

Maps & Missions

Sandra L. Pennington, PhD, RN

Chief of Staff, Office of the President and ALO

Jessica D. Egbert, PhD

Executive Vice President of Strategy and Engagement

Rocky Mountain University of Health Professions, Provo, Utah

Mapping (as an action) demonstrates connections and relationships between landmarks and is used to guide the traveler towards the specified destination. Enhanced by technology, including GPS and Google, mapping has become efficient and reliable while simultaneously retaining historic references and records.

Maps show us where we are going and tell us where we have been. If we are lost, a map can aid us in determining what road and direction are required to get back on course to our destination.

To continue the analogy of a journey in the context of accreditation and mission fulfillment, a vehicle represents your higher education institution, the institutional mission is the destination, and the accreditation process may be represented by the sophisticated GPS (or trusted navigator). Essential to achieving mission fulfillment is the historic context and strategy for navigating the roads that lie ahead.

Avoiding & Managing Potholes

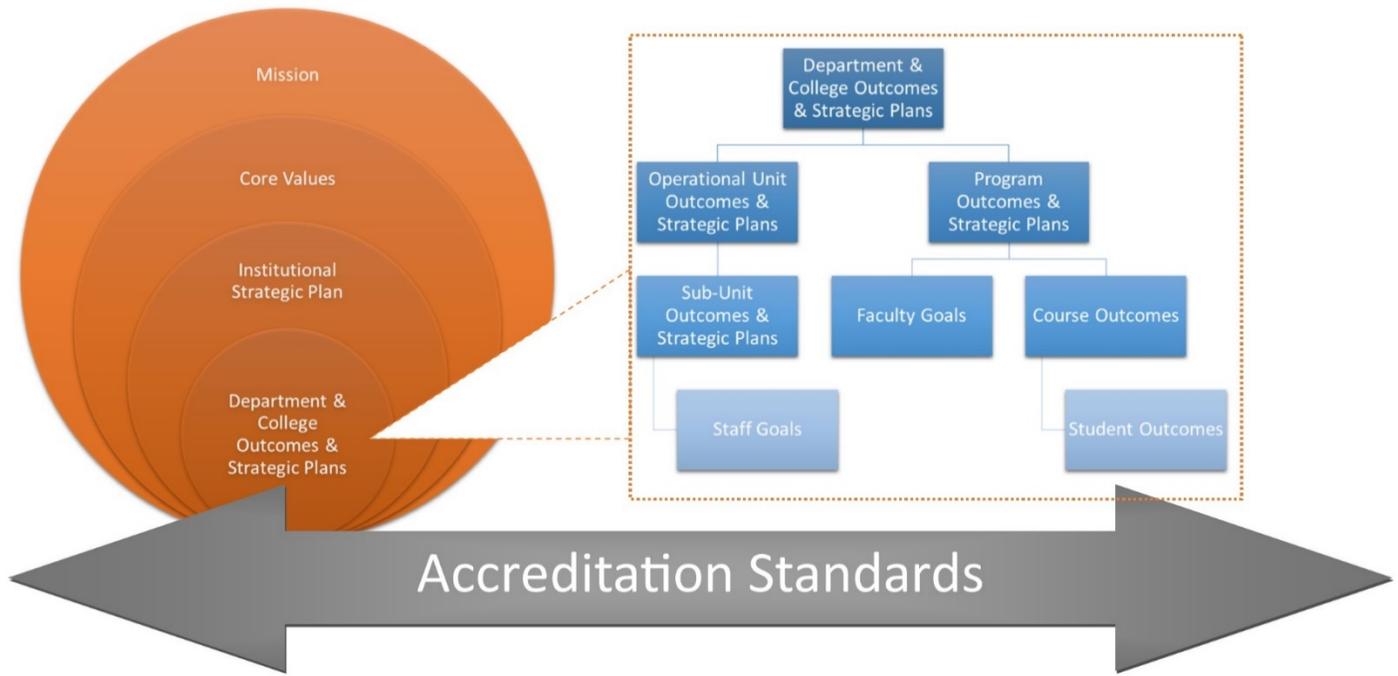
The mission-focused accreditation process is a journey of change, improvement, and growth that both challenges and satisfies. Meeting threshold expectations of quality takes persistence and a systematic process of assessment and continuous improvement that facilitate ongoing identification of areas of strength or needed improvement. This investment in continuous improvement may be at times painful, as self-reflection and peer evaluation often are. (After all, most institutions risk hitting a few potholes along the way.) Yet, those bumps need not send your journey off-course. Rather, they provide the opportunity to evaluate your path, confirm the destination, and check-in with the GPS. External challenges may include funding shortfalls, legislation and accreditation changes, and increased competition.

In addition to the bumps caused by the external environment, your institution also must address internal distractions. Just as cars require maintenance, an institution also encounters internal challenges that create opportunities to refocus on the destination (institutional mission) and receive supportive guidance provided through the accreditation seven-year cycle. In this case, competing priorities, resource challenges, loss of employees, and process failures may result in your occasional tire blow-out.

For both internal and external “potholes,” mapping processes integrated across the institution drive a culture of mission fulfillment through which all strategies and outcomes are informed. Your institutional commitment to meaningful decision-making using triangulation of data from multiple supports an underlying assessment culture that is valuable in both avoiding and managing potholes.

So, back to the initial concept of mapping.

The relationships and connections across landmarks that guide your institution towards mission fulfillment must be visible and transparent for effective navigation. Truly, the mission should inform every aspect of your institution. Consider the following model that addresses both academic and operational institutional aspects.



The model demonstrates how connections may be made from staff goals and student outcomes all the way through the institutional mission and with the ongoing support of accreditation standards. This process presents the institutional mission as the key driver of decision-making and makes this apparent to constituents.

To operationalize this strategy and demonstrate the contributions of the accreditation GPS, a sample template may be useful for your institution:

	Measure/Initiative Example	NWCCU Standard Alignment Examples (2020 Proposed)
Student Outcome	Demonstrate comprehension of concept X via deliverable Y.	1B1, 1C2, 1C6, 1D4
Course Outcome	80% of enrolled students will demonstrate comprehension of concept X at a B- or higher via deliverable Y.	1B1, 1C2, 1C6, 1D2, 1D4
Program Outcome	80% of graduates will complete a capstone project demonstrating application of concept X.	1B1, 1C2, 1C5, 1C6, 1D2, 1D4
College Outcome	80% of enrolled students will graduate from undergraduate degree program Z within six years of enrollment.	1C1, 1C2, 1D2, 1D3, 1D4
Institutional Strategic Plan Initiative	Develop and enroll students in program Z in 2019.	1B1, 1B2, 1B3, 1B4, 1C1, 1C3, 1C4, 1C7, 1C8, 1D1, 1D3, 2B1, 2B2, 2B3, 2B4, 2D2, 2E2, 2F1, 2F2, 2F3, 2G1, 2H1
Core Value Alignment	Excellence, Responsibility, Learning, Integrity	1D1, 1D4, 2B2, 2C1, 2C2, 2C3, 2F1, 2F3, 2G1, 2H1
Mission Alignment	To Provide Quality Undergraduate Education that Results in Gainful Employment.	1A1, 1B1, 1D1, 1D2

Now, back to the journey. There is a quote attributed to Lewis Carroll that says, “If you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there.” The same is true in this scenario. If your institution is traveling a destination-less journey (no or limited connections to the mission across all programs and departments), the map is rendered useless. However, if your mission is clear and connected, each milestone is guided with intent and purpose. Should potholes appear along the way, support is readily available.

Identifying Service Stations

Mission fulfillment support (we will call them service stations for the purpose of this analogy) comes in the form of mapping - accreditation standards, institutional values, departmental and college outcomes and strategies, student learning outcomes, and other related initiatives and outcomes. Activities, such as strategic planning retreats, systematic assessment and continuous improvement processes integrated into each job description, dashboards for convenience and real-time monitoring of key performance indicators, and on-the-spot Net Promoter Score surveys from students and employees provide the data and the mechanisms to support decision-making. These service stations remind us of the “why” of our institution’s existence. In fact, it is these service stations that add value to higher education by upgrading the quality of our outcomes and deliverables. For example, regional accreditation is an optional process that adds value to institutions and to students by guiding responsible operations and governance while supporting quality educational programming and gainful employment.

When used within a culture of ongoing reflection and continuous improvement, accreditation standards may be embraced as such support – the GPS for guidance and a service station for overcoming potholes. The challenge here lies in the tendency to wait until the car breaks down before realizing the oil should have been changed a long time ago. Meaning, do not wait until a scheduled self-study report is due to start reflecting on what your institution does to demonstrate accreditation compliance. In addition, do not wait to begin collecting the evidence of compliance in your data, your stories, and your continuous improvement activities months before your report is due. Schedule regular check-ups to recalibrate the GPS, document your mileage, and change the oil!

Reaching the Destination

By building connections to its mission, anticipating and mitigating challenges, and sustained monitoring of accreditation standard alignment, an institution will be well-equipped to reach its destination. This process prepares the institution to provide evidence of its historic path and its future objectives, telling the institution’s story for accreditors, the public, and those for whom meeting the standards of accreditation matters most – our students.