

The Model For Collaborative Evaluations As A Framework For The Accreditation Self-Study

¹Rigoberto Rincones-Gómez; ²Laura Hoffman; ³Liliana Rodríguez-Campos

¹Institutional Planning, Analytics, and Effectiveness.

University of North Carolina at Wilmington. USA

²Institutional Research and Effectiveness.

University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee. USA

³Educational and Psychological Studies.

University of South Florida. USA

Corresponding Author: Rigoberto Rincones-Gómez;

Abstract

Regional accreditation requires institutions to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of their programming, infrastructure, and financial well-being. It is an important enterprise that requires a true campus-wide commitment to the process, as well as strong management and leadership. It is indeed a challenging and time-consuming endeavor; however, by utilizing a formal evaluation approach institutions can guide their self-study efficiently and effectively. We present here the Model for Collaborative Evaluations (MCE) as framework to assist administrators and/or faculty in leading a self-study. The approach provides a sound structure by which to organize activities and tasks and provides guidance to empowering campus personnel to participate in such process. This article is intended to read as a descriptive piece on a collaborative evaluation model and its utility when conducting accreditation self-studies at an institution of higher education. We believe this model serves as an innovative new direction for those overseeing accreditation reviews on their campus. Provided here is an introduction to regional accreditation in the United States of America and practical methods for applying the MCE.

Keywords: accreditation, collaboration, collaboration members, evaluation, model for collaborative evaluations

INTRODUCTION

Regional accreditation is a necessary part of any institution of higher learning in the United States as access to federal financial aid is dependent on accreditation from one of the seven regional accrediting agencies (Dodd, 2004). A complex and time-consuming process, accreditation requires a substantial level of planning, organization, analysis, reporting, and flawless coordination. The accreditation process involves a self-study, a peer-review, and a formal compliance judgment by the accrediting body. Several departments from across the institution must work collaboratively to ensure a comprehensive self-study review.

Regional Accreditation

According to Alstete (2004), regional accreditation in the United States is a nongovernmental, peer evaluation system by which institutions are evaluated “to determine whether or not they are operating at basic levels of perceived quality” (p. 4). There are seven regional accrediting organizations in the United States: Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Higher Learning Commission, Middle States

Commission on Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, and WASC Senior College and University Commission (CHEA, 2016).

These private entities share a common process, each has a described set of standards, a self-study requirement, a peer-evaluation (on-site, off-site, or both), and a judgement by the agency on the institution’s accreditation status. The standards each accrediting agency develops are unique; however, they all address similar assurances of the quality of teaching, learning, services, support, and financial resources (CHEA, 2006).

The Accreditation Self-Study

For the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2012), “The decennial evaluation consists of an extensive institutional self-study process that produces a written self-study report. This report and the Commission’s accreditation standards serve as the basis

for on-site evaluation by a team of peer evaluators” (p.4). The accreditation self-study process requires institutions to examine, reflect, and cast judgment on the quality, integrity, and effectiveness of their academic and administrative activities. The purpose of accreditation is to use the self-study to improve upon these activities and to continually evaluate them both formatively and summatively. Although the self-study compliance certification document or final narrative is the summative evaluation of the institutional performance, formative evaluations throughout the planning years are essential to the success and continuous improvement of the institution. Accreditors have realized the utility of formative evaluations and requested institutions submit interim reports to evidence on-going efforts to measure and improve on educational objectives (Volkwein, 2010).

METHODOLOGY OF THE MODEL FOR COLLABORATIVE EVALUATIONS

The Model for Collaborative Evaluations (MCE) is a framework for guiding collaborative evaluations in a precise, realistic, and useful manner (Rodríguez-Campos & Rincones-Gómez, 2013). A collaborative evaluation is an evaluation in which there is a substantial degree of collaboration between the evaluator, collaboration members (CMs) and stakeholders in the evaluation process, to the extent that

they are willing and capable of being involved (Rodríguez-Campos, 2012a; Rodríguez-Campos, 2012b).

An evaluator who wishes to use a collaborative evaluation approach should be flexible and tolerant of contextual difficulties and variations in stakeholders’ willingness to participate (Garaway, 2005). To optimally use this type of approach, there must be clear expectations of its advantages and disadvantages based on the specific situation. In any case, the benefits gained by adopting a collaborative evaluation approach should outweigh the potential difficulties that may ensue.

The MCE constitutes a theoretical foundation for accreditation self-studies because its systematic structure provides a basis for decision-making through the development of formative and summative evaluations (see Figure 1). The model has been successfully used in business, nonprofit, and educational sectors (Rodríguez-Campos, 2015), and it belongs to the *use* branch of the evaluation theory tree (Alkin, 2012). The MCE is flexible so it supports both summative and formative evaluation processes within a framework that is efficient and systematic, and it is sturdy enough to allow for a variety of elements to be incorporated (e.g., Danielson, 2015; Marzano, Frontier, & Livingston, 2011; Popham, 2013).

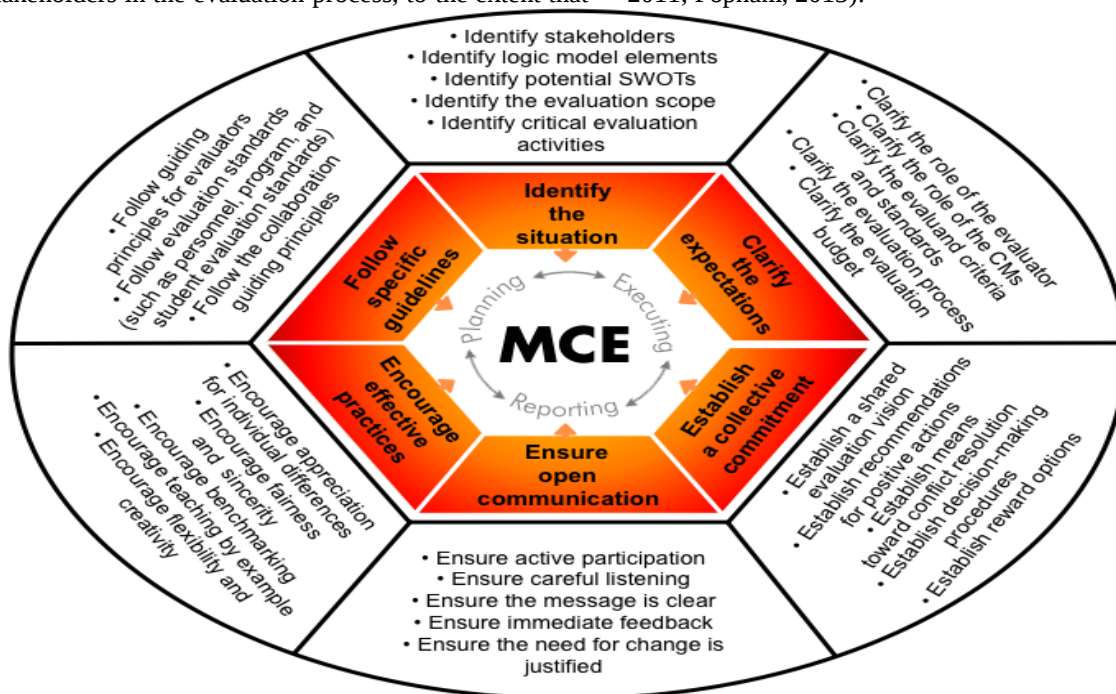


Figure 1. The Model for Collaborative Evaluations. Reprinted from *Collaborative Evaluations Step-by-Step* (p. 14), by L. Rodríguez-Campos & R. Rincones-Gómez (2nd ed.), 2013, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Copyright 2013 by Liliana Rodríguez-Campos and Rigoberto Rincones-Gómez. Reprinted with permission.

The MCE revolves around six interactive and interdependent components. This cyclic, iterative, and systematic model and its step-by-step process is robust enough to allow for handling unforeseen issues that may occur along the way. This is important when evaluating the wide range of situations that take place across departments, curriculum, policies, and procedures. A sound self-study design provides a mechanism that allows development and maintenance of effective planning and continuous improvement processes. The MCE literature, includes examples of how they could help frame aspects of regional accreditation self-studies. These examples represent just the tip of the iceberg for how collaborative evaluations can work in this highly complex venue. The MCE helps ensure end-products of the evaluation are satisfactory to stakeholders, including those for regional accrediting bodies.

Identify the Situation

The situation is a combination of formal and informal circumstances determined by the relationships that surround and sustain the collaborative evaluation. It sets the foundation for everything that follows in the evaluation. This component of the model also considers issues related to the applicability of a collaborative approach to ensure it is appropriate given the current situation. An early warning of the evaluation situation with the potential constraints and benefits (for example, funds, staff, materials, and time needed to support the collaboration) helps to better manage the effort and be prepared to overcome barriers. This MCE component is divided into the following subcomponents: (a) identify stakeholders; (b) identify logic model elements; (c) identify potential SWOTs (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats); (d) identify the evaluation scope (for example, evaluation questions, work breakdown structure); and (e) identify critical evaluation activities.

Clarify the Expectations

An expectation includes the assumption, belief, or idea we have about the self-study process and the people involved. A clear expectation is very important because it influences all the decisions made during said process. By clarifying the expectations, everyone understands which issues must be addressed and what the best ways are to achieve desired results in order to make effective contributions. As a result of clarifying the expectations, it is possible to understand the implications of each evaluation choice made. In addition, a control process can be followed to show whether evaluation activities are being carried out as planned. This MCE component is divided into the following subcomponents: (a) clarify the role of the evaluator, (b) clarify the role of the CMs, (c) clarify the evaluation criteria and standards, (d) clarify

the evaluation process, and (e) clarify the evaluation budget.

Establish a Collective Commitment

A collective commitment is a compromise to jointly meet the evaluation obligations without continuous external authority or supervision. In a collaborative evaluation, there is a need for this type of commitment in order to promote a desire to take responsibility and accountability for it. Through a collective commitment, the CMs gain a sense of ownership of the effects of this process and its continuous improvement. This increases awareness of interactions and the willingness to make adjustments to enhance the quality of the collaborative evaluation. Love and Russon (2000) stated, "...evaluation will remain one of the world's best kept secrets unless we build strong coalitions that go beyond our own backyards" (p.458). This MCE component is divided into the following subcomponents: (a) establish a shared evaluation vision, (b) establish recommendations for positive actions, (c) establish means toward conflict resolution, (d) establish decision-making procedures, and (e) establish reward options.

Ensure Open Communication

Communication is a process of social interaction (such as speaking, listening, or writing) used to convey information and exchange ideas in order to influence specific actions within the collaborative evaluation. Both formal (evaluation-related) and informal (personal) communication strategies must be planned to reflect the diverse styles of the lead evaluator and the CMs (and other stakeholders) within the collaborative evaluation. Effective communication involves understanding others as well as being understood (Konopaske, Gibson, Ivancevich, & Donnelly, 2008). Thus, it is important to foster a group dialogue of openness and exploration that continues among the CMs themselves (even outside formal meetings). This MCE component is divided into the following subcomponents: (a) ensure active participation, (b) ensure careful listening, (c) ensure the message is clear, (d) ensure immediate feedback, and (e) ensure the need for change is justified.

Encourage Effective Practices

Effective practices are sound established procedures or systems for producing a desired effect within a collaborative evaluation. Among others, this can be accomplished by balancing evaluation resource needs. Also, fostering an atmosphere in which everyone is supportive of everyone else's capabilities increases recognition that each individual provides important input to the evaluation process. As a result, people feel empowered and able to actively interact in the collaborative evaluation activities because (e.g., by

focusing on strengths) there is a belief that each contribution makes a difference. This MCE component is divided into the following subcomponents: (a) encourage appreciation for individual differences, (b) encourage fairness and sincerity, (c) encourage benchmarking, (d) encourage teaching by example, and (e) encourage flexibility and creativity.

Follow Specific Guidelines

Guidelines are principles that direct the design, use, and assessment of the collaborative evaluations, their evaluators (such as you), and their CMs. Guidelines provide direction for sound evaluations, although they alone cannot guarantee the quality of any collaborative evaluation. By identifying and addressing where the evaluation meets the necessary guidelines, the evaluator(s) and the CMs demonstrate a clearer understanding of what the process is about and how it should be carried out. These guidelines provide a shared vision about collaborative evaluations, and (if adopted and internalized) may serve as a model for you and the CMs to use and improve them. This MCE component is divided into the following subcomponents: (a) follow guiding principles for evaluators, (b) follow evaluation standards (such as program, personnel, and student evaluation standards), and (c) follow the collaboration guiding principles.

DISCUSSION OF THE APPLICATION OF THE MODEL

Identify the Situation

The first step in the accreditation self-study is the appointment of the evaluator (or evaluation team). To ensure trust and support of the campus community in this role, the evaluator must become the accreditation expert on the campus. To this end, the evaluator must attend accreditation conferences, participate in trainings specific to their work, and keep up with current changes made by the regional accrediting bodies. For example, sitting on on-site and off-site committees for other institutions provides a valuable education in accreditation by giving a first-hand experience and thus the perspective of a reviewer.

To properly implement the MCE, the evaluator must also be continuously engaged with the institutional stakeholders. There are at least five types of stakeholders associated with accreditation evaluations (a) the regional accrediting body; (b) the chief executive officers and other campus lead administrators; (c) the staff and faculty members; (d) the primary evaluation results consumers or the students; and (e) the secondary evaluation results consumers or the community. Involving all the stakeholders in appropriate ways can create buy-in to the whole process (Rodríguez-Campos, 2015). Thus, stakeholders must be carefully identified to

preserve evaluation credibility and usage. The evaluator selects an accreditation leadership team, usually made-up of the chief executive officer and the chief academic officer, as well as high-level administrators to serve as the CMs.

When gathering evidence for the self-study process, the MCE suggests using a logic model to efficiently set clear objectives that identify what to measure and how to collect those measurements, among other things. According to Knowlton & Phillips (2013) the logic model includes, but is not necessarily limited to: (a) input (e.g., personnel and other resources); (b) activities (e.g., gathering documentation, evaluating evidence of meeting standards, writing the narratives); (c) outputs (e.g. compliance certification, self-study, compliance documentation, focused reports); and (d) outcomes (e.g., continuous institutional improvement, student learning gains, enhanced institutional quality).

Once critical evaluation activities have been identified, the scheduling and assigning of responsibilities for the completion of those activities are needed. Evaluation activities are prioritized based on the time required to properly execute the self-study scope of work. Often times these activities are interdependent, according to Rodríguez-Campos and Rincones-Gómez (2013), a Gantt chart provides an excellent visual to the time allotted to each evaluation activity and overlapping relationships among the activities. The MCE also advocates the use of a Responsibility Assignment Matrix (RAM) to assign evaluation activities to specific CMs. With clear responsibility, accountability becomes inherent to the process.

Clarify the Expectations

The evaluator must clarify their role for themselves and for the CMs. Rodríguez-Campos (2012a) suggests the role is a balance between leadership and management. A leader actively shapes the vision of the evaluation while supporting and inspiring those around them. A manager takes responsibility for the end product and for meeting the expectations of the CMs and the evaluation. One must take stock in the ability to lead and manage the process and search for resources to assist in doing so; for example, reach out to other institutions that have gone or are going through the accreditation process.

The evaluator works closely with the CMs to clarify expectations required to ensure all accreditation standards are met. They have a deep understanding of the CMs' skills and ability to complete tasks. Additionally, the evaluator ensures the CMs have the knowledge necessary to feel competent when engaging stakeholders in the process and are able to communicate the expectations to those who work close to them. By

building expectations of each person's role into the evaluation and keeping them visible throughout the self-study everyone can feel motivated to accomplish goals. Clear roles ensure everyone knows exactly what they are expected to do. In turn, the CMs understand how they will contribute and that these contributions are important to the overall success of the accreditation review.

Establish a Collective Commitment

In essence, regional accreditation is a collective commitment by universities and colleges to self-impose standards for quality and continuous improvement and to engage in a peer-review process to ensure the adherence to that commitment. When establishing a shared evaluation vision, the evaluator develops a clear scope of work for the self-study. For example, adherence to the standards of accreditation is a commitment made both internally to the faculty, staff, and students of the university, as well as to sister colleges and universities across the country.

When a shared vision and commitment to the accreditation process and the work of the self-study is established, the CMs exercise responsibility and ownership of the process (Rodríguez-Campos & Walker-Egea, 2015). In a collaborative evaluation, the CMs take ownership of the evaluation process, creating an atmosphere where continuous improvement can be made toward a single vision of success. Greater results occur from synergies that arise from the diverse CM perspectives. Early in the process, a vision of why these efforts are being made must be shared with relevant stakeholders. The vision, in this case, is to ensure compliance with the accreditation standards and to write and support narratives that make the institution's case for compliance. The CMs must acknowledge that a campus-wide commitment to the process is necessary as nearly all departments are likely to contribute to the evaluation and/or the final self-study document.

Integral to successfully establishing a collective commitment, the evaluator also works collaboratively with the CMs to form recommendations for positive actions, establish means towards conflict resolution and decision-making. Rewards for involvement in the self-study or accreditation process are used to support specific efforts. Hence, a collaborative commitment to the process for selecting reward recipients and honors must be determined, as well.

It should be noted that establishing decision-making process is of utmost importance because throughout the self-study many decisions will need to be made. Most institutions will approach decision-making hierarchically. In this case, those with the greatest

expertise or those most greatly affected by the decision have the final authority. This is a common rationale and likely streamlined approach to decision-making and for it to work smoothly the evaluator must establish a collective commitment to the approach.

Everyone has a different role in the decision-making process, based on their degree of knowledge or responsibility. Also, when a decision is made in a collaborative atmosphere we ensure that everyone knows how and why decisions are made. Additionally, collaborative decision-making ensures that thought is given to how these decisions effect other aspects of the self-study, including resources.

Ensure Open Communication

Active communication from all stakeholder groups is desired and effective communication between the CMs is essential. Deadlines and milestones are openly communicated so proper planning and pacing may be done. The self-study is a campus-wide initiative. Faculty, staff, administrators, and students from every department across campus must understand the importance of accreditation and the expectations of the accreditor. Morale can be increased when communication is positive and timely which also increases commitment toward the system buy-in (Walker-Egea, 2015).

Those working in a university or college environment can surely attest to the grapevine communications that often lead to misinformation and mass confusion. Thus, the evaluator must take the lead in ensuring open communication, such as sharing ongoing performance towards achieving goals. Also, the evaluator and the CMs can collectively agree on how information will be passed along to the campus-wide stakeholders. For instance, are status reports preferred to be distributed through electronic communications, group meetings, or through one-on-one discussions? Messages delivered in a consistent manner assist in managing open Communication is also about active listening, which ensures everyone feels they are acknowledged and their contributions matter. Leading a self-study requires the evaluator to have an open-mind and to be able to identify own biases. By listening to others everyone learns new information, which may lead to better decision-making or efficiencies in the process. For example, sharing draft versions of the self-study narrative with stakeholders throughout the process provides opportunities to bring in fresh perspectives. Receiving feedback from those not as close to the production of the narrative provides additional insight and ensures clarity and comprehensiveness. The evaluator provides a detailed description of what the narrative is required to document when requesting

feedback and specifically asks reviewers to identify if the narrative responded to all requirements and if the narrative was clear and precise.

Encourage Effective Practices

Effective practices are the finest established procedures or systems for accomplishing a particular task within the collaborative evaluation. They balance evaluation needs and the resources to accomplish them. Effective practices help create a supportive atmosphere where collaboration is encouraged and the CMs work toward their goals; each CM becomes a leader who wants the process to be successful. When planning for an accreditation self-study, the evaluator must account for the great diversity in accreditation knowledge and experience.

To encourage effective practices, for example, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges provides the Institutional Resources website (SACSCOC, 2015). The evaluator may encourage the CMs to become acquainted with the handbooks, templates, guidelines, and other documents and information made available by the accreditor. Additionally, providing example narratives completed by other institutions to stakeholders will ensure that they understand what effective practices are in reference to producing a well-crafted self-study. Dependent on professional resources, attending accreditation workshops, summer quality institutes, and volunteering to serve on review teams is essential to understanding an accreditor's expectations.

Effective practices are also employed in the collection and organization of supporting documentation of the narrative. One must consider the amount of documentation required to support a self-study. Regardless, if the evidence is filed electronically or in paper format, a cataloging system that ensures easy retrieval and accurate oversight is crucial. Giving heed to a well-thought-out documentation system will make work easier in the long-run. Attending conference workshops related to organizing documents and/or networking with other universities that have engaged in the process will inform effective practices on your campus.

Follow Specific Guidelines

To ensure rigor and ethical practice an evaluation should be conducted in accordance with the "Guiding Principles for Evaluators" issued by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (2009) (available at <http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/>), and the "Guiding Principles for Collaborative Evaluations" (Rodríguez-Campos & Rincones-Gómez, 2013). Additionally, a metaevaluation advisory panel

can regularly provide professional judgment to ensure use of best practices in the collaborative evaluation.

Professional organizations like the American Evaluation Association (AEA) have established guiding principles to ensure high quality evaluations are conducted. The AEA guiding principles include aspects such as conducting evaluations on a systematic basis and adhering to the highest standards set by the association. These standards effectively provide guidelines for evaluators to espouse. Universities and colleges must have well-trained, competent evaluators implementing and adhering to them. For the CMs to be good team builders who display honesty and integrity they must be up front with any potential conflicts of interest and accurately, respectfully, and compassionately present data, results, and judgments of the evaluation.

While the guiding principles for evaluators and program evaluation standards are essential to conducting an evaluation, the collaboration guiding principles are most beneficial when using the collaborative evaluation approach. We often revisit the intended use of these specific guidelines in terms of their applicability as sound systems for each specific collaborative evaluation.

CONCLUSION

The MCE framework provides an alternative guidance to undertake the complex accreditation self-study process. We have outlined here how the approach could assist to organize this institution-wide endeavor. By conducting accreditation self-studies using the MCE, an institution can tap into its greatest resource – its students, faculty, and staff. The MCE gives the entire campus community the opportunity to engage in the process and to see how they can positively contribute. Each component of the MCE builds commitment to the process with the added benefit of creating a sound system to follow throughout the self-study.

The greatest strengths of this model are that it gives focus to collaborative processes and provides a strong basis for establishing long-term relationships. The MCE assumes that important decisions can be made collaboratively in the early evaluation stages and that ongoing alternatives can be easily incorporated as necessary. Therefore, it is a tool that helps us better understand how to develop priorities and achieve a high level of support within a collaborative evaluation.

The MCE provides an important learning opportunity. This model can help you understand and account for the nature of the work and the full range of stakeholders in a self-study effort. Results from a collaborative approach provides a useful basis for guiding the

decision-making process because people work collaboratively while understanding the added value of their interactions. This paper illustrates promising practices that could be widely integrated in different self-studies.

James Sanders (2005), former president of the AEA, summed up his impressions of the MCE: "The model...serves as a guide for evaluators who believe that making evaluation an integral part of everyday work in programs and organizations is important... It is a significant next step in the evolution of the practice of evaluation. It could not have come at a better time. In my judgment, this contribution to the evaluation literature is excellent" (p. iii).

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