

Understanding the New Criteria for Accreditation: Exploring the Criteria and the Core Components

The 1997 edition of the Commission's *Handbook for Accreditation* provided considerable explanatory text for the Criteria together with a variety of examples about how each might be interpreted in different institutional contexts. Although that Handbook addressed five Criteria, as does this one, the Criteria themselves were considerably broader, and the patterns of evidence were relatively limited in number. To help institutions explore the rich potential of each Criterion and its suggested patterns of evidence, therefore, the Commission created interpretive text and examples.

In this new edition of the *Handbook*, the Core Components make possible a fuller understanding of each Criterion and the Examples of Evidence help define the breadth and depth of each Core Component. The text that follows, therefore, provides a basic conceptual frame for each Core Component. It includes, when appropriate, definitions of words or phrases in the Criterion, Core Component, or Examples of Evidence requested by those who reviewed the penultimate version of the Criteria.

Criterion One: Mission and Integrity

The organization operates with integrity to ensure the fulfillment of its mission through structures and processes that involve the board, administration, faculty, staff, and students.

It is axiomatic to claim that the strength and vitality of higher education in the United States is directly related to the extraordinary diversity of organizations and institutions providing that education. Since the early 1930s accreditation of institutions of higher education within the North Central region has respected the importance of institutional diversity by applying broadly stated standards that can be interpreted and applied to fit specific institutional contexts. Fundamental to the Commission's capacity to make institution-specific judgments is the clarity of the institution's own stated mission.

Only a few years ago, the Commission called for an accredited institution to have a public mission statement adopted by the governing board. The Commission expected the mission statement to include stated purposes—specific goals and objectives the institution intended to achieve to fulfill its mission. Increasingly, organizations of all types, including colleges and universities, have created and use a variety of documents that summarize their core commitments for both internal and external constituents. Mission statements, once several paragraphs in length, now often contain no more than ten or fifteen words. Stated purposes are frequently captured in documents that define an organization's vision, values, and strategic goals. Although the methods by which organizations explain their core commitments might be changing, it remains fundamental to the accreditation process that these core commitments are readily understood by people within and outside of the organization and are appropriate to an institution providing higher learning for students in the twenty-first century.

The Commission's first Criterion of accreditation focuses the attention of the organization and of the Commission's peer review process on the role of these mission documents in defining and shaping the operations and priorities of the organization. All other Criteria in one way or another relate to Criterion One.

Criterion 1 - Core Component 1a

The organization's mission documents are clear and articulate publicly the organization's commitments.

What is clear in this age of marketing is that a tagline or slogan cannot by itself define an organization's multifaceted mission. It might be valuable for every student, faculty member, and administrator to be able to repeat a concise, pithy mission statement, but the best of those statements usually open a variety of operational possibilities. Only through other statements of vision, values, and goals can an organization provide some structure and priority to decision making.

The governing board formally adopts the mission documents of the organization. Those documents contain the goals for which the organization is willing to be held accountable.

Effective organizations revisit their mission documents frequently, assuring that they are dynamic and current as well as clear and understood. As external environments shift, so also might some definitions of core commitments, or the vision for the organization may shift with new leadership.

The organization's Web site, catalog, student and faculty handbooks, and recruitment and marketing materials might be the most useful places to make these documents readily available to the public. They may also exist in a variety of other formats. What is important is the ease with which internal and external constituencies have access to the documents and can understand them. The proposed types of evidence for this Core Component not only illustrate the challenge of clarity and availability, but also identify some other expectations of their contents, particularly organizational commitment to high academic standards and to assessment of achieved learning.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- The board has adopted statements of mission, vision, values, goals, and organizational priorities that together clearly and broadly define the organization's mission.
- The mission, vision, values, and goals documents define the varied internal and external constituencies the organization intends to serve.
- The mission documents include a strong commitment to high academic standards that sustain and advance excellence in higher learning.
- The mission documents state goals for the learning to be achieved by its students.
- The organization regularly evaluates and, when appropriate, revises the mission documents.
- The organization makes the mission documents available to the public, particularly to prospective and enrolled students.

Criterion 1 - Core Component 1b

In its mission documents, the organization recognizes the diversity of its learners, other constituencies, and the greater society it serves.

The Commission pledged that the new accrediting standards would engage organizations in conversations fundamental to their future. What is known for certain about the future of higher education in the United States is that it will have to be responsive to increasing numbers of students of diverse cultures and ethnic backgrounds, and that it will have to prepare its students to live productively in a national and global society marked by extraordinary diversity.

Because attention to diversity is fundamental to quality higher learning in the twenty-first century, the Commission expects every organization to address diversity in its mission documents. The premises undergirding this position are found in the Commission's "Statement on Diversity" (see Appendix A).

Diversity is a complex concept. For some organizations, ethnic and racial representation on campus, in educational programs, or in faculty and administration might be very important, particularly if their mission is to serve communities marked by ethnic and cultural diversity. For many organizations serving educational needs of rural or homogeneous communities, recognition and understanding of the impact of diversity may be more important than representation. For other organizations, particularly those that are faith-based, diversity could be understood to mean acceptance and toleration. The Commission acknowledges the importance of distinct cultural contexts and, therefore, recognizes the importance that organizations attach to being able to define themselves in ways that are unique to their existence and respective missions. With its expectation that even these organizations acknowledge the importance of diversity, the Commission asks that all organizations be transparently clear in their statements of expectations of college constituencies, fair in their enforcement of those expectations, and protective of the dignity of individuals whose behavior or beliefs may not always fit those expectations.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- In its mission documents, the organization addresses diversity within the community values and common purposes it considers fundamental to its mission.
- The mission documents present the organization's function in a multicultural society.
- The mission documents affirm the organization's commitment to honor the dignity and worth of individuals.
- The organization's required codes of belief or expected behavior are congruent with its mission.
- The mission documents provide a basis for the organization's basic strategies to address diversity.

Criterion 1 - Core Component 1c

Understanding of and support for the mission pervade the organization.

Unless all its internal constituencies understand and support the fundamental mission of the organization, even the most beautifully crafted mission documents will fail to count for much. This is especially true in this era of significant change and restructuring within higher education. Confusion about mission inevitably leads to disagreements on priorities, to not meeting students' expectations, and to decision making shaped more by the opportunities of the day than by a clear vision of the organization and its future.

Most successful organizations engage their constituents in the creation, review, and revision of basic mission documents. Most provide programs, materials, and orientations to ensure the creation of a common interpretation of mission documents. Most can also point to the key role the mission documents have played in stimulating new initiatives; creating organizational priorities; and informing seminal decisions about allocations of time, energy, and resources.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- The board, administration, faculty, staff, and students understand and support the organization's mission.
- The organization's strategic decisions are mission-driven.
- The organization's planning and budgeting priorities flow from and support the mission.
- The goals of the administrative and academic sub-units of the organization are congruent with the organization's mission.
- The organization's internal constituencies articulate the mission in a consistent manner.

Criterion 1 - Core Component 1d

The organization's governance and administrative structures promote effective leadership and support collaborative processes that enable the organization to fulfill its mission.

Beyond a common understanding of and support for the mission, the organization must have structures through which decisions are made, responsibilities assigned, and accountability for end results established. Shared governance has been a long-standing attribute of most colleges and universities in the United States. Whatever the governance and administrative structures, they need to enhance the organization's capacity to fulfill its mission.

While each college and university needs people with many different skills and talents, each also needs leadership capable of creating an environment in which the use of those skills and talents furthers the organization's mission. Capable board leadership understands the boundaries of board responsibility; effective executive leadership appreciates the need for teamwork; strong faculty leadership helps create a faculty culture supportive of the organization's goals; and good student leadership understands that the organization exists for future as well for current students. Effective leadership inevitably involves as much vision as technique, as much appreciation for the contributions of others as defined power, and as much capacity for creative compromise as ultimate authority.

There is a difference between an organization that is offering higher education and a business that is selling a consumer product. Higher education is not indoctrination; nor is it training. It is an enterprise in which qualified professionals determine what students should know and be able to do as a result of their education and create processes to determine that students actually know and can do these things. It is also an enterprise that seeks to equip people to be self-motivated and self-sustaining learners throughout their lives. It is to fulfill this very critical set of goals that colleges and universities create structures to enable their achievement.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- Board policies and practices document that the board's focus is on the organization's mission.
- The board enables the organization's chief administrative personnel to exercise effective leadership.
- The distribution of responsibilities as defined in governance structures, processes, and activities is understood and is implemented through delegated authority.
- People within the governance and administrative structures are committed to the mission and appropriately qualified to carry out their defined responsibilities.

- Faculty and other academic leaders share responsibility for the coherence of the curriculum and the integrity of academic processes.
- Effective communication facilitates governance processes and activities.
- The organization evaluates its structures and processes regularly and strengthens them as needed.

Criterion 1 - Core Component 1e

The organization upholds and protects its integrity.

Integrity is a concept with multiple interpretations. When applied to an organization, it can be understood to refer to

- ▶ The honesty of the organization in its operations
- ▶ The congruence between what an organization's mission documents say the organization is about and what it actually does
- ▶ The reputation of the organization
- ▶ The fairness with which it interacts with internal and external constituencies
- ▶ The practice of knowing and abiding by relevant laws and regulations

The Commission proposes that all of these interpretations of integrity should inform an organization's self-evaluation and a team's review.

The tremendous diversity in organizations providing higher education degrees is a given in the United States. As we move farther into the twenty-first century, the structures of those organizations will become increasingly complex and increasingly flexible; increasingly reliant on partnerships, consortia, and collaborations to provide quality higher learning in an age transformed by technology; increasingly driven to respond to unanticipated and different opportunities to provide education to new and changing populations of students; and increasingly required to provide education relevant to a global society.

What were understood to be hallmarks of institutional integrity just a couple of decades ago are no longer sufficient. Then, integrity frequently was connected with accurate representation of programs and policies, with concepts of institutional autonomy, and with the capacity of the institution to make decisions with little undue influence from the society it served. Now organizational integrity is vastly more complicated, with as many issues related to relationships among internal constituencies as to relationships with broader communities of interest. Maintenance of integrity is more than just following the advice of legal counsel, although increasingly that voice must be heard. Essentially, an organization's definition of integrity must be shaped by the values it affirms for itself as it defines its roles with its multiple constituencies.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- The activities of the organization are congruent with its mission.
- The board exercises its responsibility to the public to ensure that the organization operates legally, responsibly, and with fiscal honesty.
- The organization understands and abides by local, state, and federal laws and regulations applicable to it (or by laws and regulations established by federally-recognized sovereign entities).
- The organization consistently implements clear and fair policies regarding the rights and responsibilities of each of its internal constituencies.
- The organization's structures and processes allow it to ensure the integrity of its co-curricular and auxiliary activities.
- The organization deals fairly with its external constituents.
- The organization presents itself accurately and honestly to the public.
- The organization documents timely response to complaints and grievances, particularly those of students.

Criterion Two: Preparing for the Future

The organization's allocation of resources and its processes for evaluation and planning demonstrate its capacity to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its education, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

The last decade of the twentieth century demonstrated that no college or university can prepare for the future by simply trying to continue the actions of the past. Technology, particularly through massive and powerful networks created by the Internet, has fundamentally transformed the processing of information and, therefore, the creation and transmission of knowledge. Globalization has affected not just multinational corporations, but also—through new trade agreements—fundamental economic realities in every nation. At least in the United States, global economic competitiveness rapidly moved from manufacturing to knowledge and “knowledge workers.” Major demographic shifts are occurring in the United States that may very well change the makeup of every student body.

The accreditation process has always been understood to say something about the future of the accredited organization. In the past, the affirmation of an organization’s future rested heavily on judgments about how the organization had handled change in the past and on the health of planning processes. Criterion Two continues to weigh those variables but adds significantly to what is understood to be the challenge of confronting the future in this new century.

Criterion 2 - Core Component 2a

The organization realistically prepares for a future shaped by multiple societal and economic trends.

Fundamental to preparing for the future is an inventory of the trends that will create multiple new contexts for the organization. Some of the trends will inevitably shape aspects of the organization; others may not. Change often opens new opportunities and closes old ones. In creating its preferred future, an organization must also attend to its history and heritage and to its resource capacity as it determines which new opportunities to grasp. In identifying the trends and understanding which will require organizational attention, an organization displays its definition of realistically.

While many organizations providing quality higher learning are finding ways to be more nimble and responsive, the predominant culture of colleges and universities has involved careful study and limited risk-taking. In fact, the expectation has been that shared governance, for example, will serve as a check-and-a-balance to ensure academic integrity. The effect of shared governance can change if the total organization values innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking. However, even the most entrepreneurial college knows that there are boundaries to what it can and should attempt. The organization defines clearly how its goals are set by recognizing and honoring those boundaries.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- The organization’s planning documents reflect a sound understanding of the organization’s current capacity.
- The organization’s planning documents demonstrate that attention is being paid to emerging factors such as technology, demographic shifts, and globalization.
- The organization’s planning documents show careful attention to the organization’s function in a multicultural society.
- The organization’s planning processes include effective environmental scanning.
- The organizational environment is supportive of innovation and change.
- The organization incorporates in its planning those aspects of its history and heritage that it wishes to preserve and continue.
- The organization clearly identifies authority for decision making about organizational goals.

Criterion 2 - Core Component 2b

The organization’s resource base supports its educational programs and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future.

An organization’s resource base includes human resources as well as financial and physical assets. One test of the realism of an organization’s preparation for the future is its capacity to make a valid assessment of the strength of its existing resources. Particularly in this time of straitened finances, most colleges and universities are discovering that they cannot maintain the quality of all educational offerings, but must instead make very difficult decisions about how to delete or merge programs or find partners to share costs. Realistic plans, therefore, inevitably will include a variety of shifts in the organization’s educational programming, but all plans must evidence concern with ensuring the quality of those programs, whether continuing or new, and their consistency with the mission.

It is a fundamental premise that every affiliated organization wants to provide the best education it can. To be able to do this, the organization must know what it does well and create strategies to continue that excellence even as it focuses on improving programs that do not meet the

standard the organization has set for itself. Improvement might be as simple as experimenting with a different pedagogy, or it might require significant investment in personnel and learning support.

Some organizations may face a future of substantial change—creating new delivery systems, moving to higher degree levels, establishing new instructional sites, recruiting and admitting new student bodies, for example. Some changes will be made to enhance the organization’s financial health, some to be responsive to new educational markets, and others because a profession has changed expectations for the entry-level credential necessary for licensure. How well the organization understands the relationship between its resource base and those changes is also a test of commitment to educational quality.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- The organization’s resources are adequate for achievement of the educational quality it claims to provide.
- Plans for resource development and allocation document an organizational commitment to supporting and strengthening the quality of the education it provides.
- The organization uses its human resources effectively.
- The organization intentionally develops its human resources to meet future changes.
- The organization’s history of financial resource development and investment documents a forward-looking concern for ensuring educational quality (e.g., investments in faculty development, technology, learning support services, new or renovated facilities).
- The organization’s planning processes are flexible enough to respond to unanticipated needs for program reallocation, downsizing, or growth.
- The organization has a history of achieving its planning goals.

Criterion 2 - Core Component 2c

The organization’s ongoing evaluation and assessment processes provide reliable evidence of institutional effectiveness that clearly informs strategies for continuous improvement.

Every organization of higher learning generates data and information. Participation in financial aid programs inevitably requires the reporting of a considerable amount of data. Evaluation, however, is the effort by the people within the organization to make sense of those data. Some organizations have institutional research offices that both gather and interpret data routinely; the test of their effectiveness is how their work provides a reliable overview of performance and informs planning and budgeting processes. Other organizations may take a much less formal and consistent approach to evaluation and assessment, making more challenging the task of connecting the processes to one another and to overall planning initiatives. These organizations should determine whether their approaches should be more formal and regular or whether they actually provide sufficient evidence about performance to inform sound planning.

An organization affiliated with the Commission should desire to create a future in which it continuously performs better than it has in the past. Without stated goals for its own performance, an organization does not know what it is supposed to achieve. Without dependable and ongoing systems of self-evaluation, an organization is hard-pressed to know what it needs to improve. This basic need to create a culture of evidence has led some organizations to implement quality improvement principles. A Baldrige Award is now tailored to higher education. The Commission’s Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) option recognizes the connection between accreditation and continuous quality improvement. But an organization need not pursue either in order to appreciate the importance of having dependable data to evaluate performance and create strategies for improvement.

Again, it is worth noting that evaluation and assessment processes create data, but it is the interpretation of those data that creates reliable evidence. Data can be interpreted in a variety of ways, depending on the conceptual framework (or at times, the political agenda) brought to the task. Therefore, effective processes make the interpretation of data and information explicit, accurate, and clear.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- The organization demonstrates that its evaluation processes provide evidence that its performance meets its stated expectations for institutional effectiveness.
- The organization maintains effective systems for collecting, analyzing, and using organizational information.
- Appropriate data and feedback loops are available and used throughout the organization to support continuous improvement.

- Periodic reviews of academic and administrative sub-units contribute to improvement of the organization.
- The organization provides adequate support for its evaluation and assessment processes.

Criterion 2 - Core Component 2d

All levels of planning align with the organization's mission, thereby enhancing its capacity to fulfill that mission.

In most organizations, various kinds of planning take place at the same time. Perhaps the CEO has an organization-wide planning effort that results in a document adopted by the board and published in the organization's annual report to constituencies. Within such an organization, academic departments or schools may also create plans. Administrative-function areas usually do their own planning as well. Operational planning and strategic planning are not designed to achieve the same goals, but unless they are informed by a common understanding of the organization's mission, they run the risk of allowing areas to function at cross-purposes. Therefore, successful organizations not only endeavor to create tangible links among these processes, but also insist on grounding all planning in the organization's mission documents.

The Commission understands that successful planning can result from many different processes. But planning processes disconnected from budgeting processes will doom even the most inclusive and engaging planning effort. Without access to the resources—physical, financial, and human—supported through budget allocations, even the best-laid plans developed to strengthen capacity to fulfill the organization's mission will come to naught.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- Coordinated planning processes center on the mission documents that define vision, values, goals, and strategic priorities for the organization.
- Planning processes link with budgeting processes.
- Implementation of the organization's planning is evident in its operations.
- Long-range strategic planning processes allow for reprioritization of goals when necessary because of changing environments.
- Planning documents give evidence of the organization's awareness of the relationships among educational quality, student learning, and the diverse, complex, global, and technological world in which the organization and its students exist.
- Planning processes involve internal constituents and, where appropriate, external constituents.

Criterion Three: Student Learning and Effective Teaching

The organization provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission.

Although the next three Criteria are presented separately, they are rooted in the historic understanding of the roles of universities in society—teaching, research, and service. That understanding has been recast to fit organizations of higher learning in the twenty-first century. The reconceptualization of this historic mission emerged from the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (March 2000). Several colleges and universities have come to appreciate the power of recasting an old mission to fit new and changing needs.

In new Criterion Three, the Commission does not replace teaching with learning because the two are powerfully intertwined. However, it makes clear that teaching that does not lead to student learning cannot be called effective. In short, the test of teaching is in the learning achieved by students.

The wording of the Criterion makes an important shift from emphasizing process to emphasizing evaluation of evidence. Moreover, the evidence needs to show that results of the learning and teaching are directly related to the educational mission stated by the organization.

Criterion 3 - Core Component 3a

The organization's goals for student learning outcomes are clearly stated for each educational program and make effective assessment possible.

In crafting this Core Component, the Commission unambiguously embedded into its accreditation program its decade-long program to challenge affiliated organizations to create a culture of assessment. An organization needs to be accountable to itself and to its constituencies, to be clear about what it intends students to know and to do, and to find ways of learning whether, as a result of the education provided, students actually know and can do. The culture of assessment ought to extend to all education and training provided by the organization, not simply to the degree programs it offers. The Commission's ongoing commitment to this work is explained in its "Statement on Assessment of Student Learning" (see Appendix B).

Assessment of student learning is a process, and the process must have results foundational to the education of students.

- ▶ The results should testify to achievement of stated goals for learning.
- ▶ The results should enable the organization to strengthen and improve the capacity for student learning.
- ▶ The results should have credibility with the faculty responsible for creating effective learning environments.
- ▶ The results should have such credibility that they shape budgeting and planning priorities.

While the Core Component identifies the outcomes of strong assessment, the proposed evidence includes tested best practices in assessment as a means to achieve those outcomes.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- The organization clearly differentiates its learning goals for undergraduate, graduate, and post-baccalaureate programs by identifying the expected learning outcomes for each.
- Assessment of student learning provides evidence at multiple levels: course, program, and institutional.
- Assessment of student learning includes multiple direct and indirect measures of student learning.
- Results obtained through assessment of student learning are available to appropriate constituencies, including students themselves.
- The organization integrates into its processes for assessment of student learning and uses the data reported for purposes of external accountability (e.g., graduation rates, passage rates on licensing exams; placement rates; transfer rates).
- The organization's assessment of student learning extends to all educational offerings, including credit and non-credit certificate programs.
- Faculty are involved in defining expected student learning outcomes and creating the strategies to determine whether those outcomes are achieved.
- Faculty and administrators routinely review the effectiveness of the organization's program to assess student learning.

Criterion 3 - Core Component 3b

The organization values and supports effective teaching.

Some have argued that the Commission should focus only on learning in these new Criteria; unless learning is achieved, according to this view, we should not care about teaching. Others argue that all institutions of higher education must shift from the view that they exist for teaching to the view that they exist for learning. But the fact is that whether the emphasis of teaching shifts from delivering information to supporting students in creating knowledge from information gleaned from multiple sources, teaching must be done.

The narrow definition of teaching as essentially giving lectures and grading exams misrepresents the multifaceted work that goes into effective teaching. Organizations providing higher learning must have qualified faculties—people who by formal education or tested experience know what students must learn—who create the curricular pathways through which students gain the competencies and skills they need. Effective faculty members understand that students learn in very different ways. The organization encourages and supports their efforts to respond to diverse learning needs.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- Qualified faculty determine curricular content and strategies for instruction.

- The organization supports professional development designed to facilitate teaching suited to varied learning environments.
- The organization evaluates teaching and recognizes effective teaching.
- The organization provides services to support improved pedagogies.
- The organization demonstrates openness to innovative practices that enhance learning.
- The organization supports faculty in keeping abreast of the research on teaching and learning, and of technological advances that can positively affect student learning and the delivery of instruction.
- Faculty members actively participate in professional organizations relevant to the disciplines they teach.

Criterion 3 - Core Component 3c

The organization creates effective learning environments.

Colleges have created multiple learning environments, perhaps without being conscious of the pedagogical rationales behind them. Many graduate and upper-division courses have long used seminar formats instead of lectures, but now students of the freshman-year experience propose that freshman seminars might help student success and retention. Faculty-student research, once the purview of graduate education, now marks much undergraduate education. Internships and applied courses basic to good vocational education are now seen to be excellent ways for students to learn in the humanities and social sciences. Study abroad is a very specific learning environment. So too are new computer-based learning labs.

Research about factors that contribute to effective student learning can no longer be ignored. How students interact with other students is often as important as how they interact with faculty, but effective interaction is essential. Mentoring and advising, once thought to be primarily a faculty task, may now be found throughout an organization, particularly in the student services area. All of these variables contribute to learning environments. Faculty members are coming to appreciate how they contribute to these environments, fully understanding that the classroom experience is only one part of any learning environment.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- Assessment results inform improvements in curriculum, pedagogy, instructional resources, and student services.
- The organization provides an environment that supports all learners and respects the diversity they bring.
- Advising systems focus on student learning, including the mastery of skills required for academic success.
- Student development programs support learning throughout the student's experience regardless of the location of the student.
- The organization employs, when appropriate, new technologies that enhance effective learning environments for students.
- The organization's systems of quality assurance include regular review of whether its educational strategies, activities, processes, and technologies enhance student learning.

Criterion 3 - Core Component 3d

The organization's learning resources support student learning and effective teaching.

It was not that long ago that accreditation was understood to focus rather heavily on resources in the library. Accrediting teams counted staff members and the square footage allocated to the library and to book inventories. Unless libraries are used and valued by students and faculty, their impact on learning is small. In short, a library—or a learning resource center—exists to support learning and teaching.

Libraries are just one of many resources needed to support learning. Science education requires laboratories, arts education requires studios and performance space, and many programs require sites at which students can practice their professions under supervision. Increasingly, organizations cannot own all of these resources. They find ways to share them, or they discover that technology provides access unthought of barely ten years ago. The test for accreditation is no longer ownership. Instead, it evaluates the organization's understanding of what resources are needed for effective learning and teaching and its creative ways of linking faculty and students to the resources and making sure they are used.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- The organization ensures access to the resources (e.g., research laboratories, libraries, performance spaces, clinical practice sites) necessary to support learning and teaching.
- The organization evaluates the use of its learning resources to enhance student learning and effective teaching.
- The organization regularly assesses the effectiveness of its learning resources to support learning and teaching.
- The organization supports students, staff, and faculty in using technology effectively.
- The organization provides effective staffing and support for its learning resources.
- The organization's systems and structures enable partnerships and innovations that enhance student learning and strengthen teaching effectiveness.
- Budgeting priorities reflect that improvement in teaching and learning is a core value of the organization.

Criterion Four: Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge

The organization promotes a life of learning for its faculty, administration, staff, and students by fostering and supporting inquiry, creativity, practice, and social responsibility in ways consistent with its mission.

What separates an organization of higher learning from a postsecondary training institute? Interestingly enough, it is not the range and types of educational programs offered, nor the duration of those programs. When one compares the educational pathways of students attending an excellent technical institute with those of students in community colleges and comprehensive universities, one finds remarkable similarities in the skills the programs are meant to develop.

An organization of higher learning, while sharing the same commitment to providing education that is relevant and practical, has a broader perspective on what it means to be an educated person. That is, although it sees a student as a potential skilled employee, it values even more the need to help that student become an independently creative person, an informed and dependable citizen, and a socially aware and responsible individual. An organization of higher learning sets goals for learning and behavior relevant to these multiple and vitally important needs.

Knowledge is a powerful word, for it speaks to comprehension, application, and synthesis, not just mastery of information. Computers may have introduced the Information Age, but in a short time our definitional language for this new era began to include the term knowledge worker. The shift is as important as it is misunderstood. The knowledge worker will be technologically literate, to be sure, but what is valued is the knowledge worker's capacity to sift and winnow massive amounts of information in order to discover or create new or better understandings of ourselves and the world we live in.

Criterion 4. Core Component 4a

The organization demonstrates, through the actions of its board, administrators, students, faculty, and staff, that it values a life of learning.

In the first Criterion, the Commission sets the expectation that an organization's mission documents include commitments to excellence in higher learning. With this Core Component, the Commission seek evidence to document that the organization is living up to those commitments.

Excellence in higher learning presupposes that colleges and universities are committed to helping students become educated people capable of a life of learning. Yet students are not the sole constituency of an accredited organization. Faculty and administrators not only nourish the intellectual growth of students; they also model for each other, for students, and for other constituencies of the organization the transformational power of a life of continuous learning.

At a time when colleges and universities are too often known more for their athletes than for their scholars, the organization seeking affiliation with the Commission makes clear that its educational priorities have to do with acquisition, discovery, and application of knowledge.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- The organization's planning and pattern of financial allocation demonstrate that it values and promotes a life of learning for its students, faculty, and staff.

- The board has approved and disseminated statements supporting freedom of inquiry for the organization’s students, faculty, and staff, and honors those statements in its practices.
- The organization supports professional development opportunities and makes them available to all of its administrators, faculty, and staff.
- The organization publicly acknowledges the achievements of students and faculty in acquiring, discovering, and applying knowledge.
- The faculty and students, in keeping with the organization’s mission, produce scholarship and create knowledge through basic and applied research.
- The organization and its units use scholarship and research to stimulate organizational and educational improvements.

Criterion 4 - Core Component 4b

The organization demonstrates that acquisition of a breadth of knowledge and skills and the exercise of intellectual inquiry are integral to its educational programs.

U.S. higher education is known for its long-standing commitment to breadth of learning within its undergraduate degree programs. A baccalaureate degree, for example, represents more than the successful accumulation of a specific number of credits; it has always testified to an understood balance within those credits between studies related to a specific field and studies meant to provide a breadth of learning appropriate to the degree designation. General education—or liberal studies—is the term usually applied to studies meant to provide breadth of learning. Over the years, an orthodoxy has developed about what general education should look like and who should provide it.

With this Core Component, the Commission honors these commitments even as it recasts somewhat the understanding about how organizations might live them out. The Commission has articulated its reasons for this in its “Statement on General Education” (see Appendix C).

By its very title, this Criterion is about the skills and attitudes an educated person should possess, not about the specific curricular pathway assumed to contribute to that development. Moreover, it makes explicit a new premise for accreditation: the educated person understands that learning will continue throughout life. To learn throughout life, people need to master fundamental skills of intellectual inquiry, and they should master those skills through excellent undergraduate education.

Recently, some scholars have commented on the detrimental impact of increased specialization at the graduate level. Although not quite advocating general education for graduate students, they illustrate the idea that college and university faculties committed to quality higher learning ought to be responsible for ensuring that students at all levels master the skills requisite to being creative and independent learners throughout their lives.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- The organization integrates general education into all of its undergraduate degree programs through curricular and experiential offerings intentionally created to develop the attitudes and skills requisite for a life of learning in a diverse society.
- The organization regularly reviews the relationship between its mission and values and the effectiveness of its general education.
- The organization assesses how effectively its graduate programs establish a knowledge base on which students develop depth of expertise.
- The organization demonstrates the linkages between curricular and co-curricular activities that support inquiry, practice, creativity, and social responsibility.
- Learning outcomes demonstrate that graduates have achieved breadth of knowledge and skills and the capacity to exercise intellectual inquiry.
- Learning outcomes demonstrate effective preparation for continued learning.

Criterion 4 - Core Component 4c

The organization assesses the usefulness of its curricula to students who will live and work in a global, diverse, and technological society.

Once academics argued that higher learning focuses on the life of the mind and professional training focuses on the life of work. The dichotomy was never that simple in many professions, and it is misleading in the twenty-first century. It is perhaps that dichotomy that makes the phrase knowledge worker jarring to the ears of many academics. However, the juxtaposition of those two words says something important to the academy and to students.

Core Component 3 speaks most directly to those responsible for creating curricula—the faculty. Faculty members have long held to the tenet that excellent teaching requires being current with the scholarship in the discipline. Now the Commission proposes that faculty would be well-served to hear other voices as they create and revise courses and programs for students. It is easy to identify employers as one set of voices that need to be heard. Alumni who are building careers might provide excellent advice about the fit between the curriculum and the work world. Leaders from business and industry provide important insights into the changing environments they experience and, consequently, that they think well-educated people should understand.

It is a given that the academy needs to retain control over the education it provides. Increasingly, however, it is obvious that the academy can learn from others, and that learning can influence how educational pathways are structured for the benefit of students.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- Regular academic program reviews include attention to currency and relevance of courses and programs.
- In keeping with its mission, learning goals and outcomes include skills and professional competence essential to a diverse workforce.
- Learning outcomes document that graduates have gained the skills and knowledge they need to function in diverse local, national, and global societies.
- Curricular evaluation involves alumni, employers, and other external constituents who understand the relationships among the course of study, the currency of the curriculum, and the utility of the knowledge and skills gained.
- The organization supports creation and use of scholarship by students in keeping with its mission.
- Faculty expects students to master the knowledge and skills necessary for independent learning in programs of applied practice.
- The organization provides curricular and co-curricular opportunities that promote social responsibility.

Criterion 4 - Core Component 4d

The organization provides support to ensure that faculty, students, and staff acquire, discover, and apply knowledge responsibly.

Support in this Core Component is partly about financial support. Because it refers to the supportive nature of the environment created by the whole organization, it identifies student services and academic support services as essential to that environment. Supporting these services so that they can be as vital as possible involves commitment of funds.

Support has broader meanings worth considering as well. A supportive environment is provided by an organization when it foresees the ethical and moral implications of various approaches to acquiring, discovering, and applying knowledge. For example, it can use an effectively administered honor code to help students understand the concept of responsible use of knowledge. It can pay better attention to the integrity of research and writing done by faculty. It can require institution-wide discussions about good practices in research on animal and human subjects. It can engage students and faculty in seminal discussions about the social responsibility of the academy itself.

The organization should model responsible use of knowledge. Two clichés come to mind: “walk the talk” and “practice what you preach.” That is, if the organization expects students, faculty, and staff to be responsible with knowledge, then the organization needs to be responsible in the ways it treats creation and application of knowledge. What message about responsible ways to discover knowledge is sent when research assistants receive no credit for the final outcome of a major research project? And when published research fails to identify its sponsorship by organizations with a vested interest in the results, what does this teach about applying knowledge responsibly? These are two of many questions with no easy answers, but an organization’s policies and procedures indicate whether they have been asked and answered. An organization that compromises on its own integrity, whether it intends to or not, teaches all its constituencies a bad lesson.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- The organization’s academic and student support programs contribute to the development of student skills and attitudes fundamental to responsible use of knowledge.

- The organization follows explicit policies and procedures to ensure ethical conduct in its research and instructional activities.
- The organization encourages curricular and co-curricular activities that relate responsible use of knowledge to practicing social responsibility.
- The organization provides effective oversight and support services to ensure the integrity of research and practice conducted by its faculty and students.
- The organization creates, disseminates, and enforces clear policies on practices involving intellectual property rights.

Criterion Five: Engagement and Service

As called for by its mission, the organization identifies its constituencies and serves them in ways both value.

This Criterion can too readily be understood in the functional context of many organizations of higher learning: it must be about the extension program or the continuing education wing or the customized training department. It is, to be sure, about these components, but the Commission's interest in engagement is much broader. Attention to engagement is woven throughout these Criteria, for it constitutes a basic understanding that an organization affiliated with the Commission cares deeply about how its work intersects with the lives of individuals on and off campus and with local, national, and global organizations. The Commission's interest is directly related to its mission: "serving the common good by assuring and advancing the quality of higher learning."

Although contemporary political thinking might hold that higher education is a private rather than a public good, the Commission continues to believe that higher education is an asset of incalculable worth to society as well as to individuals. Whether students attend public, private, or proprietary colleges and universities, they move into a society that expects to benefit from the learning achieved, from the knowledge created, and from the values of social responsibility inculcated. If colleges and universities have erred in the past half century, it has been in marginalizing the importance of their engagement in "serving the common good."

The academy is being buffeted by social and economic changes beyond its control. It is asked to understand and respond to those changes. This Criterion posits that effective engagement with society is a dialogue that involves the organization at multiple points and levels. Moreover, it posits that services considered by all to be valuable and beneficial constitute evidence of effective engagement.

In the first Criterion, the Commission calls for an organization to make explicit how it defines its constituencies and the service it intends to provide them. This fifth Criterion repeats that call but asks for evidence that the organization lives up to its mission.

Criterion 5 - Core Component 5a

The organization learns from the constituencies it serves and analyzes its capacity to serve their needs and expectations.

There is an expectation in this Core Component that an organization affiliated with the Commission will be proactive in relations with its constituencies. Assuming that the organization has a clear sense of who constitutes its constituencies, this proposes that an engaged institution tries to listen to them to discern their educational needs. This Core Component deliberately did not use the words "the organization identifies the needs of its constituents." Engagement involves an interaction that leads to results of mutual benefit.

Effective engagement also requires careful consideration of whether and how the organization can—or should—meet all of the expectations. The hard fact is that many organizations of higher learning lack the capacity to respond to every educational need around them. Not every need, therefore, is automatically an opportunity to be grasped. There are times that organizational mission alone precludes a positive response. More often, the organization needs to be clear about whether it can fulfill the need or should offer to find other organizations better equipped to respond. Usually it is not hard for an organization that is eager to serve to identify unmet educational needs. But the organization should be clear about whether those needs come from its clearly identified constituency and, if so, whether the organization can reasonably meet them.

Many colleges and universities have created distinct administrative or educational units to respond to external constituency needs. At the very least, such organizations need to evaluate the effectiveness of those units both in identifying the appropriate needs and in creating and delivering training and education to meet them.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- The organization's commitments are shaped by its mission and its capacity to support those commitments.

- The organization practices periodic environmental scanning to understand the changing needs of its constituencies and their communities.
- The organization demonstrates attention to the diversity of the constituencies it serves.
- The organization's outreach programs respond to identified community needs.
- In responding to external constituencies, the organization is well-served by programs such as continuing education, outreach, customized training, and extension services.

Criterion 5 - Core Component 5b

The organization has the capacity and the commitment to engage with its identified constituencies and communities.

It is worth noting that capacity appears in two of the Core Components for this Criterion. Over the last thirty years, many organizations accredited by the Commission have moved their educational offerings off campus into high schools, learning centers, shopping malls, branch campuses, and other locations. In so doing, they have dramatically increased access to higher education. Capacity can be a real challenge to being responsive, no matter how strong the commitment. Some colleges clearly have capacity but have no strong overarching organizational commitment that enables them to make use of it.

An effective college or university is able to define its primary constituents and communities. For many, geography essentially defines both. For others, both are defined more by shared beliefs. Some more-specialized colleges serve both a professional community and a specific business or industry. In an era of intense competition for students and finances, constituencies and communities of service can become extraordinarily fluid. Community colleges, once clear about who their constituents were, now use the Internet to identify constituents in a global rather than local community. Several liberal arts colleges continue to have small residential campuses but have hundreds or thousands of students enrolled in their programs in foreign countries. Regional public universities use technology to expand their constituencies to include many outside the region and the state. The risk of such fluid definitions of constituencies is that none might be served adequately.

A connected organization strives to serve constituencies by creating connections among them as well. Service learning programs, for example, now appear on many campuses. Faculty, students, and external constituencies of the college collaborate in creating activities directly connecting student learning with serving communities needs.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- The organization's structures and processes enable effective connections with its communities.
- The organization's co-curricular activities engage students, staff, administrators, and faculty with external communities.
- The organization's educational programs connect students with external communities.
- The organization's resources—physical, financial, and human—support effective programs of engagement and service.
- Planning processes project ongoing engagement and service.

Criterion 5 - Core Component 5c

The organization demonstrates its responsiveness to those constituencies that depend on it for service.

For the most part, it is the college or university, not the Commission, that determines its constituencies. But organizations of higher learning must accept some constituencies as theirs, and recognize that they have a responsibility toward these constituencies. Perhaps the constituencies most talked about are elementary and secondary education systems. From those systems come students for our colleges and universities; from our colleges and universities come the teachers for those systems. More and more high school graduates believe that college is necessary for their future success, and increasing numbers of them matriculate. The lack of fit is evident as developmental courses balloon in numbers and enrollments and as course and degree completion rates stagnate. Responsibility for this must be shared, and many colleges are helping high schools in their region bring their students to mutually accepted standards of performance.

In many rural sections of the North Central region, communities have come to depend on a single college, or two or three reasonably closely located institutions, for educational services. The willingness of those institutions to collaborate to create seamless pathways for many kinds of learners is strong evidence of engagement and service. Sometimes the collaboration must involve local business or industry as the best

partner, while at other times the most effective partner could be a college hundreds of miles away that is willing to collaborate in creating programs needed by the community. Participating in the creation of multi-organizational higher learning centers is a good example of responding to educational needs by drawing on the strengths of several different colleges and universities.

In our urban areas, many colleges find their constituencies shifting simply because the demographics of the local population shifts. Suddenly there might be a major demand for educational services that, by mission and commitment, they want to provide, but that they are ill-equipped to handle. It is a testimony to engagement when such colleges show creativity in effectively compensating for their lack of preparedness.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- Collaborative ventures exist with other higher learning organizations and education sectors (e.g., K–12 partnerships, articulation arrangements, 2+2 programs).
- The organization’s transfer policies and practices create an environment supportive of the mobility of learners.
- Community leaders testify to the usefulness of the organization’s programs of engagement.
- The organization’s programs of engagement give evidence of building effective bridges among diverse communities.
- The organization participates in partnerships focused on shared educational, economic, and social goals.
- The organization’s partnerships and contractual arrangements uphold the organization’s integrity.

Criterion 5 - Core Component 5d

Internal and external constituencies value the services the organization provides.

This Core Component calls for evaluation, but it sets the measure of usefulness and effectiveness of service as the value external and internal constituencies find in it. Perhaps being able to attend an organization’s theater productions or to participate in forums and workshops on healthcare, childcare, gerontology, tax filings, drug dependency, and welfare benefits are of value to members of the community. Moreover, the organization or members in it should also find value in extending these opportunities. While the numbers of partners might testify to the value the external community places in an organization’s service learning programs, it is important to know whether students and faculty value the learning achieved through those programs. Sometimes the measures of values differ. For example, professionals will value a program to gain license-mandated CEUs; the organization may value the income derived from providing the program.

At the center of this Criterion and this Core Component is the expectation that organizations affiliated with the Commission take seriously their unique role in providing services to their communities of interest. As important and common as they may be, blood drives, participation in the United Way, and voter registration programs are evidence of service, but lack the sense of engagement. Because the Commission accredits such a breadth of institutions and because those institutions have exceptionally different constituencies to serve, there cannot be an expectation that all organizations will provide similar services. A comprehensive community college, for example, may offer many customized training programs; a selective liberal arts college may provide a strong alumni educational program; and a specialized school of applied health may connect with public clinics.

As it defines and interprets evidence related to this Core Component, an organization may wish to consider the following Examples of Evidence.

- The organization’s evaluation of services involves the constituencies served.
- Service programs and student, faculty, and staff volunteer activities are well-received by the communities served.
- The organization’s economic and workforce development activities are sought after and valued by civic and business leaders.
- External constituents participate in the organization’s activities and co-curricular programs open to the public.
- The organization’s facilities are available to and used by the community.
- The organization provides programs to meet the continuing education needs of licensed professionals in its community.