

## Student Learning Outcomes Workshop

March 4, 2002 • Washington, DC

**T**he Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is devoting considerable attention to accreditation and student learning outcomes. Most recently, in September 2001, CHEA published *Accreditation and Student Learning Outcomes: A Point of Departure* by Peter Ewell, vice president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS). This insightful paper outlined key decision points for accrediting organizations if they are to further incorporate evidence of student learning outcomes in judgments about the quality of institutions and programs and their accredited status.

To assist accrediting organizations, CHEA is hosting Student Learning Outcomes Workshops in three locations during 2002. The first workshop was held in Washington, DC, on March 4, 2002. What follows is a summary of this first gathering.

### **WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR GREATER ATTENTION TO STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES IN ACCREDITATION?**

#### ***Key External Constituents (Government, Students, Public) Want Information about Student Learning Outcomes***

Information about student learning outcomes is important to government, students, and the public because these constituents increasingly tie judgments about the quality of an institution or program to evidence of student academic achievement.

- Governments want evidence about the quality of student learning outcomes to make judgments about federal and state support of higher education;
- Students and prospective students want evidence of student learning outcomes to make decisions about which institutions or programs to attend and what tuition they are willing to pay; and
- The public wants evidence of student learning outcomes to

continue its support of higher education as a public good.

#### ***Accrediting Organizations Need Information About Student Learning Outcomes***

The legitimacy of accreditation as a protector of academic quality in higher education is increasingly challenged in the absence of quality review that pays significant attention to outcomes. Information about student learning outcomes is important to accrediting organizations because the expectation that accreditors will provide this information is growing among important constituents, including those who recognize these organizations.

- Each accrediting organization needs to state clearly its position with respect to how it addresses the matter of evidence of student learning outcomes in its standards, policies, and review processes.
- The accrediting community needs a shared language on the topic of student learning outcomes—both to encourage communication within the community and to clearly articulate accreditation's position and commitment to constituencies outside the community.

## *Institutions, Programs, and Faculty Need Information About Student Learning Outcomes*

For institutions and programs, information about student learning outcomes is central to any claim of intellectual authority that they may offer. For faculty, the primary value of evidence of student learning outcomes is to aid in the improvement of teaching and learning. Such a commitment to improvement is not only a key aspect of scholarship and intellectual responsibility, it is essential to claims of academic quality as well. Part of the task of accreditation is to help institutions, programs, and faculty substantiate their claims to quality.

## **II. WHAT DO ACCREDITORS NEED TO CONSIDER WHEN EXAMINING EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES?**

### *1. The Practices That Institutions and Programs Establish to Examine Student Learning Outcomes*

Accrediting organizations look to institutions and programs to:

- Distinguish student *learning* outcomes (a level of knowledge, skills, abilities that a student has attained) from a) more general student *outcomes* (something that happens to individual students as a result of attending an institution or program), b) institutional *performance* (the aggregate results of a college or university), c) institutional *processes* (the practices and structures used by an institution or program for various purposes, including gathering

evidence of student learning outcomes).

- Distinguish direct from indirect evidence of student learning outcomes (see #2 below).
- Establish and use recognizable principles for judging the adequacy of the evidence of student learning outcomes provided by institutions and programs (for example, #3 below).
- Identify and sustain general characteristics of good evidence of student learning outcomes: Is the evidence relevant, verifiable, representative, cumulative, actionable?

### *2. Types of Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes: Direct and Indirect*

Direct evidence of student learning outcomes is the result of a process deliberately designed for this purpose and may include such approaches as:

- Capstone performances;
- Professional/clinical performances;
- Third-party testing (e.g., licensure); and
- Faculty-designed examination.

Indirect evidence of student learning outcomes may include:

- Portfolios and work samples;
- Follow up of graduates;
- Employer ratings of performance; and
- Self-reported growth by graduates.

### *3. Judging Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes*

Site visit teams make judgments about the value and pertinence of the evidence of student learning outcomes presented by institutions and programs. As they do so, the following four

principles may be helpful:

- *Comprehensiveness*: Submitted evidence should cover knowledge and skills taught throughout a course or program.
- *Multiple Judgments*: Submitted evidence should involve more than one source or involve multiple judgments of student performance.
- *Multiple Dimensions*: Submitted evidence should provide information on multiple dimensions of student performance—i.e., they should yield more than a summative grade.
- *Directness*: Submitted evidence should involve at least one type based on direct observation or demonstration of student capacities—i.e., they should involve more than simply a self-report.

## **III. WHAT ARE THE KEY POLICY ISSUES THAT ACCREDITORS MUST CONSIDER WHEN ADDRESSING STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES?**

The policy decisions that accreditors make will affect the content of accreditation standards, team training, technical assistance, and the conduct of reviews. Accreditors need to make conscious decisions about:

- *The Extent to Which Accreditors are Prescriptive About Student Learning Outcomes*. How far will accreditors go in identifying the particular student learning outcomes for their institutions or programs?
- *The Unit of Analysis That Will Be Used*. Should the focus of

attention in review be placed primarily on the institution or program? The student? Both? Other?

- *The Focus of an Accreditation Review.* Whatever the unit of analysis, is the accreditor examining the process the institution or program uses to gather evidence of student learning outcomes, its capacity to gather such evidence, or the actual results themselves? Or all of these?

## **N.** SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

CHEA can play a role in addressing student learning outcomes by:

- Communicate with lawmakers about the activities of the accrediting community with particular emphasis on the variety of ways in which accreditation can and is addressing student learning outcomes.
- Collect and share good practices in accreditation and student learning outcomes.
- Develop a “CHEA Statement” or platform—a set of principles on which to base accreditor attention to student learning outcomes.

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Council for Higher Education Accreditation  
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## Student Learning Outcomes Workshops

CHEA will be holding two additional Student Learning Outcomes Workshops during 2002. The dates and locations are:

**July 16, 2002 . . . . .Portland, OR**

**September 25, 2002 . . . . .Chicago, IL**

Intended for accreditors and members of accrediting commissions, the purpose of the workshops is to develop strategies for addressing student learning outcomes in accreditation. Based on the September 2001 CHEA Occasional Paper *Accreditation and Student Learning Outcomes: A Proposed Point of Departure* by Peter Ewell of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, the workshops will provide information and structure activities to aid in the development and use of evidence of student learning outcomes in accreditation review.

*For more information about the workshops, contact CHEA at 202-955-6126.*

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