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The Council for Higher Education Accreditation will serve students and their families, colleges and 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

A national advocate and institutional voice for self-regulation of academic quality through accreditation, CHEA is an association of 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities and recognizes 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations.

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Council for Higher Education Accreditation

Using the Accreditation Visit to Benefit the Institution

CHEA®

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This Guideline *addresses the president's leadership responsibility in following up after the accreditation process: making best use of the findings; reporting to the campus, the board, other decision makers and the press.*

Presidential leadership in the accreditation process continues, even as the visiting team departs the campus. Because preparing the self study and then hosting a visiting team were so time-consuming and intensive, faculty and staff members tend to put the matter out of mind once the site visit team leaves the campus. However, for the president, this is the optimum time to take advantage of the findings of the self study and the observations of the site visit team. In some cases there is corrective work to be accomplished before the visiting team's report is transmitted to the accrediting commission, and in any case there is advantage for institutional improvement in addressing areas of weakness while the details are still fresh in people's minds.

The accreditation follow-up process might be characterized as three overlapping activities: studying the findings, reporting the findings and improving the institution or program.

Studying the Findings

Although the terminology varies among accrediting organizations, most make clear the distinction between *requirements* for gaining or maintaining accreditation and *suggestions* for institutional or program improvement. It is important to understand these distinctions because often steps can be taken to address accreditation requirements between the time of the site visit and the submission of the team report to the accrediting commission. It is advisable for the president or chancellor, along with the provost or academic dean, to hold a briefing with the accreditation steering committee to discuss the findings of the self study regarding any institutional or program weaknesses, the observations of the site visit team as reported in the exit interview and the steps needed to address any serious deficiencies that might have been identified. Most accrediting commissions will look favorably upon quick and decisive action to address shortcomings that are recognized by both the site visit team and the institution.

Nearly every accrediting team report will make suggestions for improvement of the institution or program, and this is the optimum time to begin addressing those issues as well. There is great advantage in laying plans for improvement *before* reporting to the institution's board, to the campus as a whole and to the press.

Reporting the Findings

The higher education community is often accused of not being accountable. Part of the reason for this is that we too seldom report accreditation findings thoroughly, nor do we explain how accreditation works. Some institutions are even lax about reporting accreditation findings to their governing board. It is understandable that colleges and universities do not wish to expose their weaknesses, but most institutions and programs have more strengths to extol than weaknesses to admit, and an honest report that focuses on plans for improvement will be well received by the public

Reporting to the institution's governing board should occur throughout the process, and ideally some members of the board have been engaged in the self study and the site visit. A thorough (perhaps confidential, depending on the circumstance) report to the board immediately following the site visit is advisable, particularly if there are serious deficiencies. The same might be said about reporting to the campus as a whole, although many presidents and chancellors will find it preferable to develop preliminary plans for addressing shortcomings and improvements before reporting to the campus. The timing of the campus report therefore depends on the institutional circumstance, but it is important to take advantage of the accreditation process to mobilize an institution or program for quality improvement. The more time that passes from the end of the accreditation process to planning for improvement, the more momentum is lost.

Many presidents and chancellors will be more concerned about how to report accreditation results to the media than to their internal constituencies. Accrediting organizations often have regulations about this. For example, most prohibit an institution's editing out any criticisms and reporting only positive findings, but that seldom serves the institution well anyway. We can anticipate that the press will be interested in anything negative and will yawn at positive findings. Therefore, there may be more opportunity to extol the virtues of an institution or program if press releases about the results of accreditation point out both strengths and areas to be improved, with plans for improvement also described.

For all institutions, and perhaps especially for public institutions, it may be advantageous to report accreditation findings to decision makers such as state legislators. Few legislators at either the state or federal level understand how accreditation works. Therefore, reporting to them information about the process as well as findings and plans for improvement will usually serve the institution well, particularly for institutional accreditation or high-profile professional programs.

Improving the Institution or Program

Too often the site visit team's suggestions for institutional or program improvement are not taken as seriously as they might be. A team often has excellent observations about improvements that could or should be made, but of course some of their suggestions may not be as worthy or practicable as others. It therefore behooves the president or chancellor to appoint a follow-up study group to analyze the site visit team's suggestions thoroughly and recommend action where it is deemed appropriate. As mentioned above, it is advantageous to have these recommendations and plans *before* reporting accreditation findings to the public.

Sometimes the accreditation process will serve institutional leadership well by suggesting improvements that have been recognized by the president or chancellor but that have been resisted by the institution's faculty or staff for one reason or another. Immediately following the accreditation process is the best time—it may be the *only* time—for the leadership to get these items on the institutional agenda.

Conclusion

The value of institutional and programmatic accreditation as we conduct it in the United States is perhaps first and foremost realized through an institution's or program's self study. A self study that is well done identifies weaknesses as well as strengths. These findings are usually corroborated by a site visit team, and the team may also identify additional opportunities through which the institution could be more effective. But identifying issues and acting on them are two different matters. If improvement is to be realized from the accreditation process, it is because the institution's leadership takes advantage of all the findings and mobilizes the institution to action. Strong leaders also recognize that quality improvement is a *continuous* process that proceeds from one accreditation cycle to the next without interruption.