

ACCJC NEWS

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Program Review and Institutional Quality

Program Review, which is required by the Higher Education Act that was passed in 1965, amended several times, and just renewed in fall 2008, is intended to engage colleges in a careful evaluation of how effective their educational and student support programs are, and how well students are succeeding. Colleges must use information gleaned from such on-going evaluation to make improvements to educational quality and student success.

Accreditation is higher education's system of quality assurance through self-regulation. Higher education is one of the few professions that is privileged to be self-regulating. Associated with this privilege is a belief that higher education professionals will care about, and will best know what to do about, improving student outcomes. A professional interest in maximizing student success is fundamental to the profession of college educators. Individual faculty members are often dedicated to assessing the effectiveness of their own courses in order to improve student outcomes, but program review is designed to engage the broader educational program and the institution in focusing on student success.

Educational Programs refers to the sequence of courses leading to a degree or certificate, such as the "liberal arts/transfer program" or the "nursing program," or the sequence of courses or learning activities leading to intellectual mastery, such as the Basic Skills course sequence leading to college readiness, the lifelong learning course sequence that enhances career and job skill set, etc.

Student Support Programs refers to non-instructional services, such as advising, counseling, learning resources, financial aid, tutoring, mentoring, etc., that facilitate student success and provide strategies for students to overcome the varied factors in life that may disrupt their education and reduce their success.

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Student Success means the students' completion of a course of study (course sequence, a certificate, a degree) and movement to the progression of steps fundamental to their goals: job placement, passing the licensure exam, transfer to a four-year institution, or just success in life. Smaller steps on the path to program completion can also be important measures for some programs -- successful course completion, movement to the next course in a sequence, completion of general education requirements -- as attention to these measures gives an institution information about where students are successful (or unsuccessful) at finishing programs. These interim indicators also provide measures of student success for the many students who don't seek to complete degrees and certificates. The Commission's terminology for these measures of success is "student achievement."

In addition to the idea of "completion" of the course, course sequence, certificate or degree, student success is also measured by what students have learned - can they demonstrate knowledge by applying it, pass a standardized examination, perform the tasks a job requires, manage their time effectively, communicate clearly and effectively, etc. The Commission's terminology for this form of student success is "student learning outcomes."

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The 2002 Standards of Accreditation ask colleges to identify intended student learning outcomes at the course, program and degree/certificate levels and to assess the degree to which students are learning.

Analyses of learning assessment data are meant to be added to program review so that institutions can examine and work to improve student achievement and student learning - both vital components of student success.

Students entrust their lives and their futures to the colleges they attend. They enter higher education expecting to learn, to obtain knowledge and skills that will improve their lives, and to earn the credentials that will allow them to move forward, personally, economically, and socially. The accreditation requirement that colleges review the quality of their programs and the student outcomes that result, and that colleges work to improve quality and student success, is the only acceptable response to the trust students and the public place in institutions that are accredited.

Pressure on institutions to improve student success will not subside. As evident from many speeches and comments on education in the United States, President Obama's agenda for higher education is to achieve many more college graduates by 2020 and to increase student "success." Staff appointed to the Department of Education, including Secretary Arne Duncan and Undersecretary Martha Kanter, refer to the agenda of the Obama administration as emphasizing student success and institutional accountability for student outcomes. Furthermore, the national higher education community is focusing more on measuring student outcomes and using the results to improve institutional effectiveness and student success.

The ACCJC requires its member institutions to develop and maintain the practice of regular and careful self-assessment and improvement (where needed) of educational quality and institutional effectiveness. Program review is central to institutional quality. ♦