

## INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY ASSESSMENT TOOL ALIGNMENT TO ACCREDITATION

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The Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT) helps colleges assess capacity and identify strengths and areas for improvement in light of best practices in seven key areas: 1) Leadership and Vision; 2) Data and Technology; 3) Equity; 4) Teaching and Learning; 5) Engagement and Communication; 6) Strategy and Planning; and 7) Policies and Practices. The tool provides a structure for stakeholders from all areas of a college to collectively examine critical elements necessary to support student success.

The ICAT also provides colleges with additional benefits related to their accreditation cycle. The seven regional accrediting agencies have some variation in accreditation standards or criteria but they have all adopted a cycle or process (often referred to as “closing the loop”) for colleges to use through the self-study or compliance certification process.



*Institutional Capacity Framework*

That process includes:

- identifying goals or outcomes in each area of the college;
- establishing “acceptable” levels of performance or expected outcomes or benchmarks;
- using some form of assessment of performance;
- analyzing and discussing the results of the assessment among relevant stakeholders;
- using the analysis of results to inform action, improve instructional programs and support; services, make changes to policy, and establish appropriate interventions;
- demonstrating improvements in student performance, completion, stated outcomes, and institutional quality.

Some of the accrediting agencies want colleges to use more than one form of assessment and/or both qualitative and quantitative measures in the process or cycle of initial accreditation or reaffirmation. The ICAT can provide an additional assessment tool that produces a numeric result with qualitative feedback from faculty and staff who participate in accreditation processes. While the ICAT is not intended to be a psychometric tool, it can stimulate broad-based discussion and analysis. It is a tool to facilitate consensus and to promote change and improvement.

### Alignment to the Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool

The following are ways colleges can align the ICAT with accreditation:

- As an externally developed assessment tool that is used nationally and can be used as a pre-test/post-test measure. Colleges that choose to use the ICAT can conduct the assessment early in their accreditation cycle (preferable by midpoint, e.g. year five in a ten

year cycle), facilitate forums with key groups and committees across the college to discuss the findings, develop strategies to move the institution forward in specific areas and monitor progress. The college can then retake the assessment as a post-test measure. Faculty, staff, and administrators who take the pre and post assessments will provide results that can be used as “data” to inform practice and make decisions.

- B.** As an environmental scanning tool to produce broad areas of focus for strategic planning. Colleges often conduct some form of external environmental scan in the first few steps of their strategic planning process but do not always have an effective tool to conduct internal scanning. Because the ICAT assesses strengths and needs for improvement across seven capacity areas, the results of the assessment can provide direction for the development of a strategic plan, and suggestions for the implementation of the plan.
- C.** As a facilitator of broad engagement and critical discussions about institutional issues. Colleges often find it difficult to engage large numbers of faculty and staff in the accreditation process and when the visiting team arrives on campus, some college employees are not aware of the critical issues facing the institution or the strategies developed to improve institutional quality. The process of completing the ICAT and discussing the results can stir broad-based involvement and discussion that stimulate changes in policy, practices, classroom strategies, student services, and budget allocation.
- D.** As a venue for discussion, analysis, and strategy to determine the quality issues the college faces. Multiple accrediting agencies now require colleges to address improvements in institutional quality through some form of a quality process such as ongoing quality action plans, a detailed plan to address one quality issue over several years, or some form of written document identifying the quality issues the institution faces. The ICAT encourages broad engagement in the assessment and analysis of the college’s capacity in multiple areas and the scores can be used as documentation of needs for improvement in institutional quality.
- E.** As a tool to address the recent change in focus toward student success. While student success has always been a concern of the accrediting commissions, the national focus on completion has taken on a new level of importance. Over the last few years, all of the higher education commissions within the regional accrediting agencies have added new standards relating to student success. They are now requiring colleges to address issues such as retention, course and program completion, and other measures of student success. They are interested in disaggregated data, equity, subgroups of the population, and success through all delivery methods. While there is some variation in these new standards among agencies, they are more alike than different. The following identify by accrediting agency/commission their requirements for student success benchmarks, analysis and action.
  - 1. Middle States Commission on Higher Education** - An institution commits to student retention, persistence, completion, and success through a coherent and effective support system sustained by qualified professionals, which enhances the quality of the learning environment, contributes to the educational experience, and fosters student success (IV).

2. **The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association** - The institution defines measures of student success and levels of achievement appropriate to its mission, modalities and locations of instruction, and student body, including any specifically recruited populations. These measures include rates of progression, retention, transfer, and graduation; default and loan repayment rates; licensure passage rates; and employment (8.6).
3. **The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools** - The institution demonstrates a commitment to educational improvement through ongoing attention to retention, persistence, and completion rates in its degree and certificate programs.
  - The institution has defined goals for student retention, persistence, and completion that are ambitious but attainable and appropriate to its mission, student populations, and educational offerings.
  - The institution collects and analyzes information on student retention, persistence, and completion of its programs.
  - The institution uses information on student retention, persistence, and completion of programs to make improvements as warranted by the data.
  - The institution's processes and methodologies for collecting and analyzing information on student retention, persistence, and completion of programs reflect good practice (4.C.).
4. **Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities** - The institution regularly and systematically collects data related to clearly defined indicators of achievement, analyzes those data, and formulates evidence-based evaluations of the achievement of core theme objectives (Standard 4).
5. **The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools** - The institution evaluates success with respect to student achievement consistent with its mission; uses criteria that may include enrollment data; retention, graduation, course completion, job placement rates, state licensing examinations, student portfolios, or other means of demonstrating achievement in goals (FR 4.1).
6. **The Accrediting Commission on Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges** - The institution disaggregates and analyzes learning outcomes and achievement for subpopulations of students; implements strategies when achievement gaps occur, which may include allocation or reallocation of human, fiscal and other resources, to mitigate those gaps; evaluates the efficacy of those strategies; regularly generates, evaluates, and makes public data about student achievement, including measures of retention and graduation, and evidence of student learning outcomes; has educational objectives that are widely recognized throughout the institution, are consistent with stated purposes, and are demonstrably achieved (I.B.6.).

Colleges will need to extract and analyze data from their student information systems relating to retention, course completion rates, degree attainment, and so forth but the ICAT provides data

on the college infrastructure for student success such as board and leadership support, college resources, policies and practices that support student success.

The ICAT can easily be a catalyst for ongoing, college-wide discussion about institutional strengths and weaknesses, progress on systemic change, the adoption of best practices, and improvements in institutional quality. The subscale scores, item analysis, and broad-based discussion can serve as supplemental support documentation for activities, infrastructure, and support for student success work at the college.

### **Suggestions on the Process to Support Accreditation**

For a college to use the ICAT as a tool to enhance accreditation processes, it should be noted that attention to planning and documentation of processes are critical. While a college using the ICAT as part of its Achieving the Dream work will pull teams together, take the assessment, analyze their results, and use the information to help structure student success work. They will not necessarily conduct as rigorous a process as they would for use in their compliance certification or self-evaluation for accreditation.

Achieving the Dream recommends that colleges do the following for using the ICAT:

- Document the steps in the process of planning, administering, and analyzing the results of the ICAT;
- Identify the strategies used in selecting key individuals or groups to take the assessment or be involved in the discussion of results;
- Take detailed meeting notes during each ICAT event;
- Identify action items adopted as a result of the assessment in as much detail as possible;
- Delineate how the college moved from assessment to strategy to action;
- Identify a follow-up process or evaluation for each strategy or action item (close the loop);
- Include the college's accreditation liaison in the ICAT assessment process.

The ICAT can add meaningful supplemental support for virtually every area of accreditation. As long as colleges are careful to define and document their use of the tool, it can be used to guide their self-evaluation or compliance certification process.

### **Alignment with Specific Accreditation Standards**

The six higher education commissions within the regional accrediting agencies have developed self-regulating, peer evaluation processes with criteria and standards arising from best practices in higher education. The accreditation process is designed to “provide an assessment of an institution’s effectiveness in the fulfillment of its mission, its compliance with the requirements of its accrediting association, and its continuing efforts to enhance the quality of student learning” (Accrediting Standards, 2011). Currently, the accrediting agencies “expect affiliated institutions to work toward improving their quality, increasing their effectiveness, and continually striving toward excellence. Its evaluative processes are designed to encourage such improvement” (Standards, 2016).

Accreditation criteria change and evolve over time to address rising issues in higher education. The regional accrediting agencies meet regularly to address issues and standards and are more alike than different in their approach, process, standards, and practices. The accrediting agencies periodically review and make changes to their standards; and as one makes changes in philosophy and practice, the others generally follow. Currently, all six have similar constructs

addressed through various sections of their criteria or standards. The following table demonstrates the common areas of focus among all seven regional accrediting agencies and how those align with the seven capacities of the ICAT.

### ALIGNING SECTIONS OF THE ICAT WITH ACCREDITATION MAJOR AREAS OF FOCUS

Accreditation Major Areas of Focus	ICAT Capacity
<p>Effective <b>college leadership</b> that encourages innovation and a quest for continuous improvements in institutional quality, takes responsibility for quality improvement, solicits and listens to relevant perspectives, works systematically to improve college-wide performance, and aligns decision-making with expertise.</p> <p>The creation and implementation of an <b>Intentional mission, vision and values</b> developed through appropriate and effective processes. Colleges identify institutional expectations (goals and outcomes) and level of accomplishment (benchmarks).</p>	<p><b>Leadership and Vision</b> – the commitment and collaboration of the institution’s leadership with respect to student success and the clarity of the vision for desired change.</p>
<p><b>Quality enhancement</b> to include an analysis of institutional performance, the identification of improvement strategies and a structured process (including assessment) to accomplish improvements in institutional quality.</p> <p><b>Student success benchmarks and standards</b> are established and measured. Student success variables should be disaggregated by important demographics and characteristics. Results should be analyzed and strategies employed to improve student outcomes.</p>	<p><b>Data and Technology</b> – the institution’s capacity to collect, access, analyze and use data to inform decisions, and to use powerful technology to support student success.</p>
<p>Commitment to <b>integrity and public trust</b> by acting in the best interest of students, staff, and the community; seeking a broad range of ideas and perspectives; and embracing diversity.</p>	<p><b>Equity</b> – the commitment, capabilities, and experiences of an institution to equitably serve low income students, students of color and other at-risk student populations with respect to access, success, and campus climate.</p>
<p><b>Teaching and learning</b> to include effective methods, feedback to improve instruction, assisting students to improve their learning, effective professional development and fair evaluation of teaching. Programs establish learning goals and outcomes and use assessment to improve the quality of learning. Standards applied in seated classes are applied to alternative methods such as distance education.</p>	<p><b>Teaching and Learning</b> (includes student support services) – the commitment to engaging full-time and adjunct faculty in examinations of pedagogy, meaningful professional development, and a central role for them as change agents within the institution. Also, the college’s commitment to advising, tutoring, and out-of-classroom supports as well as restructuring</p>



<p><b>The faculty</b> own the curriculum and regularly evaluates it for relevancy, currency and effectiveness. The curriculum meets the changing needs of its students. There are adequate full-time faculty to manage programs. Program completers are adequately prepared.</p> <p><b>Academic support services</b> identify learning support outcomes and use data for improvement. Appropriate student support services are implemented to support student development that is suited to the needs of the students at the institution. Staff implement a process for serving underprepared students.</p>	<p>developmental education to facilitate student learning and success.</p>
<p>While there is not a specific section of accrediting criteria that aligns with engagement and communication, it is implied throughout accreditation criteria and standards by repeated emphasis on broad engagement in accreditation processes.</p>	<p><b>Engagement and Communication</b> – the creation of strategic partnerships with key external stakeholders, such as K-12, universities, employers and community-based organizations, and internal stakeholders across the institution to participate in the student success agenda and improvement of student outcomes.</p>
<p>The overarching focus of accreditation is <b>institutional effectiveness</b> which includes strategic planning, evaluation, review of mission and outcomes, performance of program reviews, assessment of outcomes, and use of results for improvement. This also includes the use of data to determine the effectiveness of college practices and to inform decision making that is followed by substantive and collegial discussions about continuous improvement in institutional quality.</p>	<p><b>Strategy and Planning</b> – the alignment of the institution with the umbrella goal of student success and the institution's process for translating the desired future into defined goals and objectives and executing the actions to achieve them.</p>
<p><b>Organizational structure</b> where colleges must address administrative effectiveness, college governance, boards of trustees, decision-making policies, degree-granting authority, appropriately directed resources to address needs, and policies and procedures.</p>	<p><b>Policies and Practices</b> – the institutional policies and practices that impact student success and the processes for examining and aligning policies and practices to remove barriers and foster student completion.</p>

The table above contains a broad alignment between the ICAT and accreditation criteria, standards. The following are specific examples of how colleges can use the ICAT for more specific support of standards of their accrediting agencies.

## Leadership and Vision

1. The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (Accrediting Standards, 2011) states that “the institution has qualified administrative and academic officers with the experience and competence to lead the institution. (Comprehensive Standard 3.2.8)”
2. The ICAT allows the college to give itself a score on the following questions:
  - Is the student success vision used to set priorities and direct action?
  - Do college leaders seek transformational change to improve the student experience?
  - Does student success drive personnel decisions such as hiring and performance evaluations?
  - Does a culture of shared leadership for student success exist across all levels of the college?
  - Do college leaders share and use data to inform decision-making?
3. Colleges will provide organizational charts, resumes, results of performance evaluations, and documented evidence of leadership across various areas of the college. The college can also use the subscale score and the frequency distribution of scores by item on the Leadership and Vision portion of the ICAT to document the opinions of a broad range of faculty and staff about the effectiveness of leadership in directing the student success agenda of the college.
4. The college can use the discussion guide to facilitate additional discussion about strategies and actions to guide leadership decisions to improve student success.

## Data and Technology

1. The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (Standards, 2016) states that “the institution has sufficient and appropriate information, physical, and technological resources necessary for the achievement of its purposes wherever and however its academic programs are offered. It devotes sufficient resources to maintain and enhance its information, physical, and technological resources (7.2.1)
2. The college has an information technology unit and an institutional research unit that are responsible for extracting data from their student information system (Banner, Colleague, etc.), analyzing the data, formatting the data, creating usable information, and making that information available to college faculty and staff.
3. The ICAT allows the college to give itself a score on the following questions:
  - Does relevant data exist to inform decision-making?
  - Does reliable data exist to inform decisions?
  - Are data accessible to those who need it?
  - Do data analyses yield insights about the past and future?
4. The college can use the frequency distribution of scores by item on the Data and Technology portion of the ICAT to document the opinions of a broad range of faculty and

staff about whether the institution has **sufficient and appropriate information**, physical, and technological resources necessary **for the achievement of its purposes**.

5. The college can use the discussion guide to facilitate additional discussion about strategies to improve the accessibility and use of data and technology to help the college move toward achievement of its purpose.

## Equity

1. The Accrediting Commission on Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (Eligibility Requirements and Standards, 2014) states that “the institution effectively uses delivery modes, teaching methodologies and learning support services that reflect the diverse and changing needs of its students, in support of equity in success for all students (Standard II.A.7).”
2. The college has a diverse population and is attempting to create an equitable environment for learning.
3. The ICAT allows the college to give itself a score on the following questions:
  - Does the college have a clear and compelling definition for equity?
  - Is equity a primary consideration in the college’s student success efforts?
  - Does the college have a formal entity to coordinate equity efforts?
  - Are equity considerations embedded in college unit plans and practices?
4. The college can use the frequency distribution of scores by item on the Equity portion of the ICAT to document the opinions of a broad range of faculty and staff about whether the institution is delivering teaching, learning and support services that support diversity and equity.
5. The college can use the discussion guide to facilitate additional discussion about strategies to improve student success for all student populations regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability level.

## Teaching and Learning

1. The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (Accreditation Standards, 2016) states that “the institution uses the results of its assessment of student learning to inform academic and learning-support planning and practice that leads to enhancement of student learning achievements. Results of student learning assessments are made available to appropriate constituencies in a timely manner (Standard 4.B.2).”
2. The ICAT allows the college to give itself a score on the following questions:
  - Are faculty engaged as change agents in improving student success?
  - Do faculty apply research-based instructional practices?
  - Does the college offer a comprehensive array of learning supports for students?
3. The college can use the frequency distribution of scores by item on the Teaching and Learning portion of the ICAT to document the opinions of a broad range of faculty and



staff about whether the institution is using data on teaching and learning to inform action in academic and learning-support areas that enhance student learning.

4. The college can use the discussion guide to facilitate additional discussion about strategies to improve the use of data to inform decision-making about classroom and student support services.

### **Engagement and Communication**

1. The Accrediting Commission on Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (Eligibility Requirements and Standards, 2014) states that “the institution demonstrates a sustained, substantive and collegial dialog about student outcomes, student equity, academic quality, institutional effectiveness, and continuous improvement of student learning and achievement (Standard I.B.9.)”
2. The ICAT allows the college to give itself a score on the following questions:
  - Does the college engage multiple internal stakeholders in student success work?
  - Do college leaders communicate a sense of urgency for improving student success outcomes?
  - Are student success values and updates regularly communicated to the college community?
3. The college can use the frequency distribution of scores by item on the Engagement and Communication portion of the ICAT to document the opinions of a broad range of faculty and staff about whether the institution is engaged in dialog about student success and communicating its student success vision across the college.
4. The college can use the discussion guide to facilitate additional discussion about strategies to improve the use of data to inform decision-making about broad-based engagement and communication.

### **Strategy and Planning**

1. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2015) states that “the institution’s planning processes, resources, and structures are aligned with each other and are sufficient to fulfill its mission and goals, to continuously assess and improve its programs and services, and to respond effectively to opportunities and challenges (Standard VI).”
2. The ICAT allows the college to give itself a score on the following questions:
  - Does the college’s strategic plan focus on student success?
  - Does the college focus on a set of high-priority student success goals?
  - Is college planning for improvement of student outcomes data-informed?
  - Des the institution use key performance indicators to measure student success?
3. The college can use the frequency distribution of scores by item on the Strategy and Planning portion of the ICAT to document the opinions of a broad range of faculty and

staff to determine if the institution is improving its programs and services and responding to opportunities and challenges.

4. The college can use the discussion guide to facilitate additional discussion about strategies to improve the use of data to inform decision-making in regard to student success challenges and the effectiveness of programs and services to address those challenges.

## Policy and Practice

1. The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (Higher Learning Commission, 2014) states that “the institution’s policies and procedures call for responsible acquisition, discovery and application of knowledge by its [faculty](#), students, and staff (Criterion 2.E).
2. The ICAT allows the college to give itself a score on the following questions:
  - Do policies and practices support student progression and momentum towards completion?
  - Does the college effectively involve internal stakeholders in implementing and improving student success policies and practices?
  - Does the college effectively involve external stakeholders in implementing and improving student success policies and practices?
  - Does the college evaluate the effectiveness of policies and practices and revise as appropriate?
3. The college can use the subscale score and the frequency distribution of scores by item on the Policy and Practice portion of the ICAT to document the opinions of a broad range of faculty and staff to determine if policies and procedures call for responsible acquisition, discovery and application of knowledge by its [faculty](#), students, and staff.
4. The college can use the discussion guide to facilitate additional discussion about strategies to improve the development and implementation of appropriate policies and practices relating to student success.

## Conclusion

Accrediting commissions and agencies expect colleges and universities to align and integrate accreditation processes, criteria and standards with ongoing planning, evaluation, and improvement efforts, and accreditors look for methods of providing evidence to document the work going on at their institutions. While assessment tools will probably never exist to provide valid and reliable measures of the undefined and unpredictable nature of student behavior, decision-making of faculty and staff, and improvements in institutional quality, the ICAT will provide documentation of the process to improve capacity across seven broad areas of the institution. Colleges can compare themselves in light of best practices on each item of the tool. If used appropriately, including good documentation, the process of administering the ICAT and analyzing the results can result in evidence of compliance with accreditation standards and criteria.

*Accrediting agencies continually make changes to their accrediting standards and processes. This document will be updated whenever changes have been approved by the accrediting agency membership and are official.*

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