

The Higher Learning Commission and The IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction System



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As the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) has matured, the self-study process has shifted to emphasize both quality assurance and continuous improvement. A clear alignment exists between The IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction System (IDEA) and a number of the Criteria for Accreditation. Measureable student learning is a component of both the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ) and the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP).

From its inception in 1975, IDEA has served as a valuable tool to assess student learning and to guide teaching improvement. IDEA uses self-report of student learning on specific course objectives as its primary measure of teaching effectiveness. Therefore, data collected from the system is uniquely suited to aggregate across courses to indicate student learning at the course, curriculum, program, and institution levels.

While originally developed to focus on the effectiveness of individual instructors, IDEA's emphasis on specific student learning outcomes makes it a highly useful tool for assessing programs or groups of courses as well. When combining data across courses, the focus of the question is changed from "How am I doing and what might I do to improve?" to "How are we doing in supporting student learning and what might we do to improve?"

IDEA and Student Learning

Every institution must tailor an accreditation plan to suit its culture, climate, and situation. The Commission does not prescribe the plan, but rather attempts to ensure quality and stimulate improvement by helping the institution through a self-study process.

This self-study process is guided by a set of Criteria and Core Components that establish a level of accountability an institution must meet for accreditation. IDEA is well-suited to help institutions establish this level of accountability through reporting and reflection on individual, programmatic, and institutional progress.

IDEA is not prescriptive, but rather is intended to facilitate analysis and innovative thinking about how results can be used to support improvement processes as well as be an indirect source of evidence to document institutional excellence.

Unique Features of IDEA

IDEA is uniquely appropriate to address the Commission's Criteria that are focused on the theme of the Learning-Focused Organization. It allows an institution to easily use results for programmatic assessment and accreditation purposes with a number of exclusive features:

Focus on Student Learning

The student learning model, that *specific teaching methods influence certain types of student progress (learning), under certain circumstances*, was used as the foundation for the IDEA student survey.

The core of IDEA is the focus on student ratings of progress on specific objectives. Research has shown there is no single, correct way to teach. As a result, IDEA tailors each report to address the instructor's selected learning objectives and offers recommendations for improvement based on our extensive national database of comparable instructional situations.

Faculty Establishment of Course Objectives

The IDEA Faculty Information Form allows faculty to rate the importance of 12 learning objectives as "essential," "important," or "of minor or no importance." Because the purpose of each course is different, IDEA allows instructors the opportunity to define their expectations for each course by identifying which of the 12 possible learning objectives are relevant (important or essential) to their courses. The process of selecting course objectives is often collaborative, with faculty as a group taking ownership of curricular goals by reviewing each course's purposes as they contribute to a coherent curriculum.

The IDEA Faculty Information Form is frequently used not only to facilitate individual reflection, but also to spark collaborative conversations across a department about student learning expectations, institutional goals, and how individual courses contribute to student achievement. Factors related to teaching methods, learning environments, learning outcomes, and student characteristics that impact learning are all considered from a faculty perspective.

Comparative Data

The accreditation process is often helped by access to useful benchmarking data. With more than 160,000 classes

processed annually, IDEA provides solid national benchmark data for individual instructors, programs, departments, and institutions. While the confidentiality of individual institutions' results is strictly maintained, IDEA's database of information about similar groups of classes is a vital tool for comparative decision making.

Group Summary Reports and Aggregate Data Files

While student feedback can directly guide the personal reflection and improvement of individuals, the richness of the aggregated data is also a powerful information source. It can guide systematic assessment and improvement of academic programs. By better understanding the relationship of teaching methods to learning outcomes, targeted improvement processes can be pursued. Because of the richness of the survey items and the typically high survey response rates, IDEA results can be used to address a number of Criteria and Core Components.

Groups of courses (e.g., sections of one course, courses that comprise a program, institutional summaries) are analyzed for accreditation purposes. Group Summary Reports serve as a "snapshot" of institutional status. Ongoing use allows monitoring of progress over time.

Aggregate Data Files provide complete course results in an Excel spreadsheet, allowing institutions to conduct customized research on their own data. A campus may analyze results to address specific, unique institutional questions and prepare custom reports to respond to self-study for PEAQ or AQIP processes.

Institutional Use of Results

Systematic, regular monitoring of progress through the Group Summary Reports and Aggregate Data Files, combined with reflection and implementation of change as indicated, can result in measurable improvements in student learning. Institutions can align their use of IDEA with their particular program goals for student achievement, and can chart improvements resulting from analysis of results, supporting faculty collaboration toward greater overall effectiveness.

The Higher Learning Commission's Criteria and IDEA

To guide the self-study process, the Commission has provided a set of five Criteria for Accreditation. What follows is a brief discussion of the relationship between IDEA's emphasis on student learning and specific Core Components within the five Criteria that also address student learning.

Criterion Two: Core Component 2c

Preparing for the Future: The organization's ongoing evaluation and assessment processes provide reliable evidence of institutional effectiveness that clearly informs strategies for continuous improvement.

– Handbook of Accreditation (Third Edition, p. 3.2-7, 2003). The Higher Learning Commission, a commission of the North Central Association.

The purpose of this Core Component is to ensure that the institution is committed to continuous improvement through the use of ongoing self-evaluation that is based on evidence. There are many ways to address this Core Component and many systems and processes can and should be employed to demonstrate an institution is fulfilling its mission.

The ongoing use of IDEA Group Summary Reports and Aggregate Data Files to evaluate teaching effectiveness and student learning, and to facilitate improved teaching and learning, addresses Core Component 2c. Group Summary Reports allow identification of areas of excellence and challenge. For example, longitudinal data from IDEA can be used to identify where improvements are needed, where improvement has been achieved in areas of concern, and where expectations are being met related to student learning, overall effectiveness, use of teaching methods/strategies, and student attitudes.

Criterion Three: Core Component 3a

Student Learning and Effective Teaching: The organization's goals for student learning outcomes are clearly stated for each educational program and make effective assessment possible. – Handbook of

Using IDEA Data to Inform the Campus: University of Charleston (West Virginia)

The University of Charleston has an outcomes-based learning environment. IDEA results are used to inform individual faculty, programs, and the institution. When considered among other direct and indirect sources of information, IDEA informs the campus about areas of effectiveness and improvement. For instance, IDEA results suggested that faculty are effective in using teams to facilitate learning and stimulating students' intellectual efforts. Individual faculty who contribute to this success are then asked to lead workshops or provide examples of assignments that pushed students. The campus approached areas for improvement as opportunities for faculty development, program updates and curriculum changes, and changes in processes across campus.

Accreditation (Third Edition, p. 3.2-9, 2003). The Higher Learning Commission, a commission of the North Central Association.

Underlying Core Component 3a is the importance of creating a culture of assessment. Primary to this is that outcomes be identified and then assessed. Although IDEA is used to evaluate faculty effectiveness and guide individual reflection and improvement, the results also can be used in an aggregate fashion to evaluate learning at the program level. The 12 IDEA learning objectives are likely to align with many of the specific student learning outcomes of the educational programs at your institution.

Consistent with Core Component 3a, IDEA requires that essential and important course objectives be identified through the completion of the Faculty Information Form for each course. In the IDEA System, objectives selected for courses in a program are typically determined by either the individual faculty member teaching the course, or by a committee of faculty members responsible for the curriculum. Many campuses have found that the process of selecting IDEA goals is highly useful in meeting expectations of this and other Core Components.

IDEA can facilitate inquiry into student learning achievements and challenges. This inquiry may identify several specific course objectives as needing improvement and may confirm important decisions when IDEA results align with other sources of evidence.

- Are our course emphases consistent with our stated curricular purposes?
- When a learning objective is selected as “essential” or “important,” does student self-report of learning meet our expectations?
- Do our courses’ overall student progress ratings compare favorably to courses at other institutions?

Criterion Three: Core Component 3b

Student Learning and Effective Teaching: The organization values and supports effective teaching.
– Handbook of Accreditation (Third Edition, p. 3.2-10, 2003). The Higher Learning Commission, a commission of the North Central Association.

The Commission contends that addressing teaching issues is important to the institution’s understanding of learning. This Core Component addresses the need to have qualified faculty who are responsible for facilitating and guiding student learning in ways that recognize diverse learners.

A description of the systematic implementation of IDEA can show a commitment to excellence in teaching, document faculty strengths, and guide organizational efforts to support teaching effectiveness.

IDEA answers two basic questions that faculty might ask concerning the effectiveness of their teaching at the conclusion of a course:

- How did I do?
- What might I do to improve?

With IDEA, teaching effectiveness is determined by the self-report of student progress on goals chosen by the instructor. Research based on our large national database also allows IDEA to provide diagnostic assistance for those with disappointing results. IDEA provides feedback and resources (e.g., IDEA Papers, POD-IDEA Notes on Instruction and Learning) for continuous personal and collaborative improvement. An institution’s investment in the IDEA System demonstrates a commitment to faculty members’ professional growth and improvement.

IDEA’s Group Summary Report helps address questions and provide recommendations that might be raised by this Core Component:

- Which teaching methods might we employ more effectively to better support student learning?
- Do our courses’ overall student progress ratings compare favorably to courses at other institutions?

Criterion Three: Core Component 3c

Student Learning and Effective Teaching: The organization creates effective learning environments.
– Handbook of Accreditation (Third Edition, p. 3.2-11, 2003). The Higher Learning Commission, a commission of the North Central Association.

This Core Component acknowledges the importance of considering and evaluating learning environments, pedagogies, and services that are in place to support student learning.

Through IDEA, both faculty and students reflect on a number of learning environment factors. For example, faculty members document the mode of delivery, the impact of student characteristics on learning, and other circumstances as well. Based on student feedback, IDEA also provides potential improvement strategies by identifying teaching methods that may improve student learning on specific objectives if they were to be employed more frequently.

- How do our students’ work habits and motivation compare to those of students at other institutions?
- How do students perceive work demands and difficulty of the course?
- Which primary and secondary instructional modes do instructors employ?
- Which teaching methods do instructors utilize effectively?
- What are faculty perceptions of the impact of various circumstances on learning?

Demonstrating Teaching Excellence: Baldwin-Wallace College (Ohio)

IDEA was a useful source of evidence for Baldwin-Wallace College to demonstrate teaching excellence for the PEAQ accreditation process. Through an evaluative process of using information from multiple sources, the College was able to provide evidence to their assertions of meeting the Core Components of Criterion Three and how well the college was fulfilling its mission related to student learning and teaching effectiveness. Evidence of IDEA results at all levels (individual, program, institutional) demonstrated an institutional commitment to teaching, learning, and faculty development and provided evidence of how well the institution was fulfilling its mission related to student learning and teaching effectiveness. Aggregated IDEA results for the past three academic years indicated that the College's overall instructional effectiveness was "unusually high." Using institutional-level summary information, they addressed the following questions:

- Do our courses' overall student progress ratings compare favorably to the courses at other institutions?
- Do our teaching methods support the objectives most often selected as "essential" or "important"?
- How do our students' self-reported work habits and motivation compare to students at other institutions?
- How do our students view course work demands?

In addition, they demonstrated the use of IDEA data to inform possible changes and improvement in areas identified during the self-study process as challenges, including alternative IDEA administration policies to be more representative of courses and programs. During the accreditation site visit, program-level Group Summary Reports and year-over-year comparisons were provided as evidence room exhibits.

Criterion Four: Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge

A number of Core Components in Criterion Four support the theme of the Learning-Focused Organization. Integrated with the learning emphasis of Criterion Three, IDEA results can provide insight into Core Components 4a, 4b, and 4c:

4a. The organization demonstrates, through the actions of its board, administrators, students, faculty, and staff, that it values a life of learning.

4b. The organization demonstrates that acquisition of a breadth of knowledge and skills and the exercise of intellectual inquiry are integral to its educational programs.

4c. The organization assesses the usefulness of its curricula to students who will live and work in a global, diverse, and technological society. – Handbook of Accreditation (Third Edition, p. 3.2-12, p. 3.2-14, 2003). The Higher Learning Commission, a commission of the North Central Association.

An ongoing planning and evaluation process must have at its heart a commitment to continuous improvement. The ongoing use of IDEA to evaluate teaching effectiveness and student learning, and to facilitate improved teaching and learning, can provide evidence of a commitment to continuous improvement. For example, longitudinal data from IDEA can be used to identify where improvements are needed, where improvement has been achieved in areas of concern, and where expectations are being met.

Integrated processes are the key to effective utilization of information. IDEA provides tools to facilitate personal, programmatic, and institutional reflection, and to guide

discussions with colleagues or mentors. Through ongoing reflection, discussion, and the use of targeted resources to support improvement, IDEA can have an impact on individual, program, and institutional success.

The IDEA Center also has products that measure the effectiveness of key administrators. These products can be used as part of an ongoing improvement process. Please visit www.theideacenter.org for more information.

IDEA and the Academic Quality Improvement Program

The goal of the Academic Quality Improvement Program is to:

Infuse the principles and benefits of continuous improvement into the culture of colleges and universities in order to assure and advance the quality of higher education. – Introduction to AQIP (p. 1, 2007). Academic Quality Improvement Program, The Higher Learning Commission.

Meeting Student Learning Goals

IDEA may be most closely aligned with AQIP Category One, *Helping Students Learn*. The Group Summary Report may be used to address questions such as:

- Are our course emphases consistent with our stated curricular or general educational purposes?
- When a learning objective is selected as "essential" or "important," does student self-report of learning meet our expectations?
- Do our courses' overall student progress ratings compare favorably to courses at other institutions?

Identifying the Need

IDEA can serve as a tool for *Understanding Students' and Other Stakeholders' Needs* (AQIP Category Three). IDEA can be used along with other sources of information to identify key issues relevant to student learning. IDEA provides input from the students' perspectives about their course experiences. This feedback can expand upon or confirm results from other key indicators collected by the institution.

Reviewing the Internal Process

Because IDEA is typically administered systematically across courses that may be the focus of the AQIP, the aggregated results can be disseminated and reviewed by key constituents as part of the ongoing process. Tracking results longitudinally can provide insight into possible improvements and changes

resulting from the AQIP process. Specifically, IDEA can serve to determine whether goals for improvements in student learning and enhancements to the learning environment have been met. IDEA serves as a data reference point to involve constituencies and focus the initiatives of stakeholders. IDEA provides shared tools and a shared language to develop a shared vision for improvement. This use can support the following AQIP Categories:

- Four: Valuing People
- Five: Leading and Communicating
- Six: Supporting Institutional Operations
- Seven: Measuring Effectiveness
- Eight: Planning Continuous Improvement
- Nine: Building Collaborative Relationships

Helping Students Learn: University of Indianapolis (Indiana)

The University of Indianapolis has used IDEA since 2000-2001 as an institution-wide measure of student learning. In the university's AQIP System e-Portfolio, institutional IDEA data serves as one key measure, including benchmarks and comparisons with others, that has led to data-driven decision making on needed improvement. The 12 IDEA learning objectives have been mapped for the General Education core and trended as one means of assessing student learning. IDEA is serving as one tool in current campus initiatives to revise the core. Additionally, four institution-wide learning goals were identified and have been tracked through IDEA results since 2004. A campus-wide matrix system for assessment of student learning pertaining to the four learning goals and unit- or course-specific goals has recently been implemented. IDEA has begun to be embedded in the matrix as an assessment measure of the institution-wide goals addressed at the course, unit, and institutional levels. Teaching effectiveness at both the unit and institutional level is supported through faculty development programs targeted at teaching/learning strategies identified in the IDEA report to improve student learning.

HLC-AQIP Systems Portfolio and Assessing General Education: University of Saint Francis (Indiana)

In University of Saint Francis' (USF) 2007 HLC-AQIP Systems Portfolio, results from the IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction System were noted as a measure of both student learning and instructional effectiveness. The institution used IDEA ratings to address questions related to either **results** or **processes** in the following AQIP categories:

Category One: Overall ratings for progress on relevant objectives across four semesters were reported as **results** of one measure of student learning over time.

Category Four: Overall ratings for teaching effectiveness, course evaluation, and progress on relevant objectives were noted as a key measure of effectiveness in the **processes** related to ongoing faculty evaluation.

Category Seven: IDEA ratings were cited as a key institutional measure of instructional effectiveness and student learning outcomes in **processes** related to measuring effectiveness.

The institution recently expanded its use of IDEA ratings, incorporating IDEA results into the General Education Assessment Plan as a measure of effectiveness of student learning outcomes.

- Several of the IDEA objectives align with USF General Education goals, and the overall ratings for progress on relevant objectives are being assessed over time in General Education courses.
- The institution uses the IDEA process to distribute additional, customized questions that indirectly measure student perception of progress on General Education learning outcomes in General Education courses.
- General Education courses are clustered into several distribution requirement groups. Custom IDEA reports are used to assess student-perceived progress on General Education goals and learning outcomes across courses within a distribution requirement group.
- Several IDEA objectives have been aligned with course objectives for the required General Education, first-year iConnect seminar course. Group summary results for overall progress on relevant objectives, teacher excellence, and course excellence are being examined for longitudinal trends and comparison to benchmarks.

The IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction System is unique in that it serves numerous purposes, providing formative and summative feedback at both the individual and program levels. Conducting surveys is a time-consuming process and achieving high response rates has become increasingly difficult. IDEA eliminates the need to conduct additional surveys. And, since student ratings surveys typically yield high response rates, the data obtained are more representative and reliable than other surveys. IDEA is a cost-effective solution to serving your multiple information needs, supporting improvement processes as well as documenting institutional excellence.

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