1.5.1 Writing a Self-Study Report

by Marie M. B. Racine (French & Linguistics, University of the District of Columbia)

This module presents a methodology for writing a self-study report that can be used to guide the accreditation process for programs or institutions. A self-study report which accurately reflects the efforts and progress of an organization in meeting its mission and goals begins with careful planning and preparation, and it should engage all constituents in a thorough examination of its policies, procedures, and practices. Analysis must follow to determine strengths and areas for improvement in the organization’s pursuit of its mission and goals. The report should document the process followed, evidence collected, conclusions drawn, and actions taken to meet the expectations of the accrediting organization. In addition to defining the steps for organizing and writing a self study report, this module gives recommendations for executing each step in a way that engages and energizes participants in the self-study process.

Methodology for Writing a Self-Study Report

A well-organized self-study process is the starting point for a thorough and thoughtful review of an institution or selected aspects of its programs and operations. The methodology for writing a self-study report, outlined in Table 1, is intended to assist schools, colleges, and universities seek initial accreditation or prepare for re-accreditation. As the institution begins to engage in the self-study, it is important to frame its activities within changing expectations for higher education and new faculty roles for institutional effectiveness (1.1.2 Changing Expectations for Higher Education).

Step 1—Define the Purpose.

It is important to begin by defining the purpose of a self study. A self study can be conducted to help an organization meet the requirements of an external body, or it can be done for internal purposes when an institution wants to assess its efforts in fulfilling its stated mission and goals. For example, a self study may review all components of the college or university as part of a strategic planning exercise, or it may target selected programs or operations of the institution for review as part of an accreditation cycle. If a self-study is conducted in the context of accreditation, its primary purpose is to demonstrate an organization’s fulfillment of its mission and compliance with specified criteria or requirements (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2002).

Step 2—Integrate the Key Principles.

To conduct a substantive self-study that leads to a truthful and credible self-study report, it is essential to adhere to the five principles described below.

Leadership Support

It is critical for top administrators including the president, provost, vice-presidents, deans, and program directors to fully support the self-study effort. They must demonstrate their own commitment to self assessment as a tool for achieving institutional excellence by engaging in institutional reflection and working as a team to define the essence of the institution, its vision, its current and future goals, and its measures of institutional effectiveness (1.2.3 New Faculty Roles for Institutional Effectiveness). When they model the behaviors they expect of the educational community, leaders send a powerful message of support.

Top leadership must also promote self-study as a campus-wide responsibility and encourage the involvement of interested members from the broader community. Effective promotion requires tangible support, including the necessary space, personnel, release time, equipment, and materials needed to carry-out the tasks of the self study. Such support clearly indicates the leadership’s commitment to quality improvement and student success, as well as its intent to be responsive to the needs, expectations, and aspirations of the communities it serves.

Transparency and Openness

To encourage the involvement of the entire educational community, a self-study must be open, transparent, and inclusive. In an effective self-study process, the work of the steering committee and sub-committees is available for general review and comment. Sub-committee meetings as well as steering committee meetings are open to all members of the community; and minutes, reports, and all other documents are accessible in a variety of venues. The community is continuously and fully informed of activities through announcements, regular and special meetings, open forums, frequent workshops, and articles in campus publications. One mechanism for sharing information openly is the use of an electronic course management system, such as Blackboard™, since it is accessible to faculty, students, staff, and administrators. Blackboard™ provides a vehicle for posting sub-committee reports, minutes, notes, and general announcements, and it also facilitates discussions and feedback. It allows people to address openly the issues that they really care about, thus encouraging buy-in and a sense of ownership. It also contributes to the integrity of the process.
Table 1  

**Methodology for Designing a Process for Writing a Self-Study Report**

1. **Define the Purpose**  
   Select the type of self-study and approach that best suit the institution’s and accrediting agency’s needs and priorities.

2. **Integrate the Key Principles**  
   During the entire process, it is critical to always keep the key principles in mind in all steps of the process. These include:
   a. **Leadership Support**: Secure and emphasize the involvement of the top administrators to fully support the self-study effort.
   b. **Transparency and Openness**: Assure that the work of the sub-committees and the steering committee is accessible for general review, comments, and input.
   c. **Integrity and Honesty**: Answer research questions honestly, in an unbiased manner, including all viewpoints.
   d. **Evidence**: Document the findings, support analyses, and conclusions with evidence.
   e. **Continuous Improvement**: Trace and document continuous improvements resulting from previous self-studies, internal assessment systems, and evaluation reports. In addition, demonstrate the accomplishment of previous action items and plans.

3. **Build the Self-Study Team**
   a. Involve all stakeholders from the board of trustees to the administration, faculty, staff, students, alumni, and the broader community served by the institution. Strive for broad- based community buy-in.
   b. Enlist the volunteer services of colleagues from the faculty, administration, students, and others to serve on the various standards sub-committees.
   c. Invite volunteers to select the sub-committees on which they wish to serve.
   d. When necessary, appoint individuals who have special expertise in a given area represented by the standards.
   e. Provide sub-committees with a description of the standards or criteria and request that they develop charges for their respective tasks.

4. **Incorporate Professional Development**
   a. Very early in the process, establish a clear distinction between assessment (process for improvement) and evaluation (process for judgment).
   b. Develop an assessment mindset and adopt the assessment methodology.

5. **Conduct Research**
   a. Generate the research questions related to each standard or criterion.
   b. Develop the self-study design from the sub-committee’s charges and research questions.
   c. Write the draft reports related to each standard.

6. **Incorporate Essential Components in Storytelling**
   a. Review past self-studies, evaluation reports, periodic review reports, annual reports, and other specific reports to document the story of the institution, its accomplishments, and challenges since the last self-study.
   b. Link the various processes established to fulfill the institution’s mission and goals, and plans for the future.
   c. Report on the major accomplishments, the challenges successfully met, and the areas requiring further improvements. Define specific actions steps for continuous growth and improvement.
   d. Describe the historical context and tell the story that relates the evolution and progress of the institution since the last self-study.
Integrity and Honesty

The institution must operate with integrity and articulate its commitments publicly. It must answer research questions with honesty, it must document how it protects the integrity of its mission, and it must demonstrate how its structures support leadership and collaborative processes. Evidence of integrity and honesty will include various constituencies testifying that the institution adheres to ethical standards and behavior in carrying out all of its activities. It is important to highlight the institution’s strengths in this area, to note progress that has been made, and to outline issues that still need to be addressed. An organization should never attempt to hide any significant issue, an action that can only undermine the integrity of the process and erode confidence in the veracity of the report.

Evidence

It is important to collect reliable evidence of effectiveness in fulfilling the institutional mission and goals. Sub-committees or working groups should gather information and collect data to document how the institution strives to achieve excellence in its academic programs and in its delivery of services to its stakeholders. Data, tables, charts, and graphics should illustrate the narrative, and analyses, statements of findings, and conclusions must be supported with evidence. The evidence should be analyzed for the purpose of reporting strengths, areas in need of improvement, and insights, using the SII summative assessment methodology (4.1.9 SII Method for Assessment Reporting). This collected evidence also serves to establish the institution’s compliance with the accreditation standards.

Continuous Improvement

It is important to document any continuous improvement that has resulted from previous self-studies or evaluation reports in order to show how the institution, its programs, and its operations have evolved and progressed as a result of prior assessment activities. Accomplishment of previous action plans should be documented, and significant examples of institutional renewal should be highlighted and linked to planning efforts. Findings in this area should be illustrated with continuous improvement charts that outline the growth and development of both programs and units. It is also crucial to align all planning efforts with the institution’s mission and its current and future goals. Strategies should be developed that will demonstrate the commitment of the institution to continuous improvement and to the enhancement of its capacity to fulfill its mission.

Steps 3—Build the Self-Study Team.

The self-study is best done in a collegial manner with a spirit of collaboration. It is a participatory and collaborative process that must be inclusive. It should be the concern of everyone at the institution and should involve all stakeholders, from the board of trustees to the administration, the faculty, the staff, the students, the alumni, and the broader community served by the university. It is essential to engage everyone and to strive for broad based community buy-in.

Volunteers, including faculty, administrators, trustees, alumni, students, and members of the larger community, should be enlisted to serve on the various standards sub-committees or working groups. While it is usually preferable for volunteers to select the sub-committees on which they wish to serve, sometimes it may be necessary to appoint individuals who have special expertise in a given area represented by the standards. Sub-committee members may be asked to select their own chair or co-chairs. These sub-committee chairs or co-chairs will constitute the steering committee. All active participants are members of the self-study team.

The sub-committees and the steering committee work hand in hand. The sub-committees should be provided with a description of the standards or criteria, and they should develop sub-committee charges for their respective tasks.

Step 4—Incorporate Professional Development.

Self-examination should naturally lead to self-assessment. An institution and its members need to fully understand the importance of assessment for growth and development. By embracing an assessment culture, by committing to continuous self-assessment and improvement of programs and operations, an institution adopts an assessment mindset that will transform its self-perceptions and its outlook.

Though many institutions have been engaged in outcome assessments for a decade or two, it is still imperative to cultivate a pervasive culture of assessment within the university or college (4.1.2 Distinctions Between Assessment and Evaluation and 4.1.3 Mindset for Assessment). In order to develop a deeper understanding of assessment and to incorporate assessment in all functions and activities, it is necessary to provide training and to grow expertise in performing assessment throughout the institution (Palomba & Banta, 1999). It is best to accomplish this through a program of faculty and professional development that focuses on understanding assessment and its importance for continuous improvement (1.5.2 Methodology for Designing a Program Assessment System and 1.5.8 Assessing Program Assessment Systems).
Step 5—Conduct Research.

After the charges are developed, sub-committees proceed to formulate the research questions relevant to their tasks. The sub-committees’ charges and research questions will form the basis for developing a draft self-study design, which in turn is reviewed, refined, and approved by the steering committee. After the self-study design is submitted to and accepted by the accrediting association, the sub-committees and steering committees pursue their self-examination, inquiry, and reflection as they seek responses to the questions and issues raised. This is followed by the collection of data and evidence to support analysis.

The sub-committees then write the draft reports related to each standard. Once the individual standards draft reports have been written, the steering committee reviews them against the self-study design to ascertain the extent to which the institution is meeting the standards (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2002). The various standards reports will later be compiled into the self-study draft report for further review and validation by the entire community.

Steps 6—Incorporate Essential Components in Storytelling.

One of the most effective ways to profile an institution and introduce it to others is to write a compelling story of why and how the institution is serving its stakeholders in a meaningful way. In order to do so effectively, it is important to document the continuity of significant events that have had an impact on the institution’s functioning, the substantive activities it has undertaken, and the major efforts it has made to respond to the needs of its constituencies. Responses to previous recommendations will demonstrate progress made since the last accreditation visit and the last report provided by the accrediting association.

The report should tell story of the evolution of the university during the past ten years or since the last accreditation evaluation. It is helpful to review previous self-studies, evaluation reports, periodic review reports, and other specific reports that will assist in relating the story of the institution and the major challenges it has faced. It is effective to link the various processes established by the university to fulfill its mission and goals, to improve its operations, and to plan for the future. It is essential that the self-study report align with all university processes such as the strategic plan, master plan, technology plan, enrollment management plan, retention plan, and others. The summative assessment can be incorporated into the story to highlight the most significant accomplishments, the major challenges that were successfully met, and the areas that require further improvement. Program and unit assessment systems and strategic plans will provide recommended action steps for continuous improvement and future growth and development.

Concluding Thoughts

Writing a self-study report can be a frenzied paper chase for a handful of faculty and administrators, or it can be an opportunity to devote time for wider reflection and self-assessment about a program or institution. While an honest and credible self-study report is the final product, the steps used to create this report determine the extent to which the perspectives, findings, and recommendations in the report are embedded in the academic culture. Therefore, the self-study efforts need to be planned and organized both from the top down and from the bottom up. The methodology offered in this module shows how individuals can become constructively engaged in producing required accreditation materials while also generating shared understanding and commitment. Rather than being a burden, the self-study report is an opportunity to celebrate program or institution strengths, develop mindshare about important challenges, and initiate community-based plans for quality improvement.

References


