The accountability movement in the 1990s that followed the campus-based assessment movement of the 1980s produced the link between accreditation and student outcomes assessment. Two parallel continuums can be seen: one detailing the cycle of accreditation and the other student outcomes assessment. Now the two continuums have merged.

Two Continuums Collide: Accreditation and Assessment

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Calls for accountability and improvement reverberate with higher education’s internal and external constituencies today. The dialogue takes a variety of forms: cost and benefit, implementation of on-line learning, greater engagement with the communities the institution serves, program renewal, organizational transformation, and changing the accreditation process itself. Yet stakeholders have found common ground in the discussions and concerns focused on student learning outcomes. Increasingly they are becoming embedded in the accrediting process in a variety of ways. Regardless of whether the accreditation is programmatic, institutional, or virtual, colleges and universities are expected to show effective student learning outcomes. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the body that brings together the various forms of higher education accreditation in the United States, recognizes the obligation that institutions and the accrediting bodies have in addressing continuing public pressure for evidence of student learning outcomes (Eggers, 2000).

Accreditation and student learning outcomes assessment have been discussed extensively. This volume examines contemporary dimensions of how accreditation and student outcomes assessment come together. Running through the dimensions explored in this volume are two key questions:

- How should student learning outcomes be demonstrated in the accreditation process?
- How should assessment information be used to show improvement in programs, services, and student learning?
In our discussions with faculty serving on self-study teams and with college administrators overseeing accreditation processes, we find that many involved do not reflect on or fully understand what accreditation is, what ends it serves, and what its connection to the assessment of student learning may be. This chapter thus provides a backdrop for the discussions that follow.

**Accreditation Purposes and Processes**

Accreditation may be “the most fully developed institutionalization of the idea of accountability in higher education” (van Vught, 1994, p. 42). Within the context of the United States, accreditation has the following purposes:

- Fostering excellence through the development of criteria and guidelines for assessing effectiveness
- Encouraging improvement through ongoing self-study and planning
- Ensuring external constituents that a program has clearly defined goals and appropriate objectives, maintains faculty and facilities to attain them, demonstrates it is accomplishing them, and has the prospect for continuing to do so
- Provides advice and counsel to new and established programs in the accrediting process
- Ensures that programs receive sufficient support and are free from external influence that may impede their effectiveness and their freedom of inquiry

In the United States, regional bodies accredit institutions of higher education. These have separate and different standards and guidelines from program accrediting agencies (Ratcliff, 1998). Whereas a program review may serve as a basis for reallocation of resources toward a specific program, the institutional accreditation assists in achieving a balance of human and financial resources among the various programs.

Van Vught (1994) has presented a vision of a multidimensional system of accreditation wherein a number of accrediting organizations coexist, each using its own standards, guidelines, and review processes. These different accrediting bodies represent different constituencies external to the program and the university. Some serve to attest to institutional, program, or student quality to the government, while others may represent the needs and views of employers, students, or the specific field of study. Taken together, they provide multiple frames of reference in determining the quality of the institution, the program, and the student experience, forming a “market” in which institutions of higher education “compete” for students, research awards, and public recognition. In such a system, governments clearly have the right and responsibility to decide what constitutes an accrediting body. Governments may also wish to review accrediting procedures to ensure that there are adequate procedural safeguards and rigorous application of program standards. In such a vision, the accrediting body becomes a meta-level...
agent to the field of study, and the government makes procedural rather than substantive specification of the quality review process (Ratcliff, 1998).

What are the elements of a multidimensional system of evaluation that incorporates the evaluation of institutions, programs, and students? First, there needs to be a managing body that is legally empowered to recognize programs deemed legitimate and efficacious. This is the accrediting association, agency, or organization, which is most often empowered by the state and recognized by the federal government to determine quality for programs or institutions. Second, academics of the field need to have a substantive involvement in the development of standards and guidelines for conducting accreditation program reviews so that they may bear the credence desired with internal and external constituencies. Third, the process needs to provide for mechanisms by which a faculty of the program under review accepts the team of external peers assigned to the review process. If the team does not have the confidence of the faculty, it likely will not be persuasive in presenting its findings and recommendations. Fourth, the report of the site visitation team should be developed according to guidelines by which the process is approached as one of communication. That is, the utility of the evaluation of program strengths and weakness and of any recommendations or suggestions made by the site review team is diminished to the extent that it is not fully understood and deliberated by the program faculty and host institution. Fifth, the relationship between the program review process and the funding process needs to be clearly articulated. If funding decisions and the review are tied, then there need to be clear criteria to determine at what point a weak program will receive enhancements or be subject to discontinuance. Several writers in the field of quality assurance believe it best to separate funding and review processes rather than to link them tightly (Barak, 1982; George, 1982; van Vught and Westerheijden, 1993).

The accreditation process has at least five steps (Kells, 1992, p. 32):

1. The accrediting body sets standards, produces guidelines, and often provides training to peers in the program review process.
2. The program describes its goals and objectives, its faculty, facilities, and courses of study, and evaluates its strengths and weaknesses relative to its goals.
3. An evaluation team of peers identified by the accrediting body visits the program, using the guidelines and standards to examine faculty, facilities, students, and administrators. The team provides oral commentary followed by a written report to the accrediting body and to the institution housing the program under review.
4. The institution and its faculty respond to the report, providing supplemental evidence where questions remain, and indicating if and where they take exception with the findings of the report.
5. The accrediting body decides to grant, reaffirm, or deny accreditation to the program based on the self-study, the visiting team's findings, and the
institutional reply. Frequently accreditation is reaffirmed with the accrediting body making specific recommendations or suggestions for improvement during the forthcoming accrediting period.

**Program (or Specialized) Accreditation.** Program accreditation, a quality assurance process based on program review, is a means to verify the quality of academic programs and of institutions to external stakeholders. The accreditation process most often involves a formal review, with self-study of a specific academic program, evaluations by peers and external constituents, and a report to the agency, association, or organization that will certify program quality. The accrediting process necessarily encompasses the judgment of peers, as well as some determination of the extent to which the program is needed—through formal needs assessment—or valued—through graduate follow-up or employer surveys. An external body judges the quality of the program using clearly defined standards for the review and a process of self-study where the program's goals and their fulfillment are judged according to the accrediting body's standards. Accrediting bodies assemble a group of peers to review the self-study report, conduct site visits, and render judgments used in the accrediting process (Young and others, 1983). However, there are no established bases for determining who are the relevant external stakeholders, how they are selected, and what program information should guide their judgment about program effectiveness.

Accreditation needs to fulfill two dimensions of program quality. First, there should be some evidence that the programs have clear goals and courses of study to attain them. Second, the process should demonstrate that responsibilities associated with the goals are being carried out (Ewell, 1987). For a typical academic program, it means showing that the program provides courses of study appropriate to the disciplinary field, conducts research in the bodies of knowledge within its purview, and engages in service activities appropriate to the university and the field. It is also increasingly incumbent on the program to portray its impact on students, the discipline and the advance of knowledge within it, and the university and the communities it serves.

In program accreditation, peers interpret quality within the context of the program's own aims and activities. Central to specialized accreditation is the program review conducted as a self-study process. The underlying assumption of the self-study is that evaluators from outside the field of study cannot credibly or effectively examine the quality of a program in depth unless those carrying out the program have first studied and reached a judgment about its quality (Kells, 1992).

**Institutional (or Regional) Accreditation.** Regional accreditation can be defined as “a quality assurance process based on the voluntary association of schools and colleges” (Ratcliff, 1996). As defined by the CHEA (1996), certain defining characteristics are symbolic of the regional accreditation process. Regional accreditation:
1. Is a process in which a set of criteria is used to evaluate the effectiveness of an institution
2. Is voluntary and is not required by the state or federal government
3. Is a process that reflects the mission, history, and purpose of an institution
4. Is a process that presents evidence to external constituents that an institution meets or surpasses the criteria used in the evaluation
5. Does not normally use comparison in its methods; rather, it treats each institution as a unique entity
6. Is orchestrated by an external, voluntary commission comprised of representatives from the region
7. Is a process wherein the involvement of faculty and staff is regarded as fundamental to its legitimacy
8. Is conducted each time on the basis of a typical ten-year time period
9. Is a process that acknowledges “student learning and development” as a central point for use in the criteria

Regional associations accredit entire institutions (Young and others, 1983). These associations are responsible for a specific geographical region, of which there are six throughout the United States. The associations are Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, New England Association of Schools and Colleges, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Their purpose is to evaluate the quality of the institution as a whole. Normally they do not try to ascertain quality for individual academic programs within the institution; however, a significant weakness in an individual program can alter a regional accreditor’s evaluation (Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, 1983). Regional accreditation is typically reviewed every ten years (Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Higher Education, 1997). Each regional association may give specific focus or character to its accreditation process. For example, the Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting seeks to foster a “culture of evidence” among its member institutions through the self-study process (Wolff and Astin, 1990). In such an environment, an institution is open to receiving critical comments on its performance and can use data to respond to such comments. Regional accreditation provides recognition to institutions that meet a minimum standard of quality. Institutions then must strive to maintain this level of quality while seeking to improve human, physical, and financial resources; programs and services; and impact on students and other constituents. In order to maintain accreditation, an institution must respond to any criticism or suggestions given and work to improve the problems identified. Through this process, regional accreditation provides opportunities for institutional improvement and accountability.
The regional accreditation process has three phases: institution self-study, external review, and final decision by the regional commission on accreditation (or reaccreditation). The first phase consists of a probe of the institution or specific programs for which accreditation is sought by a team drawn from within the institution under review (Young and others, 1983). Self-study is conducted through review guidelines established by the accrediting body conducting the review. The accrediting body uses the self-study to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the institution in the areas of goals, student composition, faculty qualifications, program structure and content, support services to students, and administrative services, which includes the physical plant, organization, governance, financial areas, research, public services, and outcomes (Young and others, 1983). The self-study aids in the improvement of institutions by helping to establish the foundation for planning, the expansion of research and self-analysis, a chance to review policies, increasing openness among the different factions of university, and helping staff to develop (Young and others, 1983). Accreditors assert that a well-developed and thorough self-study can give an institution a tool for planning and self-analysis (Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Higher Education, 1997). The first phase of self-study can provide valuable information that can serve to promote change.

The next phase brings the accrediting body, chosen by the accrediting association, to campus to conduct an on-site review. The team members are typically from the academic community of similar institutions who serve as peers of the institution under review. They can include various stakeholders and quality assurance agencies (Ewell, 1998). The team’s final report is based on the review of the self-study presented by the institution, additional evidence gathered during their site visit, and their professional opinions. A constructive exit interview with institutional leadership and the self-study team allows the reviewers to provide appropriate advice to institutions on how they may improve their quality. The reviewers also make a recommendation to the association based on their findings. The external reviewers serve as a liaison between the institution and the accrediting body.

In the third phase, a committee of the accrediting association, whose members are most often professionals and faculty in the field, reviews the final report submitted by the external review team. It then makes a decision about whether accreditation (or reaccreditation) should be granted. The committee suggests specific areas in which the institution can improve its effectiveness and may pose a variety of institutional courses of action depending on the context and the issue addressed. The final decision made in this third phase completes the accreditation process.

Regional accreditation is a process intended to improve the quality of institutions. Society holds higher education accountable for providing evidence that students are receiving the maximum yield possible from their personal, financial, academic, and emotional investment. Higher education
institutions are considered “vendors” in an economy in which the perspective of the consumer is central (Braskamp and Braskamp, 1997). Society demands “product guarantees,” and accreditation provides the stamp of approval (Uehling, 1987). To receive this approval, institutions are subject to the three phases in the regional accreditation process. All phases demand adherence to quality and integrity (Uehling, 1987). They serve to identify potential problems within an institution or program and provide a statement of quality to external stakeholders.

Initiatives in Accreditation

The nature of accreditation as a voluntary process has changed over the years. A review of the recent evolution of regional accreditation reveals a transition from an initially voluntary nature to one that is increasingly mandatory.

Voluntary accreditation is a complex story of American institutions’ seeking to maintain quality and integrity in education. When institutional eligibility for receipt of federal funding was attached to regional accreditation, the voluntary nature of such accreditation became largely involuntary. Today regional accreditation remains a nongovernmental pursuit, but tension remains between the federal government and higher education, particularly following the failed introduction of State Postsecondary Review Entities in 1965. Colleges and universities and their constituent associations have joined to form several voluntary agencies to coordinate regional and programmatic accreditation. Since 1995, the most recent of these, the CHEA has sought to restore the voluntary nature of the accreditation process to its original purpose: promoting quality. Along with CHEA, regional accrediting bodies have started initiatives aimed at creating a national agenda.

The U.S. Department of Education proposed changes in June 1999 to the 1998 Higher Education Act that directly affected accrediting agencies. Among the several key issues, agencies are expected to review distance-education programs using the same standards they use for evaluating other academic programs (Healy, 1999). If an institution were developing off-campus locations, the accreditors would be required to visit only the first three locations, after which they could use their own discretion. The U.S. secretary of education would take on a new role of setting deadlines for the improvement of accrediting agencies that are experiencing problems. “Unannounced campus visits” were no longer expected as part of the review process. Accreditors would be required to do a periodic review of their own standards to comply with issues of reliability and validity better. All of these changes are in the spirit of making the process of accreditation more flexible and, to some extent, more collegial. For example, the Middles States Association is currently concluding such a review. The proposed regulations seek to return to the traditional role of accreditation: assessing quality and helping institutions become better places of learning (Healy, 1999).
In order for institutions to become better places of learning, each of the regional accrediting associations has undertaken a variety of projects and activities. Under the aegis of the CHEA, the six regional accrediting bodies have sought to foster similar goals and practices. Each has identified its purpose and defined initiatives that serve to improve the process of regional accreditation, as well as improve the connection between regional accreditation and student outcomes assessment. These initiatives range from surveys concerning accreditation standards to new frameworks dealing with outcomes assessment. Each of the initiatives is unique, but its underpinnings adhere to similar ideals of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) and collegiality among institutions and their accrediting bodies.

**Current Initiatives of the Regional Accrediting Bodies**

In July 1999, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCACS) embarked on the development of a new framework for accreditation. Its Academic Quality Improvement Project is based on helping higher-education institutions develop individual efforts at promoting systematic and continuous improvement. This new model maintains a focus on educational quality while preserving the ideas of institutional autonomy and distinctiveness. The project emphasizes the connection between assessment and accreditation standards. The NCACS is also involved in a project revising its mission and purpose.

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) conducted a survey of chief executive officers in 1998–1999 that sought to determine if the standards for accreditation were capable of assessing the effectiveness of their individual institutions. This initiative is aimed at involving institutions further in the standards that assess their educational quality. The NEASC has conducted an additional survey to learn more about its members’ procedures for increasing institutional effectiveness through student outcomes assessment.

The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) has organized current initiatives around the word *dialogue*, defined as communication among institutions. Since 1997, WASC has recognized and promoted the importance of sharing and communicating best practices in assessing student learning outcomes and other areas of significance with institutions and other regional accrediting bodies. WASC also revised its standards along three dimensions: reducing the number of standards to simplify the regional accreditation process, shifting the stance of accreditation from compliance to collaboration, and giving emphasis to educational effectiveness and student learning.

The other regional accrediting bodies—the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (NASC), and the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges
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(MSASC)—also have stimulated initiatives aimed at enhancing educational quality, promoting greater collaboration among accrediting bodies and institutions, and emphasizing the assessment of student learning outcomes. SACS modified their criteria to allow members confident of meeting basic SACS standards to augment the self-study process with “strategic visits,” which give external input and counsel to the institution on its chosen directions for future development of the institution. Institutions need to demonstrate educational quality continually in addition to doing so when they are granted accreditation. SACS is demonstrating the viability of continual visits to improve the process of accreditation, the institution's self-study, and the ability to transfer standards of quality to working examples of change.

In 1996, the MSA issued Framework for Outcomes Assessment, which emphasized that the goal of outcomes assessment is improvement of teaching and learning. The framework supports the idea that student outcomes assessment should attempt to determine the extent and quality of the learning students are receiving. This can be done through the nine steps in the framework assessment plan, which MSA has provided to its members. MSA also is concluding a review of its standards to sharpen the standards relative to the teaching and learning processes of institutions.

As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the six regional accrediting bodies, by adhering to a national agenda focused on improving the regional accreditation process, have created changes and programs and started initiatives that also affect the other regional accrediting bodies, specialized accrediting bodies, and institutions of higher education. These initiatives, along with a close adherence to collaboration among entities, will serve to improve the regional accreditation process by incorporating specific criteria relative to student outcomes assessment.

Student Outcomes Assessment

The shift toward more student-centered and learning-oriented accreditation standards that began in the mid-1980s links student outcomes assessment and accreditation.

In the mid-1980s, calls for reform in higher education were heeded by national reports. Reports such as Involvement in Learning (Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, 1984), Integrity in the College Curriculum (American Association of Colleges, 1985), and Time for Results (National Governors’ Association, 1986) stimulated a conversation between government representatives about student learning outcomes and the preparation of college graduates (Banta and Moffett, 1987). Individual institutional pioneers in implementing student learning outcomes as a priority included Alverno College in Milwaukee, WI, Truman State University in Kirksville, MO, and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (Banta, 1985; Palomba and Banta, 1999). Although these individual institutions implemented assessment programs in the 1980s, the majority of assessment programs began
as a result of statewide initiatives. Since the early 1980s, states increasingly have mandated the documentation of student outcomes. Formal state-level interaction began with Tennessee and Virginia. In 1979, Tennessee adopted a policy that granted funding based on standardized testing and student outcome assessment results. A different model in Virginia emerged in 1985, where institutions choose their own assessment procedures to reflect individual institutional missions (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). The institutional autonomy inherent in Virginia’s model is a more accepted model of state-mandated student outcomes assessment. In 1984, Florida began a statewide student assessment program, the College Level Academic Skills Test. These examples portray very different state initiatives. In fact, no two states have identical policies regarding accreditation or assessment (Paulson, 1990). Nevertheless, since 1985, state mandates and regional accreditation criteria have required most colleges and universities to implement procedures for student outcomes assessment (Borden and Bottrill, 1994).

In the fall of 1988, William Bennett, the U.S. secretary of education, suggested that accreditation organizations incorporate criteria for institutional student outcomes into their accrediting criteria (U.S. Department of Education, 1988). Over the next few years, regional and programmatic accrediting bodies issued new guidelines for accreditation that included student outcomes assessment. The role of statewide initiatives was crucial to stimulating the kind of attention being paid to student outcomes. Today these initiatives are reinforced by the standards of the regional accreditation agencies (El-Khawas, 1993).

Rossman and El-Khawas (1987) suggest three reasons that assessment exists in higher education institutions: political, economic, and educational. Erwin (1991) proposes a fourth: societal. Political reasons include the need of government officials to ascertain that funds allocated to higher education are being used effectively for programs and services. Assessment is seen as a tool to ensure that colleges and universities produce graduates who constitute a well-trained, competent, and competitive workforce—the economic reason. Educational reasons for assessment often come from within higher education and are reflected in the various national reports. In these reports, quality is most often the primary educational reason for implementing assessment. The societal reason refers to the broader public aspect of higher education. Society needs to understand what higher education is offering and how it is meeting the needs of the public. Such social concerns extend beyond the immediate needs of government officials for attestation that public funds are being used wisely and are larger than the internal academic discourse over the quality of programs and services.

The reasons given for why assessment exists are closely related to why accreditation exists. Federal and state governments are interested in both assessment and regional accreditation because they have a vested interest in knowing how funding is spent. Given increasingly tight budget restrictions,
the federal and state governments are forced to take a more active role in determining the outcomes and quality of institutions for the money invested. Economically, the issue is providing quality institutions that will produce quality learning to ensure a capable and proficient workforce. This translates into positive student outcomes, and these students become productive, contributing members to the economy. Educationally, the assessment of learning is important, and curricular reform may be necessary to produce a quality learning experience. Increasing tuition costs and parental concern provide reasons for the societal concerns relating to assessment (Erwin, 1991). The rationale for student outcomes assessment helps define its scope and the methods of implementation.

Assessing Student Learning Outcomes

Student learning outcomes are commonly defined as “any change or consequence occurring as a result of enrollment in a particular educational institution and involvement in its programs” (Ewell, 1983). Assessment is the process of defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and using information to increase students’ learning and development (Marchese, 1987). A framework is often useful in organizing and coordinating the process. One such framework offers five dimensions (Rowntree, 1987).

The first dimension of Rowntree’s framework addresses the question: Why assess? This involves deciding why assessment needs to be conducted and what can be expected as a result. There are many purposes of assessment. For example, assessment can be used in maintenance of standards, admissions, motivation of students, and feedback purposes for both teachers and students. The purposes of assessment may overlap and be reciprocal or can conflict. An example of where two purposes of assessment reciprocate can be found in selecting a group of candidates who score extremely high on standardized tests. An institution may be improving its standards because it will have a student body that entered at a higher level than in the past. An example where purposes may conflict is providing feedback to a student within the confines of a course. This may detrimentally affect that particular student’s motivation. The above purposes of assessment do not exhaust possible reasons for conducting assessment. Other reasons for conducting assessment include demonstrating external accountability, recruiting, fundraising, and improving instruction (Ewell, 1998). It is very important that an institution or program decide on and state the purpose of assessment beyond that of fulfilling accreditation requirements. Most purposes of assessment revolve around improving performance in some aspect or demonstrating effectiveness. Both involve some aspect of evaluation that is making judgments about the efforts of assessment (Ratcliff, 1996). These two concepts are also related to the differentiation between formative and summative assessment.
The second dimension of Rowntree's framework focuses on the question: What to assess? Given the exploration of the variety of student outcomes, it is difficult to determine which are most important. Four types of outcomes emerge: cognitive-psychological, cognitive-behavioral, affective-psychological, and affective-behavioral (Astin, 1973). The variety of possible student outcomes makes the process of assessment difficult to implement. Given individual institutions, different populations of students, varying state regulations, and a variety of student learning taxonomies, what to assess has become an individual institutional decision based on mission and institutional goals.

The third dimension addresses the question: How to assess? This dimension entails selection of a way to describe student learning from the many possible choices. The methods and measures selected should describe and differentiate excellent, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory performance. The criteria and measures selected often imply a method of data collection as well as integrating assessments from out-of-class experiences and in-class experiences, which can yield better judgments about what a particular student is learning than relying on one measure (Ewell, 1983). Also, it may be useful to incorporate both traditional and nontraditional assessment measures, such as interviews, self-judgment of one's own learning, and practical skills tests.

The fourth dimension answers the question: How to interpret? After obtaining results from the selected measures, the next step is exploring the results. Understanding this aspect of the framework is extremely important for each person in the assessment process. Data do not render their own significance. A low undergraduate performance on a writing assessment may mean that the institution needs to give more attention to improving student abilities in that area. Or it may mean that the writing assessment chosen does not adequately reflect the type of writing skills taught. Or it may mean that students are not being asked to write and improve their writing in the first courses they select in college. The results of the writing assessment alone will not illuminate where the problem lies. Further inquiry is required for improvement to occur. This further inquiry provides the interpreters of the results with a yardstick by which to measure the outcomes in the future as well.

The fifth dimension considers the question: How to respond? This involves determining to whom to communicate the findings and through what medium. Rowntree (1987) presumes two important things to consider in how to respond: providing the information to the public and providing information that is accurate and detailed. The greater the amount of information that an institution can provide, the more valid and reliable the assessment procedure will be. Also, by using honest information, the institution can consider its assessment process a means to change and improve its practices.
This framework provides only a beginning. It allows programs and institutions to organize their thoughts and give a sense of direction to a complicated process. It is also useful to determine what goes into assessing. Banta, Lund, Black, and Oblander (1996) stated: “A general theme running throughout appeals for reform is the need for institutions to focus their assessment efforts on what matters most” (p. 4). Institutions can use this framework as a way to determine where and how assessment efforts would matter most based on mission, goals, outcomes, and expectations.

**Putting Accreditation and Assessment Together: Some Conclusions**

Assessment and accreditation are both premised on the importance of quality assurance. Everyone in the educational enterprise has responsibility for maintaining and improving the quality of services and programs. Equally important are regular reviews of the validity and viability of the systems for examining quality. Colleges and universities, which seriously value and undertake quality assurances (including peer reviews), normally engage in a self-critical and reflective process. This process includes all members of the community as they strive to contribute to and enhance the educational enterprise.

The formal self-study and review process relies on certain key attributes in order to formulate strong plans. First, it should be “clear to all parties concerned (government, parliament, higher education institutions—staff and students) what may be expected from such a review process (Vroeijenstijn, 1995, p. 39). Clear expectations defining the purposes and the outcomes to be achieved through review processes must be articulated and shared with all participants. Major purposes of evaluating quality can include contributing to decisions on planning or funding, validating, granting professional recognition to programs, accrediting, or making awards of degrees (Frazer, 1991). Reviews also need to define whether the focus is on teaching, student learning, or research.

Second, the review process should be directed toward either a summative or formative evaluation. Attempts to conduct both simultaneously may lead to less successful efforts. Formative evaluations are most useful in providing directions for programmatic improvements, which faculty and administrators most highly value.

Third, college and universities should have direct responsibility and active engagement in the review processes. Taking self-study and student assessments seriously as means to accountability and improvement helps faculty and administrators to gain commitment and ownership for both the process and the outcomes. The results are more likely to be viewed as useful and credible by faculty and will have more potential to lead to targeted enhancements. Fourth, these review processes are not ends in themselves
but represent ongoing processes that should be constantly refined or adapted to changing conditions within and external to the institutional environment. Regular, systematic, and cyclical reviews help institutions to monitor the strengths of their system continuously, with a particular focus on the types of improvements made after each evaluation cycle.

There is a growing consensus that effective quality assurance methods such as accreditation and program review will depend on the history, traditions, and culture of the country, state, or territory concerned. Whatever these may be for a particular program or institution, an external element to the processes selected is necessary to attain a clear, objective, and credible outcome (Bethel, 1991). Increasingly, faculty and administrators value the views emanating from peer evaluations in crafting the course of reform.

Most countries recognize that the need to sustain or develop their economies requires an increasing population of skilled individuals to achieve stability and meet competitive challenges in the world. Escalating costs of higher education and increased student access have led to significant growth and complexity in U.S. colleges and universities. External constituencies, including employers and the public, will continue to want evidence that higher education is meeting the needs of the workplace and society in general.

The formal review processes discussed here outline the important roles that accreditation and program review have in aiding institutions to improve and inform their constituents. University alumni will assume expanded roles as citizens who must address complex issues in society and will assume leadership positions in industry and commerce. Also, sustaining basic and applied research is necessary if the skills needed by society and the global economy are to be reached.

The introduction of student outcomes assessment in the early 1980s with Tennessee and Virginia demonstrated a movement in higher education largely characterized by increased state intervention. Statewide mandates often brought about the need for student outcomes assessment plans. From the early 1980s through 1988, states increasingly became involved in mandating student outcomes assessment, and institutions felt an infringement on institutional autonomy. Beginning with the urgings of U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett in 1988, accrediting bodies began to incorporate student outcomes assessment into the accreditation criteria.

The accountability movement in the 1990s followed the campus-based assessment movement of the 1980s (Gaither, 1995). Accountability put accreditation and assessment on a collision course. Two parallel continuums can be seen: one detailing the cycle of accreditation and the other student outcomes assessment. Now the two continuums have merged. The accountability movement is still an active issue in higher education. The chapters that follow illustrate how these can be positive forces in public accountability, the impetus for internal change, the extension of distance learning, and accreditation processes.
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