

THE REACCREDITATION PROCESS: CHARTING OUR CAMPUS FUTURE

Report to the Academic Affairs / Academic Senate
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The university officially launched its multi-year reaccreditation process with the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) on January 17, 2007 at the Academic Affairs Forum. The purposes of this briefing paper are to summarize the numerous reaccreditation activities that transpired over the spring and summer of 2007, to share the major findings that emerged from a campuswide electronic survey, and to reiterate the next steps in terms of core requirements, as well as list the milestone documents that must be prepared as part of the reaccreditation process. But first, for the benefit of new Senate members and others it is fruitful to recap the purpose, emphasis, and products under the “new WASC accreditation” procedures.

WASC Process: Redux

First, the university must develop an Institutional Proposal, due October 2007. Then concurrent research and programmatic activities are to address a “Capacity and Preparatory Review” (culminating in a Spring 2010 report) and an “Educational Effectiveness Review” (report by Fall 2011). With each of these last two phases an external review committee will conduct a campus site visit.

The orientation of this institutional accreditation emphasizes the process of collaborative inquiry and **not** the creation of a single product listing campus resources and statistical trends. The purposes of this collaborative inquiry are to tell our distinctive Cal State Fullerton story and to chart plans for the future based on the core mission and goals statements with the end objective being *to achieve improvements in institutional quality*. We will achieve those outcomes through an inquiry-based self-assessment grounded in “researchable questions.” In short, the accreditation process is more about working together to chart the future of Cal State Fullerton than about achieving compliance with WASC.

Because accreditation now is a process with a lengthy time horizon, it will be a challenge to achieve from members of the campus community sustained engagement and interest in the reaccreditation process. One way to approach this challenge is by using existing processes and structures to conduct much of the required activity. Moreover, if the campus community is frequently reminded of the major objective – namely, to make Cal State Fullerton a stronger and higher quality university – then the sustained investment of time and effort will be worthwhile.

Using a WASC resource guide, *The Institutional Proposal and Beyond*, the Steering Committee determined that the special themes approach would be the most appropriate path to follow. The committee then faced three fundamental questions: How should we determine *what themes* would be the most informative for the campus to examine, given that our objective is quality improvement? What ways might those themes be translated and *bundled into researchable*

questions? How should the researchable questions be addressed over the next three years in order to conduct a meaningful Capacity and Preparatory Review (the 2010 report) and the Educational Effectiveness Review (the 2011 report)? This report outlines the activities that addressed the first two questions.

Campus Engagement Activities

WASC staff and neighboring universities caution institutions to keep the number of themes to a manageable number, perhaps no more than three or four areas of inquiry. Given that *student learning* is required to be one of those themes, the process of defining, winnowing, and bundling of concerns expressed by the various constituencies in the campus community posed a substantial challenge. Large scale forums, smaller group workshops and outreach meetings, a campuswide survey, and regular meetings of the Steering Committee were used to achieve the articulation of our major themes [Exhibit A].

As a precursor to more formal activities, a Reaccreditation Work Group in November 2006 made **initial requests to academic departments** to elicit the “top three concerns that should matter most to our campus.” The core sentiments submitted were wide-ranging. In descending order of frequency these were: (a) addressing student needs and instructional resources, (b) specific faculty interests, (c) facilities, (d) sense of campus community, and (e) connectivity with our external communities.

In January 2007, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Ephraim Smith, formally designated a nine-member Steering Committee to shepherd the reaccreditation process. That group decided that the annual **Academic Affairs Forum** would represent a timely kickoff to the process. That Forum brought Dr. Ralph Wolff, the head of WASC, to campus and offered breakout sessions on “Brainstorming Campus Futures.” One hundred thirty members of the campus community attended, offering their detailed concerns and broad areas of interest. Using the concerns raised by academic departments as a starting point, discussions at the forum resulted in these emerging themes [in alphabetical order]: addressing student learning and assessing its success, enhancing campus community, growth and institutional quality, supporting faculty and staff needs for effectiveness, and the intersection of growth and campus planning.

Following the forum, the Steering Committee presented and posted electronically the first issue of a **newsletter** “Charting Our Campus Future.” In February and March, the Committee continued to refine the emerging lists of themes by conducting **outreach discussions** with the Academic Senate, Associated Students board, Student Affairs staff, Executive Vice President’s staff, Alumni Association board, Information Technology staff, Academic Department Chairs, and Pollak Library staff.

Two large-scale forums/workshops further enriched the information base for shaping our reaccreditation research themes and the proposal. By request of the Chancellor’s Office, the **Access to Excellence** event (March 21, 2007) was held on each CSU campus. Our workshop drew 263 attendees. Its purpose was to enumerate campus strengths, along with areas for collective improvement in two domains that intentionally aligned with our reaccreditation work -- - ensuring success in student learning and building faculty and staff excellence to promote that student success.

The second event, the **Complexities of Growth** forum (April 5, 2007), was attended by 182 people. Members of the audience at the growth forum participated in a “Forced Choice Exercise” that required decision-making in the face of limited resources. The discussion items and

perspectives were extensive, ranging from infrastructure challenges to financing, our imprints on the local community, adequate staff support, and even some inherent predicaments in the nature of growth per se.

An additional consideration that factored into the emerging themes were “areas of attention” noted by the WASC Commission in its **July 2000 reaccreditation letter** to the university. These included (1) refining the definition and improving evidence of learning, (2) continued strengthening of general education, (3) improving the Program Performance Review, (4) supporting faculty learning and development.

The Steering Committee added Dr. Gerald Patton, who joined Cal State Fullerton in May as the new Director of Assessment and Educational Effectiveness. The group was also required to conduct a **Preliminary Institutional Self-Review** under each of the four WASC standards. Those standards cover detailed topical areas under the headings of (1) defining institutional purposes and ensuring educational objectives; (2) achieving educational objectives through core functions; (3) developing and applying resources and organizational structures to ensure sustainability; and (4) creating an organization committed to learning and improvement. For each of the 41 criteria for evaluation under these area standards, the Committee discussed at considerable length “*how well*” Cal State Fullerton conducts the activity and *how important that area is “to address at this time.”* With our collective sentiment and the feedback from all of the spring semester activities, the Steering Committee then prepared the formal All-Campus Survey.

Convergence of Interests and Themes: The All-Campus Survey

As a final point of evidence collection, the Steering Committee prepared the formal and electronic All-Campus Survey. The survey questionnaire was organized into six major domains of interest:

- Addressing the Needs of Students
- Ensuring Student Learning
- Faculty Excellence and Effectiveness
- Staff Excellence and Effectiveness
- Campus Planning and Vision
- Campus and Community Partnerships

For each of 48 items distributed across these domains, respondents were asked to react to two dimensions: *How well is the campus doing in this area? How important is it to address this area now?* A total of 1,242 valid surveys were completed, representing a good cross-section of the university community. Of note, more than 430 individuals offered specific comments to the open-ended opportunity. The distribution of respondents is as follows:

Students	408	32.9% of total
Administration	94	7.6%
Staff	334	26.9%
Part-Time Faculty	124	10.0%
Full-Time Faculty	282	22.7%

Survey Findings

A wealth of evidence emerged from the survey responses and they indicate both strengths and challenges of our campus. As our accreditation process moves forward, it is important to keep in

mind both sets of conditions, particularly the extent to which we can leverage what we do well to improve those areas that need attention.

One informative measure of the Cal State Fullerton strengths is to view those activities and qualities which respondents regard as the university doing “Very Well” and are considered to be “Very Important.” Exhibit B lists the top ten of these institutional strengths, in descending order of ratings. Identifying campus weaknesses or challenges depends upon which group of university stakeholders is being consulted. Even so, the survey finds general concerns about staff sufficiency and several, more explicit, indicators that are suggestive of campus planning and vision.

To focus the lens on more tightly on campus challenges, we examined the cross-combinations of areas which were marked as both “not well done” and “very important” to address at this time. Proportions for each of the five major constituencies are shown in Exhibit C.

Matters for attention that were expressed specifically by the students are provided in Exhibit D. These included an interest in more engagement with faculty and with out-of-classroom experiences.

Additionally, 34.7 percent of all respondents took the time and effort to provide written comments at the end of the questionnaire. Taken as a whole, these written comments demonstrated a qualitative richness behind the quantitative patterns raised in the questionnaire responses. Sample comments may be found in Exhibit E.

The Research Questions and Next Steps

Based on the wealth of information provided by the campus, the WASC 2000 reaccreditation letter, and the Institutional Self-Review, the Steering Committee formulated “researchable questions” to guide activities of committees, task forces, and focused special projects that will lead to documentation for the Capacity and Preparatory Review (2010) and Educational Effectiveness Review (2011) and special team visits. The Committee retained sight of the core objective, which is that these efforts should enhance the quality of the university and its activities.

While the detailed wording of questions may be revised further, the research themes and questions at this point are:

Campus-wide Planning

1. *In the face of system-wide, as well as local enrollment pressures, how does each campus unit define and assess indicators of quality and their contributions to the academic mission of the University?*
2. *How do we integrate and prioritize these indicators of quality with campus-wide planning?*

Student Learning and Its Assessment

3. *What are the student learning goals that we hold in common across baccalaureate degree programs? How are these learning goals articulated and achieved through curricular and co-curricular experiences?*

4. *Given that being able to write effectively is a particularly significant learning goal on our campus, how can student and faculty expectations about writing be aligned so as to assist in achieving this goal?*
5. *How can quality review processes, such as the PPR, annual reports and discipline-based accreditation assist departments in assessing student learning and using the results to improve programs?*

Promoting Student Success and Engagement

6. *How can we better promote the success and engagement of our students by means of our mentoring and advising services and make the best use of our fiscal, physical, staffing, and information resources in order to achieve this objective?*

The next step in the reaccreditation process is to determine how we will answer these questions. What existing structures and processes might be used to address these questions? What additional structures, special resources, and other means of support may be needed to deal with these questions in order to move Cal State Fullerton to a higher level of institutional quality?