



What Writing Center Directors Need to Know about Regional Accreditation

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Writing center directors are accustomed to scrutiny and being held accountable, especially at the local level by administrators, faculty, and the students they serve. But increasingly, directors at two- and four-year colleges and universities must also deal with the demands related to institutional accreditation. Much of the writing center community's discussion of accreditation focuses on assessment and the related shift towards learning outcomes as compared to service goals, currently a high priority for accreditation. Conducting assessment has certainly become one of the most important expectations of writing center directors today; fortunately, excellent resources such as Ellen Schendel and William Macauley Jr.'s guide *Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter* help address directors' needs in understanding best practices and how they might shape assessment at their centers. Wendy Sharer et al.'s 2016 collection, *Reclaiming Accountability: Improving Writing Programs through Accreditation and Large-Scale Assessments*, fills an important gap with several examples of writing centers' involvement in pivotal assessment and accreditation projects. When it comes to a broader understanding of the stick (or perhaps it's the carrot?) that is accreditation, however, little has been directly discussed in writing center circles.

As a writing center director who recently spent three years re-assigned as my institution's accreditation Self-Study Coordinator, I have developed an insider's view of accreditation, specifically the changing, growing demands and opportunities (yes, opportunities!) related to accreditation processes. Directors can benefit from aligning writing center work with these processes, because the work done with external audiences of accreditors in mind can also help increase support and visibility for writing centers at their local institutions. Moreover, if we can come to view accreditors as partners, a perspective that Shirley Rose urges (52-53), writing center directors can take advantage of accrediting agencies' own ongoing improvements and engage in and even shape regional and national understandings of writing centers and writing studies.

No longer do any accrediting agencies allow a ten-year span with no interim review; in fact, all of the regional accrediting bodies, feeling heat of their own from the federal level and from the public, have revised either their standards or processes or both in the past six years or are currently in the process of doing so. Writing center directors benefit from an awareness of these changes in accreditation. Further, viewing the work of accreditors collectively and with a national context in mind provides writing center directors with a better understanding not only of the immediate needs they will be obliged to fulfill but also a sense of what they can proactively prepare for. In this article, I will briefly situate regional accreditation and describe the regional accrediting agencies; provide examples of relevant accreditation standards and processes, drawing attention to changes that require ongoing reporting with analysis and evidence of continuous improvement (no more ten-year reprieves); and provide a checklist of points of entry for writing center directors into accreditation discussions.

WHO ARE THE ACCREDITORS, AND WHAT DO THEY DO?

Accreditation in general is a quality review process by which an institution or program engages in a self-evaluation weighed against an organization's set of standards or criteria. That self-evaluation is then reviewed and questioned by a group of external peer evaluators, who generally visit campus and determine if the self-evaluation is accurate. They make recommendations for or against accreditation and determine whether any improvements are needed. Their actions then are affirmed (or not) by the organization's review board and made public in some form. Rose describes four types of accreditors that work within higher education in the United States: "programmatically accreditors," "national career-related accreditors," "national faith-based accreditors," and "regional accreditors, which accredit both public and private, two-year and four-year, primarily degree-granting non-profit institutions" (54).

While all forms of accreditation might be encountered by writing center directors, in this article, I focus on regional accreditors. Regional accreditors are the primary accrediting agency that writing center directors will encounter, given their broad reach across institutional types, their role in determining institutional eligibility for federal aid, and the focus put on regional accreditation by administrators. However, much of the discussion in this article would likely be useful in regard to other forms of accreditation.

Regional accrediting agencies are not federal agencies; however, while they are not directly affiliated with government, they collect and provide information to the U.S. Department of Education, which the Department then uses to determine an institution's eli-

gibility for federal financial aid (Title IV programs) per the Higher Education Act. In turn, accrediting agencies themselves must be reviewed and deemed acceptable by the U.S. Department of Education through the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) (U.S. Department of Education). There are seven regional accrediting agencies that are currently recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, each responsible for higher education in the states under their purview¹:

- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC)
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, The Higher Learning Commission (HLC)
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Senior College and University Commission (WASC Senior)
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)

For the most part, the regional accrediting bodies function similarly, following the general outline of accreditation described above. They also all have sets of minimum expectations in addition to the standards for accreditation, and all have processes for substantive change approvals (such as the addition of new programs, expansion into graduate programming, and moving to competency-based rather than credit-based programs) and for the reporting required for Federal Compliance (the means through which the agencies are authorized by the U.S. Department of Education to gather mandated information related to Title IV). When looking across all seven agencies, a set of overall shared standards for accreditation emerges. These standards include having a clear mission with institutional goals that relate to that mission; having a primary goal of student learning and offering support for that learning; acting ethically; ensuring qualified personnel; maintaining rigorous academic programming, review, and assessment; and conducting institutional planning and management of resources, both fiscal and physical.

THE RANGE OF STANDARDS THAT CAN AFFECT CENTERS

Standards more specifically related to writing center work can be found across the various categories listed above, though each accrediting agency uses its own language for these standards and might have different levels of specificity and expectations. Writing center directors can use the language of these standards to validate the work of the writing center or point out where more support might be needed. Common standards that affect writing centers

include first, that student support is offered, especially as it relates to the institutional mission and student population: “The institution provides academic and other student support services such as tutoring...which meet[s] the needs of the specific types of students that the institution serves and the programs it offers” (WASC Senior Standard 2.13). Similarly, some standards refer to distance education and the support required for those students (which might include the work of online writing centers), such as NEASC’s Standard 5.9: “The institution offers an array of student services... appropriate to its mission and the needs and goals of its students. It recognizes the variations in services that are appropriate for residential students, at the main campus, at off-campus locations, and for distance education programs.”

Standards related to academic assessment might help writing centers argue for resources, such as NWCCU’s standard 4.B.2m, which mandates that “The institution uses the results of its assessment of student learning to inform academic and learning-support planning and practices that lead to enhancement of student learning achievements.” Assessment of student support services is increasingly specified, as is the use of this assessment in decision-making regarding allotment of resources; take, for example, HLC Criterion 5.C.2, which states “The institution links its processes for assessment of student learning, evaluation of operations, planning, and budgeting.” Though perhaps intimidating to consider, writing centers can likely make a case for the necessity of their services based not only on their own assessments but on university-wide writing assessment results.

Another common standard across the agencies requires that the staff providing support meet professional standards (who determines what those professional standards are is generally not established by the accrediting agencies) and are provided with professional development opportunities, something writing center directors often find themselves arguing for. Other typical standards writing center directors might need to consider, depending on their institution’s needs for evidence, can often be found in standards related to planning and institutional resources, ethics and integrity, transparency of services, diversity initiatives, and even contractual arrangements if any tutoring is outsourced.

OVERVIEW OF CHANGING EXPECTATIONS AND PROCESSES

Along with similar-yet-different standards for accreditation, each agency has its own set of processes and timelines of which directors also need to be aware. In addition to the usual comprehensive review with an on-site visit, most now require annual reporting that goes beyond simple submission of data, as well as mid-cycle

substantive reports. These mid-cycle reports generally require in-depth self-evaluation; for example, the NEASC mid-term report must include a 15-20 page essay on “educational effectiveness.”

At least half of the accrediting agencies also now require some form of quality improvement project with additional reporting and review. For example, SACSCOC requires a “Quality Enhancement Plan” (QEP) from each institution; in addition to meeting the usual standards for accreditation, the QEP must be a focused project which “addresses a well-defined topic or issue(s) related to enhancing student learning.” Depending on which accreditation pathway their school is placed in, HLC institutions might find themselves pursuing multiple, annual “Action Projects” or a five-year “Quality Initiative Project.” These types of focused projects are key components in the reaffirmation of accreditation.

SO WHY DO DIRECTORS NEED TO KNOW THIS?

The details of accreditation can seem like a lot of bureaucratic minutia, perhaps someone else’s problem. It’s understandable why at first glance a director might not want to get bogged down or prefer to worry about it later. But there are a number of good reasons to raise one’s level of awareness.

Knowledge about accreditation is, simply put, *practical*.

Obviously, it’s an advantage for an administrator to know what is coming down the pike, especially during a time when standards and processes are evolving. No one wants to be working towards old standards only to find out they have shifted and there are suddenly new expectations, with little or no time to adjust to them.

Being aware of the accreditation standards and processes can help a director *rhetorically situate her center in alignment with institutional priorities*.

Directors likely already demonstrate how their centers are extensions of university and programmatic missions and/or are essential towards a university’s strategic plan; consider accreditation criteria another strategy for gaining visibility and buy-in. Acknowledging or referring to accreditation standards in your reports can demonstrate an awareness that administrators will appreciate, and you can use these standards as part of your arguments for resources. For example, I might reference HLC’s criterion 3.D.4, “The institution provides to students and instructors the infrastructure and resources necessary to support effective teaching and learning” as part of an argument for creating a writing center, or criterion 3.C.6 “Staff members providing student support services, such as tutoring . . . are appropriately qualified, trained, and supported in their professional development” in an appeal for conference travel

funds. If you haven't already made an explicit effort to tie your writing center's mission to the broader university mission, do so; ensuring that resources reflect a university's mission is often paramount in reviewers' scrutiny.

Knowing about accreditation processes and timelines can help a director *recognize opportunities* for her writing center and for writing centers overall.

Becoming involved in accreditation efforts can help directors raise their leadership profile on campuses. The interdisciplinary nature of writing centers means most directors have a good handle on the scope of what's happening across programs in a way other accreditation steering committee members might not. Given that quality improvement projects are becoming the norm for accrediting agencies' processes/timelines; writing centers can position themselves to be a part of these initiatives; for example, the Sharer et al. collection details the creation of a writing center as part of a QEP at a community college, the integral role of writing centers in several other QEP projects focused on writing and WAC, and the creation of a university mentor program (akin to a writing fellows program), brought to the table by the WPA serving on the accreditation steering committee.

This awareness can help writing center directors *effect change* in accreditors' and the public's understanding about writing.

As Rose notes, writing professionals can "influence accreditation processes through participation at the local institutional level and as peer reviewers for their regional accrediting associations. They can also work collaboratively and collectively with their peers at other institutions to develop means of demonstrating student learning outcomes and the effectiveness of areas of support" (62). Ultimately, Rose calls on writing professionals to become involved with accreditation—to partner with accreditors, in order to influence and educate accreditors and accrediting agencies.

ENGAGING WITH ACCREDITATION IN THE WRITING CENTER

Below is a list of questions and prompts that directors can use to review their current efforts and to consider how to strategically align their writing center's goals and efforts with accreditation. The list starts with local, information-gathering suggestions and moves on to broader prompts leading to more active involvement.

- Know your institution's regional accreditor, and which accreditation process if the accreditor offers more than one (such as HLC's three processes).
- Read through the standards to have a sense of where the center might fit or will need to be explicitly addressed.
- Review your standards for hiring and ensuring quality of

your employees. Who determines professional standards for writing center employees at your institution? What arguments can you make or draw from, such as position statements on graduate student administrators from the IWCA or the College Readiness and Learning Association's (CRLA) certification process?

- Consider your writing center's web presence on the institutional web site. With growth of off-site review, even though the review focuses on the reports generated by the institution, reviewers will look for corroborating information. Take a look at your writing center's description of services and mission through a reviewer's eyes. It can also be useful to trace other departments' links to the center. Other web artifacts that accreditors might visit include your institution's policy statements and organizational charts; make certain that the writing center is accurately represented in these.
- Find out what is expected for annual reporting for accreditation. Is it changing? Is there a way to anticipate this and incorporate into annual reports you already write?
- Find out when your institution is next up for comprehensive review. How does the university draw on existing documentation/evidence in preparing for it? What will the timeline and expectations be for contributing?
- Explore whether your institution is contemplating any quality improvement projects that could involve writing or student support services.
- Know if your institution is facing any focus visits or progress reports related to writing or student support services. How might you/the center contribute to these needs?
- Discuss accreditation standards and processes with your staff to help demystify these standards and make such discussions part of the ongoing work of the center.
- Serve on your institution's accreditation committee.
- Consider applying to become a peer reviewer.
- Share your assessment successes and failures and accreditation experiences with other center professionals.

Rather than seeing accreditation as an external demand that drains our resources, we in writing centers can consider these requirements strategically. Viewing accreditation broadly opens up both local and global opportunities for the writing center community to explore. The increased reporting and quality improvement projects related to accreditation provide possible pathways (and the necessary institutional support) for writing center projects or expansions. Further, these accreditation mandates help ensure that institutions, and the units within them, "move from productive internal conversations about improving learning to engaging more deeply

with other institutions and higher education organizations” (WASC Senior 3). Collectively, writing center directors can use the language and processes of accreditation to engage in efforts that contribute to writing centers’ practices, values, and worth.

NOTES

1. See the U.S. Department of Education’s “Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs” (<http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/agencies.aspx>) for links to each of the regional accrediting agencies.



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