

# ACCREDITATION OVERVIEW

## 1 WHAT IS THE HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION?

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The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) is an independent corporation that was founded in 1895 as one of six regional institutional accreditors in the United States. HLC accredits degree-granting post-secondary educational institutions in the North Central region, which includes 19 states. While individual programs may also be accredited through discipline or profession-specific agencies, the Higher Learning Commission is the body which accredits RRCC as a whole.

## 2 WHAT IS AQIP?

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The AQIP Pathway is one of three options institutions have for maintaining accreditation with HLC. Like the other pathways, it is focused on quality assurance and institutional improvement, but with an added emphasis on helping institutions achieve continuous quality improvement. Many of the processes are built around the AQIP Pathway Categories, which provide a framework that institutions can use to examine their key processes and analyze, understand, and explore opportunities for improvement. The AQIP Pathway follows an eight-year cycle.

## 3 WHAT'S SO IMPORTANT ABOUT ACCREDITATION?

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College accreditation is a guarantee that a college or program meets certain principles and provides quality education.

- It gives the assurance that, you will be able to attain definite educational outcomes.
- It pledges that you'll get qualified instructors and high quality up to date curriculum.
- Without accreditation by a nationally recognized accredited organization, a school and its students are not eligible to participate in government student assistance programs like federal grants and loans.
- Most employers who offer tuition assistance will not reimburse your tuition if you attend a school that is not accredited.
- Most employers will look at a degree from an institution with accreditation as a credential demonstrating motivation and quality education.
- If you intend to transfer credits to another college, you are required to attend an accredited school.

## 4 OH, SO THIS IS ALL ABOUT ACCREDITATION?

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NO! At RRCC, we engage in assessment for a myriad of reasons, but the primary four are these:

1. We are committed to putting our students first. Assessment efforts, at their heart, are aimed at improving our institution to increase the quality of the student experience. By assessing both operational aspects as well as student learning, we take a two-fold approach to finding the best and most innovative ways to consistently monitor and improve how we do our work.
2. We need to connect the operations of individual areas to the larger mission. A high-functioning institution of higher education is mission-driven. We want to ensure that as we progress we are always keeping this in mind, and connecting our work to a larger purpose outside of our functional areas.

3. We must make the most of limited resources. In a climate where public funding of higher education is declining, we will continue to have ongoing tensions between providing the highest quality instruction and services possible, with efforts to keep tuition and costs to our students low. By connecting our budget processes to assessment, we can ensure that those programs and resources providing the largest impact to students are supported, and that we can continue to provide professional development and funding for initiatives that have proven to contribute to student success and classroom achievement.

4. We are accountable to external stakeholders. As is the case with all institutions receiving Title IV funding (Financial Aid), we are required to maintain accreditation through our regional accrediting body – the Higher Learning Commission.

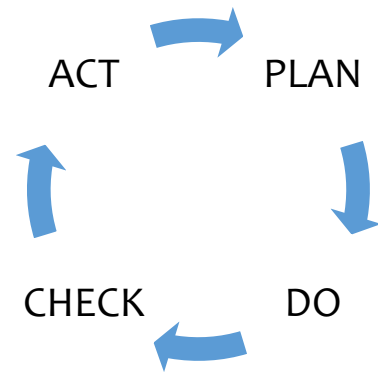
## 5 WHAT IS ASSESSMENT?

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In the simplest terms, assessment is a continuous quality improvement cycle which utilizes data to inform decisions and actions.

Assessment follows a standard cycle which includes the following steps:

- Plan: use baseline data and research to decide where you want to go.
- Do: Implement improvements
- Check: Analyze comparative data to see if you met your expected outcomes
- Act: Modify improvement plan based on results from comparative data



## 6 HOW DO WE DO CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AT RRCC?

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As a way to involve all areas of the college in continuous quality improvement, the ILEARN (Improving the Learning Experience Across Red Rocks Now) process was created. This process is no more than a formalized assessment cycle which includes documentation. The Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP) Summary contains five short sections: (1) focus, (2) data, (3) measures of success, (4) comparative data, and (5) conclusions and future action. These CIP summaries demonstrate that we are engaged in continuous quality improvement, and so it is critical that you understand your operational units CIP and can speak about it if asked.

## 7 BUT I THOUGHT ASSESSMENT WAS ABOUT STUDENT LEARNING?

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It is. Again, assessment is a cycle used for continuous quality improvement. While the ILEARN CIP focuses on operational issues, the second part of the ILEARN process is all about improving student learning through assessment. The same cycle applies, but for student learning assessment we use this cycle to look at specific learning outcomes, determine student performance and level of learning regarding them, and then adjust our teaching strategies to improve the learning of our students.