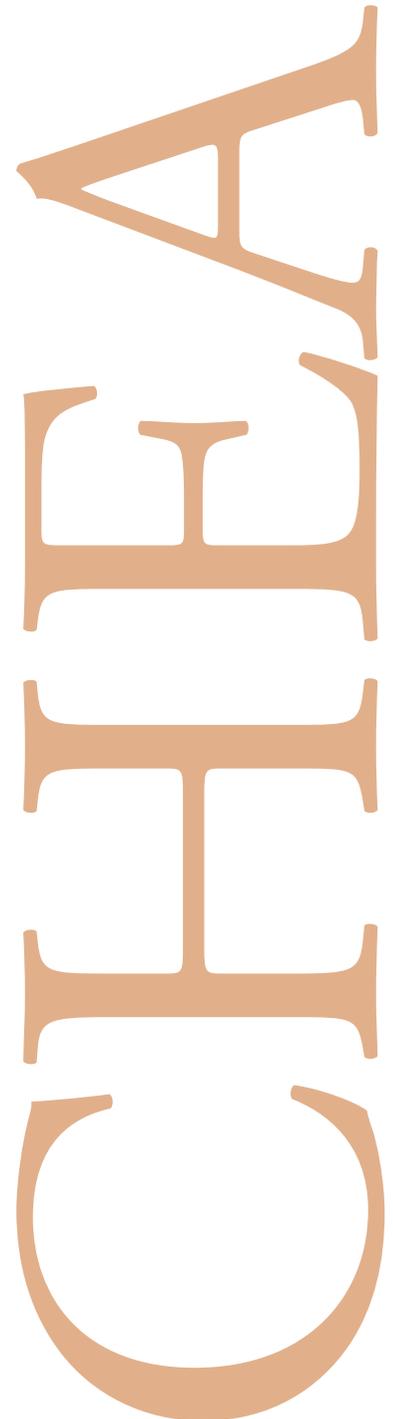


**The Competency  
Standards Project:  
Another Approach to  
Accreditation Review**

Prepared by the National Center for  
Higher Education Management Systems

CHEA Occasional Paper

August 2000



As part of its mission to promote quality assurance in accreditation of higher education institutions and programs, CHEA, from time to time, commissions and brings to public attention analyses of pertinent issues. Distribution of these papers, which do not necessarily represent CHEA's positions on the subjects addressed, is intended to foster broad and robust discussion of accreditation-related topics in the public interest.

# **The Competency Standards Project: Another Approach to Accreditation Review**

*Prepared by the*  
National Center for Higher Education Management Systems

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August 2000

**CHEA**

Council for Higher Education Accreditation

*The Council for Higher Education Accreditation will assist students and their families, colleges, universities, sponsoring bodies, governments, and employers by promoting academic quality through formal recognition of higher education accrediting bodies and will coordinate and work to advance self-regulation through accreditation.*

*CHEA Mission Statement, 1996*

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# Overview

## Competency-based Accreditation Review, Distance Learning and Outcomes

The twin issues of distance learning and students outcomes are increasingly framing discussions about the future of higher education. Distance learning is producing significant change in how higher education is doing its business and who is engaged in the enterprise. The ongoing public pressure for student outcomes is also pressure for significant change, especially in higher education's perception of its responsibility for accountability.

Do these changes in higher education also mean change for external quality review? Specifically, what does more distance learning and sustained emphasis on outcomes mean for external quality review through accreditation? This is the central question for the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the national coordinating organization for national, regional and specialized accreditation. Current accreditation practice is a product of a campus era with much less technology and less emphasis on outcomes. It is plausible that some changes in external quality review are needed in this new era of e-learning, e-college and e-knowledge.

“Distance learning” refers to the application of technology to traditional teaching and learning, producing new concepts of the classroom and faculty work and adding new providers of higher education. This technology-based education has spawned virtual universities, web-based certificates of training and corporate universities—all quite different from traditional site-based education. Campuses and physical facilities to which we have long been accustomed have a reduced presence. In many instances, computer monitors are the

new faces in “face to face.”

“Student outcomes” refers to what students learn, what they achieve and how they perform, whether full-time or part-time, degree-bound or engaged in ongoing education. State and federal officials press for information about outcomes through performance funding and accountability measures. Corporations and other employers demand outcomes to confirm that prospective employees possess carefully delineated job skills. Politicians and the public focus on accountability for what students can do and how well they do it.

Distance learning can strengthen the perception that more scrutiny of outcomes is needed. This is because distance learning environments may not include, for example, physical facilities and campuses. Full-time faculty may not be available and curriculum may be developed elsewhere. Accreditation standards that examine these features of an educational environment may not yield adequate information about quality. There may be little to examine other than student achievement—outcomes.

To address the impact of distance learning and outcomes on higher education and the implications for external quality review CHEA, in 1998, asked the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to design and test an alternative approach to accreditation standards and review—one that places significant emphasis on student outcomes and a distance delivery setting. Together, they turned to Western Governors University (WGU) to pilot what came to be called the competency standards project.

WGU, a private, competency-based university established in 1997, possesses three characteristics essential for this purpose. It is an electronically

based distance learning institution, providing focus on the challenge of technology; it is an outcomes-based institution, enabling CHEA to test whether competencies are a useful means of addressing outcomes in an accreditation review. It has distinctive elements of a traditional site-based higher education model, addressing the challenge of rethinking traditional accreditation review. WGU is an institution with footprints in both the past and the emerging future of higher education.

As a “virtual” university, WGU provides teaching and learning in a web-based environment. While WGU does not possess a physical campus, it has two administrative sites, one in Colorado and one in Utah. WGU sustains a network of relationships with site-based colleges and universities to provide student and academic support and library services. As a “competency-based” institution, WGU requires that students earn a degree through demonstration of skills and capacities, not the earning of credits and class attendance.

The accreditation review developed in the competency standards project uses the basic structural features of traditional site-based institutional accreditation: a self-study, peer review and a site visit followed by team report with recommendations. The competency-based review centers on student learning outcomes as the key indicator of institutional quality and performance.

The competency-based review requires these tools:

- Standards that call for documentation of student competencies and documentation of organizational capacity to sustain competency-based curriculum and services;
- Scoring instruments (Scoring Guides) to be used by the review team to make judgments about institutional performance;
- An institutional portfolio of existing institutional data to provide evidence that the competency-based standards have been met.

The review process includes:

- A web-based preliminary review of institutional functions related to teaching and learning using the Scoring Guides and carried out individually by the review team members;
- A team visit to the institution;
- A team analysis of pre-visit scoring in light of the visit and judgments of other team members;
- Revision of team scoring;
- An accreditation recommendation of the visiting team.

This approach to accreditation contrasts with the traditional institutional review in four ways. Traditional review standards encompass all major functions of institutions; the competency review focuses primarily on teaching and learning. The traditional review generally triggers institutional investment in additional data collection beyond existing institutional information about major functions; the competency review calls for greater reliance on existing information about teaching and learning. The traditional review emphasizes capacity and processes of institutions with less attention to outcomes; the competency review emphasizes outcomes more than capacity and processes. The traditional review relies on team decisions in making judgments not only about an institution, but also about the decision-making process used by the individual teams; the competency review offers additional structure to team decision-making.

Most important, the competency standards and review posit a clear and unmistakable connection between institutional quality and student achievement. These standards require demonstration and documentation of student competencies as central to determination of institutional quality. Institutional performance, in many ways, *is* student performance. Student achievement is the first and most critical competency standard. The other competency standards address institutional

capacity to measure competencies: Is the curriculum appropriately structured for this purpose? Are assessment techniques effectively measuring competencies?

•••••

The primary message offered to traditional accreditation from this competency based accreditation review is that a competency-based approach can be of value to assure quality in distance learning and more fully address outcomes in both traditional institutions and nontraditional institutions. This requires:

- Institutional quality defined primarily by student achievement;
- Standards that more explicitly address outcomes;
- Standards focused on teaching and learning capacity of the institution (e.g., curriculum and faculty) as this capacity serves student achievement and outcomes.

NCHEMS' work also produced additional

valuable suggestions for modification of traditional accreditation, whether reviewing site-based or distance providers:

- Relying on routinely-collected institutional evidence of quality collected is effective for both accreditors and institutions;
- Strengthening team decision-making can result from use of scoring instruments to organize team deliberations;
- Expanding use of electronic communication in accreditation review produces greater efficiency for accreditor and institutional time.



*President*

Council for Higher Education Accreditation

# Introduction

In the fall of 1998, the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) requested assistance from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to design and pilot a distinctive approach to institutional accreditation. The principal purposes of this initiative were to:

- **Develop and test a set of institutional accreditation standards founded largely on outcomes-based instructional approaches.** Rather than attempting to be “comprehensive” by addressing the traditional elements of institutional mission, resources, program content and the like, CHEA explicitly asked NCHEMS to focus on key learning processes and educational outcomes. This directive had two roots. First, it was a response to the often-heard complaint that established accreditation practice tries to do too much. Second, basing review standards largely on outcomes and instructional practices would allow the accreditation process to embrace a far greater range of institutions—including emerging “new providers” that employ distance-based, competency-based or other non-traditional modes of educational delivery.
- **Develop and test a review methodology that could minimize institutional burden and promote greater consistency and rigor in making judgments about institutional performance.** Instead of relying on the traditional components of the accreditation process—a specially written comprehensive self-study and a subsequent multi-day site visit involving a large team of peer reviewers —CHEA

encouraged NCHEMS to develop a process that relied largely on evidence generated by the institution itself in the course of its regular operations. In part, this was a response to a frequently-heard complaint by institutions that the established process of self-study is excessively time-consuming and does not always add value to existing institutional planning and evaluation efforts. An “audit” approach that relied on existing materials in “portfolio” form was therefore seen as a promising alternative. At the same time, the process of team judgment used in most accreditation visits has been perceived as essentially undocumented and occasionally idiosyncratic. An approach to review that emphasized the development of specific tools to enable a review team to generate a consistent set of judgments thus became a particular priority.

In launching a project aimed at these twin objectives, CHEA explicitly wished to acknowledge the many parallel efforts with similar goals already being pursued by its associated organizations. The last two years have witnessed a range of experiments by both regional and national accrediting organizations—all aimed at better focusing and structuring the process of institutional review. Rooted in actual practice, these initiatives are already beginning to bear fruit. But CHEA believed that it would be beneficial to supplement these emerging practice-based innovations with an independent design effort of its own that could start from first principles and could proceed outside the understandable constraints imposed by an accreditor’s organizational context. Like the “model legislation” developed by

political advocacy bodies, it was CHEA's hope that organizations could critically examine the resulting model and incorporate its elements, as appropriate, into their own unique approaches.

This document presents the results of the project in several forms. A first section describes how the standards and review process were developed and tested by NCHEMS, including a simulated review of Western Governors University (WGU). A second section presents the standards themselves and explains the specific features of their architec-

ture of particular interest to accreditation organizations. A third section describes the model review process used, with particular focus on the development and use of specially developed scoring guides and rubrics for team judgment. A fourth section provides a brief commentary on the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, based in part on the simulated review.

## **I. How the Project Developed**

NCHEMS staff drafted a set of institutional

# The Competency Standards Project

review standards focused principally on student outcomes and the manner in which the institution serves and supports its students and principal stakeholders. Resource materials used during the initial drafting process included a) existing standards related to these areas in the current standards employed by U.S. accrediting organizations, b) standards related specifically to non-traditional or distance-based providers available from organizations and quality assurance agencies worldwide (e.g., the WICHE “Principles of Good Practice in Distance Education” and Australia’s “Quality Standards for Resource-Based Education”) and c) prominent quality review standards currently being used in non-collegiate settings (e.g., ISO9001 and the Malcolm Baldrige Award). Using these materials, a set of review standards was crafted that consisted of three broad areas “Student Outcomes and Attainment,” “Responsiveness to Students” and “Organizational Alignment and Support.”

With the initial drafting process complete, CHEA sought the input of an expert panel to provide a critique and suggestions for further improvement. Accordingly, five individuals knowledgeable in accreditation were selected to examine and discuss the draft standards at a meeting in Washington held on January 12, 1999. Members of the review panel included Steve Crow of the North Central Association, Lawrence “Mac” Detmer formerly of the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs, Mike Lambert of the Distance Education and Training Council, Don Nolan of Regents College and Marianne Phelps of the U.S. Department of Education. During this meeting, many specific suggestions for improving the language of

the document were made and accepted. But the panel’s most interesting observation was that these standards should not be confined explicitly to “new provider” institutions but should be applicable to the entire range of American postsecondary institutions. As a result, the focus—and name—of the initiative shifted from a narrow concern with “competency-based” institutions toward the development of a set of standards suited to the conditions in which all institutions will likely be operating.

Recommended changes resulting from the expert panel review were incorporated into the draft standards document to produce an initial field-test version. NCHEMS staff then turned to the task of developing a set of review procedures to test the standards through a simulated review. From the outset, the design of the review process was intended to reflect two emerging features of institutional accreditation practice at the time. First, a “portfolio” of existing evidence would be used as the primary mechanism for an institution to present evidence related to the standards in lieu of the traditional self-study. Second, an audit-like process employing clear protocols for assessing presented evidence would be the centerpiece of the peer review itself. Both of these features proved viable in the simulated review.

At this point, CHEA sought a recognizably non-traditional institution to test the process. Western Governors University (WGU) agreed to act in this capacity, and in the summer of 1999 began preparing a web-site for a review portfolio consistent with the revised draft standards. At the same time, NCHEMS recruited a review team to pilot the process in partnership with WGU.

Members of the review team included Robert Albrecht (WGU's Chancellor Emeritus), Alan Guskin (Chancellor Emeritus of Antioch University), David Longanecker (Executive Director of WICHE) and Carol Twigg (Director of the Center for Academic Transformation at RPI). Peter Ewell, senior associate at NCHEMS, served as chair of the visiting team. After consulting the specially prepared web-site, the team conducted an initial assessment of WGU against the standards, using a specially prepared scoring guide. They then discussed and reconciled their initial scores in advance of the site visit. Members of the team also prepared a range of "Questions for Engagement," which were then forwarded to WGU to help prepare a framework for the visit. The two-day visit itself took place in late November 1999 and focused largely on areas unclear to the team after inspection of the portfolio and on the Questions for Engagement previously formulated. After the visit, members of the team re-scored WGU based on what they had learned, and again discussed the results to arrive at a final determination. Based on the scoring process and written comments produced as a part of the review, WGU then received a report containing a) a mock accreditation recommendation, b) a focused assessment of observed strengths and weaknesses and c) a recommendation on areas of strategic potential for the institution that might be further developed.

The simulated site visit was extremely valuable in improving the standards and review process and many changes were made after it was concluded. Among the most salient were a) adding a new set of standards on the alignment of resources and structures toward responsiveness to students and b) refining and further elaborating the scoring guides used in the review itself. Standards and review materials included in this report reflect these experience-based modifications. The simulated site visit also generated the majority of the observations about strengths and weaknesses contained in Section IV (p. 20ff).

## II. The Standards

### A. *Background to the Standards*

The competency standards are organized in terms of three main areas of institutional performance:

- *Student Outcomes and Attainment* standards examine such topics as how the institution's degree awards and credentials are defined in terms of intended learning outcomes, how student attainment of these outcomes is determined through assessment and the extent to which students actually attain these intended outcomes. The emphasis here is clearly placed on how the institution determines the competencies associated with a given award and how it assures itself that all students are meeting these competencies.
- *Responsiveness to Students* standards examine such topics as how the institution's programs are actively developed to meet identified student needs, how students are mentored to achieve established learning standards and how students are treated in their contacts with the institution. The primary guiding principle is the extent to which the institution sees its students as partners and clients, and actively shapes its offerings and activities to meet their needs.
- *Organizational Alignment and Support* standards examine the institution's organizational structures and its physical and fiscal resources, with a particular focus on how these are aligned with and actively support its teaching and learning processes. Although somewhat consistent with the resource and process-based thrust of traditional accreditation standards, these standards constitute only a small part of the document and are confined to areas relevant to core teaching and learning functions.

Both the content and structure of the stan-

dards evolved considerably during the course of the project. As noted, the most important modification was the addition of a separate section on organizational alignment because the review team felt that it needed some basis on which to raise important issues of organizational support related to academic functions. Previous draft versions of the standards did address such issues, but not in an identifiable separate section.

Within each of these three broad areas, the architecture of the project contains a further distinction:

- *Outcomes and Effectiveness* standards focus on actual performance or results. An example within Student Outcomes and Attainment is, “students demonstrably meet established academic standards as evidenced by their performance on assessments.”
- *Key Processes* standards focus on issues of implementation or design. An example within Responsive to Students is, “learning opportunities clearly identify the subject matter to be covered, the skills or knowledge to be acquired, and the learning methods used.”

Again, the original draft of the standards did not contain this fundamental distinction in the orientation of a given standard, listing the standards instead by topic area. In the course of the simulated review, however, it proved extremely useful to be able to distinguish situations in which a sound design was present, but little evidence has been found as yet on effectiveness, from those in which both were present. As emphasized in Section III (p. 17ff), moreover, this distinction among standards allowed a much more systematic process to be followed in assessing the institution’s performance.

## ***B. The Competency Standards***

### **STUDENT OUTCOMES AND ATTAINMENT**

*The institution’s graduates meet clear standards of achievement that are demonstrable through explicit*

*assessments of performance. Student outcomes and attainment is a critical aspect of institutional performance and embraces a) how standards of achievement are established and their rigor, b) how student achievement is assessed and therefore certified and c) how well students actually perform against established standards.*

For an institution to meet standards in this area, an adequate linkage between credentialing and assessed performance is critical. Institutions must demonstrate that they have established an appropriate array of learning outcomes that define each degree program, that they have processes and systems in place to support the development and administration of assessments of student learning that can determine whether students demonstrate specific levels of knowledge and skills, and that they adequately establish and administer such assessments. (Assessments may encompass, but are not limited to, “objective tests” which have correct answers defined in advance such as multiple-choice items, as well as performance-based items such as essays, portfolios and performance assessments). Assessment-based demonstrations of knowledge or skill are not necessarily linked to any particular time period used for instruction, to the number of instructional experiences engaged in, or to any resources utilized. Because of their central importance in credentialing, the means by which the institution develops or chooses its assessments is also important. Consequently, the processes used to identify and develop assessments appropriate to each credential must be thorough, sound and empirically grounded. In the final analysis, moreover, the institution’s effectiveness is revealed by its students’ actual attainment of established learning outcomes. To this end, actual student achievement levels must meet established academic standards and must be consistently monitored by the institution to ensure ongoing quality.

### **Outcomes and Effectiveness Standards**

*SOA1.1: Each degree or credential is defined in terms of an identifiable, discrete set of specific outcomes with clear, acceptable standards of achievement. The*

essence of this standard lies in the extent to which the institution's educational goals are stated, accessible and clear. At minimum, this requires a written statement of intended educational outcomes for the program as a whole framed in terms of a graduate's attributes or skills. For best practices institutions, outcomes and standards are well-elaborated in the form of sets of related competencies that provide direct guidance for assessing performance.

*SOA1.2: Each degree or credential requires successful student completion of a defined assessment or set of assessments that covers the learning outcomes identified.* This standard centers on the extent to which stated criteria of achievement are actualized in terms of clear demonstrations of student attainment. Assessments may be of many kinds, including examinations, performance assessments, or portfolios containing previously accomplished work. At minimum, this demands that required assessments be clearly identified for each credential. At the best practice level, such assessments must go beyond simple, single-person judgments like traditional class grades to involve reliable multi-rater assessments of performance.

*SOA1.3: All assessment methods and instruments used to determine student achievement strive toward being valid, reliable and demonstrably linked to the learning outcomes that they purport to cover.* This standard addresses the technical adequacy of the assessments used to determine student achievement. Evidence presented should therefore at minimum include material such as validation studies or similar data that demonstrate the validity and reliability of the methods being used. At the best practice level, the institution should also be able to demonstrate how it establishes and regularly reviews the adequacy of the assessments used from a technical standpoint—for example, through governance by a standing committee and/or the existence of established policies for reviewing new and existing assessments.

*SOA1.4: Criteria for evaluating student performance on assessments are clearly established, are stated in the institution's publications and are generally understood by students and staff.* This standard refers to the public nature and clarity of the specific levels of performance that are required for student certification of achievement. For conventional examinations, this would require that clear score levels or “cut scores” be associated with particular levels of certification. For performance assessments or similar devices, these criteria might be embedded in a scoring rubric or similar rating scheme. In both cases, at minimum, established levels should be clearly stated and there should be evidence that these criteria are actually used in the certification process.

*SOA1.5: Students demonstrably meet established academic standards as evidenced by their performance on assessments.* The focus of this standard is on the extent to which student performance on assessments in fact demonstrates the levels of attainment claimed. At minimum, this requires substantial documentation of student attainment in the form of examination scores, results of performance assessments and similar types of direct demonstrations that evidence levels of performance at or above established minimum competency criteria.

*SOA1.6: The institution ensures the portability of its degrees, certificates or other means of credentialing achievement through articulation with other institutions and, where appropriate, through linkages with the workplace.* This standard addresses the extent to which the institution's credentials are successfully articulated in a fashion that allows them to serve as “currency” in the academic and occupational marketplace. At minimum, this requires that established and understandable transfer policies with other institutions of higher education be in place. Best practice institutions will have established or negotiated course equivalents or other ways to map its certifications onto both typical academic programs at other institutions and an appropriate array of job qualifications.

## Key Processes Standards

*SOA2.1: Each field of study (e.g., sociology or electrical engineering) has been thoroughly analyzed by acknowledged experts drawn from the academy and/or associated practical/applied fields in order to identify the requisite knowledge and skills that define effective performance in the institution's programs in that field (e.g., through a job analysis or skills inventory).* The focus of this standard is on the extent to which the institution has adequately consulted relevant expertise in constructing its programs and establishing appropriate standards of achievement. At minimum, it requires that appropriate professional and/or academic expertise be in some way involved in the development of the competencies established for each level of mastery for each program offered. This may or may not include individuals employed by the institution itself. Best practice institutions will have reached beyond their own personnel to involve appropriate expertise not only from disciplinarians at other institutions but also from relevant employment or professional communities.

*SOA2.2: Acknowledged experts in assessment, in partnership with subject matter experts, are responsible for setting standards for achievement and for the selection or design of all assessments.* The focus of this standard is similar to the two above but refers to the development of assessments used to establish competence. At minimum, the same kinds of individuals noted in SOA2.1 above should be involved in reviewing the methods used to determine student performance. At the best practice level, there will be frequent liaison and consultation between assessment and subject matter experts in evolving such methods.

*SOA2.3: Assessments are reviewed and updated periodically to ensure they are current with changes in the field and/or changes in relevant assessment technology.* The focus of the standard is on the frequency and thoroughness with which the institution monitors and reviews the ways it certifies student achievement. At minimum, this requires a

periodic process of examining academic standards and the ways in which students are assessed. Best practice institutions will have established a regular schedule in which all aspects of programs are reviewed, including the manner in which student achievement is determined.

*SOA2.4: The institution regularly benchmarks its learning experiences and assessment outcomes against those of other institutions, as well as against industry and professional standards.* This standard concentrates on the extent to which the institution examines its standards and offerings in the light of best practice elsewhere. At minimum, this requires periodic examination of current practices in comparison with other colleges and universities offering similar programs. At the best practice level, the institution will regularly “benchmark” its offerings, standards, assessments and support activities against best practices elsewhere, wherever relevant, and wherever these can be found.

*SOA2.5: Internal pass rates on assessments are regularly analyzed and results are used to improve learning processes, the assessment process and associated standards of achievement.* This standard addresses the degree to which the institution regularly uses its own data on student achievement to improve its practices in all areas. At minimum, data on pass rates and other data relevant to student achievement should be collected, archived and readily retrievable. At the best practice level, institutions will have produced and appropriately disseminated regular analyses of these data that can potentially inform improvements in one or more key instructional processes.

## RESPONSIVENESS TO STUDENTS

*The institution offers an appropriate and effective range of structures and services that accommodate and support self-paced student learning.*

A student-responsive institution furnishes students with opportunities to learn that are responsive to their own learning needs and abilities. This

requires the institution to be consistently service-oriented in its actions affecting students by a) mentoring students appropriately and effectively so that their individual success in achieving learning outcomes is maximized, b) providing appropriate learning opportunities that address their individual needs and c) treating them fairly and equitably.

In an institution committed to responsiveness to students, the role of advising and mentorship is critical. In addition to their traditional role in helping students choose and plan a program of study, advisors are “mentors” who provide students with active guidance on how to acquire the knowledge, skills and experiences needed to demonstrate mastery in a given program of study or credential. At the same time, an institution is able to accommodate a diverse array of students through the learning opportunities that it makes available. Such learning opportunities need not be limited to formal courses or programs of study like traditional lectures or seminars. Instead they may embrace self-paced instruction, independent study, internships, clinical practica or other work-based experiences. Whatever the mechanism used, however, the institution is responsible for ensuring the adequate delivery and quality of all learning opportunities made available to students—either through its own offerings or through third parties.

### **Outcomes and Effectiveness Standards**

*RTS1.1: The institution ensures that students understand fully what specific areas of knowledge and skills are required by the various programs of study.* The essence of this standard requires the institution to have established mechanisms for actively guiding students through the learning process in addition to simply “communicating content.” At minimum under this standard, the institution has policies in place that require the student to meet with appropriate advisors (physically or virtually) before beginning a contemplated program of study to help them understand what competencies will be required for or associated with completing the

program. At the best practice level, these competencies will not only be described in considerable detail, but actual examples of student performance associated with mastery will be available. Best practice institutions will also require advisors or mentors to regularly re-visit program choices with students to determine if other available programs or learning opportunities might best fit what they want to accomplish at this point in their educational careers.

*RTS1.2: Students are assessed regularly to determine whether “gaps” in their current learning exist.* This includes assessment upon entry. This standard emphasizes that mentorship and assessment are directly related and that mentorship activities should be anchored upon and visibly guided by assessment evidence that indicates each student’s current level of mastery. At minimum, the institution will have established a process of entry-level skills assessment to determine areas of strength and weakness for all students (separated from any testing required for admissions), and will require mentors to advise students about their readiness to undertake various kinds of learning experiences that they may be contemplating—as well as advising them into additional skills-development activities where this is indicated. At the best practice level, the process of using assessment evidence to determine current skill gaps will be ongoing and occur at all points in the program. This may include the use of practice or diagnostic assessments at multiple points to determine areas of strength and weakness and will likely require each mentorship encounter to include a review of current student performance on relevant assessments engaged in to that point.

*RTS1.3: Students are successful in locating appropriate learning experiences consistent with the competencies they wish to master—either from the institution itself or from another learning provider.* This standard focuses specifically on the institution’s role in guiding the student to the proper kinds of learning experiences, regardless of where these may be found. At minimum, it

requires the institution to have a wide variety of learning experiences available for mentors to recommend, with access to these assured in the form of catalogues, resource listings, or similar materials. For best practice institutions, there will be evidence that mentors actually consider the full range of possibilities for appropriate learning experiences when making individual recommendations to students, and that appropriate choices are made that take into account current student knowledge and skill levels, learning styles and access to technology.

*RTS1.4: The institution ensures that students are properly prepared for assessments by periodically evaluating their readiness through an appropriate mentorship process.* As in RTS1.2 above, this standard concentrates on the degree to which mentors actively probe areas of current strength or weakness in order to advise them about their readiness to engage in particular learning experiences or to seek certification through assessment. Methods may range from formal practice tests and assessments through more informal verbal probes or selected problems posed by the mentor to ascertain current student skill levels. At minimum, there should be a pattern of evidence suggesting the use of such probes across multiple encounters between students and mentors. At the best practice level, most mentorship sessions will involve some conversations or activities designed to directly probe current student skill levels and there will be substantial use of practice assessments and similar devices. At best practice institutions, students will test their own readiness repeatedly, using resources and materials provided by the mentor or otherwise available from the institution.

*RTS1.5: Learning opportunities actively promote student success by accommodating individual learning needs and contexts.* This standard also concentrates on the intersection between the provision of appropriate learning opportunities and an individual student's own path of development by emphasizing the extent to which variations are provided that facilitate individualized learning. At

minimum, descriptions of learning opportunities should indicate how students can participate in alternative types of learning opportunities based on identified conditions or disabilities. At best practice institutions, most learning opportunities will involve multiple paths and may be experienced asynchronously by the students who engage in them.

*RTS1.6: Learning opportunities allow students to appropriately embody prior experience, with certifications of attainment based in part on demonstrable past achievement.* This standard focuses on the degree to which prior attainment can be recognized and certified if it is in fact related to program learning objectives. At minimum, the institution's programs will contain some mechanism for assessing prior learning in addition to coursework, but most learning objectives will not be attained or certified in this fashion. At the best practice level, a substantial number of students will be able to meet program objectives in this way, through successful completion of rigorous assessments or through evaluation of submitted material that attests to mastery or accomplishment.

*RTS1.7: Students have access to "learning-to-learn" strategies—either provided by the institution or available through third parties—and these are effective in raising student success rates.* This standard refers to the extent to which the institution provides students, in addition to regular course offerings, with appropriate and effective tools and experiences designed explicitly to develop their abilities as learners. Examples include developmental workshops or tutorial assistance in basic skills, information-gathering skills, study skills, or how to organize a research project. At minimum, the institution will advertise such activities and make them available to students. At best practice institutions, mentors will actively suggest such activities in the context of individual student paths of development, based on current performance levels and assessed "skill gaps."

*RTS1.8: Students are satisfied with their experiences with the institution. The essence of this standard is the degree to which the institution has established methods for “listening to its customers” and that its students in fact are satisfied.* At minimum, the institution should regularly collect student opinions about various aspects of its operations through surveys, feedback forms, or similar methods. These should be clearly advertised and regularly conducted. At the best practice level, multiple methods will be used, and will cover a range of dimensions of institutional activities and performance; the methods used should include at least one mechanism for soliciting student opinions after students have graduated or withdrawn.

### **Key Processes Standards**

*RTS2.1: Learning opportunities clearly identify the subject matter to be covered, the skills or knowledge to be acquired, and the learning methods used.* The essence of this standard is that the descriptions of learning opportunities provided to students (e.g., catalogue or course descriptions) clearly communicate what will be covered, how the material will be taught, and how performance will be judged. At minimum, this will require the kinds of content descriptions that might appear in a standard “catalogue.” At best practice institutions, descriptions will clearly identify intended learning outcomes in the form of competencies, goals, or similar statements.

*RTS2.2: The learning processes used in learning opportunities emphasize “mentorship” as well as “transmission of knowledge.”* This standard addresses the degree to which the learning opportunities engaged in by students themselves embody the principles of “mentorship” examined by the previous set of standards. At minimum, this requires that descriptions of the majority of learning opportunities contain references to activities or exercises that

require more of instructors than straightforward lecturing or provision of content material. At the best practice level, many of the learning opportunities that students actually elect will contain these features, as evidenced by provided course materials or student testimony.

*RTS2.3: Learning opportunities relate to a clear individual learning trajectory by reinforcing important concepts, promoting active learning, and accommodating differences in student characteristics and abilities.* This standard concentrates on the intersection between learning opportunities and an individual student’s own path of development, and especially emphasizes the extent to which the learning opportunities provided are capable of achieving their learning objectives in the light of a clear and well-articulated plan for skills development. At minimum, this will require statements of learning objectives and required activities that seem logically linked to the attainment of these objectives. At best practice institutions, it will require evidence that learning opportunities are deliberately constructed in terms of a clear path of development in which specific activities and exercises seem intentionally designed to lead students through successively higher levels of mastery.

*RTS2.4: Learning opportunities are systematically reviewed in order to ensure their quality and continuing relevance.* This standard requires that institutions have a regular process in place to review available learning opportunities. At minimum, this requires a written policy and review schedule, with clearly identified criteria against which courses and other learning opportunities should be reviewed. At the best practice level there will not only be substantial evidence of the use of these criteria to make decisions about which learning opportunities are to be continued, but the criteria themselves will also emphasize learner-centered concepts such as active learning, self-pacing and accommodation of diversity.

*RTS2.5: Clear policies and practices delineate the institution's obligations to its students.* As part of this obligation, institutions must demonstrate that they are truthful in what they say and write about their programs and that they have the capacity to meet their obligations to students. This standard focuses on the degree to which the institution is actively aware of its obligations to students and takes these obligations seriously in the form of truth in advertising and capacity to deliver. At minimum, submitted materials should support a judgment that the institution is aware of its obligations to students and that no false statements are made. Best practice institutions will prominently state its obligations to students and how they discharge them (including, in turn, the obligations assumed by the student in enrolling).

*RTS2.6: The institution identifies, communicates and regularly assesses standards for satisfactory academic progress.* This standard requires the institution to have established an acceptable method for determining student standing, as well as for determining whether or not students are progressing appropriately. At minimum, this requires an understandable method to determine “good standing” for federal financial aid purposes. Best practice institutions will establish policies that effectively map the attainment of significant learning objectives over time (in the form of certifications of achievement or the completion of designated portions of an established course of study), apply these policies consistently to students and take appropriate actions if satisfactory progress is not being attained.

*RTS2.7: The institution has clear procedures for addressing student grievances.* The intent of this standard is straightforward: that the institution have and follow established procedures to receive and deal with student complaints and grievances. At minimum, this requires the institution to have published statements of such policies in place,

with clear guidance on how a student should proceed in filing a grievance or lodging a complaint. There must also be substantial evidence available that the institution follows these procedures, deals with students fairly and appropriately to resolve grievances and learns from these experiences to make appropriate changes in its own activities.

#### **ORGANIZATIONAL ALIGNMENT AND SUPPORT**

*The institution ensures that high levels of student achievement and student learning can be sustained on a continuing basis through appropriate organization, energetic leadership and consistent action.*

The Organizational Alignment and Support area centers on the extent to which the institution can sustain its commitment to student outcomes and attainment and to responsiveness to students on a continuing basis through a) an appropriate mission and core values, b) organizational structures, processes, and resources aligned with core values and with one another, and c) mechanisms to promote “organizational learning” that enable the institution to determine its own effectiveness and continuously improve.

High-performing institutions require active leadership to ensure that their purposes, functions, and resources remain properly aligned. Through leadership and planning on an ongoing basis, the institution frames questions, seeks answers, analyzes itself, and revises its purposes, structures and programs accordingly. At the same time, the institution's resource acquisition and allocation processes—as well as its administrative and decision-making structures—are configured in a manner that allows it to continue to support responsiveness to students and high levels of student achievement on an ongoing basis.

#### **Outcomes and Effectiveness Standards**

*OAS1.1: The institution's mission clearly articulates a commitment to responsiveness to students and outcomes-based instructional approaches that clearly distinguishes it from traditional seat-time, credit-*

*hour-based institutions.* The essence of the standard is that the institution's purposes are clear and that they visibly embody a commitment to learner-centered approaches and the attainment of identified learning outcomes. At minimum, these properties should be visible in the institution's formal mission statement. At best practice institutions, they will also permeate other media through which the institution communicates with its various internal and external audiences so that its distinctiveness is clear.

*OAS1.2: The institution's leaders ensure that its core functions and decision-making processes are demonstrably aligned with its mission and core values, and with one another.* This standard requires the institution's leaders to act consciously and consistently in a manner that ensures alignment with its mission and core values. More specifically, it requires that values associated with responsiveness to students and ensuring student achievement of established learning outcomes are pursued constantly at all levels of the institution. At minimum, this standard requires a visible alignment between the institution's decision-making processes (such as program development, strategic planning and resource allocation) and particular aspects of its mission and core values. At the best practice level, there will be substantial evidence of action taken to support core values at multiple levels within the institution.

*OAS1.3: The institution's budgetary and organizational structures are clearly aligned with and are configured to support appropriate levels of student achievement and responsiveness to students.* This standard requires the institution to have established an appropriate resource base and organizational structure that will enable it to continue to support the central objectives of student achievement and responsiveness to students into the future. At minimum, this requires a clear organizational structure and sufficient resources to be in place in the form of staffing, physical/fiscal

resources, and information resources. At best practice institutions, there will be substantial evidence that organizational structures and investment decisions are deliberately made in ways that support student achievement and responsiveness to students (such as substantial investments in the mentorship function, in ensuring good communication with students, etc.).

*OAS1.4: The institution identifies clear standards for evaluating key staff that are based on their effectiveness (including student satisfaction) and regularly assesses their performance on this basis.*

This standard requires the institution to establish effectiveness-related standards of performance for all personnel—and especially those with substantial student contact, such as mentors—and to apply these standards regularly and rigorously. At minimum, standards for performance should be written, clear and available, and there should be a documented process through which identified personnel are periodically evaluated. At best practice institutions, there will be evidence that these processes are applied to all learning-related positions (e.g., through a personnel record) and that they include student satisfaction levels as well as data on student performance.

*OAS1.5: A process for assessing student and stakeholder satisfaction and performance is in place, including tracking students into the workplace or subsequent educational endeavors.* At minimum, the institution should be able to document one or more ways in which the satisfaction and subsequent activities of its graduates and former students are monitored, such as surveys, interviews or tracking records. Documentation should include not only the methods used, but a display of the results obtained in the form of reports or appropriate data as well. Best practice institutions

should be able to identify key stakeholders such as employers and provide evidence of the ways in which these institutions obtain their feedback (including actual results).

*OAS1.6: The institution has mechanisms for gathering and analyzing information about its own operations and effectiveness and uses this information to continuously improve itself.* This standard requires the institution to have regular and appropriate mechanisms in place to examine its own effectiveness, the results of which are used to make improvements in its programs, structures or processes on an ongoing basis. At minimum, this requires an array of methods to examine internal operations such as student flow data, service ratios and data on numbers and types of learning experiences and assessments engaged in. At best practice institutions, a considerable amount of this data must not only be present, but there should also be substantial evidence of the institution's capacity to analyze or otherwise make sense of it in the form of reports, performance indicators or similar analytical tools. Best practice institutions should also be able to point to multiple examples of the use of such information to improve one or more aspects of service or program delivery.

### **III. Institutional Presentation of Evidence and the Review Process**

Principal features of the review process designed by NCHEMS to accompany the competency standards are its reliance on existing institutional evidence to ground the review and its explicit use of rubrics to concretely assess institutional performance. Fundamental elements of the review process as it evolved—and as tested with WGU—thus included a) a web-based portfolio prepared by the institution, b) a review process, c) an assessment (scoring) guide to be used by the team, and d) a site visit. Each of these elements is more fully described below.

#### ***A. The Portfolio***

Many accrediting organizations are currently experimenting with web-based portfolios as an efficient method to communicate evidence that an institution meets their standards. In virtually all cases, however, the portfolio has been used to supplement other forms of presentation. In contrast, the competency standards project attempted to ground the initial portion of the review entirely on a portfolio model. Accordingly, as part of the simulated review, WGU was asked to prepare a web-based portfolio structured around the standards to help prepare the team for the review, guided by a template provided by NCHEMS.

As designed, the review portfolio was intended to contain the following elements:

- An orientation and overview of the institution containing information and materials needed by the review team to become basically familiar with the institution.
- For each standard, a brief narrative describing the institution's approach to the standard and a list of "exhibits" that illustrate how the institution is meeting the standard. The exhibits themselves consist of documents, policies, data displays, or specially written narratives related to the standard in some demonstrable way.
- For each exhibit, a description of what it is, why it is included in the portfolio and how it should be interpreted or read.

A particular strength of the web-based portfolio approach is that it allows appropriate "hot links" to actual institutional sites to be embedded in the presentation. For example, the team can examine the actual student grievance procedures in place as they appear to a student, or can simulate the process of navigating the institution's course offerings and administrative procedures. This is a major advantage when dealing with an institution that relies on the web to deliver instruction and/or to handle various student administrative matters. Despite these potential strong points, the simu-

lated review of WGU suggested that a portfolio cannot fully replace a site visit. This was partly because WGU was a new institution and, as a result, many of its policies and procedures were not yet documented.

### ***B. The Review Process***

As noted, the review process designed for use with the competency standards project was structured to render the team's assessment of the institution's performance more consistent and systematic than what typically occurs in the course of an accreditation visit. A central tool in this process was a specially developed Scoring Guide used by the team to rate institutional performance on multiple dimensions, which could be used both to ground discussions among team members themselves and to communicate results to the institution.

Using the Scoring Guide, members of the review team engaged in the following steps to conduct the review:

- In the period leading up to the site visit, each review team member visited the institution's portfolio web-site and reviewed additional background materials.
- Each team member then scored the institution independently, using the Scoring Guide provided. In addition to providing scores, team members generated additional supporting commentary and identified further questions that they wished the institution to clarify—either in writing or in the course of the site visit.
- Team responses were then aggregated and circulated within the team. Each rating was then discussed and mutually explained. This process proved particularly beneficial in arriving at a consistent judgment and in preparing for the visit. At the same time, team comments and questions were aggregated into a set of "Questions for Engagement." These were sent to the institution to help frame the site visit and focus particular issues that the team was interested in exploring further.

- The team then visited the institution and the visit was organized, in part, on the Questions for Engagement.
- After completion of the site visit, each team member then re-scored the institution using the provided Scoring Guide. Again, verbal commentary was provided to support each score.
- Using results of the re-scoring process, a report to the institution was prepared that a) provided an overall assessment of performance as the basis of a recommended accreditation decision, b) summarized observed strengths and weaknesses, c) identified a number of areas for potential action and development, and d) shared detailed results of the team scoring process.

The simulated review was extremely helpful in shaping this process more fully. While very supportive of the Scoring Guide, for example, review team members suggested many revisions, including the development of separate rating scales on design, implementation and effectiveness. Discussions among team members that used the Scoring Guide as a foundation were considered by reviewers to be among the most valuable aspects of the process.

### ***C. The Scoring Guide***

The Scoring Guide associated with the standards was intended to serve as a centerpiece for the review by a) providing a concrete foundation for team discussion, and b) providing a clear means to communicate the team's judgment to the institution. The Guide itself was developed by NCHEMS staff and incorporated elements derived from similar processes in sectors outside higher education—most prominently from the Baldrige Award and from similar detailed review protocols used in health care.

In the Scoring Guide, sets of individual rating scales are provided for each individual standard.

Within each standard, moreover, three different scales attempt to capture distinct aspects of institutional performance related to the standard. These are:

- **Design.** This aspect of performance examines the extent to which the institution has designed or developed specific processes or structures that would enable it to meet the standard if the design was implemented as described. Appropriate evidence here might include formally adopted policies, descriptions of procedures, descriptions of resources and key personnel, and direct inspection of catalogues, handbooks or similar material.
- **Implementation.** This aspect of performance examines the extent to which the institution has actually carried out the design as described. To attain the highest score levels, there must be evidence that key processes and the day-to-day actions of students and staff follow what is expected in the design, so that the institution is in fact “walking the talk” with respect to the procedures and actions it has established. Appropriate evidence here might include minutes of meetings, a track record of decisions made and/or live inspection of on-line processes and resources.
- **Effectiveness.** This aspect of performance examines the extent to which intended outcomes are achieved, consistent with the standard. To attain the highest score levels, there must be demonstrable evidence of student outcomes or understandings related to the standard, or similar effectiveness-related outcomes related to stakeholder satisfaction and/or organizational functioning. Appropriate evidence here might include student progress, student performance on assessments, student and stakeholder satisfaction or evidence on the acceptability and later performance of the institution’s graduates.

For standards dealing with Outcomes and Effectiveness, all three rating scales are used, while

for those addressing Key Processes only the first two are relevant. In the body of the Scoring Guide, moreover, each set of rating scales is accompanied by a further elaboration of the associated standard, including some of the specific kinds of evidence that might be sought in the institution’s portfolio and/or probed in the course of the site visit.

In addition to the detailed rating scales associated with each individual standard, the Scoring Guide also contains three holistic scoring rubrics. Each of these is associated with one of the major dimensions of performance addressed by the standards—Student Outcomes and Attainment, Responsiveness to Students, and Organizational Alignment and Support. Each holistic rubric is hierarchical and is constructed around multiple attributes in combination. Team members used these rubrics to summarize the performance of the institution as a whole on each of these three broad attributes and, in general, felt that such holistic ratings provided a useful counterpoint to the detailed standard-by-standard rating process.

#### ***D. The Site Visit***

Because of the focus provided by the Scoring Guide and the volume of material that could be shared by means of the web-based portfolio, the site visit associated with the competency standards is shorter than a typical accreditation visit. In WGU’s case, a five-member team visited the institution for two days. While challenging, the team felt that the time spent on site was adequate, largely because most of the issues had already been identified in the pre-scoring process. As a result, the principal focus of the visit became a) to conduct a limited audit to verify and validate material previously presented in the portfolio, and b) to discuss particular issues raised in the Questions for Engagement. All told, both the institution and members of the review team believed that this process worked well.

#### **IV. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Process**

The competency standards project was designed deliberately to demonstrate a purposeful alterna-

tive to the established process of institutional accreditation. As such, a brief review of its potential strengths and weaknesses is warranted. Some of these were identified by the review team members, all of whom were interviewed at the conclusion of the project. Additional points were noted by those attending conference presentations on the project and others who reviewed project materials at different points in the development of the initiative.

Identified strengths of this approach include the following:

- **Focuses on Student Learning.** Established accreditation standards are intended to be comprehensive by addressing virtually every aspect of institutional performance. As a result, they typically address such matters as resources, governance, organizational structures and support functions together with academic matters. One drawback of this approach, though, is that issues of teaching and learning—arguably the core of the institution and the aspect of institutional performance that the public most expects accreditation to address—are given less attention. Radically re-focusing both the standards and the review process on issues of teaching and learning is thus a particularly attractive feature of the competency standards approach.
- **Accommodates “New Providers.”** Non-traditional institutions such as those operating at a distance or in a distributed learning mode, and institutions offering degree programs on a competency basis, emerged rapidly in the last decade. Often these institutions pose particular challenges to existing institutional accreditation standards because they do not use regular faculty, employ different kinds of library and information support functions, or deliver distinctively different forms of instruction. Basing accreditation decisions largely on the educational results obtained and the ways in which students are treated—regardless of the specific mechanisms used to

attain these results—represents a promising approach to this challenge in a world that will increasingly feature such institutions.

- **Reduces Institutional Burden in Preparing for a Review.** Institutions frequently are concerned about the amount of time and effort that typically is invested in preparing a traditional self-study, especially if they already have documented relevant material in other, more locally useful, forms. Among the latter are strategic plans, program reviews, assessment programs and other forms of evaluation. Re-focusing the review process to concentrate less on materials prepared by the institution especially for the accreditation organization, and more on materials prepared by the institution for itself that are then audited by the accreditation organization, can alleviate this burden significantly. The portfolio aspect of the competency standards project, together with its more focused and “audit-like” site visit process, are designed particularly to address this issue.
- **Promotes Consistency in Team Judgments.** Both institutions and external critics of the process of accreditation often raise questions about the actual basis used in making peer-based judgments about institutional performance. Often, such critics allege, the issues raised are idiosyncratic and would be different if the team’s composition was altered. Similarly, those serving on teams often note that there are few mechanisms available to arrive at a collective assessment of institutional strengths and weaknesses. Based on proven methods for arriving at consistent collective judgments, rubrics or scoring guides such as those developed in the course of the competency standards project can be of considerable value. Team members in the simulated review, for instance, were particularly impressed by how the Scoring Guide was specific enough to anchor their deliberations, but allowed sufficient flexibility for them to make their own authentic judgments.

Balancing these areas of potential strength, those involved in the project and external observers noted a number of possible drawbacks to this approach if it is made a centerpiece of institutional accreditation:

- **May Overlook Important Areas of Structure or Performance.** Precisely because of its strong focus on teaching and learning, the competency standards leave many things out. As a result, an institution could quite possibly be accredited using these standards and be seriously deficient in one or more areas identified as important by a more traditional set of standards. Among these might be resource deficiencies, lack of a full-time faculty, or governance and structural issues. Adopting such a framework, therefore, must entail a quite conscious decision on the part of accreditors that such matters are of lesser importance than academic performance.
- **May Redefine the Meaning of an Academic Institution.** Following the point above, a focus on performance alone means that the historic definition of what actually constitutes a “college” or “university” may change. Traditional accreditation standards, for example, are based heavily on the notion of an academic institution as a “community of scholars” rather than as a “means to achieve student learning.” The stamp of approval provided by traditional accreditation, therefore, signifies what a college or university is at least as much as it says something about what such an institution produces. Changing to a focus on outcomes loses this distinctiveness and may therefore cause public confusion about what accreditation actually signifies.
- **May Focus on Compliance Instead of Deep Engagement.** By adopting an audit-like model of review based largely on existing evidence, institutions might largely avoid traditional accreditation’s requirement that they identify their own strengths and weaknesses. While

the portfolio component of the competency standards project addresses this condition in part, it is clear that institutions might engage in such a process without wide-spread internal reflection or analysis. The level of detail provided in the Scoring Guides associated with the project may harbor a similar danger. Absent team discussion and real rigor in application, such a scoring process could become excessively rigid and ritualized.

- **May Discourage Independent Judgment.** One of the claimed strengths of peer review is precisely that the process relies on individuals to make independent judgments based on their own unique bodies of experience. Any external review team does indeed bring a variety of talent to the process and team members may not agree about what they find. A potential drawback to a rubric-based assessment approach, therefore, may be that it suppresses the kind of independent judgment-making that many believe is a central aspect of professional peer review.

These potential strengths and weaknesses should be elaborated through further testing and application of the kinds of models suggested by the competency standards project. Clearly its products will be modified through further experience. Given the current ferment in virtually all agencies that accredit institutions, however, it is equally clear that re-thinking of both standards and review processes along the lines suggested by the project is both timely and warranted.

### **Institutional Portfolio Template**

The preparation of a portfolio constitutes the core of an institution’s review process. The portfolio contains stipulations, exhibits and data reports and is intended to be flexible enough to allow the institution to demonstrate compliance with the standards, together with reflective commentary that demonstrates serious attention to self-analysis and aimed at institutional improvement. As such, the portfolio will:

- provide the basis for a “self-analytical” rather than a purely descriptive process of “self-study.”
- contain exhibits that may be either qualitative or quantitative, depending upon the nature of the condition or performance being “certified.”
- contain actual documents/examples of student work that represent acceptable attainment of established standards of achievement.
- provide the accrediting organization with specific guidance as to how each of the standards is addressed by explaining why particular exhibits are included and how they should be interpreted.
- use established definitions and calculational procedures (e.g., federal IPEDS definitions or procedures) for any data presented.

# Appendix A-1

## Institutional Portfolio Template

- be subject to on-site or virtual verification by the review panel
- be presented electronically wherever feasible.

A portfolio will typically consist of three kinds of exhibits. Policy certifications are intended to document the institution's basic compliance with any legal, policy and procedural requirements addressed by the commission's standards. Data exhibits allow the institution to demonstrate specific areas of institutional capacity and performance noted in the standards. Sample assessments and student performances are designed to allow the review panel to directly evaluate the integrity of the degree by providing examples of acceptable performance—together with the specific assessment tasks and contexts that elicited these performances. All three types of exhibits are included in a single portfolio because the intent is to demonstrate broad compliance with the standards, not to develop a point-by-point "checklist" that assures that every stipulation implied by the language of the standards is addressed.

The most straightforward way to organize a portfolio is around the standards. Using this approach, individual exhibits should be developed and presented under each standard, regardless of their particular nature. The key is to capture the essential "spirit" or "intent" of each standard, then package exhibits around the resulting sub-headings, as opposed to producing a checkoff list of compliance measures. Following this logic, the institution should prepare its portfolio according to the following template:

For each standard:

- **General Approach to the Standard.** This is a brief paragraph that describes the institution's approach to the performance(s) being addressed by the standard. It should note key philosophical approaches and policies as well as relevant structures.
- **Exhibit Guide.** This lists the specific exhibits to be referenced under the standard and describes why they are included. It also provides the reader with guidance about how multiple exhibits fit together to demonstrate compliance with the standard—especially if particular structures or policies are inter-dependent.
- **Individual Exhibits.** These include actual texts of policies, descriptions of processes, or data displays—as well as appropriate electronic links to web-sites, if available. For each exhibit, a description of what it is, why it is included in the portfolio, and how it should be interpreted or read should also be included.

Finally, there should be an introduction to the portfolio that introduces the institution and guides the reviewer through the institution's approach to the standards as a whole.

The portfolio may take an electronic or print format. As a part of an electronic Exhibit Book, the review panel might be given access to the institution via an electronic gateway that would allow them to "visit" the institution as students or other clients might.

Exhibits related to the Student Outcomes and Attainment Standard constitute a central core of the portfolio. This section of the portfolio should illustrate the achievement standards used by the institution, shows how they were developed and how they are assessed, and demonstrates the institution's success in credentialing students who

meet established achievement standards by providing statistics on student pass rates on assessments, actual samples of student work, and data on subsequent success or attainment.

First, the institution should list the standards and outcomes used, describe who was involved in the development of a given standard or outcome, what academic resources were used, and how and who evaluates performance. Another section should describe the particular assessments used with each outcome and discuss how they were developed if they are new (the assessments).

A critical component of this section requires the institution to map the assessments to their associated outcomes. That is, the institution must explicitly show how a particular assessment determines whether or not a candidate has demonstrated a given outcome. The institution should also summarize results of the assessments for each outcome (e.g., area of study, number/proportion assessed, date assessed, procedure used, and results) in a standard tabular format.

On submission of the portfolio, the accrediting organization will select a review panel in consultation with the institution. As a first step in the process, the review panel will examine the institution's portfolio and evaluate its content against the standards. The subsequent review process is best thought of as an ongoing dialogue between the review panel and the institution, in which the portfolio stimulates questions that the review panel then forwards to the institution for response. The result is a set of analytical questions addressing areas of concern that the panel may have about the institution's compliance with particular standards. If feasible, these questions will be forwarded to the institution electronically. Thus,

- the review panel uses the exhibits as a starting point for discussion and analysis, and
- there are several exchanges of questions and answers between the panel and institution

before the site evaluation to refine the accreditation agenda.

In addition to the dialogue stimulated by the portfolio, the review panel should be accorded the opportunity to experience the institution as students or other clients might, without the potential screening effect that can occur in traditional site evaluations in which the institution selects the students, faculty, staff or classes that panel members are permitted to talk to or attend. For example, at institutions where distance education predominates, panel members could visit the institution virtually and apply for admission, register for classes or attend a class as students would. This could also be done at institutions with more traditional structures. Panel members in this case could "walk" the registration or complaint process, attend classes and talk with students, staff, and faculty. Panel members could also interview randomly selected students and clients such as employers to assess their satisfaction with the institution's various services.

## Scoring Guides

Sets of individual scoring scales are provided for each individual standard. Scoring scales are provided for three distinct aspects of institutional performance related to the standard and should be applied as indicated. These are:

**Design.** This aspect of performance examines the extent to which the institution has designed or developed specific processes or structures that would enable it to meet the standard if the design was implemented as described. Appropriate evidence here might include formally adopted policies, descriptions of procedures, descriptions of resources and key personnel, and direct inspection of catalogues, handbooks or similar material.

**Implementation.** This aspect of performance examines the extent to which the institution has ac-

tually carried out the design as described. To attain the highest score levels, there must be evidence that key processes and the day-to-day actions of students and staff follow what is expected in the design, so that the institution is in fact “walking the talk” with respect to the procedures and ac-

tions it has established. Appropriate evidence here might include minutes of meetings, a track record of decisions made and/or live inspection of on-line processes and resources.

**Effectiveness.** This aspect of performance examines the extent to which intended outcomes are achieved, consistent with the standard. To

# Appendix A-2

## Scoring Guides

attain the highest score levels, there must be demonstrable evidence of student outcomes or understandings related to the standard, or similar effectiveness-related outcomes related to stakeholder satisfaction and/or organizational functioning. Appropriate evidence here might include student progress, student performance on assessments, student and stakeholder satisfaction, or evidence on the acceptability and later performance of the institution's graduates.

Each of the two major dimensions of performance, moreover, contains standards of two kinds. Standards related to “Outcomes and Effectiveness” will require judgments to be made on all three dimensions. Standards related to “Key Processes” will require judgments to be made on only the first two dimensions. Appropriate rating scales corresponding to these distinctions are included with each standard.

Each set of scales is accompanied by a further elaboration of the standard, including some of the specific kinds of evidence that might be found in the institution's portfolio. Using these materials, reviewers should score the institution on each standard individually as a basis for structuring an initial team discussion of the institution's submission.

A holistic scoring rubric is also associated with each of the major dimensions of performance addressed by the standards—Student Outcomes and Attainment, Responsiveness to Students, and Organizational Alignment and Support. Each rubric is hierarchical and is constructed around multiple attributes in combination. These should be used to summarize the institution on these two

attributes independent of the individual standards statements that comprise each dimension.

NCHEMS), David Longanecker (Executive Director of WICHE), and Carol Twigg (Director of the Center for Academic Transformation at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute)—was assembled to conduct a simulated review of WGU. The purpose of this document is to briefly present the results of this review.

Members of the review team first reviewed a web-site containing materials structured around the CHEA standards prepared by WGU. Using a specially-prepared scoring guide, the team then rated WGU's performance on each of the CHEA standards. After discussing their ratings and preparing a number of additional review questions to be shared with WGU in advance of the visit, the team then interviewed WGU personnel in both Salt Lake City and Denver. This visit resulted in a revised scoring guide, which was used by the team to prepare a final set of ratings.

This document summarizes the team's overall findings and feedback to WGU. Consistent with the experimental nature of the review itself, the document's contents do not resemble a typical accreditation team's report. Instead, consistent with the project's primary purpose—to provide a flexible and streamlined accreditation alternative—the report consists of three distinct sections. A brief summative section first provides the team's recommendation about the accreditation status of the institution. A second “institutional feedback” section consists of summary points addressing observed strengths and weaknesses of the institution. Third and finally, completed scoring guides

# Standards on Student Outcomes and Attainment

## Outcomes and Effectiveness

*SOA1.1: Each degree or credential is defined in terms of an identifiable, discrete set of specific outcomes with clear, acceptable standards of achievement.*

The essence of this standard lies in the extent to which the institution's educational goals are stated, accessible and clear. At minimum, this requires a written statement of intended educational outcomes for the program as a whole framed in terms of a graduate's attributes or skills. At higher score levels, outcomes and standards are well-elaborated in the form of sets of related competencies that provide direct guidance for assessing performance. To meet the highest levels of attainment, statements describing educational outcomes must not only be published and understandable, but must also provide clear guidance for assessment and be supported by clear illustrations of attainment at various levels. The proportion of the institution's educational programs that meet this criterion—either minimally or fully—should also be taken into account.

**DESIGN**

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

**IMPLEMENTATION**

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

**EFFECTIVENESS**

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:











# Standards on Student Outcomes and Attainment

## Key Processes

*SOA2.1: Each field of study (e.g., sociology or electrical engineering) has been thoroughly analyzed by acknowledged experts drawn from the academy and/or associated practical/applied fields in order to identify the requisite knowledge and skills that define effective performance in the institution's programs in that field (e.g., through a job analysis or skills inventory).*

The focus of this standard is on the extent to which the institution has adequately consulted relevant expertise in constructing its programs and establishing appropriate standards of achievement. At minimum, it requires that appropriate professional and/or academic expertise be in some way involved in the development of the competencies established for each level of mastery for each program offered. This may or may not include individuals employed by the institution itself. To attain higher score levels, the institution will have reached beyond its own personnel to involve appropriate expertise not only from disciplinarians at other institutions but also from relevant employment or professional communities. To attain the highest score levels, the institution will not only have involved appropriate expertise in the development process, but will also have conducted systematic, formal analyses of the designated discipline or profession such as job analyses, or will have referenced or consulted such analyses prepared by others.

### DESIGN

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

### IMPLEMENTATION

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Standards on Student Outcomes and Attainment

## Key Processes

*SOA2.2: Acknowledged experts in assessment, in partnership with subject matter experts, are responsible for setting standards for achievement and for the selection or design of all assessments.*

The focus of this standard is similar to the two previous standards but refers to the development of assessments used to establish competence. At minimum, the same kinds of individuals noted in SOA2.1 should be involved in reviewing the methods used to determine student performance. For higher score levels, there will be frequent liaison and consultation between assessment and subject matter experts in evolving such methods. To attain the highest score levels, subject matter experts, acting as a team or in partnership, will be directly involved in the development and selection of the assessment methods used. The standard further requires that the methods used to determine student achievement be valid and reliable through the involvement of individuals with a background in assessment. At minimum, this again requires that such individuals should be involved in reviewing any of the methods used. To attain the highest score levels, such individuals will directly cooperate with subject matter experts in developing and selecting appropriate assessment methods.

### DESIGN

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

### IMPLEMENTATION

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Standards on Student Outcomes and Attainment

## Key Processes

*SOA2.3: Assessments are reviewed and updated periodically to ensure they are current with changes in the field and/or changes in relevant assessment technology.*

The focus of the standard is on the frequency and thoroughness with which the institution monitors and reviews the ways it certifies student achievement. At minimum, this requires a periodic process of examining academic standards and the ways in which students are assessed. To achieve higher score levels, institutions will have established a regular schedule in which all aspects of programs are reviewed, including the manner in which student achievement is determined. To attain the highest score levels, consideration will also be given to how existing assessment approaches can be modified, as appropriate, based on current best practice.

### DESIGN

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

### IMPLEMENTATION

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Standards on Student Outcomes and Attainment

## Key Processes

*SOA2.4: The institution regularly benchmarks its learning experiences and assessment outcomes against those of other institutions, as well as against industry and professional standards.*

This standard concentrates on the extent to which the institution examines its standards and offerings in the light of best practices elsewhere. At minimum, this requires periodic examination of current practices in comparison with other colleges and universities offering similar programs. To attain higher score levels, the institution will regularly “benchmark” its offerings, standards, assessments, and support activities against best practices elsewhere, wherever relevant, and wherever these can be found. To attain the highest score levels, there will be evidence that such benchmarking not only regularly occurs, but that the institution actively uses its results to make appropriate changes.

### DESIGN

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

### IMPLEMENTATION

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Standards on Student Outcomes and Attainment

## Key Processes

*SOA2.5: Internal pass rates on assessments are regularly analyzed and results used to improve learning processes, the assessment process and associated standards of achievement.*

This standard addresses the degree to which the institution regularly uses its own data on student achievement to improve its practices in all areas. At minimum, data on pass rates and other data relevant to student achievement should be collected, archived and readily retrievable. At higher score levels, the institution will have produced and appropriately disseminated regular analyses of these data that can potentially inform improvements in one or more key instructional processes. To attain the highest score levels, the institution will be able to demonstrate multiple ways in which the results of such analyses have actually been used to change current practices.

### DESIGN

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

### IMPLEMENTATION

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Standards on Student Outcomes and Attainment

## Key Processes

*SOA2.6: When assessments are delivered at a distance, the institution has processes in place to verify students' identities.*

The focus of this standard is straightforward but important, given the increasing salience of distance delivery and the current inability of technology alone to verify student identity at a distance for purposes of assessment. At minimum, the institution will have taken standard precautions to verify identity equivalent to those applied in any high-stakes examination in a campus setting. At higher score levels, such procedures will be fully documented in written form, with enforcement policies in place to ensure that they are followed. To attain the highest score levels, the institution will have and follow procedures to verify identity equivalent to those used at best-practice testing centers, such as requiring picture identification and administering assessments under controlled or proctored conditions in designated assessment centers. To attain the highest score levels under implementation, moreover, evidence will be presented that the institution actually follows these procedures at all sites delivering assessments.

### DESIGN

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

### IMPLEMENTATION

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Student Outcomes and Attainment

## *Holistic Scoring Rubric*

*The institution's graduates meet clear standards of achievement that are demonstrable through explicit assessments of performance.*

Student outcomes and achievement is a critical aspect of institutional performance and embraces a) how standards of achievement are established and their rigor, b) how student achievement is assessed and therefore certified, and c) how well students actually perform against established standards. All three areas should be considered when using the holistic scoring rubric that follows.

For an institution to achieve high scores, an adequate linkage between credentialing and assessed performance is critical. Institutions must demonstrate that they have established an appropriate array of learning outcomes that define each degree program, that they have processes and systems in place to support the development and administration of assessments of student learning that can determine whether students demonstrate specific levels of knowledge and skills, and that they adequately establish and administer such assessments. (Assessments may encompass, but

are not limited to, “objective tests” which have correct answers defined in advance such as multiple-choice items, as well as performance-based items such as essays, portfolios and performance assessments). Assessment-based demonstrations of knowledge or skill are not necessarily linked to any particular time period used for instruction, to the number of instructional experiences engaged in, or to any resources utilized. Because of their central importance in credentialing, the means by which the institution develops or chooses its assessments is also important. Consequently, the processes used to identify and develop assessments appropriate to each credential must be thorough, sound, and empirically grounded. In the final analysis, moreover, the institution's effectiveness is revealed by its students' actual attainment of established learning outcomes. To this end, actual student achievement levels must meet established academic standards and must be consistently monitored by the institution to ensure ongoing quality.

# Student Outcomes and Attainment

## *Rubric 1*

### **Level 0**

- Learning outcomes are not identifiable, not stated, or not interpretable

### **Level 1**

- Learning outcomes are stated for most programs
- Some programs have assessments in place to certify student achievement consistent with these outcomes
- Little (or not interpretable) evidence that students attain required levels of achievement

### **Level 2**

- Learning outcomes are stated for all programs and provide direct guidance for assessment
- Most programs have assessments in place to certify student achievement consistent with these outcomes
- Some evidence that students attain required levels of achievement
- Required outcomes and standards of achievement can be found in the institution's policies, publications and other communications
- Assessment specialists and subject matter experts were involved in the development of assessments and programs

### **Level 3**

- Learning outcomes are stated for all programs and provide direct guidance for assessment
- All programs have assessments in place to certify student achievement consistent with these outcomes; most such assessments are valid and reliable
- Convincing evidence that students attain required levels of achievement
- Required outcomes and standards of achievement are communicated widely through the institution's policies, publications and other communications
- Assessments and programs were originally developed by both assessment specialists and subject matter experts; continuing review by both constituencies occurs on an ad hoc basis
- Evaluations of the adequacy of current outcomes and standards occur on an ad hoc basis

### **Level 4**

- Learning outcomes are stated for all programs and provide direct guidance for assessment
- All programs have valid and reliable assessments in place to certify student achievement consistent with these outcomes
- Convincing evidence that students attain required levels of achievement
- Most students and staff are aware of required outcomes and standards of achievement through the institution's policies, publications and other communications

*(continued)*

- Assessments and programs were originally developed by and are periodically re-examined by both assessment specialists and subject matter experts; formal procedures for review are designed but are not fully implemented
- Evaluations of the adequacy of current outcomes and standards are regularly undertaken

#### **Level 5**

- Learning outcomes are stated for all programs and provide direct guidance for assessment
- All programs have valid and reliable assessments in place to certify student achievement consistent with these outcomes
- Convincing evidence that students attain required levels of achievement
- Students, staff and key constituents are fully aware of required outcomes and standards of achievement through the institution's policies, publications and other communications
- All assessments and programs were originally developed by and are regularly reviewed by both assessment specialists and subject matter experts
- Regular evaluations of the adequacy of current outcomes and standards are undertaken, and involve detailed analyses of past student performance as well as benchmarking against other institutions and industry standards

# Student Outcomes and Attainment

## *Instructions for Using the Rubric*

The rubric describes five levels of performance related to Student Outcomes and Attainment that could potentially describe the institution. Each level includes statements about particular attributes of the institution related to Student Outcomes and Attainment that should be true in combination for the institution to meet the level required. Based on your review of the institution's submission, please use the attached scoring sheet to indicate the level of performance that the institution appears to demonstrate for Student Outcomes and Attainment *as a whole*.

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

Comments Related to Score:













# Standards on Responsiveness to Students

## Outcomes and Effectiveness

*RTS1.7: Students have access to “learning-to-learn” strategies—either provided by the institution or available through third parties—and these are effective in raising student success rates.*

This standard refers to the extent to which the institution provides students, in addition to regular course offerings, with appropriate and effective tools and experiences designed explicitly to develop their abilities as learners. Examples include developmental workshops or tutorial assistance in basic skills, information-gathering skills, study skills or how to organize a research project. At minimum, the institution will advertise such activities and make them available to students. To attain higher score levels, mentors will actively suggest such activities in the context of individual student paths of development, based on current performance levels and assessed “skill gaps.” To attain the highest score levels, such opportunities will not only be widely available, but they will also be provided regularly on a “just in time” basis as particular skill gaps or deficiencies are developed, and students will consciously seek out such opportunities when they need them on the basis of their own self-assessment without the intervention of mentors. At the highest score levels, moreover, evidence will be presented that demonstrates that these opportunities are actually engaged in by the students who need them and that they are effective in raising their subsequent levels of attainment.

### DESIGN

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

### IMPLEMENTATION

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

### EFFECTIVENESS

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:



# Standards on Responsiveness to Students

## Key Processes

*RTS2.1: Learning opportunities clearly identify the subject matter to be covered, the skills or knowledge to be acquired, and the learning methods to be used.*

The essence of this standard is that the descriptions of learning opportunities provided to students (e.g., catalogue or course descriptions) clearly communicate what will be covered, how the material will be taught and how performance will be judged. At minimum, this will require the kinds of content descriptions that might appear in a standard “catalogue.” To attain higher score levels, descriptions will clearly identify intended learning outcomes in the form of competencies, goals or similar statements. At the highest scoring levels, potential students will be able to see what mastery actually looks like in the form of sample examination questions, tasks or problems. At the same time, descriptions of how the material will be communicated and taught will be sufficiently detailed to enable mentors and potential students to determine the degree to which a particular learning opportunity is aligned with individual student preferences, resources and learning styles.

### DESIGN

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

### IMPLEMENTATION

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Standards on Responsiveness to Students

## Key Processes

*RTS2.2: The learning processes used in learning opportunities emphasize “mentorship” as well as “transmission of knowledge.”*

This standard addresses the degree to which the learning opportunities engaged in by students themselves embody the principles of “mentorship” examined by the previous set of standards. At minimum, this requires that descriptions of the majority of learning opportunities contain references to activities or exercises that require more of instructors than straightforward lecturing or provision of content material. At higher score levels, many of the learning opportunities that students actually elect will contain these features, as evidenced by provided course materials or student testimony. At the highest score levels, the majority of learning opportunities made available to students will contain these features, mentors will actively steer students toward learning opportunities that have them and most students will engage in them.

### DESIGN

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

### IMPLEMENTATION

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Standards on Responsiveness to Students

## Key Processes

*RTS2.3: Learning opportunities relate to a clear individual learning trajectory by reinforcing important concepts, promoting active learning and accommodating differences in student characteristics and abilities.*

This standard concentrates on the intersection between learning opportunities and an individual student's own path of development, and especially emphasizes the extent to which the learning opportunities provided are capable of achieving their learning objectives in the light of a clear and well-articulated plan for skills development. At minimum, this will require statements of learning objectives and required activities that seem logically linked to the attainment of these objectives. At higher score levels, it will require evidence that learning opportunities are deliberately constructed in terms of a clear path of development in which specific activities and exercises seem intentionally designed to lead students through successively higher levels of mastery. At the highest score levels, successive levels of attainment are formally mapped or certified in the form of successive demonstrations of competence.

### DESIGN

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

### IMPLEMENTATION

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Standards on Responsiveness to Students

## Key Processes

*RTS2.4: Learning opportunities are systematically reviewed in order to ensure their quality and continuing relevance.*

This standard requires institutions have a regular process in place to review available learning opportunities. At minimum, this requires a written policy and review schedule, with clearly identified criteria against which courses and other learning opportunities should be reviewed. At higher score levels there will not only be substantial evidence of the use of these criteria to make decisions about which learning opportunities are to be continued, but the criteria themselves will also emphasize learner-centered concepts such as active learning, self-pacing and accommodation of diversity. At the highest score levels, evidence of student performance in later work for which particular learning opportunities were prerequisite will also be included, and there will be substantial evidence that reviews result in modifications and improvements of learning opportunities.

### DESIGN

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

### IMPLEMENTATION

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Standards on Responsiveness to Students

## Key Processes

*RTS2.5: Clear policies and practices delineate the institution's obligations to its students. As part of this obligation, institutions must demonstrate that they are truthful in what they say and write about their programs and that they have the capacity to meet their obligations to students.*

This standard focuses on the degree to which the institution is actively aware of its obligations to students and takes these obligations seriously in the form of truth in advertising and capacity to deliver. At minimum, submitted materials should support a judgment that the institution is aware of its obligations to students and that no false statements are made. To attain higher score levels, the institution will prominently state its obligations to students and how it discharges them (including, in turn, the obligations assumed by the student in enrolling). To attain the highest score levels, these policies and statements must not only be visible, but there should also be substantial evidence that they are followed in the form of student testimony or individual student case histories.

### DESIGN

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

### IMPLEMENTATION

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Standards on Responsiveness to Students

## Key Processes

*RTS2.6: The institution identifies, communicates and regularly assesses standards for satisfactory academic progress.*

This standard requires the institution to have established an acceptable method for determining student standing, as well as for determining whether or not students are progressing appropriately. At minimum, this requires an understandable method to determine “good standing” for federal financial aid purposes. To attain the highest scoring levels, policies should be established that effectively map the attainment of significant learning objectives over time (in the form of certifications of achievement or the completion of designated portions of an established course of study), apply these policies consistently to students and take appropriate actions if satisfactory progress is not being attained. Higher scores also require students to be fully aware of what these policies are, and to understand how they are to be applied.

### DESIGN

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

### IMPLEMENTATION

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Standards on Responsiveness to Students

## Key Processes

*RTS2.7: The institution has clear procedures for addressing student grievances.*

The intent of this standard is straightforward: that the institution have and follow established procedures to receive and deal with student complaints and grievances. At minimum, this requires the institution to have published statements of such policies in place, with clear guidance on how a student should proceed in filing a grievance or lodging a complaint. To achieve the highest score levels, there must also be substantial evidence available that the institution follows these procedures, deals with students fairly and appropriately to resolve grievances, and learns from these experiences to make appropriate changes in its own activities. At the highest score levels, moreover, there should be evidence of few grievances or complaints in the first place.

**DESIGN**

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

**IMPLEMENTATION**

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Responsiveness to Students

## *Holistic Scoring Rubric*

*The institution offers an appropriate and effective range of structures and services that accommodate and support self-paced student learning.*

An institution furnishes students with opportunities to learn that are responsive to their own learning needs and abilities. Responsiveness to students requires the institution to be consistently service-oriented in its actions affecting students by a) mentoring students appropriately and effectively so that their individual success in achieving learning outcomes is maximized, b) providing appropriate learning opportunities that address their individual needs, and c) treating them fairly and equitably. All three areas should be considered when using the holistic scoring rubric which follows.

In an institution committed to responsiveness to students, the role of advising and mentorship is critical. In addition to their traditional role in helping students choose and plan a program of

study, advisors are “mentors” who provide students with active guidance on how to acquire the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed to demonstrate mastery in a given program of study or credential. At the same time, responsiveness to learning institution is able to accommodate a diverse array of students through the learning opportunities that it makes available. Such learning opportunities need not be limited to formal courses or programs of study like traditional lectures or seminars. Instead they may embrace self-paced instruction, independent study, internships, clinical practica or other work-based experiences. Whatever the mechanism used, however, the institution is responsible for ensuring that the adequate delivery and quality of all learning opportunities are made available to students—either through its own offerings or through third parties.

## Rubric 2

### *Responsiveness to Students*

#### **Level 0**

- No evidence (or evidence not interpretable) that the institution has a commitment to responsiveness to students or exercises any aspect of responsiveness to students in an intentional way

#### **Level 1**

- The institution references principles of responsiveness to students in its mission or other publications
- Most students interact periodically with mentors or advisors
- A limited range of learning opportunities is available to students
- Descriptions of the mutual obligations of the institution and its students can be found in available publications

#### **Level 2**

- The institution prominently references principles of responsiveness to students in its mission and other publications
- Most students interact regularly with mentors or advisors
- Many learning opportunities are available to students
- Mutual obligations of the institution and its students are described through established publications, policies and procedures

#### **Level 3**

- The institution is committed to the principles of responsiveness to students as evidenced by its mission, publications and organizational structures
- All students interact regularly and frequently with mentors or advisors
- Mentorship encounters sometimes feature practice assessments or other exercises designed to determine current gaps in student knowledge and skills
- Mentorship encounters sometimes feature advisement about appropriate learning opportunities
- Many learning opportunities are available to students
- Some evidence that students select and participate in learning opportunities most suited to their current attributes and needs
- Learning opportunities are reviewed on an ad hoc basis
- Mutual obligations of the institution and its students are regularly and clearly communicated through established publications, policies and procedures

#### **Level 4**

- The institution is fully committed to the principles of responsiveness to students as evidenced by its mission, publications, and organizational structures
- All students interact regularly and frequently with mentors or advisors

*(continued)*

- Mentorship encounters often feature practice assessments or other exercises designed to determine current gaps in student knowledge and skills
- Mentorship encounters often feature advisement about appropriate learning opportunities
- Many learning opportunities are available to students, some of which are non-traditional and some of which are explicitly tailored to different student learning styles
- Some evidence that students select and participate in learning opportunities most suited to their current attributes and needs
- Learning opportunities are regularly and formally evaluated
- Students and staff are aware of and exercise the mutual obligations of the institution and its students through established publications, policies and procedures

### **Level 5**

- The institution is fully committed to the principles of responsiveness to students as evidenced by its mission, publications, organizational structures and resource-allocation strategies
- All students interact regularly and frequently with mentors or advisors
- Mentorship encounters regularly feature practice assessments or other exercises designed to determine current gaps in student knowledge and skills
- Mentorship encounters regularly feature extended advisement about appropriate learning opportunities
- A wide variety of learning opportunities is available to students, including traditional and asynchronous, class-based and modular, tailored to a broad array of student learning styles
- Convincing evidence that students select and participate in learning opportunities most suited to their current attributes and needs
- Learning opportunities are regularly and formally evaluated on the basis of timeliness and appropriateness of content, pedagogical methods employed, accessibility to students and subsequent student performance on assessments
- Students and staff are fully aware of and exercise the mutual obligations of the institution and its students through established publications, policies and procedures, as well as a strong track record of follow-through

# Responsiveness to Students

## *Instructions for Using the Rubric*

The rubric describes five levels of performance related to Responsiveness to Students that could potentially describe the institution. Each level includes statements about particular attributes of the institution related to Responsiveness to Students that should be true in combination for the institution to meet the level required. Based on your review of the institution's submission, please use the attached scoring sheet to indicate the level of performance that the institution appears to demonstrate for Responsiveness to Students as a whole.

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

Comments Related to Score:







# Standards on Organizational Alignment and Support

*OAS1.4: The institution identifies clear standards for evaluating key staff that are based on their effectiveness (including student satisfaction) and regularly assesses their performance on this basis.*

This standard requires the institution to establish effectiveness-related standards of performance for all personnel—and especially those with substantial student contact, such as mentors—and to apply these standards regularly and rigorously. At minimum, standards for performance should be written, clear and available, and there should be a documented process through which identified personnel are periodically evaluated. At higher levels of performance, there will be evidence that these processes are applied to all learning-related positions (e.g., through a personnel record) and that they include student satisfaction levels as well as data on student performance. To attain the highest score levels, performance reviews will not only include these characteristics, but will also result in recommendations for further training and development where this is indicated, and may involve exemplary performers being asked to share their experiences and knowledge with others at the institution.

**DESIGN**                      1                      2                      3                      4                      5                       Unable to Judge

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

**IMPLEMENTATION**                      1                      2                      3                      4                      5                       Unable to Judge

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

**EFFECTIVENESS**                      1                      2                      3                      4                      5                       Unable to Judge

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

Comments:

# Standards on Organizational Alignment and Support

*OASI.5: A process for assessing student and stakeholder satisfaction and performance is in place, including tracking students into the workplace or subsequent educational endeavors.*

At minimum, the institution should be able to document one or more ways in which the satisfaction and subsequent activities of its graduates and former students are monitored, such as surveys, interviews or tracking records. Documentation should include not only the methods used, but a display of the results obtained in the form of reports or appropriate data as well. At higher score levels, the institution should be able to identify key stakeholders such as employers and provide evidence of the ways in which it obtains their feedback (including actual results). At the highest score levels, the institution will be able to provide multiple instances or examples of how the resulting information has been used to improve program structure, instructional delivery or other aspects of service.

## **DESIGN**

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

## **EFFECTIVENESS**

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Standards on Organizational Alignment and Support

*OAS1.6: The institution has mechanisms for gathering and analyzing information about its own operations and effectiveness and uses this information to continuously improve itself.*

This standard requires the institution to have regular and appropriate mechanisms in place to examine its own effectiveness, the results of which are used to make improvements in its programs, structures or processes on an ongoing basis. At minimum, this requires an array of methods to examine internal operations such as student flow data, service ratios, and data on numbers and types of learning experiences and assessments engaged in. To attain higher score levels, a considerable amount of this data must not only be present, but there should also be substantial evidence of the institution's capacity to analyze or otherwise make sense of it in the form of reports, performance indicators or similar analytical tools. At this level, the institution should also be able to point to at least a few examples of the use of such information to improve one or more aspects of service or program delivery. At the highest score levels, the institution will have a substantial array of examples of this kind and will be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of any improvements made.

**DESIGN**

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

**IMPLEMENTATION**

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5
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Unable to Judge

Comments:

# Organizational Alignment and Support

## *Holistic Scoring Rubric*

*The institution ensures that high levels of student achievement and responsiveness to students can be sustained on a continuing basis through appropriate organization, energetic leadership and consistent action.*

The Organizational Alignment and Support area centers on the extent to which the institution can sustain its commitment to student outcomes and attainment and to responsiveness to students on a continuing basis through a) an appropriate mission and core values, b) organizational structures, processes, and resources aligned with core values and with one another and, c) mechanisms to promote “organizational learning” that enable it to determine its own effectiveness and continuously improve.

High-performing institutions require active leadership to ensure that their purposes, functions and resources remain properly aligned. Through leadership and planning on an ongoing basis, the institution frames questions, seeks answers, analyzes itself, and revises its purposes, structures and programs accordingly. At the same time, the institution’s resource acquisition and allocation processes—as well as its administrative and decision-making structures—are configured in a manner that allows it to continue to support responsiveness to students and high levels of student achievement on an ongoing basis.

## Rubric 3

### *Organizational Alignment and Support*

#### **Level 0**

- The institution has no sense of its purposes or what is essential about itself

#### **Level 1**

- The institution has some sense of what is distinctive or essential about itself
- Statements about purposes are not visibly related to responsiveness to students
- Essential values and character are not discussed by the institution's members at any level, and no mechanism is present for doing so

#### **Level 2**

- The institution has some sense of its purposes and its essential values and character, but key elements remain unarticulated or may be partially contradictory
- Institutional purposes are consistent with responsiveness to students
- The institution's purposes provide some guidance for action
- Institutional leaders can articulate its purposes and its essential values and character

#### **Level 3**

- The institution has a clear sense of its purposes and its essential values and character
- Purposes are demonstrably related to responsiveness to students
- The institution's purposes provide clear guidance for action and are partially reflected in its actions and decisions
- Members of the institution's community articulate its purposes and its essential values and character

#### **Level 4**

- The institution has a clear sense of its purposes and its essential values and character, which includes an awareness of its place in the higher education community and its relationship to its key constituencies and to society at large
- Purposes are demonstrably related to responsiveness to students at most levels of the organization
- The institution's purposes are frequently discernable in the institution's actions and decisions
- Members of the institution's community articulate its purposes and its essential values and character, and can describe ways in which these relate to their own activities

#### **Level 5**

- The institution has a clear and self-reflective sense of its purposes and its essential values and character, its place in the higher education community, and its relationship to its key constituencies and to society at large
- Purposes are demonstrably related to responsiveness to students at all levels of the organization

*(continued)*

- Institutional actions and decisions clearly and consistently reflect its purposes, as well as its essential values and character
- Members of the institution's community embody the institution's purposes and its essential values and character through their own day-to-day actions

# Organizational Alignment and Support

## *Instructions for Using the Rubric*

The rubric describes five levels of performance related to Organizational Alignment and Support that could potentially describe the institution. Each level includes statements about particular attributes of the institution related to Organizational Alignment and Support that should be true in combination for the institution to meet the level required. Based on your review of the institution's submission, please use the attached scoring sheet to indicate the level of performance that the institution appears to demonstrate for Organizational Alignment and Support as a whole.

Score: \_\_\_\_\_

Comments Related to Score:

# Appendix A-3

## WGU Questions for Engagement

To: Bob Mendenhall, Marcia Bankirer, and WGU Staff

From: Peter Ewell

Re: Some Questions for Engagement

Thanks again for being willing to be pilots for the CHEA mock accreditation review using the CHEA competency standards project. Members of the review team have been happy with the portfolio web-site and the other materials provided, and we look forward to visiting with you next week.

As you know, the team was asked to think about some further questions for engagement or clarification as they reviewed the portfolio. Consistent with the spirit of the CHEA approach, which emphasizes exhibits and dialogue rather than formal “self-studies,” these questions are intended largely to focus our conversations during the visit and to clarify matters which the portfolio did not fully address. They are not supposed to trigger any “official” response, written or otherwise. We hope that they will be helpful in structuring our dialogues next week.

### **Questions About Competencies and Assessments:**

1. How do students see what “exemplary” performance on assessments actually looks like? For example, are sample portfolios shared with students or cut scores on examinations provided through their mentors or through some other means?
2. Have any students taken credentialing assessments at this point? Are some sample records of achievement available through registrars’ records that we might look at?
3. How does WGU ensure that the skills embedded in the competencies for each degree remain current? Is there a schedule for review by the Program Councils?
4. What assessment instruments are actually used for credentialing for each domain within each program (the web-site did not contain this information, to our knowledge) and what levels of performance are required for each in order to “pass” the assessment?
5. How often do students essentially “test out” of a domain through assessment without having taken any formal learning experiences through WGU in that domain (e.g., preparation based on skills learned on the job, prior experience, etc.)?
6. Is there any track record of relationships with assessment centers yet? How well have they performed and have they met their agreements?
7. Have WGU’s plans for articulation with other institutions been tested yet through actual student attempts to transfer credits or competencies? What have been the results?

**Questions About Councils and Faculty Functions:**

1. How are potential disagreements between Program Councils and the Assessment Council handled (e.g., about methods for assessment, length and rigor, etc.)?
2. Given that WGU intends to monitor student pass rates on assessments and use the resulting information for improvement, what would be the actual role of the Councils and staff if a problem area was discovered here? How would this discussion be handled, who would be involved and what might action recommendations look like?

**Questions About the Mentorship Role:**

1. How are mentors evaluated?
2. What kinds of professional development opportunities do mentors have access to?
3. Could we see some examples of typical student/mentor interactions and how frequently these occur? For example, is there a developing electronic record of e-mail exchanges between students and mentors or some similar set of records that we might look at?
4. How do mentors actually assess student readiness to take a credentialing assessment? Are practice assessments used and, if so, what do they look like?
5. How do mentors proceed if no learning experiences that meet a particular student's individual needs are currently listed in the WGU Catalog?
6. How do mentors direct students to appropriate "learning-to-learn" experiences? Does WGU experience to date suggest that these are needed? What kinds are available and how actively do mentors promote them to students?

**Questions About Providers:**

1. How does WGU ensure, over time, that providers actually do what they say they do with respect to course offerings (e.g., competencies addressed, pre-requisites, meeting times and logistical arrangements, etc.)? Is there a process for "de-listing" offerings from the WGU Catalog if the provider does not meet advertised conditions?
2. Does WGU actively encourage providers to become more "learner-centered" and "customer-friendly"? Or is this left to the market to decide?

**Questions About WGU Infrastructure:**

1. How is the "Institutional Research" function handled at WGU? More particularly, how is information about student satisfaction gathered and used? Similarly, what mechanisms are in place to track students after completion of their programs or to assess employer/stakeholder needs and satisfaction on an ongoing basis?
2. How does WGU develop new degrees and/or curricula? What information is used and who is involved?

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CHEA is pleased to provide information and assistance related to accreditation issues and processes to colleges and universities and other interested parties.

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