

## OVERVIEW of the SELF-STUDY PROCESS©

All applicants seeking accreditation by the **American Academy for Liberal Education (AALE)** are required to prepare a self-study, a comprehensive and rigorous examination of performance in light of the AALE *Standards*. AALE *Standards*, which serve as the basis for the self-study, focus on those elements that comprise and support excellence in liberal arts learning. Successful applicants who are awarded AALE accreditation join a select group of programs and schools that consistently demonstrate characteristics that promote high student achievement of liberal arts learning objectives and the importance of teaching and instructional practices suitable for liberal education, and foster life-long learning that prepares students for productive engagement with the world.

### **What is the self-study process?**

The self-study process involves participation by a representative range of individuals including administrators, faculty, staff, and students, providing ample opportunity for conversation and reflection on the mission, educational objectives, and performance of the applicant program or school. Ideally, the self-study is an extension of an applicant's regular, internal assessment processes.

### **What are the purpose and aims of the self-study?**

The completion of a self-study is the essential first step a program or school takes toward AALE accreditation. It engages a broad range of individuals in the accreditation process and provides opportunity for the program or school to conduct an ordered self-examination. A well-executed self-study for accreditation serves the interests of the applicant and demonstrates to AALE in a clear, concise, and accurate manner the program's or school's strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. It achieves the following aims:

- I. Comprehensive view. The self-study imparts a coherent and comprehensive view of the *whole* program or school. Although many of the AALE *Standards* necessarily focus on particular features of the applicant's academic, administrative, or financial operations, the self-study presents these features in relation to the overarching mission of the program or school.

II. Evaluation and assessment. The self-study evaluates operational and procedural issues in relationship to educational objectives and provides a direct and honest assessment of the applicant's performance in meeting the *AALE Standards* as well as its own mission and learning objectives.

III. Framework for maintaining quality. The self-study demonstrates an applicant's ability to conduct a critical self-assessment and to use information about its performance to devise effective plans and strategies to maintain quality and advance improvements.

### **How is a self-study report prepared and written?**

Once AALE staff has reviewed an application for accreditation and determines that the program or school meets the eligibility requirements, the applicant's designated accreditation liaison is notified formally to proceed with the self-study process. The chief administrator of the program or school is responsible for appointing a committee that plans, implements, and supervises the self-study process and produces the resulting report. The self-study committee is led by a chairperson who is responsible for ensuring that the efforts of the various individuals and offices involved in drafting the self-study are coordinated. The chairperson is usually responsible for the final edited report. The self-study committee is charged with the following tasks:

- I. Review the *AALE Standards*. The standards and criteria are the benchmarks for the self-study examinations and serve as a format for the self-study report.
- II. Identify issues of special interest or concern. The self-study committee identifies issues of special interest or concern to the program or school that serve as themes for the self-study and are used to frame responses to the *AALE Standards*.
- III. Assign responses to appropriate individuals and offices. The self-study committee works with the existing administrative structures that regularly deal with the subject or questions raised by the standards to maximize the use of existing knowledge, experience, and information.
- IV. Coordinate the work of individuals and offices. The self-study committee promotes program- or school-wide understanding of the purpose and aims of the self-study. It circulates drafts of responses to the fundamental standards concerning mission and learning objectives as a context for responses to standards dealing with more particular questions such as curriculum structure or learning resources.
- V. Oversee the entire self-study process. The self-study committee ensures that the final

self-study report reflects a program- or school-wide examination of performance in light of the *AALE Standards*.

### **Are there best practices for managing the self-study process?**

A self-study for accreditation is a project involving cooperation and coordination between many individuals over an extended period of time. It is best practice for the self-study committee to set a timetable that allows sufficient time for collecting and preparing information, drafting and completing each part of the self-study, as well as for integrating the pieces to create a coherent final self-study report. Once assignments for responding to the *AALE Standards* are made, the self-study committee ensures that a regular schedule of progress reports and meetings is established and kept. Issuing periodic progress reports to the broader program or school community on the self-study process as a whole encourages conversation that will contribute to the coherence and usefulness of the self-study. Finally, allowing time for program- or school-wide dissemination and discussion of a full draft of the self-study report before it is submitted to the AALE ensures that the entire community, including faculty, administration, and governing board, understands and benefits from the self-study effort.

### **How long is needed to complete the self-study process?**

Depending on the size and complexity of the program or school applying for accreditation, the timeframe for completing the self-study report may range from as few as six (6) months to as many as eighteen (18) months. How long the self-study development process takes depends largely on time, staff, and other resource issues.

### **How is the final self-study report structured?**

The *AALE Standards* is the framework for the self-study report. The self-study process results in a document that responds to each of the standards and criteria as specifically, clearly, and concisely as possible. The framework provided by the *Standards* serves as the guide for composing a narrative that provides in-depth exposition, analysis, and evaluation rather than as a checklist or questionnaire to organize information. The final, edited self-study report contains the following elements:

- I. Title Page
- II. Table of Contents
- III. Preface

The preface (usually written by the chairperson of the self-study committee) contains a brief description of the nature and extent of participation in the self-study process and attests that a copy of the report has been sent to the chairperson of the governing board. A roster of the self-study committee members is included.

#### IV. Overview

The overview presents a brief history and factual description of the program or school (including accreditation history if any), and concisely introduces any salient themes or issues that received special focus in the self-study process or report.

#### V. Narrative

The main narrative contains the program's or school's description of how it reflects each of the AALE accreditation standards and criteria. The order of presentation follows that of the enumerated standards.

The narrative responses explain concisely how the program or school meets or has yet to fully meet each standard. It is important that the narrative responses go beyond mere description and focus on analysis and interpretation, as well as emphasis on areas needing to be strengthened or changed and what will be done to address these needs. It is important to include only an appropriate level of detail. Narrative responses provide sufficient information and analysis to be comprehensive and thorough, but no more.

All references made in the narrative to program or school publications need to cite specific documents, and give page numbers and any applicable section or paragraph numbers. These supporting publications (or their location on an official website) are to be included as appendices to the self-study report.

#### VI. Conclusion

The narrative concludes with a concise discussion of the program's or school's priorities and its own recommendations and plans for achieving these (including, where appropriate, descriptions of available resources for accomplishing these priorities as well as timetables).

#### VII. Appendices

Supporting documents cited within a narrative are placed at the conclusion of the self-study in separate appendices. Each appendix is numbered and contains the title and date of the document (for example: Appendix A. XSCHOOL *Bylaws*, Appendix B. Board of Trustees Minutes, Appendix C. Student Handbook 2015-16). If an appendix contains more than a single document,

such as a set of meeting minutes, then each document in the set is listed and numbered sequentially under the main title of the appendix (for example: Appendix B. Board of Trustees Minutes, 1. Board minutes Dec 2015; 2. Board minutes Feb 2016; 3. Board minutes June 2016). If supporting documents such as handbooks are available on the school's website, a URL address can be cited.

**How is the self-study report submitted for review?**

Once the self-study report is completed, one electronic copy is sent to the AALE administrative office. AALE staff acknowledges receipt of the copy and reviews the self-study report for completeness and notifies the program or school of any missing materials. When a complete self-study report is formally accepted, AALE staff contacts the program or school to prepare for the next step in the accreditation process – the site evaluation visit.

**Are there additional resources for completing the self-study?**

The AALE staff is available via email or by telephone at any time during the self-study process to address specific procedural questions. Applicants seeking more extensive consultation before beginning the self-study process may arrange for a staff-led workshop. For information on staff-led workshops and workshop fees, please contact the national office at: [aaleinfo@aale.org](mailto:aaleinfo@aale.org)

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