

U.S. Higher Education Regional Accreditation Commission Standards and the Centrality of Engagement

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Abstract

This study addressed the research question “How do regional accrediting standards apply to the central role of community engagement in U.S. institutions of higher education?” Using descriptive and qualitative methods, two sources were analyzed: published standards of the 6 regional accrediting commissions in the United States and the transcript of a panel discussion in which leaders from 4 of these 6 commissions shared their views on “engagement and regional accreditation.” From these analyses, 4 themes emerged: (1) the institutional determination of community engagement mission and goals, (2) community engagement in educational programs and student learning, (3) institutional effectiveness and community engagement, and (4) faculty scholarship relating to community engagement. The article concludes with recommendations for institutional practices and supporting evidence to submit to regional accreditation commissions indicating the centrality of engagement in institutional missions. Recommendations are also made regarding peer evaluator training, faculty scholarship, and civic democracy.

Introduction

Recent concerns and provocative discussions about taxpayer investments in U.S. higher education challenge institutions to carefully consider how they adapt and implement their historic missions of teaching, research, and service. Legislators and public interest groups have issued clarion calls to ground institutional purposes and practices more closely in the needs of society. In addition, the federal government has tightened the nexus between regional accreditation, institutional performance, and public accountability. In this milieu, many colleges and universities are examining and strengthening their relationships with communities through partnerships that are driven by their teaching, research, service missions, and mutual interests. Concurrently, the role of regional accreditation related to the engagement of institutions and their communities requires examination.

Purpose of the Study

Regional accreditation in the United States is required for all institutions that receive federal financial support. In recent years, the regulatory influence of these accrediting bodies on institutional operations has escalated. Yet, despite increasing external pressures on higher education institutions to focus mission-centric functions toward pressing societal concerns, institutional leaders report that regional accrediting commissions standards speak to these issues in oblique and differential terms, in contrast to descriptors for the evaluation of teaching and research missions. Therefore, this analysis combined qualitative findings from four regional accreditor representatives who participated in a national panel discussion on this topic and an examination of the relevant sections of published regional accreditation standards. The purpose of this analysis was to provide institutional leaders with a context to interpret (and influence) regional accreditor standards as they apply to institutional missions related to community engagement. In light of this purpose, the following research question was addressed: “How do regional accrediting standards apply to the central role of community engagement in U.S. institutions of higher education?” Prior to addressing the question, it is important to clarify definitions used in our approach to the descriptive analyses performed.

Definitions

Definition: Community Engagement

Depending upon the mission and strategic plan of a given institution, the operational definition and ultimate expression of community engagement may vary. However, since the work of the Kellogg Commission (2000, 2001), several organizations have developed definitions of “community engagement.” For instance, the institutions represented in the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) convened a committee consisting of individuals from member universities (Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Ohio State, Penn State, Purdue, and Wisconsin) in partnership with representatives from NASULGC’s Council on Extension, Continuing Education and Public Service Benchmarking Task Force (CECEPS) to study the definition of engagement. The joint CIC/CECEPS Committee on Engagement issued the following definition:

The partnership of university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good. (*Fitzgerald, Smith, Book, Rodin, & CIC Committee on Engagement, 2005, p. 2*)

Once adopted, the CIC/CECEPS definition influenced the discussions within professional associations and across institutions, including national public and private universities, as well as regional institutions, community colleges, and for-profit institutions. Depending upon the mission of these respective institutions, their focus on different elements of engagement varied. In 2005, with the CIC/CECEPS definition as a touchstone, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching initiated an elective classification system for community engagement which has since shaped the national conversation. The Carnegie Community Engagement Elective Classification employs the following definition:

Community engagement describes collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.

The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good. (*Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d.*)

Since it first introduced the elective community engagement classification in 2005, Carnegie has designated 311 institutions as community-engaged (*Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2011*). Because of the broad impact that this elective community engagement classification has had on higher education institutions across the country and the widespread adoption

of its definition, the Carnegie Community Engagement Elective Classification definition was used in this analysis.

Following the introduction of the Carnegie Community Engagement Elective Classification, in 2012 an important synthesis of the national conversations on community engagement to date was published in the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*. This article, “The Centrality of Engagement in Higher Education” (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2012), was the culmination of deliberations and consideration on the essential role of community engagement in higher education, primarily convened through the Council on Engagement and Outreach of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU). Arguing that “engagement is critical to the success of higher education in the future” (p. 1), the authors assert:

Through engagement with local and broader communities, we seek a means to expand and shift from the established internally focused, discipline-based framework of higher education to a framework focused on a stronger level of societal relevance that improves both society and the overarching goals of higher education.
(p. 1)

“The Centrality of Engagement in Higher Education” (Fitzgerald et al., 2012) provides further guidance on the definition of community engagement that is relevant to this examination. In light of the numerous definitions put forth since the Kellogg Commission reports (2001, 2002), the “Centrality” authors (Fitzgerald et al., 2012, p.13) suggest the following approach to defining engagement:

The collective impact of these definitions implies that if engagement is fully embedded within the core teaching, research, and service missions of the institution, it must be distinguished by at least four foundational characteristics.

1. It must be *scholarly*. A scholarship-based model of engagement embraces both *the act of engaging* (bringing universities and communities together) and *the product of engagement* (the spread of scholarship-focused, evidence-based practices in communities).
2. It must *cut across the mission* of teaching, research, and service; rather than being a separate activity, engaged

scholarship is a particular approach to campus-community collaboration.

3. It must be *reciprocal and mutually beneficial*; university and community partners engage in mutual planning, implementation, and assessment of programs and activities.
4. It must embrace the processes and values of a *civil democracy* (Bringle and Hatcher, 2011).

As a final note related to the definition of community engagement, depending upon the institution's mission, a variety of terms and definitions may be used. This poses a challenge to regional accreditors as they consider the specific expression of community engagement within the context of the institutional mission.

Definition: Regional Accreditation

In the United States, there is a long history of voluntary, peer-led, regional higher education institution accreditation. Although not governmental entities, the U.S. regional accrediting agencies now are closely linked to the allocation of federal and state funding for higher education. The U.S. Department of Education (2014) recognizes six regional accreditors at the senior college or university level (see Table 1).

Table 1. U.S. Regional Accrediting Commissions and Regions

Regional Accrediting Association	Region
Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)	Delaware, DC, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, and "other geographic areas in which the Commission conducts accrediting activities" (MSCHE, n.d.).
New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE)	Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, and "institutions in several other countries accredited by CIHE" (NEASC-CIHE, 2013).
North Central Association Higher Learning Commission (NCA HLC)	Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming (NCA HLC, 2012).
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)	Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington (NWCCU, n.d.).

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS COC)	Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, "Latin America and other international sites" (<i>SACS COC, 2013 para. 1</i>).
Western Association of Schools and Colleges College and University Commission (WASC)	California, Hawaii, Guam, America Samoa, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (<i>WASC, 2013</i>).

The standards for the Middle States Commission on Higher Education provide this synopsis of the role of regional accreditation in the United States:

Accreditation is the means of self-regulation and peer review adopted by the educational community. The accrediting process is intended to strengthen and sustain the quality and integrity of higher education, making it worthy of public confidence and minimizing the scope of external control. The extent to which each educational institution accepts and fulfills the responsibilities inherent in the process is a measure of its concern for freedom and quality in higher education and its commitment to striving for and achieving excellence in its endeavors. (*MSCHE, 2006, p. 5*)

Definition: Institutional and Educational Effectiveness

Each of the six regional accreditors incorporates the concepts of institutional and educational effectiveness in its standards. These standards have in common the following elements of ongoing and systematic processes: establishment of mission and goals, planning, expected academic and administrative outcomes, data collection, assessment of outcomes, evaluation of assessment findings, resource allocation in support of stated mission and goals, and continuous improvement in institutional performance. The following extracts from the NWCCU (on institutional effectiveness) and WASC (on educational effectiveness) provide representative samples.

Standard Four—Effectiveness and Improvement: The institution regularly and systematically collects data related to clearly defined indicators of achievement, analyzes those data, and formulates evidence-based evalu-

ations of the achievement of core theme objectives. It demonstrates clearly defined procedures for evaluating the integration and significance of institutional planning, the allocation of resources, and the application of capacity in its activities for achieving the intended outcomes of its programs and services and for achieving its core theme objectives. The institution disseminates assessment results to its constituencies and uses those results to effect improvement. (*NWCCU, 2010, p. 13*)

Educational effectiveness (EE). These standards focus on producing the intended learning results in an educational endeavor. As used by WASC, educational effectiveness includes clear and appropriate educational outcomes and objectives; and alignment at the institutional and program level of resources and processes, including assessment, to ensure delivery of programs and learner accomplishments at a level of performance appropriate to the degree or certificate awarded. At the institutional level, findings about learning are integrated into planning, budgeting, and decision making. (*WASC, 2013, p. 48*)

Methodology

This descriptive analysis was conducted utilizing two sources: (1) a transcription of comments made at the 2011 APLU Council on Engagement workshop by Barbara Brittingham, president, New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC); Sandra Elman, president, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU); Andrew Lootens-White, vice president, North Central Association Higher Learning Commission (NCA HLC); and Ralph Wolfe, president, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC); and (2) an examination of content from each of the six regional accrediting bodies in the United States and their current (2011–2013) standards for institutional accreditation made available online at their web addresses. Given the nature of the research, it was exempted from IRB review.

For the first step of the research, the presidents/commissioners of the six regional accrediting bodies were contacted via e-mail and asked to join a panel to be held at the annual APLU conference convened in San Francisco, California in November 2011. Presidents/

commissioners of three of the six regional accrediting bodies agreed to be present, and a fourth accreditor sent a vice presidential representative. In the months prior to the panel discussion, an abstract and questions were developed by the panel convener (author) and modified by the participants. During the panel presentation, notes were recorded by an institutional representative of APLU's Council on Engagement and Outreach who did not have other assignments during the presentation. The panelists' comments were transcribed to add breadth and context to the analysis of regional accreditor standards. The quoted material in this analysis was submitted to each participant for review and comment as a form of "member checking" utilized in naturalistic inquiry (*Lincoln & Guba, 1985*).

In the second step of the research, accrediting body standards were reviewed by two separate readers on two separate occasions. All content that included references to community engagement was excerpted in a table for further analysis. If such references were absent, proxies such as "community service" and "public service" were extracted. In addition, all references related to institutional mission and goals were extracted and confirmed by a second reading of the text.

It is important to note that this study is limited to six U.S. regional accrediting bodies and does not include the WASC Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges or any national, professional, or discipline-based accrediting agencies. In addition, the study was conducted utilizing the published standards for each regional accrediting commission that were in force from 2011 to 2013 (July) and published on the commissions' websites.

APLU Panel on Engagement and Regional Accreditation: Critical Issues and Strategic Dialogue

In order to gain greater understanding of how accrediting commission leaders view the applicability of standards to institutional commitment to community engagement, all six accreditors were invited to send representatives to the 2011 APLU annual meeting in San Francisco in order to participate in a panel discussion that was described as follows in the conference program:

Issues related to higher education accreditation have received considerable attention recently. The re-accreditation process is time consuming but essential and is an opportunity for campuses to demonstrate their com-

mitment to their missions—including outreach and engagement. Over the years, some accrediting bodies have added or strengthened criteria measuring engagement—others have not. This panel will facilitate a discussion on the current status of regional accrediting standards related to engagement and potential CEO recommendations related to the accreditation process. (*“Engagement and Regional Accreditation,” 2011, p. 29*)

The comments from the participants, which were recorded by a member of APLU’s Council on Engagement and Outreach, provided a second source of information in addition to the review of the accrediting standards to address the research question posed in this study: “How do regional accrediting standards apply to the central role of community engagement in U.S. institutions of higher education?” Four major themes were identified from the recorded comments: (1) the institutional determination of community engagement mission and goals, (2) community engagement in educational programs and student learning, (3) institutional effectiveness and community engagement, and (4) faculty scholarship relating to community engagement.

The first theme and the one most frequently referred to by the panel members was the institution’s role in determining how community engagement was expressed in its mission and goals. Sandra Elman of NWCCU said, “You are in the driver’s seat; you define your mission; you state the goals.” Barbara Brittingham of NEASC CIHE said, “Mission, mission, mission, it’s mentioned 70 times. If engagement fits with your mission, you can make it work.” Ralph Wolfe of WASC said, “Engagement is a critical role for a public university.” Andrew Lootens-White of NCA HLC commented on the recent revisions of his organization’s standards related to community engagement by saying that community engagement is now “integrated into the mission instead of segregating it as a separate criterion.”

The second theme identified was community engagement in educational programs and student learning. Ralph Wolfe asserted:

We need to talk about what is good learning. We need to be capacity building. We need to be a learning community. We’re like bumble bees. We go to good institutions, pick up pollen, and bring [it] back to our home institutions. What is good learning? Can you get good

learning just by sitting in the classroom and reading the textbook?

Barbara Brittingham noted that institutions should “ask departments ‘what it is you want your students to learn.’” If the response is “building students’ capacity to solve a problem,” then learning is “not just in the classroom.” Sandra Elman commented that civic and academic purposes should not be “bifurcated,” suggesting that both need to be considered in learning, teaching, and scholarship. Finally, Ralph Wolfe suggested: “We need to become cross-institutional learning communities instead of compliance organizations.”

The third theme related to the expectation that all elements of community engagement should be included in “institutional effectiveness” practices (mission and goal setting, establishment of student learning outcomes, faculty evaluation, planning, assessment, and use of findings for improvement). Sandra Elman provided the following structure:

Your institution needs to identify outcomes to measure how that mission/core theme is being met. Your institution will be held accountable: mission fulfillment, adaptability and sustainability. You will need to provide evidence (qualitative and quantitative) that the institution is meeting the objectives of engagement and you are going to sustain or adapt.

Barbara Brittingham shared her experience:

Institutions often list a variety of activities, but accreditation bodies want to see what the outcomes are and how they are evaluated. . . . it’s not enough to see what the activities are, what is the real contribution? . . . it’s not just about salaries and the economic impact of graduates. Look at research, impact of students.

The fourth theme that emerged from the participants’ comments, faculty scholarship relating to community engagement, was introduced by a question from the audience. Hiram Fitzgerald, associate provost of university outreach and engagement at Michigan State and president of the Engagement Scholarship Consortium, asked, “How are accrediting bodies focusing on engaged scholarship? Faculty are hired to do research, basic science. People do work in communities that is not engaged, communities are viewed

as a subject pool to advance their research.” Sandra Elman commented, “We don’t have preconceived notions of what service is, is not; engagement is, is not. We would hold up your university to what [it] has defined . . . and how you are measuring it.” Barbara Brittingham followed, stating, “Engagement is an umbrella over teaching, research and service in [NEASC] The focus is on teaching and how engagement is connected to teaching.” Commenting on the general standards of accreditation and the specificity of the question related to the “scholarship of engagement,” Ralph Wolfe said, “What the public expects of accreditation is the quality of the teaching and learning experience of students.” Sandra Elman added, “Accreditation bodies keep bouncing it back to the institutions; they said, ‘You can answer that for yourselves. Your institutions should define it.’”

Analysis of Regional Accrediting Standards

Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education provides accreditation in five states and the other geographical regions noted in Table 1. MSCHE’s *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education* was first published in 2006 and revised in 2009 and 2011. A review of the document found no specific references to community engagement. The sections pertinent to this analysis are contained in “Standard 1: Mission and Goals”:

The institution’s mission clearly defines its purpose within the context of higher education and indicates whom the institution serves and what it intends to accomplish. The institution’s stated goals, consistent with the aspirations and expectations of higher education, clearly specify how the institution will fulfill its mission. (*MSCHE, 2006, p. 1*)

According to Standard 1, institutional mission and goal statements are to be developed by a “broad representation from all sectors of the institution” (*p. 1*) and must include the institution’s “basic purposes and characteristics,” which may include “research or community service” (*p. 1*). Further, according to this standard, institutional goals:

- stem from the institution's mission;
- are developed with the involvement of the institution's community;
- are based on a review of existing goals and an analysis of internal and external forces affecting the institution; and
- provide a framework for ongoing institutional development and self-evaluation. (*p. 1*)

“Standard 1: Mission and Goals” of the MSCHE’s Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education reflects current best practices of “institutional effectiveness,” a central component of all six regional accreditor requirements. In addition, under “Standard 11: Educational Offerings,” the inclusion of an institution-wide “community service” requirement is cited as an example of “institutional-level learning outcomes” (*p. 41*). Further, depending upon the institutional mission and student population, Standard 11 specifies:

An institution may integrate community services with educational programs, enhancing the effectiveness with which it fulfills both its educational mission and its responsibility to society. (*p. 43*)

The analysis of MSCHE Characteristics found that it does not include specific references to “community engagement.” For the purpose of this analysis, it is important to note that the standards specify that institutional missions and goals “are developed with the involvement of the institution’s community” and include an “analysis of internal and external forces affecting the institution” (*MSCHE, 2006, p. 1*). Further, the MSCHE Characteristics provides for the integration of “community services with educational programs” within institutional missions.

New England Association of Schools and Colleges: Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE)

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE) includes six states in the northeastern U.S. and institutions in several other countries (see Table 1).

The preamble of NEASC-CIHE's *Standards for Accreditation (2011)* provides a framework for accreditation:

The Commission deals with institutional differences in ways designed to protect both educational quality and individual philosophy and practice. . . . They allow the Commission to appraise a wide variety of collegiate institutions, differing in purpose, size, organization, scope of program, clientele served, support, and control. (*Preamble, para. 4*)

From this perspective of institutional diversity, NEASC-CIHE *Standards (2011)* addresses all components of institutional mission in a broad fashion under its opening “Standard One: Mission and Purposes.”

Within Standard One, Section 1.3 introduces the institutional purpose of “public service,” along with a reference to communities:

The institution's purposes are concrete and realistic and further define its educational and other dimensions, including scholarship, research, and public service. Consistent with its mission, the institution endeavors to enhance the communities it serves (*NEASC-CIHE, 2011, p. 3*).

In each standard, the role of institutional effectiveness is included. In “Standard Two: Planning and Evaluation,” there is specific reference to the inclusion of “use of external perspectives” in the review of mission-based activities, including “academic programs and other programs.” In “Standard Five: Faculty,” the role of “community service” is specifically cited as a possible criterion for faculty evaluation:

The evaluative criteria reflect the mission and purposes of the institution and the importance it attaches to the various responsibilities of faculty, e.g., teaching, advising, assessment, scholarship, creative activities, research, and professional and community service. (*NEASC-CIHE, 2011, section 5.11*)

The NEASC-CIHE *Standards (2011)* proposes a generative relationship between institutional mission and communities: “Consistent with its mission, the institution endeavors to enhance the communities it serves” (*section 1.3*). In addition, it documents

the idea of including external entities, potentially community partners, in institutional effectiveness processes. Finally, the Standards includes the idea of “community service” as distinguished from “professional service” in faculty evaluation criteria.

North Central Association Higher Learning Commission (NCA HLC)

The Higher Learning Commission serves as the regional accreditor for 19 states. The *Criteria for Accreditation and Core Components* (NCA HLC, 2012) is the publication utilized for this analysis and includes the standards currently in effect. The 2012 *Criteria* includes the following five components: “Criterion One—Mission”; “Criterion Two—Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct”; “Criterion Three—Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support”; “Criterion Four—Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement”; and “Criterion Five—Resources, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness.”

Under “Criterion One—Mission,” Core Component 1.D (NCA HLC, 2012) establishes the following standard for all HLC-accredited institutions: “The institution’s mission demonstrates commitment to the public good.” This component contains three elements:

1. Actions and decisions reflect an understanding that in its educational role the institution serves the public, not solely the institution, and thus entails a public obligation.
2. The institution’s educational responsibilities take primacy over other purposes, such as generating financial returns for investors, contributing to a related or parent organization, or supporting external interests.
3. The institution engages with its identified external constituencies and communities of interest and responds to their needs as its mission and capacity allow.

Thus, in the current NCA HLC *Criteria* (2012), the relationship of the institution and its community is viewed through the lens of the institutional mission, rather than being separated, at least for the purposes of the accrediting standards, as it was in Criterion Five in the NCA HLC standards prior to 2012. This criterion not

only clearly articulates the expectation for a “commitment to the public good” for all NCA HLC-accredited institutions but also indicates that community engagement must be grounded in the institutional mission.

“Criterion Three—Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support” (*NCA HLC, 2012*) includes a specific reference to community engagement in the context of public accountability:

The institution fulfills the claims it makes for an enriched educational environment:

1. Co-curricular programs are suited to the institution’s mission and contribute to the educational experience of its students.
2. The institution demonstrates any claims it makes about contributions to its students’ educational experience by virtue of aspects of its mission, such as research, community engagement, service learning, religious or spiritual purpose, and economic development. (*section 3.E*)

As previously stated, the *NCA HLC Criteria (2012)* indicates that all references to public service and community engagement are to be grounded in the institutional mission. Criterion One emphasizes the role of institutions of higher education in contributing to the “public good” and establishes standards for service to the public and engagement with external communities to the extent that institutional “mission and capacity allow” (*section 1.D.3*). Further, the *Criteria* establishes an expectation of accountability with respect to student learning related to “community engagement” and “service learning.”

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities provides accreditation for 163 institutions in seven states (*NWCCU, n.d.*). For this analysis we utilized its *Complete Standards for Accreditation (2010)*, which includes five standards: “Mission, Core Themes, and Expectations”; “Resources and Capacity”; “Planning and Implementation”; “Effectiveness and Improvement”; and “Mission Fulfillment, Adaptation, and Sustainability.”

Within “Standard One: Mission, Core Themes, and Expectations,” institutional mission and core themes establish the insti-

tutional context that is then examined in the accreditation and reaffirmation processes. Thus, if the institutional mission includes community engagement, the institution must demonstrate how it carries out that mission through the establishment of its core themes, objectives, resource allocation, and institutional effectiveness processes. This interrelatedness is demonstrated in Standard One, Sections B.1 and B.2:

1.B.1 The institution identifies core themes that individually manifest essential elements of its mission and collectively encompass its mission.

1.B.2 The institution establishes objectives for each of its core themes and identifies meaningful, assessable, and verifiable indicators of achievement that form the basis for evaluating accomplishment of the objectives of its core themes.

“Standard Three: Planning and Implementation” (*NWCCU, 2010*) establishes the expectation for “ongoing, participatory planning.” In light of the mission and core themes, “participatory planning” could include internal and external members of the institution. In the case of a core theme of community engagement, it would be reasonable to expect an institution to include community representation in the planning processes.

“Standard Four: Effectiveness and Improvement,” Section 4.A.4 (*NWCCU, 2010*), requires the institution to “evaluate holistically the alignment, correlation, and integration of programs and services with respect to accomplishment of core theme objectives.” Further, this standard establishes a methodical process for evaluation of the mission, implementation, planning, and resource allocation for core themes. Finally, Standard Four addresses the use of assessment findings to improve institutional operations and capacity and includes the expectation that the results of assessment be communicated to “appropriate constituencies in a timely manner.” Thus, *NWCCU*’s Standard Four accommodates institution-led initiatives to create feedback loops that include community constituencies in the assessment of community engagement activities.

Finally, “Standard Five: Mission Fulfillment, Adaptability, and Sustainability” (*NWCCU, 2010*) establishes the expectation that an *NWCCU*-accredited institution

regularly monitors its internal and external environments to determine how and to what degree changing circumstances may impact its mission and its ability to fulfill that mission. It demonstrates that it is capable of adapting, when necessary, its mission, core themes, programs, and services to accommodate changing and emerging needs, trends, and influences to ensure enduring institutional relevancy, productivity, viability, and sustainability.

Depending upon the mission and core themes of an institution, evidence to support compliance with Standard Five may be highly internally directed. However, in institutions with missions that embrace community engagement, Standard Five invokes the need for institutional responsiveness to community needs as well as feedback.

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS COC)

The Commission on Colleges serves as the regional accrediting commission for 11 states (see Table 1), “Latin America and other international sites” (SACS COC, 2013). The Commission’s standards are embodied in a document titled *Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*. This document is divided into four major categories of standards: “The Principles of Integrity,” “Core Requirements,” “Comprehensive Standards,” and “Federal Requirements” (SACS COC, 2012). Early in the *Principles*, within the core requirements that are essential for accreditation, there is a reference to institutional mission and public service:

2.4 The institution has a clearly defined, comprehensive, and published mission statement that is specific to the institution and appropriate for higher education. The mission addresses teaching and learning and, where applicable, research and public service. (Institutional Mission) (SACS COC, 2012, p. 18)

Comprehensive Standard 3.3: Institutional Effectiveness (SACS COC, 2012) extends the requirement for established outcomes, assessments, and use for improvement to “community/public service”:

3.3.1 The institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results in each of the following areas: (Institutional Effectiveness) . . .

3.3.1.5 community/public service within its educational mission, if appropriate. (SACS COC, 2012, p. 27)

Also in “Comprehensive Standards” under “Educational Programs,” there is a requirement that specifically pertains to “outreach, and service programs,” which are often closely related to or part of the institution’s community engagement organization and activities:

3.4.2 The institution’s continuing education, outreach, and service programs are consistent with the institution’s mission. (Continuing education/service programs; SACS COC, 2012, p. 28)

Overall, the SACS COC *Principles* (2012) includes references to “public service,” “community/public service,” and “outreach and service programs” in three different sections. In two sections, the *Principles* employs qualifying language—“where applicable” and “if appropriate”—indicating that institutions may have limited or no public or community service role. However, for institutions with missions that include public/community service, institutional effectiveness standards apply, and institutions must demonstrate evidence of outcomes, achievement of outcomes, use of findings for improvement, and alignment with missions.

Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission

WASC Senior College and University Commission is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education to accredit senior colleges and universities in two states, numerous territories, and Pacific Rim countries (see Table 1; WASC, 2013). The 2013 *Handbook of Accreditation*, published in July 2013, was the document reviewed in this study. This work contains the current standards for accreditation in the applicable states and regions. The prefatory section

of the Handbook includes the following statement regarding “The Changing Context for Accreditation”:

A hallmark of U.S. higher education in the 21st century is the enormous diversity of its institutions, their missions, and the students they serve. Common across this diversity, however, is a widespread understanding that higher education represents both a public good and a private benefit. According to this understanding, higher education fosters individual development and serves the broader needs of the society and nation. Higher education has created the conditions for improving quality of life, solving problems, and enabling hope, which are essential to supporting economic prosperity and sustaining democracy in the United States. Accreditation is committed to the application of standards of performance, while affirming that high-quality education, irrespective of the different purposes of individual institutions, is in itself a contribution to the public good. (WASC, 2013, p. 3)

The concept of the “public good” is found throughout the *Handbook* (WASC, 2013) within its standards and criteria. This expectation of accountability to the general public and specific external publics served by the institution permeates the requirements for all senior colleges and universities accredited under the 2013 handbook. The glossary provides extensive definitions relevant to accreditation, assessment, and accountability, as well as the following definitions of “public good” and “public service”:

Public good—in higher education, a phrase expressing the notion that in addition to being a private good for individual students, education is a public good contributing to shared prosperity, a successful democracy, and a well-functioning society. As a public good, higher education is worthy of public support. (p. 54)

Public service—service provided by institutions to external (non-academic) communities—local, regional, national, international, or within a specific profession. Public service may include public lectures and performances, various forms of applied research, non-credit courses, and extension programs. Public service may

also include making the physical plant available to the outside community. (p. 54)

These definitions are utilized throughout the *Handbook* (WASC, 2013) and specifically in the three core commitments, the four standards of accreditation, and the related guidelines. Beginning with “Standard 1—Defining Purposes and Establishing Institutional Objectives,” Criterion 1.1 establishes that an accredited institution’s purpose statements “clearly define its essential values and character and ways in which it contributes to the public good” (p. 12). Under “Standard 2—Achieving Educational Objectives Through Core Functions,” Criterion 2.2a describes the expectations for an undergraduate education:

Baccalaureate programs engage students in an integrated course of study of sufficient breadth and depth to prepare them for work, citizenship, and life-long learning. These programs ensure the development of core competencies including, but not limited to, written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, and critical thinking. In addition, baccalaureate programs actively foster creativity, innovation, an appreciation for diversity, ethical and civic responsibility, civic engagement, and the ability to work with others. Baccalaureate programs also ensure breadth for all students in cultural and aesthetic, social and political, and scientific and technical knowledge expected of educated persons. (p. 14)

Criterion 2.3 (WASC, 2013) includes a guideline directing that for-credit “out-of-class learning experiences,” such as service-learning, be adequately resourced, developed, and supervised (p. 15). Criterion 2.9 in “Scholarship and Creativity” establishes an expectation for the promotion of “appropriate linkages among scholarship, teaching, assessment, student learning, and service” (p. 16).

The definitions of and references to “public good” and “public service” in the WASC 2013 *Handbook of Accreditation* are unique among the regional accreditation documentation. Further, the document includes references to the American Association of Colleges and Universities’ high-impact educational practices, including service-learning, which reflects an emergent national dialogue on learning and engagement.

Results and Findings

The research question addressed in this study was “How do regional accrediting standards apply to the central role of community engagement in U.S. institutions of higher education?” Using the transcribed comments made by the accrediting bodies’ representatives during the November 2011 APLU panel discussion and examination of current regional accrediting standards, four themes were identified: (1) the institutional determination of community engagement mission and goals, (2) community engagement in educational programs and student learning, (3) institutional effectiveness and community engagement, and (4) faculty scholarship relating to community engagement.

The analysis of the content from each of the six U.S. higher education regional accrediting bodies’ current (2011–2013) standards for institutional accreditation revealed limited references to “community engagement” but found other related terms such as “public service” and “community service” relating to institutional mission, purpose, and goals. The study also found that the standards addressed institutional effectiveness in terms of outcomes, assessment, and use of findings for improvement (including the role of community partners in mission, planning, and assessment activities); educational programming/student learning; and faculty scholarship. Table 2 depicts the occurrence of these themes in the standards for each regional accrediting commission as published at the time of this analysis.

Table 2. Identified Themes Relating to Community Engagement in Regional Accrediting Commission Standards

Regional Accrediting Commission	Mission and Goals	Institutional Effectiveness	Educational Programs/ Student Learning	Faculty Scholarship
Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)	X	X	X	
New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE)	X	X		X
North Central Association Higher Learning Commission (NCA HLC)	X	X	X	

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)	X	X		
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS COC)	X	X	X	
Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission (WASC)	X	X	X	X

Although the analyses of the panel transcription and regional accrediting standards were conducted separately, it is reasonable to assume that the four regional accrediting commission leaders would discuss similar themes given that they lead the implementation of the written standards.

Discussion

The research question “How do regional accrediting standards apply to the central role of community engagement in U.S. institutions of higher education?” was addressed by the findings from the analysis and the identification of the four themes. The four foundational characteristics of community engagement identified by Fitzgerald et al. in “The Centrality of Engagement in Higher Education” (2012) included (1) a scholarship-based model of engagement; (2) mission-centric engagement that permeates teaching, research, and service; (3) equal participation of community partners—“reciprocal and mutually beneficial . . . planning, implementation, and assessment of programs and activities” (p. 13); and (4) showing evidence of “the processes and values of a civil democracy” (p. 13, quoting *Bringle & Hatcher, 2011*). The first two foundational characteristics resonate in the four themes identified in the study: mission and goals, institutional effectiveness, educational program/student learning, and faculty. However, the four foundational characteristics enumerated in “The Centrality of Engagement in Higher Education” establish much more specific standards than those identified in this study from the six regional accrediting commission standards or the panel participants. Ralph Wolfe (WASC) said, “There’s only so much oxygen in an accrediting process,” indicating the limitations on the roles of regional accrediting bodies and standards.

In light of the study’s findings, “The Centrality of Engagement in Higher Education” (Fitzgerald et al., 2012) and the Carnegie Foundation definition of “community engagement” are important resources to guide institutions as they define and operationalize

their engagement missions and provide evidence of compliance. For instance, when referencing a scholarship-based model of engagement as a central mission or goal, an institution might adopt a definition shaped by Fitzgerald et al. (2012) and/or the Carnegie Foundation and provide evidence (such as policies and practices) of how this definition is operationalized in student learning, faculty tenure and promotion, educational support services, and institutional planning and assessment activities. As a complement to this evidence, the institution might document that it is implementing best practices for participation of community partners in assessment processes and using assessment findings to improve the partnership and its activities. For example, it might indicate how instruments are designed together and implemented together, findings are evaluated through institutional and community lenses, and resulting steps for improvement are taken together.

The findings of this study clarify that institutions bear the responsibility for demonstrating how their engagement mission is defined and implemented using similar institutional and educational effectiveness processes to fulfill their teaching and research missions. Such mission-driven engagement activity might be demonstrated by documents providing evidence that:

- the institution's mission statement incorporates the concept of engagement in its teaching, research, and service roles and activities;
- the institution's mission statement guides its community engagement partnerships;
- the institution's planning and evaluation processes incorporate a review of its community engagement activities and partnerships within the context of the mission statement;
- the institution and community engagement partners have established measurable outcomes for their partnerships;
- community engagement partnerships are assessed on the extent to which they achieved their expected outcomes;
- the institution and its community partners use the results of the assessments to improve or enhance their capacity to achieve the expected outcomes; and

- representative community partners are included in institutional-level planning and assessment of community engagement as well as in processes that include feedback for more informal engagement relationships established by individual faculty members with community partners.

Conclusions and Recommendation for Further Consideration

This study addressed the research question “How do regional accrediting standards apply to the central role of community engagement in U.S. institutions of higher education?” The analyses of transcribed public comments from representatives of four regional accreditors and of current regional accrediting standards led to the identification of four common themes. Since accreditors require evidence of institutional compliance, normative recommendations have been offered for types of evidence or documentation that institutions may provide and accreditors may consider as demonstrating compliance.

An important question was introduced but not answered in the discussion of the 2011 APLU panel Engagement and Regional Accreditation: Critical Issues and Strategic Dialogue. If regional accrediting commissions include references to community engagement and related mission-based activities such as “community service,” “public service,” and “outreach” in their standards, then how should peer reviewers be trained regarding these subjects? Regional accreditors provide peer reviewer training on a wide variety of subjects including faculty credentials, institutional effectiveness, financial issues, federal requirements, and so on. However, training related to the role of public or community service, or community engagement, is limited at best. Although beyond the scope and limitations of this study, there is anecdotal evidence that the teaching and research missions of institutions are reviewed as dominant functions with community engagement or public service being subordinate rather than integrated. This perception may be further confounded by historical, as well as regulatory and collective bargaining, influence on the nature of faculty “service” roles. This segregation is addressed directly by the NEASC-CIHE standards that distinguish between “community service” and “professional service” in faculty evaluation criteria.

The concept of “community engagement” expressed across each of the traditional higher education functions—teaching, research,

and service—may present a beginning point for conversations with regional accreditors that may generate opportunities for evolving understanding and interpretation of standards, potentially yielding more comprehensive forms of institutional and peer reviewer training. “The Centrality of Engagement in Higher Education” (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2012) and the Carnegie Foundation community engagement classification system and resulting scholarship could provide a starting place for training on these mission-centric functions in public institutions of higher education and would help to communicate what evidence peer reviewers might expect to see in institutions that embrace community engagement in their missions. Furthermore, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching Community Engagement Elective Classification provides exceptional information on a robust internal and external assessment process that many institutions have utilized to advance their mission related to community engagement (Carnegie, *n.d.*) and offers rich resources for consideration by regional accreditors, their institutions, and peer reviewers. In addition, a number of resources provide internal and external assessment processes and instruments that would be useful in peer reviewer training (for example, Furco, 2010; Holland, 2001; Sandmann, Williams, & Abrams, 2009; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008).

In addition to the findings of this study and recommendations for discourse with regional accreditors about evolved understandings of community engagement, it is important to note that further research should be conducted on the role of regional accreditation pertaining to institutional missions and civic democracy. The fourth foundational component cited in “The Centrality of Engagement in Higher Education” calls for embracing the “processes and values of a civil democracy” (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011, as cited in Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2012, p. 23). In a sweeping statement, Article 1.b of UNESCO’s (1998) *World Conference on Higher Education: Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century Vision and Action* identifies the “mission and functions of higher education,” including:

provide opportunities . . . for higher learning and for learning throughout life, giving to learners an optimal range of choice and a flexibility of entry and exit points within the system, as well as an opportunity for individual development and social mobility in order to educate for citizenship and for active participation in society, with a worldwide vision, for endogenous capacity-building, and for the consolidation of human

rights, sustainable development, democracy and peace, in a context of justice. (p. 21)

Prior to and after this World Declaration, the nexus between the mission of higher education and civil democracy is articulated in historic documentation and affirmed through the creation of instruments of institutions, national and regional public funding and regulations, and policy statements, in the U.S. and internationally (Fitzgerald, 2014). As the UNESCO chief, Section for Higher Education, Paulina Gonzalez-Pose said in the recently published report from the Global Network for Innovation (2014):

Higher education must not only give solid skills for the present and future world but must also contribute to the education of ethical citizens committed to the construction of peace, the defense of human rights and the values of democracy. (p. xxv)

Institutions with mission-driven commitment to civil democracy embed these values into their teaching, research, and service in ways that require evidence and explication in the regional accrediting processes. Some questions that foster further dialogue about the intersections of civil democracy and regional accreditation standards include: “What would the student learning outcomes and assessment findings related to civil democracy look like?” “What are institutional best practices?” “Are there federal and state regulations related to civil democracy as an institutional mission tied to funding?” Addressing these questions will likely engender a significant dialogue between institutions and colleagues invested in regional accrediting processes.

In conclusion, the findings of this study established the need for institutions to lead the work with regional accrediting bodies and their colleagues who serve as peer reviewers to articulate the definitions and achieve institutionalization of the “service” mission, as defined through the lens of community engagement. The authors recommend further discussions between institutional leaders, regional accreditors, peer reviewers, and community partners to examine the relevant standards for community engagement and the best institutional effectiveness practices in support of institutional mission fulfillment and community partner reciprocity and mutuality.

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