Accreditation and Accountability:
A CHEA Special Report

CHEA

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation

Mission Statement

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation will serve students and their families, colleges and universities, sponsoring bodies, governments and employers by promoting academic quality through formal recognition of higher education accrediting bodies and will coordinate and work to advance self-regulation through accreditation.

—1996

A national advocate and institutional voice for self-regulation of academic quality through accreditation, CHEA is an association of 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities and recognizes 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations.

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Dear Colleagues:

A good deal of national attention has been paid to accreditation and issues of accountability during the past year. The dominant topics have been student learning outcomes, institutional performance and information to the public. From the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education to reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, we in the accreditation community are being challenged to alter our practices to accommodate greater attention in these areas.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) has published 13 papers, advisories, and commentaries on outcomes, performance and public information during the past five years. This document is a distillation of CHEA's work, summarizing key recommendations, ideas and effective practices for accrediting organizations working with institutions and programs.

We hope that these ideas and suggestions are helpful as the accrediting community provides leadership in addressing current accountability challenges.

Thank you.

Judith Eaton
President

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Section 1.
Developing and Using Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes

A. Audiences: To Whom Is Additional Attention to Student Learning Outcomes Important?

Key external constituents (government, students, public) want information about student learning outcomes.

Information about student learning outcomes is important to government, students and the public because these constituents increasingly tie judgments about the quality of an institution or program to evidence of student academic achievement.

- Governments want evidence about the quality of student learning outcomes to make judgments about federal and state support of higher education.

- Students and prospective students want evidence of student learning outcomes to make decisions about which institutions or programs to attend and what tuition they are willing to pay.

- The public wants evidence of student learning outcomes to continue its support of higher education as a public good.

Accrediting organizations need information about student learning outcomes.

The legitimacy of accreditation as a protector of academic quality in higher education is increasingly challenged in the absence of quality review that pays significant attention to outcomes. Information about student learning outcomes is important to accrediting organizations because the expectation that accreditors will provide this information is growing among important constituents, including those who recognize these organizations.

- Each accrediting organization needs to state clearly its position with respect to how it addresses the matter of evidence of student learning outcomes in its standards, policies and review processes.

- The accrediting community needs a shared language on the topic of student learning outcomes—both to encourage communication within the community and to clearly articulate accreditation's position and commitment to constituencies outside the community.

Institutions, programs and faculty need information about student learning outcomes.

For institutions and programs, information about student learning outcomes is central to any claim of intellectual authority that they may offer. For faculty, the primary value of evidence of student learning outcomes is to aid in the improvement of teaching and learning. Such a commitment to improvement is not only a key aspect of scholarship and intellectual responsibility, it is essential to claims of academic quality as well. Part of the task of accreditation is to help institutions, programs and faculty substantiate their claims to quality.

B. Key Questions: What Needs to be Asked and Answered When Addressing Student Learning Outcomes?

What is a "student learning outcome?"

An "outcome" is something that happens to an individual student as a result of his or her attendance at a higher education institution or participation in a particular course of study. But there are many types of outcomes other than student learning. A "student learning outcome," in contrast, is properly defined in terms of the particular levels of knowledge, skills and abilities that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of collegiate experiences.

What counts as evidence of student learning?

Evidence of student learning can take many forms but must involve a direct examination of student levels of attainment—either for individual students or for representative samples of students. Examples of the types of evidence that might be used include (but are not limited to):

- faculty-designed comprehensive or capstone examinations and assignments;

- performance on external or licensure examinations;

- authentic performances or demonstrations;

- portfolios of student work over time; or
- samples of representative student work generated in response to typical course assignments.

Evidence such as survey self-reports about learning, focus groups, interviews and student satisfaction studies are certainly useful in the accreditation process, but do not constitute direct evidence of student learning outcomes.

At what level (or for what unit of analysis) should evidence of student learning outcomes be sought?

Different accreditors may choose different levels of aggregation when seeking evidence of student learning outcomes, depending upon their purposes. Options include:

- individual student;
- specified groups or aggregations of students;
- courses or groups of courses;
- programs or schools within an institution;
- institutions;
- combinations of the above.

To what extent should particular student learning outcomes be specified by accreditors?

This choice must be made explicitly by individual accreditors, depending upon their circumstances. Options range from:

- complete prescription of outcomes by accreditor (for example, specific professional skills required for practice);
- accreditor expects institution (or program) to choose and define outcomes;
- both (for example, core set of outcomes on which accreditor and institution agree).

What models are available to accreditors when choosing an approach?

Different combinations of policy choices determine the approach to addressing student learning outcomes that any particular accreditor develops. Among the most prevalent and useful points of departure are:

Program review, in which outcomes are determined largely by the institution or program, the effectiveness of program or institution as a whole is the focus of interest, and direct evidence of student learning is collected. [Note: Care should be taken here that there really is direct evidence of student learning available.]

Academic audit, in which the effectiveness of student learning outcomes is examined indirectly by looking at the adequacy of institutional (or program) processes for assuring quality. [Note: This is useful for

determining the effectiveness of quality practices, but does not involve direct evidence of student learning outcomes.]

Academic standards audit, in which the adequacy of academic standards for grading and awarding credit is checked by direct reference to actual assignments, requirements and student work. [Note: This follows the audit methodology above but incorporates direct evidence of student academic achievement into the audit process.]

Third-party certification, in which student competency is examined directly by an external body. [Note: This is not typically undertaken by accreditors but is useful to the accreditation process as a solid form of evidence.]

What issues should be anticipated?

A number of important issues arise when any accreditor addresses the topic of student learning outcomes as part of the accreditation process. Among them are:

- What standards of evidence will be used?
- How will evidence be used in determining quality (and in making an accreditation decision)?
- How will faculty be involved?
- How will the interests and concerns of external stakeholders be addressed?

Source: CHEA Occasional Paper, *Accreditation and Student Learning Outcomes: A Proposed Point of Departure.* September 2001. Retrieved 10/02/06 from http://www.chea.org/pdf/EwellSLO_Sept2001.pdf

C. What Can Accrediting Organizations Do to Establish Effective Policy and Practice to Address Student Learning Outcomes?

Accrediting organizations need to establish standards and review processes that visibly and clearly expect accredited institutions and programs to:

- Regularly gather and report concrete evidence about what students know and can do as a result of their respective courses of study, framed in terms of established learning outcomes and supplied at an appropriate level of aggregation (e.g., at the institutional or program level).
- Supplement this evidence with information about other dimensions of effective institutional or program performance with respect to student outcomes (e.g., graduation, retention, transfer, job placement or admission to graduate school) that do not constitute direct evidence of student learning.
- Prominently feature relevant evidence of student learning outcomes—along with other dimensions

of effective institutional performance, as appropriate—in demonstrating institutional or program effectiveness.

Institutions and programs need to establish clear statements of student learning outcomes and of their approach to collecting, interpreting and using evidence of student achievement.

Institutions and programs need to:

- Determine and publicly commit to the particular learning outcomes associated with various courses of study.
- Determine and communicate clearly to constituents:
  - what counts as evidence that these outcomes have been achieved and
  - what level of attainment of these outcomes is required to assure the quality of institutional or program offerings.
- Develop recognizable processes for regularly collecting and interpreting evidence of student learning outcomes.
- Use the results of this process to identify strengths and weaknesses or gaps between expected and actual performance and to identify and overcome barriers to learning.

Accrediting organizations need to use evidence of student learning outcomes in making judgments about academic quality and accredited status.

Accreditors need to:

- Establish and apply standards, policies and review processes that examine how institutions and programs develop and use evidence of student learning outcomes for internal quality assurance and program improvement.
- Working with an institution or program, examine:
  - whether expectations of student learning outcomes are set at an appropriate level for the mission, student population and resources of the institution or program;
  - whether the actual achievement levels of students against these standards are acceptable given the mission, student population and resources of an institution or program and, in the case of the professions, the professional community served; and
  - whether the institution or program makes effective use of evidence of student learning outcomes to assure and improve quality.

- Ensure that using evidence of student learning outcomes plays a central role in determining the accredited status of an institution or program.

Institutions and programs share responsibility with accrediting organizations to provide clear and credible information to constituents about what students learn.

Institutions and programs need to:

- Routinely provide students and prospective students with information about student learning outcomes and institutional and program performance in terms of these outcomes;
- Regularly report aggregate information about student learning outcomes to external constituents; and
- Supplement this information with additional evidence about the soundness of institutional and program operations and overall effectiveness with respect to mission fulfillment, as well as concrete evidence of how they benefit students in other ways.

Accrediting organizations need to:

- Establish standards, polices and review processes that visibly and clearly expect institutions and programs to discharge the above responsibilities with respect to public communication about student learning outcomes;
- Clearly communicate to accreditation's constituents the fact that accredited status signifies that student achievement levels are appropriate and acceptable; and
- Provide information about specific proficiencies or deficiencies in aggregate student academic performance, if these played a role in an accreditation action or decision about an institution or program.

Section 2.
Providing Additional Information to the Public

A. What Kinds of Information About Quality Are Accrediting Organizations Uniquely Positioned to Provide to the Public?

Academic quality of institutions and programs.

Accreditors are uniquely positioned to provide information about academic quality, e.g., the academic background and training of faculty, academic freedom and resources to support scholarly activity. In addition, potential students typically care about meaningful access to and contact with their instructors and whether they will be exposed to high-quality teaching and learning situations. Students are also interested in access to instructional resources, especially with respect to technology.

Responsiveness and service to students.

The public is interested in how students and clients are treated by an institution or program, together with the particular kinds of support that the institution will provide to help students succeed, embracing advising, tutoring and study-skills development; and attributes of an instructional environment that make it easier for students to participate, such as parking or day care.

Source: CHEA Occasional Paper, *Accreditation and the Provision of Additional Information to the Public about Institution and Program Performance.* May 2004. Retrieved November 11, 2006 from www.chea.org/pdf/CHEA_OP_May04.pdf

B. Current Accreditation Practice With Regard to Information to the Public

Information about the accrediting process.

All accrediting organizations provide information to the public about how the accreditation process works. This is done either in print (90 percent) or on organizational Websites (95 percent) or both. Ten percent of accreditors distribute this information upon request.

Information about current accredited status of institutions and programs.

All accrediting organizations provide information to the public about the current accredited status of the institutions and programs they review. This is done either in print (80 percent) or on an organizational Website (95 percent) or both. Ninety-five percent of accreditors distribute this information upon request. Twenty-seven percent of accreditors provide an accreditation history.

Information about accreditation operations and activities.

Two-thirds of accrediting organizations prepare an annual report or similar document that describes their activities for a given year. Fifty percent place this report on their Websites, and 50 percent provide this in print form. These reports include information on the types of actions that are taken.

Summary information about institutions and programs that are accredited.

One-third of accrediting organizations provide descriptive information about the institutions and programs they accredit. Data in these reports include enroll-ments, faculty size, degrees earned and descriptions of degrees or program offerings. Eighty percent of those providing the informa-tion make it available on Websites and include contact information or Web links to the institutions or programs.

Information on the results of individual accreditation reviews beyond accredited status.

Eighteen percent of the accrediting organizations provide information to the public about the results of individual reviews beyond report-ing on formal actions. The information may include descriptions of the results of a review with reference to specific accre-ditation standards, summaries of strengths or good practices, summaries of weaknesses and deficiencies, extracts of team reports or action letters, full team reports or action letters and institutional or program responses.

In response to a 2005 CHEA survey on accreditation practices with regard to informing the public, 66 recognized accreditors indicated that they provide a range of infor-mation to the public. Specifically:

- 44 accreditors provide an annual report or other opera-tions summary.
- 31 accreditors provide descrip-tive summaries of institutions or programs.
- 12 accreditors provide informa-tion on results of individual reviews beyond accredited sta-tus.
- 11 accreditors provide informa-tion about institution or pro-gram performance or student academic achievement.
- 15 accreditors require institu-tions or programs to make public the information they compile about the institutional and program performance or student academic achievement.

Use of public members.

At almost all accrediting organizations, public commission members participate fully in decisions about the accredited status of institutions or programs (98 percent) and help make policies about matters like the public disclosure of information (95 percent). Public members serve on review teams at about half (56 percent) of all accrediting organizations. Public member participation on review teams varies considerably by type of accrediting organization.

Source: CHEA Occasional Paper, *CHEA Survey of Recognized Accrediting Organizations: Providing Information to the Public.* March 2006. Retrieved 10/02/06 from http://www.chea.org/pdf/CHEA_OP_Apr06.pdf

C. Weighing Costs and Benefits of a Broader Role With Respect to Information to the Public

Who is asking for what kinds of information about quality?

The most common demand for "consumer information" in higher education is likely to be from potential students and their parents who are looking for specific attributes that will help them discriminate among a variety of institutions or programs. This might include data on academic quality or outcomes that clearly indicate areas of competitive strength or weakness, and information about distinctive features of an institution or program.

What particular stance should the accrediting organization adopt?

The stance may be primarily one of "student protection," which concentrates on providing only the information needed to help students avoid programs or institutions where they are likely to waste their time and money. It may include academic quality, student responsiveness or both.

Who else is doing this?

Depending upon the field or type of institution, there may already be dozens of competing information providers advanced through the regular media, state higher education organizations or special-purpose advocacy organizations. There are already multiple detailed and competing sources of "quality" information about selective colleges.

What distinctive informational contributions can the accrediting organization make?

The accreditation process generates a great deal of qualitative information through the on-site mechanism of peer review—information that most government or commercial providers of information cannot match. A lot of this information will address the topics of academic experiences and service responsiveness in which external constituents are especially interested.

How will adopting this posture affect the accrediting organization's relationship with its primary constituencies.

An accrediting organization's primary mission of assuring academic quality within the academic community will always take precedence. The organization needs to address whether becoming more assertive in the public-information role may actively damage an accrediting organization's capacity to continue serving its primary constituents in its traditional role.

How will adopting this posture affect the accrediting organization's internal workload and capacities?

A parallel question is the impact that adopting a broader public information role may have on the ways an accrediting organization spends its time and resources. Most accreditors have extremely limited resources with respect to personnel, communications, and information processing capacity. Redirecting these resources to address a new line of work—especially if it is not a core function and may have little potential for cost-recovery—is not a decision to undertake lightly.

Source: CHEA Occasional Paper, *Accreditation and the Provision of Additional Information to the Public about Institution and Program Performance.* May 2004. Retrieved 10/02/06 http://www.chea.org/pdf/CHEA_OP_May04.pdf

D. Suggestions for Future Practice

Accrediting organizations seeking to provide information to the public may consider the following:

- Explore whether the students and the public would benefit from accrediting organizations developing similar formats or common approaches when providing information about institutions and programs.

- Continue to develop current plans to expand information to the public in the future, especially information about the results of institutional and programmatic review.

- Continue the dialogue about effective information to the public within and among accrediting organizations: what works and what may be effective in the future, especially as this relates to institutional performance and student achievement.

Source: CHEA Occasional Paper, *CHEA Survey of Recognized Accrediting Organizations: Providing Information to the Public.* April 2006.Retrieved 10/02/06 from http://www.chea.org/pdf/CHEA_OP_Apr06.pdf

Section 3. Additional Reporting to the Public: Examples for Accreditors, Institutions and Programs

There are various ways in which accrediting organizations, institutions and programs might present additional information to the public. Three examples are presented here.

Example 1

The "Accreditation Summary" describes the formal action taken by an accrediting organization as well as a description of strengths and areas of improvement.

ACCREDITATION SUMMARY
REVIEW AND ACTION

Institution or Program: _____

Accrediting Organization: _____

Date of Review: _____

What formal action was taken by the accrediting organization as a result of the review? _____

_____

_____

What institutional or programmatic strengths were identified? _____

_____

In what areas might the institution or program improve? _____

_____

_____

When will the next formal review take place? _____

Example 2

*The "Accreditation Management Letter" is a formal notice that a review has been completed,
that specific standards have been met, that areas of institutional or programmatic operation are to be addressed,
accompanied by an overview of the institution or program.*

ACCREDITATION MANAGEMENT LETTER

The __(accrediting organization)__ reviewed ___(institution or program)__ during __(time period)__. The purpose of the review is to assure that __(institution or program)__ meets the standards of the accrediting organization.

The review was conducted according to the established practices of U.S. accrediting organizations, based on the expectations of the U.S. Department of Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, the two authorities in the United States that set standards for the conduct of institutional or programmatic accreditation.

The __(institution or program)__ meets the standards of the __(accrediting organization)__as follows:

_____

_____

_____

The __(institution or program)__ is asked to address the following areas:

_____

_____

_____

Other comments and recommendations:

_____

_____

_____

Overview of Institution or Program

Mission: _____

Control and Governance: _____

Notable Programs: _____

Faculty: _____

Students: _____

Finances: _____

Facilities: _____

Significant Changes in the Past Academic Year: _____

_____

Example 3

The "Information Profile" describes key features of an institution or program as well as key performance indicators.

INSTITUTIONAL INFORMATION PROFILE*

Name of Institution

Accreditations

    Institutional Accreditor: _____

    Programmatic Accreditor(s): _____

Date of Next Institutional Review: _____

(If used electronically, can include: To learn more about the accredited status of the institution or a program, click on the accrediting organization's name.)

Institutional Context and Mission

Institutional Mission: _____

Institutional Goals: _____

Institutional Type: _____

Brief Description of Student Population: _____

Admissions Requirements: _____

Areas of Special Focus (e.g., liberal arts, vocational education): _____

Options for Institutional Indicators of Effectiveness with Undergraduates

(Indicators must be determined and defined by the institution. These are examples only.)

1. Graduates Entering Graduate School

   Year: _____   # of Graduates: _____   # Entering Graduate School: _____

2. Job Placement

   Year: _____   # of Graduates: _____   # Employed: _____

3. Annual Transfer Activity

   Year: _____   # of Transfers: _____   Transfer Rate: _____

4. Persistence and Average Time to Certificate or Degree

   1-Yr. Certificate: _____   2-Yr. Degree: _____   4-Yr. Degree: _____

5. Graduation

   Year: _____   # of Graduates: _____   Graduation Rate: _____

6. Completion of Educational Goal (other than certificate or degree – if data collected)

   # of Students Surveyed: _____   # Completing Goal: _____

7. Other (describe)

   Success in General Education: _____

   Success in Major Field: _____

   Success in Career Learning Outcomes: _____

   Success in Licensure/Certification Exams: _____

   Additional Indicators: _____

*May also be modified for use by programs.

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