



Accreditation: What is it and Why Does it Matter to You?

Every semester, students at Cuyahoga Community College take countless tests designed to measure whether their performance in a course is up to standard.

As an academic institution responsible for conferring degrees on qualified graduates, it is important for Tri-C to administer tests and other forms of assessment to determine where students are succeeding and where they need improvement.

It's easy to see the value in testing for students. But what about the College itself? How is Tri-C held accountable to ensure that the lessons and material presented to students adequately prepare them for graduation and beyond? How is the College held accountable to provide the services and support necessary to facilitate positive outcomes for students?

Every eight years, Tri-C must pass its own test. It's administered by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), and the passage of the test determines whether Tri-C remains accredited as an institution.

Accreditation is the "stamp of approval" on the academic standards of Tri-C's programs and, in turn, the degrees and certificates the College confers. Without accreditation, Tri-C students cannot apply for federal financial aid. Transfer options to four-year schools are severely limited, as is the marketability of a Tri-C degree to potential employers.

"It's important for everyone at the College to know why accreditation is so critical to the College's mission" said Lindsay English, associate vice president of academic professional development and assessment at Tri-C. "It's vital to our ability to serve the Tri-C community, and everyone at the College plays a role in keeping our accreditation."

The College's accreditation is up for its eight-year review in February, when the HLC will visit Tri-C. During the visit, representatives from the HLC will determine whether the College remains compliant with its selected accreditation pathway.

Tri-C is on the HLC's Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) pathway. It's a pathway open only to HLC-accredited schools that have maintained high academic and performance standards. Compared to the other accreditation paths offered by the HLC, it allows a greater level of self-regulation with regard to continuous improvement.

“The HLC began offering the AQIP pathway in 2004 as a continuous improvement model,” English said. “You have to be approved to become a AQIP institution, and the status can be taken away for noncompliance.”

The idea behind AQIP is to promote consistency within each college’s continuous improvement plan.

“On the AQIP pathway, the HLC conducts a campus visit once every eight years at the minimum, and you have to submit two systems portfolios to the HLC in that eight-year span, detailing improvement processes and results,” English said. “The idea is to make improvement truly a continuous thing, as opposed to just ramping up those efforts in advance of the HLC’s visit.”

The HLC will visit Tri-C on Feb. 19 and 20. During the visit, the HLC’s representatives will speak with selected faculty, staff and students about their experiences working for and attending Tri-C and will audit the College’s performance according to five quality-standards criteria:

1. Mission

The institution’s mission is clear and articulated publicly.

2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

The institution acts with integrity and conducts itself in an ethical and responsible manner.

3. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources and Support

The institution provides high-quality education regardless of how its offerings are delivered.

4. Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement

The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments and support services. It evaluates their effectiveness through processes designed to promote continuous improvement.

5. Resources, Planning and Institutional Effectiveness

The institution’s resources, structures and processes are sufficient to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its educational offerings and respond to future challenges and opportunities. The institution plans for the future.

This is the first article in a seven-part series that will examine how various programs and people throughout Tri-C each play an important role in meeting the AQIP criteria and, by extension, assist the College in remaining accredited. Keep an eye on your email Inbox for the next six stories, running Jan. 30-Feb. 15.