The Self-Study Process in Accreditation

The Higher Learning Commission builds its comprehensive evaluations for initial and continued candidacy and for initial and continued accreditation on two major processes: institutional self-study and peer evaluation. An organization scheduled for accreditation review has the prerogative to plan and conduct the self-study process in a way that leads to its preferred continuous improvement yet still provides evidence to the Commission that it fulfills the Criteria for Accreditation. The organization summarizes its findings in a self-study report, which constitutes formal application for the Commission action desired and serves as the frame of reference for the review that the evaluation team conducts.

While acknowledging the organization’s freedom to create its own self-study design, the Commission believes that certain attributes are essential to a successful self-study process. An effective self-study process:

- **Fits the distinctive nature of the organization.** An organization’s mission makes it distinctive, as might its breadth of educational offerings or specific foci within them. The distinctions among colleges and universities are too numerous to mention, and they inevitably lead to self-study processes that cannot and should not be exactly replicated in other settings. It is important for an organization’s self-evaluation and assessment to fit its unique context.

- **Achieves stated goals that guide the design and the conduct of the process.** Knowing what is to be accomplished through the self-study process helps an organization remain focused. This means that goals shape the design and the process, rather than emerge from them. Moreover, to create successful strategies, participants need to understand the goals. Effective self-studies typically have a limited number of recognizably significant goals.

- **Ensures effective evaluation of the whole organization.** Many organizations providing higher learning are quite complex. The evaluation for accreditation looks at the total organization. Besides focusing on core educational endeavors, the evaluation includes substantial subsidiary enterprises, noncredit training programs or other significant continuing education endeavors, and development and alumni relations programs, to name just a few. Attention, too, is given to the influence of intercollegiate athletics and social fraternities and sororities on the lives of students as well as to important educational opportunities used by some students, such as study abroad, service learning, and co-op programs.

- **Promises to have an impact on the organization beyond the Commission visit.** A self-study process ultimately connects to an organization’s ongoing visioning, budgeting, and planning processes. Highly effective self-study processes produce findings and recommendations that the organization should address. When the leadership of the organization affirms that the self-study report will be a living document rather than gathering dust on a shelf, the organization’s constituencies respond to an organizational agenda, not simply to an agenda set by the Commission and its Criteria.

- **Engages multiple constituencies of the organization.** An organization is best seen through multiple lenses. A successful organization involves the work of many, and the contributions of the various constituencies make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Therefore, the value of inclusiveness in review ensures that a holistic perspective can be achieved.
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- **Builds naturally on existing and ongoing self-evaluation processes.** Current practice is well past seeing self-study for accreditation as an activity separate from and added onto an organization's existing and ongoing evaluation processes. Organizations have too little time and energy and too few resources to build a process parallel to effective existing ones. A well-designed self-study builds on what is already in place, adding to it or, sometimes, transforming it into a more effective means of evaluation. Moreover, it makes use of data that already exist somewhere in the organization, whether in the institutional research office or another area that routinely or periodically gathers information for reporting or institutional use.

- **Has strong presidential and board support.** The president and board are expected to have high expectations for organizational learning from the self-study process. Without these expectations, self-study can become a compliance activity. Clear evidence of support inspires stakeholder engagement.

- **Draws on the expertise and credibility of recognized leaders throughout the organization.** As does any task important to the organization, effective self-study taps the talents and commitments of leaders who make the effort credible. They cannot conduct the self-study alone, so they are people known for their ability to generate and support the involvement of others. They know and call on people with expertise who can make the process both efficient and effective.

- **Maintains regular and effective communication links with organizational constituencies.** Constituencies are informed and involved; they provide frequent input and feedback. When the evaluation team reaches the campus and holds informal interviews in faculty and administrative offices, discusses the organization with staff, and chats with students in the dining areas or classroom hallways, it discovers that all of them know about the process and its results.

- **Produces evidence to show that the Commission's Criteria for Accreditation are met.** As the Commission initiates the new Criteria, it is time to rethink and redesign the self-study process the organization last used. The accuracy and quality of an organization's response to the Criteria and Core Components are contingent upon its production of substantive evidence that is cogent and evaluative. An evaluative self-study connects and interprets data and makes judgments about fulfillment of the Core Components accordingly.

- **Produces a self-study report that meets the Commission's needs.** A well-designed self-study report may have many audiences, but the Commission is obviously one of the more important. The report bears the weight of providing evidence that the organization warrants an affiliated status with the Commission. It allows the evaluation team to conduct an efficient visit; it informs the people who participate in the Commission's subsequent review and decision-making processes. The self-study report links solidly with the findings produced by the self-study process.

- **Testifies to the organization's commitment to peer review.** In evaluating both the comprehensiveness of the self-study process and the integrity of the self-study report, team members discover how seriously the organization approaches peer review. A team also takes into account the documentation an organization provides of the quality of attention it gave to previous evaluation teams. Through its team report, each team evaluates and consults. The team report once concluded with short lists of strengths and challenges, and subsequent evaluation teams measured a college's commitment to peer review in part by how the organization had maintained those strengths and remedied the challenges. These simple lists are not part of the current team report. Instead, in the Assurance section of its report, the team may note a variety of discrete Examples of Evidence that deserve attention. Often, in the Advance-ment section, the team also gives advice directly related to those examples or to other issues. In the self-study report, the organization summarizes its understanding of the most salient issues raised by the last comprehensive and subsequent team(s) and evaluates how it responded to them.

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**Practical Advice for Creating and Conducting an Effective Self-Study Process**

At each Annual Meeting over the past decade, experienced self-study coordinators have served as mentors to those just beginning the self-study process. They have provided excellent practical advice in their meeting presentations and in the papers they wrote for the *Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement.*
Commission staff had only to study the Collection of Papers for the last four years to glean the practical advice that follows. This summary can be supplemented by reviewing the essays in the Collection of Papers, available from the Commission office.

Make Good Preparations

An effective self-study process builds on the context of the organization and its ongoing planning. While the steering committee and its coordinators have fundamental roles in making the process effective, the organization's leadership needs to attend to some critically important tasks before turning the self-study process over to the steering committee.

- Create the stated organizational goals or outcomes for the process; if there are expected priorities for organizational issues, make them clear.
- Identify anticipated changes or improvements that need to be integrated into the self-study process or the self-study report (for example, review of a change requiring Commission approval).
- Make explicit the organization's values and culture that the self-study process must honor.
- Propose the appropriate linkages between the self-study process and ongoing planning endeavors.
- Understand the U.S. Department of Education compliance components of the Commission's accrediting activities.
- Consult with Commission staff as needed to determine how the self-study process can be used to meet the objectives of the organization's leadership.

The leadership should also be thoughtful in positioning the steering committee. Some colleges create sizable steering committees because they give every administrative and academic unit a place. Sage advice from experienced self-study coordinators holds that the leadership may wish to

- Determine the size of the committee in relation to tasks that only the members of the committee can achieve
- Use a smaller, more efficient committee charged with creating and working with multiple subcommittees or working groups

After creating a steering committee, the leadership will want to collaborate with it in crafting the self-study design. Together they will consider which self-study model to use. The following models, all of which have been used by organizations, are not the only ones possible.

- Craft the self-study process around the Criteria for Accreditation.
- Craft the self-study process around the themes identified by the Commission.
- Craft the self-study process around functional areas of the organization.
- Organize the self-study process to fit continuous quality improvement structures and processes (including benchmarking as appropriate).
- Structure the self-study process around strategic planning processes.
- Build the self-study process around a major mission revision process.
- Build the self-study process around selected topical headings.
- Create the self-study process to support a learning organization.
- Develop a customized self-study process in consultation with the staff liaison.

Of course, every process needs to ensure that the organization can provide evidence that it fulfills the Criteria for Accreditation.

Very early, the organization's leadership and the steering committee must agree on

- Established timelines that fit the time available before the team visit. If the leadership has already set the date for the visit, make sure the steering committee believes it can meet that date. If there are concerns, contact the Commission to discuss rescheduling.
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- **The tasks to be done.** It is good practice for the chief executive officer to provide a formal written charge to the steering committee and its coordinators and to make the charge known to the broader communities within their organization.

- **The expected outcomes of the process.** Other than preparing for a visit, the total community should know of any outcomes of the process that have been set by the leadership and the steering committee, including outcomes anticipated after the visit is concluded.

- **The budget for the process.** The budgeting process should be realistic, accounting for anticipated direct costs, and taking into account a variety of indirect costs. Successful self-study processes usually include funds to cover such things as attendance at the Commission Annual Meeting and programs to reward and recognize those who oversee the process.

**Involve the Right People in the Process**

The leadership of the organization makes a very critical strategic decision in naming the steering committee and the self-study coordinator(s). Choose the right people. Experienced self-study coordinators advise that the steering committee should include people who are

- Experienced with accreditation, including, if possible, a few veterans who did it a decade earlier
- Able to focus on the organization, mitigating against silo-thinking
- Recognized for their credibility within the organization
- Highly visible and influential within the organization

Because they are part of the self-study steering committee, the self-study coordinators should possess similar qualities. In light of their special task, they should be chosen because they also have demonstrated flexibility, leadership, process management, and strong team skills.

The organization's leadership and the self-study coordinators need to attend to the care and support of the talented and resourceful people called upon to oversee the self-study process. They should

- Be very conscious of the risk of task overloading
- Recognize the work being accomplished
- Provide training, guides, and consultant help if necessary
- Support networking activities

**Establish and Use Effective Structures, Processes, and Techniques**

As the steering committee and coordinators plan for the process ahead of them, they would be well-served by

- **Creating structures or processes that involve a broad range of constituencies.** These are often subcommittees or small working groups with specific tasks or projects.
- **Using technology for data collection, communication, and networking.**
- **Establishing effective coordination of all processes within the larger self-study process.** Some propose that the steering committee and coordinators see themselves as "filters" through which multiple smaller, focused working groups are coordinated. They serve as the point of centralized communication about the process and should identify appropriate formats for submissions from individual units. Such formats may allow for reasonable differences among units, while preserving the capacity for collective and comparative analysis.
- **Providing effective data management.** A steering committee must coordinate data-gathering activities. By creating an inventory of existing collections of data in the organization, the committee can be of great assistance. It should guard against allowing the use of multiple surveys that quickly overburden students, faculty, and staff, and result in diminishing returns. It should support the gathering of new data, when necessary, that speak to institutional trend lines, provide additional needed detail, and inform evidence-building within the process.
- **Overseeing effective use of the budget for the self-study process.**
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- **Creating a process check system.** Such a system will allow the committee and coordinators to know the status of the multiple parts of the process.

- **Including ways to have fun.** This advice is repeated frequently by experienced coordinators and should not be ignored. Self-study of an organization can be a lot of work; it certainly is important work. Stress occurs because of timelines, of discovering that even the best plans hit snags, of plain old interpersonal squabbles, and of being sideswiped by the unanticipated (for example, massive budget cuts or an unanticipated leadership transition). Knowing how to have fun in spite of the distractions enables the steering committee members and coordinators to keep the self-study process on target.

### Plan for Writing the Report

In collaboration with the organization’s leadership, the steering committee should define the multiple audiences for the report. While it is obvious that one audience is The Higher Learning Commission (the evaluation team and the participants in subsequent review processes), the organization may also have internal and external uses for the report. Those uses with multiple different audiences need to be considered in designing the format of the report and the ways in which it arrays evidence.

Early in the planning process, the steering committee needs to determine how it will create the self-study report. Not long ago, many self-study reports were simply a compilation of smaller reports done by subcommittees. They often lacked a strong organizational voice. It is increasingly important for an effective self-study process to culminate in a document that speaks on behalf of the total organization. As the steering committee plans its strategy for creating the report, it should

- **Choose one or more writers/editors and clearly define their responsibilities.**

- **Weigh how direct the linkages must be between working papers generated through the process and the self-study report.** When all the working papers are available for the team to study, many self-study processes allow the writer/editor to create a document based on, but not built directly around, those papers.

- **Create a time frame for writing, and create strategies for review and revision.** The time frame should allow for multiple drafts, and the review and revision should involve the steering committee, the leadership, and others identified by the steering committee.

- **Develop the strategy for providing data in the report.** The steering committee, not the writer/editor, should determine what evidence must appear in the report. Much evidence and data can be provided to the team via the Web, and much can be placed in the team resource room. This decision should be based on the role of the data in supporting the evidence provided in the report. Many organizations choose to include charts, tables, and statistical analyses, as well as normative and longitudinal comparisons.

Self-study coordinators have found it helpful to review reports created by other organizations. Each Annual Meeting includes a large number of self-study reports for review, and each organization represented by a self-study report has indicated a willingness to make a copy available at cost. The self-studies are also available for review at the Commission office.

### The Self-Study Design

No self-study design can anticipate every variable, perhaps not even all major ones. Nonetheless, self-study coordinators have testified to the importance of writing a self-study design very early in the process. This document, sometimes also called the prospectus or plan, should be relatively straightforward and should address

- The self-study calendar and timetable
- The organization’s goals for the self-study process
- The fit between the self-study process and the self-study report, and how they will meet both the Commission’s and the organization’s needs
- The proposed structure of committees or work groups and who will serve on them
- A working outline that may become the table of contents of the self-study report
Although the Commission does not require the submission of every self-study design for review and approval, most self-study coordinators share the document with their Commission staff liaison, who reviews the design and provides comment and advice. Filing the documents early in the process is the best way to take advantage of this staff service.

**Use Commission Support**

All experienced self-study coordinators commented on the importance of

- Attending the self-study workshops at the Annual Meeting (in fact, attending the whole Annual Meeting)
- Working with the Commission’s staff liaison, including, when appropriate, scheduling a campus visit by the liaison
- Seeking help in networking with similar organizations or other coordinators, both at the Annual Meeting and through direct inquiry with the Commission office
- Using materials generated by the Commission such as the *Handbook for Accreditation* and the *Collection of Papers* of each Annual Meeting

**Hallmarks of an Effective Self-Study Report**

Every organization stamps its unique character on its self-study report. While teams appreciate attention to effective presentation, they value substance over graphic design. They need a self-study report that provides

- A brief evaluative profile of the organization, including special qualities and distinctive programs
- A summary of significant changes that have occurred since the last comprehensive evaluation
- A brief summary of the organization’s accreditation history
- A brief evaluation of the thoroughness of the self-study process
- A summary of the organization’s understanding of and response to the major issues identified by the last team(s)
- An explicit evaluation of how the organization fulfills each of the Criteria for Accreditation through meeting the Core Components

Teams also find the following very helpful

- A clear explanation of the purposes of and audiences for the report
- A clear explanation of how the report is organized
- Identification early in the report of any requests for change that are included
- A useful table of contents
- Effective cross-referencing within the report
- Indexed citations in the report corresponding to appendices to the report and exhibits in the resource room

Teams expect

- Use of information and data to create evidence to support the organization’s self-evaluation
- Thoughtful analysis of evidence
- Easily identified and succinctly stated institutional priorities for improvement
- Honest evaluation, not public relations, characterizes the tone and content of the report