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This chapter is designed to acquaint the reader with the context for accreditors' increased emphasis on student learning outcomes as a key indicator of institutional quality and on the use of learning assessment as a key strategy for guiding institutional improvement. It articulates accreditors' expectations for the presentation of evidence that the institution is using student learning outcomes assessment as part of its quality improvement efforts.

The Role of Student Learning Outcomes in Accreditation Quality Review

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In recent years, accreditation standards developed and used by most of the regional accreditors have changed to incorporate the assessment of student learning as a central process in evaluating institutional effectiveness. The incorporation of student learning outcomes into accreditation evaluation processes reflects a decade-long movement in higher education to assess student learning.

This movement itself is both a product of the concern of higher education practitioners with the quality of their own institutional and professional practices and an effort to identify and better address diverse student learning needs. Many community colleges perceive the work to articulate desired student learning outcomes and to assess student learning as likely to lead to greater institutional focus on students. Many faculty, on the other hand, perceive work on student learning as a rewarding means of exploring student learning needs and new pedagogical strategies. Institutions and faculty alike believe that a more directed concern with student learning outcomes will lead to better learning.

Institutional and faculty assessment of student learning has been conducted in the context of an increasing public concern with accountability in higher education. Among the streams of thought feeding the concern with the quality of student learning are the growing demands on limited financial aid funds, growing numbers of students seeking to attend a relatively stable number of higher education institutions, and increased public concern with the role and purpose of higher education in society. This public interest may

be termed *accountability*, although the term is often incorrectly used to reflect a singular interest in quantitative measures of student progress through an institution rather than the public's fundamental interest in what students are supposed to learn and how well they are, in fact, learning.

Accreditation is the primary means of quality assessment and assurance used by higher education in the United States. Accrediting agencies have experienced the increasing public concern for accountability of higher education as pressure to focus their own processes for reviewing institutional quality on student outcomes—student progress through the institution as well as student learning. More important, accreditors came to understand that quality review processes that include a focus on student learning draw the accreditation process itself nearer to its true purpose of assessing the quality of education offered by an institution of higher education.

Although each accrediting agency maintains its own standards and process, accreditors nationwide share ideas about the role of student learning outcomes. Almost all of the eight regional accrediting agencies have recently altered their standards and evaluation processes to increase the emphasis on student learning. They have done this while engaged in dialogue with one another about strategies for implementation. In 2001, the eight regional accrediting agencies obtained funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts to conduct a collaborative research study on the use of student learning outcomes in accreditation. This work furthered each regional accreditor's commitment to using student learning as a central part of the accreditation quality review process. Accreditors' work was also assisted by the publication of a Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) document (Ewell, 2001), which provided accreditors with a terminology and policy framework for incorporating student learning outcomes into accreditation processes.

Accreditation and Student Learning

Accreditation, by design, evaluates institutional quality. Institutional quality is determined by how well an institution fulfills its purposes. From the perspective of accrediting agencies, producing learning is one of the core purposes of an institution of higher education. In assessing institutional quality, accreditors are evaluating the student learning produced by the institution in the context of the institution's own mission, its stated learning objectives, and its identified means of assessing student learning. The challenge to community colleges is to identify the expected student learning outcomes for their own institution in the context of mission and the institution's own curriculum and to develop means of assessing that learning.

Accreditors view their central purpose as improving institutional quality. In this effort, they acknowledge that institutions take time to reach excellence. All accreditors have standards that expect institutions themselves to assess institutional effectiveness regularly, to use the analysis of

that assessment to identify and plan needed improvements, to implement those improvements, and to check their impact during another cycle of institutional assessment.

Accreditors have done more than add student learning to the list of indicators of institutional effectiveness. They have recast the meaning of institutional effectiveness to require that institutional assessment and improvement strategies ultimately support learning or result in improved student learning. Community colleges must demonstrate that students achieve the learning results intended and that the institution improves student learning, where needed, over time. The challenge, then, for community colleges is to develop sound methods of assessing student learning. The process of assessing student learning will inevitably cause faculty to explore a variety of forms of pedagogical as well as assessment strategies. Deciding on the most effective strategies for teaching and for assessing learning will require experimentation, careful research, analyses, and time.

Accreditors will require community colleges to collectively attribute meaning to the results of learning assessment and to plan institutional improvements that will result in better learning. A challenge for community colleges is to develop the capacity to discuss what the results of learning assessment mean, to identify ways of improving student learning, and to make institutional commitments to that improvement by planning, allocating needed resources, and implementing strategies for improvement.

The self-study process conducted as part of an accreditation evaluation visit is meant to report on ongoing institutionalized self-evaluation. Maki (2002) notes that institutions too often view the commitment to assessing institutional quality with a compliance mentality rather than with eagerness to explore, with curiosity, questions that are intrinsically important to faculty, administrators, support staff, trustees, members of the public, and accreditors. The questions common to all of those groups include: How well are students learning, after all the college does for and with them? How could we improve learning in order to improve students' lives? Institutional and accreditation engagement with student learning provides all of those groups an opportunity to explore the answers to those questions collectively. Accreditors have incorporated a focus on student learning into accreditation quality review processes in the belief that it will ultimately help improve students' lives.

Ultimately, accreditors and institutions will use information about student learning as well as institutional efforts to improve learning to describe institutional quality in terms that are meaningful to the public—to students, to parents, to employers, and to legislators. That institutional quality will come to be defined in terms that describe the quality of student learning will be a significant departure from the past, when quality was often described in terms of institutional resources or student attainment of benchmarks such as graduation, transfer, or job placement. Given the increasing public interest in the question of what students are learning,

institutions and accreditors alike are wise to develop thoughtful, careful, and valid means of assessing learning, talking about the results of assessment, and using the meaning generated through discussion to improve the quality of learning.

Some Practical Guidance for Institutions

When accreditors evaluate community colleges, they will focus on the strength of the institution's own claims that it is fulfilling its educational purpose or mission. Accreditors will need to understand how the college has defined student learning outcomes appropriate to institutional mission and goals, how the college has structured its own processes for evaluating student learning, and how the college planned and implemented changes designed to improve learning. Accreditors will want to examine evidence that the institution is meaningfully engaged in assessing student learning, and they will want to see some evidence of student learning.

Community colleges should be prepared to document institutional efforts with respect to student learning. Following are some suggestions for community colleges preparing to incorporate student learning into their central quality improvement processes as well as preparing for an eventual accreditation team visit.

Document Expected Student Learning Outcomes. Community colleges will need to demonstrate that they have set student learning goals that are appropriate for the course, program, certificate, or degree offered and that conform with the institution's own standards for quality. These goals must also be consistent with higher education standards of quality. Community colleges will want to set clear learning goals that speak to the content and level of learning that students are expected to achieve. These goals should be represented in writing and should be used to inform faculty pedagogy as well as to tell students what is expected of them. Community colleges should be able to present accreditors with written documentation that the expected student learning outcomes have been set and communicated to faculty and students.

Evidence that an institution has set expected learning outcomes might include course syllabi given to students, official course outlines that an institution uses to inform faculty teaching a course, or similar documentation of the expected learning outcomes designed for student services activities or learning support activities. Evidence that an institution has aligned the learning outcomes of a single educational experience (such as a course or a workshop) with the learning goals of a program or culminating degree or certificate includes records of institutional discussions, rubric, charts, or other graphics that show the summative learning goals the institution has defined. Where the process of setting or revising expected learning outcomes has involved important institutional discussion, institutions will also want to document the content of those discussions.

Document Institutional Assessment of Learning. Community colleges need to collect evidence on how well students are learning. Effective assessment will require institutions to design appropriate assessment strategies carefully. Faculty should employ both formative and summative assessment strategies that reflect diverse students' different ways of demonstrating that they have learned. Community colleges should be prepared to demonstrate that the assessment methodologies they have employed to assess learning are valid and reliable. Where institutions are experimenting with different assessments strategies, they should keep some record of experimental results.

Accreditors will evaluate the institution's engagement with assessment of learning. The faculty, staff, and administration of institutions will need to work collectively to evaluate the meaning of assessment results. The accreditors' concern with assessment of student learning is not meant to target individual faculty members, but to stimulate institution-wide engagement with student learning and institution-wide improvement in learning.

Evidence that an institution might use to demonstrate its assessment efforts includes the assessment instruments themselves, some record of experiments and research on assessment strategies, and any efforts to compile the results of assessment in order to make summative judgments about student learning at the program, certificate, or degree level. Community colleges should also keep a record of the institutional interpretation of the meaning of the assessment results, as well as institutional dialogues that led to that interpretation.

Document Student Learning Outcomes. Community colleges should be able to document that students are meeting the expected learning goals the institution has set. This documentation would take the form of assessment results compiled by individual faculty for the learning experiences they conduct as well as those compiled by program, degree, or certificate. Accreditors will want to see some representative sample of this learning as evidence of institutional quality. Community colleges may want to compile assessment reports by program, certificate, or degree, or to compile examples of student work that show progressive learning, such as in the form of learning portfolios.

Document Use of Assessment Results for Institutional Improvements. The collection and use of student learning outcomes data are meant to be a collective effort used to inform institutional efforts to improve quality of education. They should not be the sole responsibility of individuals or a separate assessment function. Accreditors will evaluate the institution's degree of engagement with the assessment of learning. Community colleges should be able to demonstrate that there is institution-wide understanding of educational quality as measured in a way that includes student learning outcomes, and that there are institutionalized commitments to improving learning. Community colleges should be prepared to demonstrate

the ways in which assessment and interpretation are used institution-wide to inform planning and implement changes.

Evidence of the ways in which institutions use the results of assessment to improve learning include documentation of important institutional discussions; documentation that shows how plans to improve learning are incorporated into institutional evaluation and improvement processes, such as program review or educational or strategic planning; and evidence that the plans to improve student learning are implemented over time. Evidence might also include policies that emphasize the use of student learning assessment in institutional evaluation, planning, or funding processes.

Accreditors will definitely seek information about how well institutional members understand the institution's own assessment strategies and the results of assessment. Individuals on campus should be prepared to field questions from visiting team members about student learning assessment and institutional meanings and commitments attached to the results of assessment.

How Some Institutions Are Addressing Student Learning Outcomes

Many higher education institutions have already developed strategies for assessing student learning and are using that assessment to improve institutional quality. Alverno College (Wisconsin), the most well-known institution in the student learning movement, has been assessing student learning for nearly twenty years. Its staff has provided a good deal of leadership to the national student learning assessment movement. The California State University at Monterey Bay, a relatively new institution, was designed to provide institutional processes that ensure adequate feedback from assessment of student learning outcomes to institutional processes for decision making.

For the last several years, the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) has been offering workshops on assessment that bring experienced practitioners together with institutional teams that are just beginning to develop an institutional approach to defining and assessing student learning. Two of the regional accrediting agencies are cosponsoring AAHE workshops for institutions in their respective regions.

At Mesa Community College (Arizona), staff designed an approach to assessing general education outcomes and using the results of assessment to improve curriculum, instruction, and learning. The college established seven areas of learning for its general education program: communication, problem solving and critical thinking, numeracy, arts and humanities, scientific inquiry, information literacy, and cultural diversity. In each of these seven areas, the college designed general education outcomes that are each measured with a different assessment tool. The college assesses students enrolled in general education classes at the beginning of study and at the

point of completion of general education, providing data on the value added through the general-education experience. Assessment is done during an annual spring assessment week in which selected classes are asked to forgo instruction and instead allow the general-education assessment to be administered to students. A faculty committee interprets assessment results and uses them to develop themes for interdisciplinary faculty work and development over the subsequent years to enhance curriculum and pedagogy in order to improve learning (Mee, 2004).

Colleges and universities that develop student learning outcomes for programs soon encounter the challenge of ensuring that the courses that make up a program of study result in the cumulative learning outcomes intended for the program. One solution is to map the learning outcomes to the various courses that a student takes to complete a program. The Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology has developed a form that includes questions to ask course instructors to identify whether a specific learning outcome is covered in their course and the degree to which it is covered:

Is the outcome explicitly stated as an outcome for the course?

Are students asked to demonstrate their competence through course work that is assessed by the instructor?

Do students receive formal feedback on their mastery of this learning outcome from the instructor (Rogers, 2004)?

Answers to these questions are used to ensure that a curriculum offers appropriate opportunities to learn and practice specific skills associated with the program's expected learning outcomes.

One of the purposes of assessing learning outcomes at the programmatic or institutional level is to provide the institution with feedback that it can use to improve educational quality. Accreditors increasingly ask that community colleges demonstrate a focus on student learning as well as a culture in which data and analyses are used to evaluate institutional quality and develop strategies for improvements. Community colleges face the challenge of gathering information that can foster appropriate discussion and improvement of institutional quality among their internal constituencies. Many institutions have developed Web-based approaches to sharing assessment data and developing collective knowledge for institutional discussions of quality. A good example of this practice can be found at Portland State University's Web site.

A Timeline for Developing Institutional Culture and Practice

Accreditors recognize that institutions will take time to develop a culture and practice that support explication of expected student learning outcomes at all appropriate levels, assessment of student learning, institution-wide

capacity to discuss the results of assessment, and the ability to attribute meaning to results in order to inform practice. The regional accrediting agencies, in their own discussions as well as communications to their membership, have suggested a time frame for full implementation of between ten and fifteen years. As community colleges prepare to engage with student learning assessment in the comprehensive manner described above, they should acknowledge the size of the task and anticipate having to work on this effort over many years.

Most community colleges will experience a comprehensive accreditation review within the next ten years. They should be aware that accreditors expect to find them in the process of developing new institutional practices around the assessment of learning, but they will not expect most institutions to have developed their capacity fully. Each college should seek advice from its accrediting agency on what is expected at its next accreditation and know that it will be important to have accomplished some substantial work by the time of the review. Institutions should also know that accreditors themselves are newly engaged with the assessment of student learning. Accreditors will appreciate learning from community colleges the strategies institutions used to explore this way of examining and improving institutional quality. Although they will ultimately make judgments about institutional quality, accreditors see themselves as partners with institutions in discovering what we can all do to improve both learning and students' lives.

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