

INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION

A CALL FOR GREATER FACULTY INVOLVEMENT

From its beginnings in the early twentieth century, the American system of regional accreditation of higher education institutions has sought to accomplish two goals: to protect the public through a system of accountability and to provide an impetus for improvement through a system of peer review. The history and development of this largely self-regulated system has been marked by the maintenance of a delicate balance between and among the regional accrediting agencies, their coordination at the national level, and the role of the federal government in the process. Recently, however, this equilibrium has been disturbed by increasing pressure from state and federal governments seeking greater authority over accreditation and challenging the long-standing role of the regional and national nongovernmental associations that have traditionally coordinated the accreditation process. During the tenure of Margaret Spellings, the current secretary of education, the federal government has shown growing interest in setting goals and standards, including mandated assessment of student learning outcomes as measures of institutional quality. The hearings and report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, known as the Spellings Commission, provided one indication of this growing pressure.¹

With the federal government seeking to insert itself more directly and substantively in the accreditation process, it is increasingly important that faculty participate in the accreditation of their own institutions, because greater involvement of faculty members can increase the likelihood that teaching and learning are maintained at a high level of quality. To leave this process primarily in the hands of administrators and other staff members is to

abdicate a portion of our responsibility to our students, to our institutions, to our profession, and to our society.

Faculty Involvement in Accreditation

There are many ways that faculty members can—and should—become involved in the accreditation process. They include the following.

1. Participate in the self-study or the “continuous-improvement” process.

On most campuses, accreditation involves the institution’s preparation of an in-depth self-study. An alternate form of accreditation, involving the notion of “continuous improvement,” has more recently been adopted by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. Whatever form is employed, faculty participation, either through the formal governance system or through individual initiative, ensures that the faculty voice will be heard within the institution’s accreditation process. Many faculty members view service on self-study committees as a distraction from what they consider to be their primary activities—teaching and research. At the same time, institutions may not fully appreciate or adequately reward such service. We believe that faculty involvement in the accreditation process should be valued as much as other forms of service. The self-study process, moreover, provides faculty members with a rewarding opportunity to examine how well an institution is fulfilling its mission and to work toward improvement where needed.

Some faculty members have commented that the self-study process is shrouded in secrecy at their institutions, but we suspect that this impression results from a lack of familiarity with the process. The self-study requirements are available online at the Web site of each regional accrediting agency (see sidebar), and it has generally been our experience that administrators welcome the support faculty members can provide with this labor-intensive task.

Faculty members often ask how they can add value to what may seem to be primarily an administrative

1. For the response of the Association’s Committee on Government Relations to the Spellings Commission’s report, see www.aaup.org/AAUP/GR/federal/FutureofHigherEd/spellrep.htm. See also James E. Perley, “The Spellings Commission Report,” *Academe* 93 (March–April 2007): 134. For the AAUP’s position on outcomes assessment, see “Mandated Assessment of Educational Outcomes,” available at www.aaup.org/AAUP/comm/rep/MandatedAssessments.htm.

function. Yet issues such as curricular design and effectiveness, assessment of students' academic performance, student retention and graduation rates, quality of academic advising, and appropriateness of cocurricular activities are central to the self-study. Because of their training and direct contact with students, faculty members are in the best position to provide analyses of these issues. And they possess the research and analytical skills not only to identify deficiencies in processes and outcomes but also to develop methods for improvement.

2. Use a faculty committee in the campus governance structure, the AAUP chapter, or the committee and chapter jointly as an accreditation resource.

A fundamental service that a faculty body can perform, especially during the self-study process, is to acquaint the campus community with the principles and standards set forth in the AAUP's 1968 statement *The Role of the Faculty in the Accrediting of Colleges and Universities*. The principles include the following: the self-study should be a "cooperative effort" involving administrators and faculty; institutions should encourage faculty participation; and the evaluation of academic programs and conditions affecting academic freedom, tenure, faculty governance, and faculty status and morale should be "largely the responsibility of faculty members." Among the recommended standards for institutions are that the majority of the self-study committee should consist of faculty and should be "responsible to the faculty as a whole"; that the self-study should include descriptions of circumstances affecting

academic freedom and tenure, the faculty role in governance, and faculty status and morale; that the self-study should be submitted to the entire faculty for possible amendment before being submitted to the accreditor; that faculty representatives should "be available to meet with the visiting committee to discuss questions of faculty concern"; and that the visiting team's report should be distributed to the entire faculty. A faculty committee in the campus governance structure, the AAUP chapter, or the committee and chapter together should do what can be done to ensure that the institution observes these standards when it undergoes an accreditation review.

For faculty members to engage actively in accreditation, they must also be aware of the timeline of relevant activities and events that constitute the process. A faculty body can facilitate this awareness by sending out a memorandum or posting an announcement on its Web site containing that timeline, thereby enabling campus members to be informed of the deadlines that must be met.

Additionally, a faculty body's Web site can serve the campus community by posting links to essential sources of information about regional accreditation. Besides the accreditation page on the Association's Web site, a faculty body might wish to post links to relevant sites of accrediting bodies and other organizations.

A faculty body, furthermore, can work through the administrative officer responsible for coordinating the campus accreditation process in order to express interest in meeting with the visiting team. When the date for the accreditation visit is set, the faculty group should ask to be added to the visiting team's schedule, employing the

Accreditation Web Sites

American Association of University Professors, accreditation page: www.aaup.org/AAUP/issues/accred

Council for Higher Education Accreditation: www.chea.org

Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, Middle States Commission on Higher Education: www.msche.org

New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education: www.neasc.org/cihe/cihe.htm

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the Higher Learning Commission: www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities: www.nwccu.org

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges: www.sacscoc.org

U.S. Department of Education, accreditation page: www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred

Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges: www.accjc.org

Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities: www.wascenior.org/wasc

protocol specified by the accrediting commission. Notification of this request should go to the administration as well. Although most teams will schedule meetings with key faculty officers and committees, faculty representatives not scheduled for an interview by the time the visit occurs should contact accrediting teams directly to indicate their interest in meeting. Meetings between visiting teams and members of the faculty—especially those on major committees and in leadership positions—are critical because without them the visiting team may have no other way to hear a faculty perspective or learn of faculty concerns. Accrediting commissions, moreover, are presumably as interested in improvement as they are in existing conditions.

Finally, a faculty body can advocate for accreditation as an indicator of quality. Accreditation is, if nothing else, a mechanism for ensuring minimum standards of academic quality. This assurance of quality is important to parents, students, and the general public as well as to the faculty, administration, and governing board.

3. Attend a regional accreditor's annual meeting.

One way for faculty members to become more familiar with the accreditation process is by attending the annual meetings of the regional accrediting agencies, where faculty will encounter accrediting commission staff, college and university presidents, other administrative officers, members of self-study committees from institutions undergoing review, and members of the pool of individuals who serve on visiting teams. The meetings can produce a direct flow of helpful information. In addition, the opportunity to engage with accreditors and other faculty members involved in accreditation can result in the establishment of a network of people who can interact meaningfully on issues of educational quality. Active participation in the discussions that take place at these annual meetings may also lead to an invitation from an accrediting agency to serve on panels setting standards or as members of accrediting teams visiting campuses other than their own (see the immediately following report, “The Faculty Role in Regional Accreditation: Service on Evaluation Teams”).

4. Find ways to improve quality.

Faculty involvement in improving instructional quality and enhancing conditions of academic life will show accreditors that the faculty cares about quality and, by implication, accreditation. Leaders in accreditation have remarked that too few faculty show an interest in it. Faculty should not justify that opinion by avoiding involvement and allowing administrators to dominate

the process. Faculty members are most familiar with the core functions of the institution and are therefore best placed to make recommendations that would improve teaching and research, enhance overall academic quality, and promote respect for principles of academic freedom and shared governance.

Conclusion

As Frederick Crosson wrote in 1988, “The requirements for accreditation mandate a role in the improvement of the educational program for the faculty, acting not as individuals, but collectively. The particular form of faculty involvement must, however, vary according to the particular history, make-up, and resources of the institution.”² The faculty at each college or university must examine how it can best have an impact on its institution’s efforts to improve the quality of programs and of the educational processes, and accreditation is one important avenue to this end. If faculty members increase their involvement in institutional accreditation, we believe that higher education overall will be strengthened, and institutions—and the public—will benefit accordingly. ☞

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2. Frederick J. Crosson, “The Role of Faculty in Accreditation,” *Academe* 74 (July–August 1988): 21.