

ACCREDITATION, ASSESSMENT, AND ONGOING IMPROVEMENT

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This article summarizes the nature of accreditation and discusses two ways in which accreditation makes a difference at BYU–Idaho. My perspective comes from 15 years as an evaluator for the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (the “Commission”) and as the principal coordinator for two institutional self-studies and several follow-up reports.

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Accreditation in higher education is self-regulation accompanied by peer review. We as an institution determine who we are and what we expect of ourselves and our students. We establish our goals, we decide how we will achieve them, we define our expectations, and we monitor our success in achieving our stated goals. Accreditation dictates only that we engage in meaningful self-regulation. It does not dictate its substance or its methods. In addition, we agree to meet other standards that have been established for colleges and universities in our region of the country. These standards provide a set of expectations related to the various dimensions of higher education—institutional operation and governance, educational programs, planning and assessment, with attention to students, faculty, library, finances, and facilities.

Every five years a delegation of peers from regional academic institutions come to our campus to “check up” on us. The purpose of these visits is to ensure, first, that we are meeting our stated goals, and second, that we are in compliance with the regional standards. We are asked to provide them with a comprehensive institutional self-study which presents evidence and analysis of how well we are meeting both our stated goals and the regional standards. The self-study identifies our institutional strengths and weaknesses and indicates how we hope to improve. During the visit, the delegation gathers its own information so that it can verify our claims and come to its own conclusions about our well-being. The delegation summarizes its findings in a report which concludes with a set of commendations and, of most interest to us, recommendations for changes that would, in their professional judgment, make us better at what we do. The ultimate decision about accreditation is made by a group of commissioners (i.e., the Commission) who carefully review the documentation we have submitted and the report generated by the visiting delegation.

The accreditation process in our region is currently undergoing a major revision. Two areas of change are important to note. First, the number of standards is being reduced to create a clearer focus. For example, the

old accreditation handbook contained 17 separate standards for faculty and one related policy on faculty evaluation. In the current draft, the new accreditation handbook will contain only three distinct standards relating to faculty and faculty evaluation. This will enable institutions to concentrate on a few core issues rather than a lengthy list of issues which were not always tightly connected. Similarly, it facilitates the work of evaluators who can now work with a shorter list of requirements.

Second, the actual process by which accreditation is carried out is also undergoing significant change. Instead of a major visit every ten years, there will be a series of visits over a seven-year period. The hope is to distribute the work associated with a comprehensive self-study over a seven-year time frame instead of a two- or three-year time frame as is currently done. Under the old system, schools would tend to get serious about self-assessment only in the three or four years leading up to the ten-year visit. Now, schools will have to show evidence that self-assessment, and planning that is informed by self-assessment, occur on a regular basis because the Commission will be checking up on institutions every two or three years.

In part, the decision to make these changes has been spurred by recent attempts of the federal government to insert itself into the accreditation of higher education. In 2007 as the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 was being crafted, the U.S. Department of Education attempted to get more control over higher education via the accreditation process. Among other things, they proposed the establishment of a common set of learning outcomes that each institution of higher learning would have to adopt and assess. The higher education community successfully resisted this federal intrusion, but realized that it needed to step up its efforts to ensure that institutional self-regulation included the continuous and systematic gathering, analysis, and reporting of evidence of student learning and growth. Thus, it is not surprising that our newly revised standards are replete with directives relating to learning outcomes. The new standards will indeed raise the bar for the use and assessment of student learning and growth.

There are two ways in which the accreditation process can affect an institution. The first is through the self-study process which is at the heart of accreditation. The second is from the recommendations given by the visiting evaluators. Let's consider what impact, if any, these two processes have had at BYU-Idaho in its formative years.

I would argue that the greatest impact of the self-study process for BYU-Idaho is the strong validation of what we are doing. One of the primary purposes for a self-study is to identify institutional strengths and successes. Self-studies completed for the 1999 and 2004 accreditation visits produced substantial evidence that our young university is providing

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a positive experience for students and employees. In addition, formal commendations from the visiting delegations in 2004, 2006, and 2008 provided encouraging reinforcement of the work being carried out on our campus. In their commendations, these independent outside observers noted our dedication to student progress and well-being, our strong sense of purpose and community, the great support we receive from our Board, and our excellent physical facilities. Obviously, we're happy about this recognition and it encourages us to continue on a proven pathway. But has the self-study process helped us become better in any significant ways? I believe it has in one very important aspect. Though it may not be surprising, given my assignment, I think the self-study process has had its most profound impact at BYU-Idaho on our institutional assessment and planning. Specifically, it has spurred the development of an annual stewardship review process which has evolved from a review of college budget requests to a focused and comprehensive examination of goals, efforts, and results within the departments and colleges.

In preparation for the annual stewardship review process, department chairs and deans now are asked to take a systematic look at the performance of their departments and colleges. What evidence is there of learning and growth in the faculty? What kind of educational experience are they providing to the students? Are departmental resources being managed well? How well prepared are graduating students for their future endeavors? To the extent that this annual exercise in self-analysis focuses on the right things, that it involves faculty members, and that it is done in an authentic and effective way, it is hard to imagine that ideas about improvements and change would not occur. On the other hand, if this annual self-analysis is treated as a hoop to jump through, and undertaken by a chair or dean in isolation, then the status quo tends to prevail and the whole enterprise is a waste of time. This new and improved process for annual self-review holds great promise for the future. To further enhance the stewardship review process at the department level, the academic leadership is working on guidelines and approaches to help bring about the conditions that will lead to a better dialogue among the faculty about a department's performance and effectiveness. All of this is a direct outgrowth of the self-study process required by accreditation.

Some may ask if the self-study process drove major initiatives for change such as a revised Foundations program, the Learning Model, or changes in our approach to online learning. In my view, the primary impetus for these large changes has been inspired leadership by university leadership rather than the collection or analysis of data for accreditation purposes. In fact, I would say that all of our current strategic initiatives are a direct outgrowth of the three imperatives outlined in President Clark's inaugural address: to serve more students, to lower the relative

cost of education, and to increase the quality of all aspects of the student experience. The role of self-study in these strategic initiatives is to inform how the initiatives might be carried out and to assess what difference these initiatives really make.

It's important to ask whether an ongoing self-study process occurring within departments has actually produced helpful changes in degree programs, including program and course requirements, curricular development, and teaching methods. While other forces may drive such adjustments, one would hope that self-study would identify needs and avenues for change. Thoughtful and inspired consideration of a situation even with limited data can lead to great things. Yet improving the quality of evidence definitely improves the quality of discussions about our aims, means, and achievements. Good data can help overcome our biases, take away our blind spots, reveal the unknown, and chip away at customs which obstruct progress, opening us to new insights about our work at the university. That's the ultimate hope for the type of self-study and self-analysis associated with accreditation. I encourage individual faculty members to ask questions and help generate data that will facilitate such discussions in their own departments and colleges, rather than leaving all the work to department chairs and office managers.

Without question, when we read the visiting delegation's report, it is their recommendations that get our attention. These are the areas where our peers think we ought to improve. Once a recommendation is given, it gets reviewed in subsequent accreditation visits until the Commission feels that we have resolved the issues expressed in the recommendations.

Since 2004, we have been given seven recommendations in three separate visits. I summarize them as follows:

In 2004

1. Capacity. BYU-Idaho should "re-examine its capacity to accomplish its self-identified aggressive academic goals while simultaneously maintaining a wholesome academic, cultural, social, and spiritual environment."
2. Assessment. "[T]here is little evidence that assessment is influencing planning across the University. Evidence of the linkage between assessment and planning consistently over time is required."
3. Faculty teaching load. "[T]he Committee strongly recommends the University develop and implement workload policies that will both maintain those emphases and ensure that faculty are able to maintain currency in their teaching fields at a level appropriate to a baccalaureate institution. The current teaching loads of faculty, coupled with the University's expectations for service, appear to leave little time for faculty to maintain disciplinary currency. This

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is exacerbated by the University's movement to the baccalaureate level, which requires engagement with the discipline at a deeper level than at the associate level."

4. Faculty scholarship. "[T]he Committee recommends that institutional policies and procedures concerning scholarship be developed and implemented in collaboration with the faculty to ensure that faculty members maintain in a chosen subject a high level of expertise, originality, critical analysis, significance, and demonstrability."

In 2006

5. Assessment of General Education. "[T]he Evaluator recommends that the current revision of general education include a plan for regular and continuous assessment of general education. The revision needs to include expected learning outcomes for general education and regular and systematic assessment linked to institutional planning."

In 2008

6. Outcomes assessment. "[C]ontinue the process of informing improvement at all levels of the university. Across all academic departments, educational assessment should include not only student-perceived learning outcomes but also empirical data and measures supporting educational outcomes and goal attainment. The evaluators found inconsistent application across campus. Empirical data is necessary to inform the appropriate curricular improvements."
7. Policies regarding faculty. "The University is encouraged to implement and communicate consistent policies across colleges in workload expectations, and awards of release time and sabbaticals."

A clear pattern emerges. In the eyes of independent observers, we have assessment issues and faculty issues to deal with. The good news is that we have been working on these issues since 2004. Our efforts are described in the various follow-up reports that we have submitted to the Commission. The bad news is that our most recent visitors think that we still have work to do in these areas. One of the major obstacles to progress in these two areas is that we, as a campus community, have been so busy working to implement elements of the ambitious strategic agenda laid out by President Clark in 2005 that we have had comparatively little time to focus on and fully resolve the priorities of the accrediting teams. For example, defining, collecting, and analyzing information about student learning and growth takes time and creative energy. Some additional

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financial resources are also needed to implement the type of assessment that accreditation mandates and, more importantly, that will be the most beneficial to us.

Neither my office nor the academic administration is able to tackle these issues alone. The faculty needs to play a significant role if we are to successfully address them. When we do finally resolve our assessment and faculty issues with the Commission, we will be a better institution and we can thank the accreditation process for helping us get there.

The two primary dimensions of accreditation that I have described, self-analysis and peer review, actually dovetail quite nicely with the gospel culture of reflective record-keeping and purposeful improvement that we encourage on our campus. President Monson captured this sentiment when he said, “Where performance is measured, performance improves. Where performance is measured and reported, the rate of improvement accelerates.”¹ As I have visited many campuses over the last decade as a visiting evaluator, I have seen a number of excellent improvements that have been made in response to accreditation. In my view, accreditation can only improve who we are and what we do. ☺

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NOTE

Thomas S. Monson, *Favorite Quotations from the Collection of Thomas S. Monson* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985).