Higher Learning Research Communications

September 2013

Share your voice: Online community building during reaffirmation of accreditation

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Recommended Citation

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High. Learn. Res. Commun.   Vol. 3, Num. 3 | September 2013

Share Your Voice: Online Community Building
During Reaffirmation of Accreditation

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Abstract: Walden University recently underwent a successful reaffirmation of accreditation process with The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. As part of the 3-year process, a committee, named the Education and Communication working group, was formed to inform and engage with the entire Walden community. The aim of this report is to describe the process and strategies this working group employed to achieve those goals in a distance learning environment. The primary charges of the Education and Communication working group were to (1) educate stakeholders about the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the importance of accreditation, and their role in the accreditation process; (2) provide consistent and quality communication to ensure stakeholders are appropriately informed about HLC and the self-study process; and (3) create and execute an appropriate and supportive communication and education plan during the HLC self-study process. The Education and Communication working group primarily focused on internal stakeholders, including students, faculty, and staff. Additional outreach specifically addressed associated individuals, such as alumni and field site supervisors. Other institutions may define their constituencies differently but will find that the goals, plans, and strategies described here will help them to achieve involvement by their stakeholders in accreditation processes.

Keywords: Accreditation, communication, engagement, distance learning environment, online learning

Introduction

Regional accreditation is vital to the well-being of any university. It provides information for both internal and external audiences about the quality and the nature of the institution. Unlike programmatic accreditation, regional accreditation looks at the health and compliance of the whole institution. It takes a meta-view of the university's operations and makes this view available to the public. It is a "watch dog" of the university's functioning and is taken very

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seriously by most institutions. Preparation for an accreditation visit is usually a lengthy and complex process.

Regional accrediting bodies have certain requirements of what to include in a Self-Study and how to structure the information. The Self-Study is the compilation of proof that a university has met the criteria for accreditation. It is also a repository of evidence to describe the accomplishments and challenges of the university. The Self-Study is the primary document submitted to the accrediting body. It is the result of data collected from a wide variety of the members of the university community. It is also important that those disparate parts of the university community be aware of and in agreement with what other various contributing members have submitted.

Walden University recently underwent a successful reaffirmation of accreditation process with The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. The reaffirmation of accreditation at Walden University was conducted with thoroughness by the entire university. As part of the 3-year process, a committee, named the Education and Communication working group, was formed to inform and engage with the entire university community. This report describes the process and strategies this committee employed to achieve those goals in a distance learning environment. These strategies and processes may be helpful for other large institutions in identifying appropriate strategies to engage their constituents in accreditation efforts, to support community engagement with and increase community understanding about accreditation.

About the Institution

Walden University, was founded in 1970 around the idea that higher education should fulfill a higher purpose. The Walden University mission holds that knowledge should be applied to effect positive social change and promote the greater good. Walden University is a fully online university with selected face-to-face opportunities in the doctoral and master's programs. Additionally, Walden has more than 46,500 students and an increasing international student population and offers more than 75 degree programs, more than 385 specializations and concentrations, and more than 45 certificates. Walden learners are typically working adults, with an average age of 40. There are more than 61,000 Walden alumni throughout the world.

The employees of Walden University are equally diverse. As of December 2012, there were more than 2,500 faculty members, working virtually from all 50 states, plus the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and Washington, DC; Canada, and 20 additional nations. Walden students live in all 50 states and in more than 165 countries. The staff is clustered in the main academic office in Minneapolis, Minnesota and the main administrative office in Baltimore, Maryland, but other staff members work virtually and/or in office sites in the U.S. and abroad. The varied locations of the Walden faculty members, students, and staff create a unique challenge for

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bringing community members together for collaboration, information, and exchange of ideas. Further, Walden University is part of Higher Education Corporation; some staff members are dedicated support for Walden University but housed within shared services divisions. Therefore, it was important for those employees who support Walden be included as part of this process. This created an additional challenge and opportunity for the Education and Communication working group, as appropriate strategies were identified for all of the Walden University dedicated staff to be included in the outreach strategies.

Preparing for a Regional Reaffirmation of Accreditation at a Virtual University

Walden University's HLC self-study steering committee made a conscious decision that, based on the mission of the university, community involvement would be an important part of the process overall. More specifically, the committee wanted a deliberate and engaging education and communication strategy for the university's key stakeholders to ensure broad community involvement in the self-study process. Staff members and students may have little background knowledge of accreditation, and faculty members who understand accreditation may not have experience supporting accreditation efforts. To further support Walden's adherence to the five criteria of accreditation as set by the HLC, the steering committee valued the input of the committee in the reaffirmation process.

Supporting community understanding and engagement in a self-study process in a virtual environment created unique challenges. Because Walden's campus is virtual, there is a strong reliance on technology. One of the initial questions was defining who comprises the "Walden community." Obviously, faculty, students, and staff are significant members of the university community. The definition was expanded, however, to include alumni, prospective students and their families, field experience supervisors, partners, and employers who provide jobs for Walden graduates. Although the focus of this report emphasizes the communications with the internal Walden community (current students, faculty, and staff), many of the strategies and communication vehicles described were utilized with and were applicable to external constituents as well.

The committee quickly realized that Walden's constituents had varying levels of understanding about accreditation. The great geographic and cultural differences among Walden's students, staff, and faculty members also posed a difficulty to be overcome. The time zone variations presented problems for synchronous meetings.

Engagement of the Walden contributing faculty (part-time faculty) was essential. Community building is particularly important for virtual faculty, and many efforts during the 3 years of the committee's existence were focused on this goal. Creating a sense of collegiality and connection through community building is one aspect of faculty support that may be particularly relevant for online and virtual faculty (Velez, 2009).

Online faculty members may experience unique challenges in faculty professional exchange and interaction. For instance, online faculty members may feel a sense of isolation and disconnect from their colleagues (Eib & Miller, 2006). However, research indicates that primary motivators for part-time faculty include the joy of teaching and personal satisfaction (Tipple, 2010), which reflect a high level of intrinsic motivation for both teaching and professional development in teaching. Effective professional collaboration for online faculty is situated in the online teaching experience and supports community development among those faculty members who are broadly located and may have limited or little interaction with one another (Bonura, Bissell, & Liljegren, 2012). A long-term approach to faculty development must include community building among the faculty members (Eib & Miller, 2006).

While the number of universities offering virtual instruction continues to grow, there is minimal published research that addresses the needs and support of virtual instructors. The intent of the committee was to use an appropriate framework situated within the online context to ensure the engagement of the entire faculty body (as part of the larger Walden community). The intent of this case study is to share lessons learned and best practices identified, to address the current gap in the research literature. Strategies are offered for how to facilitate a sense of connection by part-time/virtual faculty, as well as among staff and students, to foster a sense of connection to an institution that spans time zones and geographic boundaries.

Walden is fortunate that approximately 25 faculty and staff members serve as consultant evaluators for HLC. Because of the geographic distribution of the university, Walden employs faculty members with experience in accreditation in other regions and programs. There are also Baldridge examiners among Walden's faculty. The knowledge and experience of this diverse faculty were beneficial, not only in preparing for the reaffirmation of accreditation self-study and site visit, but also in helping the committee face the daunting task of engaging the entire Walden community. The committee regularly sought input from faculty representatives for feedback about both communication strategies used, and proposed new approaches.

Walden's staff members and students, like faculty members, are geographically distributed and had varying understandings of the reaffirmation of accreditation process. As key constituents in the self-study process, educating and communicating with, as well as engaging with Walden staff and students was critical.

A broad group of people was selected to work on the self-study process. Each participant was deliberately chosen by the steering committee because of his or her role at the university or the constituent group the participant represented. Therefore, the Education and Communication working group also represented various constituencies within the university. The members of the Education and Communication working group included Kimberlee Bethany Bonura, Ph.D., Executive Director of the Center for Faculty Excellence (CFE); Suzanne G. James, Ph.D.,

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Program Director in The Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership; Michael Karpouzie, Project Manager; Kathy Buonanno, Student Communications Director; Emily DeMarco, Executive Director of Communications; Brenda Kruse, Academic Operations Manager; Patricia Ryan, Senior Performance Specialist; and Shelley Potler, M.S.Ed., Editor of Academic Publications.

Both Bonura and James, through their roles at Walden, represented the voice of the faculty. In addition, James is an experienced consultant evaluator with The Higher Learning Commission and was able to help ensure that the team's efforts and information remained consistent with commission expectations. Karpuzie was a project manager for the committee. Buonanno was the expert in the tone and information sharing with Walden students. DeMarco was able to ensure that staff and faculty communications were appropriate; she oversees many marketing, branding, and events teams at Walden. Her skills in those areas added value to the activities of the team. Kruse represented staff and was the liaison between the working group and the self-study leadership. Her technology experience was invaluable in working with eCampus. Potler is the university's academic editor. She played an important role in drafting many and editing all of the communication messages. Ryan worked with developing trainings and webinars for faculty and staff. As further evidence of the differences at the university, even the Education and Communication working group was geographically dispersed with members in New Mexico, Maryland, and Minnesota. The purpose of outlining the various roles and contributions of the team members is to emphasize the importance of a combined skill set and diverse perspectives in ensuring effective communication with the full university community.

Preparation of Communication

The efforts of the Education and Communication working group were considered by the Steering Committee to be a key part of the overall process throughout the self-study—with its own section on the timeline (Figure 1) and as a standing agenda item on each steering committee meeting. Additionally, while other working groups were represented only by their chair on the Steering Committee, both co-chairs of the Education and Communication working group were full members of the steering committee. Further, Kruse was a member of the Education and Communication working group and a key manager of the overall accreditation process, as a direct report to the Chief Academic Officer (CAO), who also served as the self-study coordinator.
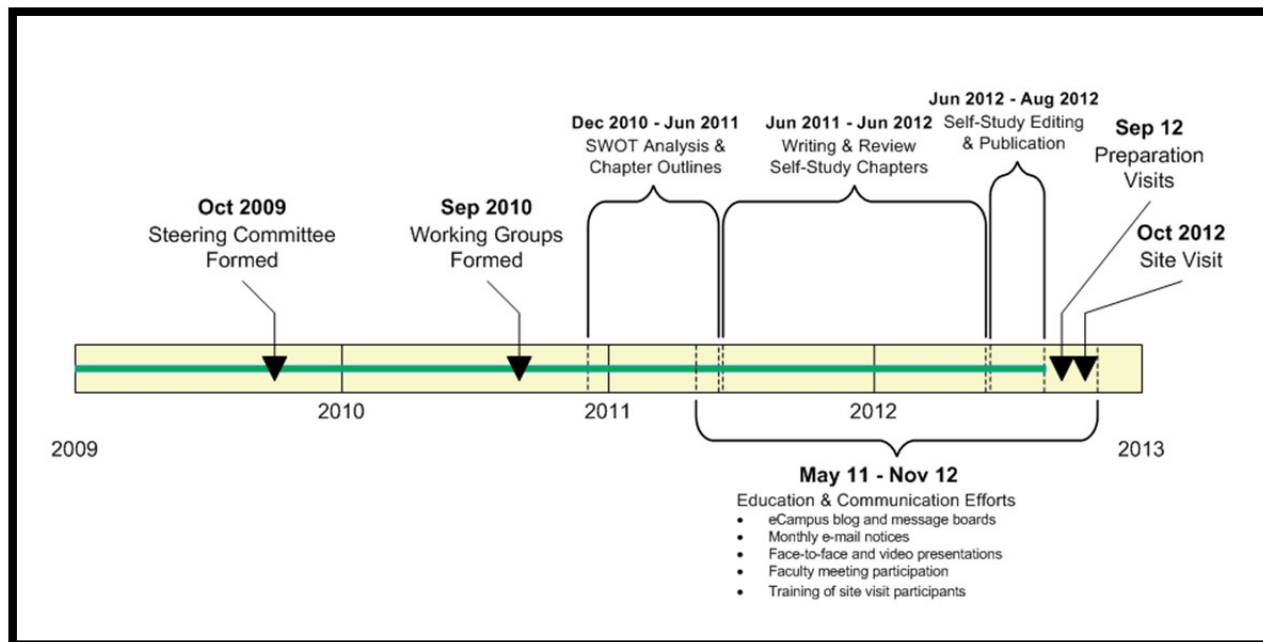
Figure 1. HLC Self-Study process timeline.

The composition of the steering committee and the working groups for Walden encompassed more than 130 people from all parts of the university working directly on the self-study in working groups or sub-groups (Figure 2).

The Education and Communication working group was one of three operational working groups, in addition to the criterion working groups and special topics working groups. The first task of the Education and Communication working group was to identify the goals that would be used throughout the 2- to 3-year period until the site visit. The Steering Committee had given a clear directive that they wanted the Education and Communication group to not simply give information, but to have a robust education effort that allowed opportunity for engagement and participation. Therefore, the Education and Communication working group concluded that the goals would be to (1) educate stakeholders about the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the importance of accreditation, and their role in the accreditation process; (2) provide consistent and quality communication to ensure stakeholders are appropriately informed about HLC and the self-study process; and (3) create and execute an appropriate and supportive communication and education plan during the HLC self-study process. Once the goals were set, a communications plan was developed and a theme was decided. The theme was "Share Your Voice"—Figures 3–5 show some of the specific examples of these efforts with this theme threaded throughout. Figure 3 is a poster that encouraged community members to "Share Your Voice." This poster is one example of several posters that were used in face-to-face venues such as faculty meetings. Figure 4 is a bookmark that provided information about the criteria for accreditation and the eCampus community. Faculty received this bookmark in face-to-face

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trainings, and new faculty received the bookmark via mail in new faculty welcome packets. Staff also received copies of the bookmark during education sessions hosted by the Chief Academic Officer at Walden's academic and support office locations. Figure 5 is an advertisement in the residency program book. This advertisement was featured in all residency program books for more than a year, so that all students, faculty, and staff who participated in residency sessions received this information.
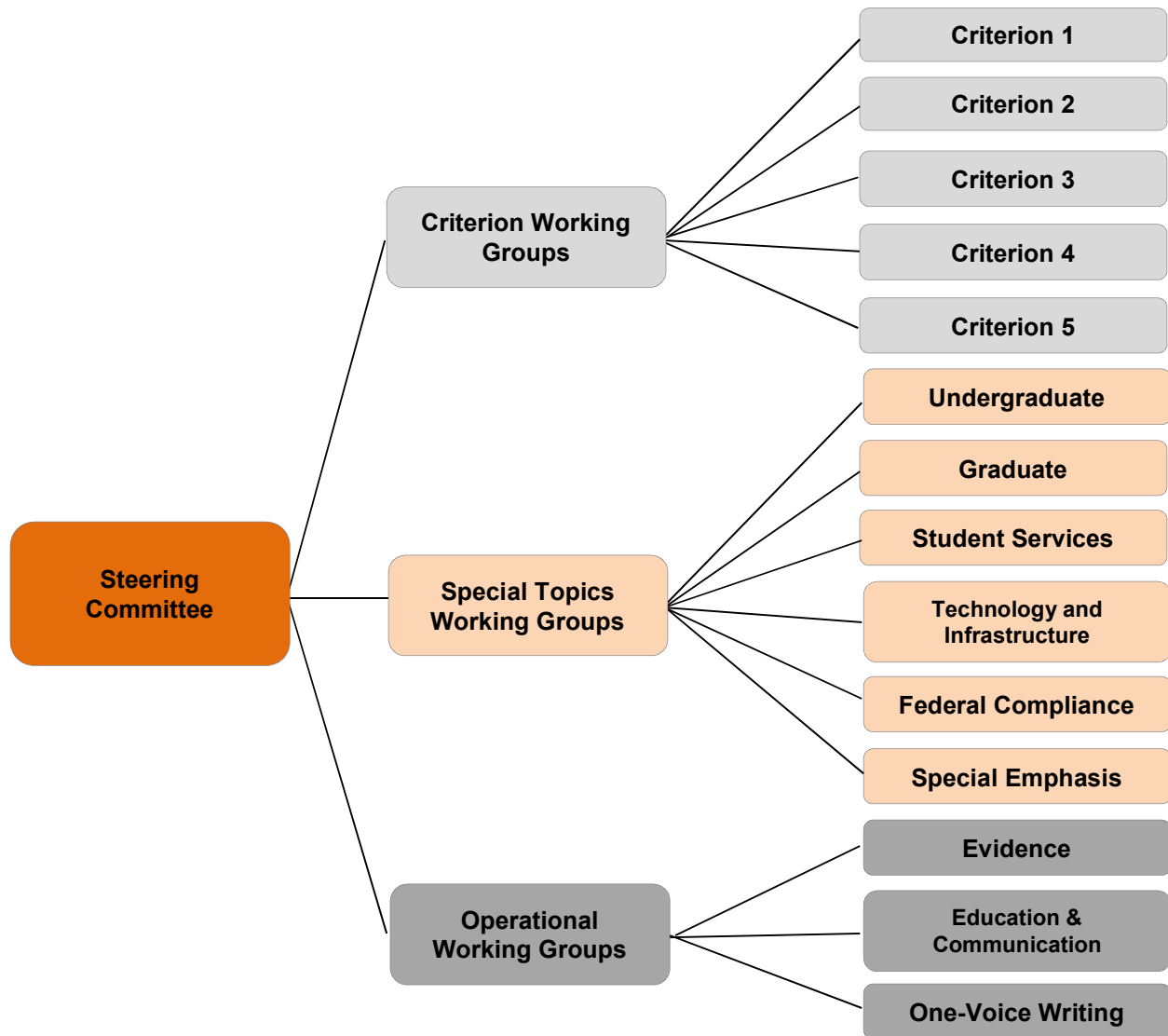
Figure 2. Structure of the HLC Self-Study Committee.

By creating the communications strategy before actually beginning work, the team was able to consider communication modalities, frequency, authors and participants, and how to reach the various audiences. Additionally, the Education and Communication working group was able to compare the strategy against the self-study timeline and align significant communication efforts around milestones in the timeline.

In addition to creating the communications strategy, a vetting and approval process was decided upon for all communications:

1. The Education and Communication working group would review and reach a consensus.

2. Then, the steering committee chair and self-study coordinator would review and approve or suggest changes.

3. The communication was then passed to a liaison on one of the support teams who specialized in accreditation and regulatory matters.

This helped to ensure that Walden's self-study leaders were aware of and in support the Education and Communication working group's efforts and, perhaps more importantly, that the information was accurate.

Once the goals had been set, the communications plan had been fully drafted, and the vetting process had been confirmed, the Education and Communication working group was finally able to start work. The members of the working group believed that it was imperative for communications be regular and deliberate—but not overwhelming. Although one of the easiest and fastest methods of communication is e-mail, constituents at the university receive many e-mails each day so the volume of messages was of great concern. It was imperative that each message sent have something new and engaging to say or the recipients would quickly learn to ignore those messages coming from the Education and Communication working group.

Throughout the self-study process, the Education and Communication working group had a regular feedback loop with the steering committee and leadership. In addition to having university leadership as part of the vetting process, regular meetings were held with them, and a standing agenda item on each steering committee meeting to share upcoming plans and ask for feedback on challenges or recent efforts.

The Education and Communication working group also collaborated closely with the self-study working groups. One major communication channel was a blog (Figure 6). The self-study working groups were asked to author blog posts about what they were working on and provided them a chance to ask the community for feedback. The working groups were then able to read the comments on their blog and incorporate that information back into their team discussions and their chapters.

Throughout the 3-year process, the Education and Communication working group had to be prepared for making changes and adjustments. It was crucial that the team be nimble and willing to make adjustments to the plan. It is not surprising that the plan as initiated became a working, living document that changed many times throughout the process, but the core goals and the deliberate nature at the start continued throughout the project.

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Figure 3. A poster encourages the Walden community to "Share Your Voice!"

Figure 4. A bookmark outlines the accreditation process and further emphasizes the "Share Your Voice!" theme. Bookmarks were included in welcome packets to new students and faculty members.

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Figure 5. A residency program book ad reiterates the "Share Your Voice" theme and outlines the key components of each criterion.

Friday, September 14, 2012

Read an Overview of the Self-Study Prepared for The Higher Learning Commission!

Posted by *HLCFeedback* Posted At *15:45 PM CDT*

Do you need a reason to celebrate? Read the Self-Study White Paper, which is an overview of our full self-study submitted to the Higher Learning Commission, and you will be optimistic about your association with Walden University. A brief history of Walden establishes the background of our growth. Many of the significant changes and accomplishments at Walden are noted in the White Paper. For each of the Five Criteria of Accreditation, we discuss how we meet the core components in our programs, curricula, policies, and processes. Just as important, we note our challenges and suggestions for continuous improvement. The development of social change as a special emphasis at the university is discussed. Walden is a future-focused, learning-focused, connected, and distinctive organization. Walden University continues to achieve a high standard of teaching, research, scholarship, and service in meeting its mission and mission-related emphasis on positive social change. The process of researching and writing the self-study is cause for celebration, and you will be proud that you are a part of such an institution.
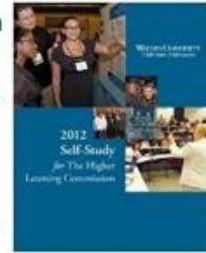
Share Your Voice!
Comment below to share your reactions.

Click Here to Pledge Your Support*!*

Click Here to View a Recent Video Presentation *from our president, Dr. Cynthia Baum, and chief academic officer, Dr. Eric Riedel!*

Figure 6. Example blog post.

Communication Process

The Education and Communication working group used a continuous improvement process to consistently evaluate the ways in which the committee communicated with staff, students, and faculty about the HLC self-study and identify potential improvements to the communication process. The committee began with the development of a communication plan and tracked progress via a communication schedule, to ensure that the process was cohesive and appropriate. Monthly updates were provided to both the steering committee and the chairs/co-chairs of the HLC self-study working groups, and feedback from these groups was

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used to further improve the processes. In addition, the overall process was discussed with the Academic Leadership (at the CFE Monthly Academic Leadership training session) and the CFE Advisory Council to gain additional input about how to best obtain faculty input and support faculty engagement in the process. The Education and Communication working group also conducted a survey on the eCampus community to gather input from staff, faculty, and students about how they preferred to be informed.

The Education and Communication working group communicated via a wide range of strategies, including face-to-face sessions (residencies, faculty meetings, and office training sessions), video (two videos from the CAO), live webinar (with the CAO after the both the Summer 2011 and Summer 2012 faculty meetings), e-mail, eCampus surveys and blogs, university publications (department newsletters, the *Ponder* [Walden's online university newsletter], and the Alumni Magazine), Facebook, and Twitter.

Although the Education and Communication working group served as the central source for and distributor of HLC communication, the members of the committee sought to represent the diverse voices of the HLC self-study team. The blogs were authored by members of each of the criterion and working groups, as well as from members of the steering committee and chairs/co-chairs group. All working groups completing blogs were requested to provide a feedback form about their experience on the blog and the way that they would use the information; this was intended to support a feedback loop for the information gathered from the community and also support process improvement. The blog discussion process was modified based on feedback from the working groups, moving from a separate discussion in the discussion board to discussion directly on the blog to facilitate a simplified and centralized discussion.

The Education and Communication working group tried to maintain a balance of providing ongoing information without overloading the community with redundant information. In many cases, the same content was repurposed to be relevant for a given segment of the community or to reinforce the same information in a new and different way. That is, the message was modified to be interesting and engaging to the particular audience. The aim was to provide opportunities for engagement and participation and make it clear to faculty, staff, and students that this was a community effort that involved and required participation from all members of the Walden community (Table 1). The eCampus community was purposely named "Accreditation: Your Voice in Continuing Quality" to reflect the central theme that every member of the Walden community had an important part in supporting the institution's commitment to accreditation in general and to this self-study in particular.

Table 1. *Communication Methods*

• E-mail
• Bookmarks
• Message Boards
• Virtual Campus Tour
• Webinars
• Videos
• Face-to-Face and Virtual Presentations
• Buttons
• Self-Study White Paper
• Classroom Participation
• Blogs
• Office Monitor Displays
• Publications
• Working Group Care Packages
• Call for Comment

Results

While not all activities (Table 2) yielded response from the community, the Education and Communication working group continued to use multiple methods with the intent of reaching as many members of the community as possible. In particular, videos and face-to-face opportunities seemed to provide the greatest response. The videos yielded the largest interaction from the student population via follow-up conversation on the blog (Table 3).

Table 2. *Key Activities*

Deliverable	Description	Timing
Committee Member Identification	Steering committee met and selected all working group members and requested their participation, including the Education and Communication working group.	September 2010
Goal Development	Developed and submitted for approval the goals of the Education and Communication working group.	October 2010
Communications Plan, Schedule, and Protocol Development	Developed drafts of the communication plan and shared with steering committee leadership over a 6-month period. When a final plan was approved, the committee began its work.	November 2010–March 2011

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Deliverable	Description	Timing
Faculty Meeting Presentations	Collaborated with self-study leadership to develop and, in some cases, host presentations for the general session and breakout session meetings at the bi-annual faculty meetings.	Winter 2011 Summer 2011 Winter 2012 Summer 2012
eCampus community and Blog launched	Launched an online community, *Accreditation: Your Voice in Continuing Quality.* Thirty-six blog posts were created; 2 posts each from the criterion and special topics working groups, and others from the steering committee, university leadership, and Special Emphasis working group. Created a form to support collection of eCampus metrics and feedback.	May 2011–October 2012
E-mail Communications	Sent e-mail communications to students, faculty, and staff members when updates to the eCampus site or blog were available; typically sent 1–2 times each month.	May 2011–October 2012
Staff Education Sessions	Held sessions to educate staff about the HLC process and the importance of their participation. These sessions were held face-to-face in all Walden offices.	May–July 2011
Bookmarks	Created bookmarks with information about the criteria for accreditation and how to access the eCampus community. These were handed out at bi-annual faculty meetings, in-person staff presentations, and sent in new faculty and student welcome packets.	May 2011–October 2012
Academic Residency Program Book Ad & Welcome Meeting Presentation	Prepared an ad for use in the academic residency program books to reach students, faculty, and staff attending residencies. Provided slides and scripts for the welcome meeting at residencies.	June 2011 (updated December 2011) – October 2012
Faculty Meeting: Meet & Greet Fair Participation	Hosted an information table at the University Faculty Meeting: Meet & Greet Fair with information about the self-study process, criteria for accreditation, and engaging activities for the faculty to participate in. Posters were created as visuals to stimulate discussion and engagement with faculty. In Winter 2012, a commitment poster was created for faculty and staff to sign and pledge their support and, in return, they received a button.	Summer 2011 Winter 2012 Summer 2012

Deliverable	Description	Timing
Social Media	Launched the use of social media to make announcements about updates and new materials, as appropriate.	August 2011–October 2012
Video Messages from Leadership	Use of video messaging to engage and educate students, faculty, and staff members about the accreditation process, Walden's progress, and why it was important to them. Videos included messages from the President and/or Chief Academic Officer.	September 2011 February 2012 July 2012
Academic Leadership Session	Hosted a session for Academic Leaders to discuss their role in the reaffirmation process and how they can support and communicate about it to their faculty.	September 2011
Newsletter Articles	Included articles in departmental newsletters, such as the Center for Faculty Excellence, Center for Research Quality, University Assessment Council, university online newsletter (the *Ponder*), and the Alumni Magazine.	September 2011–October 2012
Meeting Representation Plan	Worked with steering committee and working group chairs/co-chairs to identify regularly attended university meetings at which they would provide updates about the self-study process. Prepared monthly update presentations.	October 2011–October 2012
Care Packages for Working Groups	Sent mid-process care packages from the self-study leadership to all working group members to thank them for their efforts; included something sweet (candy), something salty (nuts or pretzels), and something to help manage the stress (stress ball and gift card to Starbucks).	December 2011
Classroom Participation	Requested that program directors share information with faculty that could be posted in classroom announcements and shared with students.	February 2012
Training Module	Developed a brief training module in the university's web-based training system for all faculty and staff.	July 2012
Call for Public Comment	Posted a Public Call for Comment on the university website; this was to meet an HLC requirement.	July–August 2012

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Deliverable	Description	Timing
Preparation Sessions / Webinars for Faculty and Staff	Hosted preparation sessions including detailed information about what to expect during the site visit, sample interview questions, and opportunities to practice at the Faculty Meeting, in the Minneapolis office, and via webinar for all other faculty and staff.	July 2012–September 2012
Office Monitor Displays	Displayed ads on the monitors located in the cafeterias of the Walden offices with reminders about the upcoming site visit.	September–October 2012
Self-study White Paper	Created a brief overview of the key points of the full self-study document to share with faculty, staff, and students.	September 2012
Virtual Campus Tour	Supported steering committee leadership in the creation of a tour of the services and online classrooms in Walden's distance learning environment.	September–October 2012

Table 3. *Participation Metrics*

	Title	Author/Group	Date Posted	Blog Comments	Message Board Posts	Survey Resp
Blog 1	Welcome	Education & Communication	5/2/2011	20	314	269
Blog 2	What is Reaffirmation?	Education & Communication	5/11/2011	10	148	N/A
Blog 3	The Reaffirmation Process—Where We Are	Education & Communication	5/20/2011	20	N/A	N/A
Blog 4	Who Are Our Constituents and What Is Their Perception of Service and Engagement?	Criterion 5	6/1/2011	30	55	N/A
Blog 5	How Has Walden Incorporated Undergraduates into the University	Undergraduate	6/15/2011	17	41	N/A

Open Access

	Title	Author/Group	Date Posted	Blog Comments	Message Board Posts	Survey Resp
Blog 6	Beyond the Classroom	Criterion 4	6/29/2011	35	62	41
Blog 7	The Walden Self-Study as a Virtual and Collaborative Writing Project	Graduate	7/15/2011	22	24	N/A
Blog 8	Criterion 3: Student Learning and Effective Teaching	Criterion 3	8/2/2011	37	31	N/A
Blog 9	Special Emphasis: The Social Change Mission	Special Emphasis	8/17/2011	63	18	N/A
Blog 10	Criterion 2: Preparing for the Future	Criterion 2	9/6/2011	18	16	N/A
Blog 11	Your Voice Matters in the HLC Self-Study Process (w/ Video Presentation)	Education & Communication	9/19/2011	53	15	N/A
Blog 12	Common Voice or "One Voice" in a Self-Study Narrative	One-Voice Writing	10/3/2011	10	2	N/A
Blog 13	Serving Professional Students Through Graduate Education at Walden University	Graduate	10/17/2011	32	38	N/A
Blog 14	Mission and Integrity at Walden University	Criterion 1	11/1/2011	26	23	N/A

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	Title	Author/Group	Date Posted	Blog Comments	Message Board Posts	Survey Resp
Blog 15	Regional and Specialized (Program Accreditation): What's the Big Deal, Anyway?	Steering Committee	11/18/2011	26	N/A	N/A
Blog 16	Learn How Walden Addresses HLC's Federal Compliance Requirements	Federal Compliance	12/8/2011	20	N/A	N/A
Blog 17	How Does Walden's Technology and Infrastructure Affect Your Academic Life?	Technology & Infrastructure	12/15/2011	13	N/A	N/A
Blog 18	HLC Self-Study Updates and New Video Presentation	Education & Communication	2/23/2012	73	N/A	N/A
Other	Sign Up to Pledge Your Support!	Education & Communication	2/23/2012	39	N/A	N/A
Blog 19	Update on Criterion 1: Mission and Integrity: Faculty Perspectives on the Walden Values, Mission, and Vision	Criterion 1	3/9/2012	3	N/A	N/A
Blog 20	Update on Criterion 2: Preparing for the Future	Criterion 2	3/23/2012	3	N/A	N/A
Blog 21	Update on Criterion 3: Student Learning and Effective Teaching	Criterion 3	4/11/2012	10	N/A	N/A

	Title	Author/Group	Date Posted	Blog Comments	Message Board Posts	Survey Resp
Blog 22	Update on Criterion 4: Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge	Criterion 4	4/16/2012	2	N/A	N/A
Blog 23	Update on Criterion 5: Engagement and Service	Criterion 5	4/30/2012	24	N/A	N/A
Blog 24	Update: Undergraduate Working Group, Part 1	Undergraduate	5/23/2012	3	N/A	N/A
Blog 25	Update: Undergraduate Working Group, Part 2	Undergraduate	5/23/2012	3	N/A	N/A
Blog 26	Update: Undergraduate Working Group, Part 3	Undergraduate	5/23/2012	8	N/A	N/A
Blog 27	Update: Student Support Services Working Group	Student Support Services	6/11/2012	1	N/A	N/A
Blog 28	Update: Graduate Education Working Group	Graduate	6/25/2012	5	N/A	N/A
Blog 29	Get Prepared for HLC!	Education & Communication	7/17/2012	7	N/A	N/A
Blog 30	Update: Technology and Infrastructure Working Group	Technology & Infrastructure	8/6/2012	0	N/A	N/A
Blog 31	Special Emphasis: Review of Social Change Literature	Special Emphasis	8/31/2012	44	N/A	N/A
Blog 32	Special Emphasis: Review of Social Change at Walden University	Special Emphasis	9/13/2012	1	N/A	N/A

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	Title	Author/Group	Date Posted	Blog Comments	Message Board Posts	Survey Resp
Blog 33	Special Emphasis: Perspectives on Social Change at Walden University	Special Emphasis	9/13/2012	0	N/A	N/A
Blog 34	Special Emphasis: Expanding Our Understanding of Social Change at Walden University	Special Emphasis	9/13/2012	7	N/A	N/A
Blog 35	Read an Overview of the Self-Study Prepared for The Higher Learning Commission!	Self-Study Steering Committee	9/14/2012	3		
Blog 36	Update: HLC Site Visit	Self-Study Steering Committee	11/6/2012			
TOTAL				688	787	310

Through a deliberate focus on community building and community education, the Education and Communication working group involved Walden's full university community in the process of reaffirmation of accreditation. In both the 2010 and 2011 Walden student satisfaction surveys, 69% of Walden students indicated that they are at least somewhat familiar with the regional reaffirmation of reaccreditation process.

Walden University conducted an engagement survey in 2012 via email to 1,660 Walden and Higher Education Corporation staff members that had direct contact with Walden University. Departments included Admissions, Academic Advising, Registration Services, Financial Aid Office, Enrollment Advising, Center for Faculty Excellence, Center for Research Support, Center for Student Support, Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, Field Marketing, Administrative Support, Product Management, and the Office of Academic Affairs. In total 1,304

surveys were completed with a 78.6% completion rate (or a 79.6% response rate). Among respondents, a full 94% indicated that they were aware of the university's commitment to accreditation (5% were neutral, and 1% indicated lack of awareness). In the same survey, 82% of staff indicated that they received sufficient communication about the accreditation efforts (13% were neutral, and only 5% indicated that they did not receive sufficient communication). Likewise, 95% of all employees (both Walden and shared services) report an understanding of the Walden mission, and 96% report commitment to the mission; there were no statistical difference in this commitment between Walden and shared service employees.

The Walden faculty body demonstrated improved understanding of the process over the timeframe of these communication efforts. In 2010, 69% of the faculty body indicated awareness of the self-study process. By 2011, 85% of the faculty body indicated awareness of the self-study efforts. Likewise, in 2010, 78% of the faculty body indicated that they were at least somewhat familiar with the regional reaffirmation of accreditation process; by 2011, 86% of the faculty body indicated they were at least somewhat familiar. In 2010, 41% indicated they were familiar or very familiar, and this rose to 50% by 2011. Walden's faculty demonstrated a strong baseline understanding of the university mission, with 98% in 2010 and 99% in 2011 indicating they at least somewhat clearly understand Walden's mission of social change; 82% in 2010 and 85% in 2011 indicated that they clearly or very clearly understand the mission of the university.

Anecdotal evidence from faculty and academic leadership indicated that the Education and Communication working group was unique in the efforts to inform and engage the full faculty body and campus community. The contributing faculty, in particular, reported that, at most campuses, adjunct and non-tenure track faculty are not included in the accreditation process and that Walden's ongoing efforts to include contributing faculty have been significantly different and inclusive. The Education and Communication working group continued to strive to communicate and engage in a way that supported every member of the staff, faculty, and student body to understand that their voice mattered in the university's self-study process.

Lessons Learned

Walden's participation in the reaffirmation of accreditation effort yielded many positive results in terms of knowledge about the university and expertise in communicating to the entire community. The Education and Communication working group, in particular, identified several strategies that worked well:

- Gaining early support from leadership—the academic and administrative leadership of both the university and of the HLC self-study provided back-up and support in all efforts.
- Building an *Education and Communication Plan* before communication begins—having a roadmap guided and focused the communication efforts and provided a skeleton schedule.

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- Sharing the message multiple times in multiple ways—"tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, tell them what you told them"; the old maxim is true not only for presentations, but for large communication efforts as well. Some recipients responded better to videos than to blogs; others preferred e-mail messages. The variety of communication strategies allowed for individuals to take advantage of the communication vehicle with which they felt most comfortable.

- Educating the community about regional accreditation—many constituents were unaware of the importance of regional accreditation or confused the university-wide accreditation efforts with programmatic accreditation of a specialized degree program.

- Being nimble and open to change—it was crucial that the Education and Communication working group be flexible and adapt to changes as they developed. Although there was remarkable stability in the faculty and staff throughout the 3-year process, there were some changes in personnel and positions. Additionally, as some communication strategies were found not to be working well, new things were tried.

- Identifying advocates to help spread the message to internal staff at meetings—of great assistance to the success of the education and communication effort was the recognition that reinforcement messages by individuals at their regular meetings was effective in driving home the importance of the reaccreditation process.

- Providing interactive opportunities when possible—inviting constituents to participate in an activity (e.g., role-playing, signing a poster, responding to a blog) proved a successful method to encourage engagement.

- Having fun with it—the Education and Communication working group took every opportunity to enjoy the process and celebrate the successes.

The Education and Communication working group also identified areas in which improvement opportunities exist:

- Understanding the real reach—there were not good tools in place to measure how effectively the messages were communicated and how many constituents were actually contacted.

- Determining methods to gather, analyze, and report data—again, better tools were necessary for accurate analysis of the success of the communication effort.

- Completely overcoming the confusion between programmatic and regional accreditation—because some programs within the university were pursuing programmatic accreditation and their efforts overlapped with the HLC process, distinguishing between the two types of accreditation was often perplexing for all constituents.

- Setting realistic expectations for time commitment—initially, estimates were that participants would need to devote 10% of their time in years 1 and 2 of the process and 20% in year 3. Although the needed hours fluctuated, in many cases, these time commitments were underestimated.

- Identifying advocates to help support the message in the classrooms—determining early on to request and recognize individuals to assist with conveying information and engaging the community, especially students in the classroom, would have benefited the process.

Conclusion

Through a deliberate focus on community building and community education, the Education and Communication working group involved Walden's full university community in the process of reaffirmation of accreditation. Students, staff, and faculty all indicated awareness of the reaffirmation of accreditation process.

One of the most significant outcomes of Walden's effort, however, was the feeling of involvement that was pervasive throughout the university. A greater understanding of regional accreditation was one result of the process. Perhaps even more important were the opportunities to work with colleagues from across the university. The process yielded opportunities to work together across colleges and programs allowing new alliances and friendships to be formed.

Other institutions may find these deliberate processes for supporting university involvement relevant to their own accreditation efforts. The ongoing process of evaluation and improvement throughout the communication efforts allowed for the communication strategy to continually mature and improve throughout the 3 years of the self-study. The Education and Communication working group continued to gather input from students, faculty, and staff, which allowed for the implementation of constituent-centered improvements in the communications process. These strategies would be effective for virtual, hybrid, and face-to-face university accreditation efforts.

References

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