

Aligning Assessment, Academic Quality and Accreditation

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The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE) is part of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA). With the assistance of a three-year grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, CIHE has developed an innovative, voluntary, alternative system for maintaining accreditation rooted in the quality principles that underlie many initiatives to improve an organization's effectiveness. Although these principles (e.g., focusing on processes, basing decisions on information data, decentralizing control, empowering faculty and staff to make the decisions that directly affect their work) are not new to higher education, individual institutions differ greatly in how widely and effectively they follow them. By offering to align its accreditation processes with an institution's efforts to practice systematic quality improvement, CIHE hopes to stimulate serious academic improvement, increase the value of accreditation and thereby better serve the common good.

The AQIP quality criteria will focus upon the education of students as the central focus of any higher education institution, and not permit an institution to "do quality" while ignoring the processes that shape students' minds.

Supported by a three-year grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, this effort to implement a new alternative comes at what many observers sense is a perilous time in higher education. Complex dynamics — including an intensifying competitive climate, galloping technological change, economic restructuring and shifting societal perceptions of the role of higher education — threaten Academia's traditional structures and standards, and require it to find new tools for managing its operations and for increasing the value a college or university can deliver to those who look to it for services. By linking accreditation firmly to the quest for ever-improving quality, CIHE believes it can arm its member institutions to better face these challenges — to thrive in a fast-changing environment.

The new model is not one that NCA's Commission proposes to impose on all institutions, but an alternative designed to be so attractive that its greater payoffs and reduced disadvantages will induce a significant proportion of member institutions to elect to use it, wholly or in parts, voluntarily. This *Academic Quality Improvement Project* (AQIP) model for continuing accreditation will be based on an institution's systematic, continuous efforts to improve its educational programs and supporting processes. Recognizing that Academia's adoption — or adaptation — of quality principles and tools has moved leisurely, CIHE senses strongly an urgency to develop and implement this alternative model in order to help educators capitalize on the benefits of the quality movement.

AQIP has therefore set itself ambitious goals: to develop, test and implement a program that will affect, voluntarily, one-third of the institutions preparing for on-site evaluations in 2004-05. CIHE is convinced that over time the results of this new approach — a well-publicized and celebrated effort by more than 300 of CIHE's institutions involved in structured intensive programs to improve educational quality — will leverage substantial improvement throughout the U.S. higher education system.

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AQIP's underlying axiom is that an institution with a robust, comprehensive quality improvement program focused on educating students meets, *ipso facto*, expectations for institutional accreditation. As many other industries have discovered, the best assurance that an organization does

quality work comes from examining its processes and its efforts to improve them. Accreditors cannot possibly assure higher educational quality by inspecting every student the nation's colleges and universities graduate. Nor does convincing evidence exist to support the assumption that institutional resources are reliable indexes to the educational value students receive. Therefore it seems commonsensical to use evidence of a college's efforts toward improvement — and the results of those efforts — to judge the worth of the educational services it provides.

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To serve accreditors as continuing assurance of value, an institution's quality improvement initiative must become an integral part of the institution's culture, and must drive the institution to educate students who demonstrate higher and higher levels of achievement. In part, much of what AQIP is attempting continues CIHE's ten-year commitment to the assessment of student learning, but with some significant differences. AQIP will nurture a partnership with institutions that set and achieve ambitious goals for themselves and their students.

Design Goals for a New Accreditation Model

AQIP is creating and implementing this new process even as CIHE continues to conduct its current accreditation program that involves nearly 200 on-site visits each year. When fully operational, AQIP will assist col-

leges and universities interested in beginning or enhancing a systematic, organization-wide effort to strengthen the quality of its academic operations and of the administrative programs that support those academic programs. Simultaneously, the project will allow institutions with successful quality improvement programs an opportunity to demonstrate that they meet accreditation expectations by documenting their activity, investment, experience and success in improving academic quality. CIHE plans to design the project so that participating institutions will find it so rewarding that they are willing to opt for it over the current approach — even though it will require higher levels of institutional effort and involvement.

In the design, development, field-testing and implementation of its new processes and services, AQIP wants to:

- integrate contemporary quality principles by emphasizing the core values of quality improvement, particularly their focus on institutional processes and results;
- focus accreditation on the improvement of teaching and learning, and involve faculty and staff more directly in all academic improvement processes;
- deliver tangible value to institutions, including practical, timely feedback and support they can use to improve students' educational performance;
- customize its processes to fit institutional needs, avoiding traditional "one-size-fits-all" approaches, and reducing, where possible, the intrusiveness, cost and decade-

long cycles of improvement associated with current accreditation;

- use technology in imaginative ways to make accrediting processes less costly and more effective;
- make useful information about institutional performance available to stakeholders in accreditation, including information that recognizes and celebrates institutional distinctiveness and outstanding achievements; and
- modify itself quickly to meet new conditions and new institutional and stakeholder requirements in a dynamic educational environment.

AQIP will operate with Pew Charitable Trusts support for three years, through June of 2002. During this period, the project will design, field-test and improve the new re-accreditation process, train both institutional personnel and evaluators in quality improvement approaches, rigorously evaluate all aspects of the new process in order to refine it, and publicize the availability of the alternative process and its potential benefits throughout the higher education community. When the three-year period concludes, CIHE's goal is to have at least one-third of its member institutions voluntarily electing the new process as their procedure for re-accreditation. The Commission foresees this alternative quality improvement accreditation process as a service that it will continue to offer to serve its institutions, long into the future.

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AQIP's Content And Processes

AQIP's accreditation approach is grounded in a set of quality criteria that provide a course of study for higher education institutions wishing to examine systematically opportunities for improving their effectiveness. Translations from other quality systems (like the Baldrige program) to AQIP's criteria will be simple, but the AQIP quality criteria will focus upon the education of students as the central focus of any higher education institution, and not permit an institution to "do quality" while ignoring the processes that shape students' minds. Using the complete set of criteria as the framework for a comprehensive institutional review, an institution will assess its overall quality journey and progress, identifying those particular systems where its opportunities for improvement are greatest. A self-assessment based on the complete set of criteria — or some parallel review process, such as the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA), the state quality programs modeled on it, or an ISO 9000 audit — can also help bring to the foreground cross-criterion or institution-wide themes that deserve closer attention. All of AQIP's criteria will be crucial to effective, high-performing institutions and a systematic program of institutional health and growth will make certain all are used for self-examination and development. In addition to structuring institutional self-assessment, the criteria will also provide the framework for NCA feedback to an institution and for an institution's quality initiatives.

Neither prescriptive, nor proscriptive, the quality criteria will not decree how a higher education institution should organize or operate, nor will they dic-

tate the specific inputs or outputs an institution must achieve. Instead, the criteria provide a perspective, a set of lenses, through which an institution can view itself. Each criterion asks an institution a series of open-ended, process-focused questions that seek to explore how effectively a particular system, a group of related processes, helps the institution achieve its fundamental mission and vision. The criteria seek to provide an institution with fresh appraisals and insights into its own operations and the ways it can improve them. As it sets itself a program for improvement, an institution will use the criteria strategically, one or a few at a time each year, as a regimen for intensive investigation and improvement of the workings of a particular system or group of systems.

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However, in focusing on individual processes, an institution must stay aware that what determines its overall success and quality is its total system, which depends on its performance in all criteria, not just in one or a few. The processes within an institution are interrelated, each affecting all the others. For that reason, the description of each criterion suggests how the other criteria impact it, and no criterion should be examined alone without this contextual broader perspective.

Each year, the criteria structure, the set of criteria themselves, and the questions asked within each criterion will be reexamined to discover how changes might make the criteria a more useful scheme for institutional self-understanding and improve-

ment. Although the wording, organization and specific questions asked may alter somewhat each year, the overall purpose of the criteria will remain constant, as will the philosophical principles that guide them. Consequently, institutions using the criteria to guide their quality initiative need not worry that wording changes will disrupt their overall impact and value. AQIP's intent is to focus institutional energy on improving academic quality rather than on the ins and outs of accreditation procedures.

Only institutions already accredited by NCA will be eligible to use this new model, so there will continue to be a different process by which new members are admitted to the Association, one that defines what distinguishes higher education providers from other organizations. But for existing (accredited) institutions, AQIP will provide a means of keeping the institutional focus on quality improvement, and will enable an institution to continue in accredited status so long as it continues to provide the commission with convincing evidence that its quality initiative is vital and effective. For many institutions, the new process should be less intrusive than the traditional one, since an institution committed to quality will be required to do nothing for accreditation that it would not have done anyway, for itself. In addition, the new process will minimize bureaucracy and paperwork that institutions perceive add minimal value.

Accreditors can't afford to continue to view their institutions' needs from a complacency bred by a century of monopoly.

Assessment with Serious Differences

By encouraging and rewarding institutions that clearly

articulate and measure accomplishment of their goals, AQIP will clearly reinforce CIHE's decade old support for assessment as the primary critical factor in assuring and advancing higher learning. However, AQIP's dedication to quality principles should cause some institutions to rethink how they have invested their energies in past assessment activities, and to approach some issues in new ways.

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First, AQIP will place the assessment of student learning in a larger context — a view of an educational institution as a system of interlocking processes that must all work to achieve a common set of goals. Consequently, AQIP will press partner institutions to derive more value from their assessment activities by forcing them to explore the contributions other systems could make to improving student learning. To cite one obvious example, how an institution actually encourages its faculty and staff to invest their time and energy (through policy and the formal reward structure) often conflicts with what these human resources could do to promote maximum student learning, growth and academic success. Yet rarely have student assessment data inspired institutions to rethink the systems they use to recruit, hire, assign duties to, review, evaluate, develop, motivate, or reward personnel. With AQIP, an institution can't duck exploring the way these critical systems — personnel, planning, information management, leadership, communication — impact its educational goals and results.

Second, AQIP will encourage institutions to reexamine their traditional assessment approaches in view of the quality principle to emphasize prevention, not inspection. Many current assessment programs are in fact inspection systems, end-of-the-line add-ons to the educational process that were designed merely to document that all students have met minimal expectations or to find out whether students were slipping through their programs with some major defect or omission. Faculty complain, understandably, that adding such checkpoints and inspections is wasteful and unnecessary, since they already evaluate students during and at the end of every course. And the value derived from across-the-board assessments is debatable, since the necessary sketchiness of an overview never provides the detailed information and precise metrics concerning particular course activities that are the necessary input to meaningful curriculum or pedagogical redesign. Investing the energy that now goes into inspection into failure-preventive course and teaching design would likely improve student achievement more and quicker than would imposing another battery of comprehensive exit examinations. Systematic quality principles favor preventive designs, so institutions participating in AQIP may find themselves strengthening systems for individual course evaluation — for example, by separating instruction and grading, leaving faculty free to concentrate on helping students learn — instead of further elaborating programs for pre-graduation assessment.

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Even more critical, assessments that document whatever levels of learning an institution's students happen to be achieving detract educators from their real responsibility: how to design robust programs, courses and other educational experiences that ensure that learning occurs efficiently, that it lasts and that it leaves the learner with the desire to continue to question, study and learn. Offering courses that work well for 5% of the students who take them is no great challenge; designing courses that produce A-level achievement for 100% ought to be our goal. AQIP seeks to help colleges understand that when only 30-40% of their students complete their baccalaureate program, they need to redesign the program — but not lower their expectations for student learning.

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Third, quality systems place tremendous stress on understanding the needs of "customers" — students and stakeholders in higher education — and finding out whether those needs are being met, or satisfied. AQIP will do the same, and so institutions participating in the project will find themselves confronting the meaning and measurement of sometimes slippery and educationally unfashionable concepts like satisfaction. Although traditional assessment has often viewed standardized cognitive tests as more reliable gauges of student learning than other evidence, a good metric for appraising how students' (or employers', or parents', etc.) needs and expectations for educational services are being

met can provide as valid and useful an assessment tool as a paper-and-pencil achievement test.

There is much misunderstanding of what it means to satisfy a student's needs. This confusion has led to superficial assessments that gauge solely whether students' perception of their instructional experience was pleasant ("Did you enjoy taking Freshman Composition?"), and to pronouncements that satisfaction measures are fundamentally worthless and only cognitive tests of knowledge should count as real assessment. Both extremes are wrong; worthwhile measures of satisfaction are possible ("How did taking Freshman Composition help you acquire the skills and knowledge you needed to succeed?"). What education strives to satisfy is not the student, but the student's lifelong need for knowledge and skills. AQIP will make institutions think hard and carefully about what and how they measure, and will demand they compare their results, concretely, with those of their competitors.

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In sum, AQIP will champion the alignment — getting the operation and objectives of the institution's systems and processes synchronized with the institution's overall mission and goals. The worth of alignment seems self-evident, but lack of shared focus and direction probably represents the most serious obstacle that higher education institutions face today. By seeing an institution as a complex, organic system and by confronting its need for alignment, AQIP hopes to make assessment a more

potent force in institutional change, a tool an institution finds powerful in improving the education it provides its students.

Conditions Press for Change

To gain institutions' acceptance of an accreditation service with a quality-improvement focus, NCA understands it must offer them a clear, dependable, cost-effective accreditation model, one that appeals because it delivers high value for the investment and yet can be operated by a small, cost-efficient NCA staff. Not only must the process focus on education and build on CIHE's decade-long emphasis on the value of assessing student learning, but it must also have sufficient flexibility to allow institutions to benefit from the use of portions of it. AQIP's work is paralleled by an equally bold Mission Project in which the CIHE is collaborating with a variety of its stakeholders to reexamine its fundamental assumptions about what it does and who it serves. CIHE believes that success in both these enterprises will pave the way for a permanent, national change in the relationship between regional accreditors and higher education institutions, and will drive real improvements in the ways accredited institutions educate their students.

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The need to develop a new accreditation process swiftly is pressing. Implementing a new model can't be allowed to take years, because many institutions don't have years to wait for a more effective system of support from their accreditors. Accelerating changes have made it clear

that those institutions that will thrive in the twenty-first century will be those that can deliver the highest quality educational services to their students — whether quality is defined by cost, convenience, graduates' acquired skills and knowledge, institutional reputation and prestige, or a combination of these and other factors. Moreover accreditors can't afford to continue to view their institutions' needs from a complacency bred by a century of monopoly during which institutions have had little choice but to accept the "services" accreditors offered them. There is an urgency that requires accreditors to behave as if they were driven by competition to improve their services to member institutions — just as their member institutions are being driven by intense competition to improve their services to students.

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CIHE believes its credibility demands that it respond to these needs swiftly. Its Academic Quality Improvement Project, structured to design and implement a new quality-based alternative to traditional accreditation, is NCA's dramatic response to this set of needs.

Additional current information about NCA's Academic Quality Improvement Project can be found at the Project's website, <http://AQIP.org>, and at NCA's website, <http://www.ncacihe.org>.

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