The Role of Faculty in SACS Accreditation: Do you know where your department goals are?

by Candace White,
Faculty Senate President-Elect

Have you discussed and voted on your departmental goals? Since each department on campus was asked to identify up to six goals - with faculty input - by early November as a first step in the SACS accreditation report, all faculty members should be able to say "yes" to this question.

The request for goals and other information about accreditation was presented to the deans at the Chancellor's Council meeting on Sept. 25. The deans passed the information on to department heads, who should be in the process of involving faculty in the development of department goals. You knew that, right?

Beauvais Lyons, Faculty Senate President, wants to be sure that we comply with the expectation from SACS that there is "bottom-up" faculty involvement in identifying and voting to approve the goals. His question to the faculty is: What are we doing to ensure this level of faculty participation in the process at the department levels?

"From a SACS perspective, if faculty haven't signed off [on the goals], we're not in compliance," according to Jim Moran, Associate Vice Provost, who has responsibility for collecting these goals. "Department heads will provide me with the date that the goals were verified by the faculty. I will trust the department heads that it was done." Faculty need to confirm that the dates are accurate.

SACS, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, was organized to develop standards and

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processes for accrediting colleges in the South. SACS accreditation is important not only because it encourages improvement, but also because regional accreditation determines eligibility for federal Title IV funds. According to the SACS website, each institution conducts a comprehensive study of its programs and services, which results in a document that evaluates the institution's effectiveness in reaching its goals.

Departmental goal setting is the first stage of the SACS accreditation process. It is easy to dismiss such an exercise, and assume that it is just part of yet another required administrative report, but according to Moran, not having input into these goals could come back to bite you.

"If your department has goals, and you make a request or submit a proposal that has nothing to do with achieving those goals, that could be a basis for denying your request," Moran said. "If the goals are there, but not used for planning, we're not in compliance."

Although universities seek SACS accreditation every ten years, this year marks the beginning of an accreditation process that differs from what it has been done in the past. According to Moran, "it is an integrated process to help departments get better." "SACS wants to be sure that departments are looking at outcomes and that the outcomes can be measured. The focus is on student learning, and this has to be faculty-driven."

Rather than looking at a checklist or a snapshot, the SACS accreditation team, who will conduct the site visit to UTK in Spring 2005, will look for evidence of on-going assessment and improvement. The team will look closely at the plan.

Another difference in the accreditation process from previous years is that for this cycle, most of the documentation will be web-based. Everything that

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goes to SACS will be available for faculty to see on the web. Moran points out that "the web site is not a document, but rather a documentation of the process."

The site will be "built" as the process unfolds. Department goals will be used to build goals for the university. SACS is less interested in what the goals are than in how they will be addressed and measured. "In that regard, SACS is the impetus for doing something we should be doing anyway," Moran says.

The web site has been up for a few weeks. Check it out. Go to the UT homepage; click on Academic Programs. On that page on the bottom right, click on Institutional Improvement (SACS). Here you will find everything you need to know and more, including the timeline for the process. You can watch the process unfold. Moran's goal is to keep the process transparent, but the web site will have two areas – one "public," available to anyone in the world with web access, and a "private" area available only to members of the UT community.

To view the members-only area, look at the bottom right hand corner of the UT home page and click on "my/UT." Enter your netID and password, and you can see if your department goals have been submitted, with or without your input. If you see department goals posted on the site that you have never seen before, find out what is going on in your department. If you have problems finding your department's information or if you have additional questions, contact Jim Moran at 4-3265 or email him at jmoran@utk.edu.

For the time being, you will only be able to see what your department is doing, but eventually department goals will be used to build institutional goals. At some point, all department goals will be posted on the public part of the site, but some things such as departmental action plans and learning outcomes will be available only to faculty in the department on the part of the web site accessible with your netID. Later this winter, department goals will be followed by SACS-required action plans, goal assessments, and faculty credential documentation.

A final difference is this is the first year that Knoxville Campus accreditation will include the Health Science Center at Memphis as part of a single accredited unit.

Moran believes the critical factor in the accreditation process is institutional improvement. He sees the process as "building something for institutional improvement that we can use for SACS. It is the beginning of the process, a whole new way of doing things that is different from what has been done before. The time to get everybody on board is now."

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PROPOSED TIMELINE FOR FACULTY HANDBOOK ACTION

Senate Meeting, Monday November 17, 2003, 3:30-5pm, UC Shiloh Room
(Chapters 1-2, first reading of Chapter 3)
Executive Committee, Monday December 15, 9am-noon, Arena Dining CD
(discuss Chapters 4-5-6)
Senate Meeting, Friday January 9, 2004, 2-4pm, UC Shiloh Room
(Chapter 3, first reading of Chapters 4-5-6)
Executive Meeting, Monday January 12, 2004, 3:30-5pm, AHT Board Room
(Handbook Discussion if needed)
Senate Meeting, Monday February 2, 2004, 3:30-5pm, UC Shiloh Room
(Chapter 4-5-6)