
Making the Shoe Fit: The New Criteria and Research U

Susan B. Twombly
University of Kansas
Professor, Teaching and Leadership
NCA Steering Committee
NCA Working Group

Christine M. Keller
University of Kansas
Senior Policy Analyst
Office of Institutional Research and Planning
NCA Working Group

**2005 Higher Learning Commission Annual Meeting
Pre-Conference Workshop on Self-Study
Chicago, IL
April 9, 2005**

For additional information

KU Self-Study Materials: <http://www.ku.edu/~oirp/NCA/ReportTOC.shtml>

KU Self-Study Process &
Resource Room Materials: <http://www.ku.edu/~oirp/NCA/>

Information on KU process: Deb Teeter, University Director
Office of Institutional Research & Planning
deb-teeter@ku.edu

Barbara Romzek, Associate Dean/Professor
Chair of NCA Steering Committee

Introduction

The University of Kansas (KU) was the first research university to undergo re-accreditation using the new criteria established by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). As the new HLC criteria for accreditation are just beginning to be used by institutions of higher education, working interpretations of the criteria that naturally develop over time are currently non-existent. In fact, HLC interpretations of the structure of the self-study changed in the relatively short time KU was conducting and writing its self-study. For example, HLC de-emphasized the cross-cutting themes as a key component of the self-studies and moved to a stronger focus on the criteria components while KU was engaged in the self-study process.

One of the ways that relatively abstract evaluation criteria, such as those employed by accreditation agencies, become defined is through cases of practical implementation. That is, as colleges and universities work with the new criteria, submit their self-studies, and as consultant-evaluators react to those self-studies, the criteria and the accreditation process themselves take on meaning that is often difficult to discern from the de-contextualized definitions and explanations found in manuals. The HLC staff can suggest to early users of the criteria what they think the criteria mean and how they think universities should respond, but until universities actually use the criteria and are evaluated by teams of consultant-evaluators, the criteria will not take on meaning. Early institutional self-study reports and HLC reflections on those experiences will be used as a basis for recommending how other universities could interpret criteria and prepare self-studies. Because KU was one of the first research universities to voluntarily use the new criteria, there were no good examples to follow as we struggled to interpret the new criteria, nor were there any other research universities to consult with about alternate interpretations. Lack of existing models proved particularly challenging for KU as a research university because the illustrative types of evidence given as fulfilling the new criteria seemed to be written for institutions that are smaller and more singularly focused. Criteria 4 and 5 proved particularly challenging. Interpreting the criteria and preparing the report were made more complicated by the fact that the evaluation team and chair were not finalized until very late in the process, i.e., approximately 3 months before the visit. The chair of the team visited KU approximately 10 weeks prior to the submission of the self-study and was helpful in resolving some issues and interpreting the criteria. His perspectives would have been valuable earlier in the process.

As the first research university to use the new criteria, KU has valuable experience to offer other universities as they prepare for re-accreditation. Likewise, the HLC itself has much to learn from our struggles to interpret the criteria and to make decisions about what supporting evidence to include. The KU accreditation visit took place at the end of January and the consultant-evaluator team recommended a full 10-year re-accreditation. The official report from the HLC and the team has not yet been released.

This paper will cover the following topics:

- 1) Why KU decided to use the new criteria
- 2) How the Self-Study process was organized using the new criteria
- 3) How Criteria 4 and 5 were interpreted
 - The kinds of data compiled to demonstrate patterns of evidence
 - How the sections were organized
 - The perceived need for repetition and how it was managed
- 4) How the Self-Study report was organized
- 5) How the team visit was planned and implemented
- 6) Lessons for other research universities and the HLC.

The Decision to Use the New Criteria

The decision to use the new criteria was based on the rationale that the new criteria appeared to hold more potential for assessing important institutional goals. Many KU initiatives over the past ten years fit into the new criteria structure and the new criteria would provide an opportunity to focus on outcomes from a decade of changes. Additionally, there was a sense that the consultant-evaluators' feedback using the new criteria would provide more useful insights than the old criteria. As one of the first institutions to use the new criteria, KU expected it could play a role in assisting the commission and other institutions that would use the criteria in the future.

Organizing the Self-Study Process

In preparation for re-accreditation, KU embarked upon the Self-Study process with three goals in mind: 1) to obtain re-accreditation, 2) to identify and explore areas of strength on which to build and areas of challenge in planning for the future, and 3) to gain perspectives from the peer consultant-evaluators' review of the Self-Study report and campus visit. Within this framework, the Self-Study process was designed to provide an opportunity for reflective and analytic dialogue within the University community to clarify substantive institutional issues, to assess the current status of outcomes from its planning initiatives, and to provide a perspective of current or anticipated challenges.

In Fall 2002, KU began the process of reflection in preparation for its institutional re-accreditation. The KU Executive Vice Chancellor (EVC)/Provost invited 21 faculty, students, and administrators from across the University to serve as members of the North Central Accreditation (NCA) Steering Committee. Individuals invited to serve were chosen for their broad institutional perspective and not to represent their particular unit. Many had previously served on university-wide task forces. The primary charge of the committee was to guide the Self-Study process within the framework identified above and to oversee the development of the Self-Study document.

The steering committee began meeting regularly to analyze and discern patterns of evidence concerning University progress in each of the five criteria. The examples were compiled and integrated into a broad narrative, based upon the four cross-cutting themes identified by the HLC – the future-oriented organization, the learning-focused organization, the connected organization, and the distinctive organization.

In Fall 2003, department chairs and deans were asked to engage in “activity mapping” to provide specific outcomes in the areas of teaching, research, and service and to identify the activities and processes that motivated these changes. This exercise proved exceedingly useful as examples to illustrate component attainment.

Early in 2004, the steering committee chair, with the help of support staff, began to hold informational meetings with key groups to clarify particular patterns of evidence. Focus groups of various internal constituency groups (students, faculty, and staff) were asked to identify characteristics of KU as a distinctive organization and to identify future opportunities and challenges. The discussions yielded a rich array of observations and patterns. The range of comments gleaned from the different constituency focus groups was remarkably similar, affirming the validity of these reflections.

During spring of 2004, the process stalled and attempts to use the cross-cutting themes as a framework to adequately address the five criteria proved increasingly cumbersome. It proved virtually impossible to address the themes while still providing sufficient “evidence” to support

both the themes and the criteria. Through consultation with the HLC, it became clear that addressing the criteria and their components would be the primary focus of re-accreditation. Based on these factors, the difficult decision was made to abandon the themes and focus exclusively on the criteria. This meant tossing out a major piece of writing and beginning again.

At this point in the process, a smaller working group was reorganized to sort through the previously gathered materials, organize the information according to the criteria, and identify any missing information. The steering committee continued to serve as a sounding board for the work of the smaller group. Several draft reports were also distributed to senior administrative groups of vice provosts and deans, university governance, and other key individuals to help evaluate whether the criteria were fully addressed. A draft report was also published on the web so the entire university community could review and comment.

Interpreting the New Criteria

The decision to use criteria components rather than the cross-cutting themes as an organizing framework for the Self-Study report was, in many ways, a relief. The criteria and their component parts offered a more concrete outline and provided more specific information requirements. However, using the criteria and core components posed other problems. Criteria 1, 2 and 3 were fairly straightforward and posed relatively few problems of interpretation. The challenge with the first three criteria was to adequately represent the size and complexity of a research university. Otherwise these core components seemed to be written for and to apply equally to all types of colleges and universities. The “activity mapping” exercise described earlier proved very useful in providing examples of evidence to use for Criteria 3, 4 and 5.

Because the criteria were designed to be broad and integrative, problems with redundancy across the criteria soon emerged. The working group wrestled with how to minimize repetition and at the same time fully answer the criteria and related components. It was decided that some redundancy was unavoidable and necessary. Based on feedback from early readers a note was added to the introduction of the Self-Study report that explained specific programs, processes, and policies were intentionally mentioned multiple times throughout the report due to the integrative nature of the criteria.

Addressing each of the core components of Criteria 4 and 5 were particularly problematic. For Criterion 4, the problem was one of fit. How do the core components specified for Criterion 4 correspond with the mission of a research university? Parts of Criterion 4 seemed to overlap with Criterion 3 – for example, should the information on general education be repeated in both criteria? With Criterion 5 the problem was one of scope. When service pervades the institution, how does one demonstrate engagement in an organized and efficient manner? The specific challenges posed by each criterion are addressed in more detail in the following sections.

Criterion 4: Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge

The organization promotes a life of learning for its faculty, administration, staff, and students by fostering and supporting inquiry, creativity, practice, and social responsibility in ways consistent with its mission.

On its surface, Criterion 4 would seem to be a perfectly appropriate criterion to judge all colleges and universities, especially research universities. Acquisition, discovery, and application of knowledge are at the center of the mission of research universities. Therefore, gathering the evidence to demonstrate achievement on this criterion appeared, at first, to be a very straightforward task. However, when one begins to read beyond the criterion title, one

immediately begins to confront challenges of interpretation. For example, the explanatory text for the criterion describes an ideal institution that “promotes a life of learning for its faculty, administration, staff, and students by fostering and supporting inquiry, creativity, practice, and social responsibility in ways consistent with its mission.” This statement is consistent with the activities of a research university, particularly if the emphasis is placed on the second half of the statement: “by fostering and supporting inquiry...”

However, core component 4a asks the institution to provide evidence that the organization “demonstrates, through actions of its board, administrators, students, faculty, and staff, that it values a life of learning.” Although one of the types of evidence suggested to meet this core component is knowledge production by students and faculty, such production is merely one of several potential areas in which evidence can be supplied. The types of evidence suggested by HLC to demonstrate achievement of component 4a vary widely from evidence that the institution’s planning and financial allocations demonstrate that it values life long learning, to supporting professional development opportunities for faculty and staff, to production of scholarship. The scope of evidence examples left us with many questions. Does this component refer to life long learning or to the acquisition, discovery, and application of knowledge? Do institutions understand life long learning to be the same thing as acquisition and discovery of knowledge? For example, the suggested example of evidence focusing on professional development could imply that this component is about all of the kinds of professional development available on campus. This would take an institution down a very different path from one in which the institution demonstrates that it produces scholarship.

Core Component 4a: *The organization demonstrates, through the actions of its board, administrators, students, faculty, and staff, that it values a life of learning.*

Ultimately, we chose to define component 4a as what research universities commonly think of as research and scholarship, and provided evidence of the kind and amount of support provided to encourage research. These included dollars and space. The major research themes/areas conducted by various academic units and centers were also described in this section along with the types of support provided to investigators, including libraries, financial support, sabbatical leaves, etc. In the end, of the 40 some pages that addressed Criterion 4, over 70 percent were devoted to component 4a.

The next component, 4b, proved more problematic. For 4a, we could define and speak to what a research university sees as one of its distinguishing characteristics. But the examples of evidentiary examples for 4b seemed to shift the focus back to undergraduate education. General education is specifically mentioned in the introduction to core component 4b. The HLC *Handbook for Accreditation* states, “By its very title, this Criterion is about the skills and attitudes an educated person should possess...” (p. 3.2-14). To the extent that the listed

Core Component 4b: *The organization demonstrates that acquisition of a breadth of knowledge and skills and the exercise of intellectual inquiry are integral to its educational programs.*

examples of evidence should help an institution interpret the meaning of core components, component 4b became more confusing. Examples of evidence ranged from assessment, which was a focus of Criterion 3, to reviewing the relationship between its mission, values and the effectiveness of its general education program. In the end, this section of KU’s report was split between addressing the importance of general education, demonstrating how research supports student learning by emphasizing undergraduate research, and describing the resources

available to support graduate education. Of all of the sections in the KU Self-Study report, this is one that does not hang together particularly well.

The core component 4c focuses on assessing the usefulness of curriculum. And once again, the examples of evidence were diverse and confusing for a research university. KU's report reiterated assessment and program review, topics discussed previously under Criterion 3. In addition, curricular enhancements arising from these reviews were also described. This section felt very repetitive and seemed to take the focus away from the "acquisition, discovery, and application of knowledge."

Core Component 4c: *The organization assesses the usefulness of its curricula to students who will live and work in a global, diverse, and technological society.*

Component 4d:" The organization provides support to ensure that faculty, students, and staff acquire, discover, and apply knowledge responsibly" was fairly straightforward. This report section contained appropriate policies and programs in place to ensure responsible knowledge discovery and application.

In summary, Criterion 4, according to its title, should be the strength of the research university; it should be the place where the institution can demonstrate what it does to promote inquiry in the curriculum and to develop and apply knowledge. However, in an apparent attempt to write a criterion that applies to all types of institutions from community colleges to research universities, the result is a criterion that is exceedingly confusing. Life long learning and discovery and application of knowledge are equated. General education and assessment are confused with research -- in part because of the definition of discovery and application of knowledge as life-long learning. This may work for a liberal arts or community college in which inquiry is the province of the general education curriculum, but it seems inappropriate for a research university. The KU report describes what the institution does in terms of the discovery and application of knowledge while complying with the requirements to discuss assessment of usefulness of curricula. The result is a section that is somewhat disjointed and repetitive of earlier pieces of the report.

From the perspective of a research university it would seem that HLC should either rethink this criterion and what it really wants to assess or it should write specifications directed to specific types of institutions. For example, could the assessment and general education piece be better dealt with under Criterion 3?

Criterion 5: Engagement and Service

As called for by its mission, the organization identifies its constituencies and serves them in ways both value.

The challenge faced in Criterion 5 was totally different from the challenge posed by Criterion 4. In the end, it was an easier problem to solve. As a complex research university KU has no one unit responsible for engagement and service. KU's continuing education division is but one unit on campus that deals with external constituents. As a consequence, the working group constantly struggled with capturing the complexity of KU's service in a meaningful and coherent way. Another area of debate and ambiguity proved to be the distinction between engagement and service. One strategy suggested by a colleague who had been involved in the development of the new criteria was to think integratively about engagement around various themes.

However, this did not prove to be a useful organizational framework for the initial writing. Furthermore, the writing team did not have sufficient information at the beginning to write a theme-based response to Criterion 5. The mere scope of service/engagement in a research university is daunting. How does a research university demonstrate that it learns from its constituents and analyzes its capacity to serve their needs? KU does not engage in one large needs assessment survey of constituents. Therefore, how can capacity and responsiveness to constituents be demonstrated? This demonstration occurs in many different and separate units. Finally, how does a research university demonstrate that constituencies value its services? Again, there is no single evaluation of the value of KU service.

The task of addressing the core components for Criterion 5 seemed overwhelming. The framework that finally emerged can from KU's EVC/Provost. His organizing principle was that as a public university, KU's service/engagement emerged directly from expertise in teaching and research. Using this idea, it made sense to look at where teaching and research was done to identify examples of how KU engaged constituents – primarily external groups. The activity mapping exercise was used to identify examples of engagement and service in the professional schools, and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences on the Lawrence Campus and the Medical Center in Kansas City. Examples were also gathered from KU Continuing Education; the various museums, performing arts centers, radio stations; and research centers. The result was a catalog of the hundreds of ways in which KU faculty, students, and staff engage constituent groups. Although the listing provided a comprehensive review of what KU does, the downside is that a catalog is not particularly engaging to read!

At the end of the catalog of activities, the final challenge was core component 5d: "Internal and external constituencies value the services the organization provides." How could value be demonstrated in the absence of centrally collected program evaluation data? There were some obvious ways: for example, the number of attendees at cultural events. In the end, analytic methods from qualitative research were employed. Looking back across the "catalog" of activities, major themes were identified. For example, one of the themes that cuts across many KU activities is lifelong learning. By examining use data from KU Continuing Education, we could demonstrate contributions to lifelong learning. A second theme was one of contributions to cultural enrichment and education. KU makes substantial contributions to the cultural life of Lawrence and the surrounding area. One surprising finding from the self-study exercise was that almost every unit at KU contributes in some way to P-12 education through summer camps for students to workshops for teachers. Although it was well known that the School of Education provided such service, most of the academic and research centers also engage in significant outreach to public schools. A third theme was of contributions to quality of life, health and wellness. Activities under this theme were primarily found at the medical center campus. And finally, the fourth theme was that KU service activities make a contribution to the economic development of the immediate community and of the state.

Perhaps KU's story of service and engagement would have been more interesting if the entire criterion was organized around these themes, but by the time the themes were identified it was too late in the process to make significant changes in what had been already written. At the end of the process, the working group had a greater sense of the intent of the criterion. However, lacking comprehensive knowledge about all of the ways in which KU engages constituents, the disparate information had to be collected and "cataloged" first. KU now has a base of information about service from which to build for the next self-study, but it also has the challenge of figuring out a better way of maintaining a central database on the types of service activities offered.

Through responding to Criterion 5, the KU community has learned a great deal about the myriad ways in which it engages its constituents. In fact, based on feedback from across campus, many people were surprised and impressed with the amount and variety of service activities detailed.

Organizing the Report

How to organize the Self-Study report sections was also a matter of interpretation and much discussion. The HLC required that the answers to the new criteria and the responses to the concerns from the previous visit be included in the final report. However the working group felt these two sections were not sufficient. The new criteria are broad, integrated and do not necessarily align cleanly with the structures of a university. To understand the responses to the criteria it was necessary in many instances to understand KU's organizational, administrative, and governance structures. It also seemed important to place the answers to the criteria in some sort of context, to explain the "KU story." In addition to the responses to the concerns from 1994 visit, information on the significant changes at KU during the last decade seemed to be relevant information. Finally, a discussion of the future seemed strangely absent.

To address these concerns, KU's Self-Study report was organized into two volumes. The University Overview in Volume 1 contains an introduction to the University of Kansas describing KU's history, traditions, and culture as well as its organizational structure and campus locations. The Significant Changes section presents KU's responses to demographic and cultural changes particularly important to the institution over the last 10 years. Following this section is KU's response to the concerns identified after the last re-accreditation visit in 1994. The University Overview concludes with a short piece on the future direction of KU. The next sections of the report discuss the five criteria and evaluate evidence of University progress in the core component areas. Volume 2 contains descriptive information about the academic units and supplemental materials.

Volume 1

- **University Overview**
 - Introduction to KU
 - Structure of KU
 - Significant Changes 1994-2004
 - Response to 1994 Concerns
 - Future Directions

- **Executive Summary of the Five Criteria**
 - **Criteria for Accreditation**
 - Criterion 1: Mission and Integrity
 - Criterion 2: Preparing for the Future
 - Criterion 3: Student Learning and Effective Teaching
 - Criterion 4: Application, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge
 - Criterion 5: Engagement and Service

Volume 2

- **Academic Profiles**
- **Supplemental Materials**

After including the additional sections and the criteria, it became clear that the report was going to easily exceed 300 pages, which brought up additional concerns about length and readability.

To help address these concerns, a graphics designer at KU's public relations office was consulted who assisted with the development of a report format that included graphics and color coding to aid readers. The hard copy of the report that was mailed to team member included a CD with an electronic version of the report that allowed team members to navigate the documents more easily and also included hotlinks to various websites with supporting information.

Organizing the Visit

In the past, consultant-evaluator visits typically consisted of one-on-one meetings between a team member and a university representative. Clearly this format would not be well suited for the new criteria. Instead, KU in consultation with the team chair put together meetings with groups of university representatives and several HLC consultant-evaluators based on broad areas such as research, student services, planning and budgeting, assessment, distance education, graduate education, and public service. Vice Provosts or Deans were assigned to facilitate each group meeting to insure that the consultant-evaluators obtained the information they needed. The grouping allowed the consultant evaluators to visit with people with broad and differing expertise in each area. The academic deans also met as a group with several team members. Some of the meetings were set up so that an initial group might discuss a topic more broadly and then follow with a more focused meeting. For example, the student services meeting discussed student success broadly and then follow-up meetings addressed more specific topics such as graduation and retention and career services.

The broader participation of KU representatives meant that more people across campus needed to be knowledgeable about the accreditation process and the Self-Study document. A briefing document was developed and informational sessions were held prior to the arrival of the visiting team.

Team members were initially assigned to groups based upon their stated areas of interest and modifications were made to the preliminary schedule once team members were on campus. Individual meetings were arranged with the Chancellor and EVC/Provost and open forums for students, faculty, and staff were included in the schedule. The group format did require some careful balancing between including enough KU representatives that the topic was adequately covered but not too many people that the consultant-evaluators were overwhelmed. At first, some of the consultant-evaluators were uncomfortable with the group format. They worried that we were trying to outnumber them. After several sessions, however, they came to appreciate the format.

The resource room utilized technology as much as possible in order to minimize the number of paper reports and documents. Laptops were set up with internet access so that team members could view many reports and resources electronically. Several webpages were specifically designed for the visit including: documentation of the self-study process, online access to the final report, and a directory of the resource material required by the HLC. The laptops were also set up with shared disk space on the university network that allowed teams members to work on different sections of the team report simultaneous without the hassle of transferring files via disk or email. The disk space was password protected and only accessible from the laptops in the resource room. A printer was also available to be used from any of the laptops.

Outcomes of Visit

After some initial uneasiness about the new group format, the consultant-evaluators were very pleased with the scheduling of the visit and the breadth of information they were able to gather

about KU. At the exit interview, the consultant-evaluators recommended a full 10 year re-accreditation for KU. The official report has not yet been released from HLC.

The process for conducting the Self-Study was very much in keeping with the institutional culture of broad input and review with focused staff effort to assemble and develop required materials. Many of the challenges we faced were the result of being the first and of not having a visiting team chair until very late in the process. The approach we took to the self-study would likely not change but we would make greater effort to clarify what was needed to avoid 'spinning our wheels' as we did in initially focusing on the themes. This is likely part of the price we paid as being the first research university to experience the new criteria. Knowing what we know now, there may be some organizational strategies that we can use to make the next self-study easier. For example, there may be some way to keep better track of service activities. The activity mapping exercise was a very valuable way to capture evidence that no one office would have had.

Recommendations

For universities

- Focus on criteria not themes
- Identify the chair early and work with him/her to interpret the criteria and clarify expectations
- Use the activity mapping exercise for concrete examples
- Use a group format for meetings during team visit
- Consider use of additional sections, particularly significant changes and academic profiles

For HLC

- Clarify the criteria and components
- Provide examples specific to research universities
- Eliminate the need for so much repetitiveness in the self-study. (Our team, while praising the quality of the report, also commented about the redundancy.)