

# Inside Accreditation

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## ACCREDITATION, QUALITY AND FALL 2020: A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

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### WHAT ABOUT FALL 2020?

What will colleges and universities be doing in Fall 2020 in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic? Can students return to

campus? How? Will remote learning prevail? To what extent? Will we see a hybrid Fall term, a mix of remote and campus-based experiences? How will institutions assure quality and maintain accredited status?

Among the many articles, webinars and discussions of what Fall 2020 will be, several valuable themes are starting to stand out. We are beginning to understand that approaching the Fall may require a fuller rethinking of the higher education experience framed not only in terms of restoring campus life, but also in terms of an expanded and perhaps more permanent role for remote learning in the collegiate experience. The themes are based on an emerging understanding that we need to move from an emergency action mindset to a mindset of creativity and innovation for the long term. This will involve:

- Planning for a fall term of both effective campus-based and effective remote education.
- Establishing norms for the quality of this education.
- Developing means to judge whether these quality norms are met.

Richard Garrett of Eduventures captures this thinking in a very thoughtful, just-published

paper, “Reimagining the College Experience in a Pandemic.” Richard proposes a valuable structure for this rethinking, calling for examination of the three major dimensions of the college experience: academic, extra-curricular and social. Central to his paper is his call to “...recreate those fundamentals in new ways.”

### FALL 2020, ACCREDITATION AND QUALITY

Such rethinking includes attention to quality and the role of accreditation as central. And, the accrediting community has been reflecting on what will need to be done to assure quality and protect students in a Fall 2020 vs. a Winter/Spring 2020 remote learning environment. What will accreditors mean when they say that, whatever the approach to teaching and learning, accreditation standards must continue to be met? What will be appropriate norms for quality when remote learning is carried out on a larger scale or a long period of time? What might institutions themselves expect from accreditation?

Can we develop a framework for action, a series of questions in essential areas, that accrediting organizations might use to assist institutions in judging quality not only in the Fall, but beyond? Is it reasonable to think that, as the presence of remote learning expands, some of this will remain with us well beyond the immediate post-pandemic period? If so, this may mean that the changes in norms for quality may be with us for some time.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

### *The Academic Experience*

Five of the most important dimensions of the academic experience are curricula, faculty, the academic calendar, grading and transfer of credit. Let's explore some questions that, if asked and answered, can be part of the work of accreditation in urging quality norms for academic life well after this pandemic:

- **Curricula:** Are curricular experiences and assignments adapted for an online environment and how? What steps are taken to organize both student-faculty and student-student interaction in a way that effectively immerses the student in course content? Is the experience synchronous? If asynchronous, how are students otherwise engaged in the course? Do students have the option of engaging their curricular experiences either on-campus or remotely or both? Are competency-based approaches being used? Are clinical or laboratory experiences successfully transitioned to virtual experiences?
- **Academic Calendar:** What attention is being paid to the organizing and scheduling of academic offerings, beyond the traditional calendar of semester or quarter offerings? Can students stop-in/stop-out, proceed at their own pace? Are time segments of various lengths being used to achieve variation in the remote learning experience? Is the calendar amenable to hybrid offerings? Are special seminars available as needed?
- **Faculty:** What is the training for faculty for remote teaching and learning, not only to start working online, but also to assist faculty as they continue this work? What platforms and related services are made available to assist faculty in developing a rich and varied online experience? How are these platforms routinely improved? What regular evaluation practices are being used to judge the effectiveness of faculty work? What is the role of evidence of student achievement in these evaluations?

- **Grading:**

What grading practices are being used? Letter grades? Pass/fail? "Ng" grading? Has there been exploration of grading practices most appropriate for remote as well as campus-based instruction? Do student learning outcomes play a key role in evaluating student performance?

How do we overcome the perception of some that remote learning is "less than"?

- **Transfer of Credit:** What arrangements have been made to assure student mobility and successful transfer of credit, whether campus-based or remote learning? Are joint efforts underway among various institutions in order that student work at one institution immediately qualifies for credit at another? Can institutions take advantage of electronic capacity to jointly offer education experiences that establish a solid foundation to encourage successful transfer? How is student progression being judged? Are decisions being made about types of grading (e.g., pass/fail vs. letter grades) that assure, whatever system is used, that students are not harmed?

### *The Student Engagement Experience*

Three important dimensions of student engagement are counseling, advising and academic support. What counts as quality in an environment dominated by remote learning?

- **Counseling:** Have opportunities to reach out to counselors and health

## FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

### **The Academic Experience - focus on...**

- Curricula
- Academic Calendar
- Faculty
- Grading
- Transfer of Credit

### **The Student Engagement Experience - focus on...**

- Counseling
- Academic Advising
- Academic Support

professionals been integrated into the remote experience? Is there outreach by the institution to students who, e.g., do not attend classes or do not complete assignments? Is there a means of being aware of problems or emergencies (illness, loss of a job) that might be affecting a student and providing assistance?

- **Academic Advising:** What tools are being used to assist students in course selection, in picking a major, in planning a program of study, whether for degree or other credential? How are students who are integrating study and work being assisted in case of academic difficulty? What creative arrangements are available to tailor scheduling to student needs?

***“If the Covid-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that higher education and accreditation are once again challenged to change.”***

- **Academic Support:** What experiences are available to students who need assistance in improving skills and knowledge, whether related to course material or to becoming more proficient using electronic tools? Are these tools

available to assist students without, e.g., laptops or reliable internet access? What assistance is given to students who are having trouble finding a space to work at home or have to manage study, work and rearing children or caring for other family members – all at the same time?

If the Covid-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that higher education and accreditation are once again challenged to change. These suggestions are offered as a framework for action to be used to determine whether accreditation standards are met moving forward. The framework can assist in this dramatic transition that is captured by “Fall 2020.”

This time the change must be swift. It must be sure. It must be creative. We owe this not only to our students, but to ourselves and to that longstanding and highly regarded profession to which we proudly belong.

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