Some focused visits are made for a degree change—for example, the addition of a specialized master's. There should be sufficient mention of the overall institution's situation in order to show that the addition of the new program will be compatible with the institution's purpose and mission and to clarify whether the addition will strain the human and financial resources of the institution.

Sometimes multiple degrees are being reviewed. It is critical for all programs under consideration to have completed all the necessary preparatory work before the visit and for the preparatory work to be clearly presented in the focused report and supplemental documents. It would be unrealistic to assume that a thorough presentation of one of the proposed programs will compensate for shortcomings about another proposal.

Lessons Learned from Years of Reviewing Self-Study Reports: Advice on Writing and Editing the Self-Study

"I know I saw that in the report somewhere, but it's not where I expect to find it!" "What do you think this means?" "There must have been fifteen different authors for this document!" "Why are they telling us this?" These are all common responses from consultant-evaluators as they read and discuss self-study reports, and they are comments that reinforce the old truism: It's not what you say, but how you say it. As we might have tried to impress upon our students the importance of writing well by telling them stories of essay exams in which two students seemed to know approximately the same amount of material, but the student who constructed the better written essay received a higher grade than the student who wrote less skillfully, the same is true for writers of self-studies. Of course, it matters what you say in your document, but how you say it is also extremely important. As someone who has co-authored a successful self-study and who has made several site visits as a consultant-evaluator, I will to present a few extremely practical reminders of dos and don'ts regarding the actual writing of the document.

☐ Tone

The tone of the self-study narrative indicates the attitude of the writer toward his or her audience. Writers should strive for a tone that is honest, free from propaganda, clear, and concise. In order to achieve such a tone, writers must remember that their readers are peers, fellow educators who will understand some of the necessary jargon of the profession, but who may not know an institution's particular language and abbreviations. Therefore, the writer must walk a fine line: avoid a patronizing, lofty tone, and at the other extreme, a too-familiar, chatty one.

Also avoid propaganda. The self-study is not meant to be a public relations piece, but rather an honest self-reflection. You rarely will fool readers by breezy assumptions and assertions that there are absolutely no problems at your institution. It is much more reasonable to mention issues you are working to resolve, describe steps you are taking, and list outcomes you hope to achieve. Similarly, using the self-study to promote a particular agenda is also inappropriate. Avoid overt and unsubstantial pats on the back, and be sure you do not use the document to promote personal agendas.

☐ Clarity

As you consider audience and appropriate tone, clarity is key. There are some important reminders as you work for greater clarity:

- **Avoid wordiness.** More is not better, either in number of words or number of syllables.
- **Eliminate redundancy.** Although this point is similar to the caution regarding wordiness, redundancy here refers to content, rather than to specific words and phrases. Sometimes it is necessary to repeat information if it is relevant and necessary to substantiate a point, but try to minimize such repetition. Decide where in the self-study it is most reasonable to place particular information, and use cross-references when that information is related to other sections of the report.
- **Use active rather than passive voice.** When subjects actually are present in sentences and are doing the action, the work, of the sentence, the document is more interesting and lively than when objects receive the action.
- **Check for parallel construction.** This means making sure that all similar parts of a sentence, a list, a table, a chart, or a graph are in the same form. Attention to form will minimize confusion for readers.
- **Work to ensure variety both in syntax and in diction.** Thus, try to avoid using all simple (or all compound or all complex, for that matter) sentences. Silly as it might make you feel, read some sections of your study aloud, listening carefully to your text. If you notice a consistent and predictable pattern, change it! Combine some sentences; break up the format with lists and bullets; deliberately vary the sentence structure throughout the document.

☐ Grammar, Mechanics, and Punctuation

Once you are sure you have the content and the style as you want them, go through the document carefully for errors in grammar, mechanics, and punctuation. Some of the most common errors to eliminate are sentence fragments, run-on sentences (or comma splices), inconsistency in verb tenses, shifts in person, lack of subject-verb and antecedent-pronoun agreement, confusing and misplaced modifiers, incorrect punctuation, and confusing abbreviations.

☐ Presentation

Provide a table of contents for your readers, and make it as clear and readable as possible. Avoid tables of contents that cover several pages and are cumbersomely numbered. Including section headings (with page numbers) at the tops of pages is helpful. Similarly, a list of appendices, materials found in the resource room, and other supplemental material is helpful to the team. Be sure margins are consistent and that the same format is used for all headings throughout the document (remember parallelism).

☐ Specific Cautions

Having written and read several self-studies, I conclude with a list of pairs of words that are sometimes problematic. As you write, revise, and proof your document, note these pitfalls. Thinking about them beforehand and discussing matters of tone, style, grammar, mechanics, and punctuation with others who are writing with you will save you a lot of time and trouble and will ensure that your self-study will be clear, concise, and readable, and thus will present your institution effectively and efficiently.

◇ **Problematic Pairs**

- **It's/Its. It's** is a contraction, and **its** is possessive. It's important for the faculty to set its agenda for monthly meetings

- **Effect/Affect. Effect** is generally used as a noun, and **affect** is generally used as a verb. The effect of that decision was serious; it affected all university students.

- **Between/Among**. Use **between** for two entities and **among** for more than two. There was extensive discussion between the president and the vice president about ways to ensure fair distribution of funds among all divisions of the university.

- **Number/Amount**. Use **number** for countable quantities and **amount** for those that can not be counted. As the number of students has increased, so has the amount of financial aid given by the university.

- **Fewer/Less**. Use **fewer** for countable quantities and **less** for those that cannot be counted. As fewer students chose to live in residence halls last year, there was less revenue for programming student activities.

- **Criteria/Criterion**. **Criteria** is the plural form of **criterion**. Search committees look at several criteria in deciding whom to hire, but the most important criterion at this university is evidence of good teaching.

- **Data/Datum**. **Data** is the plural form of **datum**. Data are essential. With this last datum, this paper has come full circle.

Norma C. Noonan is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Master of Arts in Leadership Program at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Kathryn Heltne Swanson is Professor of English and Chair, Humanities, at Augsburg College, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Strategies for Developing a Comprehensive Resource Room

Shanna Legleiter, Jackie Elliott, and Cathie Oshiro

Introduction

In October, Barton County Community College completed a comprehensive visit, which included a successful and meaningful resource room. This report describes the evolution of the resource room, identifying struggles and challenges that Barton faced during the planning process. The report also highlights the various aspects to consider when deciding where to locate the room, how to organize the information, which support functions to include, and what supplies are necessary to create a comprehensive resource room. Various methods are shared on ways to develop a room that incorporates all aspects of the institution in relation to the self-study report, including methods of integrating electronic resources.

Background

Two-and-a-half years prior to the visit, the resource room team began working on identifying ways to develop the room. The team met on a regular basis to discuss the materials that needed to be included in the resource room and how that information would be organized. As the team met, many strengths and weaknesses of the plan were discovered.

Some of the strengths included the various personal skills of the individuals on the team, the willingness of team members to work on assignments, and the quantity of information to be included in the resource room. Many weaknesses in the process became evident early on, while others developed later. The first challenge was that the team was too large to accomplish anything meaningful. Another, and probably the most significant, challenge faced by the team was how to organize the information in the resource room in a manner that created an accurate picture of the institution.

Room Selection

Perhaps one of the most important and difficult decisions for a college to make is the selection of the resource room. Some questions to be considered are:

- Does the room have capabilities for fax, phone, computers, and other equipment?
- Is the location close to clerical assistance?
- Is the location centrally located and readily available?
- Does the room allow for a sense of privacy?
- Does the room have aesthetic appeal?

It was helpful for the resource room team to hold meetings in the designated room when possible. This allowed the team to develop a mental picture of where items were to be placed.

Extended Room Selection

The resource room team also determined that additional rooms needed to be identified prior to the visit. Consequently, two meeting rooms on main campus were reserved so that the visiting team could hold larger meetings when needed. The resource room team also reserved a meeting room at the motel where the visiting team stayed. The motel meeting room contained a computer with Internet access. This computer was also connected to the college network, which allowed the visiting team to work from the motel.

Resource Room Team

A very important step for Barton to take was to identify a team leader for the resource room team. This person needed to possess many qualities, some of which were to be knowledgeable, detail-oriented, organized, and consistent. This person worked very closely with the steering committee co-chairs and the president of the college.

The resource room team was comprised of a team leader and nine other individuals who were responsible for the following: (1) welcoming consultant-evaluators, (2) resource room setup, (3) food and refreshments, and (4) promotions of the team visit. The resource room team leader selected these individuals from campus to serve on the team. The team met on an as-needed basis to identify tasks that needed to be accomplished, creating a "to do" list and a timeline in order to get tasks completed. This team was kept small so that individual strengths complemented others' weaknesses.

Organization of Resource Room Information

One of the charges of the resource room team was to identify the best method of organizing the information. After much trial and error, the team determined that the best way to organize information was through the use of notebooks. The team used the organizational chart as a guide and identified major departments within the institution that needed to be showcased. Deans or directors of those departments were asked to gather information in their areas and organize it in department notebooks containing sample forms and brochures, policies, reports commonly generated, and other relevant documents. This empowered the departments to include information that they felt was important to the self-study. The resource room team double-checked the information to ensure that the requested materials were in the room. Various notebooks were created, depending on the quantity of the information and the number of departments within each area of the institution. It was important for the team to identify materials in the resource room that were outdated and/or duplicates. Unless the team requested past information, all materials in the resource room reflected current information.

The Higher Learning Commission provides a list of institutional materials that are to be available to the consultant-evaluators at the time of the visit. Some other documents to consider including in a resource room are

- Appendices to the self-study report
- Assessment plans
- Strategic planning documents
- Administrative policies and procedures
- Audits
- Reports relative to the self-study process or working committees
- Technology plan
- Marketing and promotional literature
- Title IV compliance and certification
- Institutional and cooperative agreements
- Governance documents
- Grant documentation
- Team membership, reports, and minutes
- Institutional reports (monitoring reports)
- Board governance manual
- Institutional effectiveness documentation
- Academic program reviews
- Course syllabi
- MOUs (memorandum of understanding)

Resource Room Consistency

Consistency was key in the development of the resource room. This is where attention to detail plays a role in the organization of the information. The resource room team leader worked very closely with graphic arts personnel to ensure consistency with the theme of the notebooks. It was decided to use gray paper with navy blue ink. While each notebook was a different size, all of the notebooks were white with clear slipcovers. This allowed the resource room team to place covers on the notebooks that matched the self-study. The table of contents and tabs were all typed by the same person to maintain consistency in font and size. The resource room guide was also consistent with the theme.

Additional Resources

Several resources were included in the resource room. Two computers were placed in the room. Next to the computers was a printer/ copier unit for the visiting team's use. Likewise, a phone and a listing of phone extensions for key campus contacts were included.

The resource room team felt it was important to include the community in the development of the room. A local business in the area donated furniture, including a sofa, two chairs, a coffee table, and an end table, along with window furnishings to develop a comfortable atmosphere in the room. A tasteful painting was added to soften the room. In addition to the homelike furniture, the resource room team placed a conference table with executive chairs in the room to accommodate the visiting team. This allowed for an aesthetically pleasing working area.

An added touch that the resource room team provided was a basket of amenities. This basket contained such items as tissues, gum, mints, candy, Band-Aids, and, last but not least, Tylenol. The resource room team recognized that being away from home can be inconvenient; therefore, these items were added in the event that visiting members should need them.

Once the resource room was completed, an invitation was sent to the campus community to view it. Everyone on campus played a vital role in the development of the resource room by providing information, materials, assistance, and/or input.

A comprehensive resource room should include many common office supplies such as highlighters, pens, pencils, paper, paper clips, sticky notes, and tissues. Additionally, the resource room should incorporate hospitality services including a refrigerator, a coffeepot, drinks, and food.

Often, the visiting team needed assistance during the visit. It is a good idea to have designated clerical support available. This meant that someone was accessible whenever the team members needed help. It was also helpful to have key campus contacts available in their offices or by telephone at all times during the visit. It was sometimes difficult to anticipate every question that needed to be answered; having key individuals available and prepared allowed the visiting team to avoid delays in retrieving necessary information or data.

Conclusion

The development of a resource room does not happen in a few months. Strong leadership, teamwork, communication, and organization played very important roles. Hopefully, the methods and strategies provided will supply other institutions with some innovative ideas for creating a comprehensive resource room for future accrediting visits.

Shanna Legleiter is Administrative Assistant at Barton County Community College in Great Bend, Kansas.

Jackie Elliot is Dean of Student Development at Barton County Community College in Great Bend, Kansas.

Cathie Oshiro is Director of Grants at Barton County Community College in Great Bend, Kansas.

A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement, 2003

Volume 4: The Self-Study Process for Commission Evaluation

Chapter 3: From the Eligibility Process through Initial Affiliation

The Higher Learning Commission

A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

NCA

Restructured Expectations: Building New Partnerships for Learning

Program of
The Higher Learning Commission

108th Annual Meeting of the North Central Association

April 13 – 16, 2003 • Hyatt Regency Chicago

From PIF to Initial Accreditation: A Case Study

Laurie Pemberton and Gil Linne

This paper describes the history of becoming affiliated with The Higher Learning Commission, from PIF to initial accreditation, based on the experiences of one institution, Northcentral University (NCU) of Prescott, Arizona.

About Northcentral University

Northcentral University is a private distance-learning institution of higher education, providing high-quality learning experiences for adults through a distance-learning format. The university offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree programs in psychology and in business and technology management.

Distance learning involves education where the student and the faculty member are not located in the same place. The educational emphasis developed by Northcentral University to accomplish its mission has the following key components: (1) distance learning, (2) active self-learning, and (3) one-on-one mentoring. Active self-learning recognizes that education is a process that can accommodate individuals with different learning needs and styles. Learners are provided with a variety of materials for each course, including a course outline and detailed syllabus, the list of textbooks and reference materials for the course, and information on how to communicate with the faculty mentor assigned for the course. The faculty member provides guidance, answers questions, and evaluates the individual learner's work. Contact between the learner and the faculty mentor is achieved through the following methods: email, Web site, telephone, voice mail, fax, videoconferencing, and on occasion person-to-person contact.

Accreditation History of Northcentral University

Following is a chronological summary of events related to NCU's progress toward initial accreditation with The Higher Learning Commission.

1996		The university began operations in Prescott, Arizona.
1997	March	The university began enrolling learners in its programs.
	May 7	The university submitted its Preliminary Institutional Form (PIF) and responses to the General Institutional Requirements (GIRs).
	October 7	Commission staff analysis indicated that fifteen of the twenty-four GIRs provided sufficient evidence for validation by an on-site evaluation team. Additional information was required on nine GIRs to satisfy threshold expectations.
1998	March 20	The university submitted revisions to its PIF/GIR documents, addressing issues regarding the nine incomplete GIRs.
	July 9	Commission staff analysis of the revised PIF/GIR documents indicated that there was sufficient evidence for validation by an on-site evaluation team.
	August 18	University executives met with the Commission's executive director and other members. The new procedure for evaluating first-time applicants was described to the university, beginning with a face-to-face meeting between members of the requesting institution and the Commission staff. and a review of the PIF/GIR document by external evaluators selected by the Commission.

	November 2	The university submitted its second complete PIF/GIR document to the Commission.
1999	February 1	The Commission gave the PIF/GIR materials to the eligibility process review panel.
	April 26	The Commission completed its eligibility process review of the PIF/GIR documentation.
	May 14	The Commission informed NCU that the eligibility process review panel concluded that the evidence put forward "was sufficient to warrant an on-site visit." The official start of the self-study process was authorized.
	September 23	The Commission's liaison for NCU visited the university, providing background and advice about the accreditation process and evaluation visit.
	October 19	The date of the evaluation visit for initial candidacy was confirmed for January 10–12, 2000.
	November 5	Materials for the evaluation process were sent to the Commission.
2000	January 10–11	The four-member evaluation team conducted an on-site visit to evaluate the application for initial candidacy and found the university was deficient on three GIRs for the doctoral programs.
	April 11	NCU requested that its application for initial candidacy be withdrawn with the understanding that the university would resubmit GIRs 10, 11, and 15 for staff analysis and approval before reactivating the candidacy process.
	June 23	GIRs 10, 11, and 15 were revised and submitted, describing the actions taken to address and remedy concerns raised.
	September 7	Commission staff analysis of the resubmitted GIRs indicated that there was sufficient evidence for validation by an on-site team.
	November 7	The Commission formed the new evaluation team and set the date for the site visit.
	November 20	Materials for the evaluation process were sent to the Commission.
	December 18–19	The evaluation team chair conducted a pre-visit review to assist in preparing for the site visit.
2001	January 21–24	The four-member evaluation team conducted an on-site visit to evaluate the institution and recommended initial candidacy.
	March	The evaluation team's report was received. The university focused on all aspects of the team report for study and improvement.
	May 4	A written response to the challenges raised by the evaluation team was submitted to the Commission, wherein the university described how it was meeting or planned to meet the challenges.
	May 21	The university's president and vice president for academic affairs met with the Commission's review committee.
	June 22	The board of trustees of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools granted Northcentral University initial candidacy status.
	November 1	A date for an evaluation visit to seek initial accreditation was requested.
	December 27	The Commission set the date for the site visit.
2002	January 2	The 2002 self-study process to request initial accreditation officially began.
	August 9	Materials for the evaluation process were sent to the Commission and the four-member evaluation team.
	September 7	The evaluation team chair conducted a pre-visit review to assist in preparing for the site visit.
	October 14–16	The four-member evaluation team conducted an on-site visit to evaluate the institution and recommended initial accreditation.

From PIF to Initial Accreditation

When Northcentral University began operations as an educational institution in Arizona, it knew that a requirement for state licensure to grant degrees was progress toward obtaining accreditation with an accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. The constituents of NCU began planning for the activities required to achieve initial accreditation before the first learner was enrolled.

In 1997 the university developed its first strategic plan, developing the vision and values of the institution as well as goals and objectives for the next five years. The university also developed its model for continuous improvement and began forming its approach for institutional effectiveness and learner outcomes assessment. The institutional effectiveness and assessment plan was prepared, and the self-study process was regarded as a snapshot-in-time evaluation of the university. Tools were put into place with the first courses to solicit feedback from learners on the courses and faculty mentors. General education objectives were defined, and the entire undergraduate curriculum was reviewed. The need for program review was recognized, and an approach was drafted.

During 1997–1999, the university was also involved in preparing, submitting, revising, and resubmitting its Preliminary Information Form (PIF) along with its responses to the General Institutional Requirements (GIRs). Improvements were made to various aspects of the organization in the process. The university evaluated the rigor of its academic programs, assessment, and quality assurance in learner outcomes. Attention was paid to

- Consistent mission statement
- Governance oversight by the board of directors
- Qualifications of faculty; adequate number of full-time faculty; role of faculty in academic governance and responsibility for curriculum
- General education requirements
- Admissions requirements and screening process
- Access to information resources (virtual library)
- Reporting of financial data
- Public information about the institution, its status, etc.

Northcentral University conducted two self-studies in seeking initial candidacy and had two evaluation team visits. The first self-study was done in 1999 with a January 2000 visit, and the second self-study was done in 2000 with a January 2001 visit. The January 2000 evaluation team determined that while NCU met the GIRs for the bachelor's and master's degree programs, it did not satisfy GIRs 10, 11, and 15 for the doctorate programs. The university withdrew its application for initial candidacy, with the understanding that NCU would resubmit these problem GIRs for staff review and approval to reactivate the candidacy process. Work to be accomplished included

- Reviewing and revising the dissertation process for the Ph.D. learners
- Strengthening the faculty members, especially those supporting the doctorate programs
- Conducting program reviews

As a result of the first visit, NCU learned much about itself and the site-visit process that incorporated both evaluation and consultation by the team members. NCU focused on strengthening its academics and operations, addressing and correcting weaknesses, so that the second visit in January 2001 was successful.

After receiving initial candidacy status, the university immediately looked at progress needed to achieve initial accreditation status. Supporting our continuing learners and attracting new learners while improving and managing university affairs and meeting the GIRs and criteria presented a challenge. NCU evolved and matured as an institution during this process of critical inquiry and improvement, leaving no terms, concepts, or practices unchallenged.

The Self-Study

The self-study process should demonstrate that a continuous assessment and improvement model is incorporated in all operations. Actions should focus on the students and their educational success. The self-study is a vehicle to show that the institution will remain strong while continuing to ensure quality. Tips from NCU's experience with self-study processes include the following.

- Appointing an organized and knowledgeable self-study coordinator with responsibility for the process. An assistant coordinator is also helpful.
- Attending conferences, including the Higher Learning Commission's Annual Meeting, to enhance knowledge in higher education and accreditation.
- Obtaining samples of self-study reports from similar universities for ideas.
- Initiating appropriate changes to the university's strategic plan, IT plan, policies, procedures, handbooks, curriculum, governance, faculty, etc.
- Prioritizing institutional research and assessment.
- Beginning the self-study process early.
- Establishing an appropriate and realistic timeline for the entire self-study.
- Involving everyone (all constituencies).
- Conducting the self-study review and documenting the GIRs and criteria.
- Developing the report with at least three or four drafts of the self-study to review and revise.
- Getting feedback on the self-study from a variety of reviewers. A committee of our board of directors, along with an outside consultant, assisted in giving feedback and suggestions. An external editor improved the English and writing consistency of our final report.
- Ensuring that the self-study is an accurate evaluation of the institution. We honestly assessed our own strengths and concerns and incorporated realistic strategies.
- Establishing a resource room. We had two resource rooms. One was on paper, while the other was electronic. We gave our evaluation team access to the electronic version before the site visit.
- Conducting a mock site visit using an experienced consultant. This was helpful to everyone, especially those who had never gone through this process before.
- Inviting the evaluation team chair to a pre-site visit was invaluable in coordinating logistics and helping the team understand our uniqueness.

NCU continually considers ways it can improve its academics and operations. This is an ongoing self-assessment process that is built into the organizational structure and operations. The university updates its documents as needed, has shifted responsibilities as the institution has grown, and inspects existing procedures for efficiency and effectiveness.

Summary

The process from PIF to initial accreditation takes time, commitment, and support. It is an ongoing process of self-assessment and self-improvement. The goal and requirement is to demonstrate that the institution meets the standards incorporated in the General Institutional Requirements (GIRs) and satisfies the Criteria for Accreditation. The process requires dedication to evaluation and improvement.

The challenge placed on an institution seeking initial accreditation with the Higher Learning Commission is significant for an institution with a new educational paradigm of higher learning. Northcentral University is proud that it undertook the challenge, and believes that the process has helped our institution become better in all aspects of its academics and operations. Northcentral University is excited about its role and future in higher education.

Laurie (McCown) Pemberton is Director of Institutional Research and Assessment at Northcentral University in Prescott, Arizona.

Gil Linne is Vice President of Academic Affairs and Chief Academic Officer at Northcentral University in Prescott, Arizona.

A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement

Master Index of Papers

Volume 1: Establishing and Sustaining Effective Connections

Chapter 1. Building New Partnerships for Learning

Chapter 2: State, Regional, and National Initiatives

Effective General Education Assessment at Large Public Institutions. Julie Wallin and Brenda Masters, Oklahoma State University

Assessing the Ineffable Outcomes of General Education Through Electronic Student Portfolios. Sharon J. Hamilton, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

Assessing Critical Thinking in the General Education Program. Becky J. Chadwick and Kim D. Schopmeyer, Henry Ford Community College

Assessing Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum. Nannette Bagstad, Paul Batesel, Ronald Semmens, and Mark Skean, Mayville State University

Chapter 5. Assessing and Supporting Effective Teaching

Integrating Faculty Development and Outcomes Assessment. John Neibling, Alan Jacobs, and John Nagy, Scottsdale Community College

Effective Performance-Based Evaluation of College Faculty. Earl Nicodemus, West Liberty State College

Data-Driven Decision Making: A Case Study in Teacher Preparation. Nancy Blackford and Kate Wiles, Walsh University

Capitalizing on Internal Talent: A Model for Professional Development. Alex Birkholz and Renelle Gill, Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College

Developing the Capacity for Synthesis: Demanding and Assessing for High-Level Learning. Carol Canavan, Mount Union College

Volume 4: The Self-Study Process for Commission Evaluation

Chapter 1. Self-Study and Commission Evaluation: Coordinating the Self-Study

Initiating the Self-Study Process: Practical Suggestions. Marilyn Nelson Carroll, Rockhurst University

On Herding Ducks: Ways to Keep a Big Project Going Without Being the Gunslinger. J. Thomas Howald, Franklin College

Initiating the Self-Study Process: Planning for Success. Thomas Botzman and Carol Canavan, Mount Union College

Self-Study in a Small, Single-Purpose Institution. Kay Luft, Saint Luke's College

The Importance of Being Earnest and The Color Purple: Purpose and Structure in the Self-Study Process. Michael L. Banks, Jacqueline Gray, and Karen Jones, St. Charles Community College

Only 120 Days Remain, and the Clock Is Ticking!. Dunn T. Faires, Northeastern State University

Preparing Trustees, Faculty, Staff, and Students for the Team Visit. David McFadden and Mary Lahman, Manchester College

The Eight Weeks Prior to the Higher Learning Commission Visit. Kelly K. Brinkman and William L. Ramsey, Logan University

Chapter 2. Self-Study and Commission Evaluation: Practical Advice

Deciding How to Approach the Self-Study: Three Campuses, Three Choices. Gil Atnip, Indiana University Southeast; Marilyn Vasquez, Indiana University Northwest; and Susan Kahn, Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis

Utilizing Online Course Software to Prepare a Higher Learning Commission Self-Study. Donna L. Askins, Northern Illinois University

What Did and Did Not Work During the Self-Study Process. Terri L. Wenzlaff, Western State College

Sustaining Communication and Involvement Throughout the Self-Study. Paula M. Glover and Kristin Wilson, Moberly Area Community College

A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement

Master Index of Speakers

4

The Higher Learning Commission

A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

NCA

30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400 | Chicago, IL 60602-2504 | 312-263-0456
800-621-7440 | Fax: 312-263-7462 | www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org

Serving the common good by assuring and advancing the quality of higher learning

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

X	This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.
	This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").