

certification by the institution's chief executive officer. When the chief executive officer signs the report, he or she is stating that he/she knows, understands and concurs with the entire report, certifies its accuracy, and believes that the institution measures up to each standard.

5. The report should avoid repetition of information or the duplication of data in exhibits. It should be as concise and factual as possible.
6. The final, post readiness visit SER should be submitted to the Accrediting Commission only when all questions listed in the "Guide to Self-Evaluation" have been answered. Exhibits and other supporting documents should be identified with appropriate questions and put into appendices.
7. Careful attention should be given to the report's form and appearance.
8. If, between the time the report is submitted to the Commission and before the Commission acts on the institution's application changes have been undertaken at the institution, the Commission must be notified.
9. Self-evaluation should be an ongoing process. Institutions should use the data gathered for the report in daily management, and should continue to gather and analyze this

and other essential data on a continuing basis in the period between accreditation visits.

Conclusion

For a copy of the handbook on accreditation entitled "DETC Accreditation Handbook," send a check for \$30 (U.S. funds) made payable to "DETC" to: Publications, DETC, 1601 18th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009. You may also download several of the policies and procedures in PDF files from DETC's web site at www.detc.org.

Ten Key Components of an SER

1. Driving directions and map
2. State license
3. Organizational chart
4. Two most recent years of financial statements, prepared in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles
5. Course/program completion charts
6. Sample of enrollment contract(s) and catalog(s)
7. Faculty/Instructor Resumes
8. Teach Out Resolution
9. Institutional Summary Profile
10. Future plans and Plan of Succession

Preparing an Effective Self-Evaluation Report

The very heart of the voluntary accreditation program for distance education institutions is the institution-prepared Self-Evaluation Report (SER), a document that describes and analyzes all phases of an institution for submission to the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council, the nationally recognized accrediting agency for distance educational institutions.

The primary functions of accreditation are: (1) the identification of quality institutions and programs; and (2) the stimulation of institutional improvement. Institutions seeking accreditation from the Accrediting Commission are always advised of the importance of the Self-Evaluation Report, which can best be described as an institution's view of itself, its statement of philosophy, objectives, practices, procedures and outcomes.

The Self-Evaluation Report consists of a question and answer format supplemented by exhibits and supporting documentation. Institutions are required to respond to questions contained in the "Guide to Self-Evaluation" found in the "DETC Accreditation Handbook." Applicants furnish the Accrediting Commission with copies of their report, which is also given to the Examining

Committee members before an accreditation visit to the institution.

Self-evaluation charges the institution with the responsibility of "judging" or "accrediting" itself through frank and objective self-analysis and appraisal. In a very real sense, distance education institutions must "accredit themselves" before the visit of an Examining Committee, for self-evaluation demands that the institution measure itself against published standards, and determine for itself that it meets these standards. Institutions submitting their final report to the Accrediting Commission are in effect stating, "We have judged ourselves and find that we meet the published standards."

Purpose of the Report

When the Accrediting Commission asks institutions to prepare a Self-Evaluation Report, two purposes are served: (1) institutions are given a rationale for conducting a critical self-evaluation; and (2) information that the visiting Examining Committee will need for its background study of the institution is gathered in one place.

Self-Evaluation Reports are the tools used by the Examining Committee to evaluate the programs and

practices of an individual institution, and it provides the statement of objectives and goals against which the Accrediting Commission determines whether an institution meets the published standards. The Self-Evaluation Report provides, in a single work, the mission, history, philosophy, goals, programs, procedures, size and performance data, outcomes documentation, experiences, operational practices and potentials of an institution.

Institutions undergoing the accreditation process may sometimes think the preparation of the Self-Evaluation Report is a meaningless, mechanical chore to be delegated to an administrative assistant and duly “produced” with as little disruption of daily operations as possible. When this happens, a poor evaluation will result, which reflects negatively on the institution.

Other institutions may fear the preparation of the report, thinking that they will never be able to adequately answer the many questions listed in the “Guide to Self-Evaluation.” A misunderstanding of the purposes and uses of the Report contributes to this attitude. The institution seeking accreditation in the spirit of an open and willing desire to be recognized as a quality institution need not worry about preparing the report. Candor, objectivity and thoroughness more than compensate for weighty tomes of little substance.

Some institutions are concerned that the confidential information in

the self-evaluation might be compromised, and efforts to exclude information from the report may be considered. The entire structure of the accrediting program is based upon confidentiality and mutual trust between institutions, the Accrediting Commission and peer group evaluators. Except for a permanent file copy for the Accrediting Commission, all copies of the report itself are destroyed after the Accrediting Commission has acted on an institution’s application.

Rather than fearing, mistrusting or dismissing it as a perfunctory chore, distance education institutions should look upon self-evaluation as an effective management tool. It is a fresh appraisal of an institution’s ability to survive and grow; and, more important, it assists management in gaining perhaps the most comprehensive and reliable assessment of its institution’s sense of purpose, ability to perform, and prospective for future growth. In short, a good self-evaluation tells the institution’s executive what his/her institution stands for, where it is going, and why it is or is not reaching its optimum potential.

Value of the Report

The Self-Evaluation Report itself has value beyond its use as an integral part of the accreditation program. Many institutions have made excellent use of their reports or portions of them in one or more of the following ways:

for meeting state and federal reporting requirements; as a public relations tool for outside agencies, banks, stock analysts, boards of directors, researchers, and prospective students; as an orientation for new employees on the operations of the institution; as a historical record of an institution’s progress; as a reference point for future planning by management; and any number of other uses.

Characteristics of what constitutes a good Self-Evaluation Report would require many pages, but the ideal report should be a factual, frank, well-documented statement of an institution, its objectives and the extent to which it meets its objectives. The report should be complete, leaving no room for speculation or misinterpretation. It should include compilations of student records and statistics, financial information, and careful analysis of the institution’s “problem areas.” The report should analyze as well as describe; it should seek the “why” and the “what.”

The Readiness Visit

For first-time applicants, a “readiness” for a DETC accreditation visit is conducted prior to scheduling a full on-site review. Three draft copies of the SER narrative are submitted to DETC. A small committee visits the applicant and spends the day reviewing the SER with the institution’s officials. The committee will offer advice on how to improve the SER.

Following the visit, the committee

prepares a “Readiness Visit Report” that contains a recommendation on whether the applicant is deemed “ready” to undergo a full review. This readiness visit provides an excellent “dry run” for the applicant and generates valuable tips on improving the SER.

Preparing the Report

Here are a few tips that may prove useful to institutions preparing a Self-Evaluation Report:

1. The responsibility for preparing the report should be delegated to a senior executive, with close coordination with chief executive officers. Careful planning, coordination and realistic time scheduling are essential.
2. The institution should take as much time as it needs to prepare a good report. Long-range planning is advised, especially in large institutions where report preparation can take up to nine months or more.
3. The writing and preparation of the report should involve as many staff members as possible. Every member of the institution’s supervisory staff should review the report before the time of the visit. Institution staff should be as well prepared as the visiting Examining Committee on visitation day.
4. Senior executives should review final drafts of the report before