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An Exercise for Collecting and Organizing Evidence of Continuous Improvement

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Abstract: Colleges and universities depend upon external approvals from accreditors, government agencies, and national organizations. These approvals require periodic review of institution-prepared reports and self-studies documenting the continued validity of offered degrees and programs, student support and success, institutional effectiveness, and continuous improvement. Campus leaders generally take one of two approaches to complete this work: deploying working groups and committees or relying on one or two institutional accreditation leaders. This 2024 AALHE Conference session introduced a third approach, a hybrid of the two dominant approaches, which begins with a campus-wide assets-based exercise for gathering information and evidence. Deploying the exercise decreases the time campus stakeholders must commit to these recurring external review processes; provides accreditation leaders with information and evidence that reflect the breadth of the institution's activities; addresses the problem of a narrow interpretation of assessment activities; and is more effective in the current higher education milieu where institutional effectiveness and continuous improvement are embedded across the breadth of institutionally unique activities.

Keywords: *Higher education, continuous improvement, accreditation, assessment*

Introduction

With few exceptions, U.S. colleges and universities depend upon external validation to survive and thrive. This includes approvals from institutional accreditors, program accreditors, state governments and agencies, federal government agencies, and national organizations (Bastedo et al. 2016; Gaston 2014; Brittingham 2009; Eaton 2001).

Accreditation review has become the primary measure of quality in higher education.[1] In the cases of institutional and program accreditation, the process generally includes an institution-prepared report or self-study followed by a review from a team of external peers (Eaton, 2012). As Eaton (2001) summarized, "The study and peer review are based on the mission of an institution--its intended purpose and scope of service" (p. 38). This focus on mission emphasizes the centrality of institutional uniqueness in meeting the accreditor's criteria or standards (Olson, 2016), which is sometimes overlooked as colleges and universities seek to meet external expectations.

[1] For more on the history of higher education, accreditation, and how we arrived at this point, see Gaston 2014, Bastedo et. al. 2016, and Brittingham 2009.

Preparing for Accreditation Review

It is posited here that the institution-prepared report or self-study has increased in importance as review team visits primarily focus on ensuring the accuracy of what they have read before arriving on campus. Site-visit resource rooms have been replaced with electronic evidence files provided to the review team weeks or months before the visit. The priority has become effectively conveying the breadth of institutional activities within the report and evidence files rather than focusing on information shared while the reviewers are on campus. The institution-prepared report and evidence must demonstrate to reviewers the validity of the institution's degrees and programs; how the mission guides its work; activities that support student success; evidence of institutional effectiveness; and continuous improvement across all functions.

Institutions approach the preparation of these important documents in different ways. Some colleges and universities use a committee approach. They pull together teams of administrators and faculty members from the functional areas reflected in each report section, criteria, or standard to ensure that the breadth of activities is reflected in the report. One weakness of this approach is the additional work placed on already busy administrators and faculty members. Buehrer (2021) also notes that results from this approach are impacted by the limited knowledge of accreditation standards and their purposes among faculty, staff, and administrators: specifically, the standards related to continuous improvement.

Other institutions delegate the preparation of the report to the accreditation liaison or a small team of accreditation professionals. This addresses the problem of accreditation knowledge and skills. A weakness, however, is that one individual or a small group doesn't know the breadth of activities at the institution. This limits the information and evidence they draw from to argue that the college or university meets external expectations. Having the knowledge and ability to interpret accreditation standards and write a self-study, does not ensure a positive outcome (Buehrer, 2021).

The Assets-Based Approach

This 2024 AALHE Conference session introduced an alternative that the author participated in implementing at two midwestern institutions. An assets-based approach gathers a breadth of information and evidence from stakeholders during a one-time exercise. College and university administrators and faculty members return to their important work with and for students and serve as resources, not leaders, for preparing accreditation documents. Campus accreditation professionals use what has been collected in the exercise to prepare robust documents that draw from the breadth of the content provided. Completed documents are reviewed by stakeholders in functional areas and available for review, correction, and addition by the full campus community.

An assets-based approach to preparing documents for external review was deployed at two institutions: a mid-sized university and an undergraduate college, both accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. Previous approaches to preparing accreditation reports at these institutions had varied. In both cases, gaps in evidence and deficiencies in demonstrating continuous improvement were identified in external review team evaluations and reports. Their experiences are shared so they might inform activities at other colleges and universities.

Case Study 1: Mid-Sized Midwestern University

This university's approach to preparing its 2016 comprehensive report began by identifying stakeholder committees for each document section. Committees were tasked with collecting information and evidence and writing their report section. With the accreditor's submission date rapidly approaching, most committees had missed deadlines for submitting their sections and some were no longer meeting. Sections that were submitted included over-reliance on the same information and evidence. Committee chairs indicated uncertainty regarding what was expected of them (consistent with the findings of Buehrer, 2021).

With the impending due date, two campus leaders combined forces to prepare the document. They used the limited information and evidence gathered by the committees supplemented with additional content they collected from across the campus based on their institutional knowledge and network and accreditation knowledge. Despite working long days and weekends to complete the document on time, the resulting report lacked the breadth of evidence of effectiveness and continuous improvement. These deficiencies were reflected in the peer review team's evaluation and report.

The university had its next comprehensive evaluation and site visit scheduled for 2019, and the team preparing for this review - the accreditation liaison officer, the previous accreditation coordinator, and the current accreditation coordinator - included the two administrators who had prepared the 2016 document. They decided to use a different tactic that addressed the weaknesses in their previous approach. The starting point was a simple, one-time exercise and process to gather the information and evidence needed to prepare the institution's report. The three-person team then used their accreditation knowledge to organize the information and evidence into a compelling argument. As sections were completed, they were sent to the respective vice-presidents for review, corrections, and additions. The completed document was made available to the campus community for review before submission to the accreditor.

The resulting document reflected the breadth of university activity and continuous improvement. Accreditation was successfully reaffirmed with no follow-up requirements and included positive reviewer feedback regarding the information, evidence, and maturity in continuous improvement demonstrated in the document.

Case Study 2: Small Midwestern Private College

The exercise and process were later replicated at a small, undergraduate institution where previous accreditation evaluations required follow-up reports and interim monitoring. At this institution, the approach to preparing their 2018 report had been centralized with the accreditation leader responsible for gathering information, evidence, and preparing the document. Indeed, faculty and staff members later indicated they weren't aware of the accreditation report or the accreditor's findings. Limited breadth of input into preparing the document was reflected in the accreditation review team's evaluation which identified several areas for improvement, one core component met with concern, and a required interim report.

Four years later, preparations for the college's decennial comprehensive evaluation adopted an assets-based approach. This began with the one-time exercise and process to gather information and evidence needed to prepare the document. The accreditation liaison officer, supported by a student assistant, crafted the assurance argument using approximately 1,000 pieces of evidence and information primarily collected in the exercise and subsequent contacts made to exercise participants for additional evidence. Sections of the report were posted for leadership review as they were completed. The final document was made available to the campus community - including students and trustees - before submission to the accreditor. In 2024, the college's institutional accreditation was reaffirmed with no follow-up. As one faculty member described, the accreditation leadership led "a process most faculty would like to pretend isn't happening and gathered our community to present a truly stunning demonstration of [the College's] excellence, faithfulness, and student-centeredness," all of which are elements of the institution's mission.

Lessons Learned from These Experiences

This college and university used an exercise that helped staff, faculty, students, and administrators identify the breadth of good work already being completed across their institutions - the assets - rather than focusing on "what the accreditor wants" or narrowly defining student success and effectiveness as only student retention and graduation rates and the assessment of student learning. The exercise began with the question, "What are we doing that demonstrates we meet this core component?" Information and evidence were gathered from all functional areas: academics, governance, community engagement, culture and inclusion, student support, physical plant, campus ministries, business services, student organizations, athletics, philanthropy, alumni and family engagement, public affairs and marketing, and more.

This exercise also broke down what is needed to demonstrate effectiveness and continuous improvement into the components of *information* and *evidence*. Information is defined as what you say you do at your college or university. This is found in institutional policies, formal processes, institutional statements, foundational documents, and the breadth of activities that reflect the unique campus culture and mission. Evidence demonstrates that what you say you do is regularly occurring at your institution, it is effective, and continuously improving. This is found in data, reports, presentations, minutes, agendas, publications, correspondence, and websites. These two components are combined to demonstrate effectiveness and continuous improvement.

The accreditation leaders at both case study institutions took the following steps to deploy the exercise and process.

- **Identifying Stakeholders.** Stakeholders were identified from all functional areas of the institution: primarily those at the vice president, dean, director, and manager levels.
- **Gaining Leadership Support.** Active participation in the exercise was enhanced when participants knew that their president, provost, and CFO valued and participated in the process and expected their active engagement.
- **Facilitating a One-Time Exercise for Stakeholders.** Each three-hour exercise began with an overview of the institution's accreditation situation, what was expected of participants during the time together, and the next steps. Within the three-hour exercise, participants from similar

functional areas worked together in short, focused sessions (30-40 minutes) to identify the breadth of activities occurring at the institution.
- **Organizing the Documents.** Participants in each short session electronically provided accreditation leaders with information about each identified activity with evidence documents attached. Each piece of evidence was subsequently downloaded to form the evidence inventory. Information about each activity within the email text was copied into a shared document that served as the starting point for preparing the assurance argument.

A positive unintended outcome was that leaders at both institutions were prompted to make improvements after participating in the exercise. For example, taking meeting minutes at campus meetings to capture the discussion of data, planned improvements, and outcomes. Revisiting formal processes and policies during the exercise also reminded the campus community of expectations that need to be followed and policies that are no longer relevant and could be removed from handbooks and websites.

Contributions of Campus Colleagues

Attendees of this AALHE conference session were receptive to this assets-based approach and exercise. They expressed a general dread of the committee approach and those in accreditation liaison roles could identify with the difficulties of going it alone from their accreditation and assessment silos to prepare documents that reflect the breadth of the institution.

Some participants from large universities were skeptical of using the exercise at their institutions, suggesting the unwieldy size of their institutions would impede identifying manageable groups of stakeholders and evidence. They were, however, interested in promoting the approach for more focused program accreditation processes.

Attendees also suggested the value of using this approach in other planning efforts. They identified strategic planning, academic affairs processes, and institutional change and improvement efforts as potential activities where the assets-based exercise and approach would be beneficial.

Discussion

Using the assets-based approach and exercise described here had many institutional benefits for the two institutions where it was deployed.

First, an assets-based approach to external evaluation begins by looking for the great things already happening at institutions and mapping this information and evidence to external expectations. This elevates the uniqueness of the institution's mission and the activities that reflect that mission rather than narrowly focusing on "what the accreditor wants." It can address the problem of narrowly interpreting institutional effectiveness and continuous improvement as only the federally required student success measures and assessment of academic programs, general education, and cocurricular student learning metrics. A narrow interpretation creates a mismatch between what institutions provide and what external reviewers expect, leading to the omission of strong information and evidence from accreditation documents. Both institutions in the case studies described here are faithbased. Using an assets-based approach captured the activities that reflect the mission that might not be included in a public institution's evidence such as service-learning trips that include a Christian mission element. This begs the question, are there institutions that place themselves in negative accreditation positions by excluding institutionally unique information and evidence that might make a stronger argument?

Second, this approach and exercise improve the quantity and quality of information and evidence that accreditation leaders can draw from to prepare a compelling argument that the institution meets the criteria, standards, or other external expectations. When additional information or evidence is needed, there is an informed group of identified stakeholders from whom this can be requested. The starting point for those preparing accreditation documents is not a blank page. It is a set of information and an evidence file provided by stakeholders from across the institution that reflect what is happening in their functional areas. For example, in one of the cases discussed here, the satisfaction survey that is sent to students after the physical plant work orders that they submitted are complete, with survey responses reviewed by the physical plant office to identify areas for improvement. This illustration of continuous improvement for the benefit of students would have been omitted if not for including a representative from that functional area in the information and evidence collection exercise.
Third, it decreases the time commitment of campus stakeholders to recurring external review processes. Faculty and staff members across higher education already feel they are being asked to do more within limited time constraints. Limiting campus stakeholders' obligation to a one-time exercise, reviewing drafts, and being an on-call resource is a welcome alternative to serving on long-term committees to prepare accreditation documents.

And finally, this approach better reflects the current state of higher education where continuous improvement has been embedded within college and university processes. As Olson (2016) notes, higher education institutions have become much more complex and "need to build rational systems to conduct self-evaluation and promote change when it is needed." At one point the decennial accreditation self-study *was* this point-in-time continuous improvement process. In previous decades, McGuire (2009) and Houghton and Jurick (1995) argued that the accreditation self-study process could drive institutional planning and change. It is posited here that this is no longer needed in higher education. Continuous improvement processes (e.g., strategic plans, admissions and recruitment plans, retention plans, curricular and cocurricular assessment of student learning, campus master plans) are embedded across institutions. Lack of enthusiasm for the self-study-style committee approach to preparing accreditation reports should not be a surprise when preparing accreditation reports is an "add-on" to the planning and continuous improvement efforts already occurring.

The assets-based approach used at the case study institutions reflects this changed higher education milieu, one that Ewell (2009) might describe as an outcome of the college and university's transition from the "Assessment for the Accountability" to the "Assessment for the Improvement" paradigm. The institution-prepared accreditation report has become an audit that collects information and evidence of ongoing continuous improvement processes rather than an opportunity for self-study. The exercise described in this presentation and successfully deployed at these two institutions ensures that this audit includes the complete picture and mission-specific activities that make each higher education institution unique.

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