

The Four-Year Countdown Guide to Successful Accreditation



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Assessment and accreditation require constant attention and vigilance when you work in higher education. While they may not be considered the most enjoyable of activities, they provide a crucial opportunity to measure progress, reflect on your work, and create new plans to improve student learning and positively impact the student experience. Even though accreditation visits and reports aren't part of your everyday schedule, creating a culture of continuous assessment and preparation for accreditation leads to greater improvements and a more streamlined process.

Here at Weave, we've been in your shoes. We have over 100 years of collective experience in assessment and accreditation on our team, as well as the privilege to learn from the expertise of our clients and colleagues at over 500 accredited institutions worldwide. We are always looking for ways to make assessment and accreditation easy, engaging and effective. Along with creating the Weave software products, we regularly put our heads together to create helpful content for our peers working in the field.

We believe assessment and accreditation are some of the most important activities performed at an institution, and the individuals who lead these efforts are some of the most dedicated, level headed and passionate leaders on campus. We hope this guide proves useful for you and your colleagues, whether it introduces you to a new strategy or idea, serves as a resource to pass on to faculty and staff, or reminds you of the reason we keep showing up to lead the charge on assessment and accreditation.





The Most Important Tasks Four Years from Accreditation

We begin our guidebook four years out from the accreditation year in order to give ample time for planning and execution. The most crucial step during this year is **developing and implementing a plan for collecting assessment and accreditation data.**

Most accreditors require at least three years of data when submitting documentation for accreditation. So, if you haven't been collecting evidence consistently since your last accreditation, beginning the collection process four years out leaves you enough time to gather the minimum amount of data required.

A plan for collecting data should include **what** you are going to collect, from **whom**, and **when**. Be very specific when addressing each of these questions. The more specific you can get now, the easier the collection of documentation will be down the road.

We suggest creating a calendar or table that details everything you will be using in your report, down to the granular details of what you are collecting, from whom, when it's due, and which standard it supports.

After creating an outline or calendar detailing the evidence you'll need, share it with all involved staff and administrators. You want everyone to know what they are responsible for early on in the process and that you are expecting them to meet their deadlines. This last part brings us to the biggest challenge in year four...

A plan for collecting data should include what you are going to collect, from whom, and when. Be very specific when addressing each of these questions.





The Challenges Four Years from Accreditation

You may encounter colleagues who don't understand the reasons for assessment or accreditation, and thus, are not very cooperative. Their objections usually stem from a belief that assessment and accreditation activities are not part of their responsibilities, or they don't have the time to participate. This is a reality on many campuses, and while challenging, such attitudes provide an opportunity to educate, help, and begin to shift the culture around assessment and accreditation at your institution.

Rather than focusing on individual tasks in your outline and forcing your colleagues to complete them, start from the beginning. Plan meetings to cover the most basic explanations and reasoning behind why this work is so important. Create resources that cover questions such as:

- ✓ **What is accreditation?**
- ✓ **Why do we complete accreditation?**
- ✓ **Why is it important and good?**
- ✓ **What are the expectations?**
- ✓ **What resources are available to help everyone complete this work?**

Providing resources, in the form of handouts and meetings, as well as by positioning yourself as a resource, will hopefully give faculty and administrators a bigger picture perspective on why their involvement and cooperation in accreditation is imperative to guarantee the success of students and the institution as a whole.



REAL WORLD EXAMPLE

Amber Malinovsky, Director of Interactive Content at Weave, was previously the assistant director of assessment at a university. While there she worked to shift the assessment culture and help her colleagues understand and participate in the assessment and accreditation process.

During one training, facing a room full of faculty, she and her assessment colleague received a particularly pointed question and comment: "Why do we have to do this? Students will still attend our school even if we don't. We aren't going to do this."

You may have gotten this question at your own institution. It's a tough one. Here's how Amber and her colleague responded:

"Perhaps students will still come to our university; however, it wouldn't be the school or experience we want for them. Skipping assessment and accreditation means no federal student aid, no research dollars, no grants, no accredited degrees and fewer resources for everyone. Ultimately, it means the university would probably cease to exist. This work may be frustrating or cumbersome, but it's important for the success of the university, faculty and the students."

It's pretty difficult to argue with that, wouldn't you say? When facing tough questions at your institution, keep in mind the bigger picture and how assessment and accreditation benefit your school. This will help others broaden their perspective and understand the purpose of these activities and the value of their participation.



4 YEARS FROM ACCREDITATION

After painting the bigger picture of why accreditation is important, provide tangible suggestions and resources to assuage any worry or stress that may result from this additional work.

Assessment is often one of the more challenging standards to document for accreditation. Some suggestions to encourage high-quality yet simple assessment within courses or on-campus programs include:

- **Collect samples of student work**, such as research papers or resumes, and while grading, apply an additional rubric (Association of American Colleges & Universities [has great ones](#)) to the sample. This method doesn't require a significant amount of additional work and is very effective as accreditation data. This can be done with a group of faculty graders or within a department.
- **Create surveys or focus groups for non-academic areas**, such as career services, resource centers and student government. You can also use data you're likely already collecting, such as number of participants or time spent. Focus on making your tracking as systematic and organized as possible and you'll have a simple and accurate measure to use for assessment.

The goal with assessment is to guarantee students learn what we expect them to learn and are successful moving forward. Even when this goal is clear, it's easy to feel overwhelmed or frustrated with the assessment and accreditation process. Don't ignore the challenges that faculty and administrators face in this process; instead, acknowledge them and try to help find easier ways to get the work done. Do your best to make it simple, meaningful and enjoyable.



WORTH DISCUSSING: Course Grades As Assessment Outcomes

Using overall numeric or alpha grades as an assessment measure can be tempting for professors and those of us working in assessment. After all, the professor has already done all the work to arrive at the course grade for each student. Unfortunately, course grades don't serve as an accurate measurement of outcomes, as they aren't representative of what someone has truly learned. Course grades demonstrate performance in a class, but may also include points based on attendance, extra credit, test-taking and group projects. These types of points don't do a good job of indicating learning.

For example, let's say a desired assessment outcome for an English class is students being able to correctly cite sources using MLA format. Using a course grade to measure this outcome would tell us close to nothing about the professor's and course's ability to teach that material. The student's overall grade may partially measure his or her ability to cite sources, but it also measures a whole lot of other things.

So, what can be used instead? Two alternatives we recommend are:

Create common requirements across all identical courses.

- For example, require that all sessions of the English class mentioned above include a research paper as the final assignment. The research paper requires citations in MLA format. This gives a large sample of student work and the opportunity to measure exactly how well students are doing on their citations.
- Creating a common rubric for the course also works. Select a sample of student work, get together with the other professors and use the common rubric to grade and assess the results.

Add a pre- and post-class test for students.

- Create a scantron test covering much of the material you hope students will learn in the course. Give this test the first week and last week of class and measure the improvement in student scores.
- A tip with this one: make the tests for credit only, so students aren't worried about their score in the beginning affecting their grade. Require that students who don't take it seriously (i.e. marking the same answer for every question), retake the test appropriately in order to earn credit.



The Most Important Tasks Three Years from Accreditation

In year four you made the plan, now it's time to execute. The most important tasks in year three are:

- ✓ **Collecting high quality, consistent data and evidence**
- ✓ **Making sure you understand all of the standards from your accreditor**
- ✓ **Assembling committees**
- ✓ **Establishing processes**

You should already have your plan for collecting data. Keep up with your plan this year and work with faculty and administrators to get what you need, in the correct format, on or before the deadline. Send reminders before and on submission deadline dates. Check evidence that is being submitted and make sure it is high quality. You don't want to discover that you have terrible or useless data at the end of the year!



Keep up with your plan this year and work with faculty and administrators to get what you need, in the correct format, on or before the deadline.



Two tips for making evidence collection easier:

- **Find champions** – Ask faculty and administrators who are familiar with assessment and accreditation and are supportive of the effort to help mentor others. Leverage their experience and relationships to gain more support through guidance, office hours or workshops for those new to the process.
- **Set 3M outcomes** – Make everyone’s life easier and more enjoyable by insisting that everyone select outcomes that are meaningful to them. This will increase investment and motivation in the assessment process. Cover the 3 M’s for choosing outcomes:

MEANINGFUL – Professors must select outcomes they feel are important

MEASURABLE – Make sure the outcome is measurable with concrete data

MANAGEABLE – Keep the scope and number of outcomes being measured reasonable. Take into account resources and time.

Now you move on to deciphering and addressing your accreditors’ standards. Standards can change or be difficult to understand. Don’t assume that you’ll be okay if you skip over the tough parts. Take the time to find out what each standard means and incorporate it into your overall plan.

Along with collecting data and understanding your accreditor’s standards, we recommend assembling the committees that will help write, edit and manage the accreditation process around the end of year three. Assign specific roles and tasks to each member of the team; this will make it easier to stay organized and hold all team members accountable.

Setting up your project management system is also crucial. Having a process for making sure responses and evidence are collected, deadlines are met and work is saved will make the work this year go more smoothly. Send out assignments and reminders of who is answering specific accreditation questions and how they will submit their responses. If you are using a software platform, such as [Weave](#), make sure everyone understands the settings, saving, and collaboration features. Add additional trainings or workshops if needed.



QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THINKING IN YEAR 3

- Are there questions about standards or evaluation, either from you or professors/faculty?
- Do you understand what the standards mean? Do you know what evaluators are looking for in terms of evidence and documentation?
- What needs to be demonstrated and how?
- How can narrative and documentation work together to create a thorough representation of compliance and improvement?





The Challenges Three Years from Accreditation

The biggest challenge during this time will likely stem from trying to collect data or dealing with data that isn't achieving the desired outcomes. These difficulties can be caused by many factors:

- ✓ **Resistant faculty**
- ✓ **Confusion about what needs to be submitted**
- ✓ **Worries about how the data looks**
- ✓ **Poor data collection or measurement methods**
- ✓ **Courses that require improvement**

Now is the time to take a hands-on approach, work with everyone to collect what you need, and fix any areas that aren't meeting the standards. Remind faculty and administrators that this data is meant to **demonstrate an attempt to improve student learning**. This doesn't necessarily mean achieving 100% of every outcome; it may mean that a target isn't met, and the faculty of that program examine why and how to address it. Ideally, you are showing that you did indeed improve student learning.

If outcomes aren't as strong as anticipated, help faculty reflect and take action to improve. Institutions cannot simply assess and then do nothing; it's important to show you are closing the loop. If the assessment results are weak, there are two possible causes. The first possibility is that the assessment measures have done their job and pointed out areas that require improvement. The second possibility is that the measures utilized were weak, resulting in data that isn't a good representation of reality. Investigate which of these reasons is the culprit and make a plan to fix the outcomes, either by making changes to the course or program, or by looking at different ways to measure student learning or achievement.



WORTH DISCUSSING:

Plan, Do, Check, Act and Closing the Loop

Many liken assessment to the **Plan, Do, Check, Act** process:

- **Plan** what you want to assess
- **Do** the assessment
- **Check** the results against what was expected
- **Act** on your analysis.

In many cases only the first two are carried out though. Plan, Do... Plan, Do... and on and on. There is no closing the loop, which results in no change. Make sure to complete the entire cycle and close the loop by checking your results, coming up with a plan for improvement and carrying out that plan. Then start again at the beginning of the process.





The Most Important Tasks Two Years from Accreditation

Writing the narrative and collecting all documentation is the number one priority two years away from accreditation. Starting now gives you enough time to have a complete rough draft of the report by the end of this year, a full year before your submission date. Imagine how great you'll feel once you get to that point!

Before you begin writing, create an outline of the entire report. Once you have your outline, you should complete an assessment of compliance for each standard. This assessment of compliance essentially asks, "If the visiting team came to campus right now, where are we on compliance and where do we need to improve?" Start by creating a list of all the standards and substandards in a table. Then, ask whoever is responsible for each area to assign a grade based on your institution's current reality from one to five, one being non-compliant and 5 being exceeding standards. Complete this activity before you begin writing the report. The assessment of compliance will alert you to any gaps you face and will give you time to make changes over the next two years. These changes could include creating or refining current policies, changing curriculum, or modifying assessment measures.

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2 YEARS FROM ACCREDITATION

Now you are ready to begin the writing and assembly of all documentation. This is a good time to make sure the entire campus community knows where you are in the accreditation planning process. Inform staff that they should expect calls or further requests for data or evidence, and encourage them to be helpful and cooperative with any requests they receive. We suggest planning a campus kick-off meeting as well, which helps make sure everyone's on the same page and aware of how intense the next two years will be in regards to preparing for accreditation. This meeting is also a great time to introduce the committees and those working directly on accreditation. As always, we recommend supplying refreshments (🍕☕🍪).

Towards the end of year two, once all the writing is complete, you should provide an opportunity for the campus community to review the report and give input. Distribute the report when you believe it's nearly complete and host "brown bag" lunch sessions for anyone to drop-in and provide feedback, ask questions and make suggestions.

Once you complete the community feedback process, you'll need to submit your report to an editor. Determine if you'll be editing the document yourself or if you'll hire or select an editor to go through the report. When selecting an editor, try to find someone who has experience with accreditation editing and is familiar with the process and this type of report. You'll want the editor to focus on:

- **Revising the narrative**
 - This includes, but is not limited to: making sure the report is written in a consistent voice, verb tenses match throughout and names of the school and other proper nouns are uniform
- **Checking links**
- **Making sure all evidence is included**

The editing phase can take a couple months of back and forth communication and edits. Plan for this by beginning the editing phase as soon as writing is complete.



QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THINKING IN YEAR 2

- Can you demonstrate that processes like planning and assessment are ongoing at your institution? Can you document multiple cycles of planning and assessment?
- Does your Compliance Certificate or Self Study Report present a coherent, consistent, logical argument, supported by documentary evidence, for compliance with the relevant standards?
- Have you presented your argument and supporting documents in a clear and concise way, so that evaluators can find what they need quickly and easily?
- Are you using the process to identify ways to improve your institution?





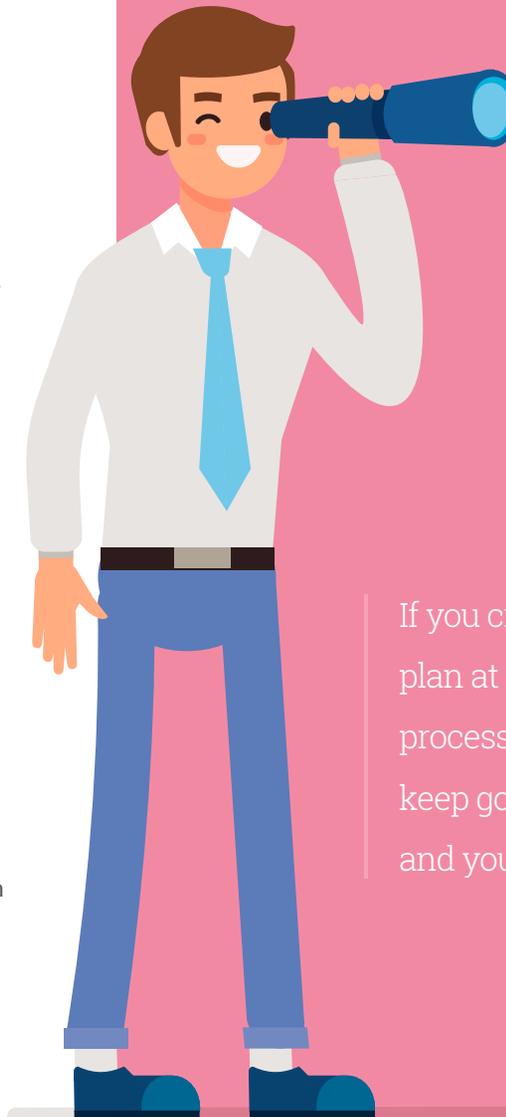
The Challenges Two Years from Accreditation

Falling behind in the reporting or narrative process or realizing you've neglected something and need to scramble to make it up are two potential challenges in year two.

If you created your in-depth plan at the start of this process, all you need to do is keep going and keep yourself and your colleagues on plan. Don't let up because you are approaching the finish line, continue to hold everyone accountable for submitting their evidence and narrative sections. Reminders of deadlines and expectations will be helpful at this point.

If contributors are behind or haven't submitted their materials, do your best to stay calm and help them complete their work. Even when stressed or frustrated, try to show understanding towards others and make the process as smooth as possible. Trying to create a positive experience around assessment and accreditation will help in years to come.

One idea for helping faculty and administrators complete their tasks is scheduling a writing retreat day. Book a room, provide food and drinks, and have someone there to help research and hunt for evidence while everyone else writes. A retreat day creates camaraderie amongst those attending, provides a designated amount of time to get the accreditation tasks done, and usually helps everyone focus a bit better than if they were trying to complete the work on their own.



If you created your in-depth plan at the start of this process, all you need to do is keep going and keep yourself and your colleagues on plan.



The Most Important Tasks One Year from Accreditation

Your report is done! What a relief! Now the focus shifts to planning for the accreditation visit. Just as with the report, the key to planning and executing a failsafe visit is organization and attention to detail.

Start with the basics when organizing the details of the visit. Determine how many visitors you will have and for how long. Next, begin planning the finer details, including:

- **Lodging** – Where will the team stay? Book a hotel close to your institution and book early to make sure the required number of rooms are available. Consider having someone from your institution stay at the hotel as well, so they can act as a point person in case any issues come up.
- **Transportation** – Verify you have licensed vehicles and drivers for the duration of the visit.
- **Meals** – Plan what, where and with whom they will be eating for all meals during the visit. Providing drinks and snacks both on-campus and at the hotel is also a good idea. The accreditation team is working long hours during the visit and will undoubtedly appreciate additional sustenance to keep them going.
- **Meetings** – Book rooms for all meetings during the visit. This may include rooms on campus, as well as at the hotel. Create a backup plan in case a room is locked or inaccessible. Who should be called or where should they go in case this occurs? Also create a plan if a meeting goes over its allotted time. How will the schedule shift to accommodate this?
- **Technology** – Make sure you have the necessary technology for all meetings, including computers, projectors, etc. Create a handout for visitors with wifi information for the hotel and campus, so they don't need to ask. Have an IT staff member on call for the entirety of the visit and provide his or her number to everyone on the university and visiting team so anyone can call if they're having an issue.

Start with the basics when organizing the details of the visit. Determine how many visitors you will have and for how long.





1 YEAR FROM ACCREDITATION

Now is also the time to create an itinerary and schedule to give to the visitors, as well as all university officials involved in the visit. Include meeting information, such as time, location and topic on all agendas. It is also wise to include who should be contacted in case something goes wrong- include name, title and contact information. Select this individual wisely, since he or she is bound to be contacted at some point during the visit. You want someone who can problem-solve, think on their feet and has the authority and resources required to deal with unforeseeable circumstances. If your institution has an event planning academic program or support office, get them involved. They are experts in this kind of thing and could be an invaluable resource.

It isn't uncommon for the visiting accreditation team to ask random faculty and staff about your institution's accreditation, mission, vision, etc. while walking around campus during their visit. One way to prepare for this is making wallet-size cards that include such essential information, and distribute them to all faculty and staff for safe keeping prior to the visit.

Right before the visit, send out a pre-visit email to the evaluators. Use this email to ask about special requests, whether that's the kind of water they want (this could happen!) or specific areas they want to focus on during the visit. Knowing this information ahead of time will allow you to plan ahead and will relieve some of the stress associated with last minute requests.

Create an itinerary and schedule to give to the visitors, as well as all university officials involved in the visit.





The Challenges One Year from Accreditation

As you prepare for the visit, the biggest challenge will be keeping perspective and creating a contingency plan for as many elements of the visit as possible. Accept that unanticipated requests and issues will arise, and rather than stress about the endless possibilities for things to go wrong, use that energy to maintain perspective and plan ahead.

If you've stuck to your plan since year 4, you have several years of data to show the evaluators, as well as a complete and thorough standards report. **This is the most important piece of the entire process.** While it may feel like the end of the world when the evaluators make it clear they only want to drink Fiji water (and you don't have any), remind yourself that the purpose of the accreditation process is to assess your institution and you've put forth immense work to facilitate that.

While maintaining perspective to keep yourself sane, plan for all the extenuating circumstances you can imagine.





AFTER THE ACCREDITATION VISIT

You did it! Congratulations to you and your team for getting through both the report and visit. This is the culmination of lots of work, collaboration and discipline. Thank everyone who was involved. While you may feel the pull to jump into analyzing what went wrong, don't! Start by focusing on wins and what went well! Keep the spirit and enthusiasm alive.

After celebrating, it's time to determine next steps. If you received a monitoring, non-compliance or probation notice, take a deep breath and know that you will be okay. Gather your team and create a plan to develop and demonstrate your institution's commitment and execution of that standard. The plan should include who will be taking responsibility for planning the reaffirmation activities, including the day-to-day work and periodic submissions to the accreditor. You also want to anticipate the resources required for this individual to carry out the reaffirmation plan, whether that means faculty time, budget or further support. Depending on the extent of the sanction, you may need to organize a committee, rather than appointing one individual to be in charge of the process. If this is the case, determine your committee structure (large committee, small steering committee with sub-committees, etc.) and recruit the appropriate members to join. Set an expectation for when the committee will meet and how the work will get done as you move toward the goal of compliance.

If you didn't receive any sanctions, congratulations! However, that doesn't mean it's time to take a break and forget about assessment and accreditation for the next few years. Begin by reflecting on the process internally. Talk with those involved in the process and get their feedback about how they felt everything went, from training to assessment support to writing the narrative to the accreditation visit. Write down the good and the bad, with tips for improvement in the future. By taking note of all the details, you are creating a playbook for ongoing assessment and accreditation. This will be an invaluable resource for future employees involved in the assessment and accreditation process, as well as for you as you begin to develop a new culture on campus. Write down everything you did, what you would change, what worked, questions to consider, what problems arose and how they were handled. All of these details will prevent the same mistakes from being made twice and will make accreditation as painless as possible.

Along with creating the playbook, look for ways to keep assessment and accreditation fresh in faculty and administrator's minds. Set the goal and expectation of assessing every year for the next 10 years, rather than waiting to begin assessment again in six years. This is the perfect time to create a cultural shift.

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Did you enjoy The Four-Year Countdown Guide to Successful Accreditation?

If you have any feedback, comments or suggestions, please get in touch by emailing Amber Malinovsky, Weave's Director of Interactive Content at Amber@weaveeducation.com.



Interested in checking out some of our recent webinars, which cover topics discussed in this guide? Use the links below!

- ✓ [Summer Checklist and Training Webinar](#)
- ✓ [Assessment Techniques in Student Affairs: Documenting Your Effectiveness](#)
- ✓ [Program Review: A Collaborative and Systematic Approach to Program Health](#)

If you want to learn more about [Weave](#) and how [our products](#) can help your institution simplify your assessment and accreditation activities, please [send us a note](#) or [request a demo](#). Our products improve collaboration, drive alignment, provide powerful reporting capabilities and are easy to setup. We also offer expert user support to all our customers, from a team that has been in your shoes and deeply understand assessment and accreditation.