Case Studies for Commission Retreat:

“What will it take for an institution to fulfill the Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness?”
November 7, 2002

Context:

Effective July 1, 2002, all accreditation reviews are being conducted under the 2001 Handbook, and we are moving into our first round of educational effectiveness reviews. What will be Commission expectations of institutions? Discussions of the new Standards started in 1998 and the final version of the Standards have been available since November 2000. As the Commission takes action in February and June 2002, it will be defining its level of expectations of educational effectiveness. How and where the Commission places its emphasis in addressing educational effectiveness will send a signal to institutions how seriously to tackle issues related to student learning and educational effectiveness, and what types of activities, support and commitment should be given.

In light of the need for further Commission engagement with this issue, and the need for staff to be able to provide institutions and teams with guidance from these discussions, the Retreat Planning Committee determined that the critical question before the Commission now is **“What will it take for an institution to fulfill the Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness?”**

Retreat sub-group discussion:

To pursue this discussion, we have developed three case studies. Commissioners are assigned to one of three sub-groups, each responsible for engaging the issues involved with one of the cases. Then, we will have a plenary discussion of each group’s findings.

Case materials:

These case studies are based on current practices found at institutions, from issues raised by CHEA in its workshops for Commissioners, from challenges to accreditation made by members of Congress at a recent hearing on the quality and effectiveness of accreditation, and from questions raised by the National Advisory Committee and the staff at USDE at its most recent meeting. Material also has been taken from an earlier memo I prepared which was given to the Commission last February in response to Peter Ewell’s paper on defining each Commission’s approach to student learning. The paper was distributed but not discussed.

Standards 2 and 4, and the section on the Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness from the Handbook are also included. Please review these materials prior to the
Commission meeting, since you will be asked to cite specific references to support your conclusions.

To facilitate the larger Commission discussion, we urge that you read all three case studies prior to the Commission meeting.

**Commissioner Assignments**

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**Questions for each group to address in dealing with your case study:**

There are questions included within each of the cases. Some general questions to consider for all of the cases include:

1. Does the institutional situation described in the case study meet Commission expectations under the Standards of Accreditation?

2. Which of the Commission Standards, Criteria for Review and Guidelines are relevant to the issues presented? (Be specific)

3. What type of follow up – either by the staff prior to the visit, during the review or by the Commission in its action letter – would be warranted?
Case Study #1 – Learning Outcomes

Background

Calls are received by different staff members from the Accrediting Liaison Officers of three different institutions accredited by the Commission. The first call is from one of the University of California campuses. (Berkeley and Davis are being reviewed this year; UC Santa Cruz is coming up.) The ALO inquires whether learning outcomes are a real requirement, since after all, there are none specified at the University or program level, except for those fields where professional or specialized accreditation has required them – e.g., engineering, teacher education, and computer science. Some course syllabi may have learning outcomes as distinguished from course objectives, but this is not a University requirement or area of emphasis. The dean and faculty at the School of Arts and Sciences (where 65% of the undergraduate students are located) do not believe any value would be served by developing learning outcomes since the programs already are of strong quality – graduates are satisfied (using alumni survey results), many are admitted to the best graduate schools where they seem to do well, a significant number are employed within a year of graduation, and anecdotally faculty receive positive comments about graduates. The ALO questions whether learning outcomes are not just some “mechanical requirement of WASC” that would be meaningless in the context of the research university. “We have great students, a great faculty, and the demand for admissions is testimony to the success of our programs.” The institution prefers to focus on such issues as how to improve writing across the curriculum, ways to improve students’ technological literacy, and the effectiveness of a special program to have senior faculty teach freshmen and sophomores in courses of under 20 students.

A second call comes from a CSU campus to a different staff member, who indicates that three years ago the university revised its mission statement to include such new terms as “creating a community of learners” and “preparing graduates for effective professional careers and responsible citizenship in the 21st century” in its new statement. A strategic planning process is underway to prepare the institution for the significant growth that is continuing under Tidal Wave II. Enrollment is up 5% this year and many programs are impacted. The ALO indicates that under the CSU Cornerstones Program, the institution is already under a mandate to produce educational outcomes for all programs and an accountability report is filed annually to the CSU Chancellor and Board of Trustees, tracking such items as retention and graduation rates, and the percentage of students in need of remedial work upon enrollment and who complete their remedial support within one year. Already, about one-third of the departments have developed educational objectives that are currently being reviewed by a faculty committee. The general education program does not have specific outcomes but a committee has been formed to determine whether it is possible or profitable to specify learning outcomes for general education. Program review criteria were revised three years ago to include, among the 9 other criteria, evidence that the program’s learning objectives are being achieved. The
ALO asks, what do you think WASC wants to fulfill the expectations for the Educational Effectiveness review? Can’t we just show you what we are already doing?

A third call comes to yet another staff member from a 1000-student church-related college that is working to use the Kings College (Pa.) model of “course embedded” learning objectives and assessment. The College started its major curricular redesign after reading through the WASC Standards and Evidence Guide, making a major commitment to align its redesign efforts with the new WASC approach. The College developed a new mission statement emphasizing its purpose to support student learning and diversity, and is now moving to create learning outcomes for each department, aligned with the new mission statement. After that, it will move to establish learning outcomes for each course through a syllabus review process. All students are required to take some time of graduation assessment, either a nationally normed test or a senior project, that can serve as a basis for summative and integrated review of the students’ baccalaureate learning. The ALO inquires whether WASC will require that all of this be completed by the time of the next visit – which is in three years.

Finally, there is a comment from a commissioner from ACCJC, who at a meeting with members of the Senior College Commission this summer, asked, “After we just adopted new Standards, based heavily on your new Standards, and requiring learning outcomes at the course, program and institutional level for all community colleges, we wonder if the Senior College Commission is going to be serious about learning outcomes with your elite senior institutions?”

1. Must all institutions have learning outcomes and if so, at what level – institutional, program, degree, and/or course?

2. Assuming that some types of learning outcomes have been established by the institution, what level of review should be expected of the stated outcomes? Should the institution be given discretion to develop its own outcomes and our role to verify their existence but not assess their quality, appropriateness and level? Or should teams and the Commission comment on the quality and appropriateness of learning outcomes? At course, program and institutional levels? Or are some areas off limits, such as course syllabi?

3. How should the Commission address whether our review of student academic achievement (which USDE regulations require us to do) results in institutions demonstrating that “all degrees – undergraduate and graduate—awarded by the institution are clearly defined in terms of … levels of student achievement necessary for graduation that represent more than simply an accumulation of courses and credits.” (CFR 2.2) What should we look for? What evidence should we examine? What if institutions continue to define degrees as 122 or 124 units and cannot establish that degree programs consistently lead to a stated set of educational or learning outcomes?
4. To what extent would the presentation by an institution of the following artifacts serve to fulfill the Commission’s expectations for educational effectiveness:

   a. Published guidelines on program review?

   b. Results of licensure examination results from two departments?

   c. Results of a recent student satisfaction survey of currently enrolled students?
Case Study #2 – Educational Results

In the UC Berkeley Preparatory Review team conference call, David Ward (President of ACE), the chair of the team, talked about the distinction between “educational results” and “learning results.” Educational results he characterized as data on retention and persistence, graduation rates, numbers going on to graduate and professional schools, etc. Learning results he defined as actual data presented by the institution on the level of learning and achievement of students. Institutions and teams are seeking guidance under our Standards and Criteria for Review whether we are going to require both from all institutions and within each category, where we will place emphasis. Some examples of issues to address:

2.A. Retention and Graduation Data

One key element in the national and regional policy discussion about higher education is the fact that far too many students who enter our colleges and universities do not complete their programs or degrees, and for those that do, there are far too many institutional barriers to enabling students to complete within four or five years. Rarely, however, do these issues show up in team reports. Rarely is data presented or discussed of retention, graduation, or special challenges. Never has a team report commented on poor graduation rates of athletes at any of our institutions or of any other groups. That our reports do not comment on these issues does not mean they are not important issues relating to educational effectiveness.

What role, if any, should these issues play in our reviews? Embedded deep in the data tables institutions provide us are some data on graduation, but unless an institution makes retention and graduation an issue, should we let such issues go? At one institution, less than a third of transfer students from community colleges graduated in three years. At another, deep analysis of data showed that only 2.9% of native freshmen graduated in four years. At yet another institution, based on publicly reported NCAA figures, only 15% of male basketball players graduated after 6 years, whereas the rate was over 80% for all students. Graduation rates of minority students, if reported, are also typically provided as an aggregate figure. Data is rarely disaggregated to show the range of disciplinary areas or comparisons of different types. Often this data is available to the institution but not presented to the evaluation team and the team, in its very limited time on site, focuses mainly on those leading issues developed by the institution.

1. Should all teams make a point of reviewing retention and graduation data of institutions as a common part of our review process? Should the Commission ask for more analysis of these issues, asking the institution to identify student groups or areas where its retention and graduation seems to work best and least? Given our commitment to diversity, should special attention be paid to disaggregating data to ensure that all groups graduate at effective levels, comparing rates not just by ethnic groups but also of athletes, across disciplines, etc.? Does the Commission want to see some treatment of these issues in team reports to show that the team has done some review of these issues?
2.B. Assessment or learning results? What do we want? What is enough?

The most common question we hear is “what kinds of assessment do we need to do?” Followed with, “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. [The CSU has 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?

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 activities 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.

2. Is there an appropriate distinction to be made between assessment and learning results? Does this institution have learning results? What should we expect?

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. Should WASC teams review licensure data? What should we do with such data, especially if pass rates are below the state or national average? What should we expect the institution to do with such data?

4. Has this institution made its case that it meets the Standards of Accreditation, even at the infrastructure and organizational levels? Has it “done enough”? What if these were the findings after the Educational Effectiveness Review? How should the Commission respond?

2.C. Meeting With Students/Sitting in Classes/Reviewing Student Work

One of the most common questions raised about the accrediting process, and raised in the recent Congressional hearing on the effectiveness of accreditation, were the questions whether accrediting teams meet with students to discuss the quality of their learning, whether teams sit in classes, and whether teams review actual student work to ensure that appropriate levels of learning is occurring.

5. What should be the goal of team meetings with students? How can teams use information gleaned from discussions with students without over-relying on anecdotal information? Can student comments be used to address learning?

6. Should team members sit in classes? There has been a debate for some time. One argument is that the small number of classes and limited period that team members observe make any classroom observations invalid. The counter-argument is that classrooms provide an opportunity to meet with students in a different context and to observe levels of preparedness. In one experimental visit (CSU Fullerton) team members met with students during a portion of senior-level classes, with good effect.

7. To what extent should team members review actual student work to assess the quality of that work and the level of assessment given to it by the institution’s faculty? If student work is not assessed, how can the institution’s standards of
quality be reviewed? Do team members need to be content experts in the field before doing so?
Case Study #3 – Institutional Commitment to Educational Effectiveness and Student Learning Improvement

Standard 4 is titled “Creating an Organization Committed to Learning and Improvement.” The 2001 Handbook calls for a core institutional commitment to educational effectiveness. Yet we know that institutional leadership, at all levels, is focused on many priorities of which assessing and improving student learning is only one. Indeed, to most administrators teaching and learning is the faculty’s responsibility. How can teams and the Commission evaluate and make judgments whether institutional commitment to improve student learning is authentic and effective? Administrative performance is more frequently evaluated on management skill, resource improvement, and program development than on issues related to student learning. We frequently hear from all levels of the institution that, without the clear and sustained attention of the president and senior administrators, no change occurs on campus, and all too often, new initiatives sputter without sustained attention and support. With public institutions facing budget cuts and independent institutions reeling from significant increases in the costs of all forms of insurance, new resources for assessment and learning improvement may be hard to find. Casey Green’s annual survey on technology indicates that for the second year in a row, institutional investment in technology is dropping. Teams often find that, even at teaching institutions, more funds are invested in supporting faculty scholarship and research than in assessment and in creating a learning-centered environment. Faculty commitment to learning about student learning and using assessment to improve learning is highly erratic amid the many competing demands placed on faculty. They typically focus on teaching load as a factor of institutional quality (the less the teaching load the better the institution).

In this environment, it will be a challenge to maximize the focus created by Standard 4 (and Standard 2) to address the three emphases of the Standard: 1) commitment of leadership at all levels to student learning and its improvement; 2) effective planning that incorporates the improvement of student learning as a strategic priority; and 3) building a “learning organization” where the culture of inquiry and culture of evidence join together in systematic collection, analysis and use of data to improve the institution.

3.A. Institutional Commitment to Student Learning

The following case describes the findings of many teams over the past several years, including early reviews of institutions under the 2001 Handbook.

Capable University (CU) has recently revised its mission statement to include such phrases as “CU is a student-centered university committed to creating a learning environment that supports student intellectual and emotional growth and development.” In its promotional literature it states “We put students and their learning first at CU.”
At the same time, the University just announced a major capital campaign, which is to take over 50% of the President’s time to fulfill. The Board has recently evaluated the President quite positively, based on her success in “improving the financial stability of the University, moving the University’s *U.S. News* rankings up to the top ten regional universities, and bringing 45 new faculty to the institution over the past five years.” The report of the University to WASC cites the significant improvement of grants and research contracts awarded to the institution, the improved endowment even with the decline in the stock market, and the fact that the School of Business has recently received professional accreditation.

In discussing the president’s role in Educational Effectiveness, the President indicates her support for assessment, indicating she encouraged the Academic Vice President to create the Assessment Initiative Fund two years ago. The President also served on a national advisory board to a national report on the improvement of undergraduate education, which called for more attention to assessment of student learning. But she indicates that academic matters are really delegated to the faculty and Academic Vice President, and that the latter has “done a really good job” improving the academic quality of the University. The President discussed assessment in her fall convocation speech before the WASC visit, commenting briefly about the new WASC emphasis on educational effectiveness. She freely admits that her time is devoted to the capital campaign, working with the Board, and external relations.

The Academic Vice President, in turn, is prepared to show that the Assessment Initiatives Fund was started two years ago to create a competitive environment for assessment projects, and that some excellent projects have been funded, most with a 2-year level of support, and some even for 3 years. In the past two years, over 30 grants have been distributed, totaling over $250,000 annually. He does acknowledge that if further budget cuts are needed, he is not sure how to sustain this fund.

Most matters relating to assessment have been delegated to the Associate Academic Vice President, who is also the WASC ALO, to the faculty assessment committee, and to school deans. When asked what have been the most significant improvements to quality at the institution in the past five years, the AVP describes the revisions to the general education program design after three year of study, the hiring of exceptionally strong new faculty from all over the United States, improved faculty diversity, the major increase in faculty research grant generation and publication productivity, and the significant improvements in the technology infrastructure throughout the University that has led to rewiring the campus and the creation of 6 smart classrooms.

The school and college deans meet with the team and indicate that, under a mandate from the AVP, they have all started to “take steps to assess student learning.” They acknowledge a wide range of views on the value of assessment, indicating that the most important values of a college education won’t be known for years. Several deans report their attention has been directed to such overwhelming priorities as diversifying their faculty while improving it, generating funds for technology and, in the case of two schools, funding new classroom buildings. Several schools have delegated assessment to
associate deans, while other schools have asked each department chair to undertake some assessment activities. The deans are aware that the program review criteria have recently been changed to include departmental assessment of learning objectives, but they admit that leadership for that came from the central administration and that they are not well connected to the program review process.

The faculty senate executive committee identifies its commitment to assessment and student learning through a policy statement adopted in 1999 calling for faculty control of assessment and assurance that assessment results would not be used for individual personnel evaluation. The Senate revived last year its Assessment Committee, and that committee has just begun to meet regularly. The Senate does not discuss student learning directly, but addresses key policy issues that lead to an improved learning environment. Key to the senate has been to work with the University administration to reduce the teaching load from 4 to 3 courses a semester, which should improve “the scholarship of teaching.” Working with administration, the number of teaching awards has been doubled, and the senate is working on developing general education outcomes, which all agree are needed. All agree that they know very little about the methods of good assessment, and many question whether there are good methods (especially from the sciences).

In separate meetings with the Director of Assessment (new in the past year), the Faculty Development Director, and the Director of Institutional Research, it appears there is some communication between the three but little coordination of efforts since each reports to a different person. They all acknowledge that, apart from the usual 5% of faculty interested in pedagogical innovation, sustaining faculty interest has been tough. Nonetheless, they acknowledge that the AVP’s Assessment Initiative Fund has worked well to open doors in each of the schools. Good studies are produced but not well disseminated or discussed other than with the small faculty advisory committee appointed for each study. As one member of the group indicated, “there is no person or group in the administration that serves as a continuing champion of student learning so that you know they mean it when they say it is a priority.”

1. **How should teams and the Commission address the level of authentic knowledge and engagement of the institution’s leadership (faculty, mid-level and senior administrators)? Has this institution demonstrated enough to fulfill the Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness?**

2. **What steps should the Commission and staff take in working to build institutional commitment to assessing and improving student learning at all levels, which is the focus of CFR 4.6?**

3. **Are there documents the team should review to move beyond assertions of commitment, such as committee minutes or actual studies?**
3. B. Planning and its linkage to Educational Effectiveness

The University of Central Hawaii recently completed its strategic plan for the next 3-5 years after an exhaustive (and exhausting) process. It has led, after review of recent growth projections and census demographics, to priorities of phased growth of the institution by 25% over the next 5 years, the expansion of graduate programs at the masters level and the construction of a major new technology, library and media center. Specific objectives over three years have been developed. The University is justifiably proud of the process used for the planning process and the product produced as a result, and of the consensus developed for these priorities.

The study did not address learning results and needed areas for investment to improve student learning, nor how faculty and administration might work together to improve teaching and learning. The strategic plan did address student life, but primarily from a facilities standpoint, committing to building a new health and fitness center.

4. The need for improved planning has been one of the highest cited areas in Commission action letters over the past several years. Recently these letters have been calling for better integration of human, fiscal and physical resource planning, and the incorporation of appropriate assessment data into planning efforts. Is this sufficient given the emphasis of Standards 2 and 4? How should educational effectiveness issues be incorporated into strategic planning?

5. Is it appropriate for the Commission to expect that, as an educational institution offering degrees, the evaluation and improvement of student learning, beyond the award of individual course grades, is a strategic institutional priority?

3.C. Learning Organizations

One of the key elements of the educational effectiveness review is for the institution to describe and evaluate the effectiveness of its systems of quality assurance, data analysis and assessment of student learning as a way of improving the intentional design, coherence and integration of these systems. As indicated above, teams commonly find that all of these elements are not commonly in place, and actions letters call for greater integration of planning, data, and assessment.

6. CFR 4.4 calls for “a deliberate set of quality assurance process at each level of institutional functioning, including new curriculum and program approval processes, periodic program review, ongoing evaluation and data collection. These processes involve assessments of effectiveness, track issues over time, and use the results of these assessments to revise and improve structures and processes, curricula and pedagogy.” How rigorously do we want to apply this criterion across the institution?

7. How can action letters address this need? Does the focus on integrated planning effectively capture it?