

Academic Quality and Its Relationship to WASC

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Just what is this thing we call *academic quality*? Is it like pornography? To paraphrase the famous quote: we know what it is when we see it, but are we able to define it? During this horrendous budget “episode,” one of the most frequently heard comments is that the main casualty of these cuts will be academic quality. Because faculty are furloughed, does that automatically mean academic quality will suffer?

In an attempt to get its arms around the quality conversation and come up with our measures of academic quality, a previous ad hoc committee of the Academic Senate surveyed the campus. We asked, *what are the attributes of academic quality*, and then, *just how well is CSUF doing on each?* Open-ended and fixed alternative responses were solicited. Almost 860 responded. Of these, almost 70% were students, nearly 25% were faculty, and the remainder (5%) were staff and administration.

Select Findings

For lecturers, students, staff and administration, the number one reflection of academic quality was: “faculty members are genuinely interested in student learning and they create supportive learning environments.” For full-time faculty, this statement was their second most important selection, whereas their number one academic quality reflection item was “the University courses, in its academic majors/programs, are rigorous and cutting edge.”

Faculty and students gave very high priority to having a strong, 21st century library with significant resources and state-of-the-art electronic access. Staff are less likely than either of these groups to look to the library as a reflection of academic quality. Students are more likely to consider accreditation as a reflection of academic quality than any other group, but all groups consider it important. Lecturers and students are more likely than faculty and staff to see a breadth and variety of academic programs consistent with a large comprehensive university serving a diverse community as an indicator of academic quality.

Although faculty see maintaining a predominantly tenured/tenure-track faculty selected and reviewed within strong RTP guidelines as important evidence of academic quality, lecturers, staff and students were considerably less likely to select this item. The same was also true for faculty accumulating a strong record of faculty scholarship/creative activity. Given their teaching responsibilities, it comes as no surprise that lecturers are the most “committed” to seeing a strong, integrated GE program as a reflection of academic quality.

CSUF’s Reality

It should already be clear from the aforementioned findings that the university’s constituencies were not in lock-step agreement on what items were reflective of academic quality. The same disconnect also appeared in their views of how we are doing. It was also interesting that although many had reflections of academic quality, considerably fewer had opinions about how we are doing. (Perhaps we don’t know?) This includes several of the reflection items thought to be important. For example, although students thought accreditation important, 41% of our constituents left the item on this “actuality” blank.

That said, however, full accreditation, regionally and discipline-specific, was seen as our highest achieved attribute (#1) of academic quality. Following very closely was the item on breadth and variety of degree programs (#2). Lecturers, staff and students gave a high actuality ranking to maintaining diversity among faculty, staff, etc., whereas faculty were less sanguine on this item. All constituents tended to agree (#4) that our faculty have strong records of qualifications, degrees, etc.

Staff (#5) and students (#4) were much more likely than faculty (#14) or lecturers (#11) to see the library in a favorable light, and they were also more likely to see our academic majors as rigorous and cutting edge. Faculty, lecturers and staff were more likely than students to see our faculty as accumulating strong scholarship records, but many students do not know

about these accomplishments. Staff were most likely to see the campus as maintaining high standing in U.S. News and World Report, but this item was one of the least selected, along with job placement of graduates (but students responding not as favorably as other constituents), high faculty performance on SOQ's (faculty responding more favorably) and co-curricular learning.

What does all this mean? It seems we have, in general, clear notions of academic quality. It also appears that constituents may differ on the items' importance and on CSUF's actual achievement on the reflection items as well. However, all constituencies agreed (#1) that we were doing well on maintaining full regional and specialized accreditations.

Academic Quality and WASC:

So, what is the relationship between academic quality and the WASC accreditation? We know from the above survey that accreditation is perceived as one of the highest attributes of academic quality. But do we understand why? Let's look at an appropriate source. "Accreditation is a process of external quality review created and used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and programs for quality assurance and quality improvement" (Eaton, 2006). In the U.S., accreditation is conducted by nonprofit, private organizations, such as Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), designed for this specific purpose. Our role is to collect and provide (to WASC) evidence of CSUF academic quality by submitting reports, data exhibits, and hosting visiting teams.

Pragmatic aspects include:

- *Assuring quality to the public and students.*

Accreditation is the primary means by which colleges, universities and programs assure quality to students and the public. Accredited status is conveyed only if institutions and programs provide evidence of fiscal stability.

- *Federal and state funds.*

Accreditation is required for access to federal funds, such as student aid and other federal programs. Federal student aid funds are available to students only if the institution or program they are attending is accredited by a recognized accrediting

organization. More than 50% of CSUF students use financial aid.

- *Easing transfer.*

Accreditation is important to students for smooth transfer of courses and programs among colleges and universities.

- *Engendering private sector confidence.*

Accreditation status of an institution or program is important to employers when evaluating the credentials of job applicants and when deciding whether to provide tuition support for current employees seeking additional education.

What is our current WASC re-accreditation status?

Accreditation is a three-phase process that includes three reports and two team visits. The work of the WASC Steering Committee and related task forces continues throughout the three phases.

- The Institutional Proposal was submitted in October 2007. The WASC Senior Commission accepted our proposal in December 2007.
- WASC Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR) visit will take place March 10-12, 2010.
- WASC Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) visit is scheduled for October 12-14, 2011.

Although it is easy to downplay the importance of accreditation during the ongoing budgetary upheavals, we must continue to provide evidence of academic quality necessary to secure imminent WASC re-accreditation and the national recognition it provides Cal State Fullerton.

Eaton, J. S. (2006). *An Overview of U.S. Accreditation.*



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