

# The WASC Accreditation Process: An Overview

## Excerpts from the 2001 WASC Handbook

<http://www.wascsenior.org>

### **PURPOSES OF WASC ACCREDITATION**

Voluntary, non-governmental, institutional accreditation as practiced by the WASC and the other regional commissions is a unique characteristic of American education. In many other countries the maintenance of educational standards is a governmental function. No institution in the United States is required to seek accreditation, however, because of the recognized benefits, most of the eligible institutions in this and other regions have sought to become accredited.

The WASC accreditation process aids institutions in developing and sustaining effective educational programs and assures the educational community, the general public, and other organizations that an accredited institution has met high standards of quality and effectiveness.

The Commission accredits institutions, not individual programs. Therefore, in addition to assessing the academic quality and educational effectiveness of institutions, the Commission emphasizes institutional structures, processes, and resources. The accreditation process is aimed at:

1. Assuring the educational community, the general public, and other organizations and agencies that an accredited institution has demonstrated it meets the Commission's Core Commitments to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness, and has been successfully reviewed under Commission Standards;
2. Promoting deep institutional engagement with issues of educational effectiveness and student learning, and developing and sharing good practices in assessing and improving the teaching and learning process;
3. Developing and applying Standards to review and improve educational quality and institutional performance, and validating these Standards and revising them through ongoing research and feedback;
4. Promoting within institutions a culture of evidence where indicators of performance are regularly developed and data collected to inform institutional decision making, planning, and improvement;
5. Developing systems of institutional review and evaluation that are adaptive to institutional context and purposes, that build on institutional evidence and support rigorous reviews, and reduce the burden and cost of accreditation; and
6. Promoting the active interchange of ideas among public and independent institutions that furthers the principles of improved institutional performance, educational effectiveness, and the process of peer review.

### **The Changing Context for Institutional Accreditation**

Accreditation stands as a distinctive American innovation to assure quality in higher education. It was founded more than 100 years ago on the principle of peer review, meaning that those within the academy are best able to evaluate the quality of higher education institutions. In the past decades, however, both institutions and the challenges of defining and evaluating quality have become significantly more complex and come under increasing scrutiny. Some of the changes that affect our ability to define and evaluate quality in the accrediting process include:

- Increasing diversity of institutional types, with significant changes occurring within traditional

institutions; the development of single-purpose institutions in a wide range of disciplines; and the expansion of profit-centered enterprises into higher education

- Development and growth of online and distributed learning within traditional institutions and the development of institutions wholly or primarily organized to provide educational services in a distributed environment
- Increased scale and complexity of institutions, where the majority of students served in higher education attend large, complex, multipurpose universities. The focus of accreditation review grows more critical at these institutions, but traditional frameworks of accreditation have become more cumbersome and less effective at these institutions
- A shift toward effectiveness and performance indicators beyond inputs and resources as the organizing basis for defining and evaluating quality
- Higher expectations for the performance of graduates, leading to calls for increased attention to evidence of student learning.
- A burgeoning focus on the diversity of learners and learning needs in American higher education, along with the increased globalization of curricula, programs, and student populations
- Higher mobility of students between institutions, changing patterns of institutional attendance, and the de-institutionalization of learning settings leading to a decline in institutional impact and control over the educational experience and curricula of students
- Concern over the rising costs of higher education and recognition that higher education is a major factor in economic growth and productivity, resulting in an emphasis on the need for greater efficiency and effectiveness in institutional performance
- The increased impact and workload caused by federal regulations that affect accreditation processes and all institutions of higher education

### **The New Framework for Accreditation**

In response to the changing context of higher education, and to reflect the principles adopted by the Commission for accreditation in the WASC region, the Commission has developed a new framework for accreditation. The elements of this new framework align under the core principles called “Core Commitments” to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness which are embodied significantly by revised Accreditation Standards and a three-stage, sequential institutional review process. Each element is described in the following sections of the *Handbook*. Together these components represent a holistic system and process of review that enable WASC to work collaboratively with institutions in a spirit of ongoing experimentation and mutual learning as defined by the Commission values stated above.

Higher education exists in the United States as a public trust and a public good. It is linked to the improvement of individuals, groups, and society as a whole. It provides the basis for conserving and transmitting the values of society and for reflecting on and identifying needed areas of change. Through research, scholarship and creative activity, institutions of higher education also promote the value of discovery and learning. In offering educational programs, institutions prepare their graduates for productive and meaningful lives as citizens and members of society.

The accrediting process functions to promote and sustain this special role for higher education, while providing assurance to the public that institutions of higher education continue to warrant public trust and support. Accreditation evaluation of institutional resources, structures, practices, and results serves an important role for the higher education community and the public in this context. Yet accreditation is not well understood and is too often considered reactive to external minimal standards.

### **Developing a New Posture of Engagement with Institutions**

Under the new framework for accreditation, qualifying institutions are able to consciously and deliberately collaborate with WASC to develop new approaches that are designed to serve institutional priorities in tandem with accreditation requirements. Such an approach opens up tremendous opportunities for creativity and renewal. At the same time, however, experimentation creates risk. Not all the ground rules are known in advance, or are even knowable. We all will need to learn together in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration, sharing the results of these processes to create opportunities for organizational learning.

The implementation of the new model may not initially be as effective as desired, especially in the first round. We believe, however, that accreditation needs to change, and that the kinds of changes needed require an openness to experimentation. We need to consider how the new Standards may accomplish the principles set forth in this *Handbook*. Our goal is a simplified, more usable, and effective process that can be better understood by the many consumers of accreditation.

We also believe that the spirit of experimentation should be embedded in the WASC of the future, leading to a more adaptive and responsive model of accreditation. Such a model would recognize and respond more effectively to the diversity of institutional missions reflected within the region, and reflect the awareness that there is an ebb and flow within each institution that may suggest different approaches each time an accreditation review is scheduled.

### **Organizing Around Core Commitments**

The concept of Core Commitments is intended to move accreditation from a reactive process of something done to an institution, to a proactive commitment of an institution which WASC reviews and validates. Framing accreditation as a commitment makes the act of accreditation more connected to the public accountability role legitimately held by accreditation, and puts the institutional commitment front and center. Given the wide range of institutions currently served by WASC and the likelihood that even newer institutional forms will emerge, there is need for a framing device to enable the Commission to apply the Standards of Accreditation flexibly as means, not ends. Thus, to become and remain accredited, each institution is expected to demonstrate that it is committed to developing and sustaining Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness.

#### ***Core Commitment to Institutional Capacity:***

The institution functions with clear purposes, high levels of institutional integrity, fiscal stability, and organizational structures to fulfill its purposes.

The *Core Commitment to Institutional Capacity* enables the institution to consider resource issues from a holistic perspective, and to consider capacity as an institutional attribute beyond minimum compliance and a review of assets. Looking at itself through a “lens” of institutional capacity enables the institution to reexamine what it *is* in terms of its capacity to fulfill its aspirations, and to integrate and synthesize findings and recommendations for improvement gained through its self review under Commission Standards. While the Standards provide an opportunity to review institutional performance within a defined area, the framework of institutional capacity allows an institution to explore cross-cutting issues such as whether resources, structures and processes are aligned with the institution’s mission and priorities, and whether there is good evidence of effectiveness in their actual deployment. An important dimension of institutional capacity reflected in the Institutional Review cycle is the institution’s potential to define and sustain educational effectiveness.

#### ***Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness:***

The institution evidences clear and appropriate educational objectives and design at the institutional and program level. The institution employs processes of review, including the collection and use of data, that assure delivery of programs and learner accomplishments at a level of performance appropriate for the degree or certificate awarded.

The *Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness* provides an opportunity for the institution to explore holistically its approaches to educational effectiveness and assess whether institutional systems, such as course and program design, faculty support, and program review are effectively linked to evidence of student learning and are consistent with the educational goals and academic standards of the institution. By design, elements of educational effectiveness were incorporated into all four Commission Standards, so that institutions would explore the relationships between capacity and educational quality and effectiveness. The Accreditation Standards identify key elements of educational effectiveness.

## Focusing on Educational Effectiveness

Many institutions have found valuable the framing of educational effectiveness presented in *Invitation to Dialogue II*, a document prepared to assist the region in developing the framework for accreditation described in this *Handbook*. The framing is repeated here to provide one possible set of lenses for institutions to review the broader issue of educational effectiveness and for applying the Standards for Accreditation.



**Articulating a Collective Vision of Educational Attainment.** Centers on the degree to which the institution sets goals and obtains results for student learning at both the institutional and program levels that are:

- clearly stated and widely understood;
- appropriate for the type and level of the degree or credential offered; and
- adequately assessed to ascertain mastery of these levels.

**Organizing for Learning.** Centers on the alignment of appropriate institutional assets and characteristics with the goal of producing high levels of student learning, consistent with the mission of the institution, including:

- curriculum, pedagogy, and method of delivery;
- faculty recruitment, development, scholarship in support of improved teaching and learning, rewards, and incentives;
- organizational structures and processes;
- information resources and planning capacity;
- student services and co-curricular activities; and
- resources and facilities.

**Becoming a Learning Organization.** Centers on the degree to which the institution has developed systems—to assess its own performance and to use information to improve student learning over time—that:

- are systematic and regular;
- reinforce a climate of inquiry throughout the institution;
- reflect the input of stakeholders and an awareness of the distinctive characteristics of its students;
- identify key dimensions of performance that include student learning; and
- are based on standards of evidence that prominently feature educational results.

## THE STATUS OF ACCREDITATION

The status of accreditation indicates that an institution has fulfilled the requirements for accreditation established by this *Handbook*. This means that the institution has:

1. Demonstrated that it meets the Core Commitments to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness;
2. Conducted a self review under the Accreditation Standards, developed and presented indicators of institutional performance, and identified areas for needed improvement to serve as the evidentiary basis for completing successfully the three-stage process of institutional review;
3. Developed an approved Institutional Proposal for Accreditation Review, and been evaluated by teams of external evaluators in the Preparatory and Educational Effectiveness Review Processes;
4. Demonstrated to the Commission that it meets or exceeds the expectations of the Accreditation Standards; and
5. Committed itself to institutional improvement, periodic self-evaluation, and continuing compliance with Commission Standards, Policies, Procedures and Decisions.

## WASC STANDARDS

STANDARD 1:	Defining Institutional Purposes and Ensuring Educational Objectives
STANDARD 2:	Achieving Educational Objectives Through Core Functions
STANDARD 3:	Developing and Applying Resources and Organizational Structures to Ensure Sustainability
STANDARD 4:	Creating an Organization Committed to Learning and Improvement

In order to address the two Core Commitments to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness, the Commission has defined Standards for Accreditation. These Standards are intended to serve several purposes:

- To guide institutions in self review as a basis for assessing institutional performance and to identify needed areas of improvement;
- To provide a framework for Institutional Presentations to the Commission and review teams;
- To serve as the basis for evaluation teams in the Institutional Review Process — for the Preparatory Review in addressing the Core Commitment to Institutional Capacity and for the Educational Effectiveness Review in addressing the Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness;
- To provide a foundation for Commission actions and the basis for required institutional follow up to such actions; and
- To assist those involved in the accrediting process, in higher education generally and members of the public, in defining institutional quality and educational effectiveness, and in promoting the development and sharing of practices leading to the improvement of quality.

## Overview of the Accreditation Review Cycle

The new WASC accreditation review process consists of three key elements, described in detail in this section. The Commission has attempted to develop a holistic *system* of review, rather than a single event, that reinforces the key values and principles of WASC, and that brings value to institutions and the public. The system of review has a clear *focus* (on effectiveness, both institutional and educational), an integrated *organization* (around the two Core Commitments, supported by the four Accreditation Standards) and a staged, sequential *structure and cycle* that permits adaptation and responsiveness to institutional context and priorities.

The new accreditation review process involves an Institutional Presentation developed in three stages, integrated and sequenced to support and promote institutional development and effectiveness:

- Stage 1: The Institutional Proposal;**
- Stage 2: the Preparatory Review; and**
- Stage 3: The Educational Effectiveness Review.**

The cycle of review is intended to be a maximum of ten years, providing institutions a three-year period to complete the process of self review and external evaluation, followed by an extended period of time for sustaining initiatives and recommendations resulting from this process.

## Institutional Self Review and External Evaluation

The heart of accreditation lies in the institutional self review. To be done effectively and with integrity, the review requires the conscious and public commitment of the institution's leadership to openness, candor, and serious engagement, and an evident intention to use the results of the self review to improve institutional capacity and educational effectiveness. The WASC accreditation process represents a shift from attempting to review all aspects of institutional functions in a compliance mode to a review and validation of effective ongoing internal systems of quality review and improvement. External evaluation under this new approach can only be successful when built on an effective internal institutional process of evaluation, reflection, and plans for further action. In addition, the new sequential system of review developed by the Commission is designed to move away from long discursive reports to evidence-based *Institutional Presentations* comprised of focused portfolios of data and exhibits, supported by reflective and analytical essays. (Note: The Institutional Presentation is comprised of the materials prepared for the three stages of review: the Proposal, the Preparatory Review, and the Educational Effectiveness Review.)

It is the conscious goal of the Commission in establishing this new system of review to promote the development of more effective internal systems of data collection and analysis, described by WASC as a "culture of evidence." Institutional Presentations under this new system are to be different from traditional self studies by taking the institution's review of key indicators of its own capacity and educational effectiveness as the central focus of review, as well as including authentic source documents that relate the institution to the Standards. The scope, length and focus of Institutional Presentations are intended to be much different from traditional comprehensive self studies. Institutional Presentations are themselves demonstrations of the institution's ability to generate and analyze indicators of performance aligned with the institution's own priorities and educational objectives, and the institution's ability to engage thoughtfully and extensively with issues of educational effectiveness and student learning.

The role of WASC evaluation teams at each stage of the review process is to work with the institution's own evidence and exhibits, determine if they accurately and fairly describe the institution, and within the context of Commission Standards, determine if the institution demonstrates it has effectively addressed the two Core Commitments: that the institution has sufficient capacity and systems of quality assurance and improvement to demonstrate educational effectiveness at the time of review and are likely to be sustained. Through the process of working with institutions to review and approve their Proposals for the accreditation process, the Commission also is adopting a stance weighted toward collaboration and institutional improvement except in those cases where the context of the institution's history or relationship with the Commission warrants a stricter compliance role.

## **Outcomes of the Accreditation Review Process**

The Commission has identified outcomes it considers important for the accreditation review process that serve both institutions and the purposes of accreditation. The outcomes also provide a model for institutions since each institution is expected to identify in its Proposal specific outcomes for its accreditation self-review. It is expected that the staged sequential Institutional Presentation of the Institutional Proposal, Preparatory Review and Educational Effectiveness Review will lead to the following outcomes.

For the institution:

1. The development of and more effective use of indicators of institutional performance and educational effectiveness to support institutional planning and decision making;
2. Greater clarity about the institution's educational objectives and criteria for defining and evaluating those objectives;
3. Improvement of the institution's capacity for self review and of its systems of quality assurance;
4. A deeper understanding of student learning, the development of more varied and effective methods of assessing learning, and the use of the results of this process to improve programs and institutional practices; and
5. Systematic engagement of the faculty with issues of assessing and improving teaching and learning processes within the institution, and with aligning support systems for faculty more effectively toward this end.

To fulfill the purposes of accreditation:

6. Validation of the institution's presentation of evidence, both to assess compliance with Accreditation Standards and to provide a basis for institutional improvement; and
7. Demonstration of the institution's fulfillment of the Core Commitments to Institutional Capacity and Educational Effectiveness.

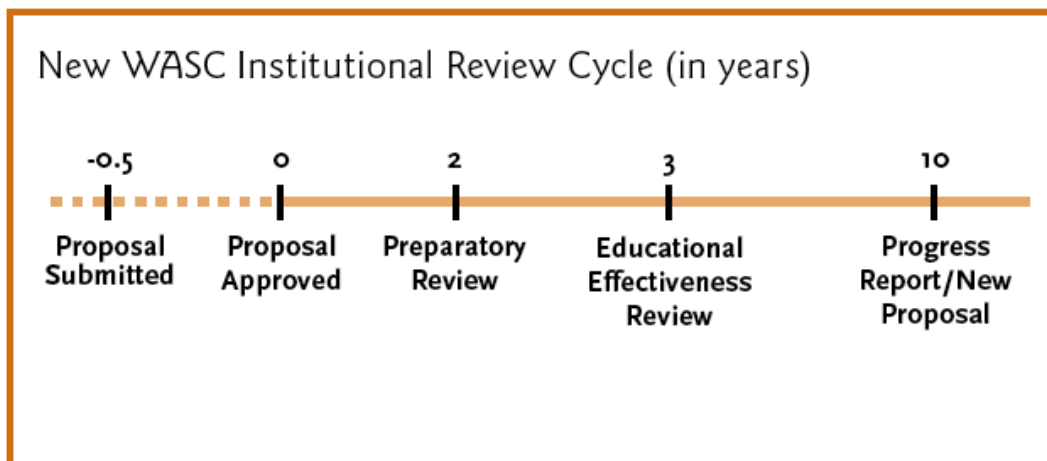
## THE WASC INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW PROCESS

In order to obtain accreditation or remain accredited, each institution is required to demonstrate that it fulfills the two Core Commitments of the Accrediting Commission:

I. **Commitment to Institutional Capacity:** The institution functions with clear purposes, high levels of institutional integrity, fiscal stability, and organizational structures to fulfill its purposes.

II. **Commitment to 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 assure delivery of programs and learner accomplishments at a level of performance appropriate for the degree or certificate awarded.

Demonstration of these Core Commitments occurs through a staged and sequential accreditation review process that results in an Institutional Presentation comprised of a Proposal, a Preparatory Review, and an Educational Effectiveness Review. This three-staged cycle applies to all institutions, regardless of where they are in the accreditation process. In the case of institutions considered for Initial Candidacy or Initial Accreditation, primary focus will be placed on institutional performance to meet the expectations of the Standards. For those institutions that have a history of Commission sanctions, greater emphasis will be placed on reviewing responses to previous Commission decisions and the identified Standards.



## Stage 1. The Institutional Proposal

### THE PROPOSAL INCLUDES:

- Statement of Institutional Context
- Description of expected outcomes
- Description of how constituencies were involved
- Description of how the Preparatory and Educational Effectiveness Reviews will be staged
- For the Preparatory Review, a brief description of how evidence will be presented, including the proposed format of presentation and identification of key indicators in the Institutional Portfolio
- For the Educational Effectiveness Review, a description of the proposed model, special emphases, and ways the institution will address student learning
- An Institutional Stipulation Statement

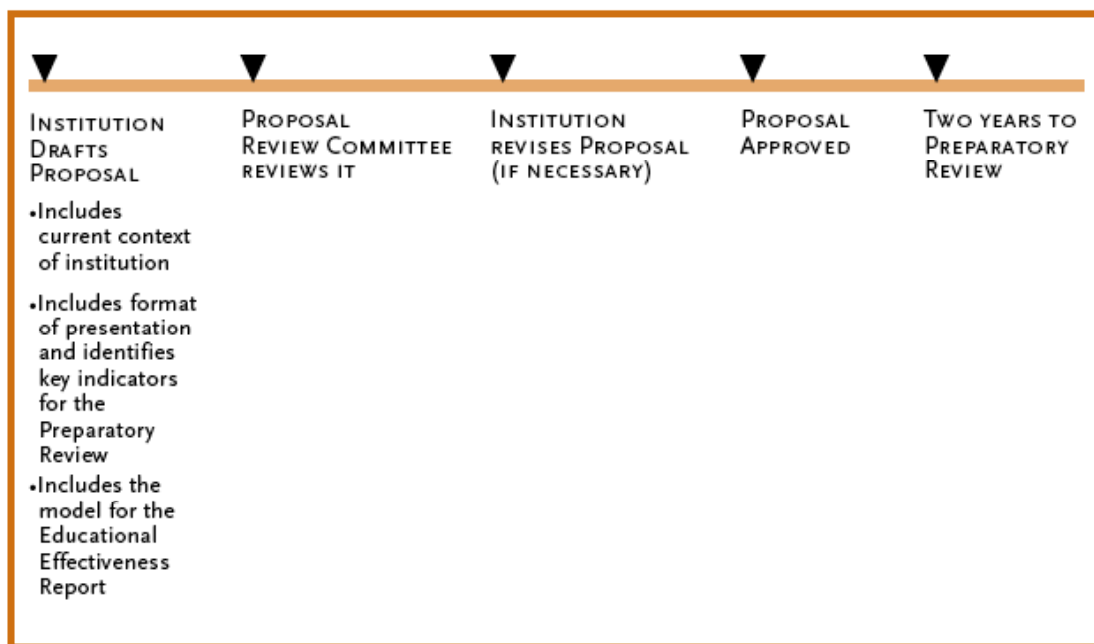
**Purposes:** The Institutional Proposal is the first element of the Institutional Presentation and the first stage in the accreditation review cycle. Its purpose is to guide the entire accreditation review process. Once the Proposal is approved, it becomes part of the total body of institutional material that supports the review during its subsequent two stages. As such, the Proposal will be shared with each subsequent review team and with the Commission. The Proposal enables the review process to be anchored in each institution's distinctive context and its intended goals for the accreditation process. The staged review process is also intended to make meaningful contributions to each institution's own internal planning and review mechanisms, as well as to reduce the burden associated with having to do work unrelated to institutional priorities. Commission interests are assured by the fact that each Proposal is reviewed by a peer committee charged with the responsibility of applying Commission criteria to each Proposal and its alignment with the Core Commitments and Accreditation Standards. Once approved, the Proposal may be further refined or modified during the accreditation process by mutual consent or by the Commission following the Preparatory Review. It provides both the institution and the Commission with a foundation for carrying out the accreditation process within a written and approved framework.

In sum, the Institutional Proposal enables the institution to:

1. Establish the context for its next accreditation review cycle by describing the institution's most important features, and the most important issues that it wishes to address;
2. Define specific goals and outcomes for the accreditation review in light of issues arising from the institution's own planning and development processes and emerging from the institution's examination of itself under the new accreditation Standards, as well as specific issues raised by the Commission as a result of the last institutional review;
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of its data gathering and analysis systems;
4. Identify how the institution will present basic data and Reflective Essays on Institutional Capacity for the Preparatory Review;
5. Explore educational effectiveness and support institutional improvement by identifying the institutional strategy to be used for the Educational Effectiveness Review; and

6. Propose the timing and relationship between the Preparatory and Educational Effectiveness Reviews (normally 12 to 18 months).

**Timing:** Submitted two-and-a-half years prior to the Preparatory Review in order to be finalized two years prior to the Preparatory Review. Formal date of submission established by the Commission.

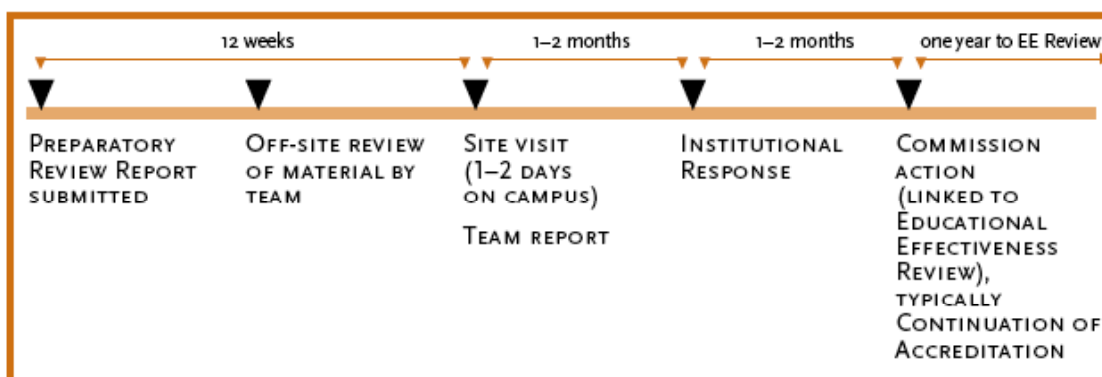


**Proposal Review Process:** Following submission, the Institutional Proposal is first reviewed by Commission staff and may be commented on with requested revisions prior to submission to the Proposal Review Committee (PRC). The PRC is authorized to approve proposals which it believes assure that an institution will be able to effectively demonstrate that it fulfills the two Core Commitments required for accreditation. In cases where the PRC has doubts that the Proposal will result in a review process that is capable of doing so, the Committee may request further information from the institution and/or may require revision and re-submission of the Proposal itself. At the conclusion of the review process, Commission staff will inform the institution that its Proposal has been accepted and that it can proceed with the review. Working with Commission staff, the institution is responsible for preparing a final copy of the Proposal for use by evaluation teams and the Commission.

## Stage 2. The Preparatory Review (Capacity and Preparatory Review, CPR)

**Purposes:** The Preparatory Review is designed to enable the Commission to determine whether an institution fulfills the Core Commitment to Institutional Capacity: *The institution functions with clear purposes, high levels of institutional integrity, fiscal stability, and organizational structures and processes to fulfill its purposes.* In keeping with the Commission's goals of focusing institutional efforts in the accreditation process on issues of importance, building a culture of evidence, reducing the burden of the accreditation review and enhancing the strategic value of the process, the Preparatory Review is intended to be a focused review which includes a site visit with clearly defined purposes and procedures. These are to:

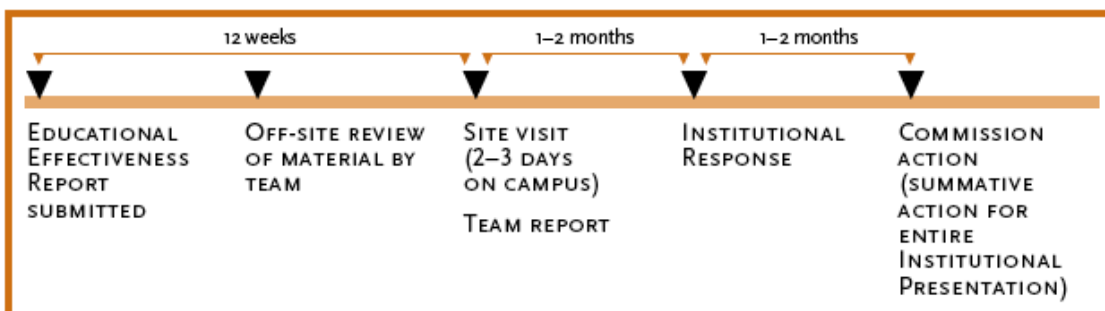
1. Audit and verify the information provided in the Institutional Presentation, and to assure that the data presented fairly and accurately portray the state of the institution at the time of review.
2. Evaluate key institutional resources, structures, and processes in the light of the Commission's Standards to assure that the institution operates at or above threshold levels acceptable for accreditation (or candidacy) and, where appropriate, to identify any capacity-related issues that need to be carried forward in the Educational Effectiveness Review.
3. Assess the institution's preparedness to undertake the Educational Effectiveness Review as proposed, and to assist the institution in refining its focus and plan for that review.



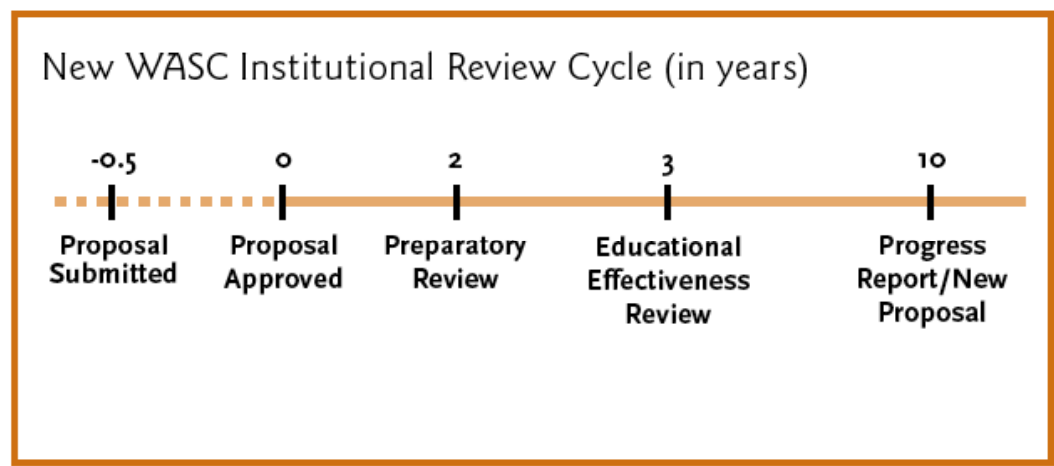
### Stage 3: The Educational Effectiveness Review (EER)

**Purposes:** The Educational Effectiveness Review is intended to be significantly different from the Preparatory Review. Its primary purpose is to invite sustained engagement by the institution on the extent to which the institution fulfills its educational objectives. Through a process of inquiry and engagement, the Educational Effectiveness Review also is designed to enable the Commission to make a judgment about the extent that the institution fulfills its Core Commitment to Educational Effectiveness: *The institution evidences clear and appropriate educational objectives and design at the institutional and program levels, and employs processes of review, including the collection and use of data, that assure the delivery of programs and learner accomplishments at a level of performance appropriate for the degree or certificate awarded.* Specific purposes of the Educational Effectiveness Review include:

1. To review the design and results of institutional efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of educational programs;
2. To examine institutional practices for evaluating student learning and to develop and share good practices in using educational results to improve the process of teaching and learning;
3. To examine the alignment of institutional resources with activities designed to achieve the institution's educational objectives; and
4. To promote sustained engagement with selected issues of Educational Effectiveness consistent with Commission Standards. These will have already been identified by the institution and approved through the Proposal Review Process. The institution is encouraged to select issues of importance to itself in this process, so the Review will be of maximum local utility.



## Cal Poly's WASC Accreditation Review Timeline



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|--|------------------------|
| Institutional Proposal <i>Submitted</i> :              | October 15, 2007       |
| Institutional Proposal <i>Approved</i> :               | Sometime in early 2008 |
| Preparatory Review <i>Campus Visit</i> :               | Spring 2010            |
| Educational Effectiveness Review <i>Campus Visit</i> : | Fall 2011              |