

STUDENT LEARNING, ASSESSMENT, AND ACCREDITATION

Among the public's many expectations of higher education, the most basic is that students will learn, and in particular that they will learn what they need to know to attain personal success and fulfill their public responsibilities in a global and diverse society. Student learning is central to all higher education organizations; therefore, these organizations define educational quality--one of their core purposes--by how well they achieve their declared mission relative to student learning. A focus on achieved student learning is critical not only to a higher education organization's ability to promote and improve curricular and co-curricular learning experiences and to provide evidence of the quality of educational experiences and programs, but also to fulfill the most basic public expectations and needs of higher education.

In October 1989, the Commission first posited that assessment of student learning is an essential component of every organization's effort to evaluate overall organizational effectiveness. In February 2003, The Higher Learning Commission adopted a newly revised position statement on assessment of student learning (see Section 3.4-2 of the *Handbook of Accreditation, Third Edition*) to reaffirm and strengthen this position. Through the Criteria for Accreditation and multiple Core Components, the Commission makes clear the centrality of student learning to effective higher education organizations and extends and deepens its commitment to and expectations for assessment. Indeed, the Commission asserts that assessment is more than a response to demands for accountability, more than a means for curricular improvement. Effective assessment is best understood as a strategy for understanding, confirming, and improving student learning.

Fundamental Questions for Conversations on Student Learning

Six fundamental questions serve as prompts for conversations about student learning and the role of assessment in affirming and improving that learning:

- 1. How are your stated student learning outcomes appropriate to your mission, programs, degrees, and students?**
- 2. What evidence do you have that students achieve your stated learning outcomes?**
- 3. In what ways do you analyze and use evidence of student learning?**
- 4. How do you ensure shared responsibility for student learning and for assessment of student learning?**
- 5. How do you evaluate and improve the effectiveness of your efforts to assess and improve student learning?**
- 6. In what ways do you inform the public and other stakeholders about what students are learning---and how well?**

In using these questions, an organization should ground its conversations in its distinct mission, context, commitments, goals and intended outcomes for student learning. In addition to informing ongoing improvement in student learning, these conversations will assist organizations and peer reviewers in discerning evidence for the Criteria and Core Components.

The fundamental questions and the conversations they prompt are intended to support a strategy of inquiry into student learning. Further, the questions are intended to support this strategy of inquiry, built on principles of good practice, as a participative and iterative process that:

- Provides information regarding student learning,
- Engages stakeholders in analyzing and using information on student learning to confirm and improve teaching and learning,
- Produces evidence that confirms achievement of intended student learning outcomes, and
- Guides broader educational and organizational improvement.

In other words, organizations assess student learning in meaningful, useful, and workable ways to evaluate how they are achieving their commitments and to act on the results in ways that advance student learning and improve educational quality. Effective assessment of student learning is a matter of commitment, not a matter of compliance.

Evaluating the Organization's Efforts to Assess and Improve Student Learning

The centrality of student learning and the fundamental nature of assessment as a strategy for understanding and improving that learning are embedded directly into the Criteria and Core Components. Thus, peer reviewers seeking evidence for the Criteria and Core Components will discern evidence of the commitment to student learning and the meaningful use of assessment to confirm and improve student learning. Neither the Criteria nor Core Components prescribe specific methods for assessing and improving student learning. It is inevitable and desirable that diverse organizations exhibit a wide variety of approaches and embed assessment of student learning in a variety of institutional forms and processes. Thus, the Commission and its peer reviewers will not approach the review with expectations for specific ways in which assessment efforts are structured and implemented, but rather with a focus on student learning and the use of assessment to confirm and improve that learning within the context and mission of the organization.

To remain focused on student learning and assessment as a strategy for confirming and improving that learning, peer reviewers may use the fundamental questions as prompts to engage faculty, staff, students, and administrators in conversations about the organization's (a) commitment to improving student learning and educational quality; (b) sustained effort to collect, analyze, and use data and information on student learning; (c) evidence that students have achieved the learning intended; (d) shared responsibility for student learning and assessment of student learning; and (e) successes and challenges in improving student learning and educational quality through assessment. These conversations will assist peer reviewers in understanding the organization's commitment to student learning and approaches to assessment of that learning within the organization's context and mission. Further, the conversation will assist in discerning areas for consultation and in identifying and validating evidence related to the Criteria and Core Components. Peer reviewers will base their accreditation-related judgments and recommendations on this evidence as it relates to the Criteria and Core Components.

Finally, the Commission realizes that assessment of student learning is an ongoing, dynamic process that requires substantial time; that is often marked by fits and starts; and that takes long-term commitment and leadership. It is reasonable for organizations to use different approaches and timetables in implementing their assessment of student learning efforts. Nevertheless, the Commission expects that each organization can demonstrate a sustained effort to implement assessment processes that are workable, reasonable, meaningful, and useful in confirming and improving student learning and in assuring and advancing broader educational and organizational quality.