

ACCREDITATION – Frequently Asked Questions

What is it?

“Regional accreditation of postsecondary institutions is a voluntary, non-governmental, self-regulatory process of quality assurance and institutional improvement. It recognizes higher education institutions for performance, integrity, and quality to merit the confidence of the educational community and the public. Accreditation or preaccreditation by a postsecondary regional accrediting agency qualifies institutions and enrolled students for access to federal funds to support teaching, research, and student financial aid.” (NWCCU web page)

Why do we do it?

The benefits of accreditation include:

- Financial Aid Opportunities – Federal (and often state) financial aid is only available to students who enroll at a college, university, or other institution of higher learning that has been accredited by the appropriate regional or special accrediting body.
- Workplace Success – Some employers prefer or require degrees/training from accredited institutions.
- Transfer of credit to other accredited institutions - student transfer between accredited colleges and universities throughout the nation is possible because of the reciprocal agreements between the six regional accrediting agencies.
- Quality Assurance - Regional accreditation assures the public, including parents, students and the business community, that the institution adheres to standards that are based on peer evaluation, regular self-evaluation and reports, and assessment of institutional effectiveness.

Who does it?

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) is the regional authority on educational quality and institutional effectiveness of higher education institutions in the seven-state Northwest region of Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. It fulfills its mission by establishing accreditation criteria and evaluation procedures by which institutions are reviewed.

How often does the NWCCU visit accredited institutions like Southwestern?

NWCCU has just revised the accreditation process which will now occur on a seven year cycle. Going forward, the cycle will include reports and visits scheduled over seven years. However, Southwestern will be among several institutions which will have a compressed schedule of reports and visits over the next two years.

What are the standards the college must meet?

NWCCU describes the revised standards in the following paragraph:

The revised accreditation standards are principle-based statements of expectations of quality and effectiveness for institutions accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. They function as: 1) indicators of educational quality and effectiveness by which institutions are evaluated; and 2) a framework for continuous improvement. Collectively they blend analysis and synthesis to enable holistic institutional self reflection and peer evaluation by examining the institution's mission, its interpretation and translation of that mission into practice; appraisal of its potential to fulfill its mission; and evaluation of the results of its efforts to achieve that mission.

You can view the full document on the Commission's web page

<http://www.nwccu.org/Standards%20Review/Pages/RevisedStandards.htm>

Overview of Revised Standards approved in January 2010

Standards

Standard One (*Mission, Core Themes, and *Expectations*)** examines institutional purpose and intentions. It requires a clear statement of institutional mission, articulation of mission fulfillment, and identification of core themes within that mission. It also requires a delineation of core theme objectives, each with assessable indicators of achievement and rationale for the selection of those indicators.

Standard Two (*Resources and Capacity*) assesses institutional inputs. It requires an evaluation of major institutional functions, resources, and infrastructure to enable a determination of the institution's *potential* to succeed in fulfilling its mission.

Standard Three (*Planning and Implementation*) evaluates planning for the institution as a whole as well as planning to achieve the objectives of its core themes.

Standard Four (*Effectiveness and Improvement*) evaluates the results of the institution's efforts. It assesses achievement of core theme objectives and achievement of goals or outcomes of programs and services. It also evaluates the institution's use of assessment results for improvement.

Standard Five (*Mission Fulfillment, Adaptation, and Sustainability*) evaluates fulfillment of institutional mission in light of the institution's own expectations (see Standard One). It assesses the institution's capacity to monitor its environment and its ability to forecast and adapt to patterns, trends, and circumstances with the potential to influence institutional viability and sustainability.

**A core theme is a manifestation of a fundamental aspect of institutional mission with overarching objectives that guide planning for contributing programs and services, development of capacity, application of resources to accomplish those objectives, and assessment of achievements of those objectives. Collectively, the core themes represent the institution's interpretation of its mission and translation of that interpretation into practice.*