

## Revisiting Accreditation Standards and the Impact on Student Affairs

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**Abstract:** This manuscript focuses on the role of student affairs in a changing accreditation environment. We update and extend our argument (Gordon et al., 2019) to first, note changes in accreditation standards (especially those involving student affairs work), and second, describe how student affairs might engage in praxis to ensure coordination and alignment with the overall student success goals set forth by accreditors. After reviewing changes in the standards, we interviewed three student affairs assessment practitioners from different accreditation environments to contextualize changes in real experiences. Key findings include a shift in accreditation standards towards institutional responsibility for student outcomes, a greater emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and a need for student affairs professionals to adapt to these changes. Practitioners and student affairs scholars are called to pay closer attention to the accreditation landscape and its impact on student affairs on our campuses. The ability of student affairs educators to be nimble with their work and how it applies to students' needs is paramount in the coming accreditation cycles. Implications for student affairs and other professionals include responses to broader pressures on higher education such as enrollment, workforce, budget, and economic development.

**Keywords:** accreditation standards, regional accrediting bodies, institutional accountability, quality assurance, colleges and universities, student affairs

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Recent changes to standards by several U.S. accreditation bodies create new opportunities and new questions for how student affairs staff and leaders might find their way to seats at the accreditation table. In 2019, we argued that student affairs professionals, after a generation of assessment work, needed to take an active role in accreditation documentation and efforts on their campuses because of the inclusion of student affairs in the standards of the time (Gordon et al., 2019). We made recommendations for the intentional inclusion of student affairs' assessment and outcomes data in accreditation conversations and reports. In the current article, we update and extend our work, noting changes in accreditation standards involving student affairs and anticipating the ways student affairs might engage in praxis with academic affairs and accrediting bodies to ensure coordination and alignment with the overall student success goals.

Since 2018 (when we finalized Gordon et al., 2019), accreditors have been responding to the shifts in the student success movement, and thereby the inclusion of student affairs assessment has shifted. Most notably, while student affairs efforts are included in college/university accreditation standards, the language used in the standards may not include the words “student affairs.” This creates both confusion and opportunity. The language used by different accreditors refers more to the function or work often undertaken by student affairs professionals and, increasingly, less about the offices and other named practices. Further, accreditors are pushing campuses to focus on their core values and student outcomes. Student affairs assessment leader efforts are needed in the current landscape to respond to accreditation changes while leading campuses in connecting and reporting academic, career development, retention, and engagement outcomes for students. The purpose of this paper is to provide an updated overview of institutional accreditation (including changes to the standards since our first overview on this topic in Gordon et al., 2019), provide our reflections on what those changes mean broadly and for student affairs specifically, share insights from three student affairs practitioners working in three different institutions belonging to three different accrediting bodies, and end with a discussion of ways student affairs might engage in praxis with academic affairs and accrediting bodies to ensure coordination and alignment with the overall student success goals. Therefore, there will be two separate methods and findings in this article to bring forward the conversation needed for today’s student affairs professionals.

### **Overview of the Institutional Accreditation Process**

The following provides an overview of how the institutional accreditation process works, as well as an understanding of the importance and purpose of maintaining institutional accreditation. It should be noted that the principles of accreditation are largely similar across organizations. In our earlier article, we provided student affairs professionals with a guide to the process. Therefore, the present article provides a quick outline with a focus on the more current standards and the implications for our work.

Over the past 200 plus years, accreditation efforts have included state oversight and regulations, specialized accreditation of academic disciplines, institutional accrediting associations, and the federal government’s statistical reporting function (Harclerod, 1980). The accreditation process itself has largely remained unchanged for institutions since our last overview in Gordon et al. (2019). Most accreditors have a 10-year re-accreditation cycle, with some including a standard mid-cycle check-in. Accreditors also require continuous, regular, and ongoing reporting for any substantive programmatic changes or responses to federal regulatory changes regardless of where the institution may be in the 10-year cycle.

Typically, a major part of accreditation and re-accreditation efforts center around an institutional self-study. Self-study is a comprehensive review of the institution, by the institution, based on accreditation standards; the self-study results in a written document that is submitted to the accreditor. The self-study report is typically reviewed by members from the accrediting agency who are also administrators, staff, or faculty from institutions similar to the one submitting the self-study. Additionally, due to federal and accrediting

agency regulations, institutions are required to also have a review team physically visit the campus and provide a decision on the status or compliance with the accreditation standards. The accreditation process, from the self-study to the on-site team visit, is (and always has been) centered around each accrediting body's standards.

### **Changes to the “Regional” Accreditation System**

The accreditation structure in the United States is complex and decentralized, covering public and private, two- and four-year, and nonprofit and for-profit institutions (Eaton, 2015). There are seven major institutional accrediting commissions for higher education recognized in the United States: Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC); Higher Learning Commission (HLC); Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE); New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE); Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU); Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC); and WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC). These agencies provide accreditation to institutions that enroll approximately 85% of students nationwide (Eaton, 2015).

Maintaining good status with one of these institutional accrediting bodies has four main purposes: (a) to provide an assurance to students and the public of institutional quality and financial stability; (b) to allow access to state and federal funds (only accredited institutions may receive federal and state monies, including funds for student aid); (c) to assure private sector confidence for employment of students and giving of private funds; and (d) to ease transfer of courses between colleges and universities (Eaton, 2015). Although accreditation is voluntary, most institutions seek it because of these recognized benefits, and most eligible institutions become (and remain) accredited (WSCUC, 2024).

One major change that has occurred since our first writing on this topic is the elimination of the “regional” accreditor. For many years, most colleges and universities in the US belonged to a regional accrediting agency that was then accountable to the US Department of Education. That is, the institution did not choose which accrediting body they belonged to; instead, the accrediting body to which an institution belonged depended on geography (i.e., in which “region” the institution was located). In 2020, in an effort to streamline processes and encourage accreditors to embrace innovation (CHEA, 2019) the US Department of Education (2020) eliminated the distinction between regional and national accreditors and “remov[ed] geography from an accrediting agency’s scope” (para 5). Now, institutions and/or the states in which they are located have the ability to choose (or change) with which accreditor they want to align (Weisman, 2022). This new landscape may require a student affairs professional not only to be aware of the standards of their current agency but also other accreditors. This newer development of accreditor choice (and future policy/law changes that may or may not occur as a result) will likely further elevate the relevance of accreditation knowledge for student affairs professionals.

**Table 1.** Each Institutional Accreditor and their Last Revision between 2018–2024

| Institutional Accreditor  | Last Revision of Standards                             |
|---|--|
| Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)  | June 2023  |
| Higher Learning Commission (HLC)  | September 2020<br>(upcoming changes in September 2025) |
| Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)  | July 2023  |
| New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE) | January 2021   |
| Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)   | November 2020  |
| Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)                               | December 2023  |
| WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)   | November 2022  |

### Updates in Standards Across Accreditors

Each accreditor has a cycle for reviewing and revising their standards. Since our last article on the inclusion of student affairs at the accreditation table (Gordon et al., 2019), each agency has had a revision in their standards. The dates of the most recent standards for the seven accreditors are provided in Table 1.

### Methods and Findings

For this manuscript, we explored the changes and shifts in accreditation standards in two ways: first, via a document analysis, and second, via interviews with student affairs practitioners. Our methods and findings are presented in this section.

### Positionality

As scholar practitioners (Green et al., 2022), the authors each bring more than 20 years of work in a variety of assessment, student affairs, accreditation, strategy, faculty, and department leadership roles. As scholars, the authors bring perspectives on assessment, change, student learning, leadership, and institutional operations. Through a series of reflective conversations and collaborative inquiry (Green et al., 2018) the authors took a praxis approach (Rendon, 2009) to examining changes to accreditation standards across agencies. Applying our perspectives and experience as scholar practitioners, we aimed to describe changes and anticipate implications for practice in the field of student affairs, and more broadly the impact on student success issues like persistence, learning, and graduation (Torres & Renn, 2021).

**Accreditation Standards Review**

In revisiting the accreditation standards for where student affairs “fits,” we first explored if and how student affairs might remain embedded in the accreditation process. Given trends in the literature and changes by accreditors, we reanalyzed the accreditation standards with a renewed focus on areas impacting student affairs. Our positionality and methods for this exploration are detailed below.

**Methods—Document Analysis for Accreditation Standards**

Document analysis is a qualitative research method that, amongst other functions, can provide a means of tracking change and development (Bowen, 2019). Because, as noted above, accreditation standards have been updated since our first analysis of the standards in 2018 (Gordon, et al., 2019), we engaged in analysis of each of the seven accreditation standards documents. Using current and past accreditation standards posted on each accreditor’s website, we obtained copies of the accreditation standards as they appeared in 2018, along with the most recently published version of each. We reanalyzed accreditation language in two ways: (a) observing overall changes (or not) to each document/standard and (b) with a continued focus on areas impacting student affairs. We looked for similarities, differences, and themes amongst the changes within and between each of the seven accreditation standards documents. Through this document analysis, we noted updates and changes we observed into three categories: (a) none, (b) minor changes, and (c) major changes. After analyzing all seven accreditation standards documents, we further engaged in a thematic analysis of those where minor or major changes were noted. We studied these changes for patterns and coded and categorized our notes to help us explore themes in the changes we observed (Bowen, 2019).

**Findings—Changes in Accreditation Standards**

Through document analysis, we observed three types of updates to the accreditation standards: (a) none, (b) minor changes, and (c) major changes.

**No Changes.** Two accrediting bodies, ACCJC and MSCHE, have not made any substantive updates or changes to their accreditation standards since we first examined them (see Table 2). It should be noted that ACCJC has changes planned for Fall 2025.

**Table 2.** *No Changes Observed in Accreditation Standards*

| Institutional Accreditor                                       | Example of No Change (2018 and 2024)   |
|--|--|
| Accrediting Commission for Community & Junior Colleges (ACCJC) | II.C.3. The institution assures equitable access to all of its students by providing appropriate, comprehensive, and reliable services to students regardless of service location or delivery method       |
| Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)           | 4.4. If offered, athletic, student life, and other extracurricular activities that are regulated by the same academic, fiscal, and administrative principles and procedures that govern all other programs |

**Minor Changes.** Two accrediting bodies, SACSCOC and HLC, have made minor changes to their accreditation standards since our first examination in 2018 (see Tables 2 and 3). We defined “minor changes” as clarifications, format changes, or other tweaks to the standards that did not change the meaning or spirit of the language and did not meaningfully nor drastically impact student affairs work or practitioners. The following tables provide examples of minor changes observed in the accreditation standards for SACSCOC and HLC since our last look at them. It should be noted that HLC has changes planned for Fall 2025 (HLC, 2024).

SACSCOC has made some wording refinements and changes, but none to standards that apply to student affairs/co-curricular work. The changes we observed for this accreditor seemed focused on clarifications (for example, changing “is responsible” to “has responsibility”; see Table 3 for examples).

**Table 3.** *Examples of Minor Changes Observed in Accreditation Standards—Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)*

| Text in 2018–19<br>(last revised in 2017)   | Current Text<br>(last revised in 2023)  |
|---|---|
| 4.2.b. ensures a clear and appropriate distinction between the policymaking function of the board and the responsibility of the administration and faculty to administer and implement policy. (Board/administrative distinction)   | 4.2.b. ensures a clear and appropriate distinction between the policymaking function of the board and the <b>respective responsibilities</b> of the administration and faculty to administer and implement policy. (Board/administrative distinction <b>and shared governance</b> )   |
| 4.2.g. defines and regularly evaluates its responsibilities and expectations. (Board self-evaluation)   | 4.2.g. defines its responsibilities and regularly evaluates <b>its effectiveness</b> . (Board self-evaluation)  |
| Section 6: Faculty<br>....Because student learning is central to the institution’s mission and educational degrees, the faculty is responsible for directing the learning enterprise, including overseeing and coordinating educational programs to ensure that each contains essential curricular components, has appropriate content and pedagogy, and maintains discipline currency. | Section 6: Faculty<br>....Because student learning is central to the institution’s mission and educational degrees, the faculty <b>has responsibility</b> for directing the learning enterprise including overseeing and coordinating educational programs to ensure that each contains essential curricular components, has appropriate content and pedagogy, and maintains discipline currency. |

*Note.* Text in bold indicates a change in wording from text in 2018–2019.

HLC also made wording refinements and changes, but again, none to standards that apply to student affairs/co-curricular work (see Table 4). For example, HLC Criterion 1 had four components (A–D) in 2018; in 2020 it had three (A–C), with component 1B, “the mission is articulated publicly,” combined into other areas in 2020. Similarly, core component 1A had three subcomponents in 2018; in 2020, it had five. Also, core component 1C seemed to be revised to be clearer about how the mission connects to society and addresses/expands on the idea of “multicultural society” (in 2013/18 version) to “informed citizenship,” “workplace success,” and “diverse backgrounds, ideas, and perspectives” in the 2020 revisions.

**Table 4.** *Examples of Minor Changes Observed in Accreditation Standards—Higher Learning Commission (HLC)*

| Text in 2018–19<br>(last revised in 2013)  | Current Text<br>(last revised in 2020)  |
|--|---|
| 1.A. The institution’s mission is broadly understood within the institution and guides its operations.   | 1.A. The institution’s mission is <b>articulated publicly and operationalized throughout the institution.</b>   |
| 1.C. The institution understands the relationship between its mission and the diversity of society.  | 1.C. The institution <b>provides opportunities for civic engagement in a diverse, multicultural society and globally connected world, as appropriate within its mission and for the constituencies it serves.</b>                                   |
| 1.C.1. The institution addresses its role in a multicultural society.  | 1.C.1. <b>The institution encourages curricular or co curricular activities that prepare students for informed citizenship and workplace success.</b>   |
| 1.C.2. The institution’s processes and activities reflect attention to human diversity as appropriate within its mission and for the constituencies it serves.                                       | 1.C.2. The institution’s processes and activities <b>demonstrate inclusive and equitable treatment of diverse populations.</b>  |
| 3.B. The institution demonstrates that the exercise of intellectual inquiry and the acquisition, application, and integration of broad learning and skills are integral to its educational programs. | 3.B.* The institution <b>offers programs that engage students in collecting, analyzing and communicating information; in mastering modes of intellectual inquiry or creative work; and in developing skills adaptable to changing environments.</b> |

| Text in 2018–19<br>(last revised in 2013)   | Current Text<br>(last revised in 2020)   |
|---|--|
| 4.B.2. The institution assesses achievement of the learning outcomes that it claims for its curricular and co-curricular programs | 4.B.1. The institution <b>has effective processes for assessment of student learning &amp; for achievement of learning goals</b> in academic & co-curricular offerings |

Note. Text in bold indicates a change in wording from text in 2018–2019.

\* All of Section 3 was revised. This is an example; also went from 3.B. 1–4 to 3.B. 1–5

**Major Changes.** Three accrediting bodies, NECHE, NWCCU, and WASC, all have made what we categorized as major changes to their standards since our first examination in 2018 (see Tables 4–6). We defined major changes as those that reflected a paradigm shift in focusing on outcomes instead of inputs (e.g., NWCCU), student success more broadly (e.g., WASC), and/or a shift to include language that specifically included or clarified a focus on diversity, equity, and/or inclusion (e.g., NECHE, NWCCU, & WASC). We do note that while HLC had some changes that involved clarifications to diversity and diverse populations, these terms were broadly represented in their standards before and thus, to us, did not constitute a major change, whereas those we categorized as major changes did not include this terminology prior to the revision.

NECHE changes seem to emphasize ensuring transparency (not listed in the table), underscoring a focus on quality and effectiveness, and adding “equity” and “inclusion” to their standards (see Table 5).

**Table 5.** Major Changes Observed in Accreditation Standards—New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE)

| Text in 2018–19<br>(revised in 2016)  | Current Text<br>(last revised in 2021)   |
|---|--|
| Evaluation 2.6 The institution regularly and systematically evaluates the achievement of its mission and purposes, giving primary focus to the realization of its educational objectives. Its system of evaluation is designed to provide valid information to support institutional improvement. The institution’s evaluation efforts are effective for addressing its unique circumstances. These efforts use both quantitative and qualitative methods | Evaluation 2.6 The institution regularly and systematically evaluates the achievement of its mission and purposes, <b>the quality of its academic programs, and the effectiveness of its operational and administrative activities</b> , giving primary focus to the realization of its educational objectives. Its system of evaluation is designed to provide valid information to support institutional improvement. The institution’s evaluation efforts are effective for addressing its unique circumstances. These efforts use both quantitative and qualitative methods. |



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| Text in 2018–19<br>(revised in 2016)   | Current Text<br>(last revised in 2021)   |
|--|--|
| 7.1 The institution employs sufficient and qualified personnel to fulfill its mission.   | 7.1 The institution employs sufficient and qualified personnel to fulfill its mission. <b>It addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity, equity, and inclusion among its personnel and assesses the effectiveness of its efforts to achieve those goals. (See also 9.5)</b>  |
| 8.10 The institution integrates the findings of its assessment process and measures of student success into its program evaluation activities and uses the findings to inform its planning and resource allocation and to establish claims the institution makes to students and prospective students. (See also 9.24) | 8.10 The institution integrates the findings of its assessment process and measures of student success into its <b>institutional and</b> program evaluation activities and uses the findings to inform its planning and resource allocation and to establish claims the institution makes to students and prospective students. (See also 9.22)  |
| 9.21 The institution publishes the locations and programs available at branch campuses and other instructional locations, including those overseas operations at which students can enroll for a degree, along with a description of the programs and services available at each location.                             | 9.20 The institution publishes <b>a description of the size and characteristics of its student population(s), as well as a description of the campus setting for each of its physical locations (main campus, branch campuses, other instructional locations and overseas locations at which students can enroll for a degree). For each location and modality of instruction, the institution publishes a description of the programs, academic and other support services, co-curricular and nonacademic opportunities, and library and other information resources available to students.</b> |

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Note. Text in bold indicates a change in wording from text in 2018–2019.

NWCCU made extensive changes to their standards, with revisions in almost every criterion and sub-criterion. Their revisions marked a clear change to a comprehensive focus on student outcomes and meaningful indicators of student success and achievement (see Table 6).

**Table 6.** Major Changes Observed in Accreditation Standards—Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)

| Text in 2018–19<br>(revised in 2010)  | Current Text<br>(last revised in 2023)   |
|---|--|
| <p>Standard One – Mission and Core Themes</p> <p>The institution articulates its purpose in a mission statement, and identifies core themes that comprise essential elements of that mission. In an examination of its purpose, characteristics, and expectations, the institution defines the parameters for mission fulfillment. Guided by that definition, it identifies an acceptable threshold or extent of mission fulfillment.</p> | <p>Standard One—<b>Student Success, and Institutional Mission and Effectiveness</b></p> <p><b>The institution articulates its commitment to student success, primarily measured through student learning and achievement, for all students, with a focus on equity and closure of achievement gaps, and establishes a mission statement, acceptable thresholds, and benchmarks for effectiveness with meaningful indicators. The institution’s programs are consistent with its mission and culminate in identified student outcomes leading to degrees, certificates, credentials, employment, or transfer to other higher education institutions or programs. Programs are systematically assessed using meaningful indicators to assure currency, improve teaching and learning strategies, and achieve stated student learning outcomes for all students, including underrepresented students and first-generation college students.</b></p> |
| <p>2.D.1: Consistent with the nature of its educational programs &amp; methods of delivery, the institution creates effective learning environments with appropriate programs &amp; services to support student learning needs.</p>   | <p>2.<b>G</b>.1: Consistent with the nature of its educational programs &amp; methods of delivery, <b>&amp; with a particular focus on equity &amp; closure of equity gaps in achievement</b>, the institution creates &amp; maintains effective learning environments with appropriate programs &amp; services to support student learning <b>&amp; success</b>.</p>  |

Note. Text in bold indicates a change in wording from text in 2018–2019.

Similarly, the WASC standards changed substantially as well. Between 2013 and 2023, the standards are quite different and clearly shift to a focus on quality and student success broadly and including diversity, equity, and inclusion (see Table 7).

**Table 7.** *Examples of Major Changes Observed in Accreditation Standards—Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)*

| Text in 2018–19<br>(revised in 2013)   | Current Text<br>(last revised in 2023)   |
|--|--|
| <p>Standard 1: Defining Institutional Purposes And Ensuring Educational Objectives</p> <p>The institution defines its purposes and establishes educational objectives aligned with those purposes. The institution has a clear and explicit sense of its essential values and character, its distinctive elements, its place in both the higher education community and society, and its contribution to the public good. It functions with integrity, transparency, and autonomy.</p>   | <p>Standard 1: Defining Institutional <b>Mission And Acting With Integrity</b></p> <p>The institution defines its <b>mission</b> and establishes educational <b>and student success</b> objectives aligned with <b>that mission</b>. The institution has a clear sense of its essential values, <b>culture</b>, and distinctive elements, and <b>its contributions to society and the public good. It promotes the success of all students and makes explicit its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The institution</b> functions with integrity and transparency.</p> |
| <p>1.4 Consistent with its purposes and character, the institution demonstrates appropriate attention to the increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion through its policies, its educational and co-curricular programs, its hiring and admissions criteria, and its administrative and organizational practices.</p>  | <p><b>1.2</b> Consistent with its purposes and character, the institution <b>defines and acts with intention to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in all its activities, including its goal setting, policies, practices, and use of resources across academic, student support, and co-curricular programs and services.</b></p>   |
| <p>Standard 2: Achieving Educational Objectives Through Core Functions</p> <p>The institution achieves its purposes and attains its educational objectives at the institutional and program level through the core functions of teaching and learning, scholarship and creative activity, and support for student learning and success. The institution demonstrates that these core functions are performed effectively by evaluating valid and reliable evidence of learning and by supporting the success of every student.</p> | <p>Standard 2: Achieving Educational Objectives <b>And Student Success</b></p> <p>The institution achieves its <b>educational and student success</b> objectives through the core functions of teaching and learning, <b>and through support for student learning, scholarship, and creative activity. It promotes the success of all students and makes explicit its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.</b> The institution demonstrates that core functions are performed effectively by evaluating valid and reliable evidence of learning.</p>                      |

| Text in 2018–19<br>(revised in 2013)  | Current Text<br>(last revised in 2023)   |
|---|--|
| <p>Standard 4: Creating An Organization Committed To Quality Assurance, Institutional Learning, And Improvement</p> <p>The institution engages in sustained, evidence-based, and participatory self-reflection about how effectively it is accomplishing its purposes and achieving its educational objectives. The institution considers the changing environment of higher education in envisioning its future. These activities inform both institutional planning and systematic evaluations of educational effectiveness. The results of institutional inquiry, research, and data collection are used to establish priorities, to plan, and to improve quality and effectiveness.</p> | <p>Standard 4: Creating An <b>Institution</b> Committed To <b>Quality Assurance</b> And Improvement</p> <p>The institution engages in sustained, evidence-based, and participatory reflection about how effectively it is accomplishing its <b>mission</b>, achieving its educational <b>and student success</b> objectives, <b>and realizing its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion</b>. The institution <b>envisions its future in light of the changing environment of higher education</b>. These activities inform both institutional planning and systematic evaluations of educational effectiveness.</p> |

Note. Text in bold (in Current Text column) indicates a change in wording from text in 2018–2019.

**Changes Summary.** Overall, accreditation standards have shifted toward institutional responsibility for student achievement, support, and outcomes, and away from prescribing programs leading to desired outcomes. After analyzing the standards, the change most often seen was a new focus on achieving success (i.e., graduation outcomes) rather than emphasizing services/programs. Standards that were changed in recent years appear to be less prescriptive about how student success is achieved (e.g., number of programs) and instead focus on outcomes (e.g., time to graduation). Institutions as a whole, including student affairs divisions and professionals, must now ensure programs and processes are in place to lead to student achievements. Previously, standards suggested “Do A to get B” (where B is graduation/student success). Now, several standards simply read “Get to B.” Further, in our observation, there is a clear shift toward including terms such as “equity” and “inclusion” in some of the standards themselves, which underscores a focus on a more holistic approach to ensuring programs and processes are in place that lead to student success. We feel it is important to note that the intent of our review of the accreditation standards was not to focus on one type of change (i.e., the inclusion of certain wording) or to determine if accreditors are becoming more or less similar to one another. The aim was to capture and analyze the changes in accreditation standards (if any) as they relate to the inclusion student affairs (or “co-curricular”) work in student outcomes and summarize trends that emerged. We recognize there is still work left for others to parse more deeply the comparative nature of changes across accreditation standards and agencies.

### **Practitioner Reflections**

After analyzing changes in the standards documents, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with three practitioners in student affairs assessment to capture their reflections. We wanted to understand lived experiences with the accreditation process and/or accreditation requirements from student affairs assessment professionals and infuse the practitioner voice into this conversation.

### **Methods—Interview Protocols**

In line with Bowen's (2019) suggestion that it is important to "seek convergence and corroboration through the use of different data sources" (p. 28), we conducted semi-structured interviews with three practitioners in student affairs assessment. The interviews were meant to be informal but informative conversations about their experiences as assessment professionals in the area of student affairs and also as a rudimentary check on the themes we felt emerged in the changes to accreditation standards (interview questions can be found in the Appendix). We sought to check with practitioners from institutions under three different accrediting bodies to see if and how (a) institutional priorities (especially as they relate to accreditation standards and any changes made by accreditors) translate to student affairs work, (b) institutional priorities/needs translate into their daily work as student affairs assessment professionals, and (c) if they had noticed any changes with regard to student affairs' involvement, inclusion, and/or ownership of student success on their campus. Once interviews were finished and thematic coding was completed, the interview takeaways and quotes were given back to interviewees to member check findings.

We interviewed three individuals, one from each of the categories we observed with regard to changes in accreditation standards: no change, minor changes, and major changes. Interviewees were selected using convenience and snowball sampling, with the researchers reaching out to practitioners we knew who were working at colleges/universities belonging to different accreditors; we asked colleagues if they were interested in being interviewed and/or to pass our information along to someone who might be. The three people we interviewed worked at a community (Associates Degree) college under JCCAC (no changes since 2018), a university from SACSCOC (minor changes since 2018), and a university from WASC (major changes since 2018). Interviewees were asked to select initials to be used as their name reference for this manuscript. A description of each interviewee follows and includes the accreditor, institutional type, and professional details.

**ACCJC Participant (no changes to accreditation requirements).** MS is a faculty member and administrator at a community college, serving at this institution for over 10 years. The college is a member of a regional innovation consortium. MS' primary role on campus is focused on student information systems in an enrollment and student support functional area. They are also a member of a campus wide outcomes assessment workgroup which focuses on solutions and policies for leaders to take forward and deploy throughout the college. MS' background includes a doctorate in education with a focus on technology adoption by campus leaders.

**SACSCOC Participant (minor changes to accreditation requirements).** HH is a full-time student affairs assessment professional at a four-year, doctoral granting, research one, large state institution. HH's primary role is an assessment professional for a division of student affairs, facilitating the assessment efforts of more than 20 departments within the division. HH has been at this institution for more than 4 years at the time of the interview and was previously at a SACSCOC institution. HH's background includes a doctorate in higher education administration.

**WASC Participant (major changes to accreditation requirements).** FB is a mid-level leader and administrator at a comprehensive public, doctoral-granting, four-year institution in a major metropolitan area. FB's primary role on campus is focused on basic needs initiatives while also the chair of the division-wide student assessment council and a member of a campus-wide outcomes assessment workgroup that focuses on building a campus culture of assessment and evaluation. FB's background includes working at the same institution for 18 years and a doctorate in education with a focus on the institutional logics of middle managers of student engagement programs.

### ***Findings—Practitioner Experiences and Reflections***

While we intentionally sampled from different accreditation environments, the interviews yielded three insights that connect across those environments. Far from being representative or conclusive, we present these quotes as examples of how professionals balance their student affairs assessment priorities with the broader accreditation standards that affect them. The major themes from the deductive thematic coding were: (a) Assessment Work is Important (but not necessarily done in response to accreditation); (b) Expectations of Leadership (as both interpreter and responder to accreditor needs); and (c) Not Knowing Specific Accreditation Standard Content (but aware it must be driving some student affairs assessment practices). Each of these themes are explored in more detail below.

**Assessment Work is Important.** From our interviews, we heard how some student affairs professionals are aware that assessment work is important. As examples, participants shared that getting a seat at the table elevated student affairs and assessment, with FB noting that “joining the assessment conversation was kind of shocking to folks because they didn’t understand what we did.” Similarly, the participants also shared an understanding of why assessment work is important to their campus; MS explained, “my job is to make things better, right? Make things more efficient,” whether outside standards change or not. Practitioners are also attuned to how campus efforts in student affairs have shifted in response to accreditation with MS noting that “as we were trying to make changes, we had accreditation and just recently our Chancellor’s office raised the bar [in response to accreditation], the vision aligned to the reporting tool which is very similar...to the process we’ve mapped out.” Finally, practitioners understand the relevance of accreditation to student affairs specifically through the mechanism of institutional priorities. Participants were actively engaging the role of student affairs assessment in the broader priorities of the campus. For example, FB noted:

[P]art of our accreditation process was the division of Student Affairs trying to find ourselves in the institution's priorities and the needs. [I am] one of the lone voices in the overall university assessment council. [I]f we can understand what a student is experiencing outside of the classroom versus in the classroom, that can create a fuller picture, but we need both sides to create that picture.

**Expectations of Leadership.** Each of the student affairs practitioners reported a reliance on campus leaders to set priorities, and trusted that those priorities were responsive to accreditation reports or standards. Practitioners reflected that their leaders' (rather than their own) accreditation knowledge resulted in changes to practice. HH noted, "We as a division right, the Vice President of Student Affairs or whoever your senior Student affairs officer is, should consider that part of their responsibilities." Additionally, leaders had the leverage to set priorities and deploy resources, both technology and staff, to respond to accreditors' needs. For example, one participant reflected:

...the leverage that was really necessary to kind of get folks on board with making the change that needed to be made. We were way behind in terms of adopting technology in the services that we provide to students and therefore was lacking the ability to do all the other things that were necessary to make sure that we were efficient in the way that we serve students. And so it was one of those things where like I, I got my role and then I was able to do all the things that I needed to kind of push some of this stuff along.

However, participants actively struggled at times with translating student affairs work in terms of institutional priorities determined by accreditation. For example, FB said:

Part of the Division of Student Affairs is trying to find ourselves in the institution's priorities and needs. When we first started that conversation...we weren't found anywhere. If this is the strategic plan, we have to do that plan whether or not the plan fits...and a lot of it is classroom-based. It's curricular-based, and a lot of it wasn't co-curricular and so we struggled with that...I think that as we've developed a cycle in a plan and a committee, we are more in line with the institutional priorities and the strategic plan.

At the same time, these professionals were relied upon to correctly interpret accreditation standards by staff and peers, and when leaders changed, so did the attention to accreditation standards as drivers for action. HH pointed out, "Since....[the previous SSAO] is not here anymore, [accreditation has] zero impact practically day-to-day on my work, which feels incorrect."

**Not Knowing Specific Accreditation Standard Content.** None of the three people we interviewed were aware of changes in language (if any) to their accreditation standards, although one participant was aware that site visits were perceived more favorably on campus. At the same time, accreditation standards were perceived as likely driving some student affairs assessment practices. For example, HH shared, "I would say the last [accreditation visit] findings for a couple of years made it easier to tell people....you have to complete all of this." Similarly, two of the three participants indicated they were working to make improvements from the last accreditation report. Regardless of the knowledge of the

standards and if they changed, student affairs assessment professionals report relying on direction from leaders and strategy from institutions—rather than their own knowledge of the accreditation standards—to get their work accomplished. Accreditation was experienced as a kind of ripple effect for these assessment practitioners. FB reflected:

...Knowing that we are part of the accreditation process and not just contributing when we need to, it's a consistent effort now. We have domains, we can answer the question, we have a cycle, we have a report.

### **Discussion**

This discussion represents the intersection of two methodologies (document analyses and reflective interviews) which informed this scholarly conversation. These data inform ongoing considerations of how student affairs is part of accreditation conversations on a given campus. It is incumbent on the reader to first identify their current accreditor, locate their standards, and interpret their responsibility. The layers of responsibility, however, can be complicated in institutions with distributed student success efforts (Torres & Renn, 2021). Depending on an individuals' context, assessment practitioners might find themselves interpreting standards as requiring less departmental structure changes and more cross-unit or cross-division collaboration. The latter could lead to more distributed responsibility across the institution and thus possible complexities for student affairs professionals.

The following discussion weaves the three themes from practitioners with the documented accreditation shifts. We bring to the foreground how the reflection themes might interact in a changing accreditation landscape, the importance of campus context and leadership, and how, in practice, student affairs professionals need to be aware of the collective responsibility for student success.

### **Changing Accreditation Landscape**

Accreditation is guided by standards of practice, which are defined and applied at an institutional level to provide guidance and direction. The need for standards and definitions is a well-recognized idea in many sectors, offering "...clear and unambiguous guidelines for operationalization - the process by which an abstract concept is transformed into variables that can be observed, manipulated, and measured" (Necka et al., 2022, p. 25). Standards provide an organizing framework for research and clarify parameters for organizing work, helping both experts and the uninitiated. Updated standards provide modernization, clarity, and consistency from which we can compare and contrast levels of access and availability of college for different populations. Consistency leads to common understanding of university obligations (such as fiscal responsibility and operational integrity) as well as common expectations of the college experience as a rite of passage, developmental milestone, and a means for social mobility.

Higher education has been broadly aided by common standards, such as the idea of a degree, the credit hour, and major areas of study. A shared, collective understanding of these concepts aids college admission, graduation, transfer between institutions, and employer understanding of the content of a college degree. Collectively, these standards



represent a slow and steady pace of evolutionary changes. At a slightly more rapid pace, institutions change in light of research and practice, in response to peer influence, and in response to outside pressures. Accreditors, as member-driven organizations, update their standards to reflect the needs and practices of member institutions and constituents. More recently, the influx of political influences, algorithmic acceleration of AI and other technologies, and enrollment profiles of institutions are representing rapid changes. All the while, institutions are made up of people who interpret standards as best as they can and who slowly influence shifts and revisions in standards. These shifts and changes take time. From this understanding, we consider how student affairs and assessment leaders interact with accreditation.

### **Importance of Campus Context and Leadership**

We consider changes in accreditation standards (document analysis) as those standards are interpreted by practitioners (interview data). The interview participants, all assessment professionals, each engaged questions of leadership, interpretation, evidence-driven change, and compliance/improvement. How and why they did so was relevant in their own contexts. From the higher operational context, we can see how their comments fit with fairly standard assessment cycles (Culp & Dungy, 2012) and reflect fairly well-known assessment barriers (Heinrich, 2017).

Leaders drive change. Some leaders might be appointed and vested with authority, and other leaders might derive authority from their relationships, influence, or insights. In any case, leaders often encounter opportunities to drive change. Self-authorship theories (see Baxter Magolda, 2007) help explain how leaders co-evolve with their environments, including accreditation. The assessment professionals we interviewed largely relied on their campus leaders for both interpretations of accreditation standards (changed or not), priorities, and their understanding of the importance of assessment. In their book, *Leading Assessment for Student Success*, Bingham et al. (2023) argued for building a culture of inquiry which includes both intentionality and understanding the reasons for assessment; one of the key reasons to assess is for accountability to accreditors (Ewell, 2009). In our interviews, we saw both intentionality and accountability on display as assessment leaders joined broader campus assessment councils. They actively sought ways for student affairs to align, contribute, and add value to the improvement efforts and storytelling of institutions.

Access to learning was referenced by our participants and in accreditation standards. Student affairs exists as a profession to promote learning and development of the whole student and to support inclusivity while recognizing and supporting diverse developmental pathways (ACPA, n.d.; NASPA, n.d). Thus, student affairs assists in both transforming and facilitating equitable access to and success through higher education. We understand that a key reason to assess programs and learning is to advance equity and equitable opportunities for high achievement (Bresciani Ludvik, 2019; Henning et al., 2023). If assessment is to evolve to be responsive to both accreditors and equity purposes, leaders require a chance to re-author and remix (Order et al., 2017) their assessment practices, use data for improved processes, and report how those outcomes fulfill accreditation standards. The professionals we interviewed reported making (or helping leadership make)

changes in programs that were intended to promote equity, transparency, and access to education. While not a major theme of our reflection data, we do see the need to recognize that even without naming equity as a goal of accreditation, the purpose of equity in student affairs assessment remains salient and was evident in some of the standard changes. Equity and access purposes align with the fact that social justice outcomes are foundational for the field of student affairs (French & Kniess, 2023; ACPA, n.d.; NASPA, n.d). Leaders and assessment professionals working in the field, through both daily practice and longer accreditation cycles, have a responsibility to regularly reexamine and clarify institutional practices and policies and use evidence and data to improve outcomes for students. We assert that equity in assessment and in practice remain a foremost priority, despite accreditors leaving specificity of equity goals up to each institution.

### **Collective Responsibility for Student Success**

In our document analysis, we observed major changes to accreditation standards in two recent update periods (2010-2020 and 2020-present). In these cases, the terms “student success,” “co-curricular,” or “student affairs” do not appear. The lack of inclusion of these terms, we believe, reflects institutional equity efforts to remove silos of practice and increase access to support for students. We also know that student affairs, as a field, builds on and combines the best of socio-cultural, diversifying, and critical and post-structural development theories (Renn & Reason, 2021). These findings and the trajectory of student affairs results in a possible future where student affairs work is no longer bound to specific units, activities, or programs but becomes more integrated with and focused on holistic student outcomes across the institution. We also observed that some of the accreditation changes reflect a reality that students do not move through their collegiate experience in any kind of silo (see Museus, 2021). A renewed opportunity emerges for student affairs to engage in praxis with academic affairs and accrediting bodies to ensure coordination and alignment with the overall student success goals.

The way we organize our work may look different at times, which could yield professional identity instability. As training programs and leaders adapt to changes, however, it is possible for a future state to be more effective for students. From a praxis standpoint (Green et al., 2022), we reflected on these changes and our work as assessment professionals for student affairs areas. We notice that a generation of student affairs professionals were trained with a clear understanding of a division between academic and student affairs and that our attendant professional identities developed around that understanding. The current accreditation changes catalyzed a palpable identity shift in at least one of us. While a challenging shift, it is ultimately reassuring to see accreditors adopt approaches that are holistic and possibly more inclusive of the personal, social, developmental, and emotional needs that drive student success, combined with academic and intellectual needs of students.

Practitioner reflections from this study yielded some common considerations about interpreting accreditation language, evidence driving change, and a spectrum of assessment purposes ranging from improvement to compliance. These considerations are intertwined and co-informing in an assessment cycle. In ideal situations, assessment and divisional leaders actively interpret and share updates to accreditation standards. Leaders

interpret those and other data to create and drive priorities in context. Programs, services, data collection, and assessments follow. Therefore, the ways professionals use and interpret accreditation data should inform assessment cycles (Culp & Dungy, 2012). Analyses and decisions close the assessment loop and data are stored to inform later reporting requirements.

### **Future Questions and Research**

Our investigation led us to more questions than we had means to address. We raise them here because, as practitioners, our goal is to engage in community discussions and scholarship to develop new practices, and eventually new standards:

1. Given recent legislative changes, we wondered: Are accreditors' changes in standards a reflection of institutions' ability to “shop around”? What implications do state/regional politics or agendas (e.g., as seen in Florida; Whitford, 2022) have on an institution's choice of accreditor (or vice versa)? What do these changes look like for structures across campus?
2. How are standards becoming more alike (or dissimilar) across accreditors? How does this affect student affairs work?
3. What is the difference for practitioners between the ideas of service-driven student affairs and outcomes-driven student affairs?
4. How might student affairs and assessment leaders coordinate and collaborate differently to reflect a desired seamless student experience?
5. How do accreditation agencies interpret the field and idea of student affairs work? What does that mean for student affairs' identity?
6. How will certification in student affairs intersect with accreditation standards?
7. Given recent legislative movements to ban diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) positions, departments, and/or activities (e.g., Bryand & Appleby, 2024), how do universities and student affairs professionals incorporate a more holistic approach to programs and processes that ensure student success?

### **Conclusion**

In describing accreditation changes in both documents and lived experiences, practitioners and scholars are called to pay closer attention to the accreditation landscape and its impact on student affairs on our campuses. Accreditation standards are reflecting broad practices of de-siloing specializations, data-driven changes to practice, and increased technology support. Those changes are, in turn, driving different functional arrangements of student affairs. How practitioners interpret changes and remain nimble with their work is a key thread in this investigation, analyses, and reflective conversations. We continue to call for student affairs leaders to be “in the know” about accreditation and accreditation standards, as practitioners rely on them to know it. For student affairs professionals, social justice and DEI work remains a priority in practice (see ACPA, n.d.; NASPA, n.d), but without additional recognition in standards, may become less of a priority. This makes it even more important for student affairs leaders to reflect the standards of their campus and be “at the accreditation table.” Implications for student affairs and other

professionals include new integrations with other units such as enrollment, workforce, budget, and economic development.

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview Questions**

1. We have a working assumption that institutional priorities translate to student affairs work. How do institutional priorities/needs translate into your daily work as a Student Affairs (assessment) professional?
2. What if anything has changed on your campus with regard to what it takes for “student success” in 2024?
  - a. In your opinion, who “owns” student success? How does that work in practice? How should that work?
3. How do you feel student affairs fits in university accreditation efforts? Do you feel that has changed in the last 5-10 years?
4. What was the nature of student affairs participation in your last accreditation cycle/report/visit? How was SA engaged in the process?
  - a. In your opinion, have tasks of student affairs changed related to accreditation? If so, how?
5. Did the most recent accreditation findings inform student affairs assessment practices? SA leadership decision making or resource allocations? Anything else? (note these should be formal changes)
  - a. How has this affected your work?
6. How (if at all) have campus efforts of student affairs shifted in the context of accreditation in the past few years? (note these would be the more informal changes)
  - a. How has this affected your work?
7. In your opinion, what are ways student affairs might engage with academic affairs and accrediting bodies to ensure coordination and alignment with the overall student success goals?
8. What is your sense of specific accreditation standards changes in the past five or so years?
  - a. If you sense there has been a change, how would you characterize those changes? (e.g., more effective?)
  - b. In your opinion, what implications do state/regional politics or agendas (e.g., as seen in Florida) have on an institution’s choice of accreditor (or vice versa)
9. Is there anything we didn’t ask that you’d like to discuss?