

## Writing the Evidentiary Statement

EVIDENTIARY STATEMENTS ARE DESIGNED to capture the essence of an institution's efforts to meet an area of focus/core component. The evidentiary statement evaluates the quality of the evidence/data the institution presents in support of the criteria/core components. The word evidence refers to the supporting material that backs up the interpretation/judgment of the writer. Evidence gives an objective foundation to the written argument, and makes the team report more than a mere collection of personal opinions. Evidence includes information involving data, examples, facts, and similar materials used to persuade a reader. In drafting a statement look for evidence that is relevant, timely, and clearly reflects the consensus of the team.

There are *three characteristics* of an effective evidentiary statement.

- ◆ First, the evidentiary statement should be clear. That is, readers should be able to discern, without a doubt, the suitability and acceptability of the evidence presented; the statement should precisely identify its merit or lack of merit.
- ◆ Second, the evidentiary statement should be limited, expounding on the merit of a single area of focus at a time. Think of it as a discrete unit that explores the quality of evidence presented for an area of focus.
- ◆ Third, the evidentiary statement should take a stand, reflecting the judgment of the team. It should provide qualitative information on whether the evidence sufficiently meets the area of focus/core component, placing the statement into one of four groups:
  - Evidence that the Core Components are met;
  - Evidence that one or more specified Core Components need organizational attention;
  - Evidence that one or more specified Core Components need Commission follow-up;
  - Evidence that one or more specified Core Components are not met and require Commission follow-up (Sanction or adverse action may be warranted).

In summary, good evidentiary statements should (a) set the context, (b) provide evidence related to the context and topic, and (c) take a stance that clearly links the statement to the Criterion and appropriate Core Components. Finally, in order to ensure that the reader understands why the issue is important or recognizes the context, some statements may benefit from commentary on the reasons why this situation has particular value (sometimes referred to as the "so what?").

**Note: There is no required order of context, evidence, and stance in an evidentiary statement. The order of the content may vary and pieces may need to be expanded on so that the statement, standing alone is coherent and substantiates its claim.**

### A few comments about evidence:

- \* Have more facts and other data than you think you will need to make the argument.
- \* Emphasize factual examples.
- \* Use multiple sources of evidence.
- \* Recognize that readers evaluate data in terms of:
  - Relevance (do they really apply to the situation or issue at hand?);
  - Consistency (do the reasons and data fit together, and do they fit with other evidentiary statements in the report and with HLC policies?).

### EXAMPLES OF INEFFECTIVE TO EXEMPLARY STATEMENTS

**Example One:** *Criterion Two, Preparing for the Future* The organization's allocation of resources and its processes for evaluation and planning demonstrate its capacity to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its education, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

1. **Evidence that the Core Components are met.** In this category, provide evidence-based evaluative statements that clearly and definitively show fulfillment of the Core Components.

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**(Ineffective)** A long-range financial plan has been developed that proposes restructuring GPU's indebtedness.

**(Less effective)** Since the announcement of *GPU Vision 2020*, the University has demonstrated significant strides in managing its financial condition through short- and long-term financial planning. The plan's resource base shows the ability for sustaining educational programs and supporting and strengthening their quality in the future.

**(Effective)** Since the announcement of *GPU Vision 2020*, the University has demonstrated significant strides in managing its financial condition through short- and long-term financial planning. In place is a long-range financial plan that proposes restructuring GPU's indebtedness and is designed to ensure that GPU has the ability for sustaining educational programs and supporting and strengthening their quality in the future.

**(Exemplary)** Since the announcement of *GPU Vision 2020*, the University has demonstrated significant strides in managing its financial condition through short- and long-term financial planning. The evidence revealed that three years of annual cost reductions, largely in non-academic areas, have totaled \$4.8 million. Further, monthly financial statements are prepared to monitor financial conditions; financial relationships with affiliates have been restructured, and a long-range financial plan has been developed that proposes restructuring GPU's indebtedness. This plan's resource base shows current and future capacity for sustaining educational programs and supporting and strengthening their quality in the future.

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### ***M*** Example 2

*Criterion Three: Student Learning and Effective Teaching.* The organization provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission.

#### **2. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components need organizational attention.**

In this category, provide evidence-based evaluative statements that identify the Core Components that need organizational attention. The next comprehensive evaluation team will review the organization's progress in addressing these areas as part of their evaluation of commitment to peer review and organizational improvement.

**(Ineffective)** GPU has recently expanded its offerings to include graduate degrees. However, evidence does not demonstrate a "graduate culture" distinct from that of an undergraduate culture, leaving the impression that these programs remain add-ons to undergraduate offerings.

**(Less effective)** Since 1997, GPU has requested and been approved for six masters programs in education, health, and business. However, evidence does not demonstrate a "graduate culture" distinct from that of an undergraduate culture, leaving the impression that these programs remain add-ons to undergraduate offerings. GPU needs to establish processes and policies characteristic of graduate offerings.

**(Effective)** Since 1997, GPU has requested and been approved for six masters programs and plans to continue to increase the number of graduate degree offerings in education, health, and business. However, evidence from faculty and administrative interviews, graduate handbooks, curricula, and Committee minutes does not indicate that GPU has developed the necessary policies, practices, and shared governing processes needed for these programs. Further, this evidence does not indicate that GPU has established a "graduate culture" distinct from that of an undergraduate culture. In fact, it is not clear that the learning outcomes of the graduate programs are sufficiently different than undergraduate outcomes, particularly in the increasing number of courses shared by undergraduate and graduate programs.

**(Exemplary)** Since 1997, GPU has requested and been approved for six masters programs, and the academic plan calls for an additional four programs with the goal of establishing a graduate school offering education, health, and business degrees. However, evidence from faculty and administrative interviews, graduate handbooks, curricula, and Committee minutes does not indicate that GPU has developed the policies, practices, and shared governing processes necessary to sustain a full graduate school. Further, this evidence does not demonstrate a "graduate culture" distinct from that of an undergraduate culture, leaving the impression that these programs remain add-ons to undergraduate offerings. In fact, it is not clear that the learning outcomes of the graduate programs are sufficiently different than undergraduate outcomes, particularly in the increasing number of courses shared by undergraduate and graduate programs. Given its vision for a full graduate school, GPU now needs to

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develop and formalize institutional and academic policies and processes necessary to develop, sustain, and ensure effective graduate education.

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**Example 3** Criterion Two: **Preparing for the Future** The organization's allocation of resources and its processes for evaluation and planning demonstrate its capacity to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its education, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

### 3. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components require Commission follow-up.

In this category, provide evidence-based evaluative statements that identify concerns specifically related to each Core Component that your team has concluded requires interim Commission follow-up (progress report, monitoring report, focused visit, contingency report, scheduling of the next comprehensive visit). Identify the Core Component(s) to which you are referring.

**(Ineffective)** GPU has failed to show that it uses data to inform internal evaluations. The institution should establish mechanisms for regular self-study and program reviews. It is unclear if GPU engages in strategic planning or uses the results of Board retreats to frame planning issues. The team believes a focused visit would help clarify the role of planning.

**(Less effective)** GPU does not demonstrate that it has an effective mechanism for assessing the results or effectiveness of its core processes, including academic program reviews and strategic planning. The Board and administration have not created effective processes for planning or responding to the challenges of the future. Therefore, the team recommends a focused visit on the subject of planning.

**(Effective)** (Core Component 2C) There is no evidence that periodic reviews of data are conducted or that the results of data analysis are used for improvement, even though the College submits an annual performance report to the state Board of Governors. Lacking regular reviews and analysis of data, process evaluations, and demonstrations that information derived from data analysis is being used to improve GPU services and operations, the university will continue finding it difficult to demonstrate institutional effectiveness or plan effectively. The judgment of the team is that the institution would benefit from being required to submit a monitoring report on institutional planning.

**(Exemplary)** (Core Component 2C) Examination of self-study documents, interviews with senior administration and the Board of Trustees, and discussions with the GPU Institutional Effectiveness Committee—composed of faculty, administrators, students, and community members—demonstrates that there is little agreement regarding where planning assumptions originate, what kinds of data would be useful in evaluating whether strategic planning or program review goals are being met, and who is responsible for ensuring that GPU has an effective process to assess progress toward meeting the mission of the institution. The evidence shows that while GPU has been able to progress in the area of financial performance, the organization's evaluation and assessment processes are episodic rather than continuous, that these processes do not provide clear linkage between institutional goals and budget allocation, and that the various planning processes are not documented or clearly aligned with institutional mission or governance structure.

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**Example 4** —building on above examples for Criterion Two: **Preparing for the Future**

### 4. Evidence that one or more specified Core Components are not met and require Commission follow-up. (Sanction or adverse action may be warranted.)

**(Exemplary)** (Core Component 2C) GPU has a history of challenges related to sustaining planned improvements recommended by accreditation site visits. In certain cases, such as those related to Criterion One, core component 1d (noted previously), this history has been related to the turnover of key leadership personnel. In other cases this history appears to be the result of the institution resisting change or abandoning change once the visiting teams have left campus. For example, one result of the previous comprehensive visit was the expectation of improvements in the assessment of student

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learning, the visiting team having concluded that the actions being taken by GPU regarding assessment did not appear to be leading to institutional improvements nor to improvements in the curriculum.

A second example is that over the past ten years GPU has had two Commission follow-up actions related to planning, including a monitoring report on the alignment of Board actions with institutional planning and the other a focus visit to examine the capacity of GPU to resolve conflict between its Board and administration sufficient to enable the institution to establish a planning process. In both cases, from the evidence examined on-site, the apparent improvements evaporated quickly. Responding to the expectation that GPU make substantive changes to its planning processes and implement these changes by the time of the required Focus visit four years after the last comprehensive visit in \_\_\_\_ was difficult and, as the GPU Self-Study notes (p.47), *“Implementation of an agreed upon process for planning was problematic...”* In addition, work initiated by a new Vice President of Academic Affairs, hired in the year prior to the \_\_\_\_ Focus Visit led that visiting team to express confidence that the College would implement the planned improvements in its assessment plans by the time of the next comprehensive visit in \_\_\_\_\_. Recognizing that change takes time, the Focus visit team report notes (p. 18): *“We believe that the college needs a deadline of six years—to demonstrate its further progress and accountability in each area.”* Yet, the progress did not continue. From the \_\_\_\_ Focus Visit to the \_\_\_\_ comprehensive visit, leadership turnover continued. During this period there were eight Vice Presidents of Academic Affairs, with the current VPAA hired in the middle of AY \_\_\_\_\_. Throughout this period the assessment of student learning has floundered and institutional planning appears to be similarly challenged. Without consistent leadership of core educational processes, and the clear involvement by multiple constituents in the GPU planning processes, the institution will continue to be unable to address previously identified challenges effectively. Therefore, the team recommends the following sanction/adverse action....