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Reaffirmation of Accreditation at The American College

By Tom Armington and Walt Woerheide, Ph.D., ChFC®, CFP®

Accreditation by a regional accreditor is not an absolute requirement for all colleges and universities but, in many cases, it is necessary for an educational institution to survive. For example, Title IV funding is available only for students attending regionally accredited colleges and universities, and the CFP Board only recognizes CFP educational curricula at regionally accredited colleges and universities. The regional accreditor for The American College is the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

The accreditation cycle is ten years and consists of two events, five years apart. The first event starts with a comprehensive self-study report. The report is about 100 pages long and typically includes many appendices and alludes to other documents. A visit by a team of peer evaluators from other institutions follows submittal of the report to the Middle States Commission. The purpose of the visit is to validate the accuracy of the report’s content and to determine whether the institution is meeting the Commission’s accreditation standards. If all goes well, the institution is accredited for five years. The second event is a five-year periodic review report (PRR). This report describes the institution’s progress in implementing recommendations made by the visiting team or the institution itself during its prior self-study and team visit. If it is determined the PRR demonstrates that the institution continues to meet all the standards, then the institution’s accreditation is reaffirmed for another five years.

If problems are noted during either the self-study or the PRR, the Middle States Commission will take one of the following steps:

- It may require additional reports to respond to a particular concern.
- It may place an institution on warning. In this case, an additional report is required and followed by a “small team” visit. Again, the purpose of the visit is to validate the report’s contents and provide a recommendation as to whether the warning should be lifted, extended or converted into probation.
- It may place an institution on probation. Once on probation, there will be another report and team visit. At that time, either the probation will be lifted or the institution will be asked to present evidence as to why its accreditation should not be revoked.

The majority of institutions successfully pass through both the self-study and PRR events. A good number, however, are asked for follow-up reports based on concerns expressed or warnings issued by the Commission. A smaller number are placed on probation. Occasionally an institution’s accreditation is revoked.

The American College submitted its most recent self-study report to the Commission in November 2012, which was followed by a team visit to The College in January 2013. In June 2013, the Commission found The College to be in compliance with all but one of its accreditation standards and placed The College on warning for insufficient evidence that it was meeting Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes. Based on the warning, the Commission required The College to
submit a follow-up report on student learning outcomes assessment in September 2014. The Commission also requested additional information about our broader assessment processes at the institutional level (Standard 7). It is important to note that the Middle States’ concerns were never about the quality of our educational programs or the effectiveness of The College; the concerns were about whether we were doing enough to assess that quality.

In July 2013, The College hired Tom Armington as associate vice president for assessment and examinations to address the Middle States requirements for assessment (Standards 14 and 7). He and Dr. Walt Woerheide, vice president for academic affairs, initiated annual academic program reviews starting in 2014 and augmented our institutional assessment processes to meet the Middle States Commission’s assessment requirements.

The academic program reviews focus on annual collection and analysis of student performance data and survey results in all Huebner and Graduate School programs. In July of each year, faculty teams headed by designated faculty Program Champions review the data collected for each academic program and analyze overall program effectiveness and student success at meeting program learning objectives. Based on their assessments, each team makes recommendations for program improvement.

Assessment at the institutional level involves coordination of diverse assessment activities in different operational areas for the purposes of informing area leadership and senior management of measurable outcomes that are necessary for ongoing decision-making. Three practices have been the focus of institutional assessment:

- An expanded college scorecard
- Assessment of its strategic plan implementation
- Development of a college-wide assessment team

The institution’s senior management recently developed an expanded scorecard of metrics that reflects The College’s performance in key areas closely linked to implementation of the strategic plan. Senior management is also developing metrics to measure outcomes of specific strategic initiatives. The Assessment Office is in the process of establishing an Institutional Assessment Team to provide continued guidance in developing and strengthening assessment processes across the institution.

In August 2014, The College submitted its follow-up report on assessment and received a small team visit in September. In November 2014, the Commission removed the warning on Standard 14 and reaffirmed The College’s accreditation. In a recent event celebrating our continued accreditation, Dr. Woerheide thanked The College community for supporting this process, saying, “To all the staff and faculty who participated in creating our report and who met with the Middle States team and demonstrated to them by thought, word and action that we believe in our processes and what we are doing, you are the ones who made this happen.”

As required by the Commission, our next steps related to continued accreditation are submission in April 2016 of a progress report on assessment of student learning outcomes and our five-year PRR, due in June 2018.

According to Mr. Armington, “Continued accreditation by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education provides verification by a widely recognized external authority that The American College meets the highest standards of integrity and quality in the academic programs and other educational services it offers.”

It is important to note that the Middle States Commission not only accredits The American College, but also the University of Pennsylvania, Princeton, Penn State, Villanova and many other highly regarded colleges and universities. We are in excellent company!