



**ACCST**

Accrediting Commission  
of Career Schools and  
Colleges of Technology

## ACCST Monograph Series

Institutional Assessment and  
Improvement Planning

## About ACCSCT

For 40 years, the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology (ACCSCT) has been committed to establishing and advancing quality education at private, postsecondary career schools and colleges. ACCSCT is dedicated to ensuring a quality education for more than 220,000 students who annually pursue career education at more than 800 ACCSCT accredited institutions.

ACCSCT has been recognized by the United States Department of Education as a reliable authority for the establishment of educational standards since 1967. ACCSCT's scope of recognition includes the accreditation of private, postsecondary, non-degree-granting institutions and degree-granting institutions in the United States, including those granting associate, baccalaureate and master's degrees, that are predominantly organized to educate students for occupational, trade and technical careers, and including institutions that offer programs via distance education.

ACCSCT's mission is to serve as a reliable authority on educational quality and to promote enhanced opportunities for students by establishing, sustaining, and enforcing valid standards and practices which contribute to the development of a highly trained and competitive workforce through quality career oriented education.

As an organization, ACCSCT is committed to the following core values:

### **Integrity**

Accomplishing our mission with a commitment to ethics, honesty, trust, consistency and fairness.

### **Accountability**

Fulfilling our responsibilities to one another, the higher education community, and the public.

### **Continuous Improvement**

Cultivating personal and professional growth through learning, goal setting, innovation, commitment and participation.

### **Open Communication**

Fostering a free and timely exchange of ideas and information in collegial environment.

### **Teamwork**

Creating strong partnerships while recognizing individual strengths and emphasizing respect and mutual support.

## Welcome to the ACCSCT 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. As stated in its report, *A Test of Leadership*, the Commission on the Future of Higher Education noted that "as higher education evolves in unexpected ways, this new landscape demands innovation and flexibility from the institutions that serve the nation's learners."<sup>1</sup>

The Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology (ACCSCT) has developed a series of brochures — *the ACCSCT Monograph Series*— on topics critical to institutional success. These brochures are designed to provide guidance on some of the more technical areas of ACCSCT accreditation. Through the *ACCSCT Monograph Series*, the Commission hopes to help our 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, *Institutional Assessment and Improvement Planning*, explains why your school needs an assessment and improvement 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.

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## Why Is Institutional Assessment and Improvement Planning Important?

Is your school producing a skilled workforce that is meeting employer needs? Does the rate of student retention in your program meet or exceed that of similar schools throughout the country? Is your staff conducting the most efficient and effective activities to support the educational process? Can you prove it?

Administrators at accredited career colleges and schools want to answer these and other questions concerning school success with a resounding "Yes!" In fact, you may assume that your school succeeds in meeting these goals and believe that your school does not exhibit obvious

deficiencies. Yet how do you know that the school operates as effectively as it could? This is the role of institutional assessment.

School leaders cannot afford to create and set into motion an academic program without a strong initial plan to achieve its purpose for existence. Institutional assessment provides the means to check on the progress of the plan. The results of this assessment should lead to recommendations on more effective planning, implementation, and change.

## Defining Institutional Assessment

Institutional assessment is a tool for monitoring the effectiveness of the school in serving its mission and purposes by collecting and analyzing data to answer the question, “are we meeting our goals?” Institutional assessment identifies the successful areas and the areas in need of improvement across the entire organization. The assessment process is as ongoing, and as dynamic, as the changing need for information and changes in performance within the organization.

Another term used in educational assessment is outcomes assessment. Outcomes assessment suggests a more limited approach than institutional assessment; it focuses on measuring student outcomes. ACCSCT’s treatment of institutional assessment is consistent with this distinction in terms. *The Standards of Accreditation* require an accredited career school or college of technology to implement ongoing institutional assessment and improvement activities and institutional planning appropriate to the size and scale of the school’s operations. According to the *Standards of Accreditation*, the assessment and improvement activities should support the management and administration of the school and should enhance the quality of education provided. Institutional assessment and improvement activities should validate the school’s educational and administrative practices, document and improve student learning and achievement, and support and enhance the quality of the education provided using information obtained:

- Internally (e.g., staff and faculty development and planning, student input and feedback, etc.); and
- Externally (e.g., Program Advisory Committees, employers, community involvement, school graduates, etc.)

ACCSCT-accredited schools are required to create and implement a comprehensive written institutional assessment and improvement plan that examines school operations and sets forth specific short- and long-range (i.e., minimally three years) goals for improvement with measurable benchmarks and implementation timelines that address school outcomes. Institutional assessment and improvement activities are expected to be significant and ongoing and should become a permanent part of the school’s operation. ACCSCT believes that a school that fails to plan for future improvement cannot provide assurance that it will operate in compliance with accrediting standards, meet its objectives, and fulfill its obligations to students.

Institutional assessment and external accreditation share a common goal: to support and enhance the quality of the education provided. As a school leader, think about the plans and efforts that your school has in place as you read this brochure. The primary focus of this brochure is to relate the components of institutional effectiveness to institutional assessment, then provide examples of how to use the assessment results to plan and implement improvement activities. The brochure will explore the components of the Institutional Assessment and Improvement Cycle, including planning and implementation activities. This guide contains a special section on establishing buy-in from a school’s stakeholders on the importance of this process and wraps up with information on how to turn this process into continuous performance improvement for your school. But before we delve into describing the cycle, let’s look at how school leadership must prepare for the process.

## Preparing Your School

School leaders must show stakeholders that they value institutional assessment and improvement and establish their commitment to it in order for this endeavor to have sustained success. Leaders can take certain steps to effectively start the program and keep it moving forward by committing 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 those staff and faculty involved with these school-wide efforts in order to build trust and secure commitment to the process.

- 2 | *Provide financial support for institutional assessment.* and improvement. Adding time, creating incentives, and purchasing resources for the process 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.* Having a single point of coordination for your school-wide efforts focuses the responsibility to encourage critical personnel to complete their 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 assessment and improvement efforts that have implications across the school. These team members can help to educate and assist the other parts of the organization on the process. For efforts more limited in scope — for example, an improvement of a single course or a process within a department — form a team to work on that particular issue under the guidance and encouragement of the coordinator and school-wide 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 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.* 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 team or appoint staff members to help key personnel understanding the process and its importance.
- 7 | *Disseminating the results to all stakeholders.* Disseminating the results of the assessment and improvement efforts 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: figure out what you are doing wrong, what you are doing right, and what you can do to improve. Let your stakeholders know that you will do this on a regular basis.
- 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 institutional assessment and improvement plan with the school's mission and make the data collection effort an integral part of regular activity.* Create a long-term strategic plan that includes institutional assessment and improvement. 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.

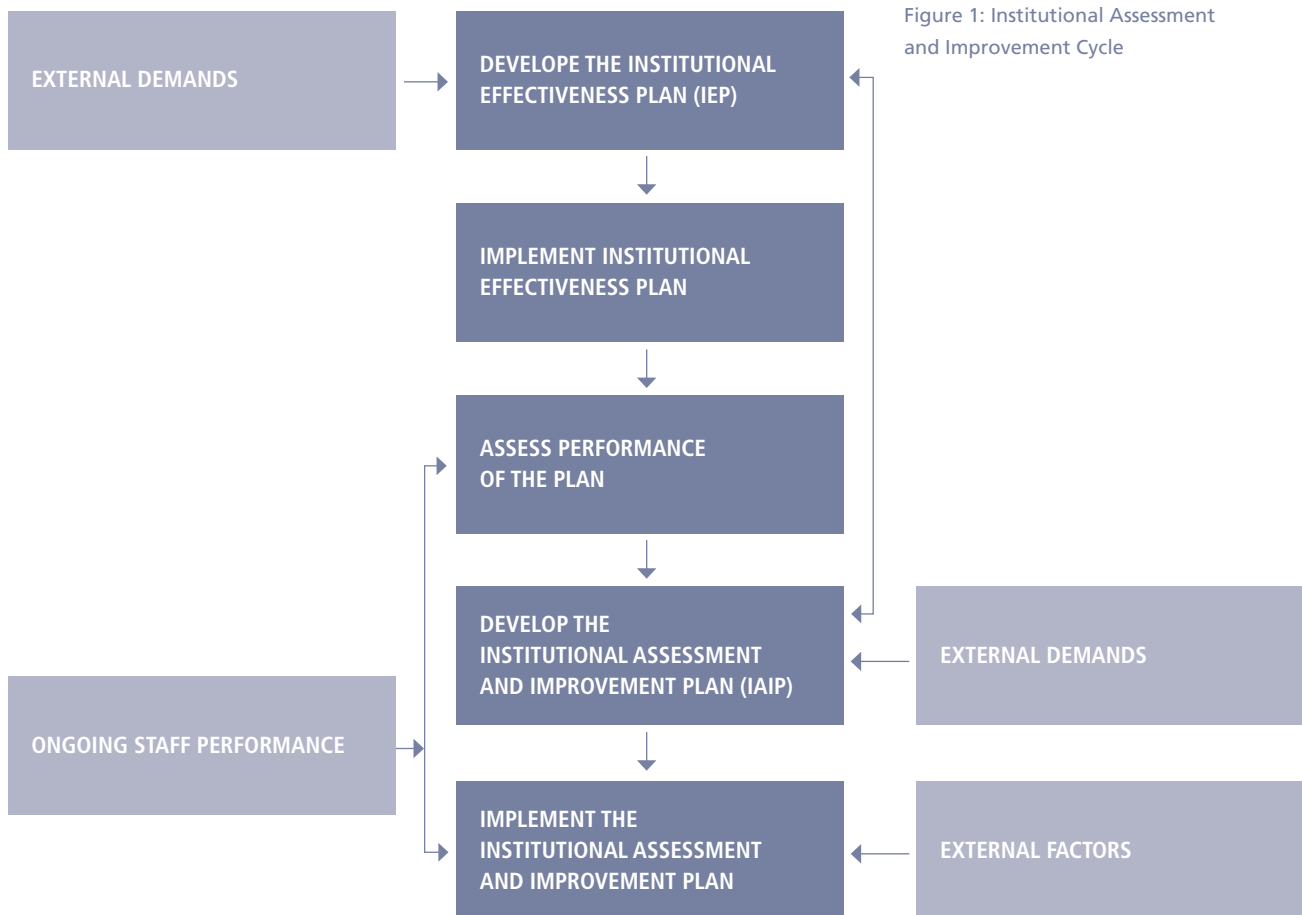
Without adequately preparing your school, success becomes less likely. Commitment and preparation are the forerunners to implementing a cycle of institutional assessment and improvement. The components of the cycle are the subject of the next section.

## The Institutional Assessment and Improvement Cycle

### PLAN THE EVALUATION

Effective institutional assessment and improvement planning, and implementation of the resulting plan, are the major components of the ongoing cycle. A critical input to the cycle is the organization's plan for institutional effectiveness which defines the broad, long-term effort by schools to facilitate meeting established goals, serving intended purposes, and improving continuously. An institutional effectiveness plan serves the organization's internal need to meet its goals as well as serving external demands, including accreditation and regulatory compliance.

Institutional effectiveness planning provides the foundation for assessment and improvement. Figure 1 illustrates the Institutional Assessment and Improvement Cycle:



As the model demonstrates, assessment is not the starting point in the cycle; the assessment effort follows the development of the institutional effectiveness plan, which includes establishing the school's mission, goals, and objectives. A school that does not define itself, its mission, organizational philosophy, education objectives, purpose, or desired outcomes for the future does not have anything meaningful to assess, or might assess the wrong things. When the organization assesses the right things, the results lead to the development of the improvement plan. If, during this cycle, there are findings that call for a review of the organization's mission and organization-level goals, the institutional effectiveness plan is reviewed for redefinition. In either case, performance according to the plan occurs and feeds back into the assessment portion of the cycle.

The components of this model are fully described in subsequent sections. The model also contains environmental factors, which surround and impact the model. The explanations below provide a better understanding of these.

*External Demands.* Requirements and requests to perform certain functions and to provide specified information can come from accreditation requirements and evaluations, regulatory agencies, employers, industry associations, the

community, the school's board of directors, and other stakeholders. Schools can anticipate and prepare for many of these demands as part of the Institutional Assessment and Improvement Cycle.

*Ongoing Staff Performance.* The staff performs its regular duties, which affect the success of the school in meeting its goals, may also affect how they manage any added assessment responsibilities and action plans resulting from the assessment or an accreditation review. In an ideal world, every staff member would perform in perfect alignment with the organization's mission, goals, and objectives. In the real world, leaders must account for individual behavior and attitudes. Performance management of school personnel can prove to be critical to the school's success.

*External Factors.* No school leader can control everything that happens outside the school, though external factors like changes in the economy, unavailability of resources, and natural disasters can obviously still affect the school's performance. The best way to deal with these external factors is to assess and monitor them when they occur by creating contingency plans for key processes which can enable a school to minimize the effects of some of these occurrences. Let's begin by exploring the development of the Institutional Effectiveness Plan.

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## Developing and Implementing the Institutional Effectiveness Plan

Just as institutional effectiveness planning provides the foundation for assessment and improvement, the institutional effectiveness plan provides the basis for the institutional assessment and improvement plans. The original effectiveness plan is written with goals and objectives from which can later be developed into an initial assessment plan. The staff performs their daily activities to align with the school's goals while external demands and factors come into play. When an assessment is conducted, the assessment results indicate the need for improvement in particular areas and provides an opportunity for the organization to use these findings to develop the improvement plan. Although the institutional improvement plan stands alone as a document, essentially it is a revised version of parts of the effectiveness plan.

The institutional effectiveness plan contains elements necessary for a high performing organization. First, the plan should include basic descriptive information concerning its program, population, and school characteristics. It is important to customize this information so that it is valuable and useful to all of the stakeholders. The next section of this report describes the other elements of the institutional effectiveness plan in more depth: the mission statement, goal setting and assessment planning, using benchmarking to set goals, selecting assessment methods and tools, and writing the final plan.

## Writing the Mission Statement

Institutional assessment cannot take place unless the school's purpose is well understood. Each school must have a meaningful mission statement that provides the foundation for every program implemented at the school, and essentially everything that happens at the school. The mission statement answers the question, "Is this something we should do?" for both existing and new institutional activities. If the answer is frequently "No," then the leadership should begin investigate whether to change the activity or the mission statement.

Here is an example of a mission statement for a fictitious school:

*New Image College of Technology creates valuable technology employees for the greater Metropolitan City community by educating its students using the most advanced teaching methods and technology. We work throughout the community to determine what employers need. We aim to produce students that possess those skills and exhibit those qualities. New Image is dedicated to staying ahead of the ever-changing skill set required in changing times by regularly updating programs.*

This statement tells you:

- What the school is trying to accomplish: creating valuable technology employees for the community
- How the school is accomplishing this mission: by educating its students using the newest and most advanced teaching methods and technology
- What the school's values are: using the most advanced teaching methods and technology, meeting employer needs, staying ahead of the need for skills

Now, suppose the school added this sentence to its mission statement:

*We continuously study and evaluate student outcomes and institutional goal achievement and use these to improve our efforts for our students, staff, employers, and the community.*

This would demonstrate the school's commitment to institutional assessment and improvement and would send an important message to the parties named. Those people would have a more explicit idea of what New Image College of Technology is doing for them and this knowledge may encourage them to be involved in that effort.

If your career school or college does not have a mission statement, develop one before you begin your assessment planning. If you do have one, make sure it reflects your true purpose. Add a statement to your mission about your commitment to assessment and improvement, if it is not already included.

## Goal Setting and Assessment Planning

When the mission statement is in place, your staff is ready to work on goal and objective development for either an initial institutional effectiveness plan or, if you are further along in the cycle, an institutional improvement plan. Remember, every goal must support the mission statement. Some goals are directly linked to the mission; these are your education goals. Other goals support the educational process and school operations, so the connection with the mission statement is not as direct. Together, these goals provide a framework for making your school a quality educational school.

The goals, and the objectives you will write later, form the basis of the assessment plan. So first ask yourself, "what are the areas that are most important in which to set goals?" Some examples of these critical goals might relate to recruitment efforts, admissions policies and procedures, student learning outcomes, and assisting graduates as they transition into the career field. This process would facilitate school's ability to build a strong foundation, and then plan to improve on this foundation.

The *Standards of Accreditation* note important outcomes related to student success: student graduation rates, graduate employment rates, employer satisfaction, student satisfaction, and student success over time. However, the Commission's evaluation includes a broader

view, which considers inputs, resources, and processes that should be evaluated within the context of the school's mission and demonstrated achievements.

To parallel this broader view, we refer to a model from the field of human performance technology to help us understand more about writing the main components of the assessment and improvement plan. Theorists Rummel and Brache<sup>2</sup> distinguish three levels of organization performance:

- Organization
- Process
- Job/Performer

These levels can relate to goals, objectives, and action plan items in this way:

- Organization level – broad, high level goals that affect the entire organization. Example areas can be found in the *Standards of Accreditation*, which require that the institutional 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
- Process level – targeted, measurable objectives that contribute to accomplishing the goals
- Individual level – action plan items by individuals and departments to accomplish the objectives  
Institutional leadership will be interested in the organization-level goals and will ask such questions as:
  - Have we improved graduate employment rates to our goal level?
  - Has student success over time increased by desired percentages?
  - Is our school meeting the expected level of profitability?

The organizational goals for which success would need to be demonstrated in these areas form the basis for assessment tasks. They are generally assessed and reviewed at the highest levels. The processes needed to accomplish the goals, or the objectives, are often developed and assessed at the next level: a department or program. To accomplish these objectives, the school needs an action plan with individual tasks to complete. The question then becomes:

- What are the actions items that small groups and individuals complete for this process level?
- When must they be completed?
- Who will complete the tasks?

These are the next part of the assessment plan. Most frequently, assessment of the action items would signal “completion” of the tasks involved.

Let's say that New Image College of Technology found that its library usage had dropped during the previous 18 months. Review the following example goal and objectives.

**Goal:** Increase library holdings to enhance the impact on the students' education, demonstrated by a student library survey rating of at least 4 (on a 1-5 scale) within the next 12 months.

**Objective:** Obtain a 10% budget increase for library resource materials by January 31st.

**Action Item:** Negotiate pricing on new materials by September 20th. Assigned to Robert.

**Action Item:** Prepare and submit budget request by October 30th. Assigned to Keisha.

**Objective:** Enlarge the book, software, and periodicals collection by 25% by December 31st.

**Action Item:** Negotiate pricing on new materials by September 20th. Assigned to Robert.

**Action Item:** Purchase materials by December 31st. Assigned to Robert.

**Objective:** Increase the company profiles collection to at least 30 profiles by May 31st.

**Action Item:** Contact employers and Program Advisory Committee members to secure materials by April 30th. Assigned to Robert.

Goals and objectives include action verbs — like improve, maintain, and increase — followed by the desired outcome. Goals and objectives are best when they have measurable targets such as a percentage or numeric change. Goals, however, can be broad and not as specific as objectives, for example, “attract the best qualified students into our

program” is fine as a goal as long as the objectives that support it are measurable. Action items are specific as to what must be accomplished, by when and by whom. Without this information, assessing the completion of the task is difficult.

When you write your plan, you may want to use an outline report format, or you may prefer to use a table for planning similar to the one shown in Figure 2. Certain parts of the plan may be better served in one form or other, but use whatever works best for your staff and stakeholders.

#### Organization Mission:

*New Image College of Technology creates valuable technology employees for the greater Metropolitan City community by educating its students using the most advanced teaching methods and technology. We work throughout the community to determine what employers need. We aim to produce students that possess those skills and exhibit those qualities. New Image is dedicated to staying ahead of the ever-changing skill set required in changing times by regularly updating programs. We continuously study and evaluate student outcomes and institutional goal achievement and use these to improve our efforts for our students, staff, employers, and the community.*

Goal	Objective	Action Plan Items / Responsibility	Timeline / Deadline	Assessment Methods /Tools	Results / Analysis
1. Increase the impact of the library on the students' education demonstrated by a student library survey rating of at least 4 (on a 1-5 scale)			January 30th And annual review each January 30th	Student Library Survey	
	1a. A budget increase of 10% for resource materials for the library will be submitted for corporate approval		January 30th	Compare current year and previous year approved budgets	
		A1. Negotiate pricing on new materials; Assigned to Robert.	September 20th	Pricing documents indicating completion of task	
		A2. Prepare and submit budget request; Assigned to Keisha.	October 30th	Check document – completed and submitted	

Could this adapted sample of goals and objectives relate back to the mission of our fictitious New Image College? The New Image mission statement states that the school strives to determine employer needs and to provide students with the most advanced teaching methods. A well-stocked library with updated, relevant materials and software, including employer profiles, could certainly fit into this scenario. If the college had improvement needs in this area, an improvement plan with these goals and objectives would be consistent with the college's mission.

## Using Benchmarking to Set Goals

Let's talk for a minute about benchmarking. Six Sigma defines benchmarking as an "improvement tool whereby a company measures its performance or process against other companies' best practices, determines how those companies achieved their performance levels, and uses the information to improve its own performance."<sup>3</sup> Best practices could come from within the same company or from entirely different industry. In our case, the best practices for educating students would most likely come from other career schools and colleges of technology but could also come from community colleges and other educational institutions.

In institutional assessment, a benchmark is the mark against which your assessment results will be compared. If a culinary school director, for example, finds data for similar schools stating that 95% of students are placed in their desired types of positions within 30 days, then the director may want to assess his or her school's graduate employment rate against this benchmark. The proper measures would then be put into place to gather the information.

Local, national, and state organizations sometimes gather benchmarking information that could relate to your institutional practices. You may have to be a member, participate in the benchmarking, or pay a fee to view the data. This type of benchmarking provides data across the members of the group rather than from individual members. Using this type of information allows you to compare your school to a standard set by similar schools rather than an individual school.

## Selecting Assessment Methods and Tools

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

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

There is a variety of off-the-shelf assessment tools available, or your staff can create assessment instruments customized to your needs. But whether designed in-house or purchased off-the-shelf, the instrument must produce data that helps the school assess what you want to assess. It is also important to select and create methods and tools that will be used willingly and properly. The tools should fit with the culture of your organization. A tool that is designed poorly, or that is too much trouble for those who must implement it, should be avoided.

When deciding how to assess progress to a goal or objective, one important question can save your school time and money: are we already collecting the required data? Inventory your school's current data collection efforts. Your school, or individual faculty and staff, may have information systems designed to gather and analyze information on student success and organization performance. Match those efforts with organizational goals and document 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 or to add another tool or process.

In areas where no data collection exists or current collection systems provide only partial data, you will need to identify possible methods and tools to collect data. As we discussed, these can be bought off-the-shelf, or created in-house. An advantage of creating a survey instrument in-house, such as for the student library survey in our fictitious goal example, is that questions can be more easily customized to the information needs of the school.

However, in order to be able to create a survey tool, your staff must possess the required time and expertise, and the tools must be tested to ensure that they yield the expected data. The methods and tools must be created and implemented in a way that enables those involved in the data collection to participate with understanding. The ability to get exactly the needed data organized to meet your analysis need is the greatest benefit of well-designed, custom instrument.

If you choose to buy or use an externally created product, there are several sources for these. Education associations and private enterprises create useful tools for certain assessment areas that are not as customized to your organization, but may produce adequate results. The main issue with these instruments is the expense – often, a school can not afford them. If you can afford to buy a survey instrument, it is important to choose carefully to find one that meets the school's objectives and collects the right data. Just as with an instrument developed internally, conduct a pilot test to check applicability and appropriateness.

## Collecting Data

When collecting data that will consist of both facts and opinions, both qualitative and quantitative tools must be used. Qualitative information can explain quantitative data in many instances. For example, New Image College might have found that use of the resource library was down 10% this year by reviewing records on materials checked out or by implementing a process to count how many people enter the library. These processes would provide quantitative data, which would tell you that library use was down, but would not tell you why. For that you need qualitative data. For example, an open-ended survey of students might show that students perceived the library materials as outdated, or that the library hours do not match their schedules. Both types of data should be collected to get the most complete picture of performance. Some data should be collected regularly or in intervals that match goal review periods. Other types of information may be needed for a specific task or project. Create a process for ongoing collection of the regularly needed data. When reviewing strategic goals, determine regular data needs and build information systems that can provide data upon request. Data that are regularly available upon

demand can be produced for an annual plan review, to make a decision, or to meet an unexpected external need. The next few paragraphs describe several listings of types of data and instruments.

One educational model provides examples of categories of information to collect: personality, attitude, curricular and pedagogical style preferences, omnibus instruments measuring a variety of variables, placement, guidance, counseling, diagnostic tests of academic and personal problems, and local data collection instruments, instruments and general sources for facilities, finances, libraries, general management, student services, teaching, boards of trustees, and general outcomes. Valuable trend information includes information collected on recruitment, program choice of student, faculty and staff personal data, instruction ratios/teaching contact, costs of instruction, student achievement, research and scholarship.<sup>4</sup>

A review of a major university's effectiveness planning workbook shows a list of assessment methods for student learning outcomes including pre- and post- tests, course-embedded assessment comprehensive exams, certification and licensure exams, portfolio evaluation, capstone course and grading with scoring rubrics. The workbook also includes assessment methods for program outcomes including tracking use of services, satisfaction surveys, timelines and budgets, focus group discussions, peer institutions benchmarking and reflective journals.<sup>5</sup> The National Community College Benchmarking Project lists 25 data points collected in their study including minority participation rates, student engagement ratings, course persistence rates, and training expenditures per employee.<sup>6</sup> Use the reference list at the end of this document for the sources of these materials.

## Final Notes on Writing the Institutional Effectiveness Plan

The team writing the plan and all those that contribute their department and program inputs must always keep in mind the purpose of the plan: internal effectiveness and continuous improvement. The team/taskforce must use this same philosophy in its own efforts to implement

the plan, setting and meeting deadlines for their own progress on the effectiveness plan and any subsequent improvement plans. The assessment team will be expected to monitor the assessment process as well and make any necessary changes before the next step in the Institutional Assessment and Improvement cycle proceeds.

## Implementing the Institutional Effectiveness Plan



Most of what goes into implementing a plan is simply this: performing to meet plan goals. The staff members of the school perform their regular responsibilities and conduct action plan activities, and designated staff participate in assessment and data collection activities. While “performance” is occurring, the school’s implementation team works with the departments and programs to make sure that they are conducting the necessary activities to make the plan work. The implementation team must communicate with each department about the process and expectations, educate them in areas needed, obtain their active involvement, and provide assistance when required.

The team should schedule and conduct regular reviews of the progress to the plan. The specific timeframe depends on the organization but a good guideline is to utilize a quarterly review. If the team finds that parts of the organization are not implementing the plan appropriately, the team should intervene. Areas that are found to be doing well could benefit from additional encouragement, recognition, or reward from the leadership team at the school.

The overall plan should go through a regular annual review as the internal and external environments are dynamic and the plan may require change. Longer term, the school should review its overall strategy and create a new plan if great changes are expected.

Conducting the assessment is also a component of implementing the plan. While we have discussed assessment a great deal in other sections, a few key points remain related to assessing performance relative to the plan.

## Assessing Performance of the Plan



If your school has not previously conducted a formal assessment program, the question is often, “where do we begin?” Here are some suggestions.

*Conduct pilot projects.* Choose a small, relevant assessment project with a group that is eager to cooperate and has data accessible or the expertise to figure out how to assess the goal. A visible problem with an anticipated successful solution works well. Word-of-mouth and intentional publicity on a successful pilot project will help your future efforts.

*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. Start where you can be more successful. Some groups will be more amenable to your efforts. Some areas have readily available assessment 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 assessment.

*Be flexible.* As the team implements the assessment, 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 assessment effort.

## Analyzing the Results

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 no matter what size your school, getting the processes right are critical to your continued success.

Begin by organizing the data collected according to which objectives and goals the data is intended to assess. 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 assessment team must complete the matching process and make sense of the results.

After organizing the data, the team reviews each objective and the assessment data. 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 calls for a review of the assessment methods and tools. The second question is most often answered by hard data: a percentage, an amount, or a rating or ranking. The answer to the final question may be found in the hard data, such as a closed-ended survey, or the team/taskforce might have to review qualitative data to explain the quantitative results.

When analyzing assessment data, the assessment team must keep in mind that not all variables in the environment can be controlled. At times, external variables affect the assessment results and must be explained in the analysis, and unexplainable results may require further study. If the inexplicable data are part of a cycle of ongoing data collection, the assessment plan should be altered in the Institutional Assessment and Improvement Plan to yield more meaningful results in the future.

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> However, both focal points and individual outcome results should be considered in the context in which they occur, for greater understanding.

The assessment team/ focuses mainly on the organization-level goals; however, high level department or program goals may also be their responsibility. Lower level objectives and job/performer-level action plans should be reviewed within the appropriate departments in much the same manner as the team review.

## Disseminating the Results

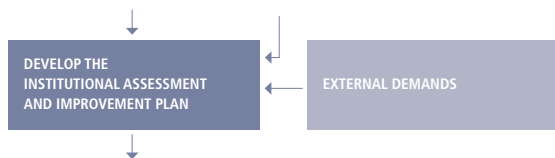
Early in this brochure, we noted that the school’s leadership had to commit to disseminating the results. Results should be communicated to:

- The organization at large;
- The departments and program as owners of the goals/objectives;
- The students and alumni; and
- All other stakeholders

The assessment team should make a presentation of results to any organization leaders who may not be involved on the team. School leadership will be most interested in organization-level goals and key outcomes on critical objectives. The team should meet with departments and programs about their outcomes. The groups who are responsible for making changes to meet goals in the future should be given that information which will in turn facilitate their ability to implement change. Students and external groups should be provided with a plan and evidence of the school’s commitment to improvement. Feedback should be available in a concise, summary format as well as detailed available results to those groups who need them. If any group requires a certain format, such as an accreditation self-evaluation report, these results should be customized accordingly. The leadership should prepare reports for, or communicate in whatever way appropriate with, students, alumni, employers, the community, the board of directors, and any government agencies, and accrediting commissions requiring results.

So, the results are in and have been disseminated to the stakeholders. The next question will be: "What are your plans for improvement?" The next section of this brochure explains how to develop the institutional improvement plan.

## Developing the Institutional Assessment and Improvement Plan



Now that all the results are in and disseminated, your team can complete an institutional assessment and improvement plan. The purpose of the institutional assessment and improvement plan is clear: setting new goals, objectives, and actions plans based on assessment results showing that the school has not met certain goals. If you have involved all stakeholders, educated them on the process, and communicated the plan and results, those affected should expect that changes will occur for goals not met.

The specific actions or changes to be implemented based on assessment findings target continuous improvement. Examples of changes that could occur include revising curricula, improving departmental processes, implementing new processes, or reallocating resources. If changes are big or a group is resistant, consider including a change management in your improvement plan. ACCSCT 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 for improvement, with measurable benchmarks and implementation timelines. Your institutional improvement plan for accreditation may or may not be the same plan that you use for your organization; this depends on whether or not your goals and objectives go beyond the boundaries of the issues evaluated for accreditation.

To complete the Institutional Assessment and Improvement Cycle, the institutional improvement plan must be implemented. Plan implementation is the next topic of discussion.

## Implementing the Institutional Assessment and Improvement Plan



Assessment and planning may have been done perfectly, but the actual changes needed for improvement must be implemented for the whole cycle of activity to be worthwhile. The assessment team should work with all groups to implement the improvement plan. Key elements of good implementation management include: Establish a timeline for implementing the activities. The timeline should be long enough to implement action items and for results to take effect. The team should be mindful of the next time for regularly scheduled evaluation, if it can, and determine whether the problem can be corrected before the next review. Depending on the nature and scope of the plan, the team might schedule an evaluation soon after implementation or the project may require a waiting period.

*Communicate the benefits of change.* Those affected should know and understand why a new action plan is put into place. If you show them what they will gain, they are more likely to adopt the plan and conduct the activity. Manage change effectively. There are various ways to manage change. Rather than just force the change, get those affected involved in creating the plan for change, which will help get buy-in to the implementation effort. The section that follows on gaining involvement will provide some insight into gaining acceptance as well. Follow-up on progress to the plan. The team is ultimately responsible for the improvement and assessment cycle, so the team should monitor activities related to the plan and keep the performers on track.

*Report on your progress.* Those conducting improvement activities would benefit from creating progress reports. This would let the assessment team and the school leadership know that they are serious about continuous improvement and working on meeting goals. It would also create an opportunity to address any issues, for example, needing an additional resource.

*Complete and repeat.* Implementing improvement activities should improve performance. However, the continual nature of the process leads back to the assessment part of the Institutional Assessment and Improvement Cycle where the process starts again. Let return to New Image College of Technology. We will imagine that at New Image, the evaluations have taken place during the January 30th annual review. The goal was: "increase library holdings to enhance the impact on the students' education, demonstrated by a student library survey rating of at least 4 (on a 1-5 scale) within the next 12 months." This year's results showed a 3.85 rating. All action items had been completed as planned, however, the assessment showed that about half of the students surveyed were not aware of materials that had arrived in the past several months and they were assuming that the library still held outdated information. The institutional improvement plan might state:

**Goal:** Maintain a library that has high impact on the students' education demonstrated by a student library survey rating of at least 4 (on a 1-5 scale) within the next 12 months.

**Objective:** Raise student awareness level on updated library materials by 80%.

**Action Item:** Include information on updated library materials in campus newsletter by February 28th. Assigned to Robert.

**Action Item:** Include information on updated library materials in student registration packet by April 30th. Assigned to Keisha.

**Action Item:** Create and post flyers on updated library materials on all major bulletin boards including the library area by February 28th. Assigned to Keisha.

The goal has not changed from the original plan. However, the action items now relate to the area identified in the

assessment. The following year's assessment would be an item specifically to measure awareness that already exists on the library survey. An interim survey could be conducted sooner to find out if the measures are working. The improvement plan focuses on those items found deficient and targets the goal.

Your institutional assessment leaders may take the appropriate planning, assessing, and implementation steps and still confront the obstacle of lack of stakeholder involvement. The next section describes ways to overcome this obstacle.

## 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, Program Advisory Committee members, employers, and external resources alike play an important role in the process at some point. In a discussion of self-study in colleges, educational author H.R. Kells identifies the following characteristics of higher education institutions that can affect the process of getting buy-in:<sup>8</sup>

- Goals are difficult to clarify
  - Data collection systems are poor
  - Policy formulation and decision-making are unique to these types of organizations
  - Decisions about the major function 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 to implementing the improvement plan.

## Involving Faculty and Staff

More than likely, faculty and staff will want to be involved in an institutional improvement process. Why wouldn't they want to be involved? Their career and professional satisfaction come through the students they serve and the school for which they work. At the very core of any successful school are the faculty and staff. They are the individuals that are going to be asked to gather the data and conduct the day-to-day work that "makes things happen." In all honesty, it's very easy to create a plan — the hard part is to implement it. Let's get to the very basic question that is going to be asked. This question will be asked verbally or nonverbally by every person involved in an institutional assessment process, regardless of the school:

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### What is in it for me?

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If you cannot answer this question, you cannot proceed with involving anyone in the school in the planning. They need to know what the advantages are of getting involved in this "extra" work that distracts them from their "real" job of serving the school and ultimately the students. Here are a few questions that you would ask (or consider asking) if you were in their shoes:

How does this help me?

What is my involvement?

What is my time commitment?

Will improve our school?

Do I believe in it?

The questions for your own school are as varied as the faculty and staff who serve your school. It is up to the school's leadership to have the answers to these questions first and foremost when you ask for faculty and staff involvement.

Faculty and staff are involved at all three levels of the planning process. At the individual level, the leadership team must help them plan for their individual roles in the assessment process. At the process level, the leadership team must help them determine how their roles in the assessment process interact with the roles of others in the assessment process. Finally, at the organization level, the

leadership team must challenge the faculty and staff to assist the organization in effectively implementing the institutional assessment plan.

For example, for a faculty member, the activities might look like this:

**Individual level:** A faculty member conducts three summative and one formative evaluation in each course that they teach.

**Process level:** A faculty member will assist the department chair/coordinator in assessing course and program goals and outcomes on a semiannual basis.

**Organizational level:** Faculty members will assist the leadership team in planning for institutional improvement during the next three years through the utilization of course and program evaluation data.

An image often utilized to symbolize cohesiveness is a chain. As the saying goes, "an organization is a chain that is as strong as its weakest link." For the purpose of institutional assessment and improvement planning, each link must understand its role, the role of other links in the chain, and most importantly, everyone involved must recognize that in order to be successful, the chain must pull together.

## Involving Students and Alumni

Schools have a very difficult time involving students and alumni in the institutional assessment process. It's difficult to open up the school to criticism, and to be open about the challenges you face to your students and graduates. Sometimes doing so can be embarrassing, and it goes against the grain of everything you have been taught about marketing. As a school, you are immediately put on the defensive and often you feel the need to explain and defend your institutional policies.

However, for institutional assessment, students and alumni are your greatest allies. They have spent more time in the classrooms, laboratories, break rooms, staff offices — and in your customers' companies — than most of the faculty,

staff, and administrators in the school. However, although your students and graduates often have the “inside scoop” on the trouble areas within a school, more than likely they will not become involved unless formally invited. But if they are, they will usually respond well. Typically, students and alumni are proud of their school and they want to help it grow stronger. In order to facilitate their involvement:

- 1 | They must be formally invited to be part of the institutional assessment team
- 2 | They must be “full” team members
- 3 | They must have goals and action plans for participation
- 4 | They must have a timeline for making recommendations
- 5 | The organization must listen to their recommendations.
- 6 | The organization must act upon their recommendation (even if this means only considering it and deciding against it).

Doing nothing is not acceptable. Student and alumni are volunteering their time and expect action to come from their recommendations. Before you request their involvement, you must first be willing to listen and act.

## Involving Program Advisory Committees

Program Advisory Committees (PACs) are a critical component of any organization’s institutional assessment plan. PACs are your formal link to industrial standards and are a formalization of your commitment to produce students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes demanded by the employment community that you serve. Without PACs, an organization cannot effectively assess student readiness for employment. PACs include your most highly valued employers and you must respect this role within your school, and provide them with a powerful role in holding the school accountable for the quality of its graduates. What are the things for which PACs should hold your school accountable? These will likely include producing graduates who have:

- Knowledge of the philosophy, traditions, and practices of their industry.
- Skills need to perform the job duties and task.
- Attitudes that allow the PAC members’ future employees the ability to be productive
- Abilities that will help them lead PAC members’ companies into the future

Can you provide them this type of employee? If so, PACs will become your greatest asset in the documentation of your institutional assessment outcomes.

Often, assessment teams review institutional assessment plans and find one to two lines about PACs. Typically, PACs are minimal committees, with minimal meetings, with minimal documentation of the discussions, and with even less documentation about the implementation of the PAC’s recommendations.

On the other hand, PACs can be leveraged to demonstrate that the school is genuinely concerned about the employability of their graduates and is continuously seeking and implementing the recommendations of the PACs. The key to involvement of PACs in the cycle is the school’s commitment to highly qualified employees. There must be a visible demonstration of this commitment in the organizational planning documents and in the daily commitment to workplace standards.

## Involving External Resources

Even if you have planned and obtained involvement from all the internal resources, you may need to complement their input by adding that of some external resources. One source of help is to hire a consultant. If your group is not confident of its ability to go through the process, you might hire a consultant to take you through it the first time. A consultant can also be hired to do specific smaller tasks that your staff may not have the time or expertise to undertake. For example, you might hire a firm to administer a questionnaire and to tabulate the results.

One external resource is the accreditation on-site evaluation team that will assess your school’s performance and compliance with accreditation standards. You may not think of the team as a resource but the on-site

evaluation team brings an objective perspective to your school, and your existing policies and procedures. If you let the accreditation report serve only as a document that gets you accredited, you may be missing an opportunity to improve above and beyond the requirements of accreditation. Speaking with the members of the team during an on-site evaluation can also provide insight into the operation of your school.

You may also interact with other schools, employers, and area groups who can lend resources to you to help you improve. Your organization might apply for an award or certification that requires outside review and feedback. Take advantage of these resources as it will not only help you improve but it will show your commitment to the continuous improvement process and to educational excellence.

## 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, teamwork, and open communication are the core values of ACCSCT. 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 institution.

The *ACCSCT Monograph Series* is 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 in print or under development are:

- Self Evaluation Processes and Practices
- Institutional Assessment and Improvement Planning
- Faculty Improvement Planning/Implementation
- Developing and Designing Degree Programs
- Learning Resource Systems
- Program Advisory Committees

**Full-color PDF versions of the Commission Consultant Brochures are available as a free download at [www.accsct.org](http://www.accsct.org). To purchase hard copies of the brochures, contact ACCSCT at [clambert@accsct.org](mailto:clambert@accsct.org).**

#### Endnotes

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## About the Authors

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Denise Allen conducts the daily operations of Sage Performance. She is a business and education consultant in organization performance, training, instructional design and development, business and educational writing, and work-life balance programs with 20 years of experience in manufacturing, high-tech, service and marketing environments. Denise's experience spans large and small scale projects, working with individual contributors, management and executives in various occupations.

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