

GUIDELINE-13 GENERAL TIPS FOR PREPARING A SELF STUDY REPORT

PREAMBLE:

The education program's Self Study Report (SSR) must be submitted to PEAC eight weeks prior to the date of the onsite accreditation visit. The SSR provides an opportunity for the program to:

- provide evidence about the program's compliance with accreditation standards
- systematically review the program and assess its outcomes
- identify areas of strength
- identify areas where strategies may need to be developed to improve or maintain program quality

More information about the format and submission requirements of the SSR can be found in the Program Accreditation Handbook.

The process of writing and formatting a SSR is one that is common to most education programs undergoing accreditation reviews. This Guideline provides general suggestions and advice about how best to prepare an SSR. The information has been collated from a discussion group on LinkedIn titled "Higher Education Accreditation Basics – Best Practices for Developing a Quality Self Study"¹.

Suggestions and Tips for Preparing a Self Study Report

Purpose

"Advise institutions that the self-study is not an add-on; rather, it is a reflection of the continuous quality improvements that institutions are already working on. "

"The self-study should be started early; however, in reality, the self-study should never end. With education changing so rapidly, self-reflection should always be occurring."

"The Self Study should be a product of the whole institution, not the wishful thinking of one administrator. Use diverse working groups that represent the broad reaches of the institution. It must be honest and accurate--but don't be too hard on yourselves."

1

<http://www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=4174303&mostPopular=&trk=tyah&trkInfo=tarId%3A1402436136199%2Ctas%3Ahigher%20education%20accreditation%20basics%2Cidx%3A1-1-1>

“Align all academic and administrative goals and objectives with those of the institution and its mission.”

“Be sure to communicate effectively to all stakeholders involved in the assessment process and let them get involved.”

Timing and preparation tips

“Start early!! If the accreditor states a timeframe, you need to adhere to it, especially if you are creating documents that need to be in place to meet the standards. You cannot wait until the last minute and hope to produce a quality piece of work. You also cannot do it in one sitting.”

“Read the standards and the directions before you start, and then follow the directions. Meet the deadline, so that feedback can be provided when you can actually use it to prepare ahead of time. Do a little every day, and don't take a day off until it's done.”

“Responding to standards is not like high school, the more you write does not give the impression that you have answered and documented compliance.”

“Especially for re-accreditations, faculty and staff should review the previous self-study for anything they said they were going to do as well as any feedback/recommendations made in the accrediting body's final report that we need to make sure we address. One piece that may be useful is to develop certain boilerplate language for certain sections of accreditation reports such as finances, library/information technology resources, etc. that may be common across areas and easily tailored to ensure consistency and that they are updated on a regular and consistent basis.”

“Make sure everyone is aware of the upcoming visit, what is in the Self Study, and what questions to expect from visitors. Publish an Executive Summary of the Self Study Document along with a list of likely questions and suggested answers. “

“Actively seek individuals or an individual who has/have participated in institutional assessment studies or reviews in the accreditation process to impart insight and direction. You want to build a quality team of assessment leaders to review, prod, refine, and strengthen the process.”

Content and Documentation

“Make sure there is backup documentation for each practice that you report in your narration.”

“Organize narrative and evidence and closely to the standard under review.”

“Support your narrative with examples/evidences of how assessment results are used for improvement and strategic planning.”

“Use appendices and exhibits to catalog your compliance and provide examples. (One rule of thumb is to give five examples for everything.) If you have a manual that addresses a topic, include it as an appendix/exhibit. Whenever possible, cite the standard or policy in your answer. This is easier in more standards (national accrediting bodies, programmatic accreditors), but a good practice. Anywhere that you believe you may not be as strong as you'd like, identify your goals or your plan of action to reach the standard. Data is good, but it can be overwhelming. Guide your reader through it. Don't assume your examiners know your organization or how you do things. Explain processes, jargon, workflows. “

Example: "We meet standard A, which requires X Y and Z in the following ways. First, our dedication to X is demonstrated through our Really Cool Committee's actions over the last year. Copies of the Really Cool Committee's agendas can be found in Appendix A. The biggest initiatives were That One Thing, as well as the Super Duper Thing. This increased first-year student retention 10%. Y was harder for the college to address. While we changed Workflow 1, from okay to kinda good, the college has devoted resources to make Y a bigger priority in 2014. Z, a strength of the college, was praised in our last site visit. Since that time, we have expanded the piloted in the 2004 school year, and it is a cornerstone of our admissions effort. Building from the guidance set forth in Policy 12.3, we adapted the leadership team to have a stronger voice from students. Representative feedback from the participant surveys is included in Appendix B, but one professor noted an increase in community engagement with her project derived from the program that paired students with community elementary school students to build math and science skills...." etc.

Writing

“Have many people write the self-study but have a small group or individual pull the narrative together. Having a single person write the self-study will result in a report that does not accurately reflect the totality of the institution or program. On the other hand, writing by committee without having someone bring all the sections together as a whole will result in a disjointed and inconsistent report.”

“Start the process early and involve more than one individual in developing the self study.”

“Remember that the readers of your self-study (visiting team members and commissioners) do not know what you know, so you need to be thorough in telling them what the institution is doing and how that meets the standards; then provide the evidence. They will be asking the question, ‘How do I know?’ “

“As you are writing, avoid acronyms. This may seem like a minor, picky point but as a reader of many self-studies I don't have time to figure out your code. Remember your readers know very little about your school, so don't expect them to speak your institutional language. “

“Be transparent. Everyone knows everything is not perfect, so be honest about the things that you are working on improving and tell what you plan is for those improvements. A self-study report that doesn't acknowledge any weaknesses leaves the institution open for deeper scrutiny than an institution that is authentic...Caution, though: This is not the time or place to air your grievances, pet peeves or other areas of discontent.”

“Make sure your study demonstrates how the institution, its academic programs and administrative units are engaged in an ongoing outcome-based assessment cycle where multiple and inter-linked tools for evaluating effectiveness are implemented.”

“Be consistent in your writing. Even though you may have several groups pulling information together I suggest having a single 'voice' to edit and ensure flow of the final document. “

Reviewing

“Have external audiences review the document - boards, advisory committees, etc. They may be able to point out things that should be emphasized but are missed internally.”

“Have the Self Study sent back to the working groups for fact-checking.”

“Reviewing often and discussing overlaps and connections is one of the best learning experiences of the process. It also keeps your information consistent across the document. I often find with various groups working on sections of the self-study, information will get muddled or not be consistent. Reviewing as a group will ensure that everyone is on the same page and the information presented is clean and accurate.”

“When the self-study is complete it needs to be read by someone else within the organization/institution. If you wrote it, it may not say what it needs to say, rather what you believe it to say. Accrediting bodies do not know your processes; the self study must speak to each individual standard and demonstrate compliance. “

“Use experienced external reviewers to ensure a complete preparation.”

Guideline Number: GUIDE-13	
Date of last revision	Associated documents
<i>June 2014</i>	Program Handbook