Middle States Accreditation:
The Role of Faculty Governance in the Process

Introduction
The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) is a professional association devoted to educational improvement through accreditation. Middle States’ accreditation is an expression of confidence in an institution’s mission and goals, its performance, and its resources. The heart of accreditation is the self-review process, in which institutions demonstrate how they meet 14 accreditation standards within the context of their own institutional mission and goals. Faculty Governance is interwoven into many of these standards. Therefore, the accreditation process is not only an opportunity for faculty to examine the role of faculty governance, but to engage the administration in discussions on improving and strengthening faculty governance with the common goal of achieving the institution’s mission, goals and objectives.

The Self-Study Process
The accreditation process includes an extensive institutional self-study process that produces a self-study report. The self-study has 2 major purposes. The PRIMARY purpose is to advance institutional self-understanding and self-improvement. The report should be analytical and forward-looking. It should be used to identify problems and develop solutions as well as identify opportunities for growth and development. The second purpose is to demonstrate to MSCHE and other external audiences that the institution meets the standards for accreditation.

A broad cross-section of the campus community is expected to participate at every stage in the self-study process. A Steering Committee may be appointed or elected, but must include adequate faculty representation. The MSCHE recommends the inclusion of “known cheerleaders” as well as a few “known skeptics.” Since an effective self-study is a major project involving a significant investment of time and resources, some institutions adjust the responsibilities and teaching loads of faculty members who have leading roles in the self-study process. The Steering Committee must promote communication during the entire process. The entire campus community should have opportunities at various points in the process to learn about and respond to self-study issues. Face-to-face meetings, email and electronic posting of documents and drafts may be used to facilitate communication and elicit feedback.

Accreditation Standards and Faculty Governance
The accreditation process focuses on 14 standards, or characteristics of excellence. In order to become accredited, institutions are expected to demonstrate these standards in substantial measure, to conduct their activities in a manner consistent with the standards, and to engage in ongoing processes of self-review and improvement. Although there are fourteen individual standards, these standards should be viewed as an interrelated whole. The first seven standards address Institutional Context, and the second seven focus on Educational Effectiveness. Consistent with the intended emphasis on assessment, each of these two sections concludes with a related assessment standard (Standard 7: Institutional
Assessment and Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning). For each standard, the MSCHE manuals provide a broader context and examples of the types of assessment and documentation that may be included in the self-study process.

Several of the standards are more relevant to faculty governance than others, beginning with Standard 4. Standard 4 focuses on governance at all levels within the institution, including faculty governance. In order to meet this standard, there must be evidence of faculty participation in policy development and decision-making at many levels within the institution. Curriculum development and promotion and tenure are both identified as activities under the purview of faculty governance. All activities are expected to be conducted with integrity and transparency in order to promote academic freedom and measurable outcomes.

- **Standard 4: Leadership and Governance**
  - The institution’s system of governance clearly defines the roles of institutional constituencies in policy development and decision-making. The governance structure includes an active governing body with sufficient autonomy to assure institutional integrity and to fulfill its responsibilities of policy and resource development, consistent with the missions of the institution.
  - The MSCHE provides the following context for this standard: “Institutional governance provides the means through which authority and responsibility are assigned, delegated and shared in a climate of mutual support and respect.”
  - Fundamental elements of leadership and governance include demonstration of a well-defined system of collegial governance including written policies outlining governance responsibilities of administration and faculty and readily available to the campus community.
  - Analysis relative to this standard may include review of faculty senate deliberations and recommendations on matters such as development of curriculum, and promotion and tenure of faculty.

- **Standard 6: Integrity**
  - In the conduct of its programs and activities involving the public and the constituencies it serves, the institution demonstrates adherence to ethical standards and its own stated policies, providing support for academic and intellectual freedom.
  - The MSCHE provides the following context for this standard: “An institution should keep its promises, honor its contracts and commitments, and represent itself truthfully. Institutions should adhere to such integrity in all institutional settings, venues and activities.”
  - Fundamental elements of integrity include a climate of academic inquiry and engagement supported by widely disseminated policies regarding academic and intellectual freedom.
Analysis relative to this standard may include evidence that faculty handbooks describe promotion, compensation, tenure and grievance procedures, and an analysis of outcomes of these activities.

- Standard 10: Faculty
  - The institution’s instructional, research, and service programs are devised, developed, monitored, and supported by qualified professionals.
  - The MSCHE provides the following context for this standard: The faculty and other qualified professionals are responsible for devising and developing an institution’s academic, professional, research, and service programs within the framework of its educational mission and goals. They are committed to all aspects of students’ success.
  - Fundamental elements of faculty include the demonstration of an educational curricula designed, maintained and updated by faculty, and the appropriate institutional support for the advancement and development of faculty.
  - Analysis relative to this standard may include evidence of faculty productivity in the scholarship of teaching as well as discipline-specific research. Assessments of faculty attitudes, faculty development programs, and appropriate policies are also encouraged.

Keep in mind that faculty involvement in the accreditation process is not limited to these 3 standards. Indeed, the faculty should be deeply involved in the evaluation of all standards, particularly those involving curriculum and student assessment, as presented in standards 11, 12 and 14:

- Standard 11: Educational Offerings
  - The institution’s educational offerings display academic content, rigor, and coherence that are appropriate to its higher education mission. The institution identifies student learning goals and objectives, including knowledge and skills, for its educational offerings.

- Standard 12: General Education
  - The institution’s curricula are designed so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills, including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competency.

- Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning
  - Assessment of student learning demonstrates that, at graduation, or other appropriate points, the institution’s students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional and appropriate higher education goals.
Given the need to view all the standards as interrelated, faculty should have involvement in the entire self-assessment and accreditation processes.

MSCHE accreditation also includes an on-site evaluation conducted by a team of qualified and appropriate practitioners. This team of peer reviewers will spend several days at the institution in order to evaluate whether the institution has complied with the accreditation standards and achieved its own stated objectives. During the site visit, the team will meet with all constituencies of the college community: the College Council, members of other appropriate governance bodies, as well as administration, faculty, staff, and students. Information gathered during the site visit will supplement information included in the self-study to draft the team’s report. The written team report initiates a process that includes opportunities for the institution to review and comment. It culminates in review by the Commission’s Committee on Evaluation Team Reports and final action on the granting of accreditation by the Commission.

Accreditation attests that an institution has met the following criteria:

- that it has a mission appropriate to higher education;
- that it is guided by well-defined and appropriate goals, including goals for student learning;
- that it has established conditions and procedures under which its mission and goals can be realized;
- that it assesses both institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes, and uses the results for improvement;
- that it is accomplishing its mission and goals substantially;
- that it is organized, staffed, and supported so that it can be expected to continue to accomplish its mission and goals; and
- that it meets the eligibility requirements and standards of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

More information concerning Middle States Accreditation is available through the Office of the Provost:
http://www.suny.edu/provost/academic_affairs/RegAccred.cfm

MSCHE publishes numerous documents that describe the accreditation process, the accreditation standards, and guidance on navigating the self-study process. Most of these documents are available online: http://www.msche.org/publications.asp

Several of these documents were heavily utilized in preparing this summary of the MSCHE accreditation process and its significance for faculty governance.
Self-Study: Creating a Useful Process and Report:

Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Requirements of Affiliation and Standards of Accreditation