

# POST-SECONDARY REGIONAL ACCREDITATION ASSESSMENT STANDARDS IN THE UNITED STATES

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## Abstract

Regional accreditation organizations in the United States have increased their demands for transparency of student outcomes, as well as articulated the demands for a continuous improvement model that includes the assessment and evaluation of student learning. A review of the regional accreditation organizations in the United States was conducted to determine the assessment methods required to meet the accreditation standards. Two broad categories of assessment methods were identified as *direct* and *indirect* methods; however, a universal definition of the two assessment methods did not exist. This review resulted in the categorization of both methods as a resource for those responsible for assessment activities.

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**Keywords:** Regional accreditation, assessment methods, direct assessment

## Introduction

In the United States, the cost of higher education has been consistently on the rise, resulting in higher levels of debt for students and their parents. In this climate, colleges are scrutinized to ensure transparency to its constituencies, including parents, policymakers, and the public. As a result, accreditation organizations are requiring institutions to assess student learning in a systematic manner and report the results as a part of their continuous improvement model.

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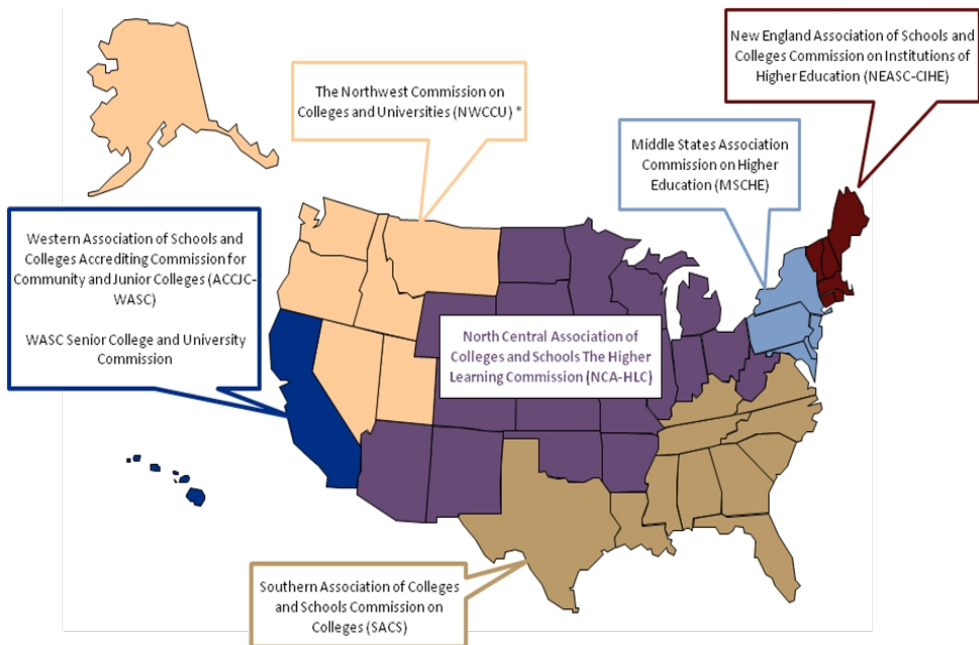
In order for a post-secondary institution to have the authority to grant federal financial aid, the institution must have a valid statement of accreditation status from their regional accreditation organization. Regional accreditation provides accreditation status to the entire institution, not just specific programs, therefore, providing a level of credibility to the entire

institution. There are seven accreditation agencies serving the six regions of the United States (see Figure 1):

1. Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges  
Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACCJC-WASC);
2. Higher Learning Commission (HLC);
3. Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE);
4. New England Association of Schools and Colleges;
5. Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU);
6. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS); and
7. WASC Senior College and University Commission (WASC-SCUC).

It should be noted that six of the seven accreditation organizations are recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), which is a non-profit organization of colleges and universities serving as the national advocate for voluntary self-regulation. Recognition by CHEA affirms that the standards and processes of the accrediting organization are consistent with the academic quality, improvement and accountability expectations that CHEA has established.

Figure 1. United States Regional Accreditation Agencies



These seven regional accreditation organizations, across the nation, now require institutions to develop and implement a system of continuous improvement which involves four key components: 1) define goals and student learning outcomes, 2) provide evidence of the assessment of these outcomes, 3) evaluate the adequacy of the attainment of the outcomes, and 4)

take actions to improve outcomes based upon the evaluation. In reviewing the standards and guidelines, two broad categories of assessment methods were identified by the regional accreditation bodies as *direct* or *indirect* methods of assessment.

There is consensus among the regional accreditation organizations that an institution's continuous improvement model should include both types of assessment methods in order to provide evidence of student learning, with an apparent emphasis on direct methods of assessment. These measures can be used to assess and evaluate courses, programs, as well as institutional outcomes. In recent years, there has been a shift from the use of indirect to direct methods of assessment.

All of the accreditation organizations provided guidelines for the assessment of student outcomes; however, there was no universal definition for direct and indirect assessment methods. The MSCHE did provide specific examples for each assessment type, which are presented in Table 1. After reviewing the seven regional accreditation standards and guidelines, the most frequently used measures of assessment were categorized as direct or indirect methods (see Table 2). Direct measures of student learning are the result of assessments designed to permit the observation of student work, by a qualified professional such as department faculty. According to WASC (2013), direct assessments are a way of gauging the quality of student learning by examining student work products and performances directly, rather than relying on surrogates such as grades or credit hours. Indirect measures of student learning are the result of self-reported opinions or satisfaction, or data that were not designed to provide a level of specificity to identify strengths and weaknesses for student outcomes or objectives.

Table 1. MSCHE Examples of Evidence of Student Learning

<b>Direct Assessment Methods</b>	<b>Indirect Assessment Methods</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scores on locally developed exams accompanied by test blueprints describing what the tests assess;</li> <li>• Portfolios of student work;</li> <li>• Capstone experiences such as research projects, presentations, theses, dissertations, oral defenses, exhibitions, or performances, scored using a rubric;</li> <li>• Score gains between entry and exit on published or local tests or writing samples;</li> <li>• Summaries and analyses of electronic discussion threads;</li> <li>• Other written work, performances, or presentations, scored using a rubric;</li> <li>• Employer ratings of employee/student intern skills</li> <li>• Ratings of student skills by field experience supervisors;</li> <li>• Scores and pass rates on licensure/certification exams or other published tests;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course grades;</li> <li>• Assignment grades if not accompanied by a scoring rubric;</li> <li>• Admission rates into graduate programs and graduation rates from those programs (4-year programs);</li> <li>• Admission rates into four-year institution programs and graduation rates from those institutions (2-year programs);</li> <li>• Placement rates of graduates into appropriate career positions and starting salaries;</li> <li>• Student ratings of their knowledge and skills and reflections of what they learned in the course/program</li> <li>• Questions on end-of-course student evaluations that ask about their course, rather than their instructor</li> <li>• Student/alumni satisfaction with their learning collected through surveys, interviews or focus groups</li> </ul>

Table 2. Classification of Direct and Indirect Assessment Methods

<b>Assessment Method</b>	<b>Direct</b>	<b>Indirect</b>
Behavioral Observations collected and documented in a systematic manner	◆	
Focus Groups		◆
Grades		◆
Graduation Rates		◆
Interviews		◆
Locally Developed Exams accompanied by a test blueprint	◆	
Oral Exams with a scoring analysis	◆	
Performance Appraisal with a scoring rubric	◆	
Portfolios with documentation of student achievement of outcomes	◆	
Standardized or Certification/Licensure Exams	◆	
Surveys capturing self-reported learning or satisfaction		◆

According to NEASC (2011), the institution must implement and provide support for systematic and broad-based assessment of what and how students are learning through their academic program and experiences outside the classroom. Assessment should be based on clear statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program and provides useful information that helps the institution to improve the experiences provided for students, as

well as to assure that the level of student achievement is appropriate for the degree awarded (NEASC Standards, 2011). Similar standards exist for all of the accreditation organizations.

It is clear that assessment is highly valued by accreditation organizations and recognized as a necessary part of the educational process that enables faculty and administrators to identify student strengths and weaknesses, and develop strategies to improve student outcomes. Although accreditation organizations have increased the dialogue of assessment and accountability, some critics maintain that institutions are still not assessing their effectiveness and are not advising the public of the quality of the education they provide to students.

Over the past several years, progress has been made regarding institutional transparency in a coordinated effort through the United States Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA). This system has been successful engaging post-secondary institutions to report select data, which is then provided to the public through the national College Portrait, a website created as part of the VSA. Although the College Portrait is gaining national recognition, and providing an added level of transparency, regional accreditation organizations maintain that institutions cannot only report statistics to a voluntary system such as the VSA, but must also have a documented continuous improvement model that is actively used by the institution. This continuous improvement model should provide the framework for a sustainable and faculty driven assessment process for institution-level, program-level, and in some instances, the assessment of course-level learning outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

Accreditation standards have purportedly resulted in an increased understanding of the assessment of student outcomes at various levels. When communicating the necessity and utility of assessment, as well as the various assessment methods to faculty; it is necessary to provide them with context. Presenting the standards and definitions of the accreditation organization, along with a contextual knowledge of the assessment process, will enable faculty to conduct meaningful assessment activities. Initially, when faculty are introduced to accreditation standards and assessment requirements, they may merely conduct their assessment activities as an act of compliance. However, once they understand that the accreditation requirements align with their regular academic responsibilities, the assessment activities will not be viewed as obtrusive. An institution can assist faculty by helping them to establish an effective continuous improvement system in which they can become actively engaged and witness the benefits to student learning.

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