

*Self-Study, Self-Critique and Self-Improvement:
Anticipating Higher Learning Commission Reaccreditation in 2010-2011*

Accreditation: An Overview¹

In the landscape of American higher education, external accreditation provides an important, albeit incomplete, measure of institutional and academic excellence. Sustaining and enhancing Drury's commitment to providing the region's finest education is not the responsibility of external accreditors. That responsibility rests appropriately with the faculty and administration of Drury University. The reflective process of preparing for accreditation review through self-study promotes continual improvement by forcing regular comprehensive review of curricula, staffing, learning outcomes, and resources. The increased demands on faculty for increased scholarship, assessment of learning outcomes, and program accountability are, by most measures, valuable products of external accreditation.

In the wake of the Spellings Commission and increased concern about access to and costs of higher education, much has been written about the need to insure 'accountability' for universities' relative success at educating their students and for their use of resources. While there are periodic calls for more intrusive oversight by state and federal entities, a far preferable (and more likely) outcome is that the well established system of regional accreditation will respond in ways that provide greater transparency, accountability and assurance of learning quality for all stakeholders.

Unlike the vast majority of nations, institutions of higher education in the United States are accredited through a series of non-governmental entities, a requirement for participation in government financial aid programs and transfer of credits with most other institutions of higher education. There are six regional associations: Middle States, New England, Northwest, Southern, Western and North Central. While the regional associations function independently, there is extensive collaboration and member institutions recognize member institutions of other associations. These agencies provide institutional (rather than disciplinary) accreditation, evaluating the entirety of an institution in terms of its own mission and the Commission's criteria. In addition to the assessment of formal educational programs, it considers governance and administration, financial stability, admissions and student services, institutional resources and an institution's relationships with its range of constituencies.

Drury University is a member of and fully accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. The North Central Association was founded in 1895 and today serves institutions in Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Wyoming, as well as Department of Defense Schools and the schools and colleges in sovereign tribal nations within these states. Revised in June 2000, the Commission's mission is "serving the common good by assuring and advancing the quality of higher learning." The Commission's core values which frame its practices are *quality, integrity, innovation, diversity, inclusiveness, service, collaboration, and learning*. Within this framework, member institutions are accredited, in short, on the basis of their ability to demonstrate a clear sense of institutional mission, to provide evidence that the institution is meeting that mission with quality and integrity, and is prepared to continue doing so into the future.

¹ *Institutional Accreditation: An Overview*. Chicago IL: Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, 2007

Member institutions are typically evaluated every ten years for continued accreditation, though some institutions are required to have a focused visit (typically after five years) if a particular area is found to be of sufficient concern by a site visit team. The reaccreditation process involves the preparation of a candid and comprehensive institutional self-study, a site visit by a team of expert *peer reviewers* (consultant evaluators), and subsequent decision making processes by other reviewers serving on a *Readers Panel* or *Review Committee*, the *Institutional Actions Council* and, finally, the Commission's *Board of Trustees*.

Looking Back to 2000-2001

Drury University received full continued accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission during the 2000-2001 academic year. The two year process that led up to the site visit in September 2000 was, by nearly every measure, tremendously successful. The conclusions of the site visit report are summarized below:

Strengths

- Support services and resources to ensure the success of day school students are comprehensive, well utilized, and appear to be effective.
- The University enjoys a strong culture of mutual respect and close collaboration between faculty and students, between faculty and administration, and among all the constituencies of the University community.
- Collegiality and morale among students, faculty, and staff at Drury University are excellent. The University community as a whole is strongly committed to institutional mission and goals.
- Drury University has made great progress in technological services and computing. Registration and records modules are upgraded, functioning well, and about to be updated again. Students, faculty, and staff have access to computing resources.
- Assessment has become a priority across Drury University. Assessment procedures are in place and increasingly incorporated into review and planning processes.
- Drury University's commitment to the integration of liberal arts with all professional and liberal disciplines is pervasive and strong throughout the University, and its recently implemented, interdisciplinary general education curriculum is well conceived and shows early signs of success.
- An unusually strong and committed adjunct faculty core supports the University.
- The strength of the University's leadership is remarkable and is widely recognized on and off campus, as is the admirably and uncommonly long tenure of those in the chief leadership positions.
- Drury's physical plant is maintained at an enviably high level; and this is more noteworthy given the age of many of the University's buildings and the relatively small size of the staff of those responsible for maintaining the University's buildings and grounds.
- The University is fortunate to have a Board of Trustees whose members are committed to Drury, knowledgeable about all aspects of the University, wisely aware of the need to grant freedom to the University's administrative leadership to manage Drury, and deeply

appreciative of all of the University's administration, faculty, and staff are doing to improve the quality of a Drury education.

- The University has a documented history of sound fiscal management, which continues to characterize the institution.

Areas of Concern

- Support services and resources to ensure success are not easily accessible to students in the evening college or at off-site locations.
- The time of faculty, staff, and administration at Drury University is extended to the limit. Institutional goals of increased enrollment, stable (or slightly increasing) student/faculty ratio, an ambitious curriculum, more graduate programs, and increased faculty research might exceed current available time of faculty, staff, and administration.
- The University's reliance on its adjunct faculty in the evening programs is approaching a level that concerns faculty and administration. This concern extends to the University's employment practices relating to adjunct faculty as well as the cohesion of academic programs that are offered in the evening.
- There is unevenness on behalf of the Drury faculty in the oversight both of the curriculum of the College of Graduate and Continuing Studies and also in the selection and evaluation of the adjunct faculty who play so prominent a role in teaching this curriculum.
- While the presence of a significant number of international students has added greatly to the diversity of the Drury student body, the absence of diversity among the University's faculty, administration, staff, and Board of Trustees remains a concern.

Advice and Suggestions

- Drury's remarkably effective administrative leadership has served the University with such continuity over the past two decades that it has been some time since Drury faced the need to contemplate a future with different leadership. We recommend that the University take steps soon to plan for Drury's future leadership.
- Central to the aims of the University is meeting the career and intellectual needs of adults in the Southwest Missouri area through the offerings of the College of Graduate and Continuing Studies. Even through the University has considered recently the possible reorganization of the academic division, we recommend that this issue be revisited with concern for the role of the Dean of the College of Graduate and Continuing Studies.
- Owing to the very lean operation of the University and the resultant heavy loads that many in the University community support, many infrastructure systems of the University have not been documented but remain in the minds and memories of those who administer the systems. The University, however, is approaching a size and complexity where the infrastructure will need to be backed up by documented systems. We recommend that the University give attention to backing up its systems with documentation that will support and assure smooth and reliable operation.

We have received formal notification from the Commission that our next site visit is scheduled during 2010-2011. We have requested a site visit during spring 2011, though we will not have final confirmation of the visit dates for quite some time. While it may seem a distant target, the initial stages of the self-study process have already begun and will continue to evolve over the next 2 years. The Higher Learning Commission's Criteria for Accreditation have been revised substantially since our last campus visit and they now focus more tightly now on institutional learning, i.e., affirming the centrality of student learning, but also insisting that institutions learn from and serve multiple constituencies as we move into an era of unprecedented change in American higher education.

Much has also changed at Drury since 2001, with two presidential (and several other top administrative) transitions, financial challenges that are nearing resolution, and corresponding anxieties on campus. At the same time, we have record enrollment, a maturing general education curriculum, increasing levels of student accomplishment and global engagement, a safer campus environment and we remain the 'top shelf' brand in our region. While I am certain we will receive continued accreditation, we cannot and should not be content solely with that 'accomplishment.' Given the amount of time and energy we will invest in the self-study process, I believe that we must expect a much larger ROI. With participation from all campus constituencies (Board, administration, faculty, staff, students and alumni), along with substantial involvement of external constituencies, I believe this process can provide both strong affirmation of and transformational change for the university.

While a candid, comprehensive and well documented evaluation of the institution will be developed over the next two years of self-study, my preliminary assessment of issues that will likely require special attention in our self-study and improvement processes:

1. A meaningful culture of assessment of student learning, including evidence that assessment data are utilized meaningfully to improve teaching/learning practices must be developed. This will require sharper and more widely shared understandings of student learning outcomes at both the departmental and institutional level. More meaningful utilization of benchmarking data will be required.
2. Issues related to faculty and staff workloads and "time" remain the dominant topics of campus concern. Ongoing deliberations regarding re-structuring faculty work are promising, but tangible evidence of progress will be important by 2010-2011.
3. The fiscal stability of the institution, thought to be unquestioned in 2001, has tangibly improved after a period of substantial distress, albeit with some (hopefully temporary) 'collateral damage' to the sense of community. It will be important to demonstrate the efficacy of decisions made in recent years to position the institution for success in the future.
4. The relationship of the traditional 'day school' and CGCS has always been somewhat ambiguous, and occasionally strained. Given the changing demographics of learners within our region (and increasingly globally), clarifying this relationship in ways that allow both 'areas' to flourish will be essential. The ongoing discussions of future strategic directions for CGCS show great promise in this regard, and we will need to provide tangible evidence of progress.
5. The continuity of top administrative leadership cannot be replicated easily, and can only be accomplished over time. The enviable level of affection, respect and trust between the Board, administration, faculty and staff noted in the 2001 report will take time to rebuild, and

imperfect progress is being made. A concerted effort to assure this continuity and continued improvement in campus climate will be essential.

6. While we have made significant progress in increasing the international diversity of our campus, our domestic minority population and the lack of a campus infrastructure to support a more diverse population remain significant concerns. The creation of the President's Council on Diversity represents a tremendous opportunity for the university, and we will need to demonstrate evidence of tangible progress.

Tentative Timetable for Self-Study and Site Visit

June 1 – September 1, 2008:	*Self-Study Committee Chairs Named and Committee Members Solicited
August 22, 2008:	*Fall Faculty Workshop Session on HLC Self-Study Process
September, 2008:	*Self-Study website developed for compiling and sharing all pertinent information
September 1, 2008 – August 15, 2009:	*Self-Study Plan Developed and Reported to HLC *Subcommittees identify, gather and analyze data, and develop draft reports for Steering Committee *Committee members attend Workshop on Self-Study at April 2009 HLC meetings
September 1, 2009-May 15, 2010:	*Steering Committee analyzes draft reports and prepares rough draft of self-study report, with feedback from all stakeholders *Confirm dates of site visit
Spring 2010:	*Distribute information to constituencies regarding request for third party comment
Summer 2010:	*Self-Study Coordinator compiles final draft of report *Site visit electronic and physical resource room prepared
Fall 2010 – Spring 2011:	*Wide distribution of self-study report *Site visit and subsequent Commission actions *Celebration

The Criteria for Accreditation*

The Criteria for Accreditation are organized under five major headings. Each Criterion has three elements: Criterion Statement, Core Components, and Examples of Evidence. The **Criteria Statements** define necessary attributes of an organization accredited by the Commission. An organization must be judged to have met each of the Criteria to merit accreditation. An organization addresses each **Core Component** as it presents reasonable and representative evidence of meeting a Criterion. **The Examples of Evidence** illustrate the types of evidence an organization might present in addressing a Core Component.

The Criteria are intentionally general so that accreditation decisions focus on the particulars of each organization, rather than on trying to make it fit a preestablished mold. The widely different purposes and scopes of colleges and universities demand criteria that are broad enough to encompass diversity and support innovation, but clear enough to ensure acceptable quality.

The Criteria Statements and Core Components are presented here. Visit the Commission's Web site to view the Examples of Evidence.

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.

- 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 of 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.

- 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.

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.

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 programs.

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.

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.

**Taken from: www.ncahlc.org*