



**ACCSC**

Accrediting Commission  
of Career Schools and  
Colleges

## ACCSC Monograph Series

Self-Evaluation Processes and Practices

## Welcome to the ACCSC Monograph Series

As higher education continues to expand and diversify in the United States, it has become apparent that now, more than ever, postsecondary school leaders need better tools to achieve their strategic goals and to ensure institutional and student success. Higher education in the United States continues to change in profound ways. With increased globalization, a greater reliance on technology, and more competition among education providers both domestically and internationally, America's higher education system must embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement as a means to remain viable and a global leader in postsecondary education.

The Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC) developed a series of brochures — *the ACCSC Monograph Series*— on topics critical to institutional success. These brochures are designed to provide guidance on some of the more technical areas of ACCSC accreditation. Through the *ACCSC Monograph Series*, the Commission hopes to help accredited schools to comply fully and accurately with the *Standards of Accreditation*, achieve institutional success, and ensure that students are well prepared to enter the workforce.

This brochure, *Self-Evaluation Processes and Practices*, explains why your school needs a self-evaluation process, how to conduct each step in the process, and how to use the process to meet external demands and internal needs for continuous performance improvement.

## Introduction: Why Self-Evaluation?

As a postsecondary school administrator, you probably have in place the key ingredients of a quality academic institution: an established, functioning school, operating with a purpose; an effective mission statement; and a strategic plan of goals and objectives. But, however well your school is functioning, you should still ask yourself: What pieces may be missing from the performance puzzle? What do we need to do to maintain a continual high level of performance?

In many situations, the missing piece is a meaningful, comprehensive, and ongoing process of self-evaluation. ACCSC accreditation is built upon a foundation of self-evaluation as a meaningful and ongoing process which involves the entire school and becomes a permanent part of the school's operation. Through the process of self-evaluation, ACCSC believes that a school should identify areas of improvement as a means to grow, adapt and diversify and that this process should be due to a school's own internal efforts to achieve greater institutional success.

According to the ACCSC *Standards of Accreditation*, an effective self-evaluation will be an assessment, over time, of the complete school, conducted by the school's administration and involving faculty, students, graduates, employers, and other stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that ACCSC accreditation requires a rigid uniformity among the schools it accredits. In fact, the diversity of the ACCSC membership, in terms of program offerings, geographic location, and student population served is one of the strongest aspects of the national accreditation structure. This sentiment is captured by Driscoll who notes that "...high-quality assessment is possible with individualized approaches that consider varied student populations, unique curricula, and respond to meaningful inquiry of a campus while at the same time addressing questions of accountability."<sup>1</sup> For ACCSC-accredited schools, institutional success is often dependent upon the quality of the educational administration. If a school's administration engages in meaningful self-evaluation and strategic planning, the chances for sustained student and institutional success is significantly increased.

So what is a self-evaluation? Evaluation compares those desired outcomes to the actual results. The addition of the

prefix self implies that your school conducts a study itself and for its own purposes, rather than by external review or for an external party. A self-evaluation, or self-study, is conducted to evaluate what works and what does not. In this brochure we will refer to self-study and self-evaluation interchangeably.

Evaluation and study can be done for a variety of purposes. Educators and administrators often recognize the need for evaluation when a problem or new situation arises; evaluation in this case helps to find the cause of the specific problem or situation. Implementing a solution to the problem creates a one-time improvement of the course, program, or process. A school can use cyclical self-evaluation activities for courses, programs, processes, and studies of facilities or equipment. Or a school may need to meet a certain quality program standard, which requires study of each facet or certain aspects of the organization. For all the needs that arise, self-evaluation of the process under study can assess whether change is needed.

Accreditation review calls for a broad form of self-study. In fact, the accreditation process is a form of evaluation that complements the school's overall self-evaluation process and serves as a springboard and as an incentive for performance evaluation and improvement. An institutional assessment and improvement planning cycle can not only meet the needs of accreditation but go beyond those requirements to help create a highly effective school. The broadest and most effective way to use self-evaluation is as part of an ongoing process of continuous performance improvement through institutional assessment and improvement planning. The *ACCSC Monograph Series* brochure, *Institutional Assessment and Improvement Planning and Implementation*, covers this topic in depth.

## Determining Needs for Self-Study

As previously stated, the need for a self-study process comes from a variety of sources. It may come from the need to solve a problem or in response to a new process or technology, which would be one-time, focused studies. However, self-evaluation should be done according to a planned cyclical process, with time frames that may be set by either internal or external requirements. For example, if your school conducts a self-study for each accreditation review, the timing of the review determines the frequency and timing of your efforts. For continuous improvement purposes at all levels of the organization, a school-wide standard pattern of evaluating programs and processes should be established. The results of this evaluation can then be mapped into documents for accreditation and other purposes as needed.

In general, questions to determine a need for self-evaluation include:

- Do we have the right programs and processes to meet the needs of our internal and external stakeholders?
- Do we have an internal continuous improvement strategy or institutional effectiveness plan, requiring self-study?
- Do we have an internal need to evaluate a particular goal, course, program, process, input, or resource?
- Do we have an external demand, including an accreditation or certification requirement, for self-study?

If you answer “yes” to any of these, you need a self-evaluation process. The next section provides a brief discussion on determining needs for improvement.

## Determining the Need for Improvement

Self-evaluation is pointless if your organization does not plan to use the results to improve. Although there are times when uncontrollable external factors affect your ability to meet your school’s goals and objectives, most often the means for improvement lie in your school and can be discovered by the following questions:

- 1 | Are our programs and processes effective in meeting our goals and standards?
- 2 | What led to that effectiveness (or ineffectiveness)?
- 3 | Can we attribute the ineffectiveness entirely to outside influences that are not under our control?
- 4 | Can we make changes to correct ineffectiveness and move to a higher level of effectiveness?

If you answer “no,” to the first question and “yes” to the fourth, then you have a need for self-improvement. If you have answered “yes” to the third question, then you must report that finding and consider how those outside influences will affect you in the future and whether that requires change. Before going into the steps of the self-evaluation process, let’s take a look at the accreditation review in more detail.

## The Accreditation Review

The accreditation review should reinforce that your school has the programs, processes, facilities, personnel, and equipment in place to help you to achieve your goals as a school. The accreditation process provides an opportunity to verify that a school has implemented the means to succeed not only in obtaining accreditation but in effectively fulfilling the school’s stated mission and educational objectives, and in meeting the needs of students, graduates, and employers. The accreditation process also provides the mechanism to evaluate a school’s compliance with accrediting standards, and seeks to ensure the systematic application of a school’s processes and procedures, which provide a base of information for a school’s broader self-evaluation efforts. At a later date, a school can use the results of the accreditation evaluation to systematically improve the school’s operation and management.

For example, the ACCSC Self-Evaluation Report asks the following question: “Does training offered prepare students for employment?” If a school has been in compliance with the accreditation standards which require the maintenance of verifiable records of initial employment, the school has already collected data

to answer this question, from graduates, employers, Program Advisory Committee evaluations, alumni interviews, employment data, and other sources. The accreditation review process requires that a school provide documentation of its effort to support and enhance graduate employment and to provide verifiable data regarding the success rates of graduates. A school can also use this information when conducting an evaluation of the effectiveness of student preparation for employment that is outside of the accreditation process.

Conversely, a school may initially collect data for internal processes and then use that data to satisfy similar accreditation review requirements. A school may also have specific internal objectives for graduate employment rates. In this case, a school could collect the data to meet internal needs, comparing the objectives to the result. Documentation of this process and the results could be used subsequently to satisfy the similar accreditation requirement. This is not to say that outcomes do not matter in accreditation. In fact, it is critical to demonstrate and document acceptable rates of student graduation and graduate employment. According to ACCSC's *Standards of Accreditation*, "[t]he school must demonstrate successful student achievement by reporting acceptable rates of student graduation and employment in the career field for which the school provided education. These rates must be supported through student transcripts, the school's verifiable records of initial employment of its graduates, or other verifiable documentation." The essential point is that if a school has an organization-wide process and are working toward goals and objectives, the school will be able to respond to the accreditation evaluation with recorded data.

As mentioned previously, self-evaluation can have a broad or narrow focus. An evaluation of a particular process, course, program, or resource produces a narrow focus. This may answer only one or a few questions on the accreditation review. However, if you are conducting self-evaluation processes across the school for continuous improvement, then you should have many of the elements in place and data collected to satisfy the accreditation process.

In other instances, information requested for an accreditation review might identify a need to maintain a new set of data or to improve a process that currently

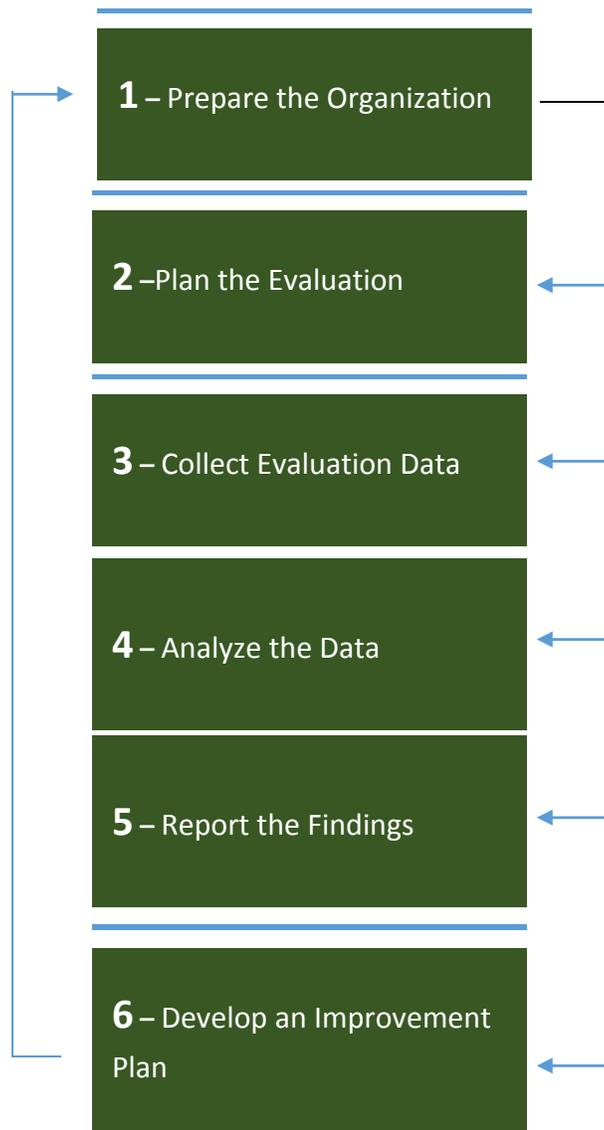
does not demonstrate compliance with accrediting standards. From this, your school can create an institutional assessment and improvement plan to rectify the lack of data or to improve the deficient process. These improvement plans can be used to facilitate overall continuous improvement at your school as well as to demonstrate the school's efforts to come into compliance for accreditation purposes.

The same thinking applies to other external standards of performance that your organization must meet. If, for example, your state board of education requires that you meet and report certain conditions, the information you collect for this purpose can become a part of your institutional effectiveness planning. Feedback on your efforts can in turn help your school to improve. To make the evaluation process as efficient as possible, plan your results and reports with all of your audiences in mind: students, graduates, and employers, as well as accrediting agencies and other regulatory bodies. You can avoid duplication of effort by collecting and analyzing the data once, then publishing the findings, with appropriate additions, in the various formats needed for your internal and external requirements. Now that we have described the role of accreditation in self-evaluation, we will examine the details of the self-evaluation process.

## The Self-Evaluation Process

As a school administrator, you must know what outcomes or results you expect before you can assess your school's level of success or failure. Effective schools operate based on a valid mission, long-term planning, and by providing support to its programs and established processes. Assuming that a school has these elements in place, we begin at the point of the self-study that explores whether those programs and processes meet the goals and objectives of the organization, how they do or do not meet them, and what solutions can be implemented for improvement. The model we use assumes that there is a need for self-evaluation. We will use the model below (Figure 1) to guide our discussion of self-evaluation.

School administrators and departmental leaders may be tempted to initiate an evaluation by immediately collecting data. However, a successful evaluation requires careful preparation before a school begins the data collection process. The next section details each step in the process.



## Step 1: Prepare the Organization

### 1

#### PREPARE THE ORGANIZATION

Leadership in the self-evaluation process comes from a variety of sources,

depending on the subject and breadth of the study. For a school-wide process, leadership typically comes from the top level of school administration. A program, process, or resource review may be led by a department chair or manager. A course designer or faculty member might lead a course evaluation. Whatever the level of the study, the leadership must commit to the following steps before beginning the process.

- 1 | *Show your commitment to the process through your involvement*

A leader who says “this is important” then walks away and waits for the results will not get the same level of commitment from staff as the leader who remains visible throughout the process. Communicate regularly with the study participants and other stakeholders about the evaluation and provide the necessary support for a successful effort. Be open about the results and improvement plans to build trust and secure commitment to the process.

- 2 | *Provide financial support for the self-evaluation*

Adding time, creating incentives, and purchasing resources for the evaluation will have a cost. Look for ways to minimize that cost but do not avoid allocating the budget necessary to cover necessary expenses. The improvements you make because of the information gathered should eventually offset any upfront costs.

- 3 | *Appoint a key staff member to coordinate the effort*

A single point of coordination for your school-wide self-evaluation efforts focuses the responsibility to encourage critical personnel to complete their evaluation tasks. The coordinator can also monitor the quality of the process. The coordinator does not have to hold a particular title or position; however, the person selected must have enough time to focus on the assessment and planning efforts and have enough influence with others to get the job done.

- 4 | *Create a team or task force to carry out the mission*

Create a team or task force to work with the coordinator you have appointed. The role of this team is to support the school-wide self-evaluation

process. Choose representatives that will be helpful in implementing the program, new process, or new procedure in your school. Include both faculty and administrators on the team for evaluation processes

with implications across the school. These team members can help to educate and to assist the other parts of the organization on the evaluation and planning cycle. For evaluations more limited in scope — for example, an evaluation of a single course or a process within a department — you would form a team of personnel to work on that particular evaluation under the guidance and encouragement of the coordinator and school-wide evaluation team.

- 5 | *Develop incentives*

To reduce resistance to change and to encourage participation in the process, you may have to create incentives for your staff. For school-wide efforts, those incentives may be faculty course releases, individual and departmental rewards, or preferential treatment, such as placing a participating department first in line for a program or new equipment. Another incentive might be to publicize the efforts of participating programs, departments, and individuals. Recognition and reward go a long way toward gaining support.

- 6 | *Plan to educate stakeholders*

Self-study participants and stakeholders may be involved in the process without understanding what it means, why it is important, and how they should prioritize the tasks involved. Use the self-evaluation team or appoint staff members to help key personnel understanding the process and its importance in enhancing and improving the school’s efficiencies and in meeting the school’s stated mission.

- 7 | *Disseminate the results to all stakeholders*

Disseminating the results of the study enables interested parties to participate in the discussion on how to improve. Openness leads to a climate of trust and belief in improvement efforts. Accessible information tells your staff the agenda for assessment: Determining where you are falling short of expectations, highlighting the areas that have

experienced the greatest success, and identifying the areas of needed improvement. Let your stakeholders know that they can expect regular and on-going feedback.

#### 8 | *Take action based on the results*

If publishing results sends a positive message to stakeholders, then acting on the results proves your commitment and keeps the cycle going. Commit to this up front and follow through by helping programs and departments make improvements. Make sure you dedicate time, effort and resources to support these endeavors.

#### 9 | *Align the self-study process with the school's mission and make the data collection effort an integral part of regular activity*

Create a strategic plan that includes self-evaluation. Find ways to integrate the data collection into everyday processes so that participation becomes a regular job responsibility. Achieving buy-in from your stakeholders is a critical element of this process.

#### 10 | *Get started!*

Do not allow fear of not doing it right keep you from beginning the process.

It is important to keep in mind that if you try to plan a self-evaluation without adequately preparing your school, success becomes less likely. However, if you prepare for this process in a meaningful way, establishing buy-in from your faculty and staff, dedicating resources, and developing a strategic vision, your team should be ready to develop the evaluation project plan.

## Step 2: Plan the Evaluation

### 2

#### PLAN THE EVALUATION

A successful self-evaluation project requires careful planning. The critical planning

steps include the who, what, when, why, and how of the project. In this section, we will cover how to develop the plan and address planning for both the school level and program level.

To develop the plan, first ask, “why are we conducting an evaluation?” Is it part of an institutional assessment and improvement plan? Do we have internal feedback that an important process has failed? Has a problem occurred? Has an accrediting body or government agency required it? Has our Program Advisory Committee advised us to conduct an evaluation? Are we taking a baseline measurement or evaluating after implementation of an improvement plan?

If the school is evaluating an issue because a problem has come to light, the school staff may need to investigate the problem to find the answers to these questions. Open communication among the administration, faculty and staff, particularly with the individuals who brought the problem to light or who are most affected or involved in the process, is of paramount importance and will help the school determine the gap between what is expected and the current situation.

If the school is conducting an initial evaluation, then the school is collecting baseline outcomes data in order to measure performance. This baseline will become a starting point for the school to measure and record the impact of any changes you make. In subsequent evaluations, the school can measure change since baseline, which will likely be due to implementing an improvement plan. The basic development of the evaluation plan will remain the same, except for the use of the baseline data for comparison.

In this section, you will find a simplified scenario presenting issues that impact evaluation plan development. The scenario is broken into several sections, each building on the one before. The intention is to show how the principles are applied to create a plan. The scenario begins with why.

*Scenario, Part 1: The director of a business school received a visit from a new teacher. The teacher was concerned about the grades her class had been earning in an advanced computing course. She had taught the course at another school and the grades were substantially higher. The director asked whose curriculum the teacher was*

*using and she explained that she had used the curriculum provided by the school and added some of her own ideas. The director also asked for specifics about the grades, to which the teacher responded that her current students*

were typically scoring in the 70-80 point range, compared to 90-100 at her previous school.

In recognition that the concepts and software taught in this course were highly valued by employers, the director decided to put an evaluation team together to investigate.

So far, the questions and answers might be as follows. Why is the school evaluating this area? In this case, a teacher presented a potential problem to the director: poor grades in a valued course.

What is the school evaluating? What are the nature, scope, and desired results of the evaluation? State the problem and purpose of the self-evaluation. Define the boundaries of what will and will not be evaluated. Locate the measurable objectives that you will evaluate by consulting your institutional effectiveness plan, by reviewing the strategic plans of the department, or by talking with the stakeholders — or all three. If objectives have not been written, the planning team should work with the parties involved to create them. Helpful information for developing your objectives can come from further examining the subject or studying a best practice on the same program or process from another group or school.

### Developing Measurable Program Objectives

Writing measurable objectives is not always easy, but without a “yardstick” it will be difficult, if not impossible, to determine how much progress the school is making. When conducting an evaluation, the school must know what result it wants before the school can investigate whether you have achieved success. In other words, the objective provides the standard against which the school is evaluating.

Goals and objectives include action verbs like: improve, maintain, and increase, followed by the desired outcome. These action verbs express targets, or desired outcomes, however, goals are generally broader and reflect organization level or higher level function goals. Objectives are more targeted, measurable subordinates, designed to accomplish the broader goals. Goals and objectives are most effective when they have measurable targets such as a percentage or numeric expression. A broad goal might state, for example, “attract the best qualified students into our program,” but a school would need measurable objectives to determine what represents the “best qualified students.”

Here is an example to illustrate how to write a measurable objective:

A student and an employee arrive in the main office to complain about tripping over a broken sidewalk at the entrance to the building. Is the objective to repair the sidewalk? Or is it a better objective to have “zero accidents due to lack of maintenance on the grounds of the facility.” “Zero accidents” is measurable. An action item for this objective could be “repair the entry sidewalk.”

If a school conducts an evaluation following implementation of an improvement plan, the objective might be to achieve a change from the baseline data. For example, let’s say the school’s initial study showed a student retention rate of 60%. The school’s goal might be to “increase student retention to 70% within one year.” A school may also identify a longer term objective, such as “increase student retention to 85% within five years.” In each time frame, the evaluation measures progress from the established baseline to the appropriate objective.

### Determining Measurable Program Outcomes

If the school has a measurable program objective, then the evaluation must produce measurable program outcomes. To achieve this, make sure to choose instruments that are valid, that measure what you intend to measure, and that produce reliable data time after time. The results must be measurable in the same units of measure as the objective.

Following the example of student retention objectives from the previous section, the school would want to collect data that it could present in terms of the percentage of students retained. It would be much less meaningful to state, “we retained more students than last year” or “we retained 1,250 students this year” than to say “Ninety-two percent of students were retained this year, up from 89% last year.” Soft data, such as recorded observations or answers to open-ended questions on surveys, can be used to support the hard data by providing further explanation of the results. For the purposes of determining measurable program outcomes, plan to use a variety of sources to answer the evaluation questions so that you can compare the evaluation outcomes to the objectives.

A final critical question is: what are the organizational blocks that could impede progress on the self-evaluation? Every school has them. If the team can identify obstacles, the members can develop strategies to overcome them.

*Scenario, Part 2: The school director consults with the leader of the team conducting the school's ongoing self-evaluation process. The director explains the situation with the advanced computing course described by the teacher. The director and the team leader put together a small evaluation team consisting of a curriculum specialist, the original course designer, a currently enrolled student, a student who has completed the course, and the teacher. The team first reviews the school's goals for this course, including expected academic outcomes, curriculum content, and skills to be acquired by the students. The team then collects any specific information available from the teacher and the student team members about current performance and expected outcomes.*

*Reviewing this information, the team finds that the current grades do not match the expected outcomes set by the department. They receive feedback from the current student team member that students are having difficulties with the material. They know that the previous instructor and students did not experience this in the previous semester. The team decides to study the following questions:*

- Why do the advanced computing course grades not match expected grade levels?
- What is creating the difference in the course grades lower than in previous semesters?
- Is the course providing the necessary material to enable students to master the skills and knowledge required?
- Which course materials are the students mastering and which are they not mastering?

The evaluation data should be compared to these established course objectives:

- 1 | Eighty percent of students' final grades will fall in the range of 80-100%
- 2 | Students can perform all items on the skill checklist in the final presentation

The boundaries of the study do not include:

- Grading information from the teacher's previous school.

Obstacles to the study:

- The new teacher has added materials and might evaluate differently, preventing a direct comparison to the previous semester's performance.

It is then time to ask: Who will be affected by or is interested in the results of the study? Who is participating in the evaluation? Who will be affected by the results? Is the school producing an internal report? Is the school evaluating this area simply for accreditation? Will the school publish results to staff, students, or alumni? Will employers or the Program Advisory Committee be concerned with these efforts? How will the stakeholders use these results? This step will help the school determine who should have representation on your project team, how to plan to educate and to influence anyone affected by or asked to participate in the evaluation for participation, and how to frame any information communicated about the study.

*Scenario, Part 3: The team has identified those affected by the course under study — the instructor, the course designer, and the students. The results will also be of interest to the program, the department, and students taking the course. Communications should be planned for these audiences and the results documented in the school's ongoing self-evaluation.*

The next question is: When are the results of the evaluation expected? Is there an external deadline for a report? Is there an internal deadline, or will the project team set the deadline? Are there critical times for certain benchmarks to be met? The answers to these questions will help you in planning the timeline for the project and to determine whether a time constraint will mean that more resources are required than are presently available.

*Scenario, Part 4: The team planned to complete the study within two weeks, to allow for possible remediation with current students.*

Next question: How will the study be completed? This question addresses the methods and tools needed to conduct the study. It includes resources — human, financial, and others needed for the study and also involves questions like who will complete which tasks and what is the timeline of events. If training for conducting or participating in the

evaluation has not been completed in the preparation phase, include it here. Also, plan the communication and reporting methods to be used during and after the evaluation. Pull together all of the information gathered into a plan that can be put into action.

*Scenario, Part 5: The team decided to use the following methods and tools and assigned responsibility and deadlines:*

Task	Responsible Parties	Timeline
Review grade book for test and project scores for previous and current semester	Current and previous instructors	Due in one week
Review rubrics and actual tests/ projects to assess pattern of incorrect responses	Current instructor	Due in one week
Compare new and original course materials with the pattern of incorrect responses	Curriculum specialist, course designer	Due in two weeks
Create improvement plan	All parties	Conducted meeting at end of two-week period
Disseminate information to students	Team leader, instructors, and students	Project information to students due in one week, results and improvement plan to students and program due in three weeks

As you write the evaluation plan, all of the plan elements must come together to answer the evaluation questions. Answering all of the questions will provide a complete picture of the results. When the school writes its plan, the school may want to use an outline or report format, or you may prefer to use a table similar to the one shown below. Use whatever works best for the school’s staff and stakeholders.

## Scenario, Part 6

Reason for Study: Grades are lower than expectations per instructor

Objective	Methods/Tools	Responsibility	Due Date	Results
1. 80% of students' scores will fall in the range of 80-100%	Review grade book for test and project scores for previous and current semester	Current and previous instructors	One week	
2. Students can perform all items on the skill checklist in the final presentation	Review rubrics and actual tests/projects to assess pattern of incorrect responses	Current instructor	Two weeks	

At the program level, the level of information in the partial table above is appropriate. For a school-wide self-evaluation plan, the chart information would be much broader and would contain multiple goals, objectives, and related evaluation outcomes that encompass the entire school.

### School Level Planning

An organization-wide self-evaluation plan with many subjects for evaluation requires a great deal of planning and coordination. The planning team must coordinate the timelines for projects that affect the same participants or use the same resources. In this case, a comprehensive institutional assessment and improvement plan would bring all of these elements together.

At the school level, goals should be broad, high-level goals that affect the entire organization or that cut across various institutional functions. Human performance technology theorists Rummel and Brache call this the organization level.<sup>3</sup> Each of these broad goals would have various measurable objectives that could become the

subject of the self-evaluation process. Required elements of a school-wide process as part of the institutional assessment and improvement plan can be found under *Section 1 (B), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation*.<sup>4</sup> ACCSC has the expectation that its accredited schools implement ongoing institutional assessment and improvement activities and planning that are appropriate to the size and scale of the school's operations and support the management and administration of the school as well as the quality of education provided. Additionally, institutional assessment and improvement activities should support and enhance the quality of the education provided using information obtained internally (e.g., staff and faculty development and planning, and student input and feedback) and externally (e.g., Program Advisory Committees, employers, community involvement, graduates, etc.) to validate the school's educational and administrative practices and to document and improve student learning and achievement. Furthermore, ACCSC has the expectation that the institutional assessment and improvement plan address the entire school in such areas as:

- Management
- Fiscal condition and budget
- Administrative policies and practices
- Student support services
- Faculty and staff development
- Educational program curricula
- Learning resources system equipment and supporting materials
- Facilities
- Student achievement outcomes

The Commission also has the expectation that institutional assessment and improvement activities be significant and ongoing experiences in the school, and not conducting merely for the purposes of satisfying a regulatory requirement once every accreditation cycle.

**Program Level Planning**

Your school’s academic programs lie in the process level.

This is where a school will find many of the targeted, measurable objectives that contribute to accomplishing its goals. Other objectives may have been developed specifically for and by the department. The topics under study would address issues pertaining to the success and operation of the particular program, including course design, instruction, and student achievement outcomes. Nonacademic departments, such as the accounting function, would also fall in the process level. Their processes and procedures support the success of the school and could become the subject of evaluation. No matter which level your evaluation examines, data collection efforts are of primary importance.

**Step 3. Collect Evaluation Data**



careful process of selecting or developing the right assessment methods and tools. Using these tools appropriately will make data collection a valuable asset to any evaluation.

Many evaluators view data collection as a daunting task. But it is an important one that involves a

**Selecting Assessment Methods and Tools**

Two important criteria for selecting assessment methods and tools will affect the success of the school’s data collection efforts:

- The methods and tools used to collect the data needed must be able to measure progress toward the specified goals and objectives
- The staff or information systems must be willing and able to collect the data as required

A variety of assessment tools exist to help your staff create assessment instruments customized to your information needs. However, data produced from any type of instrument must relate to the desired outcomes. Select methods and tools that will be implemented willingly and properly and that fit in with the culture of your organization. A tool that is designed poorly or proves too much trouble for those who must use it may be avoided or misused, resulting in insufficient or unusable data. For example, let’s say there is an evaluation of an accounting process in the school. Part of the study requires the employee to record the process by stopping at each step and recording it in detail. This recording interrupts the flow of work and creates errors in the process, and sometimes the employee forgets to record information. The errors and forgetfulness could lead to a collect of misinformation and create new problems for the employee and for the accounting function. An alternative method might be to provide an evaluation team member to observe and record the process, for less flow interruption and fewer errors.

When deciding how to assess progress to a goal or objective, one important question can save your school effort, time, and money: Are we already collecting the required data?

Inventory your school’s current data collection efforts and make a determination if your school already has information systems designed to gather and analyze information on student success and organization performance. Match those efforts with organization goals and record those tools that meet assessment needs on the plan. If you have a measure in place that works, there is no reason to change it.

Where data collection efforts are inadequate, identify possible methods and tools to collect data. First, your staff

can choose to create an instrument for data collection. However, to be able to create an effective evaluation tool, your staff must have the required time and expertise, and the tool must be tested to ensure that it will yield the expected data.

Data collection tools that meet your needs may also be available to use or purchase. Education associations and private enterprises create useful tools that may be adapted to your school and provide useful results. The main issue with these instruments is the expense; often a school can not afford them. If you can afford to purchase an instrument, choose carefully to find one that fits your school and collects the right data. Just as with an instrument developed internally, conduct a pilot test to check applicability and appropriateness. Keep in mind that ACCSC monitors the continuous compliance of its accredited schools through annual reports and the submission of other data. Thus, it would be important to ensure that a school's data collection tools facilitate its ability as a school to collect and submit accurate information for Commission consideration.

As an example of an instrument not collecting the right data, let's say that a school provides students with an annual survey on satisfaction levels with the school's programs and services. This survey shows that the students in graphic design are very dissatisfied with their computer lab, so the school explores opportunities to collect additional data to find out why. An evaluation team already has a tool to record student lab usage and usage of the graphic design programs, and this tool is put to use. However, the lab usage and program usage do not show a significant change in usage from the previous year's information. But was this the correct data to collect? Does the amount of usage show why students are or are not satisfied with the computer lab? In this case, the data collection instruments did not answer the issues raised in the evaluation. So, continuing with our example, at a later date, the evaluation team develops a survey with specific questions on the computer lab equipment, program, hours, and service, and which also allowed the students to provide open-ended feedback. The survey results show that while lab equipment and programs were satisfactory, the hours were so limited that the lab was often full and students would have to wait an hour or more to access a computer. The survey also shows that the lab assistants were not well-trained to help when computer and printer

troubleshooting were needed. Now, the school has the data needed to make improvements in the students' ability to use the lab and eventually in their satisfaction rating.

Data for study processes are either facts collected from records or individuals, or opinions gathered in person (e.g., focus groups) or through survey instruments. The data relate to descriptions of things and information about ideas, issues, strengths, and problems; data collected can also cover inputs, processes, and outputs to the institution. Some instruments collect hard data, which includes output in basic measures of performance, quality, costs, and time savings. For example, a school may decide that the registration process is inefficient. They may implement measurement tools to determine whether information collected is correct, how much the process costs in terms of personnel time and processing costs, and the actual amount of time it takes to register a random sample of students during a typical registration period; these data would be considered hard data.

Other instruments are designed to collect soft data, including, for example, work habits, new skills, climate, development, feelings, and attitudes. Soft data can sometimes be reviewed for conversion to hard data or can be used to support the hard data. Keep in mind that not everything is quantifiable.

Create an ongoing process of collecting the regularly needed data. When you review strategic goals, determine regular data needs. To enhance your opportunities for success, build information systems and data collection processes that can provide data upon request. Data that is regularly available upon demand can be produced for an annual plan review, to make a decision, or to meet an unexpected external need.

### **Developing and Using Data Collection Instruments**

The predominant types of evaluation instruments are:

- Questionnaires or surveys
- Interviews
- Testing
- Focus groups
- Observations
- Review of records/existing data
- Work samples/portfolios

Should your school choose to develop data collection instruments, here are some guidelines to producing good instruments:

- 1 | Determine the format that will address your needs; i.e., numbers or percentages vs. open-ended questions.
- 2 | Utilize a listing of tasks that are essential to complete processes or jobs under study.
- 3 | Write clear, straightforward directions and questions.
- 4 | Ensure that questions address the most important issues.
- 5 | Provide space for comments.
- 6 | Underline or capitalize key words.
- 7 | Include descriptions for response scales.
- 8 | Cluster related questions together.
- 9 | Ensure that the instrument is free of any biases. (Careful design and pilot testing can help minimize bias.)
- 10 | Run a pilot study on a sample group to check for clarity of terms, instructions, and response scales.
- 11 | Develop tabulation and scoring systems.
- 12 | Maintain the confidentiality of respondents.

The most common data collection instrument is the questionnaire or survey. Questionnaires are most effective with large groups of participants and are used to gather opinions, reactions, and responses in different environments. Questionnaires can contain five basic question types.

- Open-ended
- Checklist
- Two-way (for example, yes/no)
- Multiple choice
- Ranking scales

Generally, questionnaires are inexpensive to construct and administer as the data can be tabulated with minimal effort. The format of questionnaires typically allow for confidentiality of the subjects, however, on the down side, questionnaires are difficult to design as different meanings may be read into questions. In addition, questionnaires may be viewed by participants as impersonal, one-way communication.

Another data collection method is the observation. When conducting observations, your team should identify personnel to be observed and develop a list of activities

to observe. It is critical to provide advance notice of your observation visit to the faculty member, if the evaluation affects the faculty member's course, and to the supervisor or department head. Every effort should be made to observe without disrupting activities, to take appropriate notes, and avoid creating an environment that can be construed as spying. If appropriate, take the time to share your observations with participants as a training tool to help them improve their skills and to reinforce those areas that they excel. It would also be a good practice to check the validity of your findings by comparing the results with other data collection approaches and to not rely solely upon an observation when reaching a conclusion.

Interviews can be conducted one-on-one or in focus groups. Interviews are helpful as they permit the collection of thoughts, ideas, and opinions that might not otherwise be achieved. Multiple perspectives and sets of experiences are powerful tools in evaluative processes. Thus, using more than one interviewee is helpful, as well as following these guidelines:

- 1 | Conduct a background study on the problem.
- 2 | Develop interview questions in advance.
- 3 | Conduct the interview in a private environment which is not threatening to the interviewee.
- 4 | Determine the number of individuals to be interviewed to obtain appropriate input.
- 5 | Prepare interviewees by explaining the purpose of the interview.
- 6 | Ask permission to take notes or to record the interview.
- 7 | Begin with general questions to set the right environment, and then move on to more specific questions.
- 8 | Do not make judgments regarding responses.
- 9 | Keep the discussion on track, emphasizing key points and asking for clarifications when necessary.
- 10 | Be a good listener.
- 11 | Summarize key points from time to time.
- 12 | Keep responses confidential.
- 13 | End the interview session on a positive note.
- 14 | Prepare a summary of the interview as soon as possible.
- 15 | After analyzing results, conduct follow-up sessions if necessary.

When appropriate techniques are used, interviews can expand on findings, reveal attitudes, build rapport, allow for observation of nonverbal behaviors, and are perceived as a personal approach. Disadvantages to interviews include the possibility of racial, sexual, or other biases, difficulty in tabulating results, dependency on good interviewer skills, and time consumption. Collecting work samples or student portfolios can identify problem areas without interrupting work or learning activities. This data is inexpensive to collect and provides actual work completed rather than facts or opinions. Whether you are conducting your first self-evaluation. However, the work samples and portfolios require skill and time to interpret.

When a school initiates its first school-level evaluation, the whole process seems overwhelming. But with practice, collecting data for evaluation becomes routine. The next topic includes suggestions on how to get started.

#### Initiating a School-level Evaluation Cycle

If your school has not conducted a formal evaluation program and wants to begin a regular cycle of school wide self-evaluation, the question is often, “where do we begin?” Here are some ideas.

- 1 | *Conduct pilot projects*  
Choose a small, relevant evaluation project with a group that is eager to cooperate and for which data is available. Word-of-mouth and intentional publicity on a successful pilot project will help your future efforts.
- 2 | *Determine priorities and start at the top of the list* Review goals and data needs and prioritize the list. If the organization has a more immediate or critical need for particular data, focus on those assessments first. For example, an urgent problem may need to be resolved quickly or a deficiency corrected before an imminent accreditation review.
- 3 | *Start where you can be more successful*  
Some groups will be more amenable to your efforts and some areas have readily available evaluation resources. Certain projects and results will be more visible in the school. Start early on these projects to show commitment and tout your success in completing the evaluation.
- 4 | *Be flexible*  
As the team implements the evaluation, compromises and changes will have to be made along the way. Work with the staff to accommodate their needs while maintaining the integrity and progress of the evaluation effort.

process or your 100th, correctly analyzing the data becomes the next important step. Your answers come from data analysis. The next section focuses on analyzing evaluation data.

## Step 4: Analyze the Data



What is results analysis all about?

It is about making sense of the data that you have collected. For a

large school, collecting and analyzing data are big jobs, but regardless of school size, getting the processes right is critical to a school's continued success.

Begin by organizing the data collected by which objectives and goals the data is intended to evaluate. Multiple sources of data may have been used to obtain information about particular criteria. More general data collection instruments may have yielded data useful for comparison to a variety of desired outcomes. The evaluation team must complete the matching process and make sense of the results.

After organizing the data, the team reviews each objective and the evaluation outcomes. The team should ask, “Did the data tell us if we met this objective? Did we meet this objective? If we did not, does the data tell us why?” The first question requires a review of the evaluation methods and tools. The second question is most often answered by hard data, a percentage, an amount, a rating or ranking, for example. The answer to the final question may be found in the hard data, such as a closed-ended survey, or the team might have qualitative data to explain the quantitative results.

When analyzing evaluation data, the team must keep in mind that not all variables in the environment can be controlled. At times, external variables affect the results and must be explained in the analysis. Unexplainable results require further study and recommendations for handling the problems that they create.

The team should also look for patterns of outcomes that should occur but do not. Analyzing the data in this way can identify focal points for process improvement.<sup>7</sup>

*Scenario, Part 5: The assessment team found that grades in the current semester had decreased an average of 14 points from the previous semester. An analysis of the rubrics showed that two particular areas accounted for most of the incorrect responses. A review of the course materials showed that the new instructor’s infused material did not cover as many examples of those two areas as the original materials.*

After this discovery, the assessment team would next consider how to report the findings and to whom. Let’s examine this topic in more depth.

### Step 5: Report the Findings



As mentioned earlier, it is important that the school’s leadership commit to disseminating the results. Results should be communicated to:

- The organization at large
- The departments and program as owners of the goals/objectives
- The students and alumni
- All other stakeholders who have an interest in the quality of the program

The evaluation team should make a presentation of results to the leaders of the organization, department, or programs affected. The information should then be disseminated to the affected or interested school personnel. The evaluation team should meet with departments or programs to discuss their outcomes. The leadership should prepare reports or communications for students, alumni, employers, the community, the board of directors, and any government agencies and accrediting bodies requiring results.

Results should be available in a concise, summary format as well as in more detailed format for those groups who need more depth. For accreditation, supporting data must demonstrate the outcomes in question and be presented and organized as required by the accrediting body. The same applies to any stakeholder or external agency that requires material presented in a specified format.

Results can tell what happened, but do not solve problems. To affect positive change based on those results, your school must review its options and develop and implement an effective and appropriate institutional assessment and improvement plan.

### Step 6: Develop an Improvement Plan



Now that all the results are in, your team can complete an institutional assessment and improvement

plan. The purpose of the institutional improvement plan is clear: setting new goals, objectives, and action plans in areas in which the assessment results show that the school has not met its goals. At this point, the stakeholders should expect that changes will occur for goals not met.

Develop specific action programs or changes to be implemented based on assessment findings to target continuous improvement by asking the following questions:

- Are the programs solutions to real problems facing the school?
- Are these solutions effective?
- What is the string of events that led to the results?

Next, look for what to modify. Changes could include revising curricula, improving departmental processes, implementing new processes, and reallocating resources. If changes are big or a group is resistant, consider including change management strategy in your plan.<sup>9</sup> ACCSC requires an institutional assessment and improvement plan that addresses areas across the entire school. The required comprehensive written plan examines school operations and sets forth specific short- and long-range goals (i.e., minimum of three years)

for improvement with measurable benchmarks and implementation timelines. As an ACCSC accredited school, your organization should commit to making the improvements identified in this strategic plan and should evaluate the impact of these improvements throughout the term of accreditation.

## Gaining Involvement in the Process

The success of your assessment and improvement efforts depends on the active involvement of many stakeholders in the process. Faculty members, students, alumni, your Program Advisory Committee, and external resources alike play an important role in the process. In a discussion of self-study in colleges, educational author Kells states the following characteristics of higher education institutions that can affect the process:

- Goals are difficult to clarify
  - Data collection systems are poor
  - Policy formulation and decision-making are unique to these types of organizations
  - Decisions about major functions of teaching are basically delegated without supervisory review
  - Departments are independent and cooperation is low
  - Higher education professionals are trained for education, but most are not trained in the skills needed for a self-evaluation project
  - Academic professionals often have difficulty reaching consensus
  - Work groups and committees often function poorly
- Planning and acting strategically can aid in overcoming these potential obstacles to the success of the assessment and in implementing the improvement plan.

For a full discussion on this topic, refer to the *ACCSC Monograph Series* brochure, *Institutional Assessment and Improvement Planning*.

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## The Road to Continuous Improvement

The goal of every organization, school, business, or nonprofit organization is not only to survive and exist but to thrive and improve. Continuous improvement is the philosophy and practice that will move your school past surviving and on to thriving and improving. As a philosophy, continuous improvement guides both long-term leadership and daily performance. Putting that philosophy into practice means an ongoing cycle of planning for success, putting that plan into action, evaluating performance, and making improvements. Continuous improvement, accountability, integrity, and community are the core values of ACCSC. As long as your organization has a valid mission and carries out its mission with integrity and accountability, aligning the continuous improvement cycle with this mission will facilitate the best opportunity for a quality educational school.

The ACCSC Monograph Series are designed to help you along in the cycle of continuous performance improvement, self-evaluation, and self-improvement processes and practices. Each topic in the series covers a unique aspect of continuous improvement processes. The topics currently published are:

- Self Evaluation Processes and Practices;
- Institutional Assessment and Improvement Planning/Implementation;
- Faculty Improvement Planning/Implementation;
- Learning Resource Systems; and
- Program Advisory Committees.

Full-color PDF versions of the ACCSC Monograph Series are available as a free online download at [www.ACCSC.org](http://www.ACCSC.org).

#### Endnotes

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## About the Authors

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