

## **Case study of accreditation reaffirmation with emphasis on survival-focused prioritization for program assessment**

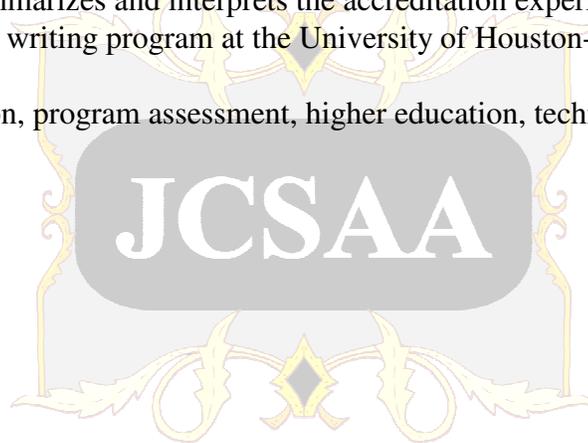
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### **ABSTRACT**

At the urging of the U.S. Department of Education, regional accrediting organizations have, during the last few years, placed much greater emphasis on implementation of assessment as a requirement for accreditation. Assessment serves two important purposes: institutional survival and improvement of student achievement. Of these two, survival is the most important. When an institution is preparing for a review by an accrediting agency, it may be prudent to minimize or postpone important, but nonessential, and sometimes contentious and divisive discussions about discipline-related assessment theories and pedagogical best practices.

This article summarizes and interprets the accreditation experience, and its aftermath, within the professional writing program at the University of Houston-Downtown.

Keywords: accreditation, program assessment, higher education, technical communication



## INTRODUCTION

The primary audience for this article is faculty and administrators at U.S. colleges and universities where accreditation reaffirmation by a regional accreditation agency is upcoming and where the commitment to assessment and development of sound assessment practices requires additional attention.

This article

1. Argues that when survival is at stake, assessment must have a laser-like focus, and that potentially important, but nonessential deliberations and initiatives to improve learning outcomes, which are susceptible to “analysis paralysis,” should be suspended until survival has been secured
2. Summarizes various approaches to the assessment process
3. Summarizes the most recent accreditation reaffirmation experience and subsequent developments at University of Houston-Downtown (UHD)

## BACKGROUND

Assessment of higher education is an ongoing, politically charged, and contentious issue. The contenders include the United States Department of Education (DOE), Congress, accreditors, and colleges (Field p. 1). The DOE, through the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), can influence the accrediting agencies and has drafted them to serve, in part, as proxies for the enforcement of DOE-promulgated assessment practices when conducting accreditation reviews of institutions of higher education.

Accreditation agencies are nongovernmental entities, but the DOE can exert considerable influence on them because accreditors must meet the DOE criteria for measuring the quality of an institution. NACIQI periodically reviews all federally recognized accrediting agencies on behalf of the DOE to determine if the accrediting agencies’ standards meet the DOE criteria. (Basken p. 1)

In 1965 the federal government set accreditation by a DOE-recognized accrediting agency as a prerequisite for students’ eligibility for federally guaranteed loans. Because these loans are an essential source of income for most colleges, accreditation became a requirement for the survival of many colleges. (Farrell p. 25)

The struggle for control over the terms of assessment as a component of accreditation has contributed to uncertainty about what accreditors want from colleges (Schmadeka). The current emphasis on assessment as an increasingly important component of accreditation can blur an important distinction at a critical time. Because assessment is usually undertaken as a matter of necessity for institutional survival, but also has the potential to help institutions improve education outcomes (Banta p. 3), it is important to recognize that the focus of assessment for survival may differ from the focus of assessment to improve educational outcomes.

Each discipline has leading scholars who articulately argue the importance, merits, and limitations of particular, and sometimes controversial, discipline-related theory and pedagogical best practices. Faculty and program administrators are often invested in these theories and best practices and vigorously participate in the discussion, development,

research, and implementation of such theories and best practices, which can lead to a principled and contentious environment when making decisions about the establishment and measurement of learning outcomes. Because, as J. Allen (2004) notes there is a tendency to formulate assessment strategies that try to do too much (p. 98), as the time for reaffirmation of accreditation approaches, important, but nonessential deliberations and initiatives to improve outcomes, which are susceptible to “analysis paralysis,” may have to be temporarily suspended until survival has been secured. Some may argue that advocacy for such a suspension is cynical or compromises intellectual integrity. Those who see this dilemma as “institutional Maslowianism” (Hierarchy of Needs) might argue that when a gun is being held to one’s head, it is prudent to surrender one’s valuables. To thrive, one needs to first survive (Maslow).

## ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Various authorities (M. Allen, Angelo, Huba and Freed, Palomba and Banta, Williams) describe educational assessment as an iterative, data-driven process that is intended to improve learning. The current assessment jargon describes the completion of one iteration as “closing the loop.” If the loop is not closed, the assessment is incomplete.

Authorities differ in their descriptions of the steps required to close the loop. The differences are not about the loop, but rather about the approach and the size of the steps to traverse the loop.

For example, Williams (2008) describes assessment as a four-step process:

1. Specify the learning outcomes (LOs). LOs are what students should know and be able to do as a result of completing a unit of learning (lesson, course, degree program).
2. Specify how to measure the extent to which students have achieved the LOs. The measures must be carefully selected or designed so that they actually measure the LOs, rather than something else. The LOs and their corresponding means of measurement must be closely aligned.

A good rule of thumb is to specify at least one direct measure and one indirect measure for each LO. Direct methods of assessment require students to produce work so reviewers can assess how well students meet expectations. Indirect methods of assessment allow students to report their perceptions of their learning experiences.

3. Collect data on the extent to which students have achieved the LOs.
4. Study the assessment results and, as needed, make changes to improve student learning (Circle of Assessment section).

Banta (2004) advocates a tailored approach to developing an effective assessment program. She emphasizes the necessity of adapting the development to the unique context of the institution.

Unfortunately there is no silver bullet, no magic potion, no single step-by-step approach that will provide easy answers to the fundamental question about how to get started in outcomes assessment. This is because every setting is different and requires its own unique approach, taking into account the mission and goals of the campus and of the individual unit undertaking assessment, the

expertise and interests of those to be involved in achieving the mission and goals and in guiding assessment, the prior history of evaluation initiatives in the unit, and the resources available to implement assessment, to name just a few of the relevant variables (p. 1).

Rather than identifying steps in the process of closing the loop, Banta identifies three phases: Planning, Implementing, and Improving and sustaining . She suggests that writing a multi-year plan is often, but not necessarily, the appropriate place to start. Banta explains that planning for effective assessment requires stakeholder involvement, includes a written plan, is based on explicit program objectives, begins when the need is recognized, and allows enough time for development. She emphasizes, “Time is crucial” (p. 2).

Advocates of Banta’s approach might consider it to be more finessed, sophisticated, and efficient, while advocates who favor the more prescriptive regimens, such as those of Williams, might view Banta’s approach, because of its fluidity, as less appropriate for those without a sophisticated understanding of both assessment and the unit being assessed, which in this case is a technical communication program.

## **TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION PROGRAM ASSESSMENT**

The increased emphasis on institutional and program assessment by the regional accrediting bodies, and others, makes program assessment, including of technical communication programs, increasingly important.

The importance of assessment to technical communication programs notwithstanding, more guidance and understanding of assessment of technical communication at the program level is needed. Given the relatively recent shift in emphasis on program level assessment and the relatively long lead time required to develop, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of assessment efforts, the current lack of guidance and understanding of best practices for assessment of technical communication at the program level is understandable.

It is encouraging to note that technical communication educators are addressing these deficiencies. For example, J. Allen has provided examples of how matrices and rubrics can be used to realize widely accepted characteristics of effectiveness in the assessment of technical communication programs (pp. 103-06). Salvo and Ren (2007) have offered a model for participatory assessment that is based on research in participatory, user-centered design. Carengie (2007) proposes development of a contextual model for program assessment. As a result of such efforts, guidance, best practices, and various permutations of assessment instruments are emerging.

Inherent in this state of emergence is a degree of ambiguity about the appropriate constituents and means for the effective assessment of a technical communication program. This state of emergence and ambiguity is, in part, a consequence of the state of writing assessment, and, in part, a result the increased emphasis on program assessment by the regional accrediting bodies, and others.

Theories, principles, and best practices of writing assessment have changed during the last 60 years, and will continue to change. Scholars and researchers advance and argue divergent approaches to important aspects of writing assessment. However important these deliberations may be, in the context of an impending review of program assessment by a

regional accrediting body, they are less important than providing sufficient evidence to assure the accreditor that an assessment plan for the program exists and is being executed.

## UHD

The focus of the UHD accreditation reaffirmation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) was on documentary evidence of

- a viable, multi-step plan to close the loop
- implementation of the plan

UHD has a long history of conducting assessment, but assessment was not consistent across colleges, departments, or programs. Of great importance to SACS was the fact that the loop was not always closed; the assessment cycle of data collection, evaluation, and modification to improve learning outcomes was not always completed. SACS conducted an on-site review of UHD from March 7-9, 2006, and, in a letter dated January 9, 2007, made several recommendations, including the following: “The institution should provide evidence that student learning outcomes are being assessed for each of the educational programs and that the assessment data are used to enhance the quality of the programs” (B. Wheelan, personal communication).

## Mobilization

After further reporting and correspondence resulted in a stalemate, the UHD upper-level academic administrators, with the help of an assessment consultant finalized a plan of action during the first weeks of 2009. The faculty senate met to both chastise these upper-level administrators for their role in the failure to avoid the impasse and to express the willingness and availability of the faculty to do whatever was necessary to help bring the situation to a satisfactory conclusion.

The jeopardy to accreditation contributed to a crisis mentality, which turned out to be a mixed blessing. On one hand, it provided the significant advantages of a focused approach and highly motivated participants; on the other hand, it limited the breadth of stakeholder participation and depth of widespread deliberation among faculty about the range and desirability of various assessment options.

The immediate strategy of the UHD assessment effort was clear: satisfy SACS. J. Allen (2004) recommends a streamlined approach to assessment strategy development (p. 98). The approach at UHD was nothing, if not streamlined. So much so that the education and thoughtful deliberation of stakeholders was necessarily truncated. It was not the fear of the anarchy of participation (Latour 1999), but rather the fear of failure, that limited the implementation of participatory assessment, as described by Salvo and Ren (2007). There was little time for democratic deliberations or academic arguments. In their place was a succinct strategy and a drop dead date.

Banta (2004) editorializes, “. . . stakeholders are much more likely to become engaged if they can perceive assessment as an integral part of a process they value such as curriculum development, peer review, or personal scholarship” (p. 3). At UHD, stakeholders became

engaged in assessment because they feared the consequences of failing to satisfy SACS. Motivation among administrators, faculty, and staff was high.

The deans led the efforts within their colleges to develop the documentation required for SACS. Each department recruited one or more individuals to lead the effort at the program level. The deans tasked the department-level liaisons with the development of LOs and rubrics, and the identification of indirect measures with which to assess the achievement of the LOs. Rubrics were a good choice for measuring the diverse LOs to be identified by the departments. As M. Allen (2004) states, “Rubrics can be used to classify any product or behavior, such as essays, research reports, portfolios, works of art, recitals, oral presentations, performances, and group activities” (p. 138).

## Results

The jeopardy to the University’s accreditation was unsettling, the topic of much speculation, and some finger pointing. The effort to clarify, implement, and document the level of assessment required to satisfy SACS was urgent, intense, and far-reaching. SACS reaffirmed the accreditation of UHD at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour.

The effort to institutionalize meaningful assessment continues. The institution’s mission statement has been rewritten. A director of assessment has been hired. Explicit LOs for programs across the University now exist, as do various means for measuring the achievement of the LOs. It seems that faculty and administration now have a somewhat greater understanding of the nature and growing importance of assessment, which may result in an increased receptivity to participate in various assessment activities, as will the proposal of the English Department Rank and Tenure Committee to add the tenure requirement of “. . . assessing success in meeting learning outcomes and adjusting teaching practice as assessment indicates is advisable” (p. 1). It is too soon to tell if assessment will become part of the institutional culture at UHD or to identify the impact of assessment on the achievement of learning outcomes, but at this time, it appears that significant momentum is building for the creation of a culture of assessment at UHD.

The urgency of the situation intruded on the process at UHD and may have provided some justification for ignoring principles of good practice for assessing higher education, as identified by Astin, et al., and published through the American Association of Higher Education. At UHD, it seemed that

- Conceptualization was a group effort, albeit a very small group, which expedited the conceptualization process.
- Participation by external stakeholders, such as actual and potential benefactors, was restricted, possibly to protect both ongoing development efforts and the University’s reputation.
- Long-term sustainability of the assessment effort was uncertain. There was reason to wonder what would happen with assessment if the immediate threat could be averted.

The net effect of the urgency was to accelerate the development of a successful response to the immediate threat, possibly at the expense of achieving what is ostensibly the longer term objective: creating a sustainable culture of effective assessment.

## Role of the Professional Writing Program

Long before the most recent accreditation visit by SACS, the professional writing (PW) program developed explicit LOs, specified measures, consistently collected data, and, with somewhat less consistency, analyzed the data to identify program strengths and weaknesses, and made program modifications in response to the results of the analysis.

At the time of the accreditation review of UHD by SACS, the evidence suggests that SACS was more concerned that UHD was closing the loop and less concerned about precisely how it was closing the loop, as long as data was being collected through at least one direct and one indirect means. At the PW program level, this suggests that, whichever side of a writing assessment issue a program's administration or faculty may support was of little consequence to SACS. From the narrow perspective where the success of writing assessment is defined only in terms of receiving accreditation renewal, it was not necessary to justify the methodology, thereby keeping the primary focus on accreditation, rather than the important, but untimely and sometimes contentious questions and issues surrounding writing assessment.

The direct measure was a rubric that was applied annually to the portfolio required of each PW major for graduation. The PW faculty believed, as argued by Elbow and Belanoff (1986), that portfolio evaluation did not suffer the inherent limitations of proficiency exams, which curtail reading, reflection, and discussion, and do not allow for the more balanced picture of a student's proficiency afforded by the multiple writing samples of a portfolio.

Prior to the annual collaborative portfolio evaluation of 2009, the PW faculty met for an "interrater reliability" session. The session was interesting for two reasons. First was the disparate evaluations of student-written recommendation reports, and second was the response of the group to the disparities, which was to ask the individual evaluators whose scores were furthest from each other to explain their scoring. These explanations revealed meaningful differences between faculty in their frames of reference (raters' contexts), which resulted in various interpretations of the rubric's evaluation criteria, thus the disparate scores. However, there was little pressure to achieve numerical consistency. The focus seemed to be on understanding differences, rather than reconciling them. The net result seemed to support Broad's (1994) contention that ". . . getting people to discuss their evaluations prior to scoring helps to open up the conversation and make room for divergent perspectives that are often squeezed out under the pressure for numerical agreement" (p. 291).

Data was collected during the annual collaborative portfolio review. Using the rubric, three PW faculty members evaluated each portfolio. Unfortunately, deliberations by the PW faculty about the implications of the rubric data for program modification were secondary to the portfolio evaluation, which was an end unto itself, and somewhat overshadowed the use of the data to identify and implement program modifications. Consideration of questions about the limitations and best uses of portfolios in the effective evaluation of writing, such as those raised by Huot (1994), were on the periphery of the portfolio review session, as were concerns about validity and reliability (Huot, Yancey, White, and others) of the assessment process. This was not due to lack of concern about the larger issues, but rather the immediacy of the need to complete the task at hand. If there is a time for reflection and a time for action, that was definitely a time for action. The undergraduate PW program coordinator not only documented the ongoing use of the rubric to evaluate portfolios, but also summarized the

conclusions and resulting recommendations of the faculty abbreviated deliberations about the implications of the rubric data for program changes needed to remedy deficiencies identified through the portfolio evaluation.

The indirect measure was mandatory student evaluations of courses and faculty performance. Institutional policy required that the student evaluations be incorporated into the annual performance evaluations of faculty. Institutional policy did not require that the implications of the student evaluations for program modifications receive consideration.

As J. Allen (2004) said is commonplace, assessment of the professional writing (PW) program was important not only in its own right, but also for its role in providing a writing intensive course that helps fill the general education requirement for writing proficiency (95). Because of the assessment deficiencies SACS identified in general education, the PW program curriculum committee was also tasked with providing assessment documentation to support the general education program. PW offers a writing-intensive course, ENG 3302 Business and Technical Report Writing, which helps satisfy the general education requirement for writing proficiency. The major ENG 3302 project is a recommendation report. The curriculum committee developed a rubric for use with recommendation report. During the development of the rubric for ENG 3302, the curriculum committee graded a set of recommendation reports without using the rubric, and then graded the same set of reports using the rubric. Grades were more uniform with the use of the rubric than without, which prompted some discussion about the advantages and limitations of the rubric. The concern was that the rubric did not accommodate committee members' differing perceptions of the relative importance of the various LOs. The resolution was to encourage faculty to use the rubric without modifications, while allowing modifications by individual faculty members as they felt compelled. The committee adopted the strategy of embedding the rubric in the scoring of the assignment, as suggested by Walvoord and Anderson (1998), and then annually compiling and reviewing the data across ENG 3302 courses. The looming SACS deadline prevented the committee from considering the use of other types of measures, for example, focus groups, as Eubanks and Abbott suggested (2003), which is inconsistent with the advice of Hamilton and Banta (2008), who warn, "To retain control of assessment at the institutional level, faculty and administrators are going to have to learn as much as possible about multiple modes of assessment and what each mode can tell us" (p. 28).

### **Aftermath**

The effort to institutionalize meaningful assessment continues. The institution's mission statement has been rewritten. A director of assessment has been hired. Explicit LOs for programs across the University now exist, as do various means for measuring the achievement of the LOs. It seems that faculty and administration now have a somewhat greater understanding of the nature and growing importance of assessment, which may result in an increased receptivity to participate in various assessment activities, as will the proposal of the English Department Rank and Tenure Committee to add the tenure requirement of ". . . assessing success in meeting learning outcomes and adjusting teaching practice as assessment indicates is advisable" (p. 1). It is too soon to tell if assessment will become part of the institutional culture at UHD or to identify the impact of assessment on the achievement of

learning outcomes, but at this time, it appears that significant momentum is building for the creation of a culture of assessment at UHD.

It is encouraging to note that significant initiatives have been launched at UHD to create a sustainable culture of assessment. These include training for interested stakeholders and explicit directives to develop and implement additional sustainable means of program evaluation, based on program LOs. For example, the 2010 annual evaluations by PW faculty of student portfolios required faculty to complete an additional rubric, which is intended to assess how well the PW program achieved two of its eight LOs (“Engage in projects for real clients” and “Conduct, evaluate, and report research and provide accurate citations”). The rubric data will be compiled, analyzed, and used to help identify any program deficits and the changes required to address those deficits. The program’s performance against all eight LOs will be assessed during a five-year cycle, with different LOs being assessed each of the five years.

## CONCLUSION

DOE pressure has compelled the regional accrediting bodies to put greater emphasis on assessment. These bodies want more than a plan for institutional and program assessment. They require sufficient evidence of ongoing and effective institutional and program assessment. Institutions and programs that fail to provide such evidence jeopardize the reaffirmation of their accreditation.

It takes time to develop and document the institutionalization of effective assessment practices. To protect institutional and program reputations and financial viability, faculty and administrators of institutions and programs that are subject to an accreditation review by a regional accrediting body would do well to take a step back from dissention about the details of assessment and focus on the completing the steps required to satisfy the accrediting body. Once the accreditor is satisfied, the pursuit of improved learning outcomes can resume with full vigor. To thrive, one must first survive.

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