A closer look at the Accreditation Standards

This is the fourth of a nine-part series highlighting each accreditation standard.

The latest Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities Accreditation Handbook begins with this rationale for the process: “Accreditation is a process of recognizing educational institutions for performance, integrity, and quality that entitles them to the confidence of the educational community and the public.” By undertaking this voluntary effort, Linfield assumes responsibility for demonstrating how the college fulfills and achieves – or plans to achieve – expected levels of performance within the context of our mission.

As a community, then, we are tasked to report on and evaluate Linfield according to nine standards identified by the Northwest Commission. Each of those standards consists of related performance measures, some of which overlap. The various members of the Accreditation Steering Committee oversee the discussions and assessment efforts related to each standard and have already formed working groups to investigate college practice in their assigned areas.

Standard Four – Faculty

Accreditation Standard Four consists of two sections: (1) Faculty Selection, Evaluation, Roles, Welfare, and Development; and (2) Scholarship, Research, and Artistic Creation.

SECTION 4.A asks the college to explain how the college ensures the selection, development and retention of faculty, factors “of paramount importance to the institution” since “the faculty’s central responsibility” is to ensure the quality of the educational programs.

To do so, faculty numbers and professional qualifications must be sufficient to foster “achievement of the institution’s missions and goals” and satisfactorily deliver the curriculum’s fields and programs.

The college must thus demonstrate how it sets about to employ professionally qualified faculty whose primary commitment lies with the institution. We must address the compensation issues that affect our effectiveness in attracting and retaining competent faculty, as well as assess the orderliness and transparency of our personnel policies.

In describing how the institution supports continued quality in the faculty, Linfield’s self-study must analyze workloads, compensation, and resources (including time) provided for professional growth and renewal.

Linfield’s policies and regulations regarding regular and systematic faculty evaluation must be discussed in view of an accreditation policy statement that presumes: (a) clearly delineated evaluation practices; (b) collegial engagement by faculty members and administration alike to ensure the content mastery and pedagogical effectiveness provided in the educational program; (c) ongoing reliance on multiple sources of information to assess faculty instruction, scholarly endeavor, and service; (d) specific plans of remediation where improvements in a faculty member’s performance is sought.

Faculty participation in academic planning, curriculum development and review, academic advising and institutional governance must be documented.

The institution must demonstrate that it fosters and protects academic freedom for faculty – an expectation so important to the accreditation of the institution that it surfaces in multiple places across the nine standards.

The college must also assess college practice around part-time and adjunct faculty, including their qualifications and professional experience, work assignments, and conditions of employment. We must demonstrate that policies concerning part-time and adjunct faculty are periodically reevaluated.

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SECTION 4.B recognizes the centrality of scholarship, including research and artistic creation, to the work of both faculty and students. This requires the college to demonstrate that scholarly/creative endeavor is integrated in mutually supportive ways with instructional activities and in ways “consistent with institutional mission and goals.”

Scholarship is defined by Standard Four as “systematic study of a chosen subject characterized by a high level of expertise, originality, critical analysis, significance, and demonstrability. Through scholarship, which may entail creation, application, synthesis, or transmission of knowledge, faculty acquire and sustain their expertise, thereby contributing to the validity and vitality of their teaching. Faculty scholarship is necessary to maintain effective instruction in all institutions of higher education. It also provides students the opportunity to observe and develop an understanding of scholarly activity.”

Research is defined as “scholarly activity directed toward constructing and/or revising theories, and creating or applying knowledge. Although not limited to graduate/research institutions, research is an essential and integral part of graduate education where it serves two principal functions: (1) it advances the frontiers of knowledge which, when disseminated, contributes to the welfare of society and ensures the viability of content in an academic discipline; and (2) it educates students in the methods of inquiry and prepares them for careers as scholars, researchers, or practitioners.”

Artistic creation is defined as “scholarly activity in the visual, performing, and literary arts that expresses original ideas, interpretations, imagination, thoughts, or feelings.”

In speaking to this section of Standard Four, the college must assess whether clearly communicated policies and procedures, including ethical considerations, guide these activities. Our self-study must also describe the degree of faculty involvement in developing and administering Linfield’s research policies and practices.

Because the standard is sensitive to the resources (including time) necessary for scholarly advancement, it asks us to evaluate whether appropriate financial, physical, administrative, and information support exists to further the institution’s goals for its faculty. The range of considerations involved in faculty advancement include the assignment of faculty responsibilities, reward system for faculty performance, and leave policies (especially sabbatical opportunities) to foster regular professional renewal.

And here too the standard requires evidence that faculty are accorded academic freedom to pursue scholarship, research, and artistic creation consistent with the institution’s mission and goals.

Required Documentation (an incomplete list):
- Statistics available concerning faculty and administration characteristics, such as numbers of males and females, minorities, full-time and part-time faculty, years of service with the institution, degrees or levels of education, and years of other significant service.
- Salary data for faculty, including compensation for special or extra responsibilities.
- Policy and procedures on the evaluation of faculty, both full-time and part-time.
- Representative examples of the institutional and public impact of faculty scholarship.

Required Exhibits (an incomplete list):
- Faculty Handbook, including personnel policies and procedures.
- Policy on Academic Freedom.
- Faculty committees and membership.
- Access to personnel files and current professional vitae.
- Copies of any doctrinal statements required for employment, promotion and tenure.
- Institutional policies regarding research activity, including sponsored research by faculty and students.

Suggested Materials:
- Statistics on faculty retention and turnover.

To learn more about the accreditation process, or to read the 1998 report, 1999 interim report or the 2003 visit report, or to see other materials that are available about the accreditation, go to:

http://www.linfield.edu/accreditation/index.php and click on “Resources.”