

**REGIONAL ACCREDITATION OF COLLEGES AND
UNIVERSITIES IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA***

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In 1995, the North Central Association celebrated its one hundredth year of existence as an accreditation association of higher education. To mark that event, the NCA Staff devoted the fall issue of 1993 of the NCA Quarterly to the topic, "The First One Hundred Years of NCA: The Early Years". Thurston E. Manning wrote the lead article in which he examined the circumstances that led to the formation of the North Central Association in 1895. He served as director of the NCA from 1975-1987 before taking the position of President of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation in Washington, D.C. He noted that the beginning of rapid change in the 1890s raised acute educational questions: "Are students studying the right courses for the new times? Are enough students staying in school to allow for a sufficient flow into the work force? Do teachers have the knowledge and skills needed to train students for the future?" Manning noted that in 1894 the United States Commissioner of Education considered the high schools the weakest part of the system of education in the United States.¹

At the end of the nineteenth century in the United States, several universities in the Mid West began to experiment with a way to identify quality graduates of high schools who sought admission to their programs. Representatives from these universities met at Northwestern University on 29 March 1895 and appointed a

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¹ Thurston E. Manning, "Life in the Nineties", *North Central Association Quarterly*, v. 68, n. 2 (Fall, 1993), p.319-322.

committee to draft a constitution. They held the first annual meeting at the University of Chicago on 1 April 1896. At that meeting, they defined what constituted a good college. The elements included respectable entrance requirements, well arranged courses of study, a qualified faculty, a good library as well as instructional buildings, and sufficient income to maintain the enterprise. Not surprisingly, those are still the essential elements of higher education today.²

By 1904, the North Central Association prepared the first list of accredited schools that became the basis for the development of admission policies by many colleges and universities in the Midwest. In 1913, the North Central Association published the first list of accredited institutions of higher education. Since 1926, the North Central Association has published the listing of accredited colleges and universities in the NCA Quarterly. Public access to accreditation information has been a very important aspect of the entire approach to the accreditation activities of the North Central Association.³

The North Central Association came to accredit colleges and universities in sixteen states stretching from West Virginia to Arizona. Today, the Association has about 1,000 member institutions that include both public and private research universities, regional comprehensive universities and colleges. It is the oldest and largest of the six regional accrediting associations. The others are the New England Association, the Middle States Association, the Southern Association, the Western Association, and the North West Association. In reality, these accreditation associations provide a general national accreditation from the perspective of a regional organization.

While elementary and secondary education became the basis for the flowering of democracy, the colleges and universities saw their role as one of educating leaders for all aspects of society. This included government leaders. The institutions came to see that the selection of qualified students to engage in the study of higher education constitute one of their most important functions. Gradually, the colleges and universities began to define themselves and their roles in society. Through the North Central Association, the colleges and universities in the Midwest developed standards by which they could measure the quality of an institution of higher education. The first set of NCA standards appeared in 1909.⁴

The North Central Association established its well-respected NCA Quarterly in 1926 as a place to publish significant articles about higher education. In the 1930s, they came to believe that the best way to assure quality in higher education was to

² Early Organization and the First Annual Meeting of the Association: Some Historical Backgrounds, *North Central Association Quarterly*, v. 50, n. 2 (Fall, 1975), p.268-272. Three histories of the North Central Association have been written. Calvin O. Davis, *A History of the North Central Association* (1945); Louis G. Gelger, *Voluntary Accreditation: A History of the North Central Association 1945-1970* (1970); and Mark Newman, *An Agency of Change: One Hundred Years of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools* (1997).

³ See *North Central Association Quarterly*, v. 67, n. 4 (Spring, 1993), p.397.

⁴ Joseph J. Semrow, A Brief History and Background of the Accreditation Process, *North Central Association Quarterly*, v. 56, n. 2 (Fall, 1981), p.383-394.

require its colleges and universities to develop endowments for the private institutions and well established budget funding appropriations for the public ones.⁵

In the 1940s, Norman Burns became the Executive Director of the North Central Association. He saw the vast expansion of American higher education after World War II. His influence on the development of American higher education was enormous. In 1964, he published an article in the Quarterly titled "Changing Concepts of Higher Education." He noted that the rising percentages of college students, their range of abilities, and technological, sociological, and economic developments had all impacted higher education in the United States. These conditions required higher education institutions to accept a broader range of responsibilities. He concluded that the individual institution could not do everything so each institution must be measured in the terms of its own particular mission. Institutions needed to determine their own rationale and become the best they could possibly be as the type of institution they had chosen to be. Institutional unity and purpose became important aspects of measuring an institution. While some institutions had a single purpose, the complex universities had multiple purposes within the confines of the various organizational units. These emerging concepts would set the stage to develop an entirely new approach to the accreditation of higher education in America.⁶

1 In search of institutional quality

The concept of institutional quality and its assessment has passed through several theoretical perspectives as it has evolved in recent decades. Two major theoretical themes that have emerged are The Theory of Limited Supply and The Theory of Value-Added Quality.

The Theory of Limited Supply has advocates in academic circles. This theory asserts that only a very small number of institutions of the highest prestige and reputation can have true quality. Variables considered relevant for this model include an institution's tuition cost, selectivity, national reputation, academic resources, and size. Today, this approach might be seen in the rankings and ratings of America's "best" by such print media as *U.S. News and World Report*, among others.

The Theory of Value-Added Quality has an entirely different focus. It measures quality in terms of its impact on the academic, personal, and professional growth of the people within the institution, often with an emphasis on the students. The most favored institutions are those that "add the most value" to their students.⁷

Both of the models of institutional quality assessment are insufficient standing alone. The authors believe that a comprehensive and constructive assessment of an

⁵ James Rowland Angell, Selection for Higher Education in a Democracy, *North Central Association Quarterly*, v. 1, n. 2 (September, 1926), p.273-280.

⁶ Norman Burns, "Changing Concepts of Higher Education, *North Central Association Quarterly*, v. 38, n. 4 (Spring, 1964), p.296-300.

⁷ G. H. Galther, Quality Assurance in Higher Education: An International Perspective, *New Directions for Institutional Research*. Josey-Bass, (Fall, 1998.), p.99.

institution of higher education in the United States is best done through a thorough and thoughtful process of regional accreditation unique to America. The remainder of this article articulates the process of regional accreditation in the United States. Looking at regional accreditation from the perspective of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and The Higher Learning Commission, the article focuses on the case study of Pittsburg State University (USA).

2 The General Institucional Requirements

The General Institutional Requirements (GIR) establish a threshold of institutional development needed by an institution seeking to affiliate with the Commission. They also reflect the NCA and The Higher Learning Commission expectations of all affiliated institutions. The GIRs embrace the seven areas of Mission, Authorization, Governance, Faculty, Educational Program, Finances, and Public Information.⁸

The Mission section includes the requirement that the institution have a mission statement that defines its basic character as a degree granting entity. Under Authorization, the institution must demonstrate that it has legal authorization to grant degrees and documents to confirm its status as not-for-profit, for-profit, or public. The Governance GIR includes the requirement that the institution have a governing board that includes public members, a chief executive officer, and formal board authorization for affiliation with the Commission.

The General Institutional Requirement for Faculty requires the institution to demonstrate that it employs a faculty that has earned degrees appropriate to the level of instruction offered from accredited institutions of higher learning. The faculty must have a sufficient number who are full-time and a significant role in developing and evaluating all of the institution's educational programs.

The Educational Program GIR has the following sections: the institution confers degrees; its degree programs have students enrolled in them; the degree programs are compatible with the mission; the degrees are appropriately named; the undergraduate degree programs include a coherent general education requirement consistent with the institution's mission and designed to ensure breadth of knowledge and the promotion of intellectual inquiry; admission policies and practices are consistent with the mission; and it provides its students access to those learning resources and support services requisite for its degree programs. The institution has to document the centrality of General Education.

Under the GIR devoted to Finances, the institution must have an external financial audit, demonstrate the appropriate allocation and use of resources to support

⁸ North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, *Handbook of Accreditation, Second Edition* (Chicago, Illinois: North Central Association, 1997), p.19-28.

its, educational programs, and demonstrate fiscal viability. Finally, the GIR related to Public Information assures that the institution makes known in the, catalog its mission statement, its educational programs and, degree requirements, and, its learning resources. It must also reveal publicly its admission policies and practices, its academic and non-academic policies, its charges and refund policies, and the academic credentials of its faculty and administrators.

3 Criteria for accreditation and patterns of evidence

The General Institutional Requirements establish a foundation within the accreditation process. The Criteria for Accreditation constitute the frame and structure built on that foundation. Each criterion is related to one or more GIRs, but each goes beyond the basic expectations, of the GIRs. Through the accreditation process, the North Central Association assures the public of institutional quality and the encouragement of continual institutional self-improvement. The North Central Association sets high expectations for its member institutions in each area, and judges holistically whether member institutions meet its Criteria. Outstanding performance in areas covered by one Criterion does not compensate for unacceptable performance in areas in other Criteria.⁹

The NCA Higher Learning Commission has always examined the overall pattern of evidence relating to each Criterion to determine whether an institution should be accredited. The Patterns of Evidence provide formally-approved lists of typical areas of institutional activity or concern that relate directly to the satisfaction of each Criterion. These lists of indicators illustrate characteristic varieties of evidence that an institution might present in building its case. They provide a core of important concerns to be considered by every institution and Evaluation Team, and inform an evaluative process that is equitable and fair. An evaluation team has the task of determining if the institution engaged in a serious self-study process, if the institution presented a convincing pattern of evidence in stating that it meets each criterion, and whether the conclusions the institution drew from the evidence are valid.

Through the Criteria for Accreditation and their supporting patterns of evidence an institution demonstrates that it fulfills each Criteria at least at a minimal level. These twin concepts become the heart of the self-study process. Quantitative data must become the basis for the sets of patterns of evidence. In order to have the extensive quantitative data needed to establish a pattern of evidence, the institution must have a research capability usually evidenced by the presence of an office of institutional research. A brief analysis of each Criterion follows.

Criterion One: "The institution has clear and publicly stated purposes consistent with its mission and appropriate to an institution of higher education." Patterns of

⁹ North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, *Handbook of Accreditation*, Second Edition (Chicago, Illinois: North Central Association, 1997), p.29-67.

evidence include long and short-range institutional and educational goals. It must have established processes involving its constituencies in evaluating its purposes. The decision-making process must be appropriate to its stated mission and purposes and the constituencies must understand the stated purposes. Publicly, the institution must inform its constituencies through public documents such as the catalog of its institutional and educational goals. Finally, the support of faculty and student freedom of inquiry must be clearly in evidence.

Criterion Two: "The institution has effectively organized the human, financial, and physical resources necessary to accomplish its, purposes." Under this criterion, the institution must demonstrate that its governing board has informed members who possess the resolve to preserve the institution's integrity. An effective administration of qualified and experienced personnel must operate through well-defined and understood organizational structures, policies, and procedures. Overall, the institution must demonstrate that it has systems of governance that provide dependable information to the institution's constituencies and, as appropriate, involve them in the decision-making process.

Criterion Three: "The institution is accomplishing its educational and other purposes. "The patterns of evidence to determine if an institution satisfies this criterion are central to the entire accreditation process. With regard to educational programs, the institution must have courses of study in the academic programs that are clearly defined, coherent, and intellectually rigorous. It must have programs that include courses whose purpose is to stimulate the examination and understanding of personal, social, and civic values, contain a scholarship component, and foster interaction between student and faculty and also between student and student.

Criterion Three also requires the institution to demonstrate that it engages in assessment of appropriate student academic achievement in all its programs. This means the documentation of proficiency in skills and competencies essential for all college-educated adults, the completion of an identifiable and coherent undergraduate level general education component, and mastery of the level of knowledge appropriate to the degree granted.

For graduate programs, the institution must distinguish clearly its, graduate from its undergraduate offerings and expect students and faculty to value and engage in research. The graduate courses must be approved, taught, and evaluated by a graduate faculty that possesses appropriate credentials and experience. Finally, the institution must use the results of regular internal and external peer review processes to ensure quality.

In addition to these specific patterns of evidence, the institution must issue transcripts, that follow commonly accepted practices, encourage effective teaching, provide ongoing support for professional development for faculty, staff, and administrators, and foster effective student services.

Criterion Four: "The institution can continue to accomplish its purposes and strengthen its educational effectiveness." Patterns of evidence in measuring whether an institution meets Criterion Four begin with whether it possesses a base of financial,

physical and human resources to position it for the future. The institution must have a decision-making process that will respond effectively to anticipated and unanticipated challenges. There must be structured assessment processes that are continuous, involve a variety of institutional constituencies, and provide meaningful and useful information to the planning processes as well as to students, faculty, and administration. A strategic planning process with plans in place along with effect resource allocation to assure an institution's continuance is central to Criterion Four.

Criterion Five: "The institution demonstrates integrity in its practices and relationships. To demonstrate the effectiveness in meeting Criterion Five, an institution must have student, faculty, and staff handbooks that delineate policies and grievance procedures. There must also be policies and practices for resolving internal disputes and the needs of a diverse educational community. There should be accurate and fair information about the institution printed in various publications. Meeting Criterion Five also includes policies and procedures regarding institutional relationships with and responsibility for intercollegiate athletics, student associations, and subsidiary or related business enterprises, and oversight processes for monitoring contractual arrangements with government, industry, and other organizations.

4 Assessment of student academic achievement

Within the last ten to twelve years, the North Central Association has developed a basic way to focus the accreditation process through a carefully conceived program of measuring the assessment of student academic learning. The assessment activities reside in an Office of Assessment. All courses and degree programs as well as general education must now be filtered through the assessment concept. Each college or university must demonstrate a culture of assessment on campus that includes the administration, the faculty, the students, and the academic support services such as the library, the records office, and other departments. Most recently, the North Central Association has developed a way to measure the level of the assessment culture in an institution. Generally speaking there are three levels with three steps within each level. On the average, the institutions have reached the beginning of level two in achieving an assessment culture.

5 Institutional assessment

As a supporting activity in the accreditation process, each college and university must develop an overall assessment of all departments to determine their effectiveness in supporting the central mission of student learning. Resource allocation follows the effectiveness of the departments and the success they have in supporting the academic mission of the institution.

6 The Self-Study Process

In the traditional accreditation process, each college or university must begin a self-study effort at least two years before they are scheduled for their NCA accreditation review. A Self-Study Committee is formed that includes broad institutional representation. The Self-Study Process focuses on the General Institutional Requirements and the Criteria For Accreditation using the concept of measuring student academic learning to develop an assessment of institutional strengths and weaknesses. Allied to this process is the college or university's efforts in engaging the entire institution in strategic planning. Extensive data must be assembled to document the self-study process and the conclusions reached by the Self-Study Committee.

7 Writing the Self-Study Report

The Self-Study Committee usually has sub-committees that are assigned the responsibility of writing sections of the Self-Study Report. The Chair of the Self-Study Committee will coordinate their efforts and edit the various reports submitted by the subcommittees into a coherent and unified Self-Study Report. Once a draft of the Self-Study Report has been produced, it is usually placed on the Self-Study Committee's web page for all members of the college or university community to review and make comment. This comment must also include the views of the public at large that the institution serves. Once the Self-Study Report has been officially completed, it is then sent to the North Central Association staff member who serves as the liaison between the institution and The Higher Learning Commission.

8 The Accreditation Visit

In the 1990s, the NCA Staff invited Dr. Joseph G. Smoot to train the new team chairs for the accrediting visits. He had participated in thirty-nine NCA accreditation visits to colleges and universities chairing twenty-two of the teams. He wrote a paper titled "The Role of the North Central Association Team Chair in Conducting Accrediting Visits to Member Institutions." He dealt with such topics as initial preparation, first contacts, team travel schedule, team self-study assignments, team report assignments, preliminary team report documents, and team meetings. He included several attachments of examples of various documents needed for the team's work. His paper was published by the Educational Resources Information Center at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.¹⁰

¹⁰ Joseph G. Smoot, The Role of the North Central Association Team Chair in Conducting Accreditation Visits to Member Institutions. North Central Association Annual Meeting, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, March 25, 1995, Chicago, Illinois. Published In *Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Microfiche Collection* and indexed in *Resources in Education* (George Washington University: Clearing House on Higher Education, October, 1995), ED383277.

The NCA staff person assembles the members of the Visiting Team that are charged with conducting a comprehensive or focused visit to an institution for the purpose of a specific review of the Self-Study Report to assure its accuracy. During the visit that usually lasts three days, the team members talk to many individuals and groups on campus. They discuss their impressions and come to conclusions on the strengths and concerns they find in the institution.

9 The Team Report and Recommendations

The Visiting Team writes a Team Report while they are on campus that discusses the Self-Study process that the institution conducted, confirms the conclusions of the Self-Study Report, and identifies specific strengths and concerns that these experienced educators believe characterize the institution at this particular time in its history. Based on the main thrust of their Report, the Visiting Team make recommendations to the NCA Staff and The Higher Learning Commission for future actions relating to the institution's affiliation status. The most time that a team will recommend for an institution before another comprehensive visit occurs is 10 years.

10 The Accreditation Process

Once the Team Report has been distributed, the institution has the right to respond either affirming it or offering alternative explanations for selected areas. The institution's recommendations along with the Team Report go to The Higher Learning Commission that makes all final decisions regarding an institution's affiliation status with the Commission.

11 A Case Study: Pittsburg State University (USA)

Pittsburg State University had its last comprehensive evaluation by the North Central Association in 1993. The North Central Association and all six of the regional accrediting associations in the United States promote and enhance the campuses that have affiliation status with them. The regional accreditation association staff work hard to assist the institutions in achieving the levels of accountability that everyone desires. The relationship between Pittsburg State University and the North Central Association is very positive. The North Central Association has accredited the University continuously since 1915.

The authors were the major individuals involved in the PSU 1993 Self-Study Process. Dr. James S. Taylor served as the Coordinator of the Self-Study Committee and Dr. Joseph G. Smoot served as a Special Consultant to the President of the University and to the Coordinator. The Self-Study Process required approximately

two years to complete. The Self-Study Committee consisted of a coordinating group, of approximately 13 members and the nine sub-committees usually had eight to 10 members.

The sub-committees focused on the following areas of institutional self-evaluation: strategic planning, educational programs, faculty resources, learning resources, and outcomes-based assessment. Each group assessed the University's strengths and concerns within the context of their area of focus and spent six months developing preliminary drafts of their findings. These reports were reviewed by the Self-Study Committee and returned to the sub-committees for further revisions. Over the, subsequent six months, the Self-Study Committee compiled a comprehensive draft of all the reports for campus-wide review.

The entire Self-Study Process was guided within the context of the University's strategic planning model. This model, developed at the University over a period of several years was subsequently adopted by other universities in the United States. It received international recognition and the NCA Staff described it as "textbook and exemplary" in its conception and execution. The University continues to be recognized for its strategic planning process. The current NCA Self-Study Process, now underway for a comprehensive evaluation visit scheduled in 2003, is also guided by the strategic planning model.

The Self-Study Report, in keeping with NCA guidelines, addressed four critical criteria for continued accreditation. These criteria addressed, institutional mission, input and resources, output and effectiveness, and the future viability of the University. Pittsburg State University also chose to add two areas of special emphasis to the Self-Study Report in an effort to highlight what many viewed as special noteworthy strengths. These emphases were technology transfer and economic development and international education.

The full Self-Study Report contained 270 pages of text, including 31 figures and 34 tables. The University also, prepared an institutional fact book with extensive data regarding the University. The Self-Study Report covered the history of the University, its mission and objectives, administration and governance, educational programs, resources and support services, faculty resources, student characteristics and successes, financial and physical resources, assessment and institutional effectiveness, the special emphases noted above, and future viability.

The first task of the Self-Study Committee was to review the Concerns raised by the last Visiting Team that came to the campus. A long and difficult task, every aspect of the University was analyzed and dissected in minute detail with special attention to the institutional data available. Assessing the progress of the campus based on performance indicators of quality over a span of 10 years challenged the Coordinator and the Self-Study Committee.

During this period of the Self-Study Process, the Coordinator and the Director of Institutional Research attended all North Central Association annual meetings and focused conferences. The senior author of this paper, Dr. Joseph G. Smoot,

held one of the highest rankings within the North Central Association and maintained valuable contacts with the organization throughout the process. The Associate Director of the NCA who served as the staff liaison visited the University twice to consult with University officials and staff.

After this final campus review, the official Self-Study Report was completed. Upon submission to the NCA Staff, the Self-Study Report was then distributed to the NCA Visiting Team members two months prior to the scheduled visit. The NCA Visiting Team spent three days on the campus. The five team members focused on different aspects of the Self-Study Report. They had office space and clerical support while on campus and a resource room with volumes of documents that supported the University's Self-Study Process. They conducted scores of interviews with administrators, faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community leaders. At the conclusion of the visit, they presented a preliminary oral report of their findings with an emphasis on the perceived Strengths and Concerns of the Team. They recommended continued accreditation for a period of 10 years for the University.

The NCA Self-Study Process can be viewed as a burden or an opportunity for growth and development. Any college or university that consciously strives to examine itself critically in order to improve the educational programs will realize the true and intended spirit of the accreditation process. Pittsburg State University has progressed as an institution of higher learning since 1915 when the North Central Association first granted the institution accreditation.

Regional accreditation in the United States provides overall full accreditation for each college and university in an area of the country that voluntarily engages in the process. In a sense, it serves as national accreditation granted through a regional process. The oldest regional accrediting organization in the United States, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, grants accreditation status to some 1,000 institutions of higher education through The Higher Learning Commission. This comprises approximately one-third of all the institutions of higher learning in America. Established in 1895, the North Central Association has often set the standard for innovation in accreditation processes. In recent years, the NCA has embraced strategic planning and the assessment of student academic learning as twin hallmarks of the entire accreditation effort.

