

## **The Role of Student Affairs in Regional Accreditation: Why and How to Be Included**

Sarah R. Gordon, Pamelyn Shefman, Bill Heinrich, Kathryn Gage

Arkansas Tech University, Alvin Community College, Michigan State University, and  
Oklahoma State University

### **The Case for Regional Accreditation as an Inclusive Process**

Strong, inclusive communities of practice, in both student affairs and regional accreditation, have characteristics where members are visible and able to contribute in meaningful ways. With student affairs functions listed in regional accreditation guidelines, the future of student affairs' place and space within higher education will rely, at least in part, on the profession's ability to engage in the accreditation process as meaningful contributors to this naturally inclusive process. However, this intended purpose of inclusivity might look and feel different at an institutional level, where professionals (including non-student affairs administrators and faculty) from across the institution contribute to writing accreditation documents. To this process, student affairs professionals bring the practices of actively encouraging cultures and norms of inclusion (Deering, 1996) and are well positioned to contribute to campus-wide efforts, including accreditation.

Involvement in an accreditation process for student affairs can be understood on a continuum from exclusion to inclusion. This continuum can be applied to how student affairs professionals are contributing to the accreditation efforts on their campuses.

“Inclusion refers to the process of promoting a sense of belonging and empowerment by

involving everyone and valuing their unique talents and contributions” (Butcher, 2015, p. 240). When viewing the accreditation process as inclusive, the interests, values, and/or missions of student affairs departments and divisions are incorporated into the university context and viewed as a benefit to the institution. Based on the varied interactions of the authors (e.g., as student affairs professionals, as directors of university assessment/accreditation, as directors of student affairs assessment, as reviewers for regional accreditors, etc.), many student affairs professionals see the accreditation process as an exclusive or inaccessible one, presumed to be the domain of academic leaders. “Exclusive behaviors and environments serve to limit our resources, including the diversity, reach, and power of our social and information networks” (Butcher, 2015, p. 241). In an exclusive accreditation process, some aspirations, interests, values, and/or missions are allowed while others are overlooked and/or actively limited. For example, at more than one of the authors’ institutions, when new leadership asked to see what student affairs’ contribution was to the accreditation report, they were given the report without question. However, when then they shared the documents with others across the division no one knew what some of the information was referring, even when it was their own areas.

The student affairs professional must identify opportunities to be included (and areas where they may potentially be excluded) in order to understand the ways they can contribute to important processes like accreditation that bring value and quality to the larger campus community. Understanding the demands of accreditors is one entry point to the campus accreditation conversation. Student affairs professionals might also contribute to the lens of *inclusion*, a shared value within student (and much of

academic) affairs (Blimling & Whitt, 1999). Inclusion, when modeled and practiced, helps students and professionals prepare for the everyday and the future, empower toward action, and change the view of what differences mean (Butcher, 2015). When student affairs (as a unit or individual professionals) is a visible presence, included, and understood as part of the accreditation environment, the work of student affairs is valued and recognized for contributions to the outcomes of higher education.

The accreditation process is intended to be a holistic and inclusive process. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to help student affairs professionals from a diverse and distributed set of administrative services, educational functions, and organizational structures, composed of people with unique backgrounds, training, and experiences, be prepared for inclusion in the regional accreditation process by: 1) providing a brief primer of the accreditation process; 2) discussing how student affairs work fits into accreditation standards, including providing suggestions for how student affairs work is valued through processes like accreditation, 3) providing an example of how data on student affairs activities and programs can be collected in a way that contributes to accreditation; and 4) encouraging student affairs professionals to become more involved in the accreditation process and provide suggestions for how to do so. A secondary product of this paper is the provision of ways to tangibly communicate the value and contributions of student affairs professionals to student outcomes that add to institutional quality. Throughout this paper, the term *student affairs professionals* includes individuals who work across structural, functional, and administrative departments and divisions that support student success; this includes, but is not limited to, the vice president and/or dean for student life, as well as professionals working

within housing and residence life, student unions, student activities, counseling, career development, orientation, enrollment management, racial and ethnic minority support services, and retention and assessment (NASPA, 2017).

### **Overview of the Regional Accreditation Process**

The following is meant to provide a primer for how the regional accreditation process works, as well as provide the reader with an understanding of the importance and purpose of maintaining regional accreditation. It should be noted that the principles of accreditation are largely similar across organizations, and no matter the type of accreditation process, student affairs professionals could benefit from a guide.

### **Types of accrediting organizations**

The accreditation structure in the United States is complex and decentralized, and covers public and private, two- and four-year, and nonprofit and for-profit institutions (Eaton, 2015). There are four types of accrediting organizations in the US: 1) regional accreditors, which cover public and private, mainly nonprofit degree-granting two- and four-year institutions; 2) faith-related national accreditors, which cover religiously affiliated and doctrinally-based institutions; 3) career-related national accreditors, which cover career-based, single purpose institutions; and 4) programmatic national accreditors, which cover specific programs, professions, and professional schools (Eaton, 2015). This paper focuses on the first type – regional accreditors – and the regional accreditation standards and processes, as these agencies accredit institutions that enroll approximately 85% of students nationwide (CHEA, 2015).

### **US regional accreditors and the role of accreditation**

There are seven major regional accrediting commissions for higher education recognized in the United States: Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC); Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE); Higher Learning Commission (HLC); New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE); Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU); WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC); and Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC); see Table 1 for the states under each accreditor's purview. Maintaining good status with one of these regional accrediting bodies has four main purposes: 1) to provide an assurance to students and the public of institutional quality and financial stability; 2) to allow access to state and federal funds (only accredited institutions may receive federal and state monies, including funds for student aid); 3) to assure private sector confidence for employment of students and giving of private funds; and 4) to ease transfer of courses between colleges and universities (Eaton, 2015). No institution is required to seek accreditation, but because of these recognized benefits, most eligible institutions seek to become (and remain) accredited (WSCUC, 2017).

## **History**

The history of higher education accreditation is, in some ways, a story of inclusion. This story in the United States coincides with sweeping changes in the growth and types of colleges and universities, and the accompanying state and federal legislative efforts to understand and navigate these pivotal points of evolution (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2011). The four primary factors affecting the expansion of accreditation efforts over the past 200 plus years include state oversight,

specialized accreditation of academic disciplines, regional and institutional type associations, and the federal government's statistical reporting function (Harclerod, 1980). Although 98% of U.S. degree-granting institutions operate under the legal authority imbued by state governments (Contreras, 2009), regional accrediting bodies serve as a bridge between the federal government and colleges by validating the quality of the institution. The role of these regional accreditors expanded at the end of the nineteenth century. During this period, new types of institutions such as community colleges were founded, elective credits were introduced, and uncertainty about the difference between secondary and higher learning institutions called for the answer to a basic categorization question: "What is a college?" (Harclerod, 1980, p. 14). Accreditors sought to identify the elements that answered this question, and thereby define the aspects of institutional legitimacy.

The concept of institutional quality became associated with accreditation after World War II. The introduction of the GI Bill provided thousands of returning veterans with the funds to attend college. As low-quality institutions proliferated and widespread fraud was detected, the federal government turned to private sector accreditors to sort out which institutions met the threshold of quality (Angula, 2016). Quality continues to be the key rationale for higher education accreditation programs. Evidence of the significant emphasis on quality is found in every U.S. regional accrediting agency's goals statement (Ryan, 2015).

### **The accreditation standards and process**

Every accreditor has criteria all institutions under its purview must meet in order to achieve accreditation; these criteria are regularly reviewed by the accreditor and its

constituents, and as such are subject to change intermittently. The criteria can be found on each accreditor's website; typically, criteria are listed in a framework organized by letters and numbers. The accreditation standards allow accreditors to ascertain the quality of a college by using five standards identified by Kelchen (2017): mission statement; governance structures, including a board of trustees; demonstration of financial health; sufficient academic, human, and physical resources; and the use and attainment of student learning outcomes. The structure and wording of accreditation standards vary depending on the accrediting body. The accreditation process occurs in a cycle, during which the accreditor monitors if and how a college/university is meeting the set standards required to maintain accreditation. An accreditation cycle can last approximately 4-10 years, depending on the accrediting body. In general, the process over that time consists of reporting, self-study, expert evaluation, and a decision.

### ***Ongoing reporting***

This requires regular (usually annual) submission of documents, including compliance documents, institutional materials, and quality assurances to verify that the institution is in compliance with the criteria for accreditation. Most accreditors also require a more substantial report midway through the accreditation cycle.

### ***Self-study***

Toward the end of an accreditation cycle, institutions undergo a comprehensive review and produce a self-study document (which may be titled differently under the various accreditors; for example, SACSCOC uses the term "Compliance Certification" through which an institution certifies the institutional self-assessment; SACSCOC,

2017a, p. 8). In the self-study document, institutions address how they meet accreditation standards. The self-study is compiled of data, information, reflections, and input from the entire campus community (including student affairs professionals) regarding if and how the accreditation standards are met.

### ***Site visit***

This is a visit to the campus by a review team made up of peers from other universities and colleges that has been trained by the accrediting body to assess institutional quality and if/how accreditation standards are being met. The site visit team will have reviewed the institutional reports prior to their visit. Site visits typically last 1-3 days, during which time the peer review team meets with faculty, staff, students, administrators, and governing board members to further assess compliance with accreditation standards and federal regulations. The review team produces a written report on their findings, which is used by the accrediting body to make a decision on granting/continuing accreditation.

### ***Accreditation decision***

Following the comprehensive evaluation that culminates with the site visit, institutions are made aware of commendations, areas for improvement, and whether their institution's accreditation was granted, continued, reaffirmed, deferred, or withdrawn.

## **Where Does Student Affairs Fit in Accreditation Efforts?**

Individual campuses may prepare for accreditation by convening teams of experts from across campus to answer the statements connected to each accreditation standard (i.e., governance, mission, resources, and student learning). The campus

accreditation team members set out to scour the institution's documents, reports, and websites to collect sufficient evidence to make a strong case to the peer review team that the various criteria have been met. Since the campus accreditation team is likely to be led by departments affiliated with academic functions, student affairs professionals may find themselves invited to the process belatedly. Individuals from student affairs may be assigned to collect evidence for those statements that explicitly mention student affairs or services, or asked to review the criteria in their entirety and provide any material they deem relevant.

Student affairs work fits into many of the criteria in different ways, while some criteria do not involve student affairs work at all (such as criteria for academic curriculum standards, and standards for governing bodies). In some criteria, student affairs, or terminology that involves student affairs work, is specifically mentioned. Table 1 provides some select examples of standards from each accreditor that specifically mention student affairs programs or activities.

Table 1  
*Select Examples of How Student Affairs Appears in Accreditation Standards*

Accreditor	US States/Territories in Accreditor's Purview	Examples of Standards Where Student Affairs is Specifically Mentioned in Accreditation Standards
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC, 2017)	AL, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, TX, VA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="813 1478 1495 1724">• The institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of seeking improvement based on analysis of the results in the areas below: ... c. Academic <b>and student services that support student success.</b></li> <li data-bbox="813 1730 1495 1873">• The institution provides appropriate academic and <b>student support programs, services, and activities</b> consistent with its mission.</li> </ul>

Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE, 2017)	DE, District of Columbia, MD, NJ, NY, PA, PR, VI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If offered, athletic, <b>student life</b>, and other <b>extracurricular activities</b> that are regulated by the same academic, fiscal, and administrative principles and procedures that govern all other programs;</li> <li>• The institution engages in periodic assessment of the effectiveness of <b>programs supporting the student experience</b>.</li> </ul>
Higher Learning Commission (HLC, 2017)	AR, AZ, CO, IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, NM, OH, OK, SD, WI, WV, WY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution provides <b>student support services</b> suited to the needs of its student populations.</li> <li>• <b>Co-curricular programs</b> are suited to the institution's mission and contribute to the educational experience of its students.</li> <li>• The institution assesses achievement of the learning outcomes that it claims for its curricular and <b>co-curricular programs</b>.</li> </ul>
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (CIHE-NEASC, 2017)	CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, VT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution offers an array of <b>student services</b>, including physical and mental health 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 as well as the differences in circumstances and goals of students pursuing degrees.</li> <li>• As appropriate, the institution provides <b>co-curricular activities</b> and supports opportunities for student leadership and participation in campus organizations and governance.</li> </ul>
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU, 2017)	AK, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent with the nature of its educational programs and methods of delivery, the institution creates effective learning environments with appropriate <b>programs and services to support student learning needs</b>.</li> <li>• If the institution operates <b>auxiliary services</b> (such as student housing, food service, and bookstore), they support the institution's mission, contribute to the intellectual climate of the campus community, and enhance the quality of the learning environment. Students, faculty, staff,</li> </ul>

---

WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC, 2017)	CA, HI, <i>US territories in the Pacific Basin</i>	<p>and administrators have opportunities for input regarding these services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As appropriate, the institution provides <b>co-curricular activities</b> and supports opportunities for student leadership and participation in campus organizations and governance.</li> <li>• <b>Co-curricular programs</b> aligned with academic goals and regularly assessed.</li> <li>• Appropriate <b>student support services</b> planned, implemented, and evaluated.</li> </ul>
Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC, 2017)	2-year institutions in CA, HI, <i>US territories in the Pacific Basin</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The institution identifies and assesses learning support outcomes for its student population and provides appropriate <b>student support services and programs</b> to achieve those outcomes. The institution uses assessment data to continuously improve student support programs and services.</li> <li>• <b>Co-curricular programs</b> and athletics programs are suited to the institution's mission and contribute to the social and cultural dimensions of the educational experience of its students. If the institution offers co-curricular or athletic programs, they are conducted with sound educational policy and standards of integrity. The institution has responsibility for the control of these programs, including their finances.</li> </ul>

---

*Note.* **Bolded** text indicates terminology that encompasses student affairs work. This list is not comprehensive and does not include every instance where student affairs work is mentioned or may fit into accreditation standards. This list is meant to be an illustrative example to provide an overview and to allow readers to see the various ways student affairs may be mentioned in accreditation criteria. This list was compiled using direct quotes from 2017 criteria, but the information should transcend this period in general if/when standards change.

In addition to places where the work of student affairs is specifically mentioned in the standards, there are many accreditation standards that apply to or include student affairs without mentioning it specifically. Every accreditor phrases these standards

differently, but generally the criteria that ‘indirectly’ involve student affairs work include:

- fulfilling the university’s mission
- addressing the institution’s role in a diverse/multicultural society
- fulfilling a commitment to the public good
- acting with integrity and in an ethical and responsible way
- providing appropriate infrastructure and resources necessary to support learning
- setting goals for student retention, persistence, and completion; and collecting and analyzing data to make improvements to help retention, persistence, and completion
- maintaining sound business practices, including appropriate fiscal and human resources
- securely and confidentially maintaining student records
- having policies and procedures regarding students’ rights and responsibilities

There is ample reason for student affairs professionals to add involvement in accreditation work to their labors. Participating in the campus accreditation process fulfills the ACPA and NASPA competency of “... mastering and utilizing assessment, evaluation and research (AER)” in order to “... shape the political and ethical climate surrounding AER processes and uses in higher education” (ACPA and NASPA, 2010, p. 12). However, beyond attaining professional competency, participation in the accreditation process may contribute to the value added by student affairs professionals. Herdlein (2011) reported that 92.9% of senior student affairs officers agreed that possessing “... expertise, coalitions, credibility and positive history” (p. 46) was one way

in which student affairs professionals could build political capital in the institution. Student affairs units that collect data sought by peer reviewers in the accreditation process not only demonstrate their assessment, evaluation and research expertise, they show themselves to be full partners in student learning, and as colleagues who can contribute a commodity that is essential to institutional endorsement.

### **A Case of Collecting Data for Institutional Purposes**

The ways in which student affairs professionals collect, compile, and share assessment, effectiveness, and learning data can help in accreditation efforts on campuses. To illustrate these principles of quality and engagement across student affairs, the following case describes an ongoing project at Michigan State University (MSU) to create a co-curricular data platform for the campus that helped student affairs professionals record non-credit learning activity, use standardized data collection and technology, and create greater institutional and student facing value for learning outside of credit-bearing activities. The regional accreditor (HLC) asks for evidence of learning activities aligned to undergraduate learning outcomes. With campus-wide undergraduate learning goals at the center of Michigan State University's HLC accreditation effort, student affairs leaders had a clear way to contribute. However, data were dispersed and difficult to track, residing on individual computers and local servers. Coordinated data collection activity needed enculturated good data, information practices, and alignment in form and content with undergraduate learning outcomes. In understanding and balancing these commitments, student affairs professionals were able to provide data for accreditation and quality assurance processes both during and outside of periodic reviews.

In a parallel conversation on the campus, the charge that informed this work – to discover the academic rationale for co-curricular activity at MSU – was sufficiently broad, and presented a few challenges. Before leaders could contribute a good data set to accreditation, the team had to clarify a few ideas. The team began to ask the questions: *Where is learning happening outside of the classroom? And, what would it look like to collect information about co-curricular activity across a large set of decentralized, non-credit learning activities?* Our assumption was, and is, that records reflect values. From that perspective, the charge pointed to a set of cultural conversations in order to engage in helpful technology conversations. Project leaders, in turn, approached the record task as one of culture building, rather than simply collecting more data. The culture-building approach was meant to provide opportunities to co-create a record, which led to increased frequency and depth of quality assurance conversations on the campus.

### **Definitions and terms**

Literature on co-curricular records, definitions, and purposes are divergent in student and academic affairs (Bartkus, Nemelka, Nemelka, & Gardner, 2012). As a result, the MSU team decided to write a relevant definition for the charge provided by the project sponsor, the campus provost. The team used this definition:

Co-curricular activity requires student participation outside the scope of an academic course of study in an MSU-sponsored activity that contributes to a student's achievement of undergraduate learning goals and competencies and/or academic learning outcomes. (Heinrich & Shea, 2017, para 8)

These learning activities are provided and documented by any number of campus faculty, staff, and, of course, student affairs professionals. Importantly, defining co-curricular work outside of specific organizational structures allowed for the inclusion of student learning from across student support functions, academic, or administrative units that offer clubs or leadership activities.

## **Purpose**

Following the definition above, the team debated several individual, organizational, and institutional benefits of a new co-curricular data record. We specifically focused on a new learning record's relevance to current students in context of the team's ability to execute the project in the current resource and political environment. Creating the following purpose statement helped demonstrate the range, depth, and quality of non-credit educational work as a nested set of goals:

*The primary purpose of the Co-Curricular Record is to provide comprehensive evidence of students' learning and engagement outside of formal coursework and academic programs through which*

- *Students benefit from integration of campus experiences, reflection on growth and development; career development, and an official student record of activities;*
- *The university benefits from assessment of students' participation in experiential learning venues and enhanced opportunities for institutional research; [and]*
- *External audiences may benefit from improved student communication, especially to employers and graduate schools (Heinrich & Shea, 2017, para. 6).*

Writing the purpose statement with multiple audiences in mind led to additional partners joining, in part, to contribute to the learning and accreditation environment.

## **Addressing quality**

The next issue the team addressed was *What should go in the co-curricular record?* To do so, the team used a human-centered design approach (Wodtke, 2017) to address the idea of quality, and included an additional 100 people from across campus sectors in over a dozen design and prototype activities over eight months. This process served to create guidelines and boundaries for the new record while also creating shared work and help acculturate staff to the new co-curricular record. The team asked the question: *What common elements of different activity types and providers of learning and engagement experiences should we collect? And how?* As consensus developed, we operationalized a learning record in various data fields. While time intensive, in prototyping the record, the team learned how the campus values and represents learning to multiple audiences, and was able to specify needs for technical solutions. The plan was that the participatory, human-centered design and broad inclusion of student affairs professionals throughout the process would help contribute to, and articulate, the value of non-credit student learning.

## **Purchasing and piloting a data management system**

Team leaders chose a vended technology that offered a series of user interfaces, learning records data storage, and, the ability to generate reports. Importantly, the team chose an educational technology that embedded the socio-cultural and pedagogical understandings that our campus stakeholders identified through the design activities and processes.

## **Partnerships**

Because we belong to a large and decentralized institution, the team actively recruited stakeholders from across campus to prototype a useful learning artifact and provide data to populate student facing records. Individual faculty and staff members from student affairs, student support, and academic units offered insights on this project and then added their data to the record. This approach to a holistic learning record was an intentional exercise in coordinating different functional area data to align to campus learning outcomes, not unlike an academic accreditation process that joins stories of learning quality from different units across campus. Numerous student affairs units contributed to the design of the record. In turn, even more student affairs learning activities were included in the record, and both students and the institution had stronger evidence of students' achievement of undergraduate learning outcomes.

## **Summary**

This case demonstrated how student affairs and student support professionals at an institution supported the accreditation process by linking student affairs efforts to student learning outcomes. The new record of student learning now has value for the institution as a process of establishing, recording, and reporting learning quality for students and accreditors. Data on said outcomes were collected using a common data platform. This case provides an example of ways that student affairs professionals can leverage co-curricular student learning records to provide accreditors with comprehensive evidence of students' learning. The case is not meant to be a prescriptive for how every campus should engage in this work, but this holistic learning record is an

example that may be applicable to other institutions as a way for student affairs work to be included in the accreditation process.

### **Implications**

Student affairs work is included in accreditation criteria, and as important contributors to the student experience and student learning, student affairs professionals should work from multiple perspectives to co-create quality in accreditation. A question many student affairs professionals could be asking is: *Are we ready to help the campus report the meaningful work of student affairs to accreditors?* In between the call for inclusion in accreditation and actual contributions to accreditation by student affairs, our data, processes, and relationships need to be “in order” to be considered for inclusion. Student affairs work is not always visible on the forefront of all campus functions, but accreditation is a very visible, public process where the contributions of student affairs work can be showcased. A priority for student affairs professionals should be to ensure that student learning outside the classroom is connected to the university’s academic goals. Student affairs professionals can and should be aware of how student learning outside the classroom affects the student experience (including student learning in academic programming), and how accreditation standards use assessment data to highlight such connections.

Further, while this paper focuses specifically on how student affairs work fits into regional accreditation efforts, student affairs activities directly support many types of program-specific accreditation (e.g., medical or engineering education). Finally, by demonstrating through assessment data how student services and supports (e.g., auxiliaries) help students, student affairs can be included in fulfilling many

accreditation standards for individual programs, colleges and/or the university. Student affairs professionals are often already doing work that aligns with accreditation standards and criteria, but the documentation and purposeful alignment of that work to the standards may be lacking. The following approaches and activities are useful for student affairs professionals to consider as they align their assessment work to fulfill accreditation standards:

- *Know your institution's accrediting organization and read the accreditation guidelines.* As outlined above, accreditation standards can be found on each accrediting organization's website. Table 1 provides a start at highlighting some standards for each accreditor where student affairs work should be documented and assessed. Further, learn which academic units are also accredited, figure out which of your students are in said units, and connect the dots.
- *Build rapport with leaders of the accreditation process.* When it is time for a self-study, there are many people "at the table" to put the documents together. Get to know who on your campus is helping with accreditation work, be sure they know you want to help, and have assessment data to contribute. Practice sharing your story and communicating the value of the work in terms of institutional priorities or where your work contributes to other departmental success.
- *Address the question 'How does student affairs work link to student learning?', then collect assessment data accordingly.* The example from MSU demonstrated that, by addressing this question and collecting data about

learning from many sources on campus, they could provide a compilation of quality-focused learning outcomes to the campus. Individual units reinforced alignments from their own work to institutional accreditation efforts. The co-curricular record project created new opportunities for student affairs units (and leaders) to connect activities, learning outcomes, and assessments to accreditation efforts. MSU did so by including a broad array of student support and co-curricular activities from across the university.

- *Record student learning data in a cohesive manner that aligns with stated institutional priorities.* Many campuses do this. Some do not. Beyond the collection and aggregation of student learning outcomes data as a part of student affairs assessment work, reporting the impacts on institutional metrics to ensure alignment with institutional goals is paramount to inclusion. Further, student affairs professionals should be good stewards of data and inform the narratives that allow decision makers to use data. By doing so, student affairs professionals can ensure that data collected are valued and understood by academic colleagues. Accreditation is a possible venue for this shared understanding.
- *Identify ways to connect accreditation leaders to data repositories or individuals with access to data.* By sharing data in a systematic way, student affairs professionals can also demonstrate and impart the meaningful ways in which student affairs professionals know the institution and students through providing evidence of how their work affects student learning and the student experience.

- *Request time and plan your own professional development to be prepared for this work.* Assessment and accreditation processes do not work well if they are rushed. Be informed, prepared, and continuously collect data that can help demonstrate the value of student affairs work on your campus.
- *Gain a place at the table.* Reach out to the staff on your campus first and join committees. The staff who oversee accreditation need our support in all seasons, and not just at the 5 year or 10 year reporting junctures. Offer your understanding and expertise of the work of student affairs so that those who oversee reporting to regional accreditors can tell our story. Remember, since the campus accreditation team is likely to be led by departments affiliated with academic functions, student affairs professionals may find themselves invited to the process belatedly. Creating these networks and relationships continuously (not just when an accreditation cycle is starting/ending or a site visit is looming) is important.

Any preparation in these ways will not only help ensure that the meaningful work of student affairs work is included in the accreditation process, it will have the additional benefit of creating partnerships across campus, encouraging the collection of usable data, and lessening the scrambling when accreditation and reporting moments arrive.

## References

- ACPA (College Student Educators International) & NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education). (2010). *ACPA/NASPA professional competency areas for student affairs practitioners*. Washington, DC: Authors. Retrieved from [https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/ACPA\\_NASPA\\_Professional\\_Compencies\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/ACPA_NASPA_Professional_Compencies_FINAL.pdf)
- Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC). (2017). *Accreditation standards*. Retrieved from <https://accjc.org/eligibility-requirements-standards-policies/#accreditation-standards>
- Angula, A. J. (2016). *Diploma mills: How for-profit colleges stiffed students, taxpayers, and the American dream*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.
- Bartkus, K. R., Nemelka, B., Nemelka, M., & Gardner, P. (2012). Clarifying the meaning of extracurricular activity: A literature review of definitions. *American Journal of Business Education*, 5(6), 693-704. Retrieved from <https://www.cluteinstitute.com/ojs/index.php/AJBE/index>
- Brazzell, J. C., & Reisser, L. (1999). Creating inclusive communities. In G.S. Blimling & E.J. Whitt (Eds.), *Good practice in student affairs: Principles to foster student learning* (pp. 157-178). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Bucher, R.D. (2015). *Diversity consciousness: Opening our minds to people, cultures, and opportunities* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.

- Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (CIHE-NEASC). (2017). *Standards*. Retrieved from <https://cihe.neasc.org/standards-policies/standards-accreditation/standards-effective-july-1-2016>
- Contreras, A. (2009). *The legal basis for degree-granting authority in the United States*. Boulder, CO: State Higher Education Executive Officers. Retrieved from <http://raceethnicity.sheeo.org/sites/default/files/publications/Contreras2009-10-LegalDegreeGranting.pdf>
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). (2002). *The fundamentals of accreditation: What do you need to know?* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from [https://www.chea.org/userfiles/uploads/fund\\_accred\\_20ques\\_02.pdf](https://www.chea.org/userfiles/uploads/fund_accred_20ques_02.pdf)
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). (2015). *The condition of accreditation: US accreditation in 2013*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from [https://www.chea.org/userfiles/uploads/Condition\\_US\\_Accreditation\\_in\\_2013.pdf](https://www.chea.org/userfiles/uploads/Condition_US_Accreditation_in_2013.pdf)
- Deering, P.D. (1996). An ethnographic study of norms of inclusion and cooperation in a multiethnic middle school. *Urban Review*, 28(1), 21-39. doi: 10.110/BF02354376
- Eaton, J.S. (2015) *An overview of US accreditation*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.chea.org/userfiles/uploads/Overview%20of%20US%20Accreditation%202015.pdf>

- Fitzpatrick, J.L., Sanders, J.R., & Worthen, B.R. (2011). *Program evaluation: Alternative approaches and practical guidelines* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Harclerod, F. F. (1980). *Accreditation: History, process and problems*. Washington, DC: American Association of Higher Education.
- Heinrich, B. & Shea, H. (2017). *What is a co-curricular record and why does MSU need one?* Retrieved from <https://hub.msu.edu/what-is-a-co-curricular-record-and-why-does-msu-need-one/>
- Herdlein, R., Kretovics, M., Rossiter, C., Sobczak, J. (2011). A survey of senior student affairs officer perceptions of the role of politics in student affairs administration. *CSPA-NYS Journal of Student Affairs*, 11(1), 37-64. Retrieved from <http://journals.canisius.edu/index.php/CSPANY/index>
- Higher Learning Commission (HLC). (2017). *Policy title: Criteria for accreditation*. Retrieved from <https://www.hlcommission.org/Policies/criteria-and-core-components.html>
- Kelchen, R. (2017). *Higher education accreditation and the federal government*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/93306/higher-education-accreditation-and-the-federal-government.pdf>
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). (2017). *Standards for accreditation and requirements for affiliation*. Retrieved from [https://www.msche.org/publications\\_view.asp?idPublicationType=1&txtPublicationType=Standards+for+Accreditation+and+Requirements+of+Affiliation](https://www.msche.org/publications_view.asp?idPublicationType=1&txtPublicationType=Standards+for+Accreditation+and+Requirements+of+Affiliation)

- NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education). (2017). *About NASPA: Advancing leadership, shaping change*. Retrieved from <https://www.naspa.org/about>
- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). (2015). *Engagement indicators & high-impact practices*. Retrieved from [http://nsse.indiana.edu/pdf/EIs\\_and\\_HIPs\\_2015.pdf](http://nsse.indiana.edu/pdf/EIs_and_HIPs_2015.pdf)
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU). (2017). *NWCCU standards*. Retrieved from <http://www.nwccu.org/accreditation/standards-policies/standards/>
- Ryan, P. (2015). Quality assurance in higher education: A review of literature. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 5(4). doi:10.18870/hlrc.v5i4.257
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). (2017). *The principles of accreditation: Foundations for quality enhancement*. Retrieved from <http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/2018PrinciplesOfAcadreditation.pdf>
- WASC Senior College and University Commission (WASC). (2017). *Handbook of accreditation 2013 revised*. Retrieved from <https://www.wscuc.org/resources/handbook-accreditation-2013>
- Wodtke, C. (2017, August 26). How I stopped worrying and learned to love design thinking. [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@cwodtke/how-i-stopped-worrying-and-learned-to-love-design-thinking-f1142bab60e8>