Realities Of Outcomes-Oriented Accreditation, 3(13)

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Abstract
Outcomes-oriented accreditation is the newest form of accountability facing schools and universities across America. It specifies a process which includes needs assessment, identification of student achievement goals, development of strategies to meet the goals, collection of data, and analysis/interpretation for ongoing planning and implementation purposes. Issues which have emerged as potentially being problematic include development of trust, buy-in to the data-driven model, and lack of preparedness on the part of many teachers to be involved. Although outcomes-oriented accreditation is sound conceptually, the reality of implementation presents numerous challenges.

Introduction
Accreditation is the means by which many government entities and professional associations assure the quality of educational organizations -- K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions. Outcomes-oriented accreditation is the new approach to educational accreditation which focuses on outcomes as opposed to inputs or activities. It is a natural extension of the school improvement model. Outcomes-oriented accreditation specifies a process which includes school or institutional needs assessment, goal development, intervention strategy design and implementation, and reassessment. Because it focuses on the use of data for planning and ultimately for quality assurance, outcomes-oriented accreditation is often called a "data-driven" model.

Outcomes-oriented accreditation provides the ultimate form of accountability because of its emphasis on results in terms of student achievement. It is based on a process which is presumed
to facilitate change. As schools and universities across the United States have begun to implement outcomes-oriented accreditation, they have encountered a range of difficulties, challenges, and successes. The purpose of this article is to clarify the rationale for outcomes-oriented accreditation, describe the process and its implications, and explore the possibilities and pitfalls to be avoided. Input from the literature will be shared as well as observations of participants from various stakeholder groups.

History

Outcomes-oriented accreditation is the most recent generation in the evolution of accreditation. Historically, the purpose of accreditation was to guarantee to the public that an educational institution was credible. No educational history book would leave out the story of Abraham Flexner who visited medical schools across the United States during the early 1900's and declared many of them to be grossly inadequate. As a result of Flexner's work, many medical schools closed and it became obvious that the field of education needed in some way to "police" itself and monitor quality (Worthen, Sanders, and Fitzpatrick, 1997, pp. 121-122). In those early days, accreditation efforts emphasized "inspection." Over time, accreditation came to focus more on inputs as a way of maintaining standards. Hence it was presumed if a school enrolled X number of high school students, it should have Y number of books on its library shelves for those students. However, critics have claimed that although certain inputs-type standards have been in place for years, the impact on student achievement has not been demonstrated. As strategic planning and other management models became more sophisticated, the calls for a focus on "outcomes" as opposed to inputs or activities, grew louder. For example, rather than asking: Is there a guidance counseling program in place?, the proponents of outcomes-oriented accreditation want to know if students' knowledge of the world of work and career training is acceptable.

The staff and representative educators associated with a number of accrediting organizations have acknowledged the potential effectiveness of an outcomes-driven improvement process, and have chosen to incorporate that approach into the accreditation requirements. For example, Armstrong (1994), representing an agency which conducts accreditations for both K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions in the north-central region of the United States, indicated that North Central Association's decision to adopt the outcomes-oriented accreditation model was "its strongest and most proactive step in responding to late 20th century educational needs" (p. 379). However, as early as 1993, Pennoyer expressed concern: "I think we have not had much success so far in persuading the faculty and administrative leadership in member schools that the real power of OA [outcomes accreditation] is that it places them and the staff in the driver's seat, that it empowers them to take charge of the school improvement process, and that the very heart of OA is a kind of organic flexibility and adaptability which is its essential resource" (p. 362).

The debate between traditional and outcomes-oriented accreditation continues. Even when arguing that traditional accreditation assumes a "guard dog" stance while outcomes accreditation is more of a "guide dog" approach, Dill (1998) cautioned that "for all we do through accreditation to put stamps of acceptability on programs, real quality over the years depends on factors that are hard to control" (p. 16).
Definition

According to the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (North Central Association Commission on Schools, 1991), the K-12 version of outcomes-oriented accreditation is defined as, "an accreditation option based on the school's documentation of the achievement of its goals through the provision of quality-with-equity programs of education for all students" (title page).

For postsecondary education, outcomes-oriented accreditation is more often called "institutional effectiveness," or "outcomes assessment," but it essentially means the same thing -- "assessment of the extent to which the intended outcomes and objectives are being accomplished" (Nichols, 1991, p.12).

In essence, the outcomes-oriented accreditation model imposes both a research/evaluation approach and the school improvement process approach upon the K-12 school or postsecondary institution seeking accreditation. That is, the current status is assessed, three to five goals are specified, and intervention strategies are determined and then implemented. As implementation proceeds, formative indicators of progress are collected. Several years later, summative data are collected which are intended to demonstrate goal achievement.

Typical goals for a secondary school would be:

- Improve math computation skills of 10th graders from a mean of the 45th percentile to a mean of the 55th percentile on a standardized achievement test.
- Increase technology skills such that 85 percent of all graduating seniors can demonstrate proficiency in word processing and spreadsheet applications.

Typical goals for a postsecondary institution, which are more often formulated at the academic departmental level, might look as follows:

- Increase job placement of accounting graduates within three months of graduation from the current rate of 75 percent to a rate of 90 percent.
- Improve public speaking skills such that 85 percent of all communications majors will demonstrate proficiency through a five-minute presentation graded by the professor using a 15-item standardized checklist.

Outcomes-oriented accreditation allows each educational entity to set its own goals, determine its own means of achieving those goals, and select/develop its own data collection to demonstrate goal achievement. In that sense the accreditation is particular to the specific school or institution. The emphasis is more on following the process and making progress toward the organization's goals.

The Process and the Reality

The general definitions of outcomes-oriented accreditation sound simple and straightforward. However, outcomes accreditation is a long-term, complex process entailing numerous steps requiring significant time, expertise, and trust. Table 1 provides a listing of 24 steps within the
outcomes accreditation process ranging from "establish a committee" to "develop performance standards." The extent to which the step may be either explicitly or implicitly stated in the accreditation requirements can vary according to several factors. For example:

- the individual accrediting organizations will each have different levels of specificity,
- K-12 accreditation tends to be more prescriptive in nature than does postsecondary accreditation, and
- variation in state or federal requirements will affect exact wording of the process.

Some of the steps outlined can be very difficult, such as "establish a climate for long-term, consensus-based, data-driven change," which may necessitate attitudinal changes on the part of faculty and administration, but all are prerequisite for successful completion of the process.

**Table 1**  
Steps within the Outcomes Accreditation Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Build trust; establish a climate for long-term, consensus-based, data-driven change; create buy-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish a committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Train/prepare committee members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create an understanding of the resource demands</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educate administrators and faculty about the process and goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure ongoing communication between the committee and stakeholders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop a mission statement if one does not already exist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop and conduct a needs/base line assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpret the needs/base line assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify goals (typically 3-5 per K-12 school or per postsecondary academic department)</td>
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<td>Build consensus for the goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop performance standards, measurement, and instrumentation for each goal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify the &quot;cut-score&quot; or point of achievement desired</td>
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<tr>
<td>Design the intervention strategies intended to bring about goal achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implement the strategies (which will include staff development, plans for implementation, monitoring of implementation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collect formative evaluation data (intended as preliminary indicators in progress toward goal achievement)</td>
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<td>Revise strategies if necessary as indicated by formative evaluation data</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disaggregate and analyze the achievement data</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collect summative evaluation data (to be the final indicator intended to demonstrate goal achievement)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prepare report</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interact with the visitation team</td>
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<tr>
<td>Draw conclusions about overall effectiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Repeat the cycle</td>
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What is the reality of this process? How does it play out in a school or university seeking accreditation? What are the problems or pitfalls that may be encountered? Information to address these questions was assembled using several sources. Preliminarily, because of the authors' involvement in accreditation from various angles, personal perspectives were explored. To expand on that, informal interviews were also conducted with stakeholders at different levels including assessment directors for multiple K-12 school districts at various points in the accreditation process, staff from the Office of Academic Affairs for a postsecondary institution which has recently been reaccredited, and both K-12 and postsecondary education visitation team chairpersons. Additionally, a review of literature was undertaken. The information collected was synthesized by identifying common and contrasting themes from the various sources. Descriptions of recurring issues which emerged from this process follow.

**Trust and Buy-In**

A climate of trust and an atmosphere of allowing people to grow in the process are needed for outcomes-oriented accreditation to work. Administration and faculty must trust each other. Faculty must trust their colleagues. And it helps if everyone can trust in the process itself. If the administration tries to "hurry" a group through, or to shepherd a group to a pre-determined conclusion, the result is bound to be a disaster.

In describing the school improvement process, Rallis and Zajano (1997) commented: "Many of the reform efforts schools are engaged in today are designed to achieve long-term effects. Thus the improvements are not immediately obvious and may not be obvious for years to come....Despite the uncertainties of the process, those involved in the work of school reform must be able to keep the faith until the outcomes are obvious" (p. 707).

One important aspect of the outcomes-oriented accreditation model is its emphasis on participation in the decision making process. Smylie, Lazarus, and Brownlee-Conyers (1996) reported that teacher involvement in school decision making relates positively to student achievement when "teacher participation is frequent, regular, and inclusive; decision making is collaborative and consensus-driven (the decision seems co-constructed); the focus includes school mission, curriculum and instruction, staff development; and leadership is shared between principal and teacher -- both take initiative, both assume responsibility" (p. 193). This leads to the conclusion that teacher involvement in decision making can be very productive if properly structured, and may also facilitate buy-in to the school improvement process.

**Rational/Linear/Data-Driven Assumptions**

The accreditation requirements associated with the outcomes approach are as much about implementation of a data-driven model as they are about outcomes, per se. That is, accrediting bodies want evidence of decision-making based on data, which is presumed to be a more "rational" approach than decision-making based on individual personality strength or politics, for example. The accrediting bodies also want to see wide involvement by educators and other stakeholders. Professionals who engage regularly in research and evaluation or strategic planning
tend to like outcomes-oriented accreditation because it approaches school improvement from a logical, research-based perspective. Charismatic leaders, creative individuals who prefer an unstructured approach, spontaneous actors, or political "movers and shakers" might prefer something other than outcomes accreditation. However, because outcomes-oriented accreditation requires extensive staff involvement, it cannot be left solely to the principal or dean's staff, or the department chair.

Outcomes-oriented accreditation also specifies use of the process and data it generates for on-going program improvement. One cannot just walk through the steps and go on to the next priority. It almost needs to be an organizational "lifestyle" decision. This is not easily accomplished in a climate where "go in your classroom and do your own thing," has been the motto, or where it is said, "leading faculty is like trying to herd cats." Whether at the K-12 or postsecondary levels, teachers believe they are the authority and that they have academic freedom. To impose any kind of structured process on them may feel to some that a restraint has been imposed on their personal judgement and professional choice.

A concern voiced by a chair on over eight K-12 outcomes accreditation visitation teams is that "Nobody knows how to use the data. School people don't understand the connection between data and school improvement planning. I have seen only two teachers in eight schools who understood that" (personal interview with authors).

On the other hand, while the accreditation coordinator at a university admits that "in the past we typically haven't used data for making decisions about program improvement," he goes on to add that he believes a key strength of outcomes accreditation is that it "systematizes decision making about curriculum matters, based on data rather than 'common sense' or 'intuition.' " (personal interview with authors).

**Teacher/Faculty Preparedness to Engage in the Process**

In general, teachers or faculty who have not had training in group process, social research protocol, or problem-solving methods may not have developed the skills needed to help their school's outcomes-oriented accreditation process. Therefore, training and development should be provided as a part of the process if possible. One cannot assume though, that the typical teacher will be ready to jump into participative decision making, research and evaluation, and the school improvement process without extra assistance.

*Tichy (1996)* reported on a study comparing three North Central Association self-study formats for accreditation. One of these formats was the outcomes model. She found that faculties using the outcomes format "did not express substantial ownership of the process" (p. 419). She attributed this to "discomfort with the interdisciplinary focus of the outcomes format, the protracted time frame, and lack of familiarity with measurement, data disaggregation, and documentation aspects of the process" (p. 420). Likewise, the outcomes format did not result in high faculty ratings for "relevance." That is, accuracy regarding "identification of strengths and areas needing improvement" was rated low (p. 420). These low ratings of "ownership" and "relevance" may both be related to lack of preparedness to participate in the process.
The overall outcomes accreditation process is a multiyear venture. All of those who start out with the process cannot be assumed to remain with the process the entire time. That means there will be turnover. There will be people who join the group who did not hear the original discussions, who do not agree with what the original group decided, and who may feel less commitment to the process. There needs to be a transition plan in place to address these issues before the committee membership begins turning over.

**Validity Issues**

There are several points within the outcomes-oriented accreditation process where threats to validity can be encountered. At the needs assessment stage it can happen that a survey is conducted which requests attitudinal data about perceived problems when the population being surveyed may not be well enough informed to provide a good response. For example, asking local business people who have never been in the high school, or who do not employ recent graduates, if the high school offerings in computer technology are sufficient, may provide misleading data. Or if, at the point of assessing progress towards goal-achievement, norm-referenced test results are used as indicators without the benefit of considering curriculum alignment, there may appear to be a weakness which could really be just a case of content being taught in the third grade, yet being tested in the second grade.

Sometimes the data being collected formatively, as the implementation of the intervention strategy is in process, will not be measured the same way as the end-product summative data. The formative and summative evaluation indicators need to be valid indicators of progress and need to be correlated. If a school's goal is improvement in "reading comprehension" skills, and the formative evaluation measures "reading aloud" and the summative evaluation measures "word attack" skills, it is not possible to draw conclusions about progress toward the goal.

Issues of validity can arise at various points in the outcomes-oriented accreditation process. A misstep at any point can render the entire process invalid.

**Disaggregating the Data**

The K-12 outcomes-oriented accreditation in particular emphasizes disaggregation of data for the purpose of analyzing variations in achievement according to critical variables. The point is to assist in assuring that achievement is not variable on the basis of gender or race, for example, and that equity is achieved.

Armstrong (1996a) suggested over 25 ways of disaggregating achievement data by personal, demographic, and academic variables, including locus of control, peer relationships, organizational membership, career goals, personal study skills, distance from school, and family mobility. Some urban school districts report, though, that efforts to disaggregate achievement data by variables other than race are met with disapproval by visitation teams (personal interview with authors). That is, when the district wishes not to focus on race, per se, but believes the critical factor should be defined as income instead, they have met with resistance. Visitation team members, who are after all, volunteer practitioners from other schools and districts, as
opposed to staff from a regional accrediting organization, may need additional training with respect to these issues.

**Selection and Implementation of Strategies**

At the strategy identification stage, it is easy for the most articulate, or most powerful person in the group to convince the others that their own idea for how to "solve the problem" is best. If the strategy identification process is merely a brainstorming discussion without referral to the literature, or to experts in the specified subject, a group may settle on a strategy which has little potential for impacting the specified problem.

Even the leadership of North Central Association acknowledged, "We in NCA have been rather prone to look mainly at manipulative forms of interventions to improve student achievement in our schools. Maybe it's time we admitted there may be a lot about pedagogy that even the best of us don't know and that one of the things we're going to have to do to improve school programs is to teach our teachers how to become authentically better teachers" (Armstrong, 1996b, p. 408).

At the strategy implementation stage, inadequate oversight by assigned group members or administration can mean that implementation is uneven, partial, or inadequate. If this happens, and if no progress is achieved, it will not be clear if the lack of progress was due to a poor strategy, or if the strategy was simply never implemented correctly.

**Resource Requirements**

Outcomes-oriented accreditation can be an expensive process. The demands in terms of the staff time needed for committee meetings, consultation, communications, assessment, analysis, administrative oversight, and report preparation are considerable. Instrumentation and data collection will have costs. Training for committee members will create expenses. Implementation of strategies designed to achieve the goals will typically require substantial resources also. At the formative evaluation stage (preliminary data collection along the way), if the system for collecting data is too cumbersome and complex, it can easily bog down. If it appears the management of the data is going to take multiple hours per week, for multiple years, on the part of some one individual, it is probably excessive.

Thomas (1991) reported that some assessment programs undertaken with limited resources have suffered serious consequences: "prematurely discontinued programs due to inadequate funds; long-term negative attitudes of faculty as a result of insufficient program planning time; and uncooperative students because of unreasonable time demands or inappropriate intrusion into their lives" (pp. 430-431).

A university official reported, "The reality of resources is a potential weakness. Departments are not given adequate resources to do this [outcomes assessment]. People think this isn't part of their professional work. They go to a two-hour workshop and we expect them to do this well. Any institution probably doesn't have the resources to do this ideally" (personal interview with authors).
Variability in Team Performance

One issue which plagues all accreditation formats using team visitation, but which is particularly problematic with outcomes-oriented accreditation because of its newness, is that of variability in team performance. The following quote from a school district official represents the view of many:
I think the only major concern that I have with the whole North Central outcomes accreditation process is the lack of training and consensus building among individual teams. Now maybe each of those members has been to some NCA training and has been through the process themselves somewhere else, but the chairperson can set such a different tone, and there isn't ever enough time spent up front with that team... I get into so many of these where it seems to me like the team members are there to prove who is the more rigorous in their evaluation, and that is not their purpose. Their purpose is to be a resource to us (personal interview with authors).

Impact

What impact have stakeholders seen associated with outcomes-oriented accreditation? At the least, as Pennoyer (1993) articulated, it may be "perceived as a mere sequence of activities to perform and mark off on a checklist, rather than a powerful school improvement process energized by creative, imaginative and vigorously autonomous leadership in the school itself" (p.362).

One university assessment coordinator said:
We have seen departments that have made improvements. The assessment provided information to validate changes they wanted to make anyway. The assessment has also helped greatly with program reviews by the state postsecondary commission...It has the potential of responding to the concerns of the public about accountability.

And,
The real use is in posing questions about 'what are the objective of this program?' 'to what extent are students meeting those objectives?' and 'what are we doing to make improvements?'...It doesn't cause change by itself, but it does provide a vehicle for change when approached with the right attitude (personal interview with authors).

A K-12 visitation chair said, "I think it has the potential to be an excellent source for initiating and improving schools. It is much more realistic, less artificial than the former system. Theoretically I think it is wonderful. I am just not sure it always works...Many people are just "doing the dance" to get an acceptable grade and move on" (personal interview with authors).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the themes which emerged from the literature and conversations with stakeholders, the following suggestions are offered to maximize the potential for success:

- Advance consideration of time, resource, and support requirements.
- Appropriate training at each stage of the process.
• Structured communication opportunities to keep everyone up-to-date on committee
decision-making and plans.
• Attention to the need for valid and reliable measurement.
• Selection of strategies grounded in research literature.
• Use of consultation as needed.
• Increased systematic training for visitation team members and chairs.

Outcomes-oriented accreditation can be a magnificent process of using student achievement data
for identifying weaknesses as compared to the ideal, developing strategies to move from here to
there, and monitoring progress toward the ideal. If carried out carefully, if undertaken with a
sense of commitment from the involved parties, the benefits for student growth, public image,
and internal climate can be tremendous. But, it can also create problems when carried out
hurriedly, without sufficient staff development, or under conditions of lack of trust. Under poor
conditions for implementation, outcomes-oriented accreditation could conceivably even harm
student achievement if it pulls resources away from teaching and learning towards an
unproductive exercise.

Outcomes-oriented accreditation: It is working? It appears the answer is: Sometimes yes,
sometimes no. It has the potential, but it also has many difficulties in implementation requiring
careful attention if success is to be achieved.

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