

Accreditation, Quality Assurance and Evidence

In the early 1960's Initial Accreditation required evidence that basic structures and processes were in place and minimal resources were available to operate an institution. For example, the existence of mission statement, a president, a governing board, etc., provided evidence of structures, while sufficient full time faculty with appropriate training, sufficient funds, a decent sized library, etc., provided evidence of resources sufficient to run a college. In addition evidence of processes for supporting academic freedom, curriculum development, governance, decision making was also required.

Beginning in the 1990's, accreditation added a requirement that colleges provide evidence that students had actually moved through college programs and were completing them. This *student achievement data* provided evidence that students were completing courses, persisting semester to semester, completing degrees and certificates, graduating, transferring, getting jobs. The standards of this era also specified that institutions provide evidence that program review was being conducted and that plans to improve education were being developed and implemented.

The initial focus on structures, resources, processes was an approach to quality that was built on what any good organization needed to survive. It was not particularly education-oriented, but it was necessary to support education. The second focus on students moving through the institution began to address the results of college efforts concerning student achievement.

These standards add another element to accreditation's focus of attention. That element is the focus on what students have learned as a result of attending college--- *student learning outcomes*. This focus requires that the institution provide evidence of a conscious effort to:

- focus on learning as the institution's core activity
- support and produce student learning
- measure that learning
- assess how well learning is occurring
- make changes to improve student learning
- organize its key processes to effectively support student learning
- allocate its resources to effectively support student learning
- improving learning as an important means to institutional improvement

Characteristics of Evidence

Evidence is the data upon which a judgment or conclusion may be based. As such, it is presented in answer to questions that have been deliberately posed because an institution regards them as important. Evidence tells all stakeholders that an institution has investigated its questions and knows something about itself---it knows what it achieves.

For evidence to be useful, it must have undergone analysis and reflection by the college community. The dialogue required for analysis and reflection is an integral part of the capacity an institution has for using the evidence it has accrued to make improvements.

Good evidence, then, is obviously related to the questions the college has investigated and it can be replicated, making it reliable. Good evidence is representative of what is, not just an isolated case, and it is information upon which an institution can take action to improve. It is, in short, relevant, verifiable, representative, and actionable.

The evidence the institution presents should be about achievements such as number of graduates, number of transfers, retention rates, etc. Evidence should also be about student learning outcomes—skills, knowledge, abilities, and affective development. And, finally, evidence should be about the effectiveness of the institution's procedures and policies.

The evidence the institution presents should be about achievements such as the number of graduates, the number of transfers, retention of students from term to term, etc. The institution should also provide evidence about student learning outcomes – the skills, knowledge, abilities, and affective development students gain as a result of their education. Finally, the institution should provide evidence of the effectiveness of the institution's procedures and policies, its resources and structures.

Self study should be only one phase of on-going institutional evaluation, and an evaluating team should be able to see how the institution develops and uses evidence of effectiveness as part of its ongoing evaluative processes. Institutions should gather and use both qualitative and quantitative evidence, and often must use indirect as well as direct measures to assess institutional effectiveness. Good evidence used in evaluations has the following characteristics:

- It is intentional, and a dialogue about its meaning and relevance has taken place.
- It is purposeful, designed to answer questions the institution has raised.
- It has been interpreted and reflected upon, not just offered up in its raw or unanalyzed form.
- It is integrated and presented in a context of other information about the institution that creates a holistic view of the institution or program.
- It is cumulative and is corroborated by multiple sources of data.
- It is coherent and sound enough to provide guidance for improvement.

It is important to note that evidence per se does not lead to confirmations of value and quality. Rather, the members of the college community, or of the higher education community, must arrive at the decisions about value and quality through active judgments. The purpose of good evidence is to encourage informed institutional dialogue that engages the college community and leads to improvement of its processes, procedures, policies, relationships, ultimately with the effect of improving student learning. Good evidence should provide the means for institutions or evaluators to make sound judgments about quality and future direction, but at the same time it will probably stimulate further inquiry about institutional quality.

Institutions report or store good evidence in many formats, and institutions engaged in self study or evaluative teams may find good evidence in a number of sources, including institutional data bases; documents such as faculty handbooks, catalogues, student handbooks, policy statements, program review documents, planning documents, minutes of important meetings, syllabi, course outlines, and institutional fact books; from survey results; from assessments of student work on examinations, class assignments, capstone projects, etc; from faculty grading rubrics and analyses of student learning out comes; from special institutional research reports.