

# INTRODUCTION

In spring 1995, when Santa Clara University was drafting a new strategic plan animated by a vision of “educating men and women for competence, conscience, and compassion,” the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of WASC was beginning to experiment with new self-study models based on a concern for student learning. Believing that these independent initiatives might converge in a fruitful way, Ralph Wolff, the Executive Director of the Accrediting Commission, suggested that Santa Clara propose a “special focus self study rather than a full-scale compliance report addressing each of the nine WASC standards and each of their sub-areas.”

This invitation intrigued Santa Clara. We saw it as an opportunity to focus our self-study on issues that were important to us, but we were also apprehensive about undertaking an experimental self-study without having much institutional experience in assessment or knowing what the expectations of a visiting team might be. After further discussion with WASC, we decided that the opportunities outweighed the risks and submitted a proposal to WASC in May 1996 (Exhibit I.4.1), followed by a revised proposal in March 1998 (Exhibit I.4.2). This proposal stated that:

Santa Clara’s self-study will review and analyze the University’s performance in relation to its *Strategic Plan*, which is encapsulated in the following “strategic vision”:

*Santa Clara University will excel in educating men and women for competence, conscience, and compassion. We will realize this vision by combining teaching and scholarship of high quality, integrated education in the Jesuit tradition, and a commitment to students as persons. Our success will result in increased national recognition and a greater ability to attract the students, faculty, staff, and resources we seek.*

The proposed structure of the self-study will allow Santa Clara to examine its effectiveness in achieving the core educational objective of “educating men and women for competence, conscience, and compassion” and to examine questions that are posed by each of the three major initiatives that are part of its planning effort:

- 1) BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF SCHOLARS. We will foster a vital intellectual community whose members collaborate as partners in learning and scholarship.
- 2) PROVIDING AN INTEGRATED EDUCATION. We will foster the education of the whole person in a learning environment that enables students to make connections among different forms of knowledge, understanding, and experience.
- 3) FOCUSING RESOURCES FOR EXCELLENCE. We will develop the resources necessary for educational excellence and focus them more sharply on advancing the University's vision, mission, and values.

The evidence to be analyzed in the self-study will include descriptive and historical information as well as data related to learning outcomes and the three strategic initiatives. Wherever feasible, our performance measures will be benchmarked over time and indicate targets toward which Santa Clara is working. An important element of the self-study will be the development of a research plan Santa Clara will put in place over the next several years to gather evidence to support the evaluation of the ongoing effectiveness of its academic programs and administrative services.

The approach we proposed dovetails with the emerging model of accreditation that WASC is developing. One of the six principles WASC proposed in 1998 to guide the revision of its Standards of Accreditation was “greater emphasis...on evidence of educational effectiveness and student learning.” In April 1999, WASC released a proposed framework for a new model of accreditation, a key element of which was a focus on educational effectiveness. While the Accrediting Commission believed it was premature to define educational effectiveness in specific terms, it did identify key elements that institutions seeking accreditation should address:

- Articulating a collective vision of educational attainment, centering on the degree to which an institution sets goals and obtains results for student learning.
- Organizing for learning, centering on the alignment of appropriate institutional assets and characteristics with the goal of producing high levels of student learning.
- Becoming a learning organization, centering on the degree to which an institution has developed systems to assess its own performance and to use information to improve student learning.

The new WASC framework outlines an accreditation process built around core commitments made by an institution to address the key issues of educational effectiveness and institutional capacity and articulates a trial statement of these commitments:

To become and remain accredited, each institution demonstrates that it is committed to developing and sustaining its institutional capacity and educational effectiveness.

- *Institutional Capacity*: The institution functions with clear purposes, high levels of institutional integrity, fiscal stability and organizational structure to fulfill its purposes.
- *Educational Effectiveness*: The institution evidences clear and appropriate educational objectives and design at the institutional and program level, and employs processes of review, including the collection and use of data, that assures the delivery of programs and learner accomplishments at a level of performance appropriate for the degree or certificate awarded.

Our focus in this self-study mirrors the proposed WASC accreditation criteria, which challenge us to establish the integrity of the degrees we offer and the educational practices we use. When we assess learning outcomes for each degree program and the educational environment in which that learning occurs, we respond to the characteristics of educational effectiveness identified by WASC: articulating a collective vision of educational attainment and organizing the environment for learning. The assessment of our effectiveness in developing and focusing our resources is consistent with the WASC emphasis on aligning institutional assets and capacity with institutional purpose. In addition, our commitment to creating a “culture of inquiry, evidence, and action” accords with WASC’s vision of institutions as learning organizations that assess their own performance and use that assessment to improve what they do and how they do it.

We embarked on this self-study in the expectation—shared by WASC—that this would be a learning experience rather than a compliance exercise. As will become apparent in the following pages, we are not as far along the learning curve as we had hoped to be. We have not made as much progress in identifying performance measures, benchmarking, or articulating a research plan as our proposal to WASC outlined. While our performance around *inquiry* and *evidence* is not as impressive as our record of *action* around the *Strategic Plan*, however, we believe that we have made significant progress and laid a good foundation for continued progress in assessment. We look forward to the review of our progress by the visiting team and their advice on our next steps.

In his 1995 convocation address, University President Paul Locatelli, S.J., captured the essence of our attempt to link strategic planning and the self-study when he remarked that what

Santa Clara sees as important is “a culture of thinking and acting strategically more than drafting of lengthy plans. It is ensuring consistency between what we say about ourselves and what we do at every level of the University.” This self-study is dedicated to stimulating dialogue in the campus community that will foster such a culture.