

Commission Action on the Accrediting Redesign Process

November 3, 2011

At its November 3 meeting, the Commission conducted a public hearing on proposed changes to the WASC accrediting process. The public hearing followed three regional forums and two webinars with participation from over 130 institutions. The Commission also received written comments from a number of institutional representatives, which were reviewed by the Commission. Based on the recommendations of the Redesign Steering Committee and feedback received from the region, the Commission discussed and adopted the following resolution:

- The Commission commends the work of the Steering Committee and the five Task Forces for engaging the 10 Commission Goals for the Redesign of the WASC Accrediting Process and developing recommendations for simplifying, shortening, and focusing the accrediting process. While much work lies ahead, the Commission acknowledges the foundation laid by all those involved in the process and the value of the feedback received on these proposed changes to date. Special commendation is extended to the Chair of the Steering Committee, Anna DiStefano, for her tireless work in coordinating and synthesizing the recommendations into a coherent framework.
- In adopting changes to the accrediting process, the Commission also wishes to acknowledge the work done by institutions in the region under the 2001/2008 Handbook of Accreditation. Steps taken by the Commission are intended to honor and build on these efforts.
- The Commission reaffirms its commitment to enhance its role as an agent of quality assurance and public accountability, and in so doing, to give greater attention to student success and student learning. The Commission also acknowledges the need to adapt its processes to the diverse range of institutions accredited and be cost-effective and value adding.
- In addition, the Commission expresses its appreciation to all those who attended the public forums and webinars and to those who submitted feedback on the proposed changes in order to make the WASC process more effective and responsive to both external and regional issues and concerns.

SUMMARY OF ACTIONS

1. TRANSPARENCY
2. REVIEW OF RETENTION AND GRADUATION
3. GRADUATION PROFICIENCIES FOR UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES
4. FOCUSING ON THE MEANING, QUALITY AND RIGOR OF THE DEGREE
 - THE DEGREE QUALIFICATIONS PROFILE
5. TRIENNIAL FINANCIAL REVIEWS
6. IDENTIFYING ADDITIONAL CRITERIA FOR FOR-PROFITS
7. REDESIGN OF THE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW PROCESS
8. TIMEFRAME FOR IMPLEMENTATION
9. REVIEW OF THE 2008 STANDARDS OF ACCREDITATION AND COMMISSION POLICIES
10. EVALUATING THE NEW ACCREDITING PROCESS
11. RESPONDING TO THE CHANGING ECOLOGY OF LEARNING
12. ADDITIONAL ACTIONS

ACTION TO SEEK FURTHER COMMENT

EXTERNAL VALIDATION/BENCHMARKING OF GRADUATION PROFICIENCIES

Be it further resolved that, with respect to the following issues, the Commission takes the actions identified below:

1. **Transparency:** Effective with actions to be taken by the Commission at its June 2012 meeting and prospectively thereafter, the Commission will make action letters and the supporting team reports publicly available on its website for all accrediting visits. The team recommendation to the Commission will remain confidential. The Commission will provide a link on its website to any institutional response to the Commission action or team report. In furtherance of this action, the Commission shall revise all related policies including the Commission Policy on Disclosure of Accrediting Documents and Commission Actions, the Commission Code of Good Practice, and other policies and documents as needed, in the Handbook of Accreditation and other publications. In addition, the Commission acted to revise the definition of a formal Notice of Concern so that it will be a public action. Revisions to the relevant provisions in the Handbook of Accreditation will be circulated for review to the Executive Committee of the Commission by December 1, 2011 for approval of changes to these policies, to then be circulated to the region for comment with final action to be taken at the February 2012 Commission meeting.
2. **Review of Retention and Graduation:** The Commission authorizes the creation of an offsite review process to evaluate institution's narratives and numbers report identifying retention and graduation rates for undergraduate programs. All candidate and accredited institutions will be reviewed between 2013 and 2015. Half of institutions awarding undergraduate degrees will be reviewed in 2013 and half in 2014, with graduate programs being similarly divided for review in 2014 and 2015. Templates for data reporting, definitions of terms and the format for institutional submissions for institutions offering undergraduate degrees will be presented to the Commission for review and approval at its February 2012 meeting, circulated to the region for comment and discussed at the April ALO meeting held in conjunction with the 2012 Academic Resource Conference. The institutional presentation will include a self-review of retention and completion rates (and numbers) and external benchmarking to similar and/or best practice institutions, selected by the institution, along with plans and targets for areas of needed improvement.
3. **Graduation Proficiencies for Undergraduate Degrees:** Consistent with Criteria for Review 2.2 and 2.6, all institutions offering undergraduate degrees will be expected to demonstrate that their graduates have achieved the institution's stated level of proficiency at least in the following five areas: written and oral communication, quantitative skills, critical thinking and information literacy. The institution has the responsibility to determine how each of the proficiencies is defined, the level of proficiency expected of students upon graduation, how the proficiency is to be assessed and to demonstrate that graduates consistently achieve or surpass the stated level of proficiency. Institutions are also expected to determine similar outcomes and levels of proficiency in the major or disciplinary field and in other areas determined by the institution to be important to fulfill its mission.
4. **Focusing on the Meaning, Quality and Rigor of the Degrees:** Building on the first paragraph of CFR 2.2 and CFR 1.2, which requires that institutions define the outcomes of degrees beyond the accumulation of courses and credits, the Commission expects that all institutions will articulate, as part of the institutional review process, the learning outcomes of the degree as a whole and demonstrate that there are processes in place to assure the meaning, quality and rigor of the degrees offered. The institution is responsible for defining how it will address these issues.

THE COMMISSION ACTIONS TAKE SIGNIFICANT STEPS TO ENHANCE WASC'S ROLE AS AN AGENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY. IN DOING SO, WASC WILL GIVE GREATER ATTENTION TO STUDENT SUCCESS AND STUDENT LEARNING IN THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS.

The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP): The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) will be piloted through voluntary learning communities to assess its usefulness as a framework for assisting institutions to assess the quality of degrees or portions of degree programs. The pilot will run from 2012 to 2014 on a voluntary and optional basis. The Commission will share the results of the pilot at Commission meetings, sessions with ALOs and at other times during the Academic Resource Conferences. Based on the review of the pilot and further discussion within the region, the Commission will determine what uses of the DQP are appropriate for quality assurance.

5. Triennial Financial Reviews: The Commission approved the recommendations of the Financial Review Task Force to establish panels for public, nonprofit and for-profit institutions to review audit results and financial ratios on a triennial basis based on readily available information. Findings from these reviews will be incorporated as appropriate into the accrediting review process. Formal recommendations of the format of such reviews will be presented for Commission review and approval in February 2012.
6. Identifying Additional Criteria for For-profit Institutions: With the increasing number of for-profit institutions seeking and attaining WASC accreditation, the Commission charges the President to identify areas where additional criteria beyond the application of the Standards of Accreditation may be needed to address the distinctive elements of such institutions. A report is to be presented to the Commission on proposed changes at the February 2012 Commission meeting to be reviewed and approved for circulation to the region for comment.
7. Redesign of the Institutional Review Process (IRP): The Commission approved the structure of the proposed redesign of the IRP, which will be a single, integrated process of a day-long offsite review followed by an onsite review that is framed by the findings of the offsite review. The onsite review will be conducted one semester, no later than two semesters, after the offsite review. Within the framework for meeting federal obligations, the Commission has committed to implementing different approaches for institutional review that will respect institutional diversity, build on the previous work of institutions to address the 2001/2008 Standards of Accreditation, be cost-effective and emphasize student success and student learning, sustainability and needed areas for improvement. The Commission has instructed the staff to develop one or more formats for this new review process adapted to the previous accrediting history of the institution and issues arising from previous reviews (EER, special visits, interim reports, substantive change actions, etc.). The institution's report for this review process would include such elements as: current issues based on the institution's self-review under the Standards, the institution's response to any findings from the offsite retention/graduation and the financial reviews and reports on graduation proficiencies (#3 above) and the meaning, quality and rigor of degrees (#4 above). Plans for implementation will be presented to the Commission for review at its February 2012 meeting for circulation to the region and at the 2012 ARC, and considered, with any modifications, for final adoption at the June 2012 Commission meeting.
8. Timeframe for Implementation: The redesigned IRP will be implemented for all accredited institutions effective fall 2013. The offsite review of retention and graduation will commence in spring 2013. The date of implementation for the triennial financial reviews will be set by the Commission upon approval of the format for these reviews in February 2012. Institutions seeking candidacy and initial accreditation will continue to use the process outlined in the Commission publication, How to Become Accredited. The date of the institution's offsite review will be the date previously scheduled by the Commission for the Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR) for all accredited institutions at the time of the completion of their review under the 2001/2008 Handbook. Institutions scheduled for their CPR in fall 2012 will be rescheduled for spring or fall 2013. Institutions scheduled for spring 2013 CPR visits will be given the option to proceed with a two-visit approach under the 2001/2008 Handbook or to pilot the redesigned IRP.

9. Review of the 2008 Standards of Accreditation and Commission Policies: The Commission requests that the Steering Committee review the 2008 Standards of Accreditation for refinement. Based on survey results and feedback to the Commission, the Commission does not believe major changes are needed, but instead, editing for simplification and clarification. The Commission requests that the Steering Committee prepare preliminary findings for discussion at the February 2012 meeting, to circulate proposed changes to the region following that meeting for comment and for further review at meetings at the 2012 ARC, with final changes adopted by the Commission in June 2012. The President is charged to develop a process for review and updating of Commission policies, using to the extent possible, the same timeline as the revision of the Standards.
10. Evaluating the New Accrediting Process: The Commission is committed to ongoing review of the impact of these changes and making improvements to the accrediting process as needed. To this end, the Commission will establish an interim review process in 2016 to evaluate the first round of reviews under the redesigned institutional review process and undertake a formal external review of these changes in 2019-20.
11. Responding to the Changing Ecology of Learning: The Commission recognizes that the ecology of learning and of higher education is changing rapidly. It requests a formal report from the Task Force on the Changing Ecology of Learning at its February 2012 meeting on how an openness to change and innovation can be built into the redesigned accrediting process, Standards and policies.
12. Additional Actions: The Commission recognizes that not all goals set by the Commission in November 2010 have been addressed and charges the President to develop a plan for addressing these goals. These include developing a public statement and/or quality matrix following accreditation review; setting additional expectations for institutional reporting of information; and considering the development of levels of accreditation.

Action to Seek Further Comment

External Validation/Benchmarking of Graduation Proficiencies: In its articulation of goals for the redesign of the accrediting process in November 2010, the Commission called for external benchmarking of key graduation proficiencies to provide a more consistent approach to evaluating student learning. This approach was affirmed by the Task Force on Levels of Learning and the Degree Qualifications Profile, which recommended that there be external validation or benchmarking of writing, critical thinking, and quantitative skills at graduation. This recommendation was modified by the Steering Committee to propose that at least two of the five graduation proficiencies in CFR 2.2 (see #3 above) be externally validated or benchmarked. In discussions throughout the region, the Commission received a range of responses from support for this proposal to expressions of concern. The Commission considered making external validation of graduation proficiencies optional, but there was a range of views within the Commission about how institutions would demonstrate effective learning without external comparisons outside the department or institution. The Commission decided, therefore, to continue to study this issue and to invite additional input from the region within the framework of the other actions taken by the Commission, especially #3 above, regarding the role of external validation, methods for undertaking validation and alternative approaches if external validation or benchmarking were not required, but made optional. Input from institutions will be solicited and received until January 15, 2012. The Commission has requested that the President prepare additional reflections on this matter. The Commission will discuss and act on this matter at its meeting in February 2012. The Commission also authorizes the staff to proceed with the scheduled “Resource Fairs” in Northern and Southern California to learn more about available approaches that could be used, whether optional or required.

Additional information may be found on the WASC website at www.wascsenior.org or by contacting Jessica Worchel, Project Manager for Accreditation Redesign at jworchel@wascsenior.org.