**Association for the Assessment
of Learning in Higher Education**

AALHE

PROMOTING ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

INTERSECTION

A journal at the intersection of assessment and learning

Special Edition:
Conversations
with
Accreditors

Contents

Note from The Editor-In-Chief

By Jane Marie Souza

Normally, AALHE's journal *Intersection* is published quarterly and offers examples of informed assessment practice across the spectrum in higher education institutions. This edition offers something a bit different. In 2014, founding editor David Eubanks included in the Fall Edition a question and answer session with then Senior Vice President/Chief of Staff of the Southern Association of College and Schools Commission on Colleges. The interview marked the first time a conversation with an accreditor was included in the *Intersection.* Realizing the value of promoting understanding of the accreditation perspective and process, the interviews were continued in subsequent editions of this publication.

Jane Marie Souza, University of Rochester; Intersection Editor-in-Chief

The editorial team of *Intersection* agreed that there would be value in collecting the interviews conducted with all accreditors since 2014 and publishing them as a set. I am happy to present this special edition of *Intersection: Conversations with Accreditors* which includes question and answer sessions with all regional accreditors as well as the Distance Education Accrediting Commission.

As you read this collection of interviews, you may note a common theme: the quest for continuous improvement. My own experience serving as a peer-reviewer for four different accrediting agencies and serving on the Council of one of them, tells me that accreditors should be, and for the most part are, interested in partnering with institutions to pursue the goal of quality in education without dictating the process of that pursuit. I have not felt an "*us* versus *them*" when working on self-studies or team visits. Rather, I view the accreditation process as a way to regularly get an external opinion of our educational effectiveness and our progress meeting our institutional missions **as we define them**. I hope this *Conversations with Accreditors* edition will promote a deeper understanding of the accreditation process by presenting the agencies' perspectives.

The goal of promoting understanding between institutions and the agencies accrediting them has been further supported during the AALHE annual conferences. Panel sessions have been offered during which agency representatives offered their viewpoints on the complex accreditor-institutional relationship. I am happy to announce that this year we will continue the discussion in Salt Lake City with another panel session, *Conversations with Accreditors.* Topics covered will include innovation in education, expectations for assessment, the peer-review process, and the changing landscape in higher education accreditation. We hope you will join this panel session with representatives from three accrediting bodies as we explore the key accreditation topics and address questions from attendees.

Finally, we welcome comments from our readers. We also invite the accreditors to provide updates and/or elaborations on the messages in these interviews. Please write to publications@aalhe.org. Thank you.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in the articles in this publication reflect those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education.

Interview with Dr. Leah Matthews, Executive Director, Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC)

Interview by Dr. Margareta Smith Knopik

First printed in AALHE Intersection Summer 2017

General Information
The **Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC)** is a private, nonprofit organization that operates as a national accreditor of institutions that primarily offer distance education. Founded in 1926, the DEAC is recognized by both the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. In June 2017, DEAC received a five-year renewal of its recognition by the U.S. Department of Education. Accreditation by DEAC covers all distance education activities within an institution and it provides a single source of nationally recognized accreditation from the postsecondary education level through professional doctoral degree-granting institutions.

Dr. Leah Matthews, Executive Director of DEAC, provided the information for this article in June 2017. Dr. Matthews joined DEAC in 2013, having previously served as Vice President for Recognition Services at the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the national coordinating organization for higher education accrediting organizations. In that role, she managed the CHEA recognition process for 60 accreditors that provide regional, national and programmatic accreditation. Prior to working with CHEA, Dr. Matthews served nearly 12 years on the staff of the Accrediting Commission for Career Schools and Colleges. Prior to joining ACCSC, Dr. Matthews worked for five years as a civilian based at the U.S. Army Japan Headquarters in Zama, Japan, where she directed family support services and education programs for children and youth and where she directed the Army Family Action Plan advocating for postsecondary education opportunities for soldiers and families assigned to the U.S. Army Japan, Headquarters.

Many schools are not familiar with DEAC with respect to membership, programs, and services it provides as compared to the mission and activities of the regional accreditation agencies. Would you provide a summary of DEAC and its member schools? Why would a school choose to be accredited by DEAC in addition to or instead of a regional?

Thank you for the opportunity to share information about the DEAC and its accreditation standards. DEAC-accredited schools provide a broad range of educational offerings, from postsecondary certificates to doctoral degree programs. The missions vary as well; they may serve to introduce a student to a new field or offer a program to enhance the skills of an existing professional. Programs may be offered on an asynchronous, purely remote-learning model or according to a synchronous, semester-based calendar using an online or hybrid model. They may have completely open admissions, or they may practice a selective admissions process. The student population among DEAC-accredited schools is still more varied. The vast majority of these students are working adults, balancing family, financial, and other constraints, for whom the traditional models of education do not work or have not worked. Their goals in returning to school are equally varied. For some, it is to expand existing professional skills; for others, it is to prepare for an entry-level position; for still others, it is to complete degree requirements, to qualify for a promotion, or to dip their toe into a new field—or it is because they have always wanted to study the Great Books, complete a divinity degree, explore unmanned vehicle technology or gain new knowledge on health and wellness. For all of them, the flexibility of learning models offered by DEAC-accredited schools provides them with an opportunity to extend their lives in ways that are otherwise not available to them because of money, time,

or location. For some, geography or other challenges make the distance learning model their only opportunity to access accredited educational programs.

DEAC offers a unique accreditation model that is an effective assessment structure for educational programs that are often student-paced, where interaction between student and instructor is primarily initiated by the student and is typically more limited both in scope and frequency than in a traditional setting or in a distance education program where interaction between students and faculty is regular and substantive, as required by the U.S. Department of Education for Title IV participation. DEAC has robust standards for reviewing regular and substantive interactions for Title IV participating institutions, but it also values student-paced and/or asynchronous models that support an individualized learning process that is responsive to both the preferences and the real-life constraints of its student population. Therefore, some distance education schools seek accreditation from DEAC because its standards align well with their unique missions and highly individualized learning outcomes for students.

In addition, DEAC is a place where experiments in now models of distance learning can undergo rigorous assessment. As these schools grow and mature in their educational offerings and institutional effectiveness, some pursue and achieve regional accreditation. Western Governors University is one example where a unique distance education delivery model was first vetted and accredited by DEAC, supporting the institution's long-term strategy of receiving regional accreditation.

While each accrediting body acknowledges that outcomes assessment is intended to demonstrate that students are learning, as well as provide a process for continuous improvement, there appears to be quite a lot of variation with respect to how each accreditor expects the assessment process to be structured and reported. What are the expectations of DEAC?

I believe that, for all accrediting organizations, including the DEAC, the essence of education is student achievement – the imparting of knowledge that enhances a student's life and advances their interests. DEAC's standards require comprehensive efforts on the part of its institutions to measure, evaluate, and improve program/student outcomes. The centrality of student achievement in evaluating institutional performance is introduced in DEAC's Accreditation Standard I, which requires that an institution's "mission reflects a commitment to providing quality distance educational offerings that meet the needs of students and relevant stakeholders."

DEAC's accreditation standards systematically require comprehensive and integrated efforts on the part of DEAC institutions to measure, evaluate, and improve program/student outcomes. For example, Standard II (Institutional Effectiveness) includes requirements for institutions to document their program/student outcome efforts with data, analytics, and reports. Standard III (Program Outcomes, Curricula, and Materials) requires additional detailed information on how program outcomes (1) are defined and measured, (2) guide development of curricular content and program design, and (3) "clearly communicate the knowledge, skills and abilities students will obtain upon completion of the educational offering."

Subsequent sections in both Standard III and Standard IV (Educational and Student Support Services) similarly address student outcomes in relation to an institution's curriculum, learning resources/technology, testing, student support services, and instructional support/academic progress assessment. An integrated approach permits a comprehensive response to DEAC's student achievement standard that requires each institution to (1) maintain systematic and ongoing processes for assessing student learning and achievement, (2) analyze data collected from those processes, (3) implement strategies to improve when appropriate, and (4) document that the results meet both internal (e.g., institution performance data) and appropriate external benchmarks. More specifically, DEAC expects accredited institutions to

> *… demonstrate and document in their Self-Evaluation Report through results of learning outcomes assessments that students achieve learning outcomes that are appropriate to its mission and to the*

rigor and depth of the degrees or certificates offered. The institution must also describe how its Outcomes Assessment Plan has contributed to the improvement of the institution over time and explain how the plan demonstrates that the institution is fulfilling its stated mission .... [T]he institution must demonstrate that it uses evidence of student learning to gauge the effectiveness of the educational practices and methodologies through its institutional effectiveness planning efforts. This data should also be used to identify and implement strategies for improving student learning. ... It is not enough for an institution to simply collect data. The institution must demonstrate that the evidence is analyzed and drives curricular and institutional improvements. [Excerpted from DEAC Guide for Self-Evaluation Report pp. 95-107.]

How and when do members report their findings and demonstrate to DEAC that they are using the data to make improvements?

As I described earlier, DEAC applies its accreditation standards in evaluating an institution's submission for initial accreditation or renewal of accreditation by employing a multi-dimensional approach that supports data-gathering from multiple sources; interim updates and reporting; documented attestations from the institution; layered reviews of compliance documentation by academic, pedagogical, administrative, and financial experts; and a final comprehensive review by Commission members.

A key feature of evaluating continual improvement is annual reporting. DEAC requires each of its institutions to submit, on an annual basis, detailed reports regarding the institution's operations, financial stability, and student achievement metrics. These reports serve three critical purposes. First, they allow DEAC to monitor institutions between the more extensive evaluations associated with the formal reaccreditation process; second, and as importantly, they reinforce the DEAC requirement that its institutions engage in continuous self-examination and self-improvement; and third, they provide assurances that the institutions have the resources available to engage in and implement improvement strategies. The leveraging of data analytics aligns with DEAC's own mission to promote innovation and quality in distance education in support of student achievement and lifelong learning opportunities. The overall process assists institutions to:
- develop early warning systems that identify when students may be getting off track;
- facilitate the strategic allocation of resources to support learning; and
- document student learning patterns and the effectiveness of curriculum components and tools.

In addition to submitting annual reports, DEAC schools provide data on their performance and quality in the period between accreditation cycles through the process of applying for approval of substantive changes. More specifically, before a change can be included in an institution's grant of accreditation, DEAC requires the institution to submit for evaluation any substantive change to its mission, objectives, programs, courses, legal status, form of control, or similar matter. A full evaluation of the proposed change is required and may include a site visit where appropriate. The substantive change notice and approval process ensures not only that DEAC is made aware of any material change to an institution's profile or operations that may occur between accreditation cycles, but also that any such change cannot be included within the grant of accreditation associated with that entity without prior confirmation from the Commission that the change is in compliance with DEAC accreditation standards.

How are site visitors for DEAC selected and trained, especially with respect to DEAC-specific assessment expectations?

I'm glad you asked this question. Selection and training of evaluators is very important and central to the integrity and quality of the accreditation process. Any individual interested in serving as a DEAC evaluator must first submit a résumé, with references, which is reviewed by the staff. Candidates chosen to participate in an evaluation are given training on the accreditation process and standards. This entails completing an evaluator course provided through DEAC's online training center and attending an in-person training workshop offered by DEAC on a periodic basis. A new evaluator is always paired with an experienced evaluator on their first site-visit. Evaluation team members are provided with detailed evaluation rubrics that provide both guidance and a comprehensive checklist for elements central to determining compliance with each of DEAC's accreditation standards. I encourage AALHE readers to review DEAC's assessment rubrics, which are available on our website at http://www.deac.org/Volunteers/Evaluator-Documents.aspx and contact DEAC if they are interested in serving as an evaluator.

What are some of the challenges faced by DEAC schools with respect to meeting DEAC assessment expectations? Is guidance available?

Applying for accreditation, in general, is challenging for most institutions. By design, DEAC's accreditation standards address the validity and integrity of an institution on multiple levels, from the adequacy of curricula to student outcomes to conformance with accepted educational and pedagogical standards for distance education teaching and learning. A comprehensive self-evaluation must ensure that no material element is left unaddressed. An institution's fiscal and administrative capacity to effectively deliver its programs through the enrollment period of any then-current student is essential to that institution's integrity. Accordingly, an institution must be able to document through audited or reviewed comparative financial statements (prepared in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles [GAAP]) that cover its two most recent fiscal years, that it is financially sound and can meet its financial obligations to provide instruction and service to its students. The self-evaluation process entails a comprehensive integration of interlocking requirements covering academic integrity, faculty and CAO qualifications, curricular content, design, delivery, testing, proctored examination, academic rigor, resources, practica, calculation of credits, etc., where, in each case, assessment is considered within the context of the effectiveness of a distance learning model. DEAC offers guidance through its Self-Evaluation Guide, available at http://www.deac.org/Seeking-Accreditation/Applications-and-Reports.aspx, its online training center, and at annual accreditation workshops.

Is there any interaction between DEAC and the regional accreditors or any programmatic accrediting bodies? If so, for what purpose(s)?

There are many occasions where DEAC interacts with regional accreditors and with the programmatic accreditation community. DEAC is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), as are most regional and programmatic accreditors. I frequently collaborate with colleagues from regional and programmatic accreditors to present on various accreditation topics at annual higher education conference events. We participate in joint meetings with the U.S. Department of Education on topics important to negotiated rulemaking sessions or recognition review. All accreditors have an interest in state authorization of distance education and the participation of states in the NC-SARA reciprocity agreements. Distance education is a feature of nearly every accreditation model across the spectrum of regional, national, and programmatic accreditation. There are endless possibilities for interactions and collaborations.

In general, what are some fundamental features of accreditation of distance education institutions as compared to "on ground" institutions?

I've discussed at length how our institutions offer a broad span of programs and enroll students with many disparate motivations who engage in learning at a distance. That said, our institutions are also schools whose primary and often exclusive mission is the education of students; they are not research institutions. Accordingly, we expect student outcomes, in their full breadth, to be integral to and the driving force behind the mission of each organization. Education is, after all, both etymologically and operationally, the "leading out" of the student into a world of greater dimension and opportunity. That is why the importance of student outcomes is embodied in each of our other accreditation standards as well – from curricula to faculty to learning management systems to resources and practica.

Curricula, for example, must not just meet academic standards of scope and content, but must also be mapped against student outcome goals and developed using instructional tools and design tailored for *distance learning*. Likewise, faculty are evaluated not just for their academic and teaching expertise, but also for their ability to engage with students *on a remote basis*, their availability to students through multiple forms of communication and across more flexible time frames, and their ability to teach effectively across a broader range of abilities and learning levels than are found at many traditional selective admissions schools. Similarly, in the area of facilities, we work actively with schools to ensure online access to a rich range of resources and to implement and enhance learning management software platforms that support greater student engagement in course materials, better communications between faculty and students, and the opportunity for social networking among students. And of course, we require our institutions to maintain a financial position sufficient to support the provision of quality programs to their students.

What changes do you anticipate with respect to higher education here in the United States, especially having to do with accreditation?

As you and your members at AALHE well know, the past five years have seen a burgeoning in the field of distance education, as well as a justified winnowing out of some of its players. New technology, new participants, a changing student profile, and a shift in the domestic as well as global economic system have individually and collectively brought challenges to educators across the industry, from traditional brick-and-mortar establishments to pure distance learning schools to institutions that offer some combination of classroom and online learning. Accreditors must rise to the occasion of embracing new models of teaching and learning. Accreditors must be assertive in implementing changes to standards and procedures with the intention of being more effective and proactive, both as monitors of institutional quality and as leaders of institutional improvement, including enhanced requirements for data collection and analytics and a strengthening focus on the area of student outcomes. As a whole, accreditation systems for higher education in the United States are going to be held more accountable to the quality of education provided by accredited institutions.

Interview Dr. Barbara Johnson, Vice President at the Higher Learning Commission

Interview by Josie Welsh

First printed in [AALHE Intersection Summer 2016](#)

Barbara J. Johnson, Ph.D., joined the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) in 2013 as a Vice President for Accreditation Relations. Her previous professional experience includes student affairs administration, community college and adult education, marketing research and consultation in both higher education and corporate environments, and tenured faculty positions in higher education. Through her extensive experience in various roles as an administrator and faculty member, she possesses a wealth of experience with program evaluation and assessment, specialized accreditation, and institutional effectiveness. I interviewed her by email.

HLC published revised criteria for accreditation in 2013. As you reviewed team reports since that time, what are some areas of emphasis that you found to be problematic for institutions regarding assessment of student learning?

Since HLC implemented new criteria in January 2013, we have reviewed the concerns identified by teams across several areas. For the 2014-15 academic year, a review of comprehensive evaluation team reports found assessment of student learning was the most cited core component for institutions in the HLC region with over 40% of institutions not fully meeting this core component. Key themes delineated in team reports relative to assessment can be categorized into five areas of concern: institutional culture, planning/process, outcomes, data, and analysis. The most common issues surround planning/process; specifically, institutions are routinely cited for the absence of a comprehensive or systematic assessment process, coupled with limited or non-existent, tangible evidence demonstrating utilization of data to improve student learning. It is also worth noting the scope of projects institutions voluntarily choose to work on in HLC's elective institution improvement program, the Assessment Academy, can similarly be categorized into the same five clusters, demonstrating institutions understand the need for improvement in these areas.

Could you expand on some of the concerns teams have identified as problem areas for institutions as it relates to assessment of student learning?

As you might suspect, some of the other major challenges include: limited or lack of faculty involvement, unclear linkages between budgeting, planning, and assessment institution-wide, and creation of new assessment plans without enough time for full implementation. It typically takes four years to go through a full cycle in which an institution can demonstrate and provide documentation of continuous improvement. When institutions attempt to do something two years before their reaffirmation it is unlikely they will have sufficient evidence of continuous improvement. Other areas of concern include co-curricular activities not being considered or accounted for in the assessment process or cycle and the lack of a relationship between course objectives and program objectives or college level assessment (gen ed). I would also like to mention other core components related to assessment of student learning include program review, linkage of assessment to budgeting and planning processes, and utilization of data to improve student persistence and completion. The related core components build on and inform a comprehensive assessment process.

Great segue. Other than assessment of student learning, which core components do institutions find problematic?

The other core components institutions find challenging include the institution's resource base, systematic and integrated planning, program quality, and persistence and completion. With respect to financial resources, the fiscal base at the institution is diminished often with an increasing debt load, lack of reserves and poor fiscal management.

As mentioned previously, systematic and integrated planning should encompass assessment of student learning and institutional operations in the planning and budgeting process. However, institutions are often unable to provide documentation to show how data have been used to make improvements or inform decisions. When it comes to program quality the program review process has often not been completed or has not been fully implemented.

Similar to assessment of student learning, what we often see with persistence and completion is a lack of data and/or evidence relative to how data are used to make improvements relative to persistence and completion.

Tell us about the engagement of faculty in assessment of student learning.

Generally, faculty are engaged in some form of assessment, so we want to acknowledge their current efforts while discussing how to enhance and formalize what they are doing. It is important to help faculty understand assessment is not being done just because an accreditation visit is approaching, but to focus on improving student learning as a priority for the institution. Faculty need to be able to point to evidence of their own that demonstrates something positive resulted because of their contributions, as that will bring about commitment to assessment of student learning.

Engaging faculty involves a sustained dialogue about the purpose of assessment and helping faculty to view improvement of student learning as a benefit to students first and foremost. The pedagogy utilized may be enhanced due to the focus on assessment of student learning. Finally, the institution benefits from improved student learning and engaged faculty and students in the learning process. Thus, accreditation can be viewed as a by-product of faculty doing their job.

In 2013, HLC moved to new methods to evaluate the Criteria for Accreditation, could you talk about the new evaluations teams utilize?

Teams make a determination on all 21-core components of the Criteria, which is different than how the criteria were evaluated prior to 2013. The team determinations provide three judgments teams can make with regard to the core component: met, met with concerns, not met.

A team may determine a core component is "Met" when they are able to demonstrate an institution is in compliance with the expectations of the core component. Even with a determination of "met," teams can note opportunities for improvement; these are not "concerns" if the institution is aware of these opportunities, has identified the need for improvement in their documents, and has a plan or process to implement to improve upon the area for improvement.

A team determines that a core component is "Met with Concerns" when an issue is identified that must be improved in order to be in full compliance with the expectations for the core component. Teams may also express "concerns" when the institution is not aware of the issues identified, has no plans or processes to implement any improvements, or may not possess the capacity or inclination to improve.

When a team determines a core component is "Not Met" it does so because of an inability to demonstrate the institution is in compliance or because the team identifies a systemic problem. As a side note, if one of the core components for the Criterion is not met or met with concerns, then the entire Criterion is not met or met with concerns, respectively.

Discuss the role of peer reviewers and benefits to serving in the peer corps.

Our diverse group of peer reviewers represents different functional areas and institutional types, reflecting the makeup of our membership. With their primary responsibility being the certification of organizational quality and improvement, they are essential to the work of the Commission in evaluating institutions. Benefits of joining the peer corps include professional development and ongoing opportunities to learn from others with different perspectives, values, and knowledge. Consult the following website for additional information: https://www.hlcommission.org/Peer-Review/peer-reviewer-application.html.

Individuals interested in serving on the peer corps can submit a letter of application, CV/Resume', and two references by the spring deadline for consideration. New peer reviewers must attend an on-site training in the fall with supplemental training opportunities provided throughout the year.

Any final thoughts you would like to share?

At HLC, we are genuinely invested in the evaluation of the institution's performance and its efforts to improve, and to us, assessment of student learning represents just one part of overall institutional effectiveness. Commitment to quality begins with the leadership of the institution and the value that is placed on continuous improvement. The value placed on assessment efforts ought to be demonstrated regularly through the consistent and clear communication of expectations and processes, proper allocation of re-sources, participation of a cross-section of stakeholders in assessment work, and engagement of individuals in dialogue that allows for multiple opportunities to contribute and share promising practices.

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Interview with Sean McKitrick, Vice President, Middle States Commission on Higher Education

Interview by Jane Marie Souza

First printed in [AALHE Intersection Spring 2017](#)

What advice would you offer to campuses concerned about upcoming changes due to the new administration?

Many things are not likely to change. Overall, what accreditors and the public expect will remain the same. They want to see that public and private dollars are spent on quality education. Also, transparency is expected about what students will learn. We will continue to want evaluations of student learning to be used to discover strengths and weaknesses in programs and have that information acted upon.

It really is not sufficient to simply do assessment. The results of the assessments must be used. Institutions are also expected to communicate to internal and external stakeholders how they are being proactive by using data to make improvements.

What do you see as some common misperceptions institutions have regarding reporting on assessment of student learning?

One misperception can be that assessment is a task utilized as a preface to accreditation events. Also, it can be thought that it is the job of the accreditor to translate and interpret assessment data. Assessment is a process, rather than an event and the responsibility for interpretation of results is best led by those who can use the data. Data should be looked at by those most qualified to identify where and what action to take. Really, assessment is about looking at strengths and weaknesses. People within the locus of control of the findings should decide what needs to be addressed for continuous quality improvement. But not everything needs to be improved. There are strengths that are identified. Sometimes people think we are looking for the bad news, but we are really looking for the process.

There is an unspoken fear that accreditors are looking to ferret out the one department fighting assessment processes. Is every institution expected to have ALL its departments on board and fully implementing the assessment cycle?

The expectation is the preponderance of programs and departments are assessing. However, the focus is not on one area alone. We are looking at the whole institution and the culture around assessment. For example, new programs may not yet have fully development assessment processes in place. A culture of assessment is broader than one department. Also, most departments are assessing even if they don't know they are doing so! In any case, the accreditors expect that everyone is engaged in an assessment process. The ways they go about it do not need to be standard. The key is "defensible" assessment and the commission is open to multiple approaches.

Assessment is relevant in all areas within an institution. Much progress has been made over the years such that organized, systematic assessment is being done nearly everywhere. Therefore, the expectation of assessment is embedded in all the Middle States standards. There is latitude with respect to strategies used. There can be qualitative or quantitative approaches. There is not a need to focus only on metrics. The same quantitative processes may not work in all areas. However, mission critical activities should promote

quality improvement evaluation. For example, the Middle States Standard II deals with integrity. The institution should evaluate the accuracy of its published materials.

The final criterion for each standard enables each institution to articulate the process for how it addresses each of the criteria within the standard.

What advice would you offer to people tasked with writing the learning outcomes assessment section of a Self-Study?

The narrative should be sure to include analysis of how the data are collected and used by the principal stakeholders. Faculty may not be the ones making the budget decisions, but they are making the curricular changes. Faculty play the central role in that they are responsible for delivering quality education. So, we would like to know how they are using the data, for example for lesson planning. Presidents can't do that. They can, however, address how the assessments impact the budget.

Instead of a point by point account of every instance of assessment, institutions should present cases of how the information is used for curricular changes and budget decisions. Representative samples are good to see. You must give readers the evidence that assessment information is used regularly. For example, a dean may consider assessment information and the narrative describes how it has been used in decision and budgeting processes. The key is to avoid so much detail that you bury the reader in it. However, a single example will not suffice either. You should try to offer a balance – offer the appropriate representative cases to demonstrate that assessment data is used routinely and effectively.

Can you talk about how training for peer reviewers is addressed?

Middle States has spent a great deal of time in the past two years reviewing and updating the process for training peer reviewers. We want to clarify what is expected in substantial measure.
We have had meaningful encounters with evaluators and team chairs and spent a good deal of time with the first campuses coming under review using the new standards. We've been engaged in continuously evaluating our training processes: conducting observations, surveys, and focus groups. We are assessing our objectives in the training. So, we are doing assessment just as the institutions ae doing.

What final thoughts would you have to share with our readers?

Assessment is proactive and positive. We want to help institutions understand that there is value added in the process. It can help institutions be more efficient and effective. Remember this is about more than compliance. It is about engaging in a conversation with the positive and negative information we discover through assessment so that we can ensure our students are well served.

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Interview Questions with Dr. Pat O'Brien, Senior Vice President of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE), New England Association of Schools and College (NEASC)

Interview by Debra Leahy

First printed in AALHE Intersection Winter 2017

What have been some of the more effective practices you have witnessed among higher education institutions toward engendering a comprehensive culture of assessment?

I think the approaches that are most successful integrate assessment into already established practices and structures so that assessment does not become bolt-on but rather much more integrated into the ongoing organization and government structure of the institution. Another effective strategy is linking the internal work to external efforts, and here I think a good example is the Vision Project. In Massachusetts, for example, it is an initiative of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, so all public colleges and universities are a part of it, and, again, sometimes that external impetus can be helpful to internal efforts. Assessment work as we know costs money and the acquisition of external funding can be helpful in engendering that comprehensive culture. I think there are some of the tried and true models: the naming of champions or the identification of assessment champions, who then take the good work and take the enthusiasm about the efforts and help it to trickle down a little bit. Finally, I think what I would say is a defining characteristic of an effective system is it's manageable. It's not so complex, and so big, and so busy, that it looks like it will collapse under its own weight.

From the Commission's point of view, what are the some more prevalent obstacles that higher education institutions face when devising assessment practices? What are some of the more effective practices the Commission has used to aid these institutions?

The two major obstacles are money and time. I think that each institution, in keeping with its own culture and its own resources, needs to figure out how to overcome those obstacles. Also helping people to understand that they are not the only institution in the world facing those obstacles, and as unique as they are, they're not necessarily unique in that regard. Sometimes not even using the word assessment can be helpful because faculty always love to talk about effective teaching, and they always love to talk about helping students be successful, and those are assessment conversations. As soon as you label them assessment conversations, some faculty will say, oh no, I don't do assessment. Well, actually they do assessment every single day. How can the institution support them in codifying their work in a way that makes it clear to everyone the good assessment that is occurring?

With the recent revision of the (NEASC) CIHE Standards, what were some of the more significant considerations regarding assessment, whether these were considerations of the Commission or the higher education institutions that participated in the revisions?

When we had eleven standards, assessment was spread out a little bit: a little bit in planning and evaluation, a little bit in the academic program, and a little bit in students. Now it's all in educational effectiveness and there's no place to hide. When it was spread out you could be so busy talking about planning that you never really got to assessment. Part of the reason for "no place to hide" is the increased expectations in Washington with respect to accountability. College has gotten more necessary and more expensive. And, as it has gotten both of those things, and as tax payer dollars are used increasingly to pay for it, the expectation is that it will be clearer for colleges to demonstrate that they are effective and to demonstrate what and how students are learning. As you read Standard Eight (Educational Effectiveness), you'll find much more emphasis on quantitative measures of success. The Commission still talks about a balance of measures, and I would add that the judicious use of anecdotal evidence can absolutely enrich the telling of the story of student success. As institutions have become more complex, so have their student bodies. Consequently, I think the Commission would argue so need to be their approaches to the understanding of student success and the assessment of the student body. The outcomes, perhaps, need to be same, but how you understand student acquisition of those outcomes may be different from various populations. Another stronger emphasis in the standards: all students, all modalities, all locations. And, here's where the Commission pushes back against some of what we are hearing, that there ought to be a single measure of student success and every institution ought to adopt it. When you read the standards you're going to see very clearly the expectation for mission-appropriate student learning outcomes and the exhortation to institutions to be explicit about what those are, about how they are measured, and about how those data are used to make improvements on the campus. Finally, what I would say in terms of the standards with respect to assessment is that there is a clear shift in the Commission's expectations and emphasis away from process to outcomes. So, it isn't enough to say that we administered the survey, but instead, we administered the survey and here is what we've learned.

In one of the Standards, the Commission mentions the involvement of "relevant constituencies." Do you foresee greater involvement by any particular stakeholders (i.e., employers, parents, Boards) in relation to assessment of student learning?

Each institution in its uniqueness will have particular constituencies or stakeholders. Public institutions may have somewhat different, or different emphasis, among the stakeholders. One of the groups you called out in your question is boards. I would say it's a fine line to walk with respect to the governing board. Because you want the governing board to be aware, you want them to be supportive, you want them to be interested, but you don't want them micromanaging. And, I think the effective President knows how to walk that line and how to make sure that the board is appropriately supportive and challenging. If we are trying to get some folks to do some work on assessment than some well-placed encouragement from the board can be helpful. You don't want the board writing the assessment plan or determining what the outcome should be. So, I think an appropriate role for the board is absolutely essential in fostering the assessment work on the campus.

The Commission has emphasized innovation and accountability as not being mutually exclusive. From an accreditation standpoint, in what ways do you believe innovation to help or hinder the assessment of student learning?

Accreditation often gets criticized as putting the kibosh on innovation. This is a criticism that I find hard to understand because I don't see a lot of places, at least not in New England, where innovation has been stifled. Not every innovation is a good idea, and I think sometimes institutions, in hindsight, realize it or perhaps they don't, but the Commission has to weigh everything that comes to it, in light of the standards. Clearly, innovation can feed assessment work. To some extent innovation can hinder assessment if it takes folks away from the established outcomes or makes it harder to articulate the outcomes associated with it or it becomes an excuse (i.e. we can't assess the program because it's a new innovation. Even innovations have to be assessed. And, I think as institutions come up with ideas that they believe are innovative, factoring in how to assess those and how to evaluate those against the mission of the institution, and against standards, is also important.

The Commission has always emphasized candor through peer review and working with the Commission. In what ways have you seen candor help institutions develop practices for assessment of student learning?

I cannot state strongly enough the importance of candor in assessment work. It's as true in assessment as it is throughout any other part of the institution. What the Commission has seen over time is very healthy evaluations on the part of institutions of their assessment practices where, again, candidly a certain initiative didn't work. And I think the ability for institutions to say, or the freedom for institutions to believe that they can say, that we tried it and it didn't work, is an important part of this process. We know that not everything is going to work the first time, not everything is going to get you the information that you need. So, we need to be able to evaluate it and say we tried it and we moved away from it and here's why and here's what we're doing instead. To be able to say that candidly and to talk about who made that determination and what you're doing instead, I think is critical to the assessment process.

Looking into the future, what are some of the regulatory changes that you foresee that will affect how we think about and report assessment activities?

It is absolutely this notion of quantitative measures of student success that are primary, such as this very facile, very simplistic, understanding that it's whether you have a job within six months at a certain salary seems to be the defining measure. For some institutions, that's great, it's absolutely the right measure for them, but for many others, it's not. I also think there's tremendous attention to debt. Tremendous attention to student debt in Washington doesn't relate necessarily to the assessment of student learning, although it may tangentially because of this notion of other ways of progressing through a program. Demonstrating competencies as opposed to seat time is the simplistic way of saying that. I think that we have an extraordinary opportunity now to inform this discourse about student success because everyone that I talk to believes that it is more than who has a job within six months at a certain level of salary. Student success is more complex, it's more nuanced, and to the extent that institutions undergoing self-studies or fifth year reports can, as we say, step up to the plate and be very explicit about that, then I do think we have an opportunity to inform the discourse. I'm hopeful that institutions will indeed embrace this challenge, embrace this opportunity and that together we can have an impact.

Debra Leahy is the Provost at New England College of Business

Interview Questions with Dr. Mac Powell, Senior Fellow of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)

Interview by Becky Dueben

Student learning outcomes and continuous improvement are important to all regional accreditors, yet there can be some variation in terms of how those processes are carried out and reported. How would you characterize NWCCU's expectations of institutions?

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and University's (NWCCU) mission is "to assure educational quality, enhance institutional effectiveness, and foster continuous improvement of colleges and universities in the Northwest region through analytical institutional self-assessment and critical peer review based upon evaluation criteria that are objectively and equitably applied to institutions with diverse missions, characteristics, and cultures." The geography of the region and its member institutions require the Commission to pay special attention to the diversity of institutions, and that focus upon valuing institutional identity and mission is carried forward in our accreditation practices. For instance, as part of our seven-year accreditation cycle, institutions are called upon to prepare a report shortly after the final Commission Action Letter to discuss the institution's Mission & Core Themes and how the institution envisions using its mission and core themes as a basis for ongoing decision-making.

How does the NWCCU guide and prepare peer reviewers for campus visits?

Like all regional accrediting agencies, NWCCU prepares its evaluators through on-site training and professional training materials. Evaluators are selected based upon their expertise and institutional experience, and teams and chairs are selected based upon their knowledge of particular types of institutions or academic expertise. Teams are led by experienced team Chairs, and supported by Staff Liaisons throughout the campus visit.

What have been effective practices you have witnessed among higher education institutions toward supporting a culture of assessment?

Over the past two years, NWCCU has engaged in a Demonstration Project, bringing together diverse types of institutions to share their experiences with assessment and measures of student achievement. The Project was facilitated by Commission Staff and outside expertise, and what was most evident was the value of collaborative work across institutions. Sharing in small cohorts of institutions (regardless of institutional type) was extremely effective in building a culture of assessment, as faculty, staff, and administrators were able to move as a cohort through the process of institutional change.

Regarding student learning outcome assessment, what are some of the areas that have been problematic for institutions?

Like many institutions around the country, the most problematic challenges around assessment involve the quality and quantity of data. Institutions vary in capacity and ability to track data that provide evidence of both formative and summative assessment, but even more challenging is having a consistent arc of data

that captures the nuanced needs and achievement of students in what are invariably programs with different sets of learning outcomes and professional standards.

What are some changes you anticipate with respect to higher education, especially with regards to accreditation?

The greatest changes are likely to involve the competing (but equally compelling) need to ensure consumer protection through measurement mechanisms that are invariably static and unyielding; while at the same time assuring a process within institutions that is dynamically changing to meet the educational needs of students. Institutions have different missions, serve different populations, and have varying degrees of resources – creating an accreditation system that is flexible enough to allow multiple types of institutions to thrive while still providing basic assurances of quality and stability will almost assuredly require change and partnerships between institutions, agencies, and the state and federal governments.

What final thoughts, if any, would you like to share?

Like any high-performing institution or organization, NWCCU takes the idea of continuous improvement as a foundational principle. As an agency that has been in existence for 100 years, we recognize the importance of change and collaboration. We have gone through a process of self-reflection involving regional feedback from surveys, annual meetings, town halls, and public comments that has culminated with a renewed commitment to creating value through the process of accreditation, simplifying and streamlining our substantive change practices, advancing our use of technology, and building a deeper relationship between institutions and Commission staff. As much as any prior time in our history, NWCCU is committed to working together (both within our region and without) to help our institutions recruit, educate, and retain the brightest and most energized students, faculty, and staff in the world.

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Interview with Mike Johnson, Senior Vice President/Chief of Staff for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)

Interview by David Eubanks

First printed in [AALHE Intersection Fall 2014](#)

Michael S. Johnson is Senior Vice President/Chief of Staff for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, the regional accreditor of degree-granting higher education institutions in the Southern states. We corresponded by email.

Demonstrating assessment of learning outcomes is often a problem area for institutions seeking reaffirmation of accreditation. What are the characteristics of successful institutions in this area?

You are right that this is a problem. In the 2013 reaffirmation class, 64% of the 75 institutions reviewed were cited at the off-site stage of our 3-step process for non-compliance with our standard calling for assessment of educational programs (Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1.1). After an on-site review, the percentage was still a very high 36% not meeting the standard. And almost a quarter of the reviewed institutions (23%) were asked for an additional follow-up after review by our Board of Trustees.

Successful institutions are able to establish that for a very broad cross-section of educational programs, all parts of CS 3.3.1.1 are met. This is a three-part standard and meeting some of it is not success. The institution must: one, have established that it has defined expected outcomes (programmatic outcomes and student learning outcomes) that are program-specific; two, have assessed the extent that these out-comes have been achieved; and three, have analyzed its assessment results and then applied the findings to undertake improvements in its programs.
A successful program does not simply have evidence that it 1) has expected outcomes, 2) undertakes assessments, and 3) makes changes to programs (e.g., curricula, staffing, course content, mode of delivery). A successful program explicitly shows that these stages are linked. For example, the assessment instruments used are appropriate ways to measure the expected outcomes mentioned. And then the improvements that are undertaken logically follow from a reasoned analysis of the assessment findings. Success does not depend on computer software. It depends on a belief that data-based decisions are desirable. It also depends on a process where someone actually reads the generated reports. If the leadership is not dedicated to the process, it is rarely successful.

What are some of the more common mistakes institutions make with regard to the learning outcomes standard?

We allow institutions to use sampling in terms of presenting information. A common mistake is to offer a sample of programs that is not well explained, and that looks to be insufficient to give a fair overview of institutional practices. For example, only programs with specialized accreditation are given (nursing is everyone's favorite to be in the sample), only undergraduate programs are given, not graduate (master's and if offered, doctoral), or some divisions/schools are not included at all. Samples need to be very robust and justified. The bigger mistake, however, is to give too little attention to one or more of the five elements mentioned above. It is not uncommon to have no "use of results" even though the rest of the standard may be met.

Another type of problem occurs with institutions that use some computer-driven process for standardizing the institutional effectiveness process, yet the process is not explained, and the generated reports are full of undefined and unexplained codes and abbreviations. I call this the "tyranny of the software" problem.

When presenting materials for the learning outcomes standards--academic program assessment reports, for example--is there any advice you could pass along to make them more readable and convincing to reviewers?

I have seen some institutions work through a sample "report" (annotations, circles and arrows, and the like) to help reviewers understand what it is that they are looking at. This is especially helpful when a standardized format is used for reporting. Another thing is to change reports from having a "planned improvements" section to an "actual improvements undertaken" section. Dave, I remember you had a report format where you made clear that some columns are done at the start of the process (stating expected outcomes, identifying specific ways that these will be assessed); these might appear in future tense but the rest of the final report form is to be LEFT BLANK. Then at the end of the reporting cycle, the actual findings are presented (PAST TENSE since the measurements have occurred). If there are planned improvements, they are future tense but not part of what we ask for; actual improvements would appear in PAST TENSE.

Finally, I urge report writers to NEVER present an effectiveness narrative in the future tense; the reports themselves will have future tense in the expected outcomes section, but when explaining the process, you are explaining a process that is already in use and has results that have already been generated and effectively used. You are reporting out your recent past efforts, not what you hope to be able to demonstrate in the future.

Do you anticipate any regulatory changes that will affect how we think about and report assessment activities? For example, more calls for accountability that have to be answered quantitatively.

The main change will probably be an expectation of more disclosure to the public of evidence related to learning outcomes. But this will probably be in terms of licensure, completion rates, and the like. In fact, our new policy statement on "Institutional Obligations for Public Disclosure" already calls for this type of information to be made public.

Is it difficult to become a peer reviewer for accreditation reports? What are the benefits?

Reviewers are nominated by the SACSCOC institution's president, then placed into our evaluator registry. We try to balance experienced and new evaluators on a committee – you probably would like some experienced evaluators on a committee visit to your institution, so you can understand why. But we use an institutional effectiveness evaluator on almost every committee, so we could certainly use more names in our registry. The benefits are many. First, you gain experience about our processes which help you in developing reports for your own institution. Second, you always take home useful ideas gained from the institution under review or from your committee colleagues. Third, you spend a few days with a great bunch of people. Fourth, your get the satisfaction of doing something that is a service to the entire academic community. I could add more, I'm sure! If a person is interested, try this link from our webpage: http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/commres/How%20to%20Become%20an%20Evaluator.pdf

Is there anything else you would like to add?

The purpose of an institutional effectiveness process is to help the institution evaluate its performance and improve itself. If the perceived purpose is simply to "get through accreditation," then the process is probably a great waste of time and energy. Successful institutional effectiveness starts with a state of mind.

Interview with Dr. Stephanie Droker, Vice President, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC-WASC)

Interview by Jane Marie Souza

What are the greatest challenges you see faced by community and junior colleges with respect to reporting on assessment of student learning?

The open access mission of community and junior colleges provides institutional faculty and staff the privilege of working with students who arrive with diverse educational preparedness, backgrounds, and experiences. These students also have varied individual goals for entering two-year colleges, which include enrolling in a specific course of their interest, advancing job skills to earn a higher wage and/or promotion, to earn a certificate or degree, or to complete lower-division coursework needed to transfer to a four-year university. Many students may aim to complete two or more of these goals while in school. This diversity in student population and educational goals makes the assessment of student learning difficult.

Further, community and junior colleges have been faced with declining enrollments and resources. While this issue is certainly not isolated to two-year institutions, effective assessment of student learning demands that colleges allocate adequate human, fiscal, technological, and training resources to support assessment efforts. This is compounded by the fact that community and junior colleges rely on strong adjunct faculty workforces. These part-time instructors are often only paid when they are teaching, and thus are not compensated for their time and effort to conduct student learning outcomes assessment.

All institutions are required to comply with accreditation-relevant federal regulations regarding student outcomes. How have some of the reporting requirements been challenging to community colleges?

Federal regulations are rather restrictive in that they tend to lean towards a "one size fits all" ideal. As described above, community and junior colleges have diverse student populations with varying needs and goals. In addition, community and junior college governance and organizational structures can widely differ. Often, colleges attempt to model their assessment efforts based upon other colleges' successful structures and processes in order to ensure compliance with federal regulations and accreditation standards. Regional accreditors must encourage the use of best practices in student learning outcomes assessment, while inspiring their member institutions to develop their own organic practices and processes so the resulting data is authentic and relevant.

Can you discuss how you involve institutions in the work of the commission?

It is easy to forget that accreditation is voluntary and regional accreditors are member organizations. Just like our member institutions, ACCJC is committed to continuously improving our processes and practices to ensure every member institution can meet its mission of high academic quality. Commissioners come from our member institutions and we rely on practitioners from the field to provide input and insights on

all aspects of our work, including professional development, policies, standards, and accreditation processes.

Is there advice that you would offer institutions regarding reporting on assessment of student learning?

As with any research endeavor, assessment tools cannot be determined until the research questions have been asked. Personnel involved with assessment of student learning must first decide the intended outcomes of the course or program before they decide on the assessment tools. As I stated above, college leadership should not advocate for a "one size fits all programs" model, nor should learning outcomes committees try to hold faculty to a prescribed set of outcomes. Faculty must be free to pursue outcomes that best fit their disciplines. For example, we would not expect nursing faculty to use the same learning outcomes as the philosophy department. While institutions have general education learning outcomes to determine if students have appropriate writing, speaking, and critical thinking skills, assessment of student learning must be based on best practices within each discipline and department. Faculty and administrators should work together to create a genuine culture of assessment - a culture where assessment is integral to the work of the college and leads to continuous improvement.

Are there any misperceptions about the self-study process that you would like to clear up?

At times, institutional personnel may feel that accreditation and the self-study process are more apt to expose institutions to negative publicity rather than helping institutions with genuine quality improvement. Such perceptions have laden the self-study process with a lot of fear. The self-study process is very effective in helping institutions to improve their educational and institutional effectiveness when institutional personnel and peer reviewers are well-informed about accreditation standards and best practices.

Using peer review to determine academic quality is unique to American higher education.   American educators are dedicated to holding themselves accountable to high standards of academic quality. To that end, institutions invite their peer educational professionals to join them in a process of rigorous self-evaluation. When a team of highly trained educators engages in this level of interaction with their colleagues, they are prepared to provide insightful and knowledgeable information regarding an institution to its internal and external constituents. Peer reviewers know that their work is highly consequential. They know they are contributing to the body of knowledge that advances research and best practices in higher education. Thus, peer review is both a privilege and a responsibility.

Resources: Suskie, L. (2009). *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide.* John Wiley & Sons

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Interview with David Chase, Associate Vice President - Educational Programming, Accrediting Commission for Schools, Western Association for Schools and Colleges

Interview by Jonathan Keiser

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Based on your experiences, what are effective practices for promoting an institutional culture of assessment and learning?

I think about these kinds of issues every day as they align with WASC's [Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission] mission and priorities, and much of my work is focused on developing and offering programming that provides institutional assistance for developing a culture of learning and assessment. I have found institutions that approach student learning in an integrated and holistic way tend to have a stronger culture of learning and assessment, because it permeates their institutional practices and policies. WASC offers a variety of programming (https://www.wscuc.org/educational-programs) that assists institutions with these efforts. For instance, our workshop, *The Learning Institution: Aligning and Integrating Practices to Support Quality,* helps educators of all kinds within an institution to focus inward through reflective strategies to better understand what the institution is doing and use what they learn to improve experiences for students. I think many institutions that have a mature culture of learning and assessment have figured out how to operationalize a convergence model of leadership where administration, faculty and staff demonstrate a shared responsibility and accountability for assessing and improving student learning. The cycle of collecting, analyzing and utilizing data on student learning is well integrated throughout all parts of the institution and discussing evidence and data is a routine practice.

From a Commission's perspective, what are common obstacles an institution encounters when designing and implementing assessment practices? How can institutions leverage accreditation agencies to assist with overcoming these obstacles?

Probably the most common obstacle is approaching assessment of student learning from only a compliance perspective. Focusing on compliance misses the point and can counter the intent of accrediting standards and criteria. I have noticed that institutions that have well defined priorities and design assessment practices that are aligned to these priorities, and spend time considering how their institutional culture drives assessment practices are less likely to encounter obstacles in collectively understanding student learning and development. This is particularly true for institutions that do not couple assessing learning only with accreditation reporting and timelines. Accreditation efforts heat up around the time an institution is preparing for reaffirmation, which can create competition for resources (e.g., time, budget, staff) with other institutional initiatives. If an institution does not have well established and longstanding assessment practices, assessment efforts might be competing for time and energy that is also being directed toward reaffirmation. The best way to avoid this problem is to make sure assessment practices aren't being driven solely by external prompts such as an upcoming reaccreditation visit and use student learning assessment to drive internal improvements as part of an ongoing effort that has momentum independent of external drivers and prompts. This mission of the institution should drive efforts to understand, confirm, and improve student learning and development and serves as the touchstone for prioritizing the work.

What advice would you offer to people tasked with coordinating and writing the assessment section of a Self-Study report?

This is a common question that many people ask who find themselves leading their institution's reaffirmation efforts. Building a coalition across the institution that is grounded in collaborative processes that provides enough time for iterative feedback and review helps mobilize the institution as whole, and takes the burden off a single person tasked with writing and coordinating the assessment section of a self-study report. This reminds me of a characterization of leadership from Bolman and Deal (2008) as "…a subtle process of mutual influence fusing thought, feeling, and action. It produces cooperative effort in the services of purposes embraced by both leader and led." The person tasked with writing about assessing student learning wants to establish collaborative processes that bridge faculty insights and disciplinary knowledge with administrative support. These sorts of strategic alliances aren't one-time conversations in a single meeting; rather they are collaborative processes requiring ongoing communication that fosters a shared responsibility for assessing, improving and reporting on student learning. There should be frequent conversations centered on data about students and their learning.

Is there an intrinsic tension between improving student learning and proving students learn at an institution? If so, do you have any advice for institutions struggling with this tension?

"Improving learning" versus "proving learning" is an interesting way to frame the tension that often exists when there are groups of people with different priorities discussing what, how, and why we assess student learning. Samuel Hope, Executive Director Emeritus of the National Association of Schools of Theatre and Music, is a brilliant thinker who recognized this tension and described large-scale assessment efforts as operating from a rhetoric of permanent accusation. This concept is powerful, and worth considering because assessment results can easily appear to be reductionist and framed by a deficit mindset rather than a means to understands the nature of student learning in an effort to improve teaching and learning. Engaging faculty in nuanced conversations about student learning that posits a shared responsibility for learning among students, teachers, administrators and the institution as whole can move from a rhetoric of accusation to one of understanding and improvement. Approaching learning and assessment conversations from a strengths mindset with a focus on improving learning while recognizing disciplinary expertise can help avoid or at least diminish this tension.

Can you discuss how your organization trains peer reviewers regarding how to understand and evaluate an institution's assessment efforts?

I'm glad you asked this question. We are revising and rolling out new training processes that have face-to-face, hybrid, and online components that leverage a learning management system so the structure and interface should be familiar to many faculty and administrators. WASC is investing in programming to assist intuitions with improving educational quality and peer reviewer training focused on assessing and improving educational quality. We also sponsor the Assessment Leadership Academy, an 11-month professional development training program that already has almost 300 alumni. These 'graduates' are well trained in a variety of best practices for assessing student learning recognizing the unique mission of many institutions – and they poised to be excellent peer reviewers. We have also convened a Community of Practice with funding from a Lumina Foundation grant that is developing greater institutional capacity for assessment practices and increasing the visibility of student learning outcomes assessment and student achievement in the overall accreditation process. The Community of Practice is helping us demonstrate how assessing student learning and achievement is critical to internal constituents (faculty, administrators, peer reviewers) focused on improving educational quality and external constituents such as policy makers interested in understating the value of higher education. All of these efforts are designed to ensure that

WASC's peer reviewer training centers on institutional quality and improvement that account for the myriad unique institutional types and cultures in our region.

What are some common misconceptions institutions have regarding reporting on assessment of student learning and accreditation expectations?

I think one of the misconceptions is failing to account for a variety of assessment reporting needs - it's not always a one size fits all model. Different disciplines may require different epistemological lenses because they value different types of knowledge and knowing; Art History faculty might want to use a methodology and reporting structure that looks very different than an Economics faculty because they're trying to understand student learning from different perspectives.

A similar misconception is approaching assessment by trying to address only what the accreditor wants rather than what is meaningful to faculty and the institution. It's similar to a student asking, what do I need to know for the test? It should be more about what an institution needs to know about its students and their learning in order to celebrate successes and improve curriculum and instruction as necessary. Accreditation is a peer based quality assurance system, and the misconception can sometimes be "us" and "them" approach to assessment. There is no "us" and "them" because it's is all "we." Accreditation standards emerge, are applied, and are interpreted by peers in the higher education community.

Do you foresee any regulatory changes that will impact institutional assessment efforts?

That's a good question, but difficult to answer because the policy landscape is volatile and it's difficult to predict the trajectory things will take as the process of reauthorizing the Higher Education Act develops. The best way to insulate your college from regulatory change is to make assessment an institutional priority. If assessing learning is part of the fabric of an institution's culture, it doesn't matter if regulations shift between process or outcomes – either way, the institution is systemically collecting, analyzing, interpreting, reporting and most importantly using data on student learning.

What other thoughts or suggestions would you like to share with our readers?

Well, I'm starting to think about assessment in terms of a developmental trajectory for institutional growth. Assessment can foreground broader work for institutional improvement because it privileges learning at the center of the effort. When reflection about student learning becomes an intentional institutional practice, it can have integrated functional areas. Assessment can get people in Academic Affairs and Student Affairs collaborating and contributing to common goals so there is a true sense of shared responsibility for students' and their learning. This is something I hope to see more of in the future.

Reference

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Interview with Mary Ellen Petrisko, President of WASC Senior College and University Commission

Interview by Monica Stitt-Bergh

First printed in [AALHE Intersection Fall 2016](#)

Mary Ellen Petrisko is the President of WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC). I interviewed her by email.

Demonstrating assessment of learning outcomes can be a problem area for institutions seeking reaffirmation. What are the characteristics of successful institutions in this area?

First, let me distinguish between demonstrating assessment of learning outcomes and demonstrating the achievement of learning outcomes through assessment. Perhaps only a subtle twist on the words, but I think it's an important one, as I believe assessment can be seen—and is sometimes seen—more as a process (the famous, or infamous, loop!) than the work through which student achievement of stated learning outcomes is assessed for the purpose of quality assurance and improvement. What we are talking about is seeing that learning has occurred, not that an assessment process has taken place. And all of that is easy to say. How to demonstrate that learning has occurred, and to what extent it has occurred, at what levels, is not as easy.
Institutions that are successful in demonstrating the achievement of outcomes distinguish inputs from out-comes, include not only retention and graduation data but quantitative and qualitative data and information about specific, high-level goals such as, for WSCUC, the core competencies that we expect all of our institutions to ensure for all students, no matter what their major course of study, and other institutional- and program-level goals. Successful institutions explicitly link their explicitly stated learning outcomes (e.g., "the ability to identify information needs, locate and access relevant information and critically evaluate a diverse array of sources") to evidence that those outcomes have been met (e.g., summary data on the ex-tent to which an appropriate and representative sampling of students have appropriately identified, accessed, and evaluated information in assignments). They also indicate the extent to which they have been met (e.g., how many students have achieved the goal at what levels of achievement) and make clear what actions have been undertaken to improve students' achievement of those goals (e.g., additional orientation to available sources of information being provided earlier in the curriculum, or additional attention in the curriculum to identifying red flags in evaluating the reliability/biases/marketing aspects of information).

What do you see as some of major challenges in faculty's carrying out their responsibilities in outcomes assessment?

For one, being a cohesive faculty at the program and institutional levels with the time available to work together to agree on what students need to learn and be able to do to earn a credential/degree from their institution. Faculty structures have changed enormously over the last years, making it increasingly challenging for faculty to be in the same place at the same time on a regular basis to work on setting, discussing, and working on outcomes. Especially when contingent faculty are hired with responsibilities limited to time in the classroom or online, including them in the conversations regarding outcomes and the work of assessment is a challenge—certainly possible, but a challenge. There is also the challenge of helping faculty to see that they really are interested in assessment, no matter how much they may protest to the contrary! They want their students to learn, they want them to succeed, and they want to be satisfied that they have done a good job in helping them meet their learning goals. Assessment helps them to do this

and ultimately to take greater satisfaction in their work. The word "assessment" itself can be a stumbling block, as it has become so laden with connotations of external requirements above and beyond teaching and learning ("the accreditor is making us do this"). I've often told leadership to use whatever language works best to communicate the purposes—and rewards—of assessment and to help faculty to see that in many cases they are already doing more assessment than they realize.

Do you think campuses have misconceptions about what WSCUC is looking for with respect to learning outcomes assessment?

I don't know if it's misconceptions about what WSCUC is looking for as much as it is difficulty in knowing how to present evidence of their student outcomes. We have a Criterion for Review (an element of one of our Standards) that states the expectation that "the institution regularly generates, evaluates, and makes public data about student achievement, including measures of retention and graduation, and evidence of student learning" (emphasis added). The institutional Statement of Accreditation Status pages on our websites includes a Student Achievement URL for each accredited and candidate institution through which we further disseminate this publicly available information. A research study of a selected sample of these URLs showed that a very wide variety of information has been made available but that it is not always good solid evidence of student learning. For this reason, we have begun work with representatives from a number of our member institutions to help us gather best practices and sample tools that institutions may find useful in gathering and presenting their own information. Stay tuned!

Where do you see institutions struggling the most with learning outcomes assessment?

In the humanities. I used to love visiting institutions and talking to philosophy faculty in particular who said, "you can't measure what I teach." As a former faculty member in philosophy, I always answered "oh, yes you can!" and/or "on what basis, then, do you grade your students?" What's needed IMHO is setting clear goals that are operationally defined: what does this skill or knowledge look like walking around? And what is the appropriate measurement to determine whether it's been achieved? It's easy, for example, to say that we want our students to be "global citizens." What makes a global citizen? Knowledge of political and economic systems other than our own? Knowledge of other languages? Experience studying in other countries? An understanding of how history gives us insight into current situations in our own country and how we are related to the cultures we grew out of? These are much more easily measured than "global citizenship." Another example, above and beyond the challenge in the humanities, is with some of the core competencies we expect to be developed in all students. Take for example "critical thinking." What IS critical thinking? What does it look like when in operation? Some institutions have defined this; others have not. WSCUC has offered a number of workshops to help institutions address this issue, including among other pragmatic assistance help in defining the competencies as makes sense for them, setting appropriate standards of performance, and using their findings to strengthen their programs. This is another aspect of the need for faculty to be working together to agree on what they want their students to know and be able to do and which measures are the appropriate ones to determine success.

There seems to be pressure from the USDE and the political environment in the areas of learning and student success, how is that affecting WSCUC? How does it filter to institutions?

There has been a great deal of discussion nationally regarding both low graduation rates and the extent to which college and university graduates have the skills needed to succeed in the workplace. How the discussion regarding graduation rates has affected WSCUC has been to note that the low graduation rates published by IPEDS cover only about 40% of the undergraduates in our region due to their being restricted to first-time full-time students, clearly not the majority of students in our region. Not being satisfied only to

criticize this measure, we have worked and are working on an alternative measure, the Graduation Rate Dashboard (GRD), that takes into account all students earning degrees at an institution, regard-less of enrollment status or time to degree. This is how our work filters to institutions: giving them an alternative, often more-inclusive measure to demonstrate their students' success.

How the national discussion regarding alumni's having the skills necessary to succeed in the workplace has affected WSCUC can be seen in the requirement, unique to my knowledge among the regionals, that institutions demonstrate that their students, regardless of major, have acquired the core competencies of writing and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and information literacy. This filters to institutions, of course, in their needing to provide evidence of the achievement of these competencies in their self-study reports.

WSCUC prides itself on paying attention to what is being said outside of the higher education community regarding higher education and accreditation and responding appropriately. That does not mean that we agree with all critiques, and indeed in some cases it can mean working to educate critics regarding the realities of higher education and our work as accreditors as we see and experience them.

How does WSCUC see itself working together with institutions to advocate for quality in higher education?

The number one priority listed in our 2017-19 Strategic Priorities is "Cultivate and steward stake-holder partnerships for research and learning in support of institutional improvement." We have recently secured a Lumina Foundation grant to develop and facilitate a Community of Practice of WSCUC institutions in order to increase leadership for and institutional capacity in learning outcomes assessment. As referenced above, we have also called together a group of institutional representatives to work on how best to provide evidence of student learning to the public as is required by our Standards. Another group is working on an alternative institutional review process in response to calls for a more risk-based approach to accreditation that can provide a more compressed, streamlined approach to accreditation for institutions who meet certain criteria. As these examples demonstrate, WSCUC believes in the value of working together with institutions on not only advocating for quality in higher education but demonstrating it as well.

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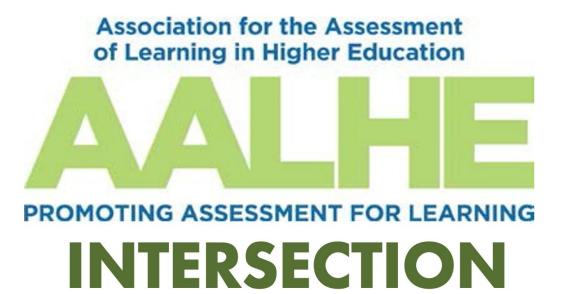
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