Characteristics of Evidence

Evidence is information upon which a judgment or conclusion may be based. As such, it is presented in answer to questions that have been deliberately posed because an institution regards them as important. Evidence tells all stakeholders that an institution has investigated its questions and knows something about itself; it knows what it achieves. Evidence can include data, which refers to categories of information that represent qualitative attributes of a variable or a series of variables.

For evidence to be useful, it must have undergone analysis and reflection by the college community. The dialogue required for analysis and reflection is an integral part of the capacity an institution has for using the evidence it has accrued to make improvements.

Good evidence, then, is obviously related to the questions the college has investigated and it can be replicated, making it reliable. Good evidence is representative of what is, not just an isolated case, and it is information upon which an institution can take action to improve. It is, in short, relevant, verifiable, representative, and actionable.

It is important to note that evidence per se does not lead to confirmations of value and quality. Rather, the members of the college community, or of the higher education community, must arrive at the decisions about value and quality through active judgments. The purpose of good evidence is to encourage informed institutional dialogue that engages the college community and leads to improvement of its processes, procedures, policies, and relationships, ultimately with the effect of improving student learning. Good evidence should provide the means for institutions or evaluators to make sound judgments about quality and future direction, and at the same time it will probably stimulate further inquiry about institutional quality.

Institutions report or store good evidence in many formats, and institutions engaged in self evaluation or external evaluation teams may find good evidence in a number of sources, including institutional databases; documents such as faculty handbooks, catalogues, student handbooks, policy statements, program review documents, planning documents, minutes of important meetings, syllabi, course outlines, and institutional fact books; from survey results; from assessments of student work on examinations, class assignments, capstone projects, etc.; from faculty grading rubrics and assessment of student learning outcomes; and from special institutional research reports.

Self evaluation should be only one phase of on-going institutional evaluation. An External Evaluation Team should be able to see how the institution develops and uses evidence of effectiveness as part of its ongoing evaluative processes. Institutions should gather and use both qualitative and quantitative evidence, and often must use indirect as well as direct measures to assess institutional effectiveness. Good evidence used in evaluations has the following characteristics:

- It is intentional, and a dialogue about its meaning and relevance has taken place.

- It is purposeful, designed to answer questions the institution has raised.

- It has been interpreted and reflected upon, not just reviewed in its raw or unanalyzed form.

- It is integrated and presented in a context with other information about the institution that creates a holistic view of the institution or program.

- It is cumulative and is corroborated by multiple sources of evidence and/or data.

- It is coherent and sound enough to provide guidance for improvement.

The institution will provide to the evaluation team members visiting the institution an electronic copy of the Self Evaluation Report **and evidence** on a CD ROM or electronic memory device in advance of the visit. During the visit, the team members should also have access to the evidence and data upon which the institutional analysis is based at the time of the institution's submission of the Self Evaluation Report. Institutions have been informed that it is useful for readers when the electronic copy of the report contains hyperlinks to the relevant evidence provided on an electronic memory device. Links to websites or other materials should be tested to ensure they are working.

Evidence on Student Achievement and Student Learning

The evidence the institution presents should be about student achievements (student movement through the institution) and should include data on the following:

- Student preparedness for college, including performance on placement tests and/or placement

- Student training, needs, including local employment training needs, transfer education needs, basic skills needs, etc.

- Course completion data

- Retention of students from term to term

- Student progression to the next course/next level of course

- Student program (major) completion

- Student graduation rates

- Student transfer rates to four-year institutions

- Student job placement rates

- Student scores on licensure exams

The evidence should be disaggregated by age, gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, delivery mode, instructional site, cohort group, and other categories as relevant to the institution's service area and mission. (Refer to the Manual for Institutional Self Evaluation, Section 5.4 "Requirements for Evidentiary Information" for a detailed description of evidence and to Appendix H for a sample template for student achievement data and disaggregation.)

The evidence the institution presents should also be about student learning outcomes (mastery of the knowledge, skills, abilities, competencies attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and values at the course, program, and degree levels in the context of each college's mission and population) and should include data on the following:

- Development, dissemination, and assessment of student learning outcomes attainment

- Samples of student work/performance (recitals, projects, capstone courses, etc.)

- Summary of assessment data on student learning outcomes

- Measurement and analysis of student attainment of student learning outcomes used as part of the institution's self evaluation and planning processes

- Improvement of the teaching/learning process as a result of the above analysis