

Pursing Excellence Through the SACS Reaffirmation of Accreditation Process

Dalton State College seeks excellence in every area of its operation. In higher education, excellence can be measured through numbers—enrollment, retention and graduation rates, pass rates of graduates on licensure exams, numbers of students accepted to graduate and professional schools. Excellence can also be determined by the reputations and scholarly output of professors. Another important criterion of excellence is the recognition and approval of accrediting bodies.

In recent years Dalton State College has gained—or regained—accreditation status with the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the Georgia Board of Nursing and the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), and the Commission on Accreditation of the Council on Social Work Education. These professional stamps of approval guarantee our students that they are receiving outstanding instruction and academic resources in specific programs of study.

However, all of these certifications, to one degree or another, hinge on the regional accreditation of Dalton State College through the Southern Association of College and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS/COC). SACS/COC is the accrediting body for eleven states in the southeastern United States and some Latin American countries. Formed in 1895, it accredits colleges and universities that grant associate's, baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral degrees. SACS validates higher education institutions such as Dalton State in many ways, and SACS

accreditation allows students to be awarded federal financial aid, such as Pell Grants and Stafford Loans, and to earn transferable credits.

SACS and Dalton State College

SACS recertification takes place every ten years. Dalton State passed its last review in 2003 with flying colors, with just two recommendations. With our next recertification coming up in 2012 (with official accreditation being announced in 2013), the college hopes to repeat and perhaps exceed its last excellent review.

Of course, much has changed at DSC—and with SACS/COC—since 2003. At Dalton State, we have seen the hiring of many new faculty and administrators, the addition of several academic programs, and the beginning of residential life and athletic programs. For SACS/COC, a significant change to the accreditation process was made with a restructuring of what is known as the Compliance Report and the inclusion of the Quality Enhancement Plan requirement.

The SACS Reaffirmation Process

Anyone who has experience with SACS knows that, in the past, colleges were required to answer and document compliance to a series of “must statements.” There were more than 200 of these requirements and they were categorized into six areas: adherence to mission, institutional assessment, governance, instruction, academic resources, and fiscal responsibility.

Today, the must statements are fewer in number and are phrased as fact statements describing the reality of the institution’s operations. Furthermore, the former six categories

have been re-ordered into four sections: The Principle of Integrity, Core Requirements, Comprehensive Standards, and Federal Requirements.

After a one- to two-year process of self-examination, the college will produce an extensive document called the Compliance Report, which is accompanied by a roomful of documentation. Fortunately, the digital revolution has allowed the Compliance Report and its support to be submitted online. DSC's Compliance Report was due to SACS in March of 2012, at which time it will go through a review process by SACS officials and a committee of SACS-affiliated higher education professionals from outside Georgia.

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The leaders in the reaffirmation efforts are Dr. Henry Codjoe, Director of Institutional Research and Planning and Chief Data Officer; Dr. Sandra Stone, Vice President for Academic Affairs; and Dr. Mary Nielsen, Professor of English and Reading and Dean of the School of Liberal Arts. Dr. Codjoe fulfills the role of SACS Accreditation Liaison, and Dr. Nielsen is serving as the editor of the final Compliance Report. Dr. Claudette Williams, a vice president of SACS, will be working closely with Dalton State to guide us through the process.

The outstanding feature of the SACS reaffirmation process is institutional effectiveness. SACS/COC primarily investigates how a college or university runs its internal affairs in a systematic process. Because institutional effectiveness registers as such a priority for SACS, another portion of the reaffirmation procedure has been added since Dalton State College's last review. The Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) is a much shorter document, but it is no less important to the success of a college's application for reaffirmation.

The Quality Enhancement Plan

The Quality Enhancement Plan is focused on improving student learning. The inclusion of the QEP is not an obstacle, but an encouragement for a college or university to investigate its operations, find areas where student learning could be improved, devise a thorough plan based on data and best practices, and ensure that the outcomes are achieved.

The QEP is a process, not an event. Its preparation starts two or three years before the actual on-site, three-day visit (for DSC, September 18-20, 2012), and its implementation continues for at least five years after SACS approves the components of the Plan. The Plan must address a significant issue in student learning, utilize clear assessment methods, and show responsible and reasonable budgeting to enact the Plan. Participation in preparing the QEP should include all constituencies of the college, and the QEP must also be integrated into other aspects of the college's planning.

The QEP at Dalton State

After months of discussion, data mining, and input for various sectors of the college, Dalton State has decided on the following QEP topic: *“Improving the Academic Performance of High Risk Students Through Learning Support English: Getting on the ‘Write’ Path.”* In short, the QEP will seek to improve instruction and resources for students in learning support English.

This brief description of the accreditation process is provided so that you—an alum or supporter of Dalton State College—will know that the QEP Committee, the SACS Certification

Teams, the administration, and the faculty be working hard over the next eighteen months to showcase through this process, the outstanding work of the faculty, staff, leadership, and students of Dalton State. Excellence is something we do every day, even though our chance to prove it through SACS reaffirmation comes around every ten years.