WASC Accreditation Redesign at a Glance:
A GUIDE TO THE DRAFT 2013 HANDBOOK OF ACCREDITATION
WASC Accreditation Redesign at a Glance

Listening, Learning, Leading

WASC Accreditation Redesign at a Glance is a companion document to the draft 2013 Handbook. The document:
- Discusses the current context of higher education and accreditation and goals of the redesign
- Highlights key changes to the draft 2013 Handbook and how feedback from the region has been incorporated
- Lays out a timeline for implementing new requirements
- Provides guidance on next steps in the redesign and how the region can provide feedback on the draft 2013 Handbook

Throughout the redesign process, WASC has solicited and incorporated feedback from the region and other stakeholders on ways to enhance the accreditation review process. Since its February 22-24, 2012 meeting, when the Commission acted to suspend implementation on specific aspects of the redesign, WASC has continued to consult with stakeholders in the region, and has worked internally to incorporate feedback.

Further consultation occurred at the April 2012 WASC Academic Resource Conference and at multiple meetings with stakeholders in the region throughout spring and summer 2012. This feedback was reviewed at the June 2012 Commission meeting. WASC is now distributing the draft 2013 Handbook of Accreditation to the region in order to gather further feedback (see page 7 for more detail).

Highlights key changes to the draft 2013 Handbook.

Recommendations from the Region

Redesigning Accreditation For A New Era

Educational effectiveness has always been the hallmark of WASC-accredited institutions, and the 2001 WASC Handbook of Accreditation highlighted that strength with a new emphasis on learning outcomes, assessment, and program review. Institutions in the region have made even more progress over the last decade, and WASC accreditation has likewise evolved since the last comprehensive Handbook revisions in 2001 and 2008. The social, economic, environmental, and political landscape is also changing. The region is now faced with greatly increased expectations for institutional accountability and consumer protection, as well as demands for improved academic standards and student performance, as measured by graduation rates. At the same time, state funding for colleges and universities has plunged to historically low levels, and student debt has climbed to historically high levels. New technologies, demographic shifts, and alternative learning, and builds on the previous work of institutions undertaken as part of reviews under the 2001/2008 Handbooks.

The following chart summarizes the changing role of accreditation.

Redesign Process, February-August, 2012

Core Functions of Accreditation

- Compliance Centered
- Improvement Centered
- Accountability/Quality Assurance Centered

Public Reporting and Transparency

- Public announcement of grant of accreditation
- Reports internally circulated for improvement; accrediting action publicly reported

Meaningful and clear public information about institutional performance and commission actions reported

Summary of Changes

- Focus of Review: All standards applied to assure compliance
- Demonstration of Effectiveness: Must demonstrate standards at least at minimum level
- Public Reporting and Transparency: Public announcement of grant of accreditation

New directions in the redesign include:

- A clear, concise, and comprehensive framework for institutional accountability and program improvement
- A focus on learning outcomes and student success
- An emphasis on continuous improvement and institutional self-assessment
- A clear and transparent process for reviewing institutional performance

GOALS OF THE ACCREDITATION REDESIGN

To address this changing context, WASC is redesigning its accreditation process to bolster and highlight its quality-assurance and accountability aspects. The intent of the redesign is to create a credible process that meets increasing federal obligations, focuses on key issues of student learning, and builds on the previous work of institutions undertaken as part of reviews under the 2001/2008 Handbooks.

The following chart summarizes the changing role of accreditation.
So what’s new and different about the WASC accreditation process? The draft 2013 Handbook of Accreditation represents changes that build on past progress and incorporates feedback received throughout the revision process. Among the highlights you’ll notice:

- **Transparency**: As of June 2012, all Commission action letters and team reports are being posted to WASC’s publicly accessible Web site. This change has been applauded nationally, including in the pages of The Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Ed, for providing better information to the public on the accrediting process and institutions involved in the accrediting process.

- **Updated Core Commitments, Standards, Criteria for Review, and Guidelines**: These have been revised for clarity and consistency, to reflect changes made during the redesign and the current realities of higher education, and to align with the revised Institutional Review Process. The Overview in Part II of the 2013 Handbook describes the connection between each section. Should you need it, WASC can also provide you a tracked-changes version.

Key changes to the Standards:

1. **Standard 1: Inclusion of transparency and the public good**
2. **Standard 2: Requirement that institutions set standards of performance for student learning**: 2.2b more clearly identifies expectations for graduate programs; greater focus on co-curricular programs
3. **Standard 3: Reflects changing roles and types of faculty**
4. **Standard 4: Rewritten to reflect the changing environment of higher education and support institutions in their efforts to plan and adapt for this ever-changing environment**

- **Redesigned Institutional Review Process (IRP)**: The IRP has been shortened, streamlined, and redesigned to focus more specifically on improving student learning and issues specific to the institution. Instead of a proposal and two on-site visits per review cycle, institutions will have one off-site review and one visit each. An overview of the IRP can be found on page 21 of the 2013 Handbook.

**Examination of financial and degree completion data**: Two new committees will conduct in-depth reviews of the financial status of an institution and its retention and graduation rates on a regular basis. The findings of these two committees will be incorporated into the off-site review. If no major issues are identified, the institution can then focus on other areas of improvement.

- **Institutional reports**: The institutional report encompases the majority of changes that have been made to the substance of the IRP. Concerns relating to the examination of graduation proficiencies and a proposal for external validation of at least two of these proficiencies have also been addressed in this section. The report is broken into components where institutions will be asked to address the following topics, in addition to any self-generated themes they may wish to include. Below are some key highlights of a few select components:

  - **Institutional context**: As part of their mission, institutions are asked to discuss how they are contributing to the public good. Public-good policy is being developed to support institutions in this endeavor.
  - **Compliance**: Institutions are required to demonstrate compliance with WASC Standards and policies, as well as federal regulatory provisions regarding institutional integrity, etc.
  - **Meaning, quality, and integrity of degree programs**: In this section, the institution defines and ensures a distinctive and coherent educational experience for each of its degree programs. Many institutions were concerned that WASC would require that institutions use the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) as part of the accreditation process. WASC has included reference to the DQP and other resources to support institutions in defining the meaning, quality, and integrity of their degree programs, but does not require institutions to use the DQP or any specific framework or resource.

**Student learning, core competencies, and standards of performance at graduation**: The public, including students and their families, policymakers, and other stakeholders are asking institutions to demonstrate what essential knowledge and skills students have acquired that are relevant to their degree programs. WASC is no longer using the term “graduation proficiencies,” but is requiring institutions to define the Core Competencies in 2.2a, the standards of student performance expected for each at graduation, and gather evidence (which can be based on sampling) using the assessment methods of its choice (see Projected Timeline for Implementation of New Requirements Concerning Core Competencies for further detail). Although it is not required, WASC notes that institutions may also benefit from external perspectives and collaboration with other institutions, e.g., through benchmarking or use of comparative data.

**Sustainability**: With the rapid changes in the higher education environment, institutions need to demonstrate how they are ensuring their financial viability and planning their long-term stability.

**Glossary**: WASC has also expanded and refined a glossary of terms to provide clarity on terms used.

---

**Balancing Institutional Diversity and Autonomy With Policy Imperatives**

The challenge before the Commission, and all WASC accredited institutions, is to find ways to address the constructive critiques of both accreditation and higher education regarding transparency, completion, and educational quality; while continuing to respect institutional diversity and autonomy. The U.S. Department of Education has made it clear that it expects WASC to be able to evaluate and demonstrate institutional compliance with each of the Standards, especially those related to student academic achievement.

WASC, whose decision-making leadership is drawn from institutions within the region, respects the diversity and autonomy of its member institutions. WASC accreditation requires that institutions clearly state their mission, apply the Standards of Accreditation within the context of that mission, and demonstrate how the institution meets society’s needs for an educated citizenry based on their mission, the students they serve, and the programs they offer. Each institution defines its own expectations regarding student and institutional performance. WASC will support institutions as they articulate the meaning of their degrees, set standards of performance, choose assessment methods, develop a vision of higher education in the 21st century, and define success appropriately in the context of each institution’s mission.
Implementing the 2013 Handbook of Accreditation

The 2013 Handbook will go into effect on July 1, 2013. Beginning in 2014, all institutions will be reviewed under the 2013 Handbook of Accreditation. Institutions will need to assess what further work will need to be done to address new requirements. The first few years (up to 2016) of the Institutional Review Process will be considered a period of phase-in. Institutions coming before the Commission for reaccreditation during this period that can show good-faith efforts to meet expectations, as well as plans to meet the new requirements, will be evaluated with consideration of the challenges of this phase-in period. Though we are all building on past experience and on infrastructure that has been put in place over the past decade, the early years of implementation will be a time of experimentation and learning. Institutions being reviewed after the phase-in period will be expected to demonstrate that they have addressed all aspects of the revised Standards and the new areas of emphasis.

Projected Timeline for Implementation of New Requirements Concerning Core Competencies

One area where particular questions have arisen, and about which further guidance is needed is the implementation of the Core Competencies. The following table identifies expectations for implementation based on the year in which an institution is scheduled for its off-site review.

| Group 1: Institutions scheduled for off-site reviews in spring and fall 2014 |
| Institution work with at least one Core Competency. They define the outcome, identify standards of performance for graduates in that competency, assess their students’ performance, and identify areas for improvement. At the same time, they develop a plan for how they will approach the other four Core Competencies. The plan may also address other outcomes in areas of importance to the institution. |

| Group 2: Institutions scheduled for reviews in spring 2015, fall 2015, spring 2016, and fall 2016 |
| Institutions work with at least three Competencies, following a plan developed earlier. In each Competency, students’ performance is assessed, results are analyzed, and areas that need improvement are identified. For at least one Competency, the institution has “closed the loop,” and implemented changes that have improved performance. For each competency, assessment may take place within a program or separately. At the same time, they develop a plan for how they will approach the other Core Competencies that have not yet been addressed. |

| Group 3: Institutions scheduled for reviews in spring 2017 and beyond |
| For all five Core Competencies, the institution has created a plan, identified standards of performance at the institutional and/or program level, and implemented assessment. The institution is able to demonstrate where learning results have been improved, in areas where improvement is needed, steps are being taken. In all five Competencies, the institution is able to report, with supporting evidence, the proportion of students achieving desired standards of performance. |

Where We Go From Here

WASC will continue to engage the region and gather feedback on the draft 2013 Handbook until the Commission gives final approval in February 2013. Comments about the 2013 Handbook can be submitted electronically at https://www.wascsenior.org/redesign/providing comments or e-mailed directly to WASC at redesigncomments@wascsenior.org. A series of regional forums and stakeholder meetings are scheduled in early fall of 2012 to update the region on the redesign. Register for a regional forum at http://www.wascsenior.org/redesign/regionalforums2012.

Next Steps

- September 2012 - January 2013
  - Hold regional forums and other meetings with stakeholders to update the region on the accreditation redesign and gather feedback
  - Solicit written comments from the region

- November 7-9, 2012
  - Present preliminary feedback from the region to the Commission
  - Hold public meeting with the Commission to hear comments from the region

- Late November, 2012
  - Distribute draft revisions from the Commission for further comment from the region

- January 11, 2013
  - Last day to submit comments from the region

- February 20-22, 2013
  - Present final draft Handbook to the Commission for approval
  - Final public hearing with the Commission

- July 1, 2013
  - The 2013 Handbook of Accreditation takes effect

Commission Policies:

All Commission policies are currently under review and being revised as needed. Upon approval by the Commission, revisions of draft WASC policies will be distributed to the region for comment throughout 2012-2013.