

Assessment for Reaccreditation

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Higher educational institutions across the nation face many challenges, one of which is accreditation. Accreditation provides both an assurance of quality and an accountability instrument for higher education institutions (Garfolo & Hullier, 2015). The strategic plan that is developed to achieve accreditation involves embedding elements of, and pursuit towards innovation, change, and quality education deeply into the accreditation review process (Sandmann, Williams, & Abrams, 2009). The accreditation process can be a facilitator to lend legitimacy to institutional goals and shifts in strategies towards change, innovation, and quality education (Sandmann, Williams, & Abrams, 2009). One of the major factors of consideration for any higher education institution in the accreditation process is student surveys. According to the Higher Learning Commission, these surveys are intended to give students the opportunity to be involved in the evaluation process, and help identify issues from the student perspective (Higher Learning Commission, 2014).

Northern Arizona University has created a comprehensive course evaluation for each student enrolled in each course. This evaluation is considered an assessment tool, one of which used for accreditation. By offering each student a voice in how course materials are introduced, NAU allows the student to become a key stakeholder. In addition to the statements presented on the evaluation sheet, the following statements could possibly be up for consideration:

- I am satisfied that this course helped me with the progress toward completing my degree
- My instructor provides adequate resources for course materials and activities
- My instructor encourages me to strive for academic success

- I feel the methods in which the instructor presented the course material are up to date in terms of technology

Alexander (2013) contests that innovation begins in the classroom at over 6000 universities and community colleges in the United States. Additionally, this innovation is what will help lead our students and country into the global economy of the 21st century (Alexander, 2013). Having industry ready graduates further emphasizes the need for institutional autonomy and competition of school choice in higher education. Institutional autonomy so that schools can specialize in professional training and education to produce the best possible work ready students when they graduate. Competition and school choice enables students to choose their career path based on school program offerings at a reasonable price. Helping connect students to a complete higher education experience to in demand training and education is what will make them industry ready when they graduate. Students need to complete degrees with earnings that will outpace the student loan debt (Alexander, 2013).

Keeping all this in mind and having full knowledge of the importance of student surveys, the question still begs, to what degree are course evaluations and final grades sufficient when measuring student learning outcomes? One theory offered by the Association of American Colleges & Universities suggests that student course evaluations might point to the “popularity” of an instructor instead of superior teaching capabilities (Education, L., 2014). A well-liked instructor on campus could possibly fill the seats in their classroom, but when it comes to student evaluations, there is not clear defining point that only reflects what and how well the student has learned during the course of the semester. In addition, grades might also show an inaccurate depiction of a student learning experience in the classroom. According to an article written by

Chapell for the American Psychological Association, there is a direct correlation between test anxiety and grade point average. Students who suffer from a high-test-anxiety average a B, where students with low-test-anxiety average a B+ to an A. When testing was taken out of the equation, the high-test-anxiety group with a much higher GPA (Chapell, 2005). Course assignments and class participation should perhaps be a greater factor in the overall GPA or final grade of a student. Studies have found that when students are relaxed in the classroom setting those students are 50% more likely to retain the material presented to them. Classroom climate and methods of presenting course material prove to have the most influence on student learning (Wang, 2004). In an article written by Schuh and Gansemer-Topf titled *The Role of Student Affairs in Student Learning Assessment*, the authors explain many institutions miss the importance of the student's out of class activities/experiences.

For this reason it is incumbent on student affairs to systematically assess the contributions to student learning outcomes of students' out-of-class experiences and of student affairs to these outcomes. Student affairs professionals should also be involved in the discussions that lead to the design and implementation of campus-wide efforts to assess student learning and personal development and to use the results to improve the quality of the student experience (Schuh, J. H., & Gansemer-Topf, A.M., p 6, 2010).

Higher education institutions have made great strides in the field of assessments and allowing students to be involved in the process, however when an institution is focusing on accreditation or the reaccreditation there are other things to consider. Funding is the most commanding issue that higher education institutions face. The Department of Education administers 180 billion dollars each year to higher education (Alexander, 2013). This number is

gaining the attention of many lawmakers and policy makers. Consider the attention of the educational leaders that Governor Ducey caught when he announced the state of Arizona, would decrease funding to state schools by 110 million dollars (Hunnicut, 2015). Ultimately, times of economic tightening require institutional leaders focus on doing the little things right. Sometimes that may result in stakeholders doing more with less while maintaining a focus on the execution of the plan that leads to viability of the institution through maintaining its' accreditation. Cost is also a consideration of the student when deciding where to study. Higher educational leaders must keep their institution viable, while still competitive in regards to tuition rates. Being nationally accredited goes a long way when determining the cost of tuition and can ultimately substantiate the rise in tuition costs. When conducting student surveys, it might be pertinent to address tuition costs with students. Students that felt they are getting a good value education would perhaps be more apt to return a satisfied evaluation.

Core component 4.B. addresses the processes and methodologies of an institution's good practices that reflect student learning. The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment reports that university assessments are becoming powered by accreditation and the institution's commitment to improve rather than outside government pressure (Kuh, G. & Ikenberry, S., 2009). In that same report, the authors explain that faculty engagement is a key component in student learning with 66% of institutions reporting the fact that more faculty involvement would greatly help with the assessment process (Kuh, G. & Ikenberry, S., 2009).

One additional idea for NAU to consider would be to focus more on a campus-wide culture of diversity and inclusion. Although it is important for the institution to have set methods

of inclusion for the student body, it is just as important for the faculty and staff to encounter the same practices. Beckie Supiano and author for The Chronicle of Higher Education wrote an article about the Racial Disparities in Higher Education. In the article, Supiano outlines that nearly 80 percent of full-time faculty members in colleges and universities across the country are white males and females, while only 6 percent are African Americans (Supiano, 2015). Higher education leaders must take more heed to hiring qualified African Americans as instructors on their campuses. By doing so, the minority students might possibly relate to these faculty members in such a manner as to help them feel included in campus activities. A sense of belonging helps foster student learning. As higher education intuitions strive for diversity on campuses, they themselves can help represent this trait through their employees.

Educational leaders must demonstrate the ability to handle today's problems while planning for the future reaccreditation (Faber & Ma, 2015). Proper planning prevents poor performance is a statement that has been echoed by many leaders throughout the history of organizations executing a plan. This statement is truly one for educational leaders to consider in daily execution of tasks, assessment of outcomes, and planning for the future of the institution. Having a process in place that addresses issues that maintain the focus on future viability is critical to the longevity of the institution. Institutions self-assessment and continual renewal for intuitions outside of the accreditations process help keep the institutions at the peak of the change wave rather than being consumed by the wave of change.

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