

The WASC Accreditation Review Process

Shifting from Assessment to Learning

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November 1, 2002

Sonoma State University

CSU Assessment Coordinators

Friday, November 1, 2002

Sonoma State University

11:00 – 1:00 pm Meeting with Ralph Wolff, Executive Director, WASC

Wolff distributed sections of the WASC Handbook of Accreditation / 2001 Manual: a) Organizing Around Core Commitments, b) Standard 2, and c) Standard 4.

To become and remain accredited, institutions are expected to demonstrate that they are committed to developing and sustaining institutional capacity and educational effectiveness. The latter is embodied in standard 2 → *Achieving Educational Objectives through Core Functions: Teaching and Learning, Scholarship and Creative Activity, and Support for Student Learning* and standard 4 → *Creating an Organization Committed to Learning and Improvement*.

Presentation: “Shifting from Assessment to Learning.”

Wolff shared the traditional assessment model involving the identification of goals, development of assessment methods, collection of data, analysis of data, introduction of changes, identification of goals etc. He noted that the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools model underlying the AQIP (Academic Quality Improvement Project) efforts embraces this traditional approach: goals → action projects → annual updates → closing of the loop.

Wolff wants us to move away from that model. This model, he maintains, will not get us where we want to be, which is to demonstrate through assessment systems that we are “learning.” We need a model that is organized around the value system that underlies the WASC standards. The focus there is the quality of the educational/ learning experiences. We want to move from an “assessment focus” to a “culture of learning.” The ultimate goal is a learning-centered institution.

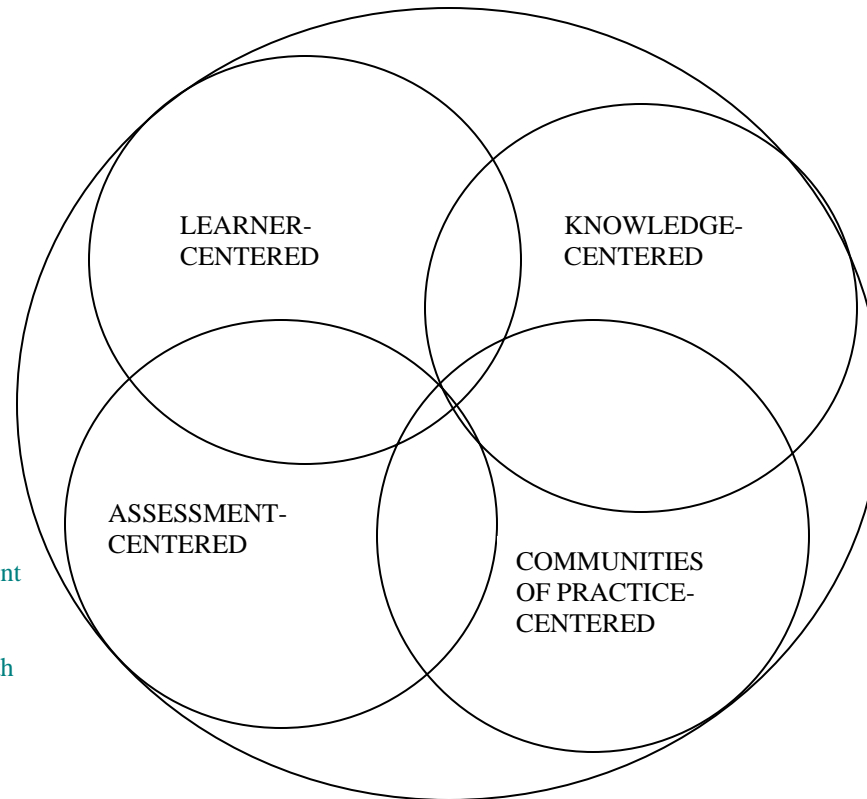
“What does quality mean in higher education?” Wolff suggests that quality in higher education has three dimensions: inputs, processes and results/outcomes.

Inputs. Looks at the resources, structures and policies. *Processes.* Includes course approval, program review, faculty development and assessment processes. *Results/ Outcomes.* Focuses on learning results, licensing results, test results and portfolio results. WASC is interested in all three dimensions of quality; not just outcomes/assessment. Indeed, the WASC review process is designed around these dimensions. The [Preparatory Review](#) addresses inputs and processes, while the [Educational Effectiveness Review](#) analyzes results and outcomes. He reported that initially 90 percent of the [Institutional Proposals](#) were returned because they did not address all three dimensions; the current rate is about 45 percent. There is too much emphasis on structures and resources; quality is to be demonstrated, not minimum compliance!

CULTURE OF LEARNING

- Demographics (age, experience)
- Preparation
- Embedded knowledge/ Misinformation

- Multidimensional
- Focus on Authentic Student Work/ Results
- Process for Engagement
- Commitment to Work with Evidence/Results



- Content
- Coverage
- Outcomes
- Pedagogy
- Learning design

- Student Groups (in and out of class and beyond)
- Work-related groups
- Community-centered Groups
- Family

WASC concludes that quality, like institutions, is multidimensional, complex, ambiguous and messy. WASC standards and underlying values emphasize the creation of a **culture of learning**. Such a culture of learning is learner-centered, knowledge-centered, assessment-centered, and community of practice-centered.

Learner-centered: demographics (age, experience), preparation, embedded knowledge, misinformation. Who are your learners? What are the conceptions or misconceptions with which they approach learning? It is hard to learn new information when it is contrary to your mental model; see “The Private Universe.” See also “How People Learn,” by Ann Brown, for research on learning. *Knowledge-centered*: content, coverage, outcomes, pedagogy, learning design. This is the arena in which the faculty operate. They understand their discipline and are in a position to define key outcomes. Faculty involvement is in the pedagogy and learning design aspects of educational / learning experiences; **not** in assessment! The ideal is learning-centered teams of faculty addressing the issue of how to approach learning at CSU, Chico. Administrators are to feed information to faculty through faculty development efforts. Faculty are more and more willing to accept such help (Recall, acceptance of assistance in the use of academic technology). *Assessment-centered*: multidimensional, focusing on authentic student work/results, processes for engagement, and commitment to work with evidence/results. Improved teaching will not necessarily lead to improved learning! (see Larry Spence’s article in *Change Magazine*). *Communities of practice-centered*: student groups, in-class and out-of-class and beyond, work-related groups, community centered groups and family. It should be recognized that learning takes place within a context. Recognize further the concepts of deep learning and transferable knowledge and the skill of applying knowledge. Tests do not measure the latter. See the work by Richard J. Light at Harvard on what faculty and administrators can do to improve students’ experiences. See also the use of learning teams at the University of Phoenix.

The four circles form a Venn diagram indicating interaction effects.

The Standards of Accreditation

The four Standards of Accreditation cover each of the dimensions of quality in higher education and the culture of learning. The criteria for review following each of the standards define the values that are deeply embedded in higher education. For example, 1.2 address the question of “who we are”, what educational programs we deliver. Criterion 2.2 suggests we have conversations about competencies for graduation. What is the structure of those conversations? Criterion 4.6 contains incredible values: commitment to processes of inquiry, evaluation and use of data. This is our mission. This is our work!

What's Out	What's In
Compliance	Accountability
Affirming and Asserting	Commitment and Engagement
More is More	Less is More
Doing More Assessment	Finding the “Good Catch” – Identifying Issues that need Attention
Protecting the Institution from Criticism	Presenting a Balanced View of the Institution
Presenting the “Ideal Institution.”	Using the WASC process to create a sustained learning-centered culture
Seeing Accreditation as a Once-a-decade Burden	Seeing the Interplay of Systems
	Learning as a Strategic Institutional Priority
	Evidence

Wolff wants to “bust the mind set” underlying the “What’s Out” practices. He compared it to students asking a professor what the minimum requirements are for passing a course. We want to shift away from compliance to accountability. Away from statements like “We have the best programs in... Away from the notion that 400 pages of reporting anecdotes is better than 100 pages of real evidence. Away from lists and lists of ad-hoc assessment activities to a culture of evidence based on integrated systems. Away from an unwillingness to discuss shortcomings to taking the stance of a learner and being open to dialogue and deep learning. Away from a posture of “We have no problems” to building commitment to continuous improvement. The end game is not; “Are you above or below the line.” Rather the end game is “Is learning built into the strategic thinking of the institution?” Demonstrate on the basis of data, evidence, and information that as an institution you are addressing this or that problem. Provide evidence of the intentional design of quality assurance. (See WASC, *Evidence Guide*, January 2002).

ABC University: A Case Study

Prior to the meeting, Wolff had distributed a case study entitled “Assessment or Learning Results? What do we want? What is enough?” The case was designed to have participants address the most common questions heard on campuses preparing for a WASC accreditation review: “What kind of assessment do we need to do for WASC?” and “How much is ‘enough’ for WASC?” Four groups were constituted to address each of four questions posed at the end of the case study. (See Appendix).

Question 1 Group Report

- Very much describes the campus experience
- Lack of integration of assessment activities
- Lack of resources for assessment and concern for budget crisis
- Some refocusing on learning rather than assessment
- At the level of the individual class there is some deeper interaction with students, for example service learning

Question 2 Group Report

- Overall answer: yes, no, as little as possible
- Difficulty of assessing learning results at an institutional level
- Need to align rewards with underlying values; incorporate into RTP process
- Too often process is the outcome in the academy
- Our mature governance systems are more effective at blocking/stopping any new initiatives than at leading/spearheading initiatives; leadership is needed

Question 3 Group Report

- Performance on licensure exams is a necessary but not sufficient measure of program quality

Question 4 Group Report

- The overall goal is to build a culture of learning which includes a culture of evidence
- President and Provost to require mission statements and outcomes of each program
- Leadership

Comments by Ralph Wolff

Question 1

- The case illustrates that each campus is doing something; it illustrates the half-empty, half-full dilemma
- Further illustrates the nurture versus punish dilemma for WASC
- WACS wishes for a focus that enables the campus to conduct a conversation about student learning based on some evidence. WASC looks for an authentic approach
- Standard 2 describes the faculty's role in the culture of learning; Standard 4 describes the role of the institution in promoting that culture of learning.

Question 2

- In 1984 assessment became the focus of activities. Activities = efforts were rewarded. Not unlike a student who expects a high grade because of the amount of time he/she spent on the assignment
- The early 1990's saw budget cuts and assessment lost
- In the 2000's various internal and external stakeholders are raising questions about accountability. They demand documented evidence of learning

Question 3

- Wolff not sure that accreditation can satisfy all government demands; government timeframes are typically shorter than ten years
- Wolff requested licensure data during a recent visit at a CSU campus; was told that the campus did have the data; when asked where?, the answer was: don't know
- Data needs to be available at the institutional level and be distributed to stimulate dialogue. If results are low in terms of professed values than the question to be addressed what are we going to do about it?

Question 4

- WASC asks for evidence (micro) and for a culture of learning (macro)
- WASC is not asking for perfection but for awareness of imperfection and openness to feedback on performance
- WASC asks for clarity about institutional strengths and explicit decisions to work on selected areas for improvement

WASC wants to challenge each institution into a dynamic relationship to the standards. WASC assumes the institution meets the minimum requirements. It looks for "learning" to become a strategic priority with demonstrated, continuous dialogue/debate on effectiveness indicators and their use to stimulate long-term sustainable campus distinctiveness.

APPENDIX

CASE STUDY

Assessment or learning results? What do we want? What is enough?

For discussion at CSU Assessment Directors Conference
November 1, 2002
Ralph Wolff, Executive Director
Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities
WASC

Background

The two most common questions heard on campuses preparing for a WASC accreditation review are “What kinds of assessment do we need to do for WASC?” and “How much is ‘enough’ for WASC?”

All institutions are, and have been, engaged in multiple forms of assessment. Most undertake some form of student or alumni surveys of satisfaction, many conduct short surveys at registration and others use the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Departments occasionally meet with employers or advisory groups. Nearly all institutions have some form of periodic program review. Others have formed assessment committees of the faculty senate, and some have created the position of assessment director. All of the public institutions, and many independents, assess entry-level student writing and math competency upon admission. All CSU campuses have an upper division and graduate program writing requirement. Within institutions with many departments, there will always be those that require a capstone course, or offer a senior thesis as an option. Innovative departments might even be experimenting with portfolios with students. Schools of engineering are conducting assessments and focusing on outcomes to meet the new standards of ABET (Accrediting Board for Engineering and Technology), which are centered on outcomes. Most health science programs have had learning outcomes and effectiveness indicators with licensing scores for years. The two teacher accrediting agencies (NCATE and TEAC), in very different ways, address outcomes. In addition, a number of institutions have used incentive funding for assessment projects to get assessment started at their institutions. Thus, there are many activities of assessment underway. Should we be satisfied with these many activities?

Case Study

The following case represents what we typically find at campuses, large and small:

ABC University presents a report to WASC outlining the numerous assessment activities it has underway. They include recent use of the NSSE, alumni surveys conducted by several departments and by the University recently, reporting very high satisfaction among those responding. Writing assessments upon admissions show that fewer students need remedial English, though math remediation remains at a constant 30 – 35%. Program review criteria were revised three years ago to include assessment of outcomes as one of the nine criteria. A new director of assessment has conducted two workshops in the past year for faculty, and a senate assessment committee has revived its regular meetings in the past year. It has surveyed all departments and found that those most deeply engaged in assessment have received seed money from the University assessment initiatives fund, and many departments are just getting underway. The first program reviews under the new criteria were conducted last semester, revealing that departments are really not sure how to address assessment as part of the program review process. The University asserts it has made major progress in assessment, and is beginning to build its culture of evidence, and just needs more time for its initiatives to come to fruition.

The team, looking at the assessment infrastructure and assessment results, finds that other than in engineering and education, only a few departments have begun to define learning outcomes for graduates, though nearly all have more general educational goals that are published in the catalog. There are no clear learning goals for the general education program, though the faculty assessment committee urged that they be developed. The NSSE was applied yet the results have not been discussed with the faculty in any depth or used for promoting deeper dialogue, though a written report on it was distributed to the faculty. The Director of Assessment reports there are emerging a small group of interested assistant deans and a few faculty from throughout the University interested in assessment, but not sustained leadership from the senior University administration. The two workshops were attended by 25-30 faculty, but there has been little follow up. Seed money from the Academic Vice President has been the source of most of the assessment initiatives on campus, and concerns over the need to reduce operating expenses has made many question whether this support will be sustained. While the first funded assessment activities yielded some interesting studies, they have not been followed up consistently with continuing funding from schools or departments, and the University wide program only funds new initiatives. The Director of Institutional Research recently undertook a major study of writing, which was used to support efforts for a writing across the curriculum initiative, which is being studied by the faculty. The faculty assessment committee has met irregularly for the past few years but is meeting more regularly, surveying departments and trying to learn for itself what assessment means and what works best.

After extensive checking with various units, the team learns that licensure or state test data is available in accounting, teaching, nursing, radiation therapy, and MFCC licensure. It is not clear if other results are known or knowable. Apparently there is no central

collection of this data or discussion of it outside of the school or department. Apparently, pass rates have fluctuated, especially on the CBEST, with students one of the past three years falling below the statewide average.

Advisory committees meet, but they are not regularly used for assessing student learning. Capstone courses are offered in a few departments, but there was no evidence that faculty collectively discuss them or see these courses as the basis for integrating and assessing student knowledge from the entire program.

Five program reviews have been conducted under the new criteria, and the reports from them suggest that departments are at very different stages of understanding of assessment and learning. Departmental reports for the program reviews contain some surveys, anecdotal reports of what graduates are doing, and in a very few cases, licensing results. There is little evidence that departments discuss these data or that they discuss student learning directly. The external reviewer report for program reviews remain largely oriented toward review of curriculum and resources, though there are recommendations for further assessment and the need for support from the central administration for assessment support (both resources and faculty development).

It also appears that there is little communication or coordination between the Assessment Director, the Director of Faculty Development and the Director of Institutional Research. Each reports to a different person in the University administration, though the Director of Assessment sits as a resource to the faculty assessment committee.

Questions for Discussion:

1. To what extent does this case study represent the circumstances of your institution?

2. Is there an appropriate distinction to be made between focusing on assessment and learning results? Does this institution have learning results? What should WASC expect of institutions?

3. At a recent USDE National Advisory Committee meeting, a specialized accrediting agency was excoriated for not doing anything when only 41% of graduates from one of its accredited programs passed a statewide examination, well below other institutions. To what extent are licensure results collected centrally, discussed and used as the basis for follow up action at your institution? Are licensing results sufficient to constitute effective evidence of learning results?

4. How might this institution organize itself to use the WASC accreditation review process to address build a learning-centered culture? Has the institution “done enough?”