A Historical Context and Summary of the Accreditation Process

(Sal Ciolino, Director, Office of Institutional Analysis)

Gettysburg College like all other institutions of higher education is required to conduct a self-study every ten years, to submit a progress report between self-studies and an annual report of activities. The College’s last self-study was completed in March 2004.

There are several regional accrediting bodies which operate as membership organizations. Gettysburg is a founding member (1921) of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MS/CHE). Members are expected to comply with certain agreed upon policies, expectations and requirements and function somewhat like quality control measures. These are published in *Characteristics of Excellence: eligibility requirements and standards for accreditation*. These standards were revised in totality and in January 2004 became effective.

Since 1952, these regional bodies have been given legitimacy through their recognition by state governments and the federal government (more recently the Federal Department of Education). In the years leading to the revisions of the *Characteristics of Excellence* and since the Federal Department of Education has “pressured” these accrediting bodies to include significant institutional expectations to provide measures of outcomes—assessment or risk losing their recognition. (Recently, one accrediting body was suspended for six months due to non-compliance with assessment expectations.)

There are benefits associated with accreditation. Among them are:

- Students work is recognized and may transfer among most accredited institutions
- Degrees are valued and recognized
- Foundations and corporations value and recognize accreditation and provide financial support
- Agencies of the state and federal governments provide students financial aid
- Research grants are awarded to faculty through agencies such as NIH and NSF

In the years leading to the last self-study mindful of the new eligibility requirements, the College’s Self-study Steering Committee, co-chaired by professors Kathy Cain and Tim Shannon, strategically identified assessment as the focus of the self-study. The College easily met twelve of the fourteen standards but fell short on:

Standard 7: Institutional Assessment and
Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning

By directly dealing with our Achilles Heal we could demonstrate our intention “comply” with accreditation standards and their associated fundamental elements. A self-study proposal was submitted. The Commissions approved the proposal providing that the study resulted in a plan for student learning assessment which was implemented during the later part of the self-study. The committee worked double duty—both as the Self-study Steering Committee and the interim committee that would develop an assessment plan in response to Standards 7 and 14. The self-study was completed, a plan was developed and in the late fall of 2003 two committees – Committee on Learning Assessment (COLA) and the Co-curricular Learning Assessment Group (CLAG) were
appointed. The documents were shared in open meetings in the fall of 2003 and a final Self-study Report was written and distributed in January 2004.

These documents together with many other resources on student learning assessment were placed online at:

http://www.gettysburg.edu/about/offices/ees/institutional_analysis/self_study.dot

From February 23 to February 25 a visiting team representing the MS/CHE composed of six people (president, provost, faculty, student affairs, information technology, MS/CHE representative) visited the College and met (17 sessions) with faculty, students, administrators, and various committees to review, probe, discuss, inquire, analyze and report on the status of the College.

After their review they verbally delivered their results and submitted a written report within 10 days.

The team made several suggestions and one recommendation. While suggestions allow for some room for interpretation, recommendations are “required”. The recommendation states:

“As acknowledged in the self-study, Gettysburg is still in the process of developing its student learning goals and expectations, particularly in the area of general education and in a number of majors and programs. In that context, the visiting team recommends that the College conclude the first full articulation of learning goals at the general education and program levels as soon as possible and not later than the conclusion of the 2004-2005 academic year. This timely completion will permit the development of course learning goals and appropriate assessment measures by the end of the 2005-2006 academic year.”

Timely was in reference to the “new” curriculum which had been recently adopted by the faculty and the stated intention to assess its impact on learning.

The team concluded that “Based on the review of the self-study, institutional documents, and interviews, the team affirms that Gettysburg College continues to meet the eligibility requirements established by the Middle States Commission.”

At the June 2004 meeting the Commission heard testimony on behalf of reaccreditation and voted to reaffirm accreditation. But, requested “a progress letter by October 1, 2005, documenting the articulation of learning goals for general education and academic programs” and to address our progress further in the Periodic Review Report due June 1, 2009. The progress letter outlining the College’s progress together with appropriate attachments was sent as prescribed, it was accepted and approved by the Commissions and a new Statement of Accreditation Status was provided. It is available at:

http://www.msche.org/institutions_directory.asp?txtRange=g

At this time we are expected to continue with the articulation of student learning goals, complete course learning goals and conduct assessments to measure student learning. These activities and associated results are to be included in the Periodic Review Report due June 1, 2009.
The call for public accountability has not diminished, it continues with a different twist. USA Today recently (11/14/2006) reported:

“All she (Margaret Spellings, Sect. of Ed.) wants, Spellings says, is better information made available to families, taxpayers and policymakers so they can make better decisions about how they spend their money. And given how little is really known about how well students are served by higher education, she says, she doesn't see why anyone would find that unreasonable.”

“…This month, she will meet with accrediting agencies responsible for quality control in higher education. In the spring, she will host a summit with all interested parties. …”

To conclude, assessment at Gettysburg responds to our commitment to measure student learning, accreditation standards, and national accountability expectations.

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