Evidence Guide

A Guide to Using Evidence in the Accreditation Process: A Resource to Support Institutions and Evaluation Teams

A Working Draft
January 2002

Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges & Universities

Western Association of Schools & Colleges

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Table of Contents

Prologue

A Guide to Using Evidence in the Accreditation Process: A Resource to Support Institutions and Evaluation Teams is the first of a series of resource materials designed to support institutions and teams in the implementation of the new accreditation process developed over the past five years. A guide on evidence is the first to be developed because of the central role evidence plays in the new accreditation process reflected in the *2001 Handbook of Accreditation*. The *2001 Handbook* is built on a number of principles that require greater development and use of evidence than ever before. Excerpting from the *2001 Handbook*:

■ "The new process is intended to rely heavily on existing institutional evidence and sampling of institutional exhibits and processes, including, as appropriate, student work." (page 4)

■ "The accreditation process is aimed at promoting within institutions a culture of evidence where indicators of performance are regularly developed and data collected to inform decision-making, planning, and improvement." (page 8)

■ "The institution has developed indicators and evidence to ascertain the level of achievement of its purposes and educational objectives." (page 17)

One of the meta-purposes of the reform process was to create a total systems model that encouraged institutions to assess the type, amount and quality of evidence regularly collected, and use the accreditation process to improve ongoing development and use of institutional data and evidence. All too often the traditional model of accreditation leads to reports that are disconnected from existing institutional practices. The timing of each stage of the accreditation review process and the structure of both institutional presentations and team visits are changed significantly under this new model as a result of this new emphasis on evidence.

Timing and Focus of the Three-Stage Review Process. The timing and focus of the three-stage review process is organized around institutional evidence. For example, as the first stage in the review process, the Proposal provides each institution with an opportunity to design how it will conduct its self-review and to identify those issues it wishes to address within its context for team review and feedback. The Preparatory Review is set two years later to provide the institution time to assess its own evidence, and transition from generating information that is little-used to focusing on the kinds of evidence most needed. The Educational Effectiveness Review is set a year after the Preparatory Review because our experience has shown that several years are needed to collect and analyze evidence of educational effectiveness and student learning, and to establish the key elements of good evidence – tracking information over time and developing multiple indicators of performance. Institutions are expected to move from promises of future assessment to a demonstration that there is a conscious approach to evaluating and improving education, based on effective evidence of student learning results. Teams will be expected to review with the institution the actual evidence collected and discuss with the institution what the evidence means, what is "good enough" and how it might lead to deeper understanding and improvement.

Institutional Presentations. Institutional presentations are to be organized around portfolios of evidence, data and exhibits. Page limits have been set so institutions will focus on existing evidence, and assess what it means. Reflective essays are expected to indicate why the specific exhibits and data were selected, what they mean to the institution, and how they are being used to support further inquiry, decision-making, and improvement. In addition, it is hoped that portfolios can be useful to the institution and used between accreditation reviews to promote further inquiries

about effectiveness. With all or part of the portfolios becoming standing, they can be updated and revised easily at the time of the next review, reducing the cost and burden of future reviews.

Team Visits. Team visits are also being restructured to focus on institutional evidence as the basis for interaction on site. Teams are expected to work with the evidence presented by the institution, to frame inquiries about the evidence, and to use visit strategies to verify and discuss its implications regarding institutional capacity and educational effectiveness. Pre-visit conference calls are now the norm to identify key issues for the site visit and to determine what method will be used to address the evidence presented by the institution. While interviews will still be conducted, other strategies are being developed to focus the team more on the kinds of evidence commonly used by the institution in its ongoing operations.

At the core of all of this is the question: "Just what is evidence?" And, "When is evidence good or probative?" In law, evidence is that which is offered as proof of a fact or condition. The term denotes neutrality – it may be useful and true, providing effective support to a claim. But it also may be false or misleading, and thus have no probative value. Thus, each institution will need to give meaning to the evidence it presents, indicating how it views the evidence and what it is intended to represent. In the academic world, there are many approaches to gathering and reporting evidence, reflected in the traditions of the disciplines. The Commission has no preferred model of evidence, and encourages the development of those methods that are most effective for each institution and the issues it is studying.

This *Guide* is intended to support institutions, provide concrete examples of good practices, and raise questions that might stimulate better understanding of how WASC intends for evidence to be developed and used in the accreditation process. But it is not intended to be applied mechanically or to create a new set of standards. We must always keep in mind, however, that this emphasis on evidence is about *means*; the *ends* we seek are real student learning and institutional and educational effectiveness.

This is intentionally a "Working Draft." Excerpts from an earlier draft were discussed with institutional representatives in previous workshops, with a very positive response. This Working Draft is intended to be a companion to the *2001 Handbook*. This *Guide* will also be distributed to visiting teams to assist them in using evidence in the course of their reviews, and to improve their citations of evidence in the preparation of team reports.

We welcome your suggestions for improving this Working Draft. Is this *Guide* useful? Is it easy to use? How can it be improved? Are there other ways for us to assist you in the development, deployment and use of evidence at your institution? The Commission website (*www.wascweb.org*) will begin to gather examples and good practices drawn from teams, highlighting where evidence has been used particularly effectively. A survey form is provided at the end of the *Guide*, or you may contact us at *wascsr@wascsenior.org*. After field testing this Working Draft through 2002, we will make revisions and publish a final document in late 2002.

We also wish to acknowledge the good work of Peter Ewell, Senior Associate at NCHMS, who was the primary author of this *Guide*. He has worked with the Commission and institutions throughout the *Handbook* development process, and this *Guide* reflects issues Peter has been writing and speaking about for years.

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Executive Director
January 2002

Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to help institutions learn how to assemble and use evidence in all stages of the WASC review process. For some, the concepts discussed will be straightforward and familiar. For others, these concepts may stimulate new thinking about how to organize institutional information resources and use them for decision-making.

The central objective of this *Guide* is to develop a common understanding of the WASC accreditation process throughout the region. This *Guide* will explain how and why concrete, verifiable evidence that an institution meets core commitments to capacity and educational effectiveness is the fundamental basis of WASC accreditation.

Among the purposes of accreditation:
Promoting within institutions a culture of evidence where indicators of performance are regularly developed and data collected to inform institutional decision-making, planning, and improvement

Institutions of higher education gather a lot of data for various purposes – and use these data effectively in many ways. For example, most have a clear picture of their financial condition and what affects it. They also have basic descriptive information about who enrolls and who graduates. WASC's interest in becoming more "evidential" in the accreditation process is thus *not* simply about "gathering more data." It centers instead on becoming more systematic and intentional about gathering data about the right *things* – performance and effectiveness – and on *using* the resulting information to continuously improve what WASC does.

Accordingly, this *Guide* has three main sections.

- The first examines why WASC has chosen to emphasize a "culture of evidence," and reviews some specific properties of good evidence.

- The second section applies the notion of evidence directly to the four WASC standards, providing a range of examples to illustrate both the intent of each standard and the different kinds of information that an institution might consider presenting in the course of a review.

- The third section examines in greater detail the particular sources of evidence that an institution might employ, and how it might organize and present these sources as it prepares for accreditation.

- A References section is also included, which lists and annotates a number of useful sources on evidence and its use in higher education evaluation and decision-making.

I. The Nature and Use of Evidence

As WASC began reexamining its approach to accreditation in the early 1990s, its members began consciously using the phrase "culture of evidence." And, as the region's thinking evolved, the language of "evidence" was increasingly invoked through documents such as *Invitation to Dialogue I* and *Invitation to Dialogue II*. Use of such language helped further the development of experimental visit approaches and new ways of presenting information for review. But the concept of evidence was never really defined, nor were the reasons for WASC adopting such a posture made clear in the form of a central commitment. With a new set of standards and a redesigned multi-stage review process now in place, it is clearly time to do so.

Why Is WASC Concerned About Evidence?

As described in *Invitation to Dialogue I*, the Commission believes that the rapidly changing context in which higher education now operates calls for a new philosophy of accreditation. The growing variety of institutions and methods of instructional delivery in the region suggest that formulaic approaches emphasizing "one-size-fits-all" standards of quality are no longer appropriate. Institutions of higher education themselves, meanwhile, will need to become increasingly information-driven and reflective if they are to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing environment. Finally, stakeholder demands that colleges and universities provide concrete proof of their contributions to student learning and to society at large have become more insistent.

For all these reasons, the *2001 Handbook of Accreditation* lists on page 8, prominently among the purposes of accreditation, "Promoting within institutions a culture of evidence where indicators of performance are regularly developed and data collected to inform institutional decision-making, planning, and improvement."

The Commission's belief in the central importance of evidence in the accreditation process is thus founded on two core values:

■ Responsible membership in the academy is based on the conviction that any form of inquiry must be informed and its results must be verifiable. All academic disciplines have established canons of evidence, which they use to assess the adequacy of their scholarly products. More importantly, all members of the academy accept the proposition that it is irresponsible to assert conclusions or to engage in serious scholarly discourse without recourse to evidence. A belief in the fundamental value of evidence, and the willingness to be disciplined by it, should thus be a defining characteristic for an institution of higher learning – perhaps *the* defining characteristic.

■ As a consequence, accreditation must constitute more than a periodic event and must lead to significant levels of ongoing engagement for all institutions. The process of accreditation, moreover, should result in more than an external validation of "quality;" it should "add value" to an institution by providing an important opportunity to inquire deeply into student learning – a matter related directly to the mission of every college and university in the region.

In advancing the central importance of evidence in accordance with these two propositions, the Commission seeks to move accreditation from its current reliance on assertion and description toward a reliance on demonstration and performance. For all participants in the process, including institutions, review team members, Commissioners and staff, this means continually posing a single question: "How do we know?" In our scholarly work, we realize that our answers to this question are never entirely satisfactory. Indeed, the shortcomings we see are what drive us to further inquiry. Our efforts to assure quality and to improve the

performance of the many different colleges and universities in our region should be guided by the same set of values.

What Is Evidence?

At the most fundamental level, "evidence" is the substance of what is advanced to support a claim that something is true. This makes evidence different from things like "information," "data," or "facts" in at least five subtle but important ways:

■ First, evidence is *intentional* and *purposeful*; it is advanced to address deliberately posed questions that are important to both institutions and their stakeholders. One implication is that evidence is always implicitly or explicitly located within a dialogue among those who seek to reach agreed-upon conclusions about what is true. What counts as evidence, then, is not a given but rather a particular community of judgment.

The next section of this *Guide* contains a set of basic principles designed to help determine what constitutes good evidence in the context of accreditation. In applying these principles, it is important to remember that the essential setting in which evidence is advanced remains a continuing *dialogue* – an exchange in which information is advanced, critiqued, refined and enhanced.

Evidence is the substance of what is advanced to support a claim that something is true. Its characteristics include:

- *Evidence is intentional and purposeful*
- *Evidence entails interpretation and reflection*
- *Evidence is integrated and holistic*
- *Evidence can be both quantitative and qualitative*
- *Evidence can be either direct or indirect*

■ Second, evidence always entails *interpretation* and *reflection*; it does not "speak for itself." This means that sound evidence involves more than simply presenting a body of data or "listing the facts." Instead, it implies that the party advancing the evidence has thought about what it means and can interpret it appropriately to support a conclusion. Indeed, for purposes of accreditation, as much emphasis should be placed on what an institution *makes* of the information that it advances – and how it is using the conclusions it has drawn to improve itself – as on the information itself.

■ Third, good evidence is *integrated* and *holistic*; it does not consist merely of a list of unrelated "facts." Individual pieces of data are thus never advanced as evidence on their own. Rather, they take on meaning in the overall context in which they are presented. This means that individual pieces of evidence should mutually reinforce one another, based on the fact that information of quite different kinds, drawn from diverse sources, point in a similar direction. It also implies that judgments need to be made about any body of evidence as a whole – on the "weight" of the evidence, in common parlance.

■ Fourth, what counts as evidence can be both *quantitative* and *qualitative*; it is not just confined to numbers. Certainly, where available and appropriate, quantitative data will be powerful and it is expected that much of the information an institution advances in support of its claims for capacity and educational effectiveness will be in numeric form. But it is important for institutions to avoid automatic assumptions that "measurement" is what is wanted. Indeed, narrowly confining the body of evidence submitted to things like disembodied test scores or facilities inventories is precisely the opposite of what WASC seeks from institutions.

■ Fifth, good evidence can be either *direct* or *indirect*; it does not always require obtrusive data-gathering that uses specially designed instruments. Indeed, as emphasized in the *2001 Handbook of Accreditation*, the process should "rely heavily on existing institutional evidence and sampling of institutional exhibits and processes…" (page 4). While there may be many occasions on which new data will need to be collected, institutions should be certain that they have creatively tapped the wealth of information on their own performance that is already available.

In addition to these properties, which apply to all forms of evidence, some specific points need to be made about evidence when it is used for purposes of accreditation. One point concerns what evidence ought to be about. In self-study, institutions have traditionally used data largely to describe who they *are*. These data typically include such aspects as enrollment counts, program inventories, faculty numbers and credentials, numbers of volumes in the library, financial resources and space inventories. While these data will surely be useful in future accreditation reviews – both to orient visiting team members to the institution and to provide some indicators of capacity – the kinds of evidence advanced in the new WASC accreditation process ought instead to concentrate largely on

what each institution *does* and *how well it does* relative to its goals and standards of performance.

As also stated in the *Handbook*, the accreditation process should "focus on institutional purposes and results, not on specific structures or methods for their accomplishment" (page 4). In the case of students, for instance, the information presented should go beyond how many there are and focus instead on how retention/graduation rates vary for different types of students and how both aggregated and disaggregated results match institutional expectations and goals. More importantly, in the case of student learning, institutions should cite more than just a list of assessment activities and selected performance results, such as licensure pass rates. They should also identify areas where key institutional learning objectives and performance standards are being achieved or where improvement is needed.

In the case of faculty, in addition to their credentials, emphasis should be placed on the effectiveness of the support that the institution provides in developing scholarship of teaching or in moving toward more learning-centered institutional approaches.

In the case of finances and facilities, the object of interest should be not just their extent or sufficiency but also how effectively they are renewed and how they are deliberately deployed to support teaching and learning.

One of the most difficult and widely discussed venues for evidence is that provided in the assessment of student learning. In the case of assessment of learning, four principles of evidence have proved applicable across a wide range of settings and methods:

1. Evidence should cover knowledge and skills taught throughout the program's curriculum. Evidence offered in support of student learning in the accreditation process should not be limited to that of a single course or sub-field of the discipline (unless the course used as a setting for assessment is designed as an integrative capstone whose coverage is itself comprehensive). The unit of analysis for evaluation for the student is the cumulative experience and level of learning of the student at the time of graduation. For programs, the cumulative effect and learning results that are generated for students in an ongoing way at the completion of the program is to be studied. At the institutional level, correlation of student learning to institutional goals should be done in ways beyond using a specific course relevant to the ability area or domain of knowledge.

2. Evidence should involve multiple judgments of student performance. Parallel to the need for more than single courses to be used in making judgments of student performance – individually and collectively – is the need for more than one person to evaluate evidence of student learning. Many techniques are available for engaging multiple reviews and reviewers, such as portfolio analyses, broad reviews of student work products, and follow-up studies. Data should be submitted for broad faculty discussion and action to make recommended adjustments that will improve student learning results.

3. Evidence should provide information on multiple dimensions of student performance. In essence, this principle suggests that assessment results in more than a single summative judgment of adequacy. Information should instead be collected on a number of discrete dimensions of performance, and should be aggregated across students to provide evidence of the overall strengths and weaknesses of graduates in a program or at the institutional level. A single grade or certification of mastery is thus insufficient to meet this principle, even though it may in fact have resulted from a multi-dimensional grading process.

4. Evidence should involve more than surveys or self-reports of competence and growth by students. One of the first steps many institutions undertake when they begin assessment is to survey students about satisfaction and perceived growth and development. Surveys asking students to rate their own strengths and weaknesses and/or areas of growth, though helpful, are inadequate as stand-alone assessments of outcomes. More and different types of evidence are expected in addressing student learning, including reviews of direct student learning products and the gathering and evaluation of actual student learning results.

When using evidence in the context of WASC accreditation, institutions also need to avoid a number of negative syndromes that have frequently been encountered in other settings. Put simply, these include:

■ **Trying to "measure" everything.** The best evidence is selective, with the selection process guided deliberately by institutional priorities and strategic themes. But in an evaluative situation like accreditation, it is easy to be misled into thinking that, when it comes to information, "more is better." The Commission therefore encourages institutions to think carefully about the evidence they present and to ensure that it is relevant and of high quality. A structured and well-explained presentation, anchored on a succinct body of well-documented and reflected-upon evidence, will be far more convincing than simply a "data dump."

■ **Trying to be too "precise."** The best evidence is most effective within the context in which it is advanced. While the parallel to scholarship noted above demands evidence that is credible, valid and accurate, good evidence does not always have to be as precise as methodologically possible. Rather, it should be as precise as *necessary*, given the problem at hand, or the question to be answered. In presenting evidence, moreover, it is often useful to build in multiple sources rather than to invest everything in a single source or method. Finally, it is frequently important to take risks in gathering information and thus, always better to be "approximately correct" about the right things than "precise" about things that are peripheral.

Evidence is a robust but malleable concept that should not be construed too narrowly. Syndromes to avoid when using evidence:
- *Trying to measure everything*
- *Trying to be too precise*
- *Avoiding premature closure*

■ **Avoiding premature closure**. Reflecting on evidence is a process that is never really completed. As a result, institutions need not always draw summary conclusions from the evidence they present to WASC as part of the accreditation process. Sometimes, reviewing evidence does provide "answers" and suggests particular actions that might be taken – indeed, the Commission wants to encourage institutions to act on evidence wherever possible. However, reflection sometimes yields more precise *questions* and suggests new lines of investigation that might be undertaken. This, too, is a positive outcome and it should not be shunned. In fact, the iterative nature of the process of collecting evidence about performance and of raising questions for further inquiry is one of the hallmarks of what WASC means by a "culture of evidence." In sum, evidence is a robust but malleable concept that should not be construed too narrowly. As the following section argues, rigorous canons of good evidence can be clearly stated and applied. However, it is important from the outset for institutions to think creatively about evidence and to leave the door open to forms of demonstration that go beyond statistics and compliance.

What Constitutes Good Evidence?

Because evidence is always advanced in support of a specific question and in the context of a given community of judgment, it is important to make clear the properties of evidence that are most compelling in the review process. Five principles of evidence communicate this intent and correspond directly to the standards expected of scholarly discourse. Like any principles, they are intended to provide general guidance and should therefore be applied creatively and flexibly. Indeed, several of them involve making hard choices about matters such as the level of detail to be provided, how much reflective commentary to include, and how much documentation is sufficient. Collectively, they frame an overall approach to using evidence in the Preparatory and Educational Effectiveness Reviews that the Commission believes is appropriate to WASC's developing philosophy of accreditation.

In the discussion that follows, each principle is stated and illustrated with examples.

1. Relevant. Any evidence advanced ought first to be demonstrably related to the question being investigated. While this principle may seem obvious, it is frequently violated in practice. In fact, institutions sometimes produce reams of statistics in the course of an evaluation that are only marginally related to the questions they are trying to answer. This principle implies the well-known measurement property of *validity* – the extent to which the advanced evidence is capable of fully and faithfully representing the underlying concept of interest. Equally implied is the need to explain coherently exactly what any advanced information is *supposed to be evidence of*, and why it was chosen over other potential sources of information. In practical terms, this means that institutions need to select carefully the kinds of evidence they advance, in the light of specific WASC Standards or questions of importance to the institutions themselves. It means they not only should present the evidence, but also should set forth a clear rationale for why they think it is related to the Standard's intent.

Example: In relation to Criterion for Review 1.2, Institution X provides a set of unit planning guidelines stating that academic departments should establish educational objectives.

Commentary: While such guidelines may be useful, simply citing the existence of this guideline or the fact that X% of departments have now established educational goals and objectives says little about the extent to which departments and faculty are aware of the educational objectives that have been established or actually apply them when they evaluate student work. Relevant evidence that speaks to this point might include actual samples of departmental learning objectives that reflect institution-wide educational objectives, results of faculty/staff surveys that indicate awareness of such objectives, or results of a syllabus study that suggest broad awareness of them among teaching faculty. Even better evidence might be a systematic self-audit in which a faculty team examines a sample of departments to determine the extent to which their faculties have intentionally incorporated these objectives in the ways they teach their courses, and have explicitly designed assignments that require students to demonstrate mastery of these objectives.

Five principles frame an overall approach to using good evidence in the WASC accreditation process. *Institutions should focus on evidence that is of greatest ongoing use to it and that is:*

1. Relevant: *the extent to which the advanced evidence is capable of fully and faithfully representing the underlying concept of interest presented with a clear rationale for why it is related to the intent of the WASC Standard*

2. Verifiable: *the process of assembling evidence that is documentable and replicable*

3. Representative: *the extent to which the evidence is typical of an underlying situation or condition, particularly when data are provided as trends over time*

4. Cumulative: *the use of multiple sources, methods and approaches that provide independent corroboration for issues of importance*

5. Actionable: *focusing on evidence that is reflectively analyzed and interpreted so that it will provide an institution with guidance for action and improvement*

Example: In relation to Criterion for Review 2.6, University X provides catalog copy indicating the specific course and credit requirements needed to earn a degree.

Commentary: The primary intent of the criterion is for the institution to be able to demonstrate that its graduates have met established and recognized standards for achievement, not that they have completed the curriculum as described. Relevant evidence that speaks to this point might include the following: assessed results of student writing samples that show graduates have reached the levels of writing expected by faculty, curricular features such as capstone courses or presentations that require students to demonstrate what they have learned in various courses, examples of common grading criteria or rubrics in particular fields or departments, or benchmark comparisons with other institutions that indicate comparable curricular features or levels of student attainment.

2. Verifiable. The validity of any evidence advanced must be verifiable. This is partly a matter of whether the process of assembling the evidence is replicable, and if repeating the process would yield a similar result. This property, of course, corresponds directly to the concept of *reliability* in measurement. Verifiability, however, is also a matter of *documentation* – whether sufficient information is available to enable a reviewer (or any third party) to independently corroborate what was found. Because these concepts constitute fundamental principles of scholarship, they should already be familiar to college faculties.

Example: In relation to Criterion for Review 2.7, Institution Y states that employers often express satisfaction with the match between abilities of the institution's graduates and their own needs.

Commentary: The evidence presented could be strengthened in two ways, both involving the simple reporting of additional details. First, specific numbers and percentages could be cited in support of this conclusion, suggesting systematic attention to the question posed. Second, the particular methods used to collect such information, such as surveys or focus group interviews, could be described and could be made available to a visiting team for inspection.

Example: In relation to Criterion for Review 2.12, Institution Z presents a description of its advising policies, together with results of a recent survey by the Institutional Research Office that show an overall 87% satisfaction rate with advising (including several subpopulation breakdowns).

Institution Z also presents the results of a random audit of 25 student records that show its policies are actually being carried out.

Commentary: The second of these two evidence-gathering approaches could easily be replicated by the team on site through its own audit procedure, and documentation for both could be made readily available for further inspection or analysis. The evidence presented is, in principle, highly verifiable even if no further investigations are undertaken to determine its veracity.

3. Representative. Any evidence advanced must be *typical* of an underlying situation or condition, not an isolated case. If statistics are presented based on a sample, therefore, evidence of the degree to which the sample is representative of the overall population ought to be provided. Furthermore, it is helpful to present such statistics *over time* (three to five years) to check for inevitable variation and to make any underlying trends apparent. If the evidence provided is qualitative – for instance, in the form of case examples or documents – multiple instances should be given or additional data shown to indicate how typical the cases presented really are. In advancing this principle, the Commission needs to make it clear that sampling is generally useful and desirable. Sampling procedures can save considerable energy and allow for much more in-depth analysis and interpretation than would be possible when trying to collect data about all cases. But in both sampling and reporting, care must be taken to ensure that what is claimed is typical.

Example: In relation to Criterion for Review 3.4, Institution Z describes its faculty fellows program together with an annotated example of a particular chemistry professor's project on using classroom assessment techniques to improve her instruction.

Commentary: The use of a particular case is appropriate and compelling because it can demonstrate in depth the kind of scholarship of teaching that individual faculty members are engaging in and that the institution is attempting to foster. But the evidence would be strengthened if statistics were also presented on how many faculty have participated in such programs, the distribution of participation across disciplines/departments and/or different kinds of faculty (e.g., age, rank, demographics). A simple chart showing the numbers and kinds of development projects that faculty have undertaken through this program (e.g., classroom research, course portfolios) could also be effective.

Example: In relation to Criterion for Review 2.7, Institution X provides a detailed account of the recent re-accreditation of its Nursing Program by the National League of Nursing (NLN) as an example of its efforts to improve program currency and effectiveness using evidence of student learning. This account also illustrates how the institution involves external stakeholders in such reviews.

Commentary: Because of the detailed requirements for effectiveness reporting required by the NLN, the case of nursing would probably provide an excellent example of program evaluation at any institution. However, to claim that it is representative, the institution would be well advised to provide information on how many other programs have undergone such processes. The case for institutional commitment would also be strengthened if an additional example were chosen from among those departments that are not required to undergo external review. Another potential issue raised by this example is the match between NLN requirements and the institution's own mission and educational goals. While specific elements of nursing practice are important, so are the abilities and values that the institution seeks to instill in *all* of its graduates.

4. Cumulative. Evidence gains credibility as additional sources or methods for generating it are employed. Conclusions also become more believable when they can be independently corroborated by quite different sources. In evaluation, using multiple methods is often termed *triangulation* and helps guard against the inevitable flaws associated with any one approach. The same principle applies to qualitative evidence whose "weight" is enhanced both as new cases or testimony are added and when such additions are drawn from different sources. In advancing this principle, WASC does not mean to suggest that each and every statement advanced by an institution needs to be backed by information drawn from multiple sources. Indeed, a major intent of the new approach to accreditation is to streamline the process. But it does suggest that the entire body of evidence should be mutually reinforcing when presented to address a particular Standard or to address an issue or question of importance to the institution.

Example: As part of its Educational Effectiveness presentation, Institution W provides several in-depth case studies of areas that it wishes to improve. These include oral communications across the curriculum, technological literacy and the integration of learning communities into first-year courses. Each of these case studies involves syllabus analysis (including a look at the content and difficulty of the assignments given to students), survey results comparing faculty and student perceptions of actual classroom practices, and (for the first two cases) results of a rubric-based analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of representative samples of actual student work. For oral communications, moreover, a scoring system devised by the National Communications Association is employed to examine selected student presentations, and the scoring is verified by an external reviewer at another college. In the case of learning communities, information about student reenrollment and ultimate graduation rates is also supplied.

Commentary: The evidence provided is drawn from each of the main classes of effectiveness information available to any institution. These include "hard" statistics that are drawn from existing records systems and analyzed to create appropriate indicators of performance (e.g., retention/graduation rates, syllabus analysis and examination of actual student assignments); self-reported data on perceptions and behaviors drawn from surveys, focus groups or interviews; and direct examination of student performance using, where appropriate, recognized or externally validated assessment procedures.

5. Actionable. Finally, as stated in *Invitation to Dialogue II* (page 7), the Commission wishes to "encourage institutions to generate and evaluate quantitative and qualitative evidence such that the institution is able to use this information to improve what it does." Good evidence, therefore, should provide institutions with specific guidance for action and improvement. This means that both the analysis and presentation of evidence must be appropriately *disaggregated* to reveal underlying patterns of strength and weakness, or to uncover specific opportunities for intervention and improvement. The evidence provided must also be *reflectively analyzed and interpreted* to reveal its specific implications for the institution.

Example: In presenting evidence of the support it provides for student learning, Institution Z notes that it has established explicit targets for first-year retention rates and for six-year program completion rates. It also provides a table indicating the actual rates attained over the past three years, which shows whether or not the established target was met.

Commentary: Establishing targets is useful, but a basis for action would be greatly strengthened if additional analysis was undertaken to break these results down to the level of individual schools and departments. Further disaggregation of these data might reveal even more opportunities for action. For example, which kinds of students seem to be dropping out and when? Can these events be associated with any particular courses or other experiences? Are there populations or schools that appear to have exemplary rates? What might explain this? Also, how might any best practices identified in the analysis be used for further improvement?

Example: In relation to Criterion for Review 3.2, Institution X provides statistical data on the overall composition of its faculty by discipline, age, diversity, and tenure status – together with a brief interpretive commentary that emphasizes the likelihood that upcoming faculty retirements will alter significantly its ability to staff specific disciplines in areas where high future student demand is anticipated. The institution also notes that, while providing a significant staffing challenge, this situation also offers an important opportunity to systematically address its diversity goals. The institution accompanies this brief commentary with a note indicating that these statistics are currently being examined by a special joint task force made up of associate deans and representatives of the Faculty Senate to help determine a coordinated recruitment strategy.

Commentary: The evidence provided is presented in enough detail to reveal its implications. Specific conclusions are also noted, and actions being taken in response are described. The presentation is thus informative in itself and would provide a visiting team with appropriate guidance about how to probe further.

II. Evidence and the WASC Accreditation Standards

The questions that any institution seeks to investigate through the accreditation process, as well as the judgment that the Commission ultimately renders about an institution, must ultimately be anchored in the four Standards and their associated Criteria for Review. As emphasized in the *2001 Handbook of Accreditation* (page 15), the Commission intends to make judgments about institutions primarily at the Standard level. Consequently, institutions should conceptualize evidence largely at the Standard level, rather than attempt to systematically address each and every Criterion for Review.

> ***Standard I***
> *Defining Institutional Purposes and Ensuring Educational Objectives*
> *• Institutional Purposes*
> *• Integrity*
> *The institution defines its purposes and establishes educational objectives aligned with its purposes and character. It has a clear and conscious sense of its essential values and character, its distinctive elements, its place in the higher education community, and its relationship to society at large. Through its purposes and educational objectives, the institution dedicates itself to higher learning, the search for truth, and the dissemination of knowledge. The institution functions with integrity and autonomy.*
> *(WASC 2001 Handbook of Accreditation, page 17)*

That said, however, individual Criteria for Review and Questions for Institutional Engagement exist for a reason; they often suggest specific kinds of evidence that institutions might want to consider. Some discussion of the more general evidential considerations associated with the four Standards is therefore warranted.

In the discussion below, each Standard is briefly reviewed by examining the essential claim the institution must make to demonstrate that it meets the Standard. The discussion also provides several examples of the kinds of evidential exhibits that might be most helpful.

■ **Standard I: Defining Institutional Purposes and Ensuring Educational Objectives.** This Standard addresses the extent to which the institution knows itself and what it is about, and how it has established appropriate goals and objectives to articulate this vision. At the same time, through the sub-area of Integrity, it addresses the way the institution does business in pursuit of these goals and objectives. From an evidential standpoint, the Standard requires two kinds of demonstration. The first is straightforward and involves pointing explicitly to appropriate documents, policies, procedures and structures that show appropriate elements are in place. The second is more challenging, as it requires demonstration that members of the institutional community are aware of, believe in and are acting consistently with these established goals, objectives and values.

Sample Evidence: Institution X provides three mini-case studies that show how academic programs in different disciplines and schools have incorporated established institutional purposes and educational objectives in their own planning and evaluation processes. These cases are presented in a consistent format and include contact information specifying how further information can be obtained. Each case study also briefly describes a key strategic decision that the program/ unit has recently made, which is intended to demonstrate that mid-level leaders are invested in overall objectives and are acting consistently with overall institutional values and purposes.

Commentary: While largely descriptive, the evidence provided goes beyond simply confirming that requisite institution-level goals and objectives exist; it illustrates how they are actually being adapted and used at lower levels of the organization. As in any set of case examples, the evidence would be strengthened by information that allows a reviewer to determine how typical the examples selected are – perhaps in the form of a summary

table documenting the results of an internal audit of a larger number of programs or units.

Sample Evidence: Institution Y provides the results of a recent campus-wide survey that addresses the extent to which distinctive institutional values are widely recognized and shared, and used as guides for action by faculty and staff. It also provides the results of a set of focus group studies, participated in by members of the local community that confirm the institution's view of itself.

Commentary: While it does not provide direct evidence that the institution's core values are being acted upon, what is shown clearly provides a basis for assessing the extent to which core values and purposes are known and shared. The fact that two mutually reinforcing data sources are used increases the credibility of the overall finding. In themselves, though, these two pieces of evidence remain static, regardless of their context. If the institution had also provided a description of how these results were actively used to encourage a continuing campus-wide dialogue about core values and how they might be strengthened, the case for internalization would be even stronger.

Standard II
Achieving Educational Objectives Through Core Functions
- *Teaching and Learning*
- *Scholarship and Creative Activity*
- *Support for Student Learning*

The institution achieves its institutional purposes and attains its educational objectives through the core functions of teaching and learning, scholarship and creative activity, and support for student learning. It demonstrates that these core functions are performed effectively and that they support one another in the institution's efforts to attain educational effectiveness.
(WASC 2001 Handbook of Accreditation, page 20)

Sample Evidence: Institution Z provides documents that attest to its commitment to diversity in student, faculty and staff recruitment, and provides five-year trend data intended to show increases in diversity in each of these areas.

Commentary: The information provided essentially serves as evidence in two ways – by showing that the needed policies are in place and by attempting to examine performance behaviorally. Because diversity is cultural and perceptual as well as behavioral, though, the case might have been amplified by additional data on attitudes and experiences collected from students and members of the community through surveys or focus groups, by evidence that attention was being paid to diversity issues in curriculum and pedagogy, or by evidence that members of the campus community actively support its diversity initiatives. As the population in the western region continues to become more diverse, the institution must demonstrate that its diversification is intentional and more than an artifact of demographic changes in the community.

■ **Standard II: Achieving Educational Objectives Through Core Functions.** This Standard centers on how the institution organizes itself to attain its educational objectives through its teaching and learning processes, through the support it provides for its students, and by the ways it engages in appropriate scholarship. From an evidential point of view, like Standard I, it requires the institution to demonstrate that certain important structures and processes are present, including the fact that clear academic standards and standards for student achievement are in place. More importantly, it requires evidence of the alignment of these structures and processes with its educational objectives and standards of achievement, and evidence that its core functions are mutually supporting. Most challenging of all, it demands evidence that learning is actually occurring and that key educational goals are being achieved.

Sample Evidence: Institution X provides a variety of materials that illustrate how it documents student achievement in the area of writing – one of its most prominent goals for general education. They include results of a campus-wide study of the types of writing assignments given to students in writing-intensive courses, results of a tracking study using registration records to demonstrate how many such courses students actually encounter (and whether any identifiable groups of students are avoiding them), and annotated examples of actual student work that illustrate achievement at different levels, including exiting seniors. Results of two alumni survey items are also provided that address the importance of writing and how much respondents felt the institution helped them to develop their writing skills.

Commentary: This body of evidence is deep and authentic, though it addresses only one important learning outcome. A particular strength is that it examines all three elements of the curriculum with respect to the ability in question – its design,

how it is carried out, and how effective it is. It also contains several sources of evidence, allowing considerable triangulation. The sample evidence does, however, address only one of many potential objectives. Consequently, to strengthen it, additional commentary might be provided that addresses briefly how other objectives are being investigated and how a visiting team might obtain related evidence on site.

Sample Evidence: Institution Y provides catalog and sample syllabus material confirming that its baccalaureate program is designed to address key educational objectives such as those listed under Criterion for Review 2.2.

Standard III
Developing and Applying Resources and Organizational Structures to Ensure Sustainability
- *Faculty and Staff*
- *Fiscal, Physical and Information Resources*
- *Organizational Structures and Decision-Making Processes*

The institution sustains its operations and supports the achievement of its educational objectives through its investment in human, physical, fiscal, and information resources and through an appropriate and effective set of organizational and decision-making structures. These key resources and organizational structures promote the achievement of institutional purposes and educational objectives and create a high quality environment for learning. (WASC 2001 Handbook of Accreditation, page 25)

Commentary: The evidence provided descriptively documents that such objectives have been formally established at the campus level. And, the inclusion of syllabus material makes the case that at least some faculty are using these objectives at the individual classroom level. This case would be strengthened, however, by the results of a more systematic study of syllabi and course assignments to determine the extent to which faculty are incorporating established learning objectives in their day-to-day practice. It would also be strengthened by the results of surveys from both students and faculty, which suggest that both are aware of key educational objectives and that both perceive that the institution's curriculum and pedagogy are aligned with them.

Sample Evidence: Institution Z provides results of a current student survey focused on identifying students' educational needs and their satisfaction with the support for learning that the institution is providing them through its various services. These results are broken down by standard demographic and major field categories.

Commentary: The evidence provided is oriented toward performance, and the way it is presented enables the institution to identify those populations that are currently being best served and least well-served. It might be strengthened by a more longitudinal design in which an identified group of students was followed over multiple years, or by conducting focus groups of respondents to explore more fully what the survey responses really mean.

■ **Standard III: Developing and Applying Resources and Organizational Structures to Ensure Sustainability.** At the most basic level, this standard addresses the adequacy of the institution's resource base, its organizational structures and its decision-making processes. More importantly, it focuses on how these resources and structures are configured so that they are aligned with one another and with the institution's purposes – essentially, how the institution is "organized for learning." Addressing this standard from an evidential standpoint demands three kinds of demonstration. First, like Standards I and II, documentation needs to be provided to show that key resources and structures are both in place and are sufficient in amount and kind to enable the institution to operate effectively. Second, given the Standard's emphasis on sustainability, there should be evidence that the institution is renewing its key assets in appropriate ways. Third, and most challenging, there should be evidence that focuses explicitly on the ways key resources and structures are aligned with one another and how they actively foster and support the attainment of institutional goals and educational objectives.

Sample Evidence: Institution X provides a chart noting the distribution of its faculty by discipline and educational background, together with an analysis of the changing nature of its educational offerings to reach students at a distance, and an analysis of its efforts to infuse technology into pedagogy. Its conclusion is that a substantial gap is developing between the institution's curricular and pedagogical aspirations and the ability of its faculty to meet these aspirations. It then outlines a plan for faculty development (and recruitment priorities) over the next five years that is designed to address this gap.

Commentary: The evidence provided not only allows an assessment of the adequacy of faculty to be made in relation to Criterion for Review 3.8, but it also demonstrates sensitivity to the strategic issues involved in maintaining the faculty as an institutional "asset" in the light of established instructional plans. Providing the development plan further reinforces the fact that the institution is aware of its challenges and that it is beginning to organize itself to meet them.

Sample Evidence: Institution Y provides a brief description of its Center for Teaching Excellence, which is intended to assist faculty in evaluating their own teaching and in developing more effective pedagogical materials and approaches. Two annotated extracts from faculty teaching portfolios are provided, together with Internet links to the full portfolios. Summary statistics are also provided, noting the numbers and distribution of faculty who have participated in the Center's activities during the last five years and a listing of some of the results or changes that they have made.

Standard IV
Creating an Organization Committed to Learning and Improvement
• Strategic Thinking and Planning
• Commitment to Learning and Improvement
The institution conducts sustained, evidence-based, and participatory discussions about how effectively it is accomplishing its purposes and achieving its educational objectives. These activities inform both institutional planning and systematic evaluations of educational effectiveness. The results of institutional inquiry, research, and data collection are used to establish priorities at different levels of the institution, and to revise institutional purposes, structures, and approaches to teaching, learning, and scholarly work. (WASC 2001 Handbook of Accreditation, page 29)

Commentary: This example provides evidence of the institution's investments in a key resource consistent with both its own goals and Criterion for Review 3.4. Concrete illustrations are provided, as well as documentation, which allows a reviewer to make a judgment about how representative these illustrations are. Note, though, that the evidence provided does not allow any claim about the effectiveness of these activities to be made, nor does it address the question of whether such participation is institutionally valued or rewarded.

Sample Evidence: Institution Z provides a short tabular display that shows its current library holdings, plus the electronic information links and resources that it can make available to its faculty, staff and students. Responses to two items addressing the adequacy of information resources (print and on-line) on a survey recently administered to students are also provided, as is a brief description of results from a client response study conducted by the library last year to determine how long it takes users to obtain the information they are seeking and how they obtained it.

Commentary: The evidence provided speaks directly to Criterion for Review 3.6, but is also relevant to the body of Standard IV because of the clear value that the institution places on self-evaluation. Effectiveness is addressed in two different ways, both of which reinforce each other. Note also that only a couple of relevant data items are offered, rather than the typical practice of showing all the results of a student survey and relying on the reviewer to find the relevant items.

■ **Standard IV: Creating an Organization Committed to Learning and Improvement.** This standard addresses the adequacy of the institution's infrastructure for planning and improvement, including its information resources, organizational arrangements and self-evaluation processes. More importantly, it focuses on the use of these resources at all levels to track performance and to improve how the institution operates. To demonstrate this, several kinds of evidence are implied. First, like the other three Standards, documentation that key planning and information resources are in place will be required. Second, evidence must be provided that members of the campus community know about what kinds of information are available and have acquired the habit of information-based discussion and decision-making. Essentially, the institution must demonstrate that its "culture of evidence" is both broad and deep. Finally, this standard requires evidence that all of this leads to change and improvement, and that people act out a commitment to inquiry, learning and improvement in their everyday activities.

Sample Evidence: Institution X provides a sample page and URL for its on-line display of 16 key performance indicators that were established three years ago through an extensive faculty-staff and key constituent consultation process. Each indicator shows five years of trend data and is headlined

with the key finding embedded in the display. Hyperlinks allow further disaggregation of the provided data. The display also contains a sentence or phrase that shows what the institution is doing in response to what the indicator shows – either to try to correct a problem or to capitalize on a favorable trend – together with a hyperlink to additional information about the follow-up effort in question.

Commentary: The evidence provided is powerfully indicative of the institution's ability to assemble, manipulate and make sense of a complex body of information. It also demonstrates that the institution has established clear and visible ways to monitor its performance, which are consistent with both Criteria for Review 4.5 and 1.2. Finally, the evidence provided demonstrates that the institution understands the need to follow up on what it finds, in the most effective manner. Not directly addressed by the evidence provided, though, is the degree to which these indicators are accessed throughout the institution or the extent to which members of the campus community find them useful.

Sample Evidence: Institution Y provides the results of a self-audit of its program review process in which six randomly selected departments that have completed such reviews were examined by a team comprised of members of the program review committee. Beginning with each unit's report and resulting recommendations, the internal auditors visited line faculty and interviewed student majors to determine the following: the extent to which the unit's self-study was developed in a manner consistent with established program review guidelines, how much regular members of the department were aware of the program review process and participated in it, the extent to which evidence of student learning was apparent during the review process and in what manner, and how the resulting recommendations were being followed up.

Commentary: The provided evidence principally addresses the question of whether established planning/evaluation processes have an impact at lower levels and are being acted upon. Insofar as the review touched on the use and usefulness of the evaluative data generated in the course of the program review process, it also testifies to the extent and adequacy of the institution's data resources. The Committee's report on its self-audit might be strengthened by offering specific suggestions about how to improve the program review process, based on what was learned through the audit, together with a plan of action. It might also have focused more explicitly on how each department was ensuring that its stated expectations for student learning are embedded in faculty work in the form of the assignments given to students and in the standards used to assess student performance.

Sample Evidence: Institution Z provides a sampling of materials associated with a one-and-a-half-day planning retreat in which a fifth of the campus community (faculty, key staff and selected students) participates on a rotating basis each spring. Seven key indicators are presented by a faculty team that illuminate a specific area of performance, and participants break into small brainstorming groups to consider the following: the concrete implications of the presented data, what might be done in response, and what additional information might shed light on the issue. Conclusions from the retreat become priorities for a permanent improvement fund that is established as an annual set-aside in the institution's operating budget. They are also used to amend and update the institution's ongoing strategic plan.

Commentary: The provided evidence indicates the institution's ability to collect and manipulate information about performance, illustrates broad participation in problem identification and improvement, and demonstrates a clear link to regular decision-making processes. It also describes a process that is not only sufficiently open and visible, but one that could also be easily audited by a visiting team.

Clearly, these examples are illustrative, and each institution will need to develop its own models, though few will at first be able to match all of the kinds of illustrated evidence. However, matching the full array is not warranted; instead, each institution should carefully examine its own information resources and processes to determine the kinds of evidence that best fit its own context and resources. Paying attention to the evidential entailments of each Standard to identify concrete and relevant demonstrations of performance, though, will always constitute a good place to start planning for the accreditation process.

III. Assembling and Presenting Evidence in the Course of Review

As the examples included in the previous sections clearly illustrate, many different kinds of evidence are useful and appropriate to the WASC accreditation process. But the very breadth of evidence as a concept poses operational challenges to any institution as it prepares for review. Detailed instructions on gathering, analyzing and presenting various kinds of information are beyond the purposes of this *Guide*. It is, however, appropriate to examine more specifically the ways an institution might begin the tasks of organizing information and constructing exhibits for its presentations to WASC.

Where Does Good Evidence Come From?

It has often been stated that colleges and universities are data-rich and information-poor. Indeed, most institutions collect and store a remarkable amount of data about students, courses, faculty, staff, facilities and financial activities. However, the places where these data are kept are often scattered and unrelated, and the formats in which they reside often render them difficult to retrieve and manipulate. As a result, plentiful data sources are usually not tapped as fully or appropriately as they might be to yield useful information. At the same time, colleges and universities keep myriad documents, including individual records, descriptions of policies and requirements, and correspondence and meeting minutes that might qualify as evidence for the two WASC Core Commitments. Because most institutions are administratively decentralized and functionally dispersed, these documents and materials are similarly scattered and hard to access.

Where does good evidence come from?
- *Institutional databases*
- *Documents such as catalogs, handbooks, policy statements, strategic plans, program reviews, committee minutes and reports, portfolios, fact books*
- *Surveys of students, alumni, faculty/staff, and key constituents*
- *Assessment results such as nationally normed discipline examinations, licensure examinations, exercises in capstone courses, portfolios and work samples, benchmark assignments, self-reported gains in knowledge and skills*
- *Special studies and reports*

Given this condition, the accreditation process is an excellent occasion for institutions to take stock of their evidential resources and mobilize them to their advantage. One way to do this is to systematically inventory available information. To conduct an inventory of this kind, an internal team typically visits each administrative office and academic department to determine the kinds of records that it keeps, any surveys that it might have administered, and any local data-collection efforts that it may have undertaken. At the same time, such teams sometimes follow well-established record-collection or data-gathering trails to determine what kinds of data are collected, from whom and on what schedules. For example, they might follow in the footsteps of a typical student as he or she seeks information about attending the institution, applies and is admitted, attends orientation, registers for and attends classes, applies for and receives financial aid, is advised and provided academic assistance, enters a major (and often changes it), engages in co-curricular activities, participates in campus-wide or deparment-level surveys or assessments, completes a program and graduates, and is contacted by an alumni or placement office after graduation. At each point in this longitudinal process, records or data are generated and the audit team can document who has them, what form they are in, and where they go. Similar exercises can be undertaken to examine personnel and faculty records or to look at the processes through which curricula are developed and evolve.

Much of this work may already have been done by Institutional Research or Student Affairs offices and it pays to begin with the data/information inventories that such offices have compiled. In the context of accreditation, it is frequently useful to structure the resulting general

inventory in terms of the kinds of evidence that appear most relevant to particular Standards and to use these Standards in the institution's own planning and internal review. This may, in turn, suggest important gaps in the institution's evidential resources that ought to be addressed. More importantly, it should gradually lead institutions to think about their information resources as a *system* – organized intentionally to address important questions about institutional performance and capable of relating quite different kinds of information to examine important educational questions. Finally, while the accreditation process provides institutions with a useful occasion to take stock of their data and information resources, the objective of compiling an inventory is not to "show" WASC that these resources exist. Instead, it is to assist institutions in organizing and improving both the content and the utility of their own internal mechanisms of self-inquiry and improvement, as implied by Standard IV.

Information resources should be considered as a system – organized intentionally to address important questions about institutional performance and capable of relating quite different kinds of information to examine important educational questions.

Regardless of how the task of taking stock of evidence is approached, institutions will need to deal with many different sources and types of information including records data, documents, surveys, and assessment results. Although each is potentially useful as evidence, each also has its own peculiarities, and each has a set of particular applications in accreditation. Some of the most common sources and types of evidence available for use in the accreditation process are reviewed below.

■ **Institutional Databases.** Large computerized database systems, like student records systems, personnel systems and financial accounting systems, currently do most of the transactional business of colleges and universities. As a result, they contain much of the data needed to describe and analyze current operations. Indeed, such databases are the source for the bulk of the "fact book"-type information (e.g. enrollment counts, course inventories, faculty/staff counts, and financial reports) required by WASC in its annual reporting process and in the standard data elements that the Commission requires as part of the Proposal and Preparatory Review. Institutions that have an established Institutional Research function will already have compiled most of this information in an accessible form. This is also the kind of information that is regularly reported by public institutions to state authorities and to the federal government through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). For institutions that lack an Institutional Research office, assembling such required reporting data is thus often a good first step in preparing for review.

But, institutional databases can also be mined to yield even more useful information about institutional and program performance. For example, data drawn from them can be used to examine how students flow through the institution and what kinds of course-taking patterns they engage in; how faculty teaching loads are distributed; the extent to which programs, faculty and physical/financial resources are aligned with the institution's mission and core values; or what kinds of investments the institution is making in renewing its physical and human assets. Extracting this information, however, requires the ability to find, link, and manipulate disparate pieces of data that often reside in different databases and that require some expertise to access. As a result, many institutions find it useful to create distinct analytical databases that contain frequently used, carefully chosen, census-positioned extracts drawn from operational data systems (see Jones 1982 in References).

■ **Documents.** Written documentation is voluminous at most colleges and universities, and documents are generally kept only by the offices that generate them. Many of the documents most useful for accreditation, though, tend to be published and are readily available. These include items such as catalogs, student and personnel handbooks, policy statements, and strategic planning or program review documents. Other potentially useful documents will be harder to locate, like minutes of key meetings, committee reports and curriculum documentation (e.g., syllabi, assignments). In these cases, the inventory process described above can prove especially useful as a way to start organizing evidence.

The principal challenge associated with using documents as evidence, of course, is that they are numerous and bulky. Particular care, therefore, will need to be taken to select only a few carefully chosen examples as exhibits. An institution may

simply provide a listing of additional documentation in connection with a given Standard or Criterion for Review, which a visiting team might inspect on arrival. Institutions that keep documents on-line (and WASC expects that more and more will do so in the years to come) might additionally provide URLs or other references that can enable a team to quickly access them. For any documents actually selected as exhibits, it is useful to make certain that their relevance is clear by providing a brief introductory cover statement linking them to the Standards. To streamline the process, textual extracts drawn from selected documents may be more effective as evidence than the full document, provided that enough referential material is given for the visiting team to retrieve the full text, if needed.

■ **Surveys.** Results of surveys of students, alumni, faculty/staff or key constituents are among the most popular kinds of data used to examine institutional performance. This is partly because surveys represent a relatively efficient way to obtain such information. For example, survey items can be designed specifically to address questions like how much students feel they have learned, how satisfied students and staff are with the kinds of services the institution provides, or the degree to which the institution's core values are shared among its stakeholders. However, using surveys as evidence in conjunction with the accreditation process also poses a number of challenges.

First, there are generally a lot of them. Indeed, one of the first things most institutions discover in the course of a data audit is exactly how many surveys there are. Usually, such a proliferation of surveys occurs because many offices need information and, without any central coordination, choose to design and administer their own. A common byproduct of conducting an inventory, therefore, is often an institution-wide approach to survey administration, which is intended to cut down on the sheer number of surveys and to allow information drawn from a few carefully designed and regularly administered questionnaires to inform multiple offices and constituencies. Devices helpful in organizing survey information in the context of accreditation involve the use of matrices to relate individual survey items to particular Standards or Criterion for Review (see Ewell and Lisensky 1988 in References).

Second, survey results often contain missing data and are based on incomplete response rates. Accordingly, if used as evidence, they should always be accompanied by documentation that indicates the populations surveyed, the response rates obtained, and any information about the representativeness of those who responded. Third, survey data at most institutions tend to be underanalyzed. Typically, only item means or the percentage of participants answering each response category are reported, with few subpopulation breakdowns or comparisons across items provided. Yet, because responses to survey items can vary substantially with even slight variations in question phrasing, the best information contained in surveys is often revealed by *comparisons* – among different types of respondents, across the same types of respondents over time, or with results obtained at other institutions administering the same survey. As a result, it is generally useful to undertake such further analyses, even though not everything they yield will be ultimately reported as evidence.

Finally, the particular limits and role of survey-based information in the accreditation process need to be fully understood. Surveys are at their best when they tell you something about how students (or former students) are *behaving* and how they *feel* about their experiences. They are typically not very good at determining *what* and *how much* students have learned. So, while satisfaction is clearly important, measures that look only at whether, or how much, students are satisfied are not enough. The clear importance of Standard II, for example, is that institutions be able to provide direct evidence of student academic achievement, preferably in the form of authentic student work.

■ **Assessment Results.** Because of the prominence of educational effectiveness in the WASC accreditation process, much of the evidence that an institution will muster will be based on local assessment processes. Like surveys, though, there are often a lot of these and their results pose particular problems of assembly, analysis and interpretation. First, there are many kinds of assessments, and they are often conducted more or less independently by individual programs and departments. Among the most commonly encountered methods are: nationally available assessment examinations in general education or

selected major fields (for which comparisons with national norms can be reported), professional or occupational licensure or certification examinations (typically reported in terms of pass rates), faculty-made comprehensive examinations (virtually always in the major), capstone courses in which selected assessment exercises can be embedded, portfolios and work samples drawing from previously graded student work, benchmark assignments embedded in regular classes and scored by teams of faculty employing specially designed scoring guides or rubrics, and self-reported gains in knowledge and skills reported by students on questionnaires. Details of the strengths, weaknesses and quirks of each method are beyond the scope of this *Guide*.

A first major challenge is to document and assemble relevant assessment studies, no matter what their character. As is the case with surveys, it is generally wise to record aspects such as the purpose of the assessment, the population covered, why it was undertaken, key results obtained and what was done as a result of what was learned (as required by Data Element 7.0 in the Preparatory Review). This information usually is best assembled by visiting each academic department to talk to faculty directly, although some institutions have obtained reasonable results by circulating a form. Assessments, like survey results, often involve the use of samples where data are missing, so information such as response rates and analyses of representativeness will generally be appropriate. Assessment results are also rarely useful until they are analyzed to reveal patterns of strength and weakness across different outcomes, dimensions, or domains; among different student populations; or over time. But, because "assessment" is so frequently seen by departments as "summative," assessment results are subject to the problem of being reported only in the aggregate to demonstrate whether or not a set of previously fixed objectives has been attained.

This last observation highlights a deeper problem with many assessment studies – they are poorly designed to answer well-focused research questions that *somebody* at the institution really *wants to know*. As a result, they are often not positioned well to inform improvement. Instead, assessment methods should be carefully matched to specific problems and settings. For example, student performance on standardized achievement tests may effectively benchmark aggregate institutional performance against peer institutions. However, such performances rarely provide sufficient detail for faculty members to intervene and improve them. Furthermore, assessment results are not always "useless" if they don't lead to concrete changes in practice. Sometimes their utility, in contrast, lies in documenting what is done effectively, triggering a new round of questions, or in deepening collective understanding about a major set of issues.

■ **Special Studies and Reports.** Especially useful as sources of evidence for accreditation will likely be a range of previously compiled reports or analyses that contain data already analyzed and compiled from the above sources. Institutional Research reports are among the most prominent, and typically include retention/completion studies, faculty/course workload analyses, and surveys of students. Another prominent source of "semi-analyzed" data is often found in Program Review. In most Program Review approaches, each department collects a common set of data (or has it supplied in the form of indicators from a central source).

Needs assessments and strategic planning studies constitute another frequently available source, and usually contain data not regularly collected by the institution, such as constituent and stakeholder perceptions drawn from interviews and focus groups, available social statistics to determine program demand, and inventories of what other institutions are doing. Other available sources may include campus climate surveys (administered to some combination of faculty, staff and students) or consultant reports on various topics.

Studies of this kind can play two roles as evidence in the accreditation process. First, the data they contain and the conclusions they reach can be directly cited in connection with a particular area of performance. Where this is the case, it may be best to excerpt the finding, together with references so that further follow-ups can be conducted. The fact and frequency of such studies, however, and the range of topics they address, can also serve as *de facto* evidence that the institution is addressing Standard IV. Thus, a summary chart showing the range of such studies undertaken over the last five years can be a useful exhibit under this Standard. The chart can address the topic covered, the kinds

of information collected, principal findings and some indication of how the results of each study were used. As emphasized by the last suggested entry for this chart, showing how the results of such studies were actually applied to inform specific areas of policy and practice will always render the evidence more persuasive.

Sources such as these will typically provide most of the information needed to support accreditation. However, it is appropriate to continually re-emphasize the importance of being creative and taking risks. Some of the most innovative pieces of evaluative information have arisen from simply reflecting on the process being examined to determine whether some kind of unobtrusive evidence might be collected (see Webb 1999 in References). And, as noted previously, it is important to involve all of the institution's potential data providers in brainstorming about potential evidence, as well as in the task of compiling an inventory. Among the most prominent of these are Institutional Research, the Admissions and Registrar's offices, various Student Affairs offices, Academic Affairs offices (as well as individual schools and departments), Human Resources, Finance offices and Alumni Affairs offices. In this regard, it is important to stress that the task of assembling evidence can never start too soon. Inventories of potential evidence to support accreditation are best compiled early in the process, and should be continually updated as new information becomes available. It must be remembered that the intent of the current WASC process is to see the development of a culture of evidence that is ongoing, rather than periodic.

How should evidence be presented in the WASC accreditation process?

- *Authentic, self-contained and documented* ***exhibits*** *of institutional work and learning*
- ***Indicators,*** *direct or indirect statistics designed to monitor performance or to indicate the condition of an institution's assets and programs*
- ***Data displays,*** *including tables and graphs, using comparisons when possible*
- ***Case studies,*** *telling an in-depth, representative and authentic story, and illustrating an approach or demonstration of effectiveness*

How Should Evidence be Presented?

The examples of evidence noted in Section II of this *Guide* are quite different, and the Commission expects a similar variety in what institutions advance. However, such variety can pose significant challenges in presentation when preparing the Preparatory Review Report and the Educational Effectiveness Report. As a result, it is useful to consider some common forms of presenting evidence and, within each, to provide some general guidance on what makes each of them effective.

■ **Exhibits.** Exhibits constitute the basic building blocks of evidence for the Institutional Presentation in both the Preparatory Review and Educational Effectiveness Review. Therefore, they must be selected with considerable care. Exhibits can take many different forms, including data tables, charts, documents, links to websites, pictures or audio presentations. Their essential character, like their counterparts in a research inquiry of any kind, dictates that they be authentic, self-contained and documented.

Authentic implies that the best exhibits represent something real – a product or byproduct of an actual process or event – rather than a description of it. Thus, minutes of a key meeting, samples of actual student work or the direct testimony of a key stakeholder all constitute more effective exhibits than the narrative contained in a traditional self-study. This is not to say that no narrative should be included; it simply means that the exhibit itself should be as authentic and real as possible, preferably generated in the natural course of doing business.

Self-contained implies that most exhibits will be presented independently to demonstrate some aspect of an institution's commitment, such as a link to a Standard or to a particular Criterion for Review. Again, this is not to say that individual exhibits should have nothing to do with one another. In fact, when addressing a given Standard or strategic theme, it may be appropriate to present a group of exhibits that illustrate different aspects of the topic or that present mutually reinforcing kinds of evidence.

Documented implies that it is made clear what the exhibit is, where it comes from and what it is intended to demonstrate. This is typically accomplished by means of a short accompanying narrative that, at minimum, provides this context for a reviewer and can allow a visiting team to pursue the evidence further on site.

A commonly encountered difficulty is that some powerful exhibits are potentially quite large – for example, a strategic plan, committee report or results of a program review. In such cases, in order to preserve authenticity, it is frequently effective to present an extract, with information provided about how to access the entire document. Examples might include the agenda of a key meeting or an extracted data table, presented along with a brief narrative describing the event or document itself.

Another difficulty frequently arises when a large number of exhibits of the same kind are potentially available – for instance, examples of student work or faculty scholarship. In such cases, presenting selected samples will be appropriate, together with statistics indicating how the selected cases are broadly representative of the parent population and information that would allow a visiting team to examine additional cases on site (or on-line).

Finally, exhibits should be referenced as evidence of a *particular* claim, much as a research finding should be referenced in a piece of scholarship. Indeed, the manner in which the institution reflects on the body of evidence as a whole in the context of its report, and how it draws appropriate implications and conclusions, is an integral part of the accreditation process.

■ **Indicators.** Indicators constitute a special kind of exhibit, consisting typically of statistics designed to monitor institutional performance or to indicate the condition of an institution's assets and programs. Indicators may be direct or indirect, and are often the product of calculations involving a number of related measures. For these indicators to be valid and useful, it is necessary that they reflect statistically the underlying area of performance they are supposed to represent. Many institutions have established "key performance indicators," "dashboards" or "balanced scorecards" in recent years because such devices enable decision-makers and stakeholders to quickly monitor a range of important areas of performance at the same time. Indeed, the Commission has called attention to their potential utility in an explicit reference in Criterion for Review 1.2. As a result, if such key indicators have been established by an institution, they should probably constitute a key exhibit for the Institutional Presentation in the Preparatory Review.

Like the broader category of exhibits, good indicators share a number of important properties. First, rather than being presented individually, good indicators are part of a *system*. This means they should be mutually reinforcing and should attempt to examine different parts of how the institution functions. Indeed, in many cases, indicator systems are deliberately designed to reflect policy trade-offs. Including data on admissions standards and retention/completion rates in the same indicator set, for instance, can help avoid the easy answer of raising retention simply by restricting admission.

Second, good indicators are not merely descriptive, but are centered on *performance*. This generally means that they are constructed as rates or ratios, such as admissions yield rates, pass rates on licensure examinations, faculty productivity or rates of depreciation in instructional equipment. Finally, good indicators are straightforward and *easy to interpret*. No matter what they represent, it should be clear what they mean. This implies that complex statistical manipulations should generally be avoided and it should be clear what "good" performance means. Sound indicators should do more than simply provide information; they should also provide decision-makers with guidance about how to *improve* things. In short, indicators can be extremely useful as evidence in the accreditation process, both for what they directly communicate about the institution's condition and performance, and for what they say about how it uses information in planning and decision-making.

■ **Data Displays.** Data displays, including tables and graphs, will also be prominent among the exhibits that any institution presents as evidence in its portfolio. Thus, institutions need to be aware of the characteristics of effective data displays. First, a good data display has a *central message*, and it should be constructed so that this message is featured. This is why graphics are often more effective than columns of numbers. Graphic displays force us to simplify messages and are usually far better than data displays at showing trends and contrasts. To reinforce this point, it is often useful to convey the message of a display in several different ways by showing the "picture" itself and by titling the display with a headline that announces the principal finding it contains.

Second, a good data display allows ready *comparisons* to be made across subpopulations or units, over time or against an established standard. This means that its entries should always be normalized in percentage terms rather than as counts or totals. They should also facilitate the judgment of relative performance. Finally, good data displays contain sufficient *documentation* for a reviewer to judge the quality of the evidence being advanced and information on how he or she can find out more. For example, numbers of observations in each category should always be included so that the significance of any observed differences between subpopulations or categories can be assessed. In the case of survey data, information on response rates should be provided.

In selecting modes of evidence, institutions should:

- *Gather evidence on questions most important to the institution's goals and context*
- *Think carefully about what information will be most authentic and illuminating for these questions*
- *Remember that a mix of exhibits of different kinds will be most compelling*
- *Consistently frame the search for evidence and dialogues about its meaning in terms of a wider spirit of inquiry and scholarship*
- *Be willing to take risks by using new methods to gather information*
- *Ask the hard questions that will lead to institutional self-knowledge and improvement*

■ **Case Studies**. Often, the best way to provide compelling evidence is to tell a story. Case studies that address how a particular campus initiative unfolded or how a specific area of performance can be examined in detail at the level of a particular academic unit or program are therefore attractive as evidential exhibits. This is especially true in challenging areas such as examining educational effectiveness. The advantages of case studies are clear. First, they allow the topic to be treated with *depth* and *subtlety*, far more so than in a more general narrative or a summary table. Second, their authenticity renders them highly *credible*. While it is possible to write a general narrative that is invariably glowing about performance, it is extremely difficult to create a case example that doesn't contain examples of challenges as well as triumphs. Finally, presenting *several* cases allows the institution to demonstrate a variety of approaches or demonstrations of effectiveness that are mutually reinforcing precisely because they are different.

As evidence, case examples do have equally prominent drawbacks. The biggest of these is that the case in question may be unrepresentative and, indeed, may be chosen largely because it is an exception. Institutions should, therefore, take particular care to provide information about the relative *typicality* of the story about to be told when presenting cases as evidence. Case studies can also be excessively long and detailed, even when they are strongly illustrative of a particular area of performance. For example, it is often useful to present them in a *standard format* of some kind, noting context, actions taken, lessons learned and so on. Finally, like other exhibits, case examples need to be *documented* sufficiently for reviewers to follow up on site. As a result, it is often useful to provide either contact information for people to talk to further or links to additional information.

This section is not intended to be a methodological textbook, and many additional points about how to handle different kinds of evidence are addressed by the sources listed in the References section that follows. In selecting modes of evidence, institutions are always well-advised to think carefully about the questions they are investigating and what information will be most authentic and illuminating. At the same time, they should remember that a mix of exhibits of different kinds will almost always provide the most compelling demonstration. Most importantly, they need to consistently frame their search for evidence and their dialogues about its meaning in terms of a wider spirit of inquiry and scholarship.

One implication is that evidence of any quality about important questions will usually be more valuable in the accreditation process than "perfect data" about relatively trivial questions. Another implication is that institutions should not be afraid to take risks by using new methods to gather information about important questions, even if they don't always yield the anticipated results. Not every inquiry results in a definitive answer or changed behavior. Avoiding hard questions about institutional performance, on the other hand, will neither advance self-knowledge nor lead to meaningful improvement. And self-knowledge and improvement are ultimately what WASC wants the accreditation process to be about.

References

There is vast literature on evidence and its use in evaluative settings like the accreditation process. As institutions begin to marshal evidence in preparation for accreditation, they may find the following sources especially beneficial.

■ Bers, Trudy H., with Jeffrey A. Seybert (1999). *Effective Reporting*. Tallahassee, FL: Association for Institutional Research (AIR). A brief and highly readable guide to presenting data and information in the context of institutional research. Addresses the reporting of both qualitative and quantitative information, and is especially strong on the use of graphics and the emerging possibilities of web-based reporting. A more thorough (and probably the definitive) treatment of graphics can be found in Tufte, Edward R. (1983). *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press.

■ Borden, Victor M.H.; and Banta, Trudy W. (1994). *Using Performance Indicators to Guide Strategic Decision Making, New Directions for Institutional Research #82*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. This edited collection describes a number of approaches to constructing performance indicators in higher education settings. Particularly useful is an extensive appendix listing some 250 higher education performance indicators grouped under 22 categories of performance.

■ Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2000). *The Common Data Project*. Washington, D.C.: Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). Reviews the current data requirements of both regional and specialized accrediting agencies, and proposes a common core of data for use in the accreditation process. Definitions and sources for proposed data elements are included.

■ Ewell, Peter T. (1989). *Enhancing Information Use in Decision Making, New Directions for Institutional Research #64*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. This is an edited collection of essays that discusses a range of techniques for using information more effectively in college and university settings. Includes analyses of lessons drawn from evaluation practice, the organizational context for information, the psychological dimensions that affect information use, and techniques for effective reporting. For additional examples of innovative reporting formats, see Kinnick, Mary K.(1985). Increasing the Use of Student Outcomes Information, in P. T. Ewell (ed.), *Assessing Educational Outcomes, New Directions for Institutional Research #47*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 93-109.

■ Ewell, Peter T.; and Lisensky, Robert (1988). *Assessing Institutional Effectiveness: Re-Directing the Self-Study Process*. Washington, D.C.: Consortium for the Advancement of Private Higher Education (CAPHE). Based on a project involving 10 colleges, provides guidance on how to identify existing data and information resources and how to organize the presentation of evidence around strategic themes. Emphasizes the notion of institutionalizing information as a permanent strategic resource.

■ Jones, Dennis P. (1982). *Data and Information for Executive Decisions in Higher Education*. Boulder, CO: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS). Addresses the basic properties of data and information in a higher education context, with particular emphasis on the need for information to be tailored to the characteristics of users and particular kinds of decisions. Provides a useful review of the properties of good information in a decision-making context, as well as a conceptual overview of the structure and contents of a comprehensive management database for colleges and universities.

■ Light, Richard J.; Singer, Judith D.; and Willett, John B. (1990). *By Design: Planning Research on Higher Education.* Provides an unusually readable and accessible approach to the basics of designing and implementing evaluation research in college and university settings, based on the first five years of experience at the Harvard Assessment Seminar. Specific topics addressed include formulating appropriate research questions, identifying target populations, choosing the right evaluative methods and presenting results in an actionable form.

■ Webb, Eugene J.; Campbell, Donald T.; Schwartz, and Richard D. (1999). *Unobtrusive Measures: Non-Reactive Research in the Social Sciences, Revised Edition.* Sage Classics Series, 2. New York: Sage Publications. This is the classic treatment of unobtrusive measures such as direct observations and "footprint" data, revised and updated. Still provides the best general introduction to this topic.

■ Whiteley, Meredith A.; Porter, John D.; and Fenske, Robert H. (1992). *The Primer for Institutional Research.* Tallahassee, FL: Association for Institutional Research (AIR). Provides a basic orientation to the principal methods and tools of institutional research in the form of a dozen essays prepared by leading practitioners. Among the topics addressed are student impact, faculty workload analysis, persistence and student tracking, diversity, cost analysis, peer comparison and academic program review. An earlier edition covers a different set of topics and is also useful [Muffo, John A.; and McLaughlin, Gerald W. (1987)].

Comments Form

We at WASC are interested in learning your thoughts on *A Guide to Using Evidence in the Accreditation Process: A Resource to Support Institutions and Evaluation Teams.* Please e-mail Elizabeth Griego at *egriego@wascsenior.org,* or fax this response form to Elizabeth at (510) 748-9797.

1. What do you think about how Peter Ewell has defined evidence in this Guide?

2. What did you find particularly useful about this Guide?

3. What in this Guide needs clarifying?

4. If you anticipate utilizing this Guide in further campus conversations, with whom will you share it and how might you use it? Or, let us know how you have used it.

5. We would appreciate knowing any reflections you have on the use of evidence in the WASC review process.

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