Alabama A&M University Conference on Institutional Effectiveness and SACS Compliance

“How to Write Convincing Narratives”

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Do not let the situation confuse you...
Presentation Overview*

I. Common Understandings
   - SACS Philosophy of Accreditation
   - Definition of Terms

II. Imperatives for Writing Convincing Narratives

III. Analyzing a Case for Compliance

IV. Review Examples and Charts

Disclaimer: This presentation in part or in whole is based on various SACSCOC materials to which we acknowledge all credits.
I. Common Understandings
   A. Philosophy
   B. Definitions
A. Accreditation Philosophy

Four Concepts

Accreditation Philosophy

• At the heart of SACSCOC accreditation is the belief in each institution’s effectiveness and its ability to create and sustain an environment that enhances student learning. This belief is supported by a reaffirmation process that includes four components:
  • Peer Review- a review by colleagues in higher education and professional practice with knowledge and experience that enables them to render professional judgment related to quality and effectiveness.
  • Institutional Integrity- characterized by forthright, truthful, accurate and complete interactions with constituent groups and SACSCOC.
  • Quality Enhancement and Continuous Improvement- commitment to the implementation and utilization of results that provide the foundation for quality enhancement.
  • Focus on Student Learning- a commitment to assuring a quality product.
Student Learning: A Quick Overview
Student Learning Defined

• **Student Learning**
  – Knowledge
  – Skills
  – Behaviors
  – Values

• **Student Learning Outcomes**
  – Clearly focused
  – Measurable
Student Learning As A Transformative Process

Source: Southern Education Foundation
Caula A. Beyl

Transformative process depicting the student as a lump of coal being transmuted into a rough diamond as a result of learning and ultimately into the finished and polished diamond representing the final product of program and university experience.

- Core Curriculum
- Peer Relationships
- University Environment
- Program Curriculum
- Advisor Mentorship
- Instructor Relationships
- Incoming Freshman
- University Core Curriculum Completed
- Graduating Senior
Student Learning Assessment

“Student-learning assessment is an evidenced-based accounting of student engagement in academic, social/civic, personal/interpersonal, physical, and political programs and activities to assure educational quality.”
B. Definition of Terms

- Compliance Certification
- Core Requirements
- Comprehensive Standards
- Coherent Evidence
- Current Evidence
- Federal Requirements
- Relevant Evidence
- Reliable/Verifiable Evidence
- Representative Evidence
Terms

• **Compliance Certification**- primary document submitted to SACSCOC for initial accreditation or reaffirmation of accreditation that provides narrative arguments for compliance with the Core Requirements (CR) or Comprehensive Standards (CS) and Federal Requirements (FR).

• **Core Requirements**- *basic, broad-based, foundational requirements that establishes a threshold for an in-depth analysis through the Comprehensive Standards.*

• **Comprehensive Standards**- specific to the operations at an institution, establishes expected levels of accomplishment, and represent good practice in higher education.

• **Federal Requirements**- reflect criteria established by the U.S. Department of Education for inclusion in regional accreditation reviews.
Terms

• **Coherent Evidence** - the level of the institution’s compliance with SACSCOC CR, CS and FR is **orderly** and **logical** and **consistent** with other patterns of evidence presented.

• **Current Evidence** - information that is **up-to-date** and **supports** an assessment of the institution.

• **Relevant Evidence** - evidence that **directly addresses** a CR, CS, or FR and provides the basis for the institution’s argument for compliance.

• **Reliable/Verifiable Evidence** - data that can be **consistently replicated**, **corroborated**, and **interpreted** to provide the basis for compliance with the CR, CS, or FR.

• **Representative Evidence** - is not indicative of an **isolated case** but is representative of a **larger body of knowledge**.
II. Imperatives for Writing Convincing Narratives

• Compliance Components
• Commission Policies and Guidelines
• Documentation
• Evaluation of Evidence
• Determining Compliance
• Building a Case for Compliance
• Length of the Narrative
Compliance Components

- Compliance Components- multiple discrete issues that are embedded in the Core Requirements, Comprehensive Standards, and Federal Requirements that must be addressed when responding to the requirement or standards. Look for:
  - Numbers
  - Commas
  - Modifiers
Commission Policies

- Commission policies are designed to provide **guidance and clarity** for compliance with several standards that may involve alternative approaches and congruence of institutional policies and commission policies. These include:

  - 2.3  2.7.4  3.4
  - 3.4.4  3.5.2  3.6.3
  - 3.12  3.13  4.5
Documentation

• An accurate knowledge and interpretation of the CR, CS, and FR should be followed by the assembly and inventory of documents related to each CR and CS. Examples of documents may include:

  - Publications
  - Policies
  - Minutes
  - Handbooks
  - Institutional Data
  - Audits
  - Personnel Files
  - Contracts
  - Assessment Data
  - MOUs
Evaluating Evidence

- **Reliable** - evidence can be consistently interpreted.
- **Current** - information supports the current status of the institution.
- **Verifiable** - evidence can be corroborated and replicated.
- **Objective** - evidence is based on observable data.
- **Relevant** - evidence directly addresses the requirement or standard.
- **Representative** - evidence reflects a larger body of evidence.
Determining Compliance

- Institutions are required to make a determination of their compliance status. This determination should be based on the body of evidence (Documentation) assembled. An institution will determine that it is:
  - **Fully Compliant** - complies with all requirements of a CR, CS, or FR.
  - **In Partial Compliance** - complies with some but not all aspects of a CR, CS, or FR.
  - **Non-Compliant** - does not comply with any aspect of a CR, CS, or FR.
Developing the Narrative to Support Compliance

• Narratives should provide a clear, succinct, and convincing justification.

• Narratives should summarize and interpret the attached documentation and link them to the variables (components) in the CR, CS, and FR.

• Narratives should make copious use of past tense verbs to describe actions previously taken, present tense to describe current actions to support continuation of compliance.
Length of the Narrative

• The length of the narrative may vary from one CR and CS to another. Some may require a sentence or two such as CR. 2.6 or several pages such as CR. 2.5.

• A key guide to writing the narrative is to use the identified components for each CR and CS.

• Techniques to use in writing the narratives:
Length of Narrative Continued

1. Use various **sub-headings** to separate ideas and show relationships among component parts.

2. Create **flow charts** to illustrate complex processes.

3. Use **summary tables** to provide an overview of mass data.

4. Pinpoint and **interpret** extensive or complex documents.
III. Analysis of a Case for Compliance

IV. Examples