Accreditation Standard 8 (2013 Business Standards): Curricula Management and Assurance of Learning

An Interpretation

March 2019

AACSB International Accreditation Standard 8 (2013 Standards): Curricula Management and Assurance of Learning: An Interpretation

Purpose

This white paper provides guidance consistent with the spirit and intent of AACSB business accreditation Standard 8. This interpretation is directed at assisting AACSB-accredited schools, peer review teams, mentors, accreditation committees, and others in consistently applying Standard 8 in the context of the accreditation peer review process and reporting. It is intended to provide guidance to all constituents while AACSB develops the 2020 business standards, expected to be voted on in April 2020 with a phase-in period of two to three years. Because there is still a significant amount of time schools will potentially be under the 2013 standards, it is critical that AACSB provide accurate, thoughtful, and sufficient guidance for its membership in the near term. This white paper does not represent a change in AACSB standards; rather, it is intended to provide clarity in areas of perceived misinterpretation of the intent of Standard 8.

Background

Standard 8 of the 2013 business accreditation standards is distinctly different from its corresponding standard in the 2003 business accreditation standards in that it is far more principles-based, providing a basic framework but allowing schools to define their assurance of learning (AoL) systems with more flexibility and according to their mission. In contrast, the 2003 business accreditation standards contained seven standards dedicated to AoL and also provided more prescriptive guidance embedded within those seven standards. There was additional guidance accompanying the 2003 standards provided through an AACSB white paper on AoL, which subsequently became obsolete with the implementation of 2013 standards.

In the absence of specific guidance regarding the intent of a more principles-based system of AoL, schools, volunteers, committee members, mentors, and peer review teams often have continued to rely on legacy guidance, which may not be appropriate for the 2013 standards. This document provides a foundation for AoL messaging, content, guidelines, and standards consistent with the intent of the more principles-based Standard 8 of the 2013 standards.

We are further informed by the work of the Business Accreditation Task Force (BATF), which has gathered a great deal of stakeholder input from across the world with respect to AoL. This work has revealed a consistent theme of AoL being administratively and financially burdensome. Many schools hire dedicated assessment staff to comply with and carry out the AoL process, which can add a financial burden to the school.

AACSB's recent internal analysis revealed that Standard 8 was the number-one standard mentioned as a deficiency for schools being recommended for a Continuous Improvement Review 2 (CIR2) decision following a Continuous Improvement Review (CIR) visit. A disproportionate number of schools are being recommended for CIR2 because peer review teams and/or AACSB committees conclude that a given school doesn't sufficiently align with Standard 8.

However, there is a wide variance among peer review teams in what constitutes non-alignment. The intent of this white paper is to ensure that all stakeholders have the same understanding of what constitutes alignment with Standard 8, and disseminate the agreed-upon guidance using identical messaging at every level.

The Current Language of Standard 8 (2013 Standards)

Below is the Standard 8 language followed by the interpretive guidance that currently exists.

Standard 8: The school uses well-documented, systematic processes for determining and revising degree program learning goals; designing, delivering, and improving degree program curricula to achieve learning goals; and demonstrating that degree program learning goals have been met. [CURRICULA MANAGEMENT AND ASSURANCE OF LEARNING]

Definitions

- *Learning goals* state the educational expectations for each degree program. They specify the intellectual and behavioral competencies a program is intended to instill. In defining these goals, the faculty members clarify how they intend for graduates to be competent and effective as a result of completing the program.

- A *curriculum* maps out how the school facilitates achievement of program learning goals. It is defined by content (theories, concepts, skills, etc.), pedagogies (teaching methods, delivery modes), and structures (how the content is organized and sequenced to create a systematic, integrated program of teaching and learning). A curriculum is also influenced by the mission, values, and culture of the school.

- *Assurance of learning* refers to processes for demonstrating that students achieve learning expectations for the programs in which they participate. Schools use assurance of learning to demonstrate accountability and assure external constituents, such as potential students, trustees, public officials, supporters, and accrediting organizations, that the school meets its goals. Assurance of learning also assists the school and faculty members to improve programs and courses. By measuring learning, the school can evaluate its students' success at achieving learning goals, use the measures to plan improvement efforts, and (depending on the type of measures) provide feedback and guidance for individual students. For assurance of learning purposes, AACSB accreditation is concerned with broad, program-level focused learning goals for each degree program, rather than detailed learning goals by course or topic, which must be the responsibility of individual faculty members.

- *Curricula management* refers to the school's processes and organization for development, design, and implementation of each degree program's structure, organization, content, assessment of outcomes, pedagogy, etc. Curricula management captures input from key business school stakeholders and is influenced by assurance of learning results, new developments in business practices and issues, revision of mission and strategy that relate to new areas of instruction, etc.

The "Basis for Judgment" that follows the standard provides interpretive guidance to peer review teams on how to determine whether a school is aligned with the spirit and intention of the standards.

Basis for Judgment

- Learning goals derive from and are consonant with the school's mission, expected outcomes, and strategies. Curricula management processes are guided by the school's mission, expected outcomes, and strategies. Curricula management processes align curricula for all programs with the school's mission, expected outcomes, and strategies.

- Learning goals and curricula reflect currency of knowledge. Appropriately qualified faculty members are involved in all aspects of curricula management, including the determination of learning goals and the design and ongoing revision of degree program content, pedagogies, and structure to achieve learning goals. The peer review team expects to see evidence of curricula improvement based on a systematic assurance of learning process.

- Depending on the teaching/learning models and the division of labor, curricula management facilitates faculty-faculty and faculty-staff interactions and engagement to support development and management of both curricula and the learning process.

- Learning goals and curricula reflect expectations of stakeholders. Schools incorporate perspectives from stakeholders, including organizations employing graduates, alumni, students, the university community, policy makers, etc., into curricula management processes.

- Learning goals are achieved. Systematic processes support assurance of learning and produce a portfolio of evidence demonstrating achievement of learning goals. These processes also produce a portfolio of documented improvements based on collected evidence. The school provides a portfolio of evidence for each business degree program to demonstrate that students meet the learning goals. Or, if assessment demonstrates that students are not meeting the learning goals, the school has instituted efforts to eliminate the discrepancy.

- Evidence of recent curricula development, review, or revision demonstrates the effectiveness of curricula/program management.

- Results of regular assessment activities should be reflected in changes to program curriculum.

The "Guidance for Documentation" that accompanies the standard provides guidance to a school for how it needs to demonstrate alignment with Standard 8.

Guidance for Documentation

- Describe processes for determining and revising learning goals, curricula management, and assurance of learning. Discuss mission, faculty, and stakeholder involvement in these processes.

- Show how curricula management processes have produced new or revised curricula for degree programs, describing the source of information that supports the new or revised program development.

- Discuss and provide evidence of faculty-faculty and faculty-staff interaction in curricula management processes.

- List the learning goals for each business degree program—this list should include both conceptual and operational definitions. Also, provide curriculum maps and assessment schedule, demonstrating regular assessment of learning goals.

- Provide a portfolio of evidence, including direct assessment of student learning, showing that students meet all of the learning goals for each business degree program. Or, if assessment demonstrates that students are not meeting learning goals, describe efforts that the unit has instituted to eliminate the discrepancy. Indirect assessments (e.g., employer satisfaction or alumni surveys, etc.) may be used as part of the portfolio of evidence, to provide contextual information for direct assessment or information for continuous improvement.

- If the business school is subject to formalized regulations or quality assessment processes focused on the evaluation of student performance, and these processes are consistent with AACSB expectations and best practices, they may be applied to demonstrate assurance of learning. The burden of proof is on the school to document that these systems support effective continuous improvement in student performance and outcomes.

In reading Standard 8 and its accompanying interpretive guidance, it is important to note that there are elements the standards do not prescribe:

What the standards do *not* do:

- Specify the number of learning goals a school should adopt
- Prescribe that learning objectives must be included underneath each learning goal
- Use the terminology "close the loop," or specify how many times this activity must occur
- Prescribe how many times a learning goal must be assessed in order to constitute "regular" assessment
- Describe specifically what a school needs to do to have a "mature" AoL system

Clarifications Needed to Align Stakeholders

To align seminar facilitators, AACSB staff, volunteers, schools, peer review teams, mentors, and committees, the following clarifications relative to Standard 8 are to be applied. **Because we do not know what changes might be adopted in the 2020 standards relative to AoL, this guidance is intended for Standard 8 of the 2013 standards only. The 2020 standards will present new guidance.**

Philosophy of AoL

In many cases, it appears that schools are creating an unnecessarily burdensome system by instituting a large number of learning goals and learning objectives and measuring all learning goals in every course (module) every year. It is AACSB's position that more complexity, a greater number of learning goals, or assessing every goal every year does not make an AoL system better. Rather, it is a systematic process, informed by the school's mission and strategies and resulting in meaningful improvements in curriculum and student learning, that defines a strong and mature AoL system. Additionally, sampling is appropriate as long as the sample is representative across the sample frame.

Importantly, from a peer review standpoint, AoL should not be approached with a compliance mindset. The peer review team should be concerned with whether the school is demonstrating that they have a systematic process in place to assess student learning, they are applying their process, student learning outcomes demonstrate that learning goals are being achieved, and the school's curricula is informed and improved by the assurance of learning process. Peer review teams and mentors should keep in mind that they are determining whether the school is meeting the spirit and intent of the standard and showing continuous improvement.

The Essential Elements That Demonstrate Alignment With Standard 8

The essential elements for alignment with Standard 8 emanate from the language in the standard and the interpretive guidance that follows the standard and are as follows:

1. A well-documented process
2. A systematic process that involves faculty and stakeholder involvement
3. Demonstration that degree learning goals have been met, or in cases where learning goals are not being met, efforts to eliminate the discrepancy
4. Learning goals that are consonant with the school's mission, expected outcomes, and strategies
5. Curriculum improvement based on the assurance of learning process
6. Learning goals established for each degree program, including conceptual and operational definitions
7. Curriculum maps showing where learning goals are assessed
8. Direct assessment of student learning is required (indirect allowed as supporting evidence)
9. An assessment schedule showing regular assessment

Terminology That Requires Clarification

Learning Goals: Learning goals, driven by mission, strategies, and expected outcomes, describe conceptually what students will be or have (in terms of skills/competencies and knowledge) as a result of completing a degree program. There is no optimal number of learning goals for a given degree program. However, as a *guideline*, schools tend to have four learning goals *on average* for each degree program. The actual number may be more or less than four.[1] The school should create the AoL system that best supports its mission.

The Guidance for Documentation (see above) contains a requirement that learning goals contain both conceptual and operational definitions. How schools incorporate operational definitions is a school choice. Many schools choose to include learning objectives under each learning goal as the operationalization of learning goals. Similar to learning goals, if a school chooses to include learning objectives under each learning goal, there is no optimal number of learning objectives; however, as a guideline, schools that use learning goals tend to have one to three learning objectives for each learning goal. This guideline may vary in practice. An alternative way to incorporate operational definitions is to write learning goals that contain specific and measurable components embedded within the goal. Either way, learning goals are typically measured twice in a five-year cycle with improvements launched between the two measurement cycles in order to facilitate improving the curriculum.

Closing the Loop: This terminology has created much confusion with a multitude of interpretations. Simply put, AACSB interprets closing the loop to mean that a school shows how curriculum was improved as a result of the assurance of learning process. Specifically, data from the second measure allows us to judge whether the curriculum improvements that were driven by the first round of data/results have been effective in helping students learn and/or perform better. Schools typically "close the loop" at least once in their five-year cycle for each learning goal. A commonly repeated phrase that is a misconception is that schools must "close the loop twice." This misconception appears to be a misinterpretation related to the fact that schools typically assess learning goals twice in a 5-year period.

Curriculum review and revision should occur routinely and systematically and be informed by the AoL process. Because curriculum changes emanate from a multitude of sources (e.g., external stakeholder input, university or school strategic choices, financial, or competitive drivers, etc.), Standard 8 does require schools to identify what curriculum changes were made directly as a result of their AoL process.

General vs. Knowledge-Based Learning Goals

It is acceptable and appropriate for schools to include both *general* (e.g., communications skills, ethics, global mindset, etc.) and *knowledge-based* (e.g., accounting, finance, management, etc.) learning goals in its AoL program. It is also acceptable for schools to assess *general* learning goals common across all degree programs in core courses (modules) that all business students take, as opposed to repeating identical *general* learning goals in every degree program.

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[1] FAQ No. 13 in Appendix IV of the standards identifies four to eight learning goals as a guideline for a mature AoL system. However, this range is only intended to be a guideline, not a prescriptive number.

Reporting Assurance of Learning Results

Standard 8 requires AoL results to be shown by degree program. However, results should also be shown by location and delivery modes in order to demonstrate the equivalence of high-quality learning experiences as required by Standard 11.