STUDENT SUCCESS *in* COLLEGE

Promoting Student Success

What Accreditation Teams Can Do

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Six Conditions that Matter to Student Success

I.   "Living" Mission and "Lived" Educational Philosophy
II. Unshakeable Focus on Student Learning
III. Environments Adapted for Educational Enrichment
IV. Clear Pathways to Student Success
V.   Improvement-Oriented Ethos
VI. Shared Responsibility for Educational Quality and Student Success

T he process of accreditation review in the U.S. serves two primary functions: quality assurance and continual improvement. The experienced educators who voluntarily serve on accreditation teams apply common standards of quality that serve students and meet public accountability expectations and offer suggestions and recommendations for institutional consideration and improvement. In the last decade, regional accreditation commissions and national professional and specialized accreditation agencies have increasingly focused on student learning results and institutional improvement. There has been a corresponding shift in focus from institutional resources, structures, and inputs as the primary indicators of institutional quality, toward increased emphasis on student learning results, appropriate to the degree level and mission of the institution. Accreditation review team reports are rich sources for examples of institutional practices that engage student learning. What have not been readily available to accreditation teams, however, are compilations of examples of good institutional practice.

The suggestions offered here are drawn in large part from a study of 20 diverse four-year colleges and universities that have higher-than-predicted graduation rates and, through the National Survey of Student Engagement, demonstrated that they have effective practices for fostering success among students of differing abilities and aspirations. These institutions—called DEEP schools here because they were studied for the project on Documenting Effective Educational Practices—clearly communicate that they value high quality undergraduate teaching and learning.

National Survey of Student Engagement

Of particular relevance to accreditation's focus on student learning and educational attainment is that the foundation for the strong performance of this group of institutions is due in large part to systematically applied policies and practices that emphasize student success, broadly defined to include learning, personal development, student satisfaction, and persistence. While accreditation standards inevitably require adopting policies and practices congruent with this goal, they generally have not been prescriptive for content. The DEEP study offers some best-practice models that enact the intent of accreditation standards and supply some much-needed exemplars for the growing body of knowledge about assessment and improvement of programmatic and institutional learning.

1. Institutional mission and goals purposefully establish the foundation for student success

DEEP schools are distinctive for having coherent *enacted* missions. Institutional missions are regarded as "enacted" when what people at a college or university *do* is consistent with what the institution espouses in its written mission statement. Accreditation teams can look for evidence of how the mission shapes institutional policies and processes by determining to what extent faculty, staff, and administration have a shared vision of how to promote student success and the ways that vision is promulgated. Through their recommendations and suggestions, teams can also encourage ways that faculty, staff and others can become clearer about institutional priorities and how policies and practices can become better aligned with the espoused mission and educational purposes. For example, Winston-Salem State University and the University of Texas at El Paso are strongly committed to expanding educational opportunity for and developing the talents of underserved populations. They enact their social responsibility mission by supporting diversity on campus, emphasizing high-quality undergraduate teaching, providing high-level student support, and encouraging students to give back to their communities. CSU Monterey Bay uses the term "Vision Students" to refer to students who have been denied educational opportunity due to their socioeconomic or ethnic backgrounds, and to whom

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the institution has committed its central focus to serve. In 1999, the University engaged in a series of "vision dialogues" so that stakeholders could seek more effective ways to put vision into practice. Alverno College, grounded in egalitarian ideals and an ethic of social justice, defines its commitment to ensuring the success of its women students this way: "To accomplish our mission, we must work constantly (to create) a community of learning (in) the pursuit of knowledge and the development of students' abilities."

2. Student success is a product of good educational design

Strong-performing colleges and universities devote thoughtful attention to the comprehensive and systematic assessment of learning and to the development of complementary policies and processes that support students academically and socially. Faculty and staff at DEEP schools are knowledgeable about the students they serve and then design academic and co-curricular programs to meet students' needs and interests. Schools such as Fayetteville State University, the University of Texas at El Paso, the University of Maine Farmington, and Winston-Salem State University require students to take advantage of proactive support resources such as summer advising, orientation, and fall welcome week, and then follow up with advising and other programs to assess and ensure student progress. At other institutions, such as the University of Michigan, a high-achieving student body is challenged with programs like the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, Michigan Learning Communities, Sweetland Writing Center, and the first-year seminar program. These initiatives provide good-practice exemplars for effective program design. Emphasis on assessment of learning at the program, department and institutional levels ensures intentionality, coherence, coordination, and alignment across the institution. The numerous examples from the 20 DEEP schools provide instructive illustrations for what accreditation teams should look for when determining whether institutional policies, programs, and practices are educationally effective.

3. *Responsibility for ensuring educational quality and creating supportive environments is a shared responsibility*

Accreditation teams look for evidence of respect, collaboration, and partnership among governing board members, faculty, academic administrators, student affairs staff, and student leaders. Too often, accreditors observe units functioning as stand alone silos where competing interests dilute the quality of the undergraduate experience. Institutions that intentionally forge strong internal partnerships are supported by multiple sources and invest publicly and powerfully in student success. They also raise the quality of the institutional conversation about the many factors contributing to student success. The DEEP study describes collaborative working relationships at small, focused liberal arts colleges like Alverno College and Macalester College and at large, research-oriented multiversities like the University of Michigan and the University of Kansas.

4. *Effective approaches to assuring student success require strong evidence-gathering systems and data-informed decision making*

The 20 DEEP schools consciously align institutional priorities with planning and budgeting cycles of decision making. Evidence is collected systematically, analyzed with comparative cohorts, benchmarked when possible, discussed collaboratively and, ultimately, used to guide policy and practice. For example, interviews with graduating seniors conducted at the University of Kansas by three-person teams of faculty provide evidence that is analyzed to improve general education and major subjects. Longwood University uses surveys, academic progress statistics, curriculum evaluations and competency testing to assess competencies in writing, oral communication, fundamental mathematical skills, scientific literacy, and the basic use of computers for all of its graduates. Based on this evidence, Longwood revised some curricular requirements and added capstone courses to improve the student experience. Institutions are often open to making such changes but have lacked the knowledge about how to gather evidence effectively and how to integrate evidence appropriately into decision-making processes. Accreditors can use these examples to point to effective practice and to deepen understanding of how to enact institutional improvement efforts. And, just as institutions need to focus their efforts on areas of highest priority, so do accreditation teams need to focus their time on campus on reviewing those matters that are most important when it comes to demonstrating quality and helping students achieve.

5. *Accreditation team members must be familiar with the range of best practices that foster student success*

Accreditation processes must evolve beyond a system based on principles and standards designed for site-based, residential, degree-granting, largely full-time student bodies to an approach that ensures the success of *all students*, whatever the form and structure of their educational experience at the institution being reviewed. The review process itself must move beyond descriptions and assertions to critical, evidence-based inquiry that focuses on strategies to help the institution realize the improvement it seeks. Accreditation team members should include the factors and conditions highlighted in this study as they review an institution's performance – those that enrich academic experiences, encourage active and collaborative learning, provide high expectations for student performance, sustain supportive environments, deepen student engagement, and encourage student-faculty interactions. Evaluators must be prepared to look beyond the student-teacher relationship in the classroom—as vital as this is—and probe for evidence of institution-wide conversations and collaboration around the enriched, nuanced understanding of student success assumed in this study. Expecting faculty, staff and others to consistently use educationally-effective principles throughout the institution and explaining to institutional stakeholders why these practices and effective application are important will improve the practice of accreditation itself.

Questions to Ponder:

While accreditation teams operate under the framework of standards of accreditation, the broad definition of student success used in this study—enhanced learning, personal development, student satisfaction, and persistence—may be used to augment the process of accreditation review. By pondering some questions, accreditors may come to a deeper understanding about their role in reviewing institutional efforts to ensure student success and enhance educational effectiveness:

1. What evidence does the institution being reviewed present that demonstrates its enacted mission is coherent, clearly stated, and widely understood?

2. To what extent are course, program, and institutional goals and purposes well aligned and focused on student success?

3. What evidence is there that the governing board, administration, faculty, and student affairs work in partnership on agreed-upon principles, approaches, goals, and indicators of success?

4. What measures are used to inform campus discussions about accountability for student success? Who evaluates the meaning of these measures and what is the evidence of their effectiveness?

5. How is student learning assessed beyond the course level? What discussions occur about the analysis of results? How is learning systematically improved?

6. How and on what topics is student satisfaction assessed? How are results analyzed and how are improvements made from the data? How systematic is the assessment of student satisfaction? What weight is given to student opinions?

7. To what extent does the institution explore assumptions that shape the design and organization of its curriculum and pedagogy, and generate new approaches to teaching and learning?

8. What is known about why students come to the institution, why they stay, and how they persist? How is this information used to create greater responsiveness to student needs?

Answers to these questions from different types of strong-performing institutions around the country are offered in *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*. The book features what 20 diverse, educationally effective college and universities do to promote student success. The Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP)

project was supported with generous grants from Lumina Foundation for Education and the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. Altogether, the 24-member research team talked with more than 2,700 people during its 40 multiple-day site visits to the DEEP schools. Six properties and conditions shared by these colleges and universities are discussed, along with a wide array of effective educational policies and practices that, if adapted appropriately, can help a campus create and sustain a culture that supports student success. The book can be used in faculty and staff development, strategic planning, institutional mission clarification, leadership development, and collaborative efforts between academic and student affairs. A companion volume, *Assessing Conditions to Enhance Educational Effectiveness: The Inventory for Student Engagement and Success,* will be available in September 2005. It provides a template for institutions to use to identify areas of institutional functioning that can be strengthened to promote student success.

Sources:

Kuh, G.D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J.H., & Whitt, E.J. (in press). *Assessing conditions to enhance educational effectiveness: The Inventory for Student Engagement and Success*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E. J. & Associates (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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Project DEEP Colleges and Universities

Alverno College (WI)	Sweet Briar College (VA)
California State University at Monterey Bay (CA)	University of Kansas (KS)
The Evergreen State College (WA)	University of Maine at Farmington (ME)
Fayetteville State University (NC)	University of Michigan (MI)
George Mason University (VA)	University of Texas at El Paso (TX)
Gonzaga University (WA)	Ursinus College (PA)
Longwood University (VA)	Wabash College (IN)
Macalester College (MN)	Wheaton College (MA)
Miami University (OH)	Winston-Salem State University (NC)
Sewanee: University of the South (TN)	Wofford College (SC)