Demonstrating Institutional Quality through Academic Accreditation

A Case Study of a Public University in the U.S

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Director of Academic Accreditation
• Academic Accreditation in the U.S.
• Institutional Quality through Academic Accreditation
• The Higher Learning Commission
• Northern Illinois University (NIU) Case Study
• Key Lessons
Higher Education in the U.S.

- No federal ministry of education or other centralized authority exercising national control over post secondary educational institutions
- Instead, higher diversity in mission among American higher educational institutions
- Accreditation system to assure basic level of quality
- Federal support to institutions and students through accreditation system
Academic Accreditation in the U.S.

- Ensures that institutions deliver acceptable levels of quality and meets established standards
- Students/faculty receive appropriate credit for work accomplished
- Institutions can confidently evaluate and transfer credit received from other accredited institutions
- Provides a pathway for involving faculty and staff in institutional planning and evaluation
- Allows opportunities for self-evaluation and continuous improvement
- Access to federal support for students and institutions
Common Types of Accreditation

• Regional Accreditation
  ➢ Institutional level e.g., Higher learning Commission

• Specialized/Disciplinary Accreditation
  ➢ Programs within institutions e.g., Ph.D. in Psychology
  ➢ Discipline-specific schools within universities e.g., the Law School
• The Higher Learning Commission (HLC)
  ➢ One of six regional accrediting associations in the U.S.
  ➢ Accredits degree-granting post-secondary educational institutions in north-central region- 19 states
  ➢ Offers programs and services to support quality of education
    ▪ Academy for Assessment of Student Learning
    ▪ Academy for Student Persistence and Completion
    ▪ Annual Conference
    ▪ Workshops and publications of materials for administrators and peer reviewers
1. Focus on student learning
2. Education as a public purpose
3. Education for a diverse, technological, globally connected world
4. A culture of continuous improvement
5. Evidence-based institutional learning and self-presentation
6. Integrity, transparency, and ethical behavior/practice
7. Governance for the well-being of the institution

8. Planning and management of resources to ensure institutional sustainability

9. Mission-centered evaluation

10. Accreditation through peer-review
Five Core Components of the HLC

- Mission
- Integrity: Ethical & Responsible Conduct
- Teaching & Learning: Quality, Resources, Support
- Teaching & Learning: Evaluation & Improvement
- Resource, Planning, & Institutional Effectiveness
Do you have any questions about academic accreditation before I transition to the NIU case study?
The NIU Case Study

- Description of NIU
- Vision and Mission
- Institutional Accreditation History
- HLC Self-Study Process- 2014
- Examples of Self-Analysis
- HLC Peer Review Feedback
- Sense-Making and Next Steps
- Transition to Open Pathways
Description of NIU

- 4-year Public, Carnegie High Research university
- 756-acre DeKalb campus and three regional sites in northern Illinois
- 21,000 students - undergraduate, masters, doctoral students
- 39 academic departments/schools in 7 Colleges
Description of NIU

- Mean undergraduate age = 22 years
- Mean graduate student age = 32 years
- > 500 international students
- > 5,700 faculty, staff, graduate students
Vision and Mission

• The vision of Northern Illinois University is to be the premier student-centered, research-focused public university in the Midwest, contributing to the advancement of knowledge for the benefit of the people of the region, the state, the nation, and the world.

• The mission of the University is to promote excellence and engagement in teaching and learning, research and scholarship, creativity and artistry, and outreach and service.
Governance Structures

• Board of Trustees
• President
• Provost
• 9 Administrative Divisions
• University Council
• Faculty Senate
• Supportive Professional Staff Council
• Operating Staff Council
• Student Association
NIU’s Curricular Offerings

Baccalaureate
- 63 majors
- 73 emphases
- 69 minors
- 10 pre-professional programs

Graduate
- 56 master's degrees
- 13 Doctor of Philosophy degrees
- 6 Doctor of Education degrees
- 100 areas of study

Professional
- Juris Doctor
- Doctor of Audiology
- Doctor of Physical Therapy
- Performer's Certificate
- Educational Specialist

39 academic departments/schools in 7 degree-granting colleges
NIU's Accreditation History

- Accredited teacher training institution and Class A rating as a four-year degree granting college (1931)
- Master of Science in Education degree accredited; reaccredited in 1956 (1933-1935)
- Preliminary accreditation for Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor of Education degrees (1953)
- Continued accreditation by the NCA (1959)
- Grant full accreditation by the North Central Association (NCA) (1962)
- Continued accreditation by the NCA (1974)
- Continued accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission with follow-up report (1983)
- Continued accreditation by the NCA (1994)
- Continued accreditation by the NCA (2004)
2014 Self-Study Process

- March 2014 comprehensive site visit by the HLC
- > 2 years of evidence collection to address accreditation criteria set by the HLC
- Capturing institutional changes since 2004 visit
- Re-examination of the mission statement
- Formation of oversight team and steering committees in October 2011
- Organization of the self-study narrative
- Widespread campus involvement
# Self-Study Process Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Date</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 3-5, 2014</td>
<td>• HLC site visit.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall 2013</td>
<td>• Make self-study report available for comment;</td>
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<td>• Prepare final version;</td>
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<td>• Submit self-study report to HLC.</td>
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<td>Summer 2013</td>
<td>• Prepare penultimate draft of self-study report.</td>
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<td>Spring 2013</td>
<td>• Review evidence;</td>
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<td>• Draft responses to criteria;</td>
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<tr>
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<td>• Discuss and rewrite.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring 2012</td>
<td>• Develop overall strategy for preparing self-study report;</td>
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<td>• Meet with HLC liaison;</td>
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<td>• Attend HLC Annual Meeting;</td>
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<td>• Begin review of evidence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall 2011</td>
<td>• Select Steering Committee chair and members.</td>
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Initial Step: Mission Update Task Force (December 2011)

Self-Study Process - Stage 1*

1. Provost
2. Coordinator of Self-Study/Steering Committee Chair
3. Oversight Team
4. 9 Steering Committee (SC) members chairing sub-committees
5. SC members represented faculty, provost’s staff, Institutional Research
6. 5-6 members from Office of the Provost + Coordinator

*December 2011
Self-Study Process - Stage 2*

• Defining the sub-committees membership
  ➢ Nominations of faculty, staff, and students by campus community

• Clarifying role of each sub-committee
  ➢ to gather, review, and analyze evidence of how well NIU is meeting the HLC criterion,
  ➢ extent of improvement since last study, and
  ➢ future plans

• Identifying key personnel for establishing electronic and physical resource room

Initiated in January 2012
Self-Study Process- Stage 3

- Campus Awareness, Preparation, and Engagement
  - Established NIU’s re-accreditation website for process update and transparency (spring 2012)
  - Countdown to site visit clock (spring 2012)
  - Communication with university committees, governance councils, interest groups, and college senates (spring-summer 2012)
  - Quarterly updates to the board of trustees
  - Campus community comment opportunity in response to self-study draft (September 2013)
Self-Study Process - Stage 4

• Campus Site-Visit
  ➢ NIU’s HLC website
  ➢ Planning Logistics
  ➢ ….in spite of the weather!

Resource Room
NIU Self-Study Report to the Higher Learning Commission: Successes, Challenges, and Opportunities

Examples
Self-Study Analysis - Example 1

**Criterion One:** The institution’s mission is clear and articulated publicly; it guides the institution’s operations

**Successes**

- **Wide spectrum of resources to help support the needs of our diverse community** and enjoy campus-wide awareness of and participation in diversity initiatives
- **Flexibility of program and course delivery** through a well-established regional presence, facilitating access to quality educational opportunity in the region and beyond
- **Carnegie Community Engagement Classification** identifies us as leaders in community and curricular engagement
- **Collaborative shared governance model** engages a broad community
- **Updated mission statement** captures our commitment to excellence and engagement in all our endeavors
Self-Study Analysis- Example 1

Challenges

• Continue efforts to recruit and retain diverse faculty and staff to parallel the increasing diversity of our students

• Direct student recruiting efforts to respond to changing regional demographics

Opportunities

• Continue to enhance communication about and integrate our mission into all campus activities

• Meet the challenge of changing demographics - offering greater access to increasingly diverse current and prospective students

• Diversity initiatives can be more cohesive to better capitalize on the opportunities available through the diverse cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives of our faculty, staff, and students
Criterion Four: The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments, and support services, and it evaluates their effectiveness for student learning through processes designed to promote continuous improvement

Successes

- **Strong program review process** and an invested community of faculty and staff engaged in continuous improvement
- **Robust culture of assessment, particularly at the programmatic level**, and an emerging research agenda in the field of assessment, led by the Office of Assessment Services
- **Student access to increasingly user-friendly interfaces** to monitor and assess their degree progress, registration, and transcripts
Challenges

- Address the challenges inherent in the enrollment, retention, persistence, and completion targets established by the Vision 2020 Initiative.
- Systematically implement and broadly share outcomes for co-curricular programs and initiatives that will contribute to a university-wide picture of learning outside the classroom.

Opportunities

- Continue development and implementation of a set of academic performance measures that align with our mission and priorities with external benchmarking against peers and with state performance-based funding metrics.
- Create a more cohesive model of student retention and completion, coordinating programs across divisions.
- Meet the challenge of changing demographics especially in offering greater access to increasingly diverse domestic and international current and prospective students.
HLC Peer Evaluation Feedback

• Evidence of excellence in teaching & learning
• Appropriate faculty to student ratios
• Commitment to the larger public good
• Student diversity and enriched educational environment
• Community outreach efforts
• Thorough and robust academic program review process
• Good standing with our 27 specialized/disciplinary accreditors
• Distance delivery expansion potential
• Compliance with federal requirements
Sense-making: Alignment with NIU’s Focus and Pillars of Success

- **Thriving Communities**
  - Continued commitment to public good
  - Community outreach efforts
  - Enriched and diverse educational environment

- **Ethically Inspired Leadership**
  - Compliance with federal requirements

- **Financial Sustainability**
  - Good standing with disciplinary accreditors
  - Robust Program Review process
  - Distance delivery expansion potential

- **Student Career Success**
  - Excellence in teaching and learning
  - Faculty to student ratios
Reflections: Success Factors

- Organization of process
- Strong leadership by oversight and steering committees
- Evidence collection for resource room
- Commitment of faculty, staff, students
- Consistent message of urgency and importance
- Planning for site-team visit
- Campus awareness, involvement, and feedback
Next Steps

• Communicate successes to colleges and departments
• Understand the implications of transitioning to HLC’s Open Pathway system
• Prepare for a more continuous accreditation process
Open Pathway Reaffirmation Timeline

July 2014: Reaffirmation of Institutional Accreditation

Reaffirmation of Accreditation in 2023-24

Years 1-3: Annual Assurance Updates
Year 4: Assurance Review; Interim Monitoring Report on Budgets & Planning
Years 5-9: Quality Initiative
Year 10: Assurance Review + Site Visit

2014-17
- Contribute documents to Evidence File Annually

2017-18
- Assurance Argument and Evidence File
- Assurance Review- no site visit
- Interim Report on Budgeting & Planning

2018-23
- File Quality Initiative (QI) Proposal
- Implement QI
- Report QI results to HLC

2023-24
- Assurance Argument and Evidence File
- Federal Compliance Requirements
- Assurance Review
- Comprehensive Evaluation with site visit
Key Lessons

• Continuous quality improvement at institutional level through the use of feedback from accreditation

• Internal and external communication of findings can support enhancement and reputation of programs

• Identified challenges integrated into strategic planning process

• Open pathway will require transition to a digitized system of organizing, planning, collaborating, and writing the assurance arguments in future
References and Resources

- Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) http://www.chea.org/
- The Higher Learning Commission: http://www.ncahlc.org/
- Northern Illinois University: http://www.niu.edu/index.shtml
- Ritu Subramony rsubramony1@niu.edu