

7 PRACTICAL TIPS: How Assessment & Accreditation Weave Together





Welcome to the job you didn't know you wanted.

Most assessment, accreditation, and IE directors didn't set out to be in their roles. Until recently, there were not even courses on those topics, let alone programs of study or career paths. Typically the jobs were filled by organized faculty and staff with a true desire to understand and improve their institution. And, let's be honest, sometimes taking on this work was the result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or being volunteered :).

Happily this important field is growing, and is filled with people like YOU.

You might be new to assessment. We're going to let you in on a little secret – assessment and accreditation go together like flowers and bees. They are both rooted in a desire to genuinely investigate, understand, reflect, and

improve. They both encourage an application of the scientific process to something we hold most dear: how our institution serves its most valuable stakeholders – our students.

While, yes, assessment and accreditation do “check some boxes,” they are much more than that. They are the opportunity to examine our programs and institutions, to celebrate how amazing they are, and identify how they can become even better. We've developed this ebook with the hopes of empowering practitioners to tackle their work with purpose and be successful in it.

This work is not for the faint of heart, but for brave colleagues ready to set out on an adventure. Get your cape on – your institution needs a hero like you!

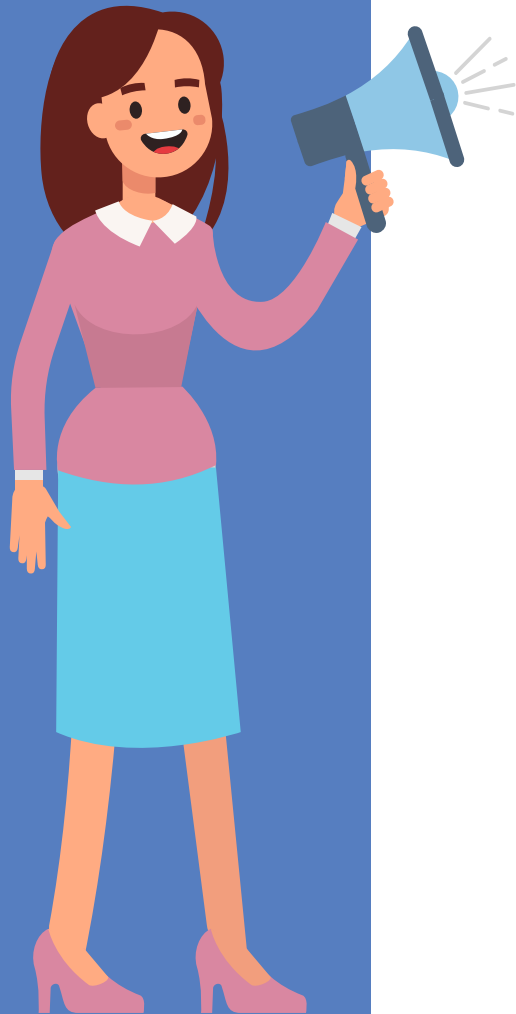


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CONCLUSION & RESOURCES

Important Context

Before we can see where we're going, it can be useful to look at where we've been. Higher education began centuries ago, but as it has grown, there have been (and continue to be) many calls for improvement and accountability, which is where the system we know today began.

Accredited institutions are typically accountable to three areas: The Department of Education that defines national laws, the regional accreditor that confers accreditation and reaffirmation, and the additional requirements that most states have.



Where did assessment come from?

Questions about retention, value-add, and competencies prompted practitioners to perform action research in the form of program evaluation, strategic planning, and budgeting. This looks a lot like the methodology we know and love: set outcomes, define measurements and success criteria, gather data, reflect, take action.

What is the relationship between accreditation and assessment?

Very similar to assessment, accreditation seeks to ensure an acceptable level of quality across diverse programs and institutions in higher education. Assessment of student learning is key to ensuring that quality.

The Department of Education describes accreditation as *"a means of conducting nongovernmental, peer*



evaluation of educational institutions and programs” and lists the following as some of the purposes of accreditation:

- Assess the quality of academic programs at institutions of higher education
- Create a culture of continuous improvement of academic quality at colleges and universities and stimulate a general raising of standards among educational institutions
- Involve the faculty and staff comprehensively in institutional evaluation and planning
- Establish criteria for professional certification and licensure and for upgrading courses offering such preparation

Additionally, The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (a non-governmental organization that holds accreditors accountable) provides a major national and international forum for communication and exchange among accrediting organizations, institutions and programs by:

- Ensuring that a neutral, external party has reviewed, using appropriate peer expertise, the quality of

education provided by an institution or program and offered suggestions for improvement

- Ensuring eligible students have access to federal financial aid (only accredited schools qualify)
- Signaling to prospective employers that an educational program has met widely accepted educational standards. A particular field may require graduation from an accredited program or institution

What is assessment and accreditation good for?

- Most importantly, it promotes **providing quality** for our stakeholders
- Accreditation goes further as a vehicle of **transparency and accountability**, as well as by upholding a shared set of values and standards
- Assessment is truly research – what are you aiming to do or accomplish, how will you know you’ve done it, and what can you do if you have not? This genuine process of **reflection and growth is vital to education**



Big Picture Advice

Some of the most critical advice for managing successful assessment and accreditation is from a higher level perspective (the nitty gritty is in the next section!). Having some of these foundational pieces in place can ensure a smooth experience.



Tie assessment to accreditation

While technically assessment may only cover a few parts of the accreditation report, in actuality the entire process is modeled after assessment. What are our goals and responsibilities, and how are we showing that we are achieving them (and if not, what's the plan)? Both are a process of discovery and adjustment in the pursuit of our mission and values.

Strive for a continuous journey

This is not something to panic over every 5-10 years. Not only is the experience easier and more successful when done on a continuous basis, we also have

better information to act on and to help us improve. Rather than implying, “we need to get this done for our re-accreditation in a few years,” we can instead re-frame the objective as, “ensuring and sharing the quality of what goes on here.”

Involve others

Don't shoulder the institution's assessment or accreditation all by yourself (trust us, it's impossible!), even if you are a “one-person shop.”

- **Create a sense of shared responsibility and community.** The institution and students are important to everyone – not just to IE professionals. Also, this applies to each employee



at the institution - from the President to the Parking Department. Tap into campus pride at ALL levels.

- **Find champions.** There are colleagues who have experience and passion for this on your campus! Reach out to them for support, involve them in being ambassadors for this important work.
- **Collaborate with faculty and staff** not only on gathering data and items for reports but for designing a sustainable process.
- **Access the amazing community of professionals out there!** There are close to 4,300 institutions with someone working on exactly what you are. There's no need to reinvent the wheel; connect with colleagues and learn from their experiences. (The Resources section below has some suggestions!).

Be mindful of how you communicate

How you say it is just as important as what you say. This is important to all of us. Why do you feel this work is important and vital? Lead with that answer and allow that passion to permeate all your communication. Your tone will set how people perceive assessment and accreditation. This work IS important, and the way we talk about it

should convey that it matters. We do not assess because we HAVE to but because it is vitally important. While one inescapable aspect of assessment and accreditation is certainly compliance, at its core it is examining the health of our institution and what we provide for our students. It is our chance to tell our institution's story to the world. That's something everyone can get behind! Reaffirmation is simply a byproduct, not THE product.

Respect is key. Avoid situations and communication that imply "buy in," as this implies coercion. Faculty and staff (including you!) are intelligent and conscientious - they do not need to be "sold" on assessment and accreditation. Don't assume they will be resistant - have a different conversation:

- Create an environment where you are a resource for these items. They are an expert in their field and in their classes, and you are an expert in IE. This partnership can result in more efficient work for you both!
- Be clear about the process and what you need while also emphasizing how this all can be relevant to them.
- Keep in mind that assessment and accreditation are only a part of their work, and respect their time and



other duties. Communication and meetings should be relevant and productive for all parties.

- Practice active listening. Probe for questions about what is important to them, what's working, and what isn't. Continue to work together toward solutions.

Stay positive and embrace this as a way to learn about your institution (program, students, etc.)

- Promote assessment as a tool they can use, rather than as additional work. What are they already doing that they can utilize and share? What have they already discovered and improved? What do they wish they knew or had? Helping them work through those questions will yield productive and impactful action.
- Share the value of the accreditation process and demonstrate how it is an opportunity to ensure our mission and values are being carried out.

Patience, resilience, flexibility

Processes, data collection and analysis, report writing, and relationships take time. Often the results of our hard work won't be seen immediately. The entire journey is very iterative because things do not always go according to our well-thought-out plans. The ability to accept this as an opportunity to make positive change will make all the difference!



7 Top Tips for Institutional Effectiveness

Below, we have curated 7 top tips from our community and [Knowledge Center Resources](#). These flow from the themes in the previous section and are actionable advice from people just like you.



1 COMPLETE A SELF-ASSESSMENT

- Begin at the beginning: Where is your institution? Is there a process for data collection and report writing already? What gaps are there? What is the culture toward assessment and accreditation?
- Closely examine the current process; take it apart and put it back together. What is needed to make it work well?

2 INVEST IN YOURSELF

- Set aside time and resources for your continuing education. It will save time and money (and ward off nervous breakdowns) in the long run!
- Don't reinvent the wheel. Reach out to others doing this work and learn best practices.
- Serve on a review team or observe with a review team at other campuses.

3

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH COMMUNICATION

Tone

- Teamwork: It will take a village! Keep relationships as paramount. While having project management skills is definitely a plus for this role, people skills might be even more important!
- Honesty: Be honest and genuine. Hiding uncomfortable realities will eventually destroy trust.
- Positivity: This work is important, interesting, and can be enjoyable! Talk about your work with confidence.

Process

- Start at the very beginning: Remember not everyone thinks about this daily like we do! Educate people about the process and what's required for transparency; share resources for how it will get done.
- Speak the same language: Establish common terminology for assessment and accreditation to ensure everyone is on the same page.
- Be Consistent: Establish regular, meaningful meetings and communication. Always have and follow an agenda for meetings and ensure all emails have value.

Feedback

- Office Hours: Meet with people individually when necessary, especially to assist them in completing this work.
- READ what you ask for and provide comments: We are not so different from students. If we don't receive feedback, we will treat assignments as busywork and reports will be of poorer quality.

Have some fun!

- Make it enjoyable to do assessment/ accreditation work, not a chore.
- Network and provide opportunities for professional development for your faculty and staff teams.
- Feed people!
- Celebrate regularly, and publicly if possible! There are so many successes that merit sharing.



4

PROVIDE RESOURCES

As we think about training faculty and staff and creating lasting change on campus, focus on learning and improvement and WHY we do this work, backed by data and research to shape the conversation.

Use opportunities you already have to connect with faculty and staff

- Use 15 minutes of an existing faculty meeting to talk about assessment and accreditation.
- Attend and network at faculty orientation.
- Consider partnering with the teaching & learning center for training expertise.
- Find and utilize your champions! Faculty and staff with IE experience are excellent ambassadors for their disciplines (they are also awesome to have on your IE committee).

Offer Training: What works best with your audience?

- Individual or group? Content all at once or as needed?
- To train the trainer – one person per division on how to train their people – or for your office to provide it all?

- Do you need to do separate training on software?
- What would the timeline be for training?
- What other formats would be useful? A website? Handouts? Videos? Are there some you can use, or do they need to be created?

Incentivize

- Bring in an outside trainer or expert
- Offer food or recognition

Consider Using Technology

- Software training is a great reason to also train on best practices
- Inside the software you can create global examples to share with your campus that are easily accessible
- You have access to a team that does this every day!



5

PROMOTE MEANINGFUL ASSESSMENT

Anything we are doing in assessment needs to be meaningful to the department or institution.

If it isn't... don't do it.

If appropriate, coach faculty and staff to:

- Use a curriculum map and timeline as these are a wonderful foundation for assessment. You can easily see where students are learning and where outcomes are being addressed across the curriculum.
- Balance relevance with reality. The process must be doable and create value for it to be sustained.
 - *MEANINGFUL* – Faculty/Staff should select outcomes they feel are important.
 - *MEASURABLE* – Outcomes should be measurable, with concrete data. Encourage quality sources of information - make sure the data being captured will show accurate measurement of outcomes. Targets should be aspirational but attainable (and most importantly, present!).
 - *MANAGEABLE* – Take into account resources and time. Keep the scope and number of outcomes and measures reasonable.

- Finish the process with reflection on findings and making plans (closing the loop). Remind faculty and staff that it's perfectly okay to not meet a target. It's what we learn and decide to do about it that's important. One successful strategy can be to tie these action plans to budgets! This works well because there is data to support requests.

As a trainer and resource, communicate definitions and examples while training so the process is efficient. Best practice examples are very helpful, especially if you can direct faculty toward ones from their discipline.

Consider using technology to:

- Standardize terminology and fields
- Eliminate redundancy by using information for multiple purposes (accreditation, state reports, program review)
- Get live reports on progress
- Save time (= more time for other duties)



6

BE PREPARED FOR ACCREDITATION

Starting early is decent advice, but even better - don't ever stop!

Make a plan: Prioritize but prepare to be flexible

- Set a detailed timeline, by years, semesters, months, and weeks. Begin with the next visit or report date and work backwards.
- Do an inventory so you can determine high priority areas.
- Identify resources for you and those you will be recruiting to help.

Share the plan

- Start by introducing your colleagues to the big picture of accreditation - what it is, why we do it, why it's good, and what's expected.
- Share the timeline and resources with your campus.

Make an outline of your entire report

- Enlist help! Assign a name to each item for execution and collection.
- Create a list of documents to use for your narrative.
- Do a standards audit: If the visiting team came to

campus right now, would we meet the expectations, and where do we need to improve? Ask whoever is responsible for each standard to assign a grade from one to five based on your institution's current reality – one being non-compliant and 5 meaning exceeding standards. Make plans for how to address weak areas.

DunDunDun... The Report

- Write, revise, and edit narrative. Some schools take several years to do this step to ensure it is not rushed. Even better, update the narratives annually to ensure that standards are always being met.
- Give the campus community a way to participate in further revising the draft.
- Check all documentation and any links. If you are using a software product for the report, run it frequently to save your history and to prevent last minute technical issues. Submission day is not the day to learn new functionality.

Celebrate!!!

7

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR (CHALLENGES)

Feeling overwhelmed? First, know that this is very common - assessment and accreditation are huge, high-stakes processes.

- It cannot belong to one person or a small team alone. Stay positive, but communicate realistic expectations.
- Use your charm to build a large team and spread the work around.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help! There are supporters on your campus, as well as many outside communities of assessment and accreditation leaders. (Hint: see the Resources section below for details!)

People not submitting items. Often this is accidental or due to confusion about what needs to be done.

- To avoid it, break down what you need into very small tasks with cushioned due dates. For example: Mission statement due 9/1. Goals (2) due 9/8. Outcomes (3) due 9/15. Measures (2 per outcome) and Targets due 10/1. Findings due two days after last class each semester. Reflection and Action plans due two weeks after last class.
- Get more personal. You can start with an email,

followed by a friendly phone call, and then set up a meeting. If needed, use that time to actually complete the work. Don't forget to ask questions about why this might not be working for them; again, it will save time in the long run!

- Worse case scenario, get what you need another way, even if it's having files emailed to you.

Falling behind on timelines.

- To avoid it, create aggressive timelines to start with so you have a cushion for falling behind.
- Include some carrots/sticks in the timeline. For example: Those that get items in on time will be highlighted in the report to the Provost... as will those that do not :).
- Worse case scenario, adjust the dates as best you can to still meet your goals. Communicate about this professionally while emphasizing everyone's shared responsibility.



Not enough data/evidence.

- Be transparent about what is missing and why.
- Include a plan for correcting it and when it will be complete.

Too much data/evidence.

- This sounds like a great problem to have, but often it adds complications. More is just more! Remember, reviewers want to be efficient at their work. Seeing only your best evidence makes that possible. Think of it as a story you are trying to tell - if the data/evidence doesn't belong in the story, don't include it.
- To avoid it, from the start only plan to use data and evidence that best demonstrates what you are trying to prove.
- Too late and it's all together already? No worries! Rate each piece. The ones that are low can be moved to another place in case they are needed but will not be included in the final report.

Data/evidence is not favorable.

- First, that's okay.
- Really, it's okay.

- It is paramount to be genuine in this process. Approach it as an opportunity: Why is this surprising? What does it mean? What are we going to do about it? Document that reflection and plan!

Changes in leadership. This can be very challenging, but if you have built a solid team and communicate regularly, it should not derail you.

- Involve the new leaders at your earliest opportunity.
- Share all the successes your campus has had so far.
- At a high level, detail what is left to complete and what you need to do it well.
- Where appropriate, share any support your leaders offer with your colleagues.



Conclusion and Resources

While this cannot be a comprehensive, day-by-day guide (and let's be honest, you don't have time to read something like that anyway!), we hope it has given you some ideas to implement at your institution. Happily, there are loads of heroes out there developing resources, and we are including our favorites here!

RESOURCES

- [Weave Knowledge Center](#)
- [ASSESS listserv](#)
- [Four Year Countdown Guide to Successful Accreditation](#)
- [NILOA](#)
- [Accreditation: Struggle to Success Webinar](#)
- [Assessment Commons](#)
- [Assessment 101 Guide](#)
- [Assessment Worksheet](#)
- [IE Tips and Tricks](#)

SOURCES

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Did You Enjoy These 7 Top Tips?

If you want to learn more about how Weave can help your institution simplify your accreditation and assessment activities, please request a demo at weaveeducation.com/demo. Our solution improves collaboration, drives alignment, provides powerful reporting capabilities and is easy to set up. We also offer expert user support to all of our members, from a team that has been in your shoes and deeply understands accreditation and assessment.

Interested in checking out some of our recent webinars, which cover topics discussed in this guide? Go to our knowledge center here: weaveeducation.com/knowledgecenter.

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