

Summary of Commission Goals for the 2012-20 Handbook Redesign Process

As part of the process established for the review and redesign for the WASC process and the creation of a new Handbook of Accreditation for 2012-20, six concept papers were prepared suggesting new areas for WASC to address. The authors were invited to identify areas of needed change for accreditation over the next decade. The papers are found at <http://www.wascsenior.org/handbook/conceptpapers>.

To oversee the Handbook redesign process, the Commission appointed a Steering committee, representing the wide variety of institutions WASC accredits and including, for the first time, an undergraduate and graduate student. [A membership list is available at <http://www.wascsenior.org/handbook/committeeroster>]. The Steering Committee held its first meeting November 2-3, 2010, and reviewed these papers and approved an overall design for the Handbook revision process. It found that there were many valuable recommendations for WASC to consider that would respond to increasing concerns about accountability, transparency and quality assurance.

The Steering Committee forwarded its recommendations to the Commission, which met November 3-5, 2010, including those recommendations for changes in the WASC process that seemed the most promising for further exploration. The Commission also reviewed these papers and the recommendations of the Handbook Revision Steering Committee, leading to the identification of the following goals to guide the Handbook redesign process:

1. Developing a clear and public accountability and quality assurance role that moves well beyond minimum standards. Such a framework would be part of a comprehensive approach to assure the public and the higher education community that rigorous standards of quality are being applied, and externally validated, in key areas. This role would include:
 - Using external data comparisons and taking into account each institution's context, the Commission would work collaboratively with each institution to establish a target graduation rate. The institution would be expected to meet or exceed that graduation rate, including appropriate rates for disaggregated groups.
 - Expecting that several outcomes already specified in CFR 2.2 for the baccalaureate degree are externally validated as achieving levels of learning appropriate for the degree awarded. Such areas might include written communication, critical thinking, information literacy and other common and core foundations for the baccalaureate degree across all institutions accredited by WASC.
 - Exploring the role of a degree profile or framework which identifies common expectations for the associate, baccalaureate and master's degrees. These expectations would be considered as guides for institutions and piloted by institutions to assess their value and applicability.

2. Increasing the transparency of the accrediting process by considering providing greater public information about the outcomes of institutional evaluations by the Commission. This could include making public institutional evaluations under the Framework for Evaluating Educational Effectiveness, highlighting institutional performance in key areas under the Standards of Accreditation, or providing public access to commission action letters or parts of institutions' annual reports.
3. Consider identification of levels of accreditation to move beyond a single binary action of "accredited" or not. This may be addressed by increased transparency, reflected above, or developing higher levels of accreditation to acknowledge exemplary practices.
4. Bridging senior-level institutions more effectively with community colleges to support effective transfer and support for community college students, and to work collaboratively with the WASC Commission on Community and Junior Colleges on common general education requirements.
5. Shortening and focusing the institutional review process in ways to a) complete the process in 3 years (from the current 5-6); b) rely more heavily on off-site reviews of data; c) focus site visits on key areas identified prior to the visit, and d) focus on key issues of quality improvement and innovation for the Educational Effectiveness Review once public accountability has been established.
6. Clarifying what can be taken off the table in the review process so that institutions need not repeatedly establish compliance, but rather can focus energies on activities leading to significant improvement or reform.
7. Explore alternative models and new approaches to education and credentialing, and how the commission would position itself to work with those.
8. Enhancing the public advocacy role for WASC to provide leadership within the region to discuss emerging areas of innovation, quality improvement, and needed learning outcomes for the 21st Century including going beyond career and workforce preparation. Beyond the region, WASC would highlight exemplary institutional practices, trends emerging within the region, and issues relating to quality assurance and public accountability.

These goals will now be taken up by Task Forces organized around these topics. The work of the Task Forces will be presented at the CEO, CAO and ALO meetings at the annual Academic Resource Conference in San Francisco, April 6-8, 2011. In addition, prior to the ARC, webinars will be offered to discuss the Handbook revision process, these goals, and preliminary findings and recommendations.

Approved by the Executive Committee of the Commission. December 14, 2010