

The Office of Curriculum, Accreditation and Assessment

Institutional Effectiveness

An Accreditation Update

Special SACS Update Edition by SACS Faculty Coordinator Michael Turney

“Regional commissions ... divided accreditation into two purposes to make the review more acceptable and valuable to colleges and universities. The first is quality assurance... on the traditional issues of mission, finance, governance, & minimal quality standards. The second, institutional improvement, assesses the quality of institutional results ... related to some aspect of student learning outcomes.”

Joseph C. Burke
Achieving Accountability
in Higher Education

“Can we win SACS approval? Can we get reaffirmed?”

If you attended the First Friday reception in the UC Ballroom on January 12, you may recognize the questions above as the start of the chorus to “*The Ballad of SACS Reaffirmation*.” In that song performed by Pat Moynahan and Michael Turney, the response was an enthusiastic and affirmative “Yes, we’ll be reaffirmed. We will be reaffirmed. We’re among the best in the land.”

Realistically, it’s important that we don’t fall victim to a false sense of optimism or put off working on reaffirmation while we wait for the due date to get closer. NKU’s reaffirmation of accreditation is neither guaranteed nor a foregone conclusion.

SACS fully reaffirmed 73 institutions last year, but it also denied reaffirmation, placed on probation, or issued warnings to 18 others.

To be reaffirmed, we will need to be in compliance with SACS’s core requirements and

comprehensive standards as well as having a meaningful Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for improving student learning. Reaffirmation has become a two-pronged process, and we need to attend to both.

We now have a qualified and enthusiastic committee exploring our options and preparing for the selection of an appropriate QEP topic. But, at the same time, critical compliance issues are going begging for attention.

Unless we get serious and starting focusing on critical compliance issues, including but not limited to assessment planning, listing student learning outcomes in syllabi, aligning course outcomes with academic program goals, and justifying faculty credentials on a course by course basis, we may not get the positive response we want from SACS.

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Compliance no longer uses a one-size-fits-all checklist

Achieving SACS compliance used to involve a detailed checklist of “must statements” that were uniformly applied to every institution, and institutional self-studies simply gathered data about each of these statements and checked off whether the institution was in compliance or not. And, with every institution required to be in compliance with every standard, the only alternative to a checkmark showing compliance was a detailed plan outlining how any non-compliance would be corrected.

In 1998, when NKU did its last compliance audit, SACS provided 468 must statements we had to address. They ranged from percentage of courses taught by faculty members holding terminal degrees to the number of hours the library was open and dealt with policies as diverse as generally accepted principles of institutional accounting and procedures for determining whether student athletes were in “academic good standing.” (Continued on page 2)

No longer a checklist
(Continued from page 1)

Since every must statement applied to every SACS institution and they all had to measure up in the same way, there was little recognition of institutional differences. Mission statements, visions, goals, funding streams, and even student characteristics were almost irrelevant. The only relevant question was: Does the institution's data fall within the parameters of acceptability defined by SACS?

But, even as NKU was going through that daunting one-size fits-all process in 1998, change was percolating through SACS and other regional accrediting agencies. They were beginning to rethink the accreditation process.

The next decade brought remarkable changes. Accreditation moved away from rigidly demanding uniform measures of conformity from every institution and moved toward asking institutions how their unique

missions and attributes encourage student learning. Instead of requiring that every institution's metrics measure up to every other institution, accrediting agencies now ask institutions how effective they are in meeting their own stated goals and objectives.

Old bugaboos like the number of volumes in the library or the percentage of part-time faculty are gone. In their place is a concern with how well the institution is achieving its self-defined purpose and whether it is delivering what it promises to its students.

This revised approach called for new and less quantitative standards that can easily be adapted to fit the unique traits of individual institutions. SACS's response was the 2001 edition of *The Principles of Accreditation*.

As *The Handbook for Reaffirmation of Accreditation* points out, these new guidelines "introduced significant changes... The institution's effectiveness and its ability to create and sustain an environment that enhances student learning is the focus of this new approach. The process is designed to determine the quality of an institution within the framework of its mission, its goals, and its analysis of and response to crucial institutional issues." (p. 2)

In lieu of nearly 500 very detailed must statements, the new *Principles* contained 12 Core Requirements and 53 Comprehensive Standards that form a broad and philosophical summary of good practices in higher education.

Now, institutions demonstrating their compliance with SACS requirements and comprehensive standards begin by examining their own mission, vision, and values statements to assess their compatibility with the SACS guidelines. Then they look at their existing policies and daily practices to see how well they measure up to institutional assertions and SACS standards. How consistent and mutually supportive are they?

These are not rhetorical questions. SACS expects definitive answers and will not be satisfied with fine-sounding verbiage, off the cuff assertions of compliance, or heartfelt assurances of good intentions. *The Handbook* advises that answers must be supported by "compelling and appropriately documented evidence." (p. 17)

Unlike the old must statements that could easily be addressed by counting occurrences and tabulating statistical summaries, *The Principles* require much more interpretation and narrative explanation. *The Handbook* says some standards require "extensive analysis, judgment, multiple assessment modes, and identification of patterns of evidence in order to present a persuasive case for compliance." (p 14)

"Several sources of relevant evidence may need to be identified in order to justify a claim of compliance." (p. 16)

The bottom line is: The new approach to accreditation allows NKU and other SACS schools more latitude than they had in the past to demonstrate how and to what extent they comply with the accepted standards and good practices of higher education. However, they now have a much greater need to thoroughly explain their intentions and document their actions.

Compliance Committees

Seven university committees have been established to help NKU prepare the documentation for its SACS Compliance Certification. These seven committees will focus on the following areas:

- Academic Programs & Support
- Communication with Constituencies
- Faculty Credentials & Duties
- Finance & Budget
- Governance & Administration
- Planning & Assessment
- Student Policies & Services

SACS Principles are still evolving

A revised 2007 *Interim Edition of The Principles of Accreditation* incorporates largely procedural changes approved at the SACS annual meeting in December 2006. Further changes linking academic program objectives to student learning outcomes at the course level are expected in Dec. 2007.

These changes and any other changes made through 2008 will apply to NKU when its reaffirmation is considered in 2009.

SACS's concern with faculty credentials is now at the course level

Reviewing faculty credentials has always been part of accreditation. The primary concerns were:
 (a) Does the institution have enough full-time faculty? and
 (b) Do these faculty have the appropriate academic degrees for the ranks and positions they hold?

Of course, it wasn't this simple. There were lots of other questions related to terminal versus non-terminal degrees, full-time versus part-time, tenure track versus non-tenure track appointments, administrative release time, committee and community service, performance reviews, and other aspects of faculty work. While this ensured adequate-sized faculties and at least minimally acceptable credentials for being on a faculty, it never drilled down to the classroom level to consider faculty qualifications for specific courses.

SACS's new concentration on student learning outcomes is changing this.

Now, instead of asking if faculty members' credentials are appropriate for someone of their rank in a given department, SACS is asking if faculty members' credentials are appropriate for each and every course they teach. And, this question is asked every term, not just once every ten years when it's time for reaffirmation.

It has to be answered on the SACS Faculty Roster form that was first given to NKU department chairs in fall 2006. Henceforth all programs must submit a Faculty Roster each term they offer any for-credit courses.

The Faculty Roster lists each faculty member, whether full-time or part-time, along with each course she/he is teaching that term, regardless

of which department "owns" the course. It then lists information about the faculty member's qualifications for teaching that particular course.

In most cases, the expected minimum qualification will be a graduate degree. Ideally, faculty teaching baccalaureate level courses will hold a doctorate or a master's degree in the field in which they are teaching. At the very least, SACS expects a master's degree in some field with a concentration of at least 18 graduate semester hours in the discipline being taught. (*Resource Manual for Principles of Accreditation*; p. 54)

However, there may be instances in which someone without a graduate degree or graduate credit could be qualified to teach, and SACS realizes this. In these cases, rather than listing the faculty member's degrees and/or graduate hours, the Faculty Roster calls for the department chair to narratively explain and document the instructor's alternate qualifications. They may include, but are not limited to, work or research experience, professional licensure or certification, non-credit professional development or other specialized training, prior teaching experience in

this or other related courses, or extenuating circumstances. For faculty members who only teach fundamental courses in the discipline in which they earned a graduate degree, there is little difference between the old SACS standards and the new ones. But, for those who teach a diverse repertoire of courses that cross disciplines, or those who have drifted into different areas of interest or a different discipline than their graduate degrees, there may have to be more documentation and/or explanation of their credentials. It's possible, for instance, that someone teaching a four-course load could end up with four different sets of credentials and/or narrative justifications, one for each of her/his courses.

At this point, we can't predict the full impact this change in assessing faculty credentials will have on NKU because we don't yet have a full set of Faculty Rosters to review. However, some administrators are concerned that our department chairs may need to write an inordinate number of special justifications for faculty members who are teaching outside of the discipline in which they earned their degrees and most of their graduate hours.

Sources for more information about SACS reaffirmation

SACS documents available on-line at www.sacscoc.org:

The 2007 Interim Edition of The Principles of Accreditation
The Handbook for Reaffirmation of Accreditation
Resource Manual for Principles of Accreditation

NKU information sources:

NKU's SACS Reaffirmation Main Page at <http://access.nku.edu/sacs>
 QEP site on Blackboard at <http://learnonline.nku.edu>
 Dr. Michael Turney, Faculty Coordinator for SACS Reaffirmation,
 available at turney@nku.edu or extension 6394.
 Dr. Sam Zachary, Chair of the QEP Theme and Concept Committee
 available at zachary@nku.edu or extension 5883

The Office of Curriculum, Accreditation and Assessment provides assistance to colleges, departments, faculty, and other units of the University in the identification of appropriate information pertinent to measuring programmatic outcomes.

The office is responsible for the University's curricular and assessment activities, serves as NKU's Liaison to the Southern Association of Colleges & Schools (SACS), and will take a leadership role in the University's 2009 reaffirmation process.

Assessment drives continuous improvement

Earlier approaches to accreditation stressed the need to measure up to set standards but offered little incentive for improvement beyond that. Being good enough was all that mattered.

With SACS's revised approach to accreditation and its emphasis on continuous improvement, being good enough is not enough. *The 2007 Interim Edition of The Principles of Accreditation* outlining accreditation standards demands more.

To be accredited an institution must demonstrate "effectiveness in the fulfillment of its mission, its compliance with the requirements of its accrediting association, and its continuing efforts to enhance the quality of student learning and its programs and services." (p. 1) Institutions now need to show they are constantly taking steps to become better.

In SACS's eyes, a strong commitment to continuous improvement is the key to institutional effectiveness. It therefore demands an ongoing cycle of planning, implementation and assessment followed by periodic adjustments in goals and operational strategies. As shown in the right column, this expectation is reiterated in both the core requirements and comprehensive standards.

While our five-year cycle of academic program reviews focused on curriculum and disciplinary trends is keeping our

programs competitive and consistent with those at other institutions, it just doesn't measure up to SACS's expectations for assessing student learning outcomes and for continuous improvement.

We are, therefore, trying to develop more effective assessment planning for all academic departments, and we have asked all faculty members to incorporate explicit student learning outcomes in their course syllabi.

Regrettably, we've been slow starting on the assessment path. Compilations of departmental syllabi with student learning outcomes were due Nov. 1, but only 15 have come in for Fall 2006. Departmental assessment plans were also due in November; only nine departments submitted a draft assessment plan by their due date.

We now need to accelerate our pace. We are not even close to having the kind of university-wide assessment of student learning that SACS requires.

Fortunately, some NKU departments – primarily those involved in specialized accreditation within their disciplines – are near the leading edge of this trend and already have assessment plans. Hopefully they'll serve as trailblazers and models for the rest of us.

Core Requirement 2.5

The institution engages in ongoing, integrated, and institution-wide research-based planning and evaluation processes that:

- (1) incorporate a systematic review of institutional mission, goals, and outcomes;
- (2) result in continuing improvement in institutional quality; and
- (3) demonstrate the institution is effectively accomplishing its mission.

Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1

The institution identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs (including student learning outcomes for educational program) and its administrative and educational support services; assesses whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of those results. This standard is likely to be amended in December 2007 with language similar to the following which was submitted to a review committee in late 2006: "educational programs, to include student learning outcomes at the program and the individual course level."

WE HOPE THAT THIS NEWSLETTER WILL HELP TO KEEP YOU AWARE OF UPCOMING GOALS AND RESPONSIBILITIES ASSOCIATED WITH SACS REAFFIRMATION. PLEASE CONTACT THE OFFICE WITH COMMENTS OR CONTENT SUGGESTIONS TO INCLUDE IN THIS QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER!