

Themes

Several themes thread throughout these standards. These themes can provide guidance and structure to self-reflective dialogue and evaluation of institutional effectiveness. The themes are as follows:

Dialogue

The standards are designed to facilitate college engagement in inclusive, informed, and intentional dialogue about institutional quality and improvement. The dialogue should purposefully guide institutional change. All members of the college community should participate in this reflection and exchange about student achievement, student learning, and the effectiveness of its processes, policies, and organization. For the dialogue to have its intended effect, it should be based on reliable information about the college's programs and services and evidence on how well the institution is meeting student needs. Information should be quantitative and qualitative, responsive to a clear inquiry, meaningfully interpreted, and broadly communicated. The institutional dialogue should result in ongoing self-reflection and conscious improvement.

Student Learning Outcomes

The development of Student Learning Outcomes is one of the key themes in these standards. The theme has to do with the institution consciously and robustly demonstrating the effectiveness of its efforts to produce and support student learning by developing student learning outcomes at the course, program, and degree level. This demonstration of effectiveness requires that learning outcomes be measured and assessed to determine how well learning is occurring so that changes to improve learning and teaching can be made. It requires that faculty engage in discussions of ways to deliver instruction to maximize student learning. It requires that those providing student support services develop student learning outcomes and evaluate the quality of their policies, processes, and procedures for providing students access and movement through the institution. And it requires that student learning outcomes be at the center of the institution's key processes and allocation of resources. Ultimately, this theme requires that an institution engage in self-analysis leading to improvement of all that it does regarding learning and teaching.

Institutional Commitments

The standards ask institutions to make a commitment in action to providing high quality education congruent with institutional mission. The first expression of this is in Standard I, which calls for an institutional mission statement that reflects the intended student population and the institution's commitment to student learning. Throughout the standards, the commission asks that institutions insure the consistency between mission and institution goals and plans and insure that the mission is more than a statement of intention -- that it guides institutional action. The standards also ask that an institution commit to supporting student learning as its primary mission. The number of references

to student learning outcomes throughout the standards are designed to guide this institutional commitment to student learning. The standards' requirement that the entire institution participate in reviewing institutional performance and developing plans for improvement of student learning outcomes is intended to help the institution sustain its commitment to student learning. Finally, the requirement that an institution regularly review its mission statement asks that the institution periodically reflect on its mission statement, adapt it as needed, and renew commitment to achieving the mission.

Evaluation, Planning, and Improvement

The standards require ongoing institutional evaluation and improvement to help serve students better. Evaluation focuses on student achievement, student learning, and the effectiveness of processes, policies, and organization. Improvement is achieved through an ongoing and systematic cycle of evaluation, integrated planning, implementation, and re-evaluation. The planning cycle begins with evaluation of student needs and college programs and services. This evaluation in turn informs college decisions about where it needs to improve, and the college identifies improvement goals campus-wide. Resources are distributed in order to implement these goals. When resources are insufficient to support improvement goals, the college adjusts its resource decisions to reflect its priorities or seeks other means of supplying resources to meet its goals. Once improvement plans have been fully implemented, evaluation of how well the goals have been met ensues. Thus, the planning cycle is comprised of evaluation, goal setting, resource distribution, implementation, and reevaluation.

Organization

The Standards require colleges to have inclusive, informed and intentional efforts to define student learning, provide programs to support that learning, and to evaluate how well learning is occurring. This requirement means that the institution must have in place the organizational means to identify and make public the learning outcomes, to evaluate the effectiveness of programs in producing those outcomes, and to make improvements. This requirement for adequate staff, resources and organizational structure (communication and decision making structures) is not new to accreditation standards, but the new expectation is that these be oriented to produce and support student learning. Consequently, they will be evaluated in part by how well they support learning.

Institutional Integrity

This theme deals with the institution's demonstrated concern with honesty, truthfulness, and the manner in which it represents itself to all stakeholders, internal and external. This theme speaks to the intentions of an institution as well as to how it carries them out. It prompts institutional assessment of the integrity of its policies, practices, and procedures and to how it treats students, employees, and its publics. It asks that the institution concern itself with the clarity, understandability, accessibility, and appropriateness of its publications; that its faculty provide for open inquiry in their classes as well as student grades that reflect an honest appraisal of student performance against faculty standards. It

has an expectation of academic honesty on the part of students. It requires that the institution demonstrate regard for issues of equity and diversity. It encourages the institution to look at its hiring and employment practices as well as to its relationship with the Commission and other external agencies. Finally, it expects that an institution be self-reflective and honest with itself in all its operations.