

# The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges, and The IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction System



Insight.Improvement.Impact.®

Through the accreditation process, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (Commission) “expects affiliated institutions to work toward improving their quality, increasing their effectiveness, and continually striving toward excellence.” (Standards for Accreditation, p. 1, 2005, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges). A clear alignment exists between The IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction System (IDEA) and a number of the Standards for Accreditation.

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 Standards 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 Standards. 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 conversation 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 Standards.

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 the Commission.

### **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 Commission on Institutions of Higher Education's Standards and IDEA**

To guide the self-study process, the Commission has provided a set of 11 Standards for Accreditation. What follows is a brief discussion of the relationship between IDEA's emphasis on student learning and specific Standards that also address student learning.

### **Standard Two: Planning and Evaluation**

*The institution undertakes planning and evaluation appropriate to its needs to accomplish and improve the achievement of its mission and purposes. It identifies its planning and evaluation priorities and pursues them effectively.* – Standards for Accreditation (p. 4, 2005). Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

A primary emphasis of this Standard is the use of ongoing, evidence-based self-evaluation of academic programs, with a focus on systematic improvement. There are many ways to address this Standard and many systems and processes can and should be employed to demonstrate an institution is fulfilling its mission.

The 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 such a commitment.

The systematic use of IDEA Group Summary Reports and Aggregate Data Files addresses Standard Two. 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.

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](http://www.theideacenter.org) for more information.

### **Standard Four: The Academic Program**

*The institution's academic programs are consistent with and serve to fulfill its mission and purposes. The institution works systematically and effectively to plan, provide, oversee, evaluate, improve, and assure the academic quality and integrity of its academic programs and the credits and degrees awarded. The institution develops the systematic means to understand how and what students are learning and to use the evidence obtained to improve the academic program.* – Standards for Accreditation (p. 7, 2005). Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

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.

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 educational programs.

Consistent with Standard Four, 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 Standard.

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?

This Standard also acknowledges the importance of considering and evaluating instructional methods and procedures 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?

### **Standard Five: Faculty**

*The institution develops a faculty that is suited to the fulfillment of the institution’s mission. Faculty qualifications, numbers, and performance are sufficient to accomplish the institution’s mission and purposes. Faculty competently offer the institution’s academic programs and fulfill those tasks appropriately assigned them.* – Standards for Accreditation (p. 14, 2005).  
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

This Standard addresses the need to have qualified faculty who are responsible for facilitating and guiding student learning. Fundamental elements of this standard include demonstrating excellence in teaching and professional growth. 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?

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.

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 Standard:

- 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?

### **Comprehensive Use of IDEA: Champlain College (Vermont)**

Since electing to use the IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction System, Champlain College has systematically used results to support institutional planning and evaluation, curriculum development and improvement, and faculty evaluation.

#### **Standard Two: Planning and Evaluation**

**Institutional Dashboard:** Champlain College developed an institutional dashboard to monitor achievement of five goals related to academic quality, student life, finance, employees, and diversity and inclusion. Two components of

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the academic quality goal are Quality of Teaching, and Student Learning and Success. Champlain uses the summary measures provided by the IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction, among other measures, to monitor progress. Within the Quality of Teaching component, the College has established a goal of 75 percent of its classes earning a raw score at or above the IDEA database average on the “Excellent Teacher” and “Excellent Course” summary measures. This same target has been set for the “Progress on Relevant Learning Objectives” as the student perception indicator of Student Learning and Success.

**Standard Four: The Academic Program**

**Curriculum Development and Improvement:** The IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction System serves as a tool to guide faculty discussion about curriculum and course learning objectives, and teaching methods employed to facilitate student learning. In fall 2007, Champlain College introduced its new interdisciplinary, integrated general education curriculum consisting of 13 sequenced courses. For each course, the course instructors collectively selected essential teaching objectives for the IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction System. Five of the objectives feature prominently in the core curriculum. Faculty use the results from student ratings to reflect on student self-report of learning on the five objectives – and to consider how they might improve their teaching practices and communication about their intended objectives.

In addition, the dean reminds faculty about their stated objectives, encouraging them to invite mid-term feedback from their students about what is working well and where they could improve in addressing these objectives. This practice draws the attention of both faculty and students to the underlying aims of the course. At year end, faculty review results to determine whether student reports of progress changed as faculty changed their approaches.

**Standard Five: Faculty**

**Faculty Evaluation:** Champlain College began a process to recreate its Faculty Evaluation system in spring 2006. Its Faculty Evaluation Task Force established the *Characteristics of Effective Teaching* for Champlain faculty, and then created a map that connects IDEA questions to the desired teaching characteristics. Next, they added custom questions to address missing areas. Based on the map, customized reports for each faculty member summarize results in four key areas: 1) Course Design and Assessment, 2) Course Delivery and Learning Environment, 3) Mastery of Subject, and 4) Course Management. Faculty use these and their IDEA Diagnostic Form Reports to frame teaching goals in their annual self-evaluation. Based on institutional-level reports, the College was also able to pinpoint a need for further support of adjunct faculty. In response, Champlain made adjunct faculty a more intentional focus of its Center for Instructional Practice.

*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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