TO:            University Community  
FROM:          Gary L. Miller  
DATE:          March 28, 2011  
SUBJECT:       University Accreditation

This is a time of unusually rich discussions about the environment for student learning at Wichita State University. We are addressing the Kansas Board of Regent’s Foresight 2020 strategic plan, as well as our Performance Agreements and a new process for Program Review. At the same time The Ad Hoc Committee on General Education is advancing in its work. And we are beginning to address a new process put in place by our regional accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission.

Many of you are already familiar with HLC from your involvement in the Self Study leading to the university’s 2007 reaccreditation. More of you will be asked to become engaged in the coming months in the next round with HLC, which has made major revisions in its process.

The HLC is rolling out a new accreditation process over the next few years that will require us to rethink how we perform and assess our educational mission. This new process, called Pathways, separates compliance from improvement.1 Universities will still be required to build portfolios of data and materials, documenting (through more frequent peer reviews) their compliance with the association’s many standards, with much of the information being made public.

On a parallel track, or pathway, universities will have the flexibility to propose their own projects or themes as the focus of the self-improvement piece of their accreditation review, and will be judged (once the projects are approved by a peer team) by how well they carry out the plan.2 It’s similar to the Regents’ Foresight 2020 in that we choose the steps to pursue broad goals.

An approach to the improvement piece of HLC’s new process is one that views quality and accountability in an ecological context. Shavelson3, one of the leading thinkers on these issues, defines a process that sets high outcomes for learning quality, which includes learning in the major and learning in general education; accreditation that incorporates new methods for quality improvement; and an audit system that focuses on the rigor of outcomes set by the institution, the quality of the processes the institution has in place for improvement, and the extent to which the institution is progressing toward its goals (Figure 1).

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Assessment of Learning Quality
(Includes General Ed, Program Review)

Accreditation
(Includes QI Plan)

Academic Audit
(Includes Performance Agreements)

Figure 1. Approach to Quality and Accountability

All of these areas should be viewed together and complementary. For example, when we address KBOR’s *Foresight 2020* goals and objectives, those discussions should fit into our overall plans for improvement at WSU. KBOR’s Performance Agreements and Program Review requirements should also be a part of our overall plans. Too frequently we have rushed to address weaknesses or gaps in a compartmentalized fashion. This has led to duplication, and at times, a waste of resources.

Determining what quality means in our business and how we can prove it must be a part of what we do going forward. The redefining of general education will help in this process and will finally determine dimensions we want every WSU graduate to attain.

In preparation for our work in quality improvement and accountability, we will begin the process this year of establishing a timeline for our work toward reaccreditation, which involves assigning responsibility. In this light; we are beginning the process by establishing the following deadlines:

- **Spring 2011:** Steering Committee formed and Web page launched. ([www.wichita.edu/wsuhlc](http://www.wichita.edu/wsuhlc))
- **Fall 2011:** Work begins (led by Associate Provost Richard Muma) to assess the environment and engage the University around HLC’s new accreditation model.
- **Spring 2012:** Quality improvement project selected.
- **Fall 2012-Spring 2013** Quality improvement project (proposal) submitted to HLC for approval.
- **Spring 2013-Spring 2016** WSU implements its quality improvement project.
- **Fall 2016-Spring 2017** WSU submits quality improvement project report and other documents for its accreditation reaffirmation.

I am excited about the future of learning at WSU and encourage you to engage in discussions and activities that will move our institution forward.

GLM/lcm