Meeting with Ralph Wolff, Executive Director, WASC


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

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

- LEARNER-CENTERED
- KNOWLEDGE-CENTERED
- COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE-CENTERED
- ASSESSMENT-CENTERED

- 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
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!
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).