Critique of the University of Pittsburgh Self-Study

**Identify the accrediting body and summarize the accreditation standards that in your judgment require some degree of quantitative analysis rather than qualitative judgment.**

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education is responsible for the University of Pittsburgh’s accreditation. It has established 14 standards for accreditation, grouped under two sections—Institutional Context (Standards 1-7) and Educational Effectiveness (Standards 8-14). The current edition of the standards was updated in 2011 to include new distance education and correspondence education requirements (under Standard 13). In my view, most of the standards require some degree of quantitative analysis. In particular, those standards grouped under Educational Effectiveness that focus on measuring outcomes would require substantial quantitative analysis. These include Standard 8: Student Admissions and Retention (requires institutions to show evidence of student persistence and attrition and an examination of enrollment management), Standard 9: Student Support Services (which seeks ongoing assessment of student support services), Standard 11: Educational Offerings (requires that learning goals are identified and student achievement is measured), Standard 12: General Education (requires assessment of general education outcomes), and Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning.

In my view, Standard 13: Related Educational Activities, which was modified to accommodate standards for distance education, is of increased importance both for institutions that offer online programs like the University of Pittsburgh, and for those with campuses overseas, such as New York University’s campus in Abu Dhabi (Daley, 2011). Twelve fundamental elements are outlined for distance education in this standard, two of which require quantitative analysis related to learning outcomes and periodic assessment.

**Drawing upon the lecture notes and readings, comment critically on the adequacy of the data and analysis that was brought to bear against the standards in the self-study that you reviewed.**

The University of Pittsburgh has taken an interesting approach to its self-study. Rather than address the accreditation standards in their entirety, it has chosen to report specifically on the topic of assessment. This move is consistent with a growing trend in accreditation to make student outcomes assessment central to the overall process (Volkwein, 2009). Pittsburgh’s self-study wholly addresses standard 7 (Institutional Assessment) and standard 14 (Assessment of Student Learning), and partially addresses standards 2, 8, 9, and 11. A separate report, the “Document Roadmap,” addresses the remaining standards.

The Pittsburgh self-study is a detailed report on how it conducts assessment and evaluation. It draws on a number of surveys, including those on student satisfaction and student engagement, and surveys targeting graduates/seniors, alumni and leavers. The university uses
survey results in combination with faculty input and direct evidence of students’ work to assess learning outcomes. As an example, the self-study describes a general education writing course which is evaluated through a combination of ongoing gathering of student writing, faculty input, and student self-assessment. Additional data used for its report on student learning outcomes include assessment plans for each degree and certificate program, annual reports of assessment activities for each program, results of student performance on national assessment tests, and standardized assessment of information literacy skills and academic proficiency. I was interested to note that while much of the data generated for the self-study was produced by the Institutional Research Office, the office was not represented on the self-study steering committee.

**Make recommendations for improving the Self-Study next time.**

The University of Pittsburgh decided to focus solely on assessment for its self-study and was permitted to do so under a Middle States option which allows institutions to give special emphasis to an area of particular importance. Overall, it has produced a thorough self-study that delves deeply into its assessment and evaluation processes at both the institution level and the program level. However, as a result of the approach it has taken, the university has relegated many of the other standards (in particular those grouped under Institutional Context) to a second, less visible report, which could imply that they are of less importance. In my view, Standards 4 through 6, which focus on leadership, governance, administration, and integrity, are too important to be consigned to a secondary document. I feel that in its next self-study, the university should attempt to integrate all standards into one report.

Another area I feel that the university will need to focus on in its next self-study is that of Standard 13, and in particular, the distance learning component of that standard.

**References**


