

The New Framework for Accreditation

In response to the changing context of higher education, and to reflect the principles adopted by the Commission for accreditation in the WASC region, the Commission has developed a new framework for accreditation. The elements of this new framework align under the core principles called “Core Commitments” to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness which are embodied significantly by revised Accreditation Standards and a three-stage, sequential institutional review process. Each element is described in the following sections of the *Handbook*. Together these components represent a holistic system and process of review that enable WASC to work collaboratively with institutions in a spirit of ongoing experimentation and mutual learning as defined by the Commission values stated above.

Higher education exists in the United States as a public trust and a public good. It is linked to the improvement of individuals, groups, and society as a whole. It provides the basis for conserving and transmitting the values of society and for reflecting on and identifying needed areas of change. Through research, scholarship and creative activity, institutions of higher education also promote the value of discovery and learning. In offering educational programs, institutions prepare their graduates for productive and meaningful lives as citizens and members of society.

The accrediting process functions to promote and sustain this special role for higher education, while providing assurance to the public that institutions of higher education continue to warrant public trust and support. Accreditation evaluation of institutional resources, structures, practices, and results serves an important role for the higher education community and the public in this context. Yet accreditation is not well understood and is too often considered reactive to external minimal standards.

Developing a New Posture of Engagement with Institutions

Under the new framework for accreditation, qualifying institutions are able to consciously and deliberately collaborate with WASC to develop new approaches that are designed to serve institutional priorities in tandem with accreditation requirements. Such an approach opens up tremendous opportunities for creativity and renewal. At the same time, however, experimentation creates risk. Not all the ground rules are known in advance, or are even knowable. We all will need to learn together in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration, sharing the results of these processes to create opportunities for organizational learning.

The implementation of the new model may not initially be as effective as desired, especially in the first round. We believe, however, that accreditation needs to change, and that the kinds of changes needed require an openness to experimentation. We need to consider how the new Standards may accomplish the principles set forth in this *Handbook*. Our goal is a simplified, more usable, and effective process that can be better understood by the many consumers of accreditation.

We also believe that the spirit of experimentation should be embedded in the WASC of the future, leading to a more adaptive and responsive model of accreditation. Such a model would

recognize and respond more effectively to the diversity of institutional missions reflected within the region, and reflect the awareness that there is an ebb and flow within each institution that may suggest different approaches each time an accreditation review is scheduled.

Organizing Around Core Commitments

The concept of Core Commitments is intended to move accreditation from a reactive process of something done to an institution, to a proactive commitment of an institution which WASC reviews and validates. Framing accreditation as a commitment makes the act of accreditation more connected to the public accountability role legitimately held by accreditation, and puts the institutional commitment front and center. Given the wide range of institutions currently served by WASC and the likelihood that even newer institutional forms will emerge, there is need for a framing device to enable the Commission to apply the Standards of Accreditation flexibly as means, not ends.

Thus, to become and remain accredited, each institution is expected to demonstrate that it is committed to developing and sustaining Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness.

Core Commitment to Institutional Capacity:

The institution functions with clear purposes, high levels of institutional integrity, fiscal stability, and organizational structures to fulfill its purposes.

The Core Commitment to Institutional Capacity enables the institution to consider resource issues from a holistic perspective, and to consider capacity as an institutional attribute beyond minimum compliance and a review of assets. Looking at itself through a “lens” of institutional capacity enables the institution to reexamine what it *is* in terms of its capacity to fulfill its aspirations, and to integrate and synthesize findings and recommendations for improvement gained through its self review under Commission Standards. While the Standards provide an opportunity to review institutional performance within a defined area, the framework of institutional capacity allows an institution to explore cross-cutting issues such as whether resources, structures and processes are aligned with the institution’s mission and priorities, and whether there is good evidence of effectiveness in their actual deployment. An important dimension of institutional capacity reflected in the Institutional Review cycle is the institution’s potential to define and sustain educational effectiveness.

Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness:

The institution evidences clear and appropriate educational objectives and design at the institutional and program level. The institution employs processes of review, including the collection and use of data, that assure delivery of programs and learner accomplishments at a level of performance appropriate for the degree or certificate awarded.

The Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness provides an opportunity for the institution to explore holistically its approaches to educational effectiveness and assess whether institutional

systems, such as course and program design, faculty support, and program review are effectively linked to evidence of student learning and are consistent with the educational goals and academic standards of the institution. By design, elements of educational effectiveness were incorporated into all four Commission Standards, so that institutions would explore the relationships between capacity and educational quality and effectiveness. The Accreditation Standards identify key elements of educational effectiveness. Many institutions have found valuable the framing of educational effectiveness presented in *Invitation to Dialogue II*, a document prepared to assist the region in developing the framework for accreditation described in this *Handbook*. The framing is repeated here to provide one possible set of lenses for institutions to review the broader issue of educational effectiveness and for applying the Standards for Accreditation.