

Assessment Briefing Report # 1

Understanding the New Criteria for North Central Accreditation

Introduction

The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (hereafter referred to as NCA) is the body that provides regional accreditation for Northeastern Illinois University. It operates under the authority of the federal government. That is to say, that in order for its “seal of approval” and accrediting processes to be recognized, it must comply with the U.S. Federal Code for accrediting bodies.

Accreditation by NCA is extremely important. Accreditation is a mark of educational quality and a necessary requirement to receive federal funding, including student financial aid. More importantly, accreditation can signify that an institution cares deeply about its students and is committed to continually finding new ways to improve student learning and success.

Our next accrediting site visit is scheduled for 2006. While most faculty members continually assess what works and what does not in the classroom, formal assessment in preparation for North Central’s visit provides an opportunity for more in-depth conversations among faculty about what really matters most in teaching and learning.

This past Spring, NCA updated its requirements and provided more detailed guidance to institutions that were preparing for review. These new criteria place increasing emphases on teaching and learning—central activities of the institution. There are five criteria and each has a number of core components.

This document presents an overview of the five criteria and their core components. In addition, a more detailed description is provided for Criterion Three that more explicitly refers to teaching and learning.

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.”

In order to assess this criterion, NCA will examine publicly available documents such as catalogs, departmental brochures, web sites, student and faculty handbooks and marketing materials to see how well the university articulates its mission to its various publics. It will look for evidence that it recognizes the diversity of its learners, and that all of its internal constituents understand and support the mission. NCA will examine university planning processes and documents and look for evidence that such processes are collaborative, and that there are clearly defined linkages between mission, goals and priorities. Finally, NCA looks for evidence that we deal fairly with both internal and external constituencies and that there is congruence between what we say we do and what we actually do. Related to criterion one, the five core component statements that describe what our documents and evidence should show are:

- 1a: The organization’s mission documents are clear and articulate publicly the organization’s commitments.
- 1b: In its mission documents, the organization recognizes the diversity of its learners, other constituencies, and the greater society it serves.
- 1c: Understanding and support for the mission pervade the organization.
- 1d: The organization’s governance and administrative structures promote effective leadership and support collaborative processes that enable the organization to fulfill its mission.
- 1e: The organization upholds and protects its integrity.

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.”

Universities must prepare for a future that will be shaped by changing demographics, technologies and the economy. NCA will look for clearly articulated planning processes, organizational structures and evidence of ongoing evaluation and assessment that support the institution’s commitment to educational quality. Related to criterion two, the four core component statements that describe what our documents and evidence should show are:

- 2a: The organization realistically prepares for a future shaped by multiple societal and economic trends.
- 2b: The organization’s resource base supports its educational programs and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future.
- 2c: The organization’s ongoing evaluation and assessment processes provide reliable evidence of institutional effectiveness that clearly informs strategies for continuous improvement.
- 2d: All levels of planning align with the organization’s mission, thereby enhancing its capacity to fulfill that mission.

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.”

This criterion makes clear NCA’s position 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 university needs to show that the results of learning and teaching are directly related to the educational mission stated by the organization. Whatever assessment tools are used, these need to demonstrate the degree to which stated goals for learning are achieved and how these results are used to improve the capacity for student learning. Further, these results should be factored into the budgeting and planning processes of the university.

Recognizing that no one tool can be used to measure all of the learning outcomes, NCA expects to see both indirect and direct measures of student learning at multiple levels (course, program, department, institutional) and within multiple learning environments (credit and not for credit offerings, seminars, faculty-student research programs, advising, study abroad programs, internships, student development programs, etc.). Use of learning resources such as libraries, laboratories and technology are to be assessed. Specifically, NCA will be looking at how the university identifies needed learning resources and links these to faculty and students. Evidence of use of these resources is also part of the assessment process.

Related to criterion three, the four core component statements that describe what our documents and evidence should show are:

- 3a: The organization's goals for student learning outcomes are clearly stated for each educational program and make effective assessment possible.
- 3b: The organization values and supports effective teaching.
- 3c: The organization creates effective learning environments.
- 3d: The organization's learning resources support student learning and effective teaching.

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.”

This criterion encompasses the research mission of the institution. For the 21st century, NCA recognizes that now more than ever, the fulfillment of the mission of institutions of higher learning is critical. Unlike technical institutes and job training programs that cultivate student skills for a specific occupation, NCA sees that higher education serves a broader goal of creating knowledge workers:

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. (Restructured Expectations, April 2003, NCA)

Related to criterion four, the four core component statements that describe what our documents and evidence should show are:

- 4a: The organization demonstrates, through the actions of its board, administrators, students, faculty, and staff, that it values a life of learning.
- 4b: The organization demonstrates that acquisition of a breadth of knowledge and skills and the exercise of intellectual inquiry are integral to its educational process.
- 4c: The organization assesses the usefulness of its curricula to students who will live and work in a global, diverse, and technological society.
- 4d: The organization provides support to ensure that faculty, students, and staff acquire, discover, and apply knowledge responsibly.

Criterion Five: Engagement and Service

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

NCA believes that in order for institutions of higher education to fulfill their public missions, that is, to effectively serve societal needs, opportunities for engagement at multiple points and levels are necessary. Among the evidence that NCA will consider is evidence that the university’s curricular and co-curricular programs connect students with external communities; that it’s outreach programs respond to identified community needs; that it’s partnerships and contractual arrangements uphold the university’s integrity, that the university’s evaluation of services provided involves the constituencies served, and that it’s facilities serve the public.

Related to criterion five, the four core component statements that describe what our documents and evidence should show are:

- 5a: The organization learns from the constituencies it serves and analyzes its capacity to serve their needs and expectations.
- 5b: The organization has the capacity and the commitment to engage with its identified constituencies and communities.
- 5c: The organization demonstrates its responsiveness to those constituencies that depend on it for service.
- 5d: Internal and external constituencies value the services the organization provides.

In the coming weeks, many individuals and work groups across campus will be involved in assessment related activities. A preliminary list includes the Assessment Task Force, the General Education Committee, the Center for Teaching and Learning, assessment liaisons and working groups within the colleges, Shelley Bannister and Angeles Eames. The more we can share information about these activities, the better able we will be to learn from each other and lend support where needed. This report is just one step in that direction.