

The implementation of a world indigenous accreditation authority

Ray Barnhardt

University of Alaska, Fairbanks

rjbarnhardt@alaska.edu

In August of 2002, representatives of Indigenous higher education institutions from around the world, ranging from Māori Wānanga in New Zealand to Tribal Colleges from across the U.S.A., assembled in Kananaskis, Alberta and established the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium. WINHEC was created to provide an international forum and support for Indigenous Peoples to pursue common goals through higher education, including “creating an accreditation body for Indigenous education initiatives and systems that identify common criteria, practices and principles by which Indigenous Peoples live.” A year later, after a series of extended planning meetings in Albuquerque, New Mexico and Ōtaki, New Zealand, the WINHEC Executive Board at its 2003 annual meeting in Honolulu brought this goal to reality with the formation of the WINHEC Accreditation Authority and the approval of a Handbook to guide Indigenous-serving institutions and programs as they prepared for a new form of accreditation self-study and review. This chapter will describe the rationale for and implementation of the WINHEC accreditation system and its unfolding contribution to Indigenous self-determination in higher education.

WINHEC founding principles

This World Indigenous Higher Education Consortium was founded on the principles set out in the following Articles of the 1993 United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (formally adopted in 2007):

Article #13,

Indigenous Peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the

use and control of ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of human remains.

Article #14,

Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

Article #15,

Indigenous peoples have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State. All Indigenous peoples also have this right and the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Indigenous children living outside their communities have the right to be provided access to education in their own culture and language. States shall take effective measures to provide appropriate resources for these purposes.

Article #16,

Indigenous peoples have the right to have the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations appropriately reflected in all forms of education and public information. States shall take effective measures, in consultation with the Indigenous peoples concerned, to eliminate prejudice and discrimination and promote tolerance, understanding and good relations among Indigenous peoples and all segments of society.

Indigenous peoples throughout the world have been seeking to exercise the rights articulated above, as well as those outlined in the Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Rights in Education (1999), through the creation of educational institutions and programs that assert, as a basic form of self-determination, that Indigenous people have the right to be Indigenous. Diverse as they were in their own histories and cultural traditions, the representatives of the many Indigenous regions and institutions that assembled in Kananaskis took remarkably little time to articulate a common purpose for an international organization to pursue their interests, as reflected in the following adopted vision and goals.

WINHEC Vision:

We gather as Indigenous Peoples of our respective nations recognizing and reaffirming the educational rights of all Indigenous Peoples. We share the vision of all Indigenous Peoples of the world united in the collective synergy of self-determination through control of higher education. Committed to building partnerships that restore

and retain Indigenous spirituality, cultures and languages, homelands, social systems, economic systems and self determination.

WINHEC Goals:

The purpose of WINHEC is to provide an international forum and support for Indigenous Peoples to pursue common goals through higher education, including but not limited to:

1. Accelerating the articulation of Indigenous epistemologies (ways of knowing, education, philosophy, and research);
2. Protecting and enhancing Indigenous spiritual beliefs, culture and languages through higher education;
3. Advancing the social, economical, and political status of Indigenous Peoples that contribute to the well-being of Indigenous communities through higher education;
4. Creating an accreditation body for Indigenous education initiatives and systems that identify common criteria, practices and principles by which Indigenous Peoples live;
5. Recognizing the significance of Indigenous education;
6. Creating a global network for sharing knowledge through exchange forums and state of the art technology;
7. Recognizing the educational rights of Indigenous Peoples;
8. Protecting, preserving and advocating Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights, in particular the reaffirming and observance of the Mataatua Declaration on Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1994); and
9. Promoting the maintenance, retention and advancement of traditional Indigenous bodies of knowledge.

Once the purposes of the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium were established, a series of working groups were formed to address the various goals that had been adopted, including a Working Group on Accreditation (Goal 4). The accreditation working group convened a series of meetings at various venues over the next year to solicit input regarding what an Indigenous accreditation system might look like and how it could be implemented. The intent was not to replicate the many existing and varied national accreditation and quality assurance regimes to which Indigenous institutions and programs were already subject, but to address the unique features that distinguish such institutions and programs from their mainstream counterparts (Barnhardt, 1991). Drawing upon the sometimes frustrating experiences of Indigenous-serving institutions and programs that had

been through an accreditation review under their respective national structures, as well as the limited but highly relevant experience of the First Nations Accreditation Board in Alberta, Canada, the Working Group on Accreditation began to piece together an Indigenous accreditation system for WINHEC implementation.

WINHEC Accreditation

Accreditation is a process of recognizing educational institutions for performance, integrity, and quality that entitles them to the confidence of the cultural and educational community being served. In the case of the WINHEC Accreditation Authority, this recognition is extended to include significant participation by the Indigenous peoples to be served through the respective institution/program, including responsibility for establishing review criteria and participating in the self-study and review process. An underlying consideration in the implementation of this accreditation process is the inherent diversity of Indigenous cultural histories, traditions and world views, all of which must not only be acknowledged, but must be recognized and celebrated as a valued asset and serve as one of the fundamental premises on which the accreditation process rests (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991).

In postsecondary education, accreditation performs a number of important functions, including the validation of credibility on the part of the public being served, and encouragement of efforts toward maximizing educational effectiveness. The accrediting process requires institutions and programs to examine their own goals, operations, and achievements, and then provides the expert critiques and suggestions of an external review team, and the recommendations of the accrediting body. Since the accreditation is reviewed periodically, institutions are encouraged toward continued self-study and improvement.

Accreditation of institutions and specialized programs is granted by a number of national, regional and professional organizations, each representing a lens through which to examine the quality and integrity of the institutions/programs in question. Though each of these organizations has its distinctive definitions of eligibility, criteria for accreditation, and operating procedures, most of them undertake accreditation as one means of assuring the public constituencies about the quality and integrity of the services rendered. While the

procedures of the various national and professional accrediting structures differ somewhat in detail, each is intended to fulfill the following purposes:

1. foster quality assurance in postsecondary education through the development of criteria and guidelines for assessing educational effectiveness in a context that values diversity and reflects locally defined definitions of what constitutes quality and effectiveness;
2. encourage institutional improvement of educational endeavors through continuous self-study and evaluation;
3. insure the educational community, the general public, and other agencies or organizations that an institution/program has clearly defined and appropriate educational objectives, has established conditions under which their achievement can reasonably be expected, appears in fact to be accomplishing them substantially, and is so organized, staffed, and supported that it can be expected to continue to do so; and
4. provide counsel and assistance to established and developing institutions (NWCCU, 2003).

Accreditation by the WINHEC Accreditation Authority strives to insure that an Indigenous-serving postsecondary institution/program's own goals are soundly conceived, that its educational and cultural programs have been intelligently devised, and that its purposes are being accomplished in a manner that should continue to merit confidence by the Indigenous constituencies being served. Thus, the WINHEC accreditation review process seeks to take into account and support the diversity that exists among Indigenous-serving postsecondary institutions/programs. This is accomplished through implementation of the following "Guiding Principles for WINHEC Accreditation Authority" (WINHEC, 2004).

1. The WINHEC Accreditation Authority will serve as a vehicle for strengthening and validating Indigenous higher education institutions and programs based on standards and procedures developed and implemented by WINHEC member institutions.
2. The criteria for accreditation review will be founded upon the diverse Indigenous language and cultural beliefs, protocols, laws and practices that provide the epistemological and pedagogical basis for the institutions and programs under review, and will be applied in a manner that is consistent with the principles outlined in the 1993 United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the 1994 Mataatua Declaration on Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the 1999 Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Rights in Education.
3. The primary focus of the WINHEC Accreditation Authority will be the internal congruence and cultural integrity of the institutions/programs under review, with secondary consideration given to linkages with external/mainstream institutions and accreditation systems.

4. The WINHEC Accreditation Authority will provide a means for institution-level accreditation of Indigenous-controlled higher education institutions, as well as program-level accreditation of Indigenous-oriented programs within Indigenous and mainstream institutions (including teacher education programs).
5. The accreditation review process will include the role of locally respected Elders and recognized cultural practitioners, and the use of the heritage language(s) as reflected in the institution/program under review.
6. The WINHEC Accreditation Authority will promote Indigenous research that is respectful of cultural and intellectual property rights and closely integrated with the communities being served.
7. The WINHEC Accreditation Authority self-study process will be guided by local cultural standards that are developed by the respective Indigenous communities, and thus will provide international recognition and validation for educational initiatives grounded in Indigenous world views, knowledge systems and ways of knowing.
8. The WINHEC Accreditation Authority will provide accredited institutions and programs with access to the following WINHEC services:
 - a. Each accredited institutional member shall receive formal acknowledgement and recognition of its accreditation status in the form of an official certificate from WINHEC, have one vote on the Accreditation Authority Board, and be invited to participate in program reviews of other applicants for accreditation.
 - b. Each accredited member shall be included in the planning and implementation of cooperative activities (e.g., conferences, scholar/student exchanges, shared programs/curricula, cooperative research initiatives) of WINHEC programs and institutions.
 - c. Each accredited member shall have opportunities to enroll students in and contribute to the offerings associated with articulated international baccalaureate and graduate degree programs focusing on Indigenous studies, including the acceptance of approved transfer credits among all member programs and institutions.
 - d. Accredited members shall have opportunities for faculty and students to form partnerships on joint research activities and to participate in faculty/student exchanges among member programs and institutions.
 - e. Accredited members shall be responsible for contributing to and have access to a database of Indigenous scholars for external review of research papers, theses, grant proposals, manuscripts, etc.
 - f. Accredited members shall be invited to participate in and contribute to international seminars, conferences, policy papers and comparable initiatives that pertain to the interests of the member programs and institutions.

Eligibility requirements of applicants for accreditation

Applicants for accreditation are required to submit an application portfolio to the WINHEC Accreditation Authority and if accepted, prepare a self-study addressing the criteria for review outlined in the accreditation guidelines. Applicants may be either an Indigenous-serving institution (e.g. a Tribal College or Wānanga), or an Indigenous-serving program contained within a mainstream institution, and the review process is adjusted accordingly. Programs are assessed with regard to their integrity and support in the context of the host institution.

The characteristics of an institution/program and the conditions required by the Accreditation Authority for consideration as an Applicant for Accreditation are outlined in the WINHEC Accreditation Handbook (2004). Each component of the eligibility requirements is a pre-condition that relates to the appropriate guidelines and criteria by which quality, integrity, effectiveness and accreditation are evaluated.

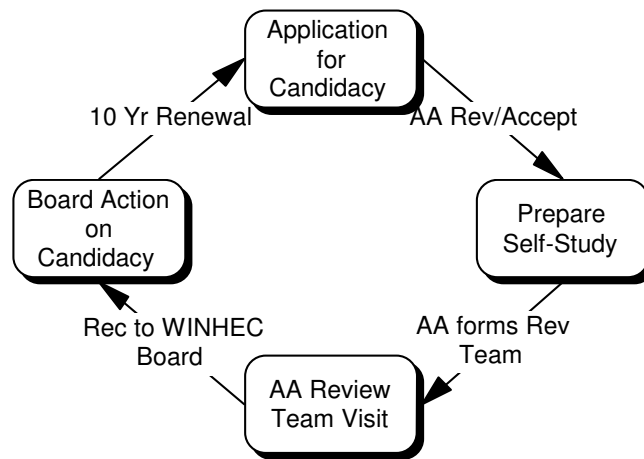
Overview of the accreditation review process

The WINHEC Accreditation Authority appoints an accreditation review team made up of representatives from at least four member institutions/programs, two of which are from the same national context as the applicant institution/program. The review team includes a minimum of one Elder who has been associated with a member program or institution.

The review team prepares a report based on a review of the self-study and an on-site visit to the candidate program/institution. This report (including the self-study) is submitted to the WINHEC Accreditation Authority for final consideration of membership approval.

The review process to be jointly conducted by the institution and the Accreditation Authority includes the following steps:

1. A representative of the Authority conducts a preliminary visit to the institution/program 6 to 12 months before a review team visit.
2. The institution/program analyzes itself through a self-study, as outlined below.
3. Review team members study the institutional self-study report, visit the institution/program and prepare a written report.
4. A draft report from the review team is prepared and sent to the institution/program chair. The chair is given an opportunity to respond to the review team's written report before the final report is prepared.
5. The team's final report is mailed to the chair and the Accreditation Authority board members four to six weeks before the next scheduled board meeting.
6. The WINHEC Accreditation Authority Board of Affirmation reviews the institution/program self-study and the review team's report, interviews the review team chair and if necessary, the person in charge of the institution/program, and takes action on the basis of information obtained. These actions may include, but are not limited to the following:
 - a. The Authority may grant full accreditation with all rights and privileges thereof, which will be subject to renewal in 10 years.
 - b. The Authority may grant a provisional accreditation, stipulating specific adjustments and modifications required and a timeframe in which they must be addressed. If the modifications are met in the specified time, full accreditation will be granted. If the modifications are not met as specified, the Authority may withdraw further recognition, or extend the provisional status until the modifications are met.
7. If at any time during the 10-year full accreditation period the Accreditation Authority is notified that an accredited institution/program no longer meets the minimal conditions under which it was originally accredited, the Authority will review the information to determine if it warrants investigation, if so, an investigation will be conducted and recommendations will be presented to the Accreditation Board for action. If deemed appropriate, the Authority reserves the right to rescind accreditation under its auspices. The institution/program involved may appeal such action to the WINHEC Executive Board for further consideration.
8. Institutions/programs that receive full accreditation are required to submit an Interim Report to the WINHEC Accreditation Authority at the 5-year mark of the 10-year period of full accreditation.



WINHEC ACCREDITATION AUTHORITY
Application/Review Cycle

The review process is a major undertaking, and a full academic year is considered to be the minimum working time needed. Preparation normally begins more than a year before the date of the site visit.

Accreditation Self-Study

Role of self-study. The WINHEC Accreditation Authority, while requiring the submission of a self-study report in connection with a review for accreditation, recognizes that the self-study process is more beneficial to the institution/program when it is undertaken in response to significant needs felt by the Indigenous community being served. Accordingly, a variety of approaches to self-study are acceptable and an institution/program is permitted to propose some variation in the design of the self-study which it considers to be of intrinsic value as long as the overarching purposes of a comprehensive self-study are met and all Authority requirements are addressed.

Self-study steering committee. It is important to have a steering committee broadly representative of the institution/program under review and the Indigenous communities being served so that a comprehensive assessment may be promoted. Also, others whose interests might be affected by the results of the study should in some way be involved. How the leadership and the participating personnel for the self-study are selected, whether by election, appointment, or some combination of both, should be resolved in accordance with the tradition and climate of the institution/program. Most institution/programs have multiple constituencies who have somewhat differing interests and values. An institution/program organizing for self-study is expected to have these various points of view in mind as it makes its plans and staffs its committees.

Development of the Report. The "Standards and Guidelines for Self-Study" which follow below provides a suggested framework of essential considerations for the self-study and for the external review team. An institution/program undergoing review is encouraged to design a narrative report best suited to its mission and supported by the necessary data presented in a concise and readable form (WINHEC, 2004).

Cultural standards and their use in the self-study

As indicated in Guiding Principles #5 and #7 above, one of the pre-conditions for a WINHEC Accreditation Authority review is the identification of a locally appropriate and accepted set of "Cultural Standards" against which the cultural integrity of the institution/program can be reviewed and assessed. "Cultural Standards" refers here to a locally defined set of guidelines, principles and/or values that reflect the cultural essence to which the goals of the particular program or institution are directed and under which it operates. The intent is to affirm the performance of Indigenous-serving institutions and programs in reference to standards appropriate to the Indigenous cultural contexts involved, rather than impose a single set of generic standards assumed to be equally applicable to all institutions/programs. These local Cultural Standards must be in place and submitted to the WINHEC Accreditation Authority for reference as a pre-condition for consideration of eligibility.

Cultural standards development. If such Cultural Standards do not yet exist in the Indigenous region under consideration, the candidate program or institution is urged to convene a broadly representative group of Indigenous people from across the region being served who can either develop and adopt an original set of cultural standards/guidelines applicable to the tribes/region/nation involved, or review, adapt and endorse an existing set of cultural standards, such as the Alaska version in Appendix A, or the Hawai'i Guidelines for Culturally Healthy and Responsive Learning Environments (available at <http://www.olelo.hawaii.edu/dual/nhmo/>). Once adopted by the appropriate Indigenous authorities, the relevant cultural standards/guidelines are then submitted to the WINHEC Accreditation Authority to serve as the basis on which the educational and cultural integrity of the respective institution/program will be reviewed for accreditation.

In preparing the self-study, the institution/program under consideration is expected to demonstrate that it meets each element of the standards, and any applicable policy. The self-study document is expected to include an appraisal of the institution/program's strengths, weaknesses, and achievements relative to each standard.

Conclusion

In November, 2004, a Māori Teacher Education program, a Māori Philosophy and Law program and a Māori Kaumātua/Elder program, each offered by one of the three Māori Wānanga (Tribal Colleges) in New Zealand, underwent review and became the first programs to be accredited by the WINHEC Accreditation Authority. Two additional First Nations programs in Canada and two new Native Hawaiian institutions have each initiated the process to become candidates for WINHEC accreditation. In some cases, these programs and institutions are seeking WINHEC accreditation as the primary form of quality assurance and validation for their work, while others are seeking Indigenous validation in addition to existing regional or national accreditation. Either way, the WINHEC accreditation process reflects a new form of self-determination in which Indigenous peoples are asserting their rights to provide educational opportunities grounded in their own worldviews, knowledge systems and ways of knowing.

A copy of the WINHEC Accreditation Handbook, including sample “cultural standards” are available on the WINHEC web site at <http://www.win-hec.org>, or on the Alaska Native Knowledge Network web site at <http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/ihe.html>.

References

- Barnhardt, R. (1991). Higher Education in the Fourth World: Indigenous People Take Control. *Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education*, 3(2), 11-13.
- Kirkness, V. J., & Barnhardt, R. (1991). First Nations and Higher Education: The Four R's - Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 30(3), 1-15.
- NWCCU. (2003). *Accreditation Overview*. Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, Redmond, WA. (<http://www.nwccu.org/>)
- U.N. Commission on Human Rights (1993). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Working Group on Indigenous Populations, Geneva, Switzerland. (<http://www.cwis.org/drft9329.html>)
- U.N. Commission on Human Rights (1994). *Mataatua Declaration on Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous People*, First International Conference on the Cultural & Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Whakatane, New Zealand. (<http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/mataatua.html>)
- WINHEC. (2004). *WINHEC Accreditation Handbook, 2nd Edition*. World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium, Honolulu, HI. (<http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/ihe.html>)
- WIPCE. (1999). *Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Rights in Education*. World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education, Hilo, HI. (<http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/IKS/cool.html>)

Editor's note:

The original version of this paper was published as:

Barnhardt, R. (2008). The Implementation of a World Indigenous Accreditation Authority. In L. S. Warner & G. Gipp (Eds.), *Traditions and Culture in the Millennium: Tribal Colleges and Universities*. Greenwich, CT: InfoAge Publishers.

[A note from the lead author, Linda Sue Warner supporting reprinting and publication in this journal has been received.]