

**Bookend** - Welcome to the *Leatherneck Accreditation Lab*, a podcast to prepare for Western Illinois University's HLC Accreditation site visit. This is Debbie Kepple-Mamros, Director of Assessment, Accreditation and Strategic Planning. We have several episodes planned. One episode will be released each week up until the site visit on March 29 - 30, 2021.

Episode 1: *What is accreditation and why is it important?*

Speaker 1 - Debbie Kepple-Mamros

- Welcome to this first podcast episode of *The Leatherneck Accreditation Lab* where we will be providing you with information about accreditation. This is episode 1, titled *What is Accreditation and Why is it Important?* So, let's jump right in and get started. Dr. Mark Mossman, Associate Provost for Undergraduate and Graduate Studies is here with us, as is Dr. Lori Baker-Sperry, Professor of Women's Studies and WIU's Assessment Coordinator.

Speaker 2 - [Mark Mossman](#)

- Hello to all our listeners.
- Western Illinois University has its ten-year reaffirmation of accreditation with HLC coming up this semester.
- Even though this event only happens once every 10 years, Western has been actively working towards this event since the last time HLC visited, as is typical of high quality universities.
- I'd like to introduce Lori Baker-Sperry, who was a central figure in our accreditation efforts in 2011 and has continued to work towards WIU's accreditation in 2021.
- Lori, can you give us a brief overview of your experience with Western's HLC accreditation process in 2011. What is HLC? What was the 2011 process and visit like? What were some of the challenges? And finally, how has your experience preparing for this upcoming accreditation visit been different?

Speaker 3 - [Lori Baker-Sperry](#)

Higher Learning Commission is one of six regional accreditors – they cover postsecondary institutions in the midwest and parts of the southwest.

Their job is to ensure that we can provide evidence of the quality of a Western education. During our review:

1. they evaluate the evidence we provide,
2. provide us with feedback and recommendations, if there are problem areas they will examine those and
3. confirm that we are able to evaluate ourselves to maintain that standard.

HLC emphasizes:

1. institutional planning and;
  2. a focus on student persistence and completion;
  3. But HLC regards the **teaching mission** and a focus on **assessment of student learning** as primary and as encompassing every aspect of students' experience:
1. Recruitment, admission, fees, financial aid support, advising, classes; cocurricular offerings; programs such as FYE, and post-graduation placement.

HLC asserts that ASL is essential to continuous improvement because the direction and decisions of a university should be well grounded in evidence. ASL should be deeply embedded in an institution's activities, at all levels. HLC requires we have clear goals, involve faculty at all points in the process, and use the assessment results to improve our students' ability to learn.

HLC ensures that we meet the commitment we make to our students- we invite them here and they (as well as HLC) expect that we will provide them with a quality education that will be in operation for the duration of their degree programs. For this reason, HLC seeks information on sustainability and wise management of its resources as well.

There is a laundry list of reasons Western needs to be accredited. They include: Accreditation is very important for an institution.

1. For example, if a university is not accredited, it becomes difficult for a student to
  - a. transfer credits to **an accredited** college,
  - b. it is more difficult for a student to get into graduate or professional school.
  - c. Students at **unaccredited** colleges generally cannot get federal or state financial aid.

They may also **not** be able to use scholarships or tuition help from employers, community organizations, etc.

#### Speaker 4 - [Mark Mossman](#)

- So besides the financial and legal aspects of accreditation, going through this process every ten years allows a university to reflect and review its processes.
  - It keeps us accountable
  - It reminds us what we need to focus on. These are things like: assessment, program review, the evaluation of the success of our graduates, being consistent with our mission, operating with integrity, and shared governance among other things.
- The assurance argument allows all the stakeholders to read about the various aspects of the university that they may only have contact with on rare occasions.
- For the details, HLC has chosen a team of 7 evaluators to read our assurance argument and visit with university faculty, staff and students, and evaluate the university through a student survey. Normally, all 7 would travel to both the Macomb and Quad Cities

campuses to do this evaluation over several days. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, much of this will be done remotely but there will be one on-site evaluator who plans to spend the day.

- The survey to students went out on January 25.
- The assurance argument is a document that requires us to show evidence that Western meets the required core components to reaffirm its accreditation. These are divided into 5 sections or Criterion.
  - Mission
  - Integrity, Ethical and Responsible Conduct
  - Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources and Support
  - Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement
  - Institutional Effectiveness, Resources and Planning
- Final drafts of each section of our assurance argument can be found by going to Western's website and searching for "Assurance Argument Review"
- Western will be notified of HLC's decision on our reaffirmation of accreditation before the end of Spring Semester.

Speaker 5 - Debbie Kepple-Mamros

- Thank you both. That's all for this episode. If you have any questions, please feel free to email us at [aasp@wiu.edu](mailto:aasp@wiu.edu).

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