3: Degree Programs: Meaning, Quality, and Integrity of Degrees

(CFRs 1.2, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.6, 2.7, 4.3)

Additional CFRs associated with prompts: 1.1, 2.1, 4.1, 4.4, 4.6

Institutions are expected to define the meaning of the undergraduate and graduate degrees they confer and to ensure their quality and integrity. Quality and integrity have many definitions; in this context WSCUC understands them to mean a rich, coherent, and challenging educational experience, together with assurance that students consistently meet the standards of performance that the institution has set for that educational experience.

Traditionally, institutions have described their degrees either very generally (i.e., as something of self-evident value) or very concretely (in terms of specific degree requirements and preparation for specific professions). This component of the institutional report asks for something different: a holistic exploration of the middle ground between those two extremes, expressed in terms of the outcomes for students and the institutional mechanisms that support those outcomes. Defining the meaning of higher degrees can provide clarity for institutions, for students, and for a public that seeks to understand what unique educational experience will be had at that particular institution and what makes the investment in that experience worthwhile.

CFR 2.2 indicates that the degree as a whole should be more than the sum of its traditional parts: courses, credits, and grades. Exploring the meaning of a degree thus involves addressing questions about what the institution expects its students — undergraduates and graduates alike — to know and be able to do upon graduation, and how graduates embody the distinct values and traditions of the institution through their dispositions and future plans. It leads to analysis of how effectively courses, curricula, the co-curriculum, and other experiences are structured, sequenced, and delivered so that students achieve learning outcomes at the expected levels of performance in core competencies, in their majors or fields of specialization, in general education, and in areas distinctive to the institution. It means ensuring alignment among all these elements, and maintaining an assessment infrastructure that enables the institution to diagnose problems and make improvements when needed. Not least of all, it means developing the language to communicate clearly about the degree — what it demands and what it offers — to internal and external audiences.

Institutions may wish to draw on existing resources that can be used to understand and articulate the meaning of degrees. These include, for example, AACU’s LEAP outcomes, the VALUE rubrics (which align with the LEAP outcomes), high-impact practices (HIPS), and findings from NSSE, UCUES, CIRP, or the CSEQ (see Glossary for information on these resources). As appropriate, institution-level learning outcomes (ILOs) may also play a useful role in defining the meaning of undergraduate and graduate degrees. Identifying common outcomes at the division or school level rather than the institution level may make sense for some institutions.

Another resource is the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP). This framework describes the meaning of three postsecondary degrees: associate, baccalaureate, and master’s and defines increasingly sophisticated levels of performance in five broad areas of learning appropriate to
postsecondary education. The DQP offers institutions—and the public—a point of reference and a common framework for talking about the meaning of degrees, but without prescriptions or standardization.

WSCUC does not require institutions to use any specific framework or resource in the articulation of the meaning, quality, and integrity of their degrees. Rather, institutions are encouraged to develop their own strategies for articulating the meaning of their degrees in ways that make sense for their mission, values, and student populations.

**Prompts:** The following prompts may be helpful in getting started, but the institution is not required to follow these prompts or respond to them directly.

- What does it mean for a graduate to hold a degree from the institution, i.e., what are the distinctive experiences and learning outcomes? For each degree level offered, what level of proficiency is expected? What is the overall student experience? How do these outcomes flow from the mission? (CFRs 1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 2.2)
  [Note: The discussion may focus on institutional learning outcomes that apply to all degree levels, or on the meaning of the degree at each level offered, i.e., associate, baccalaureate, master’s, doctoral.]
- What are the processes used at the institution to ensure the quality and rigor of the degrees offered? How are these degrees evaluated to assure that the degrees awarded meet institutional standards of quality and consistency? (CFRs 2.6, 2.7, 4.1, 4.3, 4.4, 4.6)
- What was identified in the process of considering the meaning, quality, and integrity of the degrees that may require deeper reflection, changes, restructuring, etc.? What will be done as a result? What resources will be required?
- What role does program review play in assessing the quality, meaning, and integrity of the institution’s degree programs? (CFRs 2.7, 4.1)