



Self-Study Guide

The American Academy for Liberal Education

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Overview

Institutions and programs applying for accreditation or reaccreditation by the American Academy for Liberal Education are required to prepare a self-study report. A self-study is an applicant's formal, comprehensive, and rigorous examination of its performance in light of the Academy's *Standards and Criteria* as well as of its own mission and educational objectives. The self-study report is a central element in the accreditation process.

Preparing an effective self-study for accreditation is a demanding project for an institution or program to undertake, regardless of its size or complexity. The Academy recognizes this, and has designed its *Standards and Criteria*, which serve as the basis for the self-study report, to focus on the areas of greatest interest and concern to liberal arts educators and administrators. In addition, the Academy has prepared the *Handbook for Guided Self-Study*, which identifies further questions for each standard that the college should consider when writing the self-study.

The self-study process involves participation by a broad and representative range of individuals, committees, and offices, and should provide ample opportunity for conversation and reflection on the nature, aims, and performance of the applicant institution or program.

Aims for the Self-Study

A well-planned and executed self-study for accreditation will serve the interests of the applicant institution or program as well as the reporting requirements of the Academy by drawing a clear, concise, and truthful picture of its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement. Ideally, the self-study will be an extension of an institution's regular, internal processes for review and improvement. This is to work as the window by which the site visitor, Academy staff, Council and Board view the college.

Comprehensiveness

The self-study should paint a coherent and well-integrated picture of the *whole* institution or program under review. Though many of the Academy's *Standards* necessarily focus on particular features of applicants' academic, administrative, or financial operations, ***the self-study should discuss these features in relation to the overarching nature and aims of the institution or program.*** Also, it is important to relate operational and procedural issues to educational functions and goals.

Appraisal and Assessment

Though a self-study necessarily involves concise *description* of programs, structures, and operations, ***the self-study process, as well as the resulting report, should emphasize frank appraisal and assessment of the applicant's performance in meeting the Academy's Standards and Criteria as well as its own mission and educational aims.***

Self-Evaluation and Improvement

The self-study process should reflect the internal, ***on-going efforts of an institution or program to evaluate and improve its own performance.*** The self-study should demonstrate an applicant's willingness to subject itself to critical self-examination, as well as its ability to devise effective plans and strategies for addressing areas of weakness and for developing areas of strength.

Preparing to Write a Self-Study for Accreditation

Once Academy staff have reviewed an application for accreditation and determined that the institution or program meets the Academy's eligibility requirements, *the applicant's designated accreditation liaison will be notified formally to proceed with the self-study process.*

Role of the President or Chief Academic Officer

The primary role of the president of an institution (or in the case of programs applying for accreditation, of the dean or chief academic officer) in the self-study process is to ensure widespread awareness of, and participation in that process. Though the president usually does not take a leading role in implementing or supervising the self-study process, his ability to encourage interest and participation is vital to its success. The president is also responsible for appointing a steering committee that will plan, implement, and supervise the self-study process and edit the resulting report.

Appointing a Steering Committee; Role of the Chairman

The first practical step for an institution or program preparing to write a self-study for accreditation is to name a steering committee responsible for designing, implementing, and overseeing the self-study process. The chairman of the steering committee is responsible for ensuring that the efforts of the various individuals, committees and offices involved in drafting the self-study are well-coordinated and efficient. He is also responsible for the final edited report. The steering committee is charged with these tasks:

Identifying key issues or questions of concern to the institution or program that will serve as unifying themes or foci for the self-study report. Careful attention to this matter will greatly increase the value of the self-study effort to the institution or program.

Assigning responsibility for responding to the various standards and criteria to the appropriate individuals, departments, committees, and offices throughout the institution or program. To the extent possible, the steering committee may wish to make use of existing bodies or processes that regularly deal with the matter or questions raised by the various standards and criteria. This will minimize the creation of new and ad hoc committees, and maximize the use of existing knowledge, experience, and information.

Coordinating the work of the various individuals, committees and offices so as to create a broad understanding of the nature and purposes of the self-study process. For example, it may be helpful to address first the more comprehensive or fundamental standards – those dealing with mission and educational aims. Edited drafts of responses to these broader issues may set a useful context for those drafting responses to standards dealing with more particular questions, such as curriculum structure, student services, or library resources.

Overseeing the self-study process and ensuring that the final self-study report appropriately reflects an institution or program-wide review of the nature, purposes, and of their educational enterprise.

Role of Academy Staff

Once a steering committee has been appointed and a chairman designated, the institution or program may wish to invite a representative of the Academy to visit their campus and to provide assistance as they develop a plan for the self-study. Academy staff is available for consultation at any point during the application and self-study preparation process.

Adopting a Timetable

A self-study for accreditation is a complex project involving cooperation and coordination between many parties over an extended period of time. The steering committee should set a timetable that allows sufficient time for collecting and preparing information, drafting and completing each part of the self-study, as well as for integrating the final document. Academy staff can assist in developing a timetable, and should be informed once a timetable has been formally approved.

Once assignments for responding to the various standards and criteria have been made, the steering committee should ensure that a regular schedule of progress reports and meetings is established and kept. The steering committee itself should issue periodic progress reports to the broader campus community on the self-study process as a whole.

The timetable adopted should also allow time and create occasions for conversation among the different individuals, committees, and offices responsible for drafting aspects of the self-study. This will encourage discussion and reflection on the relations between the different parts of the institution or program and their roles in fulfilling overall institutional or program objectives, and

will also contribute to the overall coherence and usefulness of the final self-study report.

It is advisable that target dates for completing different parts of the self-study be staggered, with the most fundamental and general topics (mission, educational aims) completed before more specific topics (library resources, student services).

Time should also be allowed for campus-wide dissemination and discussion of a full draft of the report before the final report is submitted to the Academy. This will help ensure that the entire community, including faculty, administration, and governing board, understand and benefit from the self-study effort.

Length of Self-Study Process

Depending on the size and complexity of the institution or program applying for accreditation, the timeframe for completing the self-study may range from six (6) to eighteen months (18). Generally speaking, a well-focused effort conducted over a shorter period of time may be more rewarding to participants, and to the institution or program as a whole, than a more drawn out process that dilutes interest in and attention to this reflective, evaluative process.

Target Dates

Target dates for completing the self-study and submitting a final version to the Academy are very important, and should be observed closely. Other aspects of the accreditation process, notably the required site evaluation visit by peer reviewers, depend on timely completion of the self-study process. ***Please note:*** *Site evaluation visits may be postponed or canceled at the prerogative of the Academy's Director for Higher Education if a complete self-study (with all supporting materials) is not made available to the Team members at least four weeks before the Evaluation Team visit. The applicant institution or program is responsible for all costs associated with site visits cancelled for this reason.*

Structuring the Self-Study Report

The Academy's *Standards and Criteria* provide a basic framework for the self-study report. The self-study process should result in a document that responds to the substance of each of the various standards and criteria clearly and concisely. However, the *Standards* need not be seen as a rigid template for the final report. The basic framework provided by the *Standards* should be seen primarily as a guide to composing a narrative that provides in-depth exposition, analysis, and evaluation rather than as a checklist or questionnaire to organize information.

Format

The final, edited self-study should contain the following elements:

1. *Title Page*
2. *Table of Contents*
3. *Preface Describing the Self-Study Process*

The chairman of the self-study committee should very briefly describe the nature and extent of participation in the self-study process, and certify that a copy of the report has been sent to the head of the institution's governing board (or, in the case of programs, to the institution's CEO). A roster of the self-study steering committee's members should be included.

4. *Overview*

The overview should present a brief history and factual description of the institution or program (including accreditation history), and concisely introduce any salient themes or issues that received special focus in the self-study process or report.

5. *Narrative*

The main body of the self-study should contain the responses to the Academy's standards and criteria. The order of presentation may follow that of the *Standards* themselves, or may reflect institutional or program priorities. Formats for the narrative portion of the self-study that depart from that of the Academy's *Standards* should include an index showing where each item is addressed.

The narrative responses should briefly explain or describe how the institution or program meets or falls short of meeting each standard. It is important that the narrative responses go beyond mere description and focus extensively ***on analysis, interpretation, and projections.*** The responses should place special emphasis on areas needing to be strengthened or changed, and should also ***describe briefly a plan of action for addressing these needs.*** It is important to include only an appropriate level of detail. Narrative responses should provide ***sufficient information and analysis to be comprehensive and thorough,*** but no more.

All references made in the narrative to institutional or program publications should cite specific documents, and give page numbers and any applicable section or paragraph numbers. These supporting publications may be included as appendices to the self-study report.

6. *Conclusion*

The narrative should conclude with a concise discussion of the institution's or program's leading priorities and its recommendations and plans for achieving these (including, where appropriate, descriptions of available resources for accomplishing these priorities as well as timetables).

7. *Appendices*

Distribution of Copies

Once the self-study has been completed and a final draft formally approved, copies (*including all supporting documents*) must be sent promptly to the Academy (***in electronic form, via flash drives***) as well as to site evaluation team members, in the following numbers:

Academy office copies: Three (3) copies of the completed self-study (including all supporting documents) should be sent directly to the Academy.

Site evaluation team members: One (1) copy of the completed self-study (including all supporting documents) should be sent directly to each member of the site evaluation team.

Please note: Site evaluation team members should also be sent, together with the self-study or earlier, a complete set of all application materials submitted to the Academy, including the letter of intent to apply for accreditation, the application form, and all supporting materials submitted to the Academy in fulfillment of the eligibility requirements.