



> FISCAL AND STRATEGIC TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM:
**INSTITUTIONAL LESSONS FOR
ACCREDITATION REAFFIRMATION**

UNCF Institute for Capacity Building

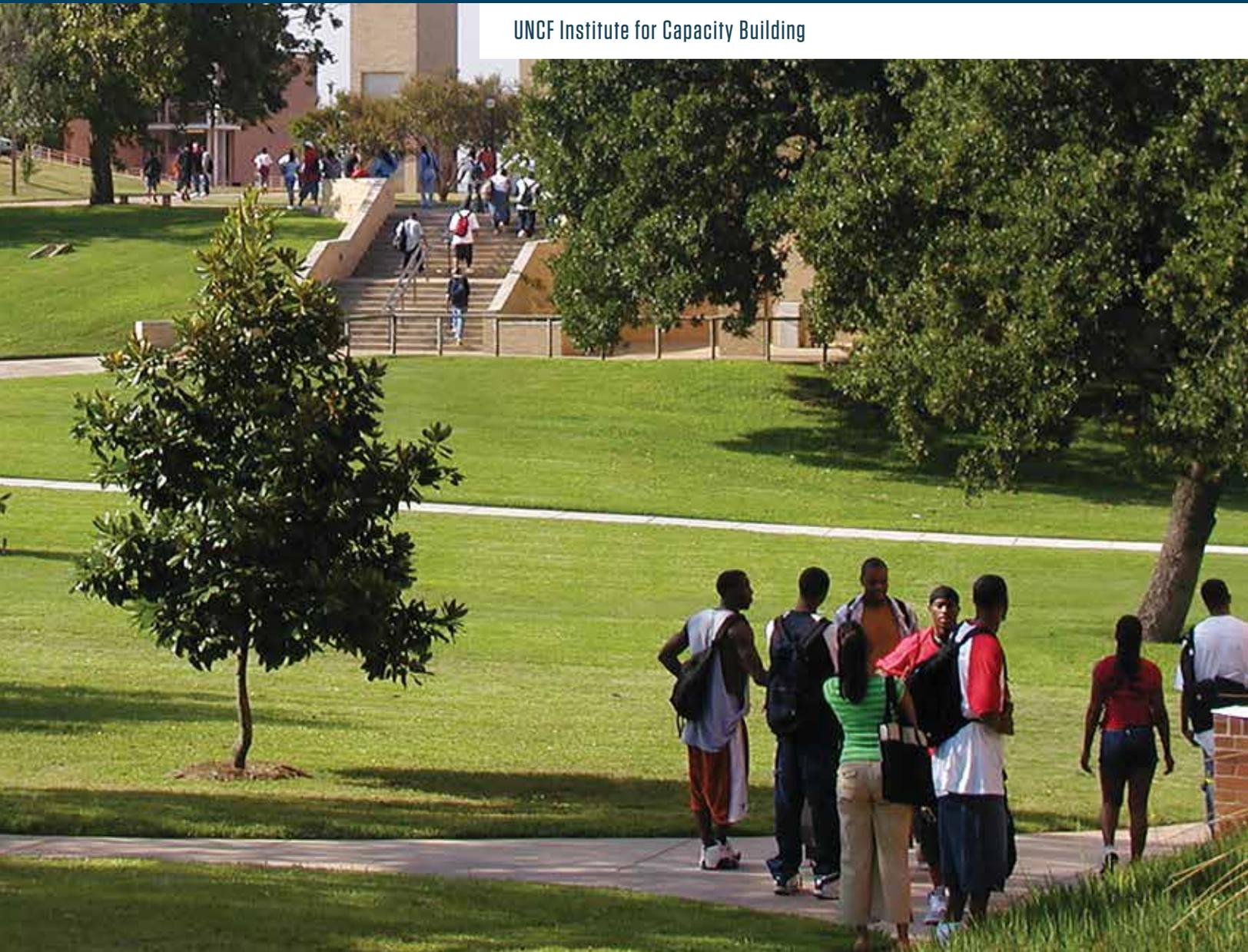


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Accreditation is essential for the operational vitality and long-term stability of colleges and universities. It is an ongoing evaluation process used to assure and improve the quality of higher education institutions and programs. For historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs)—and other low-resourced institutions—programs that provide technical assistance and financial support during the accreditation process are instrumental in preparing for accreditation reaffirmation.

UNCF (United Negro College Fund), with several years of support from the Walmart Foundation, developed the Fiscal and Strategic Technical Assistance Program (FASTAP) to address the recurring challenges faced by UNCF-member institutions in areas of accreditation, fiscal management and accountability, strategic planning and institutional effectiveness through four types of interventions:

1. Reaffirmation of Accreditation Readiness Reviews
2. Deep Dive Institutional Assessments and Interventions
3. Interim Five-year Reaffirmation Readiness Reviews
4. High-priority Technical Assistance

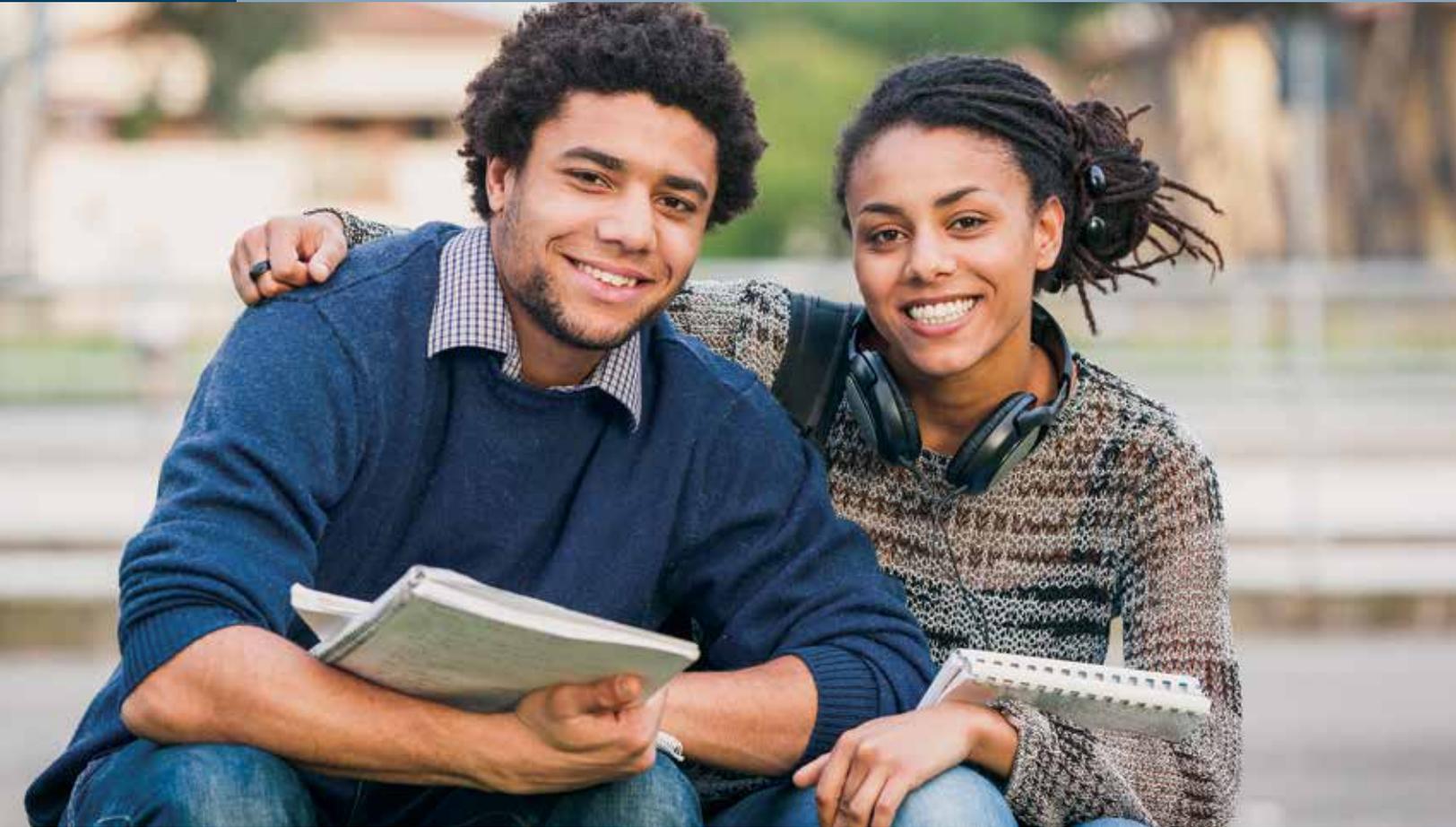
Each of the 25 FASTAP institutions that contributed to this paper approached reaffirmation with its own unique set of challenges and outcomes. While each institution approached accreditation differently, a number of key lessons and common best practices emerged. This paper shares those lessons and best practices and describes the value of external supports and resources in the reaffirmation process.

Activities fell under three overarching themes discovered throughout the majority of institutions. The first theme was the need to increase human resource capacities. The second theme was the need to strengthen internal controls, specifically around fiscal management and technological enhancements. Lastly, institutions identified the need to update their policies and procedures that reinforce the internal operations and business processes.

Within these three overarching themes, five major actions were revealed as accreditation reaffirmation best practices:

1. Utilize experienced external consultants
2. Implement activities to improve staff competences and capacities
3. Assess and improve fiscal operations and strengthen internal controls
4. Update and/or implement technological enhancements
5. Update policies and procedures manuals

Focusing on these core themes and practices better positioned the institutions to address systemic challenges in fiscal management, institutional effectiveness and accreditation. While HBCUs are rarely seen as models of best practice in the higher education arena, despite their success with limited resources, the findings in this paper demonstrate key lessons and best practices that would be beneficial to similarly situated institutions in their efforts to comply with regional accreditation standards.



INTRODUCTION

Accreditation plays a critical role in the long-term stability of colleges and universities. The process is used to scrutinize and evaluate the quality of postsecondary institutions and programs and to assess efforts toward continued quality improvement using a set of agreed-upon and rigorous standards.¹ The loss of accreditation can lead to loss of access to federal aid, a decline in student enrollment and ultimately the closure of an institution. For historically low-resource institutions such as historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and minority-serving institutions, programs that provide assistance and support during the accreditation reaffirmation process are instrumental, especially when funding for higher education is low.

Since 2007, most of the 37 UNCF-member HBCUs have participated in a program through the UNCF Institute for Capacity Building (ICB) called the Fiscal and Strategic Technical Assistance Program (FASTAP). FASTAP assists selected institutions with their accreditation and fiscal management through targeted and discrete technical assistance, institutional grants and professional development. A number of institutions participated in FASTAP, each with its own accreditation challenges and outcomes, and each contributing to the emergence of key lessons and best practices. To adequately address standards and criteria related to fiscal management and accreditation, a common set of actions took place across participating institutions. HBCUs are rarely seen as models of best practices in the larger postsecondary arena despite acknowledged success with limited resources. However, given the extensive investment made in FASTAP, there are numerous lessons to impart to other institutions that are challenged with accreditation compliance. This paper shares those key lessons and best practices to better inform the accreditation efforts of other low-resource institutions.

WHAT IS ACCREDITATION?

Accreditation in higher education is a quality assurance process. It is the primary means by which colleges, universities and educational programs ensure quality to students and the public.² According to the U.S. Department of Education, the goal of accreditation “is to ensure that education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality.”³ An institution or program that has successfully completed an accreditation review is deemed to have the academic and student supports and services in place to assist students achieve their educational goals and the financial and physical resources to sustain its viability and serve the needs of its programs.⁴ Accreditation occurs on an ongoing cycle and institutions and programs are periodically reviewed, ranging from every few years to once every 10 years.⁵

Accreditation is carried out by private, non-governmental organizations to conduct external quality reviews. National and regional accrediting agencies review degree-granting, non-profit or for-profit, two-year and four-year institutions. National accrediting agencies⁶ provide accreditation to institutions and programs that either do not qualify for regional accreditation, choose not to pursue regional accreditation or find the priorities of a national accreditor better aligned with their mission and character.⁷ At the regional level, six accrediting agencies evaluate and accredit the institutions located within their respective regions according to their specific standards. These regional accrediting agencies are:

- Higher Learning Commission (HLC)
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE)
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)

According to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, all regional accrediting agencies create specific standards or criteria to evaluate and use common practices to ensure that institutions and programs meet adequate expectations of quality and

improve over time.⁸ These standards or criteria address such key areas as faculty, student support services, finance and facilities, curricula and student learning outcomes. Common practices, such as self-study, peer review, site visits, review and decision making, are used by all accrediting agencies to assess specific standards. Institutions must go through a series of steps when seeking accreditation: preparation of evidence showing accomplishment by the institution or program, examination of evidence and a site visit by faculty and administrative peers, and action by the accrediting organization to determine accreditation status.⁹ Each phase of the accreditation process requires different sets of organizational skills to comply with accrediting standards.

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Accreditation status benefits students, institutions and employers. It signals to students and the public that an institution meets a threshold for standards and that their degree or credential from that institution has market value. Accreditation also “adds value to society through assuring quality, enabling government to make sound judgments about the use of public funds, aiding the private sector in decisions about financial support, and easing transfer of credit.”¹⁰ It is truly the institutional “seal of approval” in higher education; its absence signals questionable quality to the public at large.



FASTAP: ACCREDITATION AND HBCUs

For the past eight years, UNCF has been working with the Walmart Foundation to strategically address the persistent and systemic challenges faced by UNCF-member HBCUs in the areas of accreditation, fiscal management and accountability, strategic planning and institutional effectiveness. All low-resourced institutions face challenges in these areas on a daily basis, but heightened federal accountability proposals require all colleges and universities to better manage these critical functions. This new accountability reality, which also includes potential accreditation reform, makes FASTAP even more vital for campuses in the UNCF network. The goals of FASTAP are to:

1. Help ensure network-wide compliance with accreditation standards by supporting UNCF-member institutions in the development of institutional cultures of accountability, assessment and effectiveness.
2. Help UNCF-member institutions achieve long-term fiscal stability.

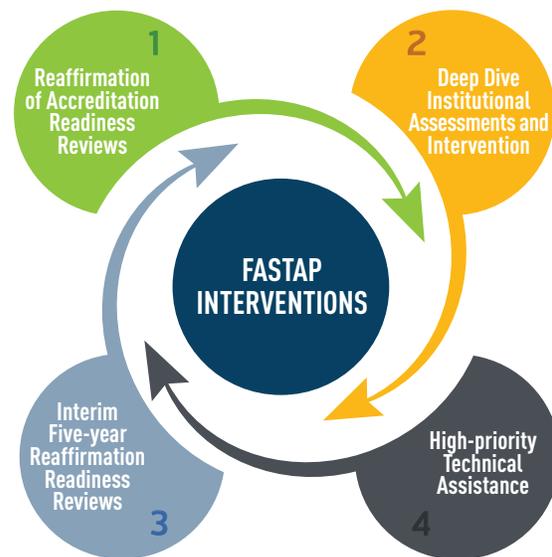
FASTAP seeks to assist the UNCF network of colleges and universities successfully navigate the processes and compliance requirements of their regional accrediting body.

FASTAP seeks to assist the UNCF network of colleges and universities successfully navigate the processes and compliance requirements of their regional accrediting body. The majority of HBCUs, including 35 of the 37 UNCF-member institutions, are located in the South and are accredited by SACSCOC. The remaining two UNCF-member institutions are accredited by HLC. To obtain or maintain accreditation with SACSCOC, an institution must comply with the standards contained in the “Principles of Accreditation: Foundation for Quality Enhancement.”¹¹ This includes compliance with 12 core requirements, 61 comprehensive standards and seven federal requirements, and the development of a quality enhancement plan (QEP). Similar to

SACSCOC, HLC works to ensure the quality of its members by assessing the extent to which institutions meet the two core components and five criteria for accreditation. The five HLC criteria for accreditation “are the standards of quality by which the Commission determines whether an institution merits accreditation or reaffirmation of accreditation.”¹²

To assist member institutions in their efforts to adequately meet regional accrediting standards and maintain good standing, FASTAP offers a suite of interventions, as shown in figure 1, that include onsite needs assessments, targeted technical assistance, institutional grants and professional development. A detailed description of each intervention can be found in Appendix A.

Figure 1. Interventions offered through FASTAP



In addition to the four interventions, ICB hosts professional development institutes that bring together leaders and key officials from member institutions to discuss best practices on topics relevant to institutional capacity building and enhance their skills on fiscal and strategic planning. Combined, these services assist UNCF-member HBCUs prepare to meet accreditation reaffirmation standards and requirements without sanctions or worse, loss of accreditation.

METHODOLOGY/Framework

Since 2009, UNCF’s Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute has employed mixed-method designs, using online surveys and qualitative interviews for data collection, to determine the effectiveness of FASTAP in addressing the accreditation needs of participating institutions. Evaluations were conducted to provide a better understanding of the ways FASTAP was implemented across participating institutions and to determine the program’s effectiveness in helping institutions prepare for reaffirmation and long-term fiscal stability. For the purpose of this paper, a meta-analysis of the evaluations was conducted to uncover commonalities in the actions institutions took to prepare for reaffirmation and identify a set of consistent best practices to better inform the accreditation efforts of other institutions.

Three research questions guided this analysis:

1. What common areas of focus-guided institutional preparation and what outcomes were achieved by participating FASTAP institutions?
2. What value has FASTAP added to assist participating institutions in preparation for the accreditation reaffirmation process?
3. What best practices and lessons learned can be gained from participating FASTAP institutions?

Five evaluation reports, from 2011 to 2015, were analyzed. Twenty-three institutional administrators (presidents, vice presidents, provosts, deans, department chairs and chief financial officers) and UNCF consultants were surveyed and interviewed, representing 25 UNCF-member HBCUs. Evaluation respondents had served in their role from less than 12 months to over 15 years. Selected institutions received FASTAP support in the form of one of the four interventions (see table 1).

Table 1. Type of FASTAP intervention granted to participating institutions

Type of FASTAP Intervention	Number of Institutions Receiving FASTAP Intervention
Reaffirmation of Accreditation Readiness Reviews	15
Deep Dive Institutional Assessments and Intervention	3
Interim Five-year Reaffirmation Readiness Reviews	5
High-priority Technical Assistance	3

FINDINGS

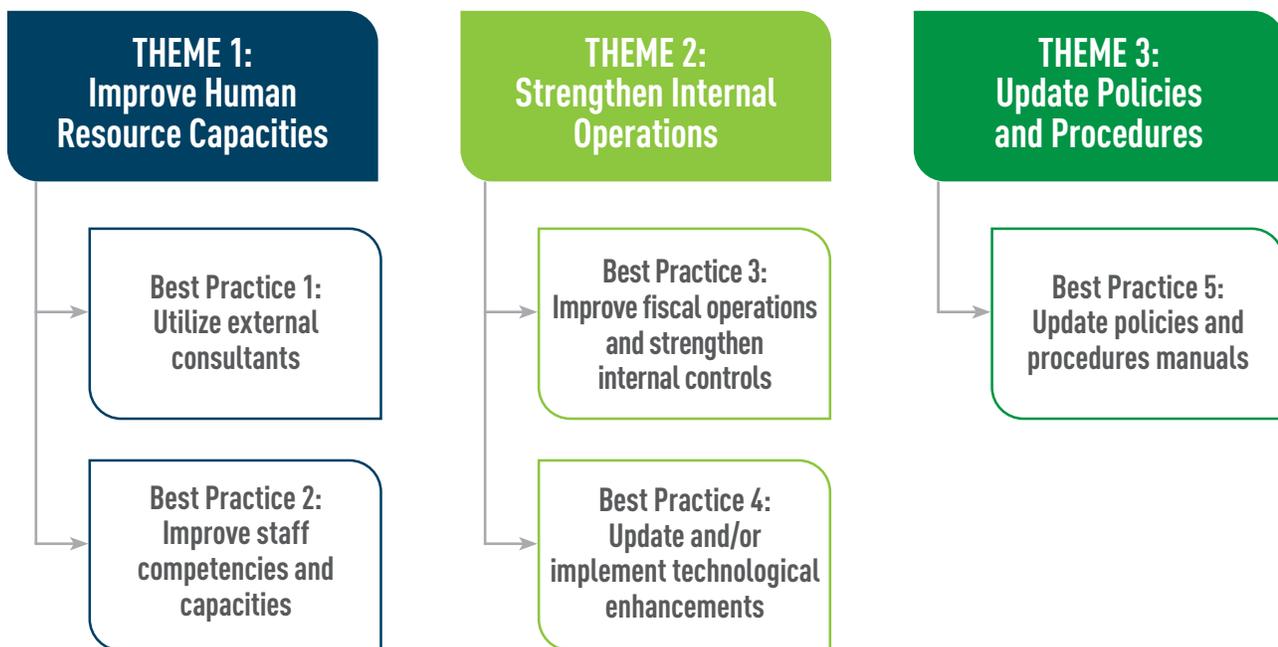
Across the participating institutions, the evaluations uncovered common focus areas, implementation activities and shared outcomes. Focus areas are specific improvement areas that institutions chose as a priority based on need. These areas included consultants, technological equipment, professional development training, policies and procedures manuals, and infrastructure and internal controls. As a result of targeted implementation activities to address focus areas, shared outcomes included improved fiscal operations and processes, improved staff competencies and capacities, updated policies and procedures manuals, timely report submission and removal from sanctions. Based on the thematic analysis of previous evaluations, a set of key lessons and best practices emerged. Other institutions looking to undergo the accreditation process can benefit from utilizing these lessons, which are outlined on page 8.

LESSONS LEARNED: BEST PRACTICES THAT FASTAP INSTITUTIONS EMPLOY IN PREPARATION FOR ACCREDITATION REAFFIRMATION

While each participating institution approached preparing for reaffirmation differently, they engaged in a common set of themes and best practices (see figure 2). Institutional reaffirmation preparation activities fell under three overarching themes. The first was improving human resource capacities. Across the majority of institutions, a consistent need was identified to increase staff competencies and capabilities and improve technical skills in order to effectively carry out administrative and fiscal operations. The second most common theme was the need to strengthen internal controls, particularly around fiscal management and technological enhancements. Technological enhancements included the implementation and integration of new financial aid software and administrative systems. This allowed for more integrated and streamlined processes and procedures throughout the institution. Lastly, institutions identified the need to update the policies and procedures that reinforce internal operations and business processes.

Across the three overarching themes, five major actions were revealed as best practices: utilizing external consultants; improving staff competencies and capacities; improving fiscal operations and strengthening internal controls; updating and/or implementing technological enhancements; and updating policies and procedures manuals. Each best practice is described in detail in the following section. Collectively, these practices created institutional capacity and strengthened the position of the institution to comply with regional accreditation core requirements and comprehensive standards.

Figure 2. Common themes and best practices related to preparation for accreditation reaffirmation



THEME 1: IMPROVE HUMAN RESOURCE CAPACITIES

Two best practices were identified to improve human resource capacities across the institutions.

Best Practice 1: Utilize an external consultant to conduct a needs assessment to determine focus areas and implementation activities and provide assistance implementing needs-assessment recommendations and accreditation activities.

“This program says you’re willing to let someone who is completely independent come in and assess where you are. The consultant came in, did an overview, provided a report, discussed the report, and talked about things we could take from the report and actually move forward on.”

– FASTAP participant

The use of an external consultant, while not required, can provide an institution with a sound, objective voice that can illuminate institutional pain points without repercussions. Participating institutions were assigned a dedicated FASTAP consultant (e.g., a president, provost or other senior-level administrator with extensive experience as an accreditation evaluator or an observer with subject matter expertise), who performed a thorough onsite assessment of the institution’s fiscal affairs and other compliance measures that respective accrediting agencies require through the reaffirmation process. Some of the financial problem indicators that FASTAP consultants looked for include cash flow shortfalls, vendor complaints of delayed payments, lack of timely interim financial information, deficits in unrestricted operations, accuracy of federal financial aid reporting, quality enhancement plan development, and enrollment management’s ability to recruit and retain students. The consultant review concluded with a formal report presented to institutional leadership with outcome-driven recommendations and a suggested implementation plan based on the issues and challenges identified.

Institutions also utilized external consultants to help bring recommendations and implementation

plan activities to fruition and facilitate their comprehensive reaffirmation preparation. The consultants provided seasoned expertise in areas around financial management, institutional effectiveness and other accreditation standards and assisted institutions in thinking through their implementation plans and targeted activities. Consultants assist institutions to implement their recommended improvements by providing training to staff and board members, reviewing materials and critiquing QEP and monitoring reports, developing materials to improve financial and enrollment management processes, and assisting with updating policies and operations manuals.

For institutions under the Interim Five-year Reaffirmation Readiness Reviews intervention, consultants were especially useful in providing support throughout the preparation and review of documents for their final reports. (The reviews are designed to assist member institutions earlier in the accreditation process with the preparation of their quality enhancement plan and other reporting requirements, which must be submitted for the SACSCOC Fifth-year Interim Review.) At one participating institution that sought to be removed from the sanction of warning, the FASTAP consultant reviewed content, made recommendations for evidence and provided formatting assistance for the monitoring report. One institution leader stated, *“His knowledge of SACSCOC requirements was exceptional and very helpful. He helped with understanding the appropriate responses and evidence to include in the SACSCOC monitoring report.”* Similarly, another institution utilized the FASTAP consultant to help prepare compliance reports on three SACSCOC sanctions related to financial management and stability. The lead FASTAP consultant’s past affiliation as a SACSCOC commissioner *“offered [the institution] an opportunity to seek insight concerning the tenor of the Fourth Monitoring Report.”* Other participants indicated that having an outside reader/consultant was vital to a successful compilation of evidentiary materials and reviews of final reports.

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Many institutions expressed the positive impact of having an external consultant visit their campus and bring to their attention matters often overlooked in the day-to-day operations of regular employees. The consultants were able to expose trouble spots that had become somewhat invisible to staff, subsequently pushing institutional leaders to strengthen their accreditation operations in previously unforeseen ways. One interviewee explained, *“Sometimes when you’re dealing with things on a daily basis, you may not see it the same way as someone from the outside, who’s totally neutral, sees it.”*

Best Practice 2: Improve staff competencies and capacities

“When someone is able to get additional training related to their respective areas, people feel more empowered and more knowledgeable.”
– FASTAP participant

One of the biggest steps institutions realized they needed to take to prepare for reaffirmation was improving staff competencies and building staff capacity. Staff trainings and professional development workshops were the primary activities set forth by each institution, specifically in the areas of process enhancements and administrative and financial software.

Institutions benefited from engaging key players from across campus in the reaffirmation process. One college gained capacity to prepare for reaffirmation by engaging a cross-section of campus staff from finance, enrollment management and information technology. This method prompted open dialogue, ownership of the work activities required to reach the stated objectives and a strong sense of accomplishment among the different offices when progress was made. One recipient said the trainings *“opened up the mindset of everybody”* and *“allowed persons who were not intimately involved in the reaffirmation process to understand how vital their role is for the college to substantiate that it is financially stable.”* Similarly, the UNCF consultant was helpful in getting key players from across the

institution in one room to discuss how different areas affect one another. The UNCF consultant explained the different classifications related to accounting for net assets, which some of the seasoned staff did not understand. At one university, for instance,

“There was never a meeting, workshop or training as detailed as what the consultant provided. She shared a lot of her knowledge and elaborated on the exact topic that was needed. She did an excellent job facilitating that discussion and made sure [everyone in the room] understood.” – FASTAP participant

a newly integrated university-wide technology was being implemented. This new system automates the student, academic and administrative life cycle into a single system. Training was provided to staff to improve their technical skills and capacity to fully utilize the new system. A comprehensive training program was provided to the institution’s core team, which in turn was responsible for training others on campus. At another university, training was provided to staff to assist with improving the collections and travel expenses processes. Consultants conducted workshops on how to utilize best practices related to training optimization within the expense and collections module to essentially reduce expenses and improve the college’s bottom line. The improvement of business processes and supplementary staff training increased institutional capacity in support of SACSCOC core requirements and comprehensive standards pertaining to physical and financial resources.

FASTAP consultants were instrumental, one campus president explained, in preparing staff for SACSCOC visits and reporting. Consultants provided advice and direction that *“improved staff capacity providing important knowledge on content selection and formatting for SACSCOC reports. We are much more confident about preparing for the upcoming decennial review in March.”* Staff are more knowledgeable about the appropriate responses and evidences when presenting such information to SACSCOC

and implemented better systems for documenting information for future requests from stakeholders. Consultants at one particular institution helped prepare the faculty, staff and administrators for their upcoming Special Committee visit. The consultant led a mock visit that mirrored the structure and tone of committee visits. This allowed session participants to gain a better sense of the types of questions that might be asked during the real visit. The session concluded with the development of several “dos” and “don’ts” and strategies to prepare for the actual visit.

Since 2008, ICB has periodically convened institutional leaders and key officials of member institutions to participate in conferences and webinars to enhance their skills in fiscal and strategic planning and accreditation.

Another element that helped improve staff competencies and capabilities was ICB’s professional development institutes. Since 2008, ICB has periodically convened institutional leaders and key officials of member institutions to participate in conferences and webinars to enhance their skills in fiscal and strategic planning and accreditation. In 2008, the institute brought together member presidents, their chief financial officers (CFOs), and their accreditation liaison officers to discuss ways to establish an institutional climate of assessment, evidence, and accountability. The 2009 institute was attended by CFOs and their staffs to share best practices and innovative ideas to ensure the fiscal soundness of their institutions.

In 2011, FASTAP consultants led a workshop on FASTAP processes, outcomes and best practices to help attendees prepare for onsite reaffirmation reviews and respond to recommendations and sanctions by regional accreditation agencies. The 2014 FASTAP institute focused on student debt management and included two tracks that focused on reaffirmation of accreditation standards and student loan cohort default rates. Most recently, the 2015 FASTAP institute was designed for CFOs and served as a training ground for UNCF’s member institutions to deepen their financial management

skills related to accreditation. A substantial number of 2015 institute participants found value in the information shared and identified tangible ways to incorporate their learning into their work, such as creating a SACSCOC-CFO guide or consistently reviewing SACSCOC standards and applying them to daily operations. Overall, the overwhelming majority of participants across the institutes found them effective and a value-add to their work preparing their institution for accreditation reaffirmation.

THEME 2: STRENGTHEN INTERNAL OPERATIONS

Strengthening internal operations in preparation for reaffirmation not only assists in meeting accreditation standards, but it also strengthens the institution for long-term sustainability. Two best practices were identified to strengthen internal operations across participating FASTAP institutions.

Best Practice 3: Improve fiscal operations and strengthen internal controls

To better prepare for accreditation, as it specifically relates to fiscal stability, a majority of the participating institutions cited the need to improve efficiency in fiscal operations and strengthen internal controls. Because of the resources provided through the FASTAP grant, institutions were able to strengthen systematic approaches to address cash flow challenges, improve accounting procedures and improve the delivery of financial aid. For instance, the activities implemented under the FASTAP grant strengthened one institution’s systematic approach to track and quantify activities related to students’ account receivables and untimely cash flow challenges.

Technical training in financial aid and enrollment management software was provided to mid-level staff in admissions and financial aid that enabled the financial aid office to manage and disburse aid more quickly and effectively. More specifically, the financial aid manager learned to pull direct loan disbursements (Stafford, PLUS, Grad Plus) from

financial aid software directly over to the business office using the net disbursements of the awards. This allowed the college to examine trends and make data-driven decisions moving forward that affect enrollment and cash flow.

FASTAP resources also assisted institutions in improving procedures over accounting for net assets. One institution identified the need to move from a manual collections process to an automated process. To address this challenge, the institution began to launch the customization of an accounts receivable collections module. With the work of a consultant from the accounts receivable software provider, the collections manager built out a test letter that would automatically be sent to students with balances owed. Another consultant met with personnel from the business and finance office and the institutional advancement office to discuss existing processes related to the various classes of net assets and identified opportunities for improvement. Net assets procedures and a related checklist were developed as a reference tool for implementing the institution's existing net assets policies. A consultant also helped classify certain items into respective categories so that financial statements are presented fairly and in accordance with the SACSCOC standards.

Similarly, another institution identified process enhancements in the finance and administration office that would better prepare the college for reaffirmation of accreditation while bolstering the overall fiscal stability of the college. The institutional team decided to enhance the utilization of the technology they already had and move from a manual distribution and collections process to an automated process to complete financial aid distribution tasks.

Best Practice 4: Update and/or implement technological enhancements (software systems and equipment)

While not as common across institutions as other areas, technological enhancements were another area that institutions focused on to better prepare for accreditation. This included purchasing new equipment, implementing software and fully

integrating software systems. For instance, one university focused on enhancing software to enable the delivery of a current audit report, thereby improving the accuracy and timeliness of the financial reporting process and increasing accountability and transparency within the accounting function. Another university examined operational approaches and the use of technology. The FASTAP Deep Dive process allowed for a review of the university's allocation of resources to purchase software designed to help organize and provide efficiencies in several units of the school's operations. The recommendations made by the FASTAP team also helped develop a strategy for identifying and selecting fundraising/donor management software. Through the purchase of new software and equipment, the institution is in a better position to address issues of institutional effectiveness by more efficiently gathering and reporting information.

The recommendations made by the FASTAP team also helped develop a strategy for identifying and selecting fundraising/donor management software.

THEME 3: UPDATE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Strengthening the policies that reinforce internal operations and business processes was the final theme to emerge. Policy and procedure documentation, and evidence that they are adhered to, is important for regional accreditors to demonstrate that an institution is operating with fidelity. In order to address this need, institutions identified the fifth and final best practice.

Best Practice 5: Update policies and procedure manuals

To continue strengthening the operations of the college and better prepare for accreditation and improve long-term stability, institutions felt the need to make documented changes to processes and

procedures in an updated policies and procedures manual to support current and future staff. For instance, one institution updated its policies and operations manual and developed a number of job aides in the financial aid and human resources offices to better guide staff from their hybrid manual/automated approach to complete major tasks following the technology process designed within the system. Another college documented policies and procedures as they relate to net

assets (net asset classification, net asset release, documentation required) to serve as a training tool for future staff. The FASTAP consultant developed a checklist outlining steps to ensure that funds are allocated to the appropriate net classification that will be used as a resource for staff moving forward. The staff was able to implement better systems to document information for future requests from stakeholders and is better prepared for the upcoming decennial review and future reviews.



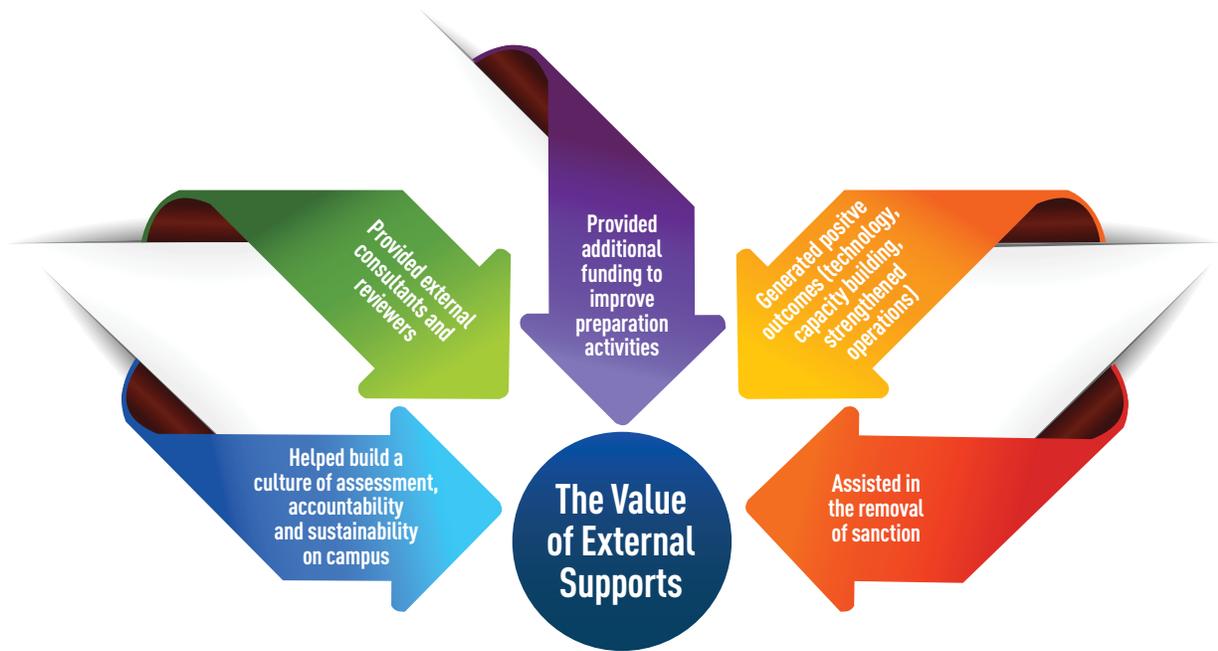
THE VALUE OF EXTERNAL SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES IN THE REAFFIRMATION PROCESS

“Most [HBCUs] are challenged with resources and personnel so any opportunity to actually help move the needle is most impactful. [FASTAP] helps focus and identify areas of concern needed as they look toward preparation for accreditation and the reaffirmation process.” – FASTAP participant

Programs that provide external supports and additional resources for institutions undergoing accreditation are invaluable. Member institutions consider FASTAP one of UNCF’s most important

programs and a useful resource. FASTAP has been instrumental in moving institutions beyond discussions of what they should be accomplishing to a point of targeted actions tied to achieving their respective reaffirmation goals. Through conversations with current and previous FASTAP recipients, it is clear that FASTAP has a positive impact on helping institutions address challenges and adequately prepare for accreditation reaffirmation and creating a culture of long-term fiscal stability. While it is too early to tell the long-term impact of FASTAP participation on an institution’s ability to sustain a culture of reaffirmation readiness, institutions have begun

Figure 3. The value of external supports and resources for institutions during the accreditation process



to see an impact in their business and operational processes, in improved staff competencies and capabilities and for those who have been placed on sanction—in their ability to be removed from sanction.

The current FASTAP program model appears optimal in achieving program goals and assisting institutions at various stages of reaffirmation. As depicted in figure 3, the value of FASTAP is that it helps build a culture of assessment, accountability and sustainability; provides external consultants and reviewers; provides additional funding; generates positive outcomes in technological improvements, improved staff competencies, timely reporting; and assists in removal from sanction.

What follows is a discussion on these five value-based outcomes of FASTAP on participating institutions with examples that validate each outcome.

1. FASTAP helped build a culture of assessment, accountability and sustainability on campus

“[FASTAP] enhances the readiness for the reaffirmation process.”
– FASTAP presidential participant

One of FASTAP’s goals is to support member institutions in the development of institutional practices and systems of assessment, accountability and effectiveness. One campus leader complimented the FASTAP process and visiting team in *“helping to underscore areas of continuing improvement, including the development of a new SACSCOC quality enhancement plan.”* Another president noted how the budding culture of assessment—as facilitated by FASTAP—lent itself to continuous improvement efforts by stating that, *“in 9-10 years, this institution will be involved in continuous strategic planning and assessment and will be ready to give their reports. It will be a pleasure, rather than a chore.”* One institution that was removed from sanction indicated that *“the activities supported by the FASTAP grant were essential to the continued success and accreditation of the University and therefore have been incorporated into the operational budget.”* Each institution was required to incorporate a sustainability statement in its implementation plan and indicate the ways in which





the institution’s activities would improve operations that will be sustained beyond the grant funding. As previously mentioned, one institution utilized its FASTAP grant to implement a new technological solution to fully integrate administrative and financial information systems. The institution indicated that the implementation of such a system, along with corresponding enhancements to policies and procedures, would improve operations and create a sustainable financial base by *“accelerating productivity and growth with reducing administrative time and costs, reducing the technology costs of managing disparate systems, strengthening risk management processes and internal controls, improving financial reporting and budget management, improving faculty and staff retention, and gaining insights to make sound strategic decisions with real-time business analytics.”*

2. External consultants and reviewers were invaluable

“Anytime you can get ahead and have recommendations from an external evaluator, and get them early related to SACSCOC standards, that’s of great benefit to the institution.”
– FASTAP participant

One of the most valuable elements of FASTAP was access to external consultants and reviewers. Throughout the years, consultants played a vital role in helping participating institutions prepare for accreditation by providing expertise and support while helping shepherd them through the accreditation process. Surveys and interviews with respondents indicated they were satisfied with the quality of work provided by FASTAP consultants

and reported that consultants’ experiences with the reaccreditation process and expertise in their respective fields were instrumental. One campus leader appreciated the diagnostic insight the consultant brought to their process. *“It would be better to have consultants being critical with us and pointing out where the holes and gaps are than for the [accreditation] committee to do so.”* Echoing similar praise, another leader explained how *“the consultant came and did an in-depth review of what our needs were. As a result of her report, we were able to tailor what our institution was doing. She helped us tremendously to stay focused on those two [SACSCOC financial standards].”* For institutions developing and enhancing a Quality Enhancement Plan, the consultant was vital to a successful review of documents, indicating what items would be evidentiary and what could be revealed through a thorough analysis. *“Recommendations from the consultant provided a blueprint to our report”* and without that guidance and feedback, *“we wouldn’t be as far along as we are.”*

3. Funding assisted campuses to secure necessary resources in preparing for reaffirmation

“As a FASTAP recipient. . . . The funds are very helpful to the institutions and accreditation is one [area] that has caused a lot of problems for schools. Getting the extra resources to bring in expert minds and extra assistance is helpful.” *– FASTAP participant*

Recipients throughout the years expressed deep gratitude for the additional financial assistance and noted how FASTAP aided their campus in overcoming funding constraints. Depending on their intervention, institutions received anywhere from \$10,000 to \$75,000. As several recipients pointed out, *“as a private HBCU, things get tight,”* so having additional financial resources to use at the institution’s discretion is very useful. Funding was used primarily to initiate a review of internal processes, purchase needed technology upgrades, hire additional staff, and conduct internal audits. Without the funding provided through FASTAP, much of the work accomplished by the project would not have been done or would have been postponed significantly. One participant explained, *“We got a lot of bang for our buck with the grant, and we’re so glad we got it. It’s helping us achieve the goals and then some.”* Another participant who utilized the FASTAP funds to address QEP challenges echoed, *“Without the assistance, we probably would not have had the funds to contract the consultants who did the actual writing and editing of the report.”* Overwhelmingly, funding from the FASTAP grant provided institutions with the means to gain additional support to assist in their accreditation process.

Overwhelmingly, funding from the FASTAP grant provided institutions with the means to gain additional support to assist in their accreditation process.

4. FASTAP generated positive outcomes in terms of technological improvements, capacity building, and improved reporting

Resources from the FASTAP grant increased participating institutions’ ability to comply with particular accreditation standards by upgrading and implementing technological software systems, providing necessary trainings to staff and key stakeholders and improving reporting processes. Two presidential FASTAP participants and a recent campus leader indicated that technological upgrades made available through FASTAP funds allowed

various individual technology systems to interface with one another. Staff trainings improved the knowledge of current staff on how to more effectively and efficiently utilize systems and enhance processes on their campuses. One interviewee explained how at one institution, the training helped staff not closely involved in the reaffirmation process understand how essential their role is to aid the college in demonstrating financial stability. The improvement in technology and hands-on training of staff members by the consultants further allowed employees to effectively report out to various stakeholders (such as SACSCOC and UNCF) in a timely manner.

5. FASTAP assisted in the removal of sanctions

One of the most impactful goals of FASTAP is reducing the number of sanctions from regional accrediting bodies across UNCF-member institutions to zero. SACSCOC indicated the need for one college that was on probation to show specific data on its institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes. The college needed to provide evidence that student learning outcome assessment results were used to improve the institution’s education programs. A FASTAP consultant reviewed the institution’s draft SACSCOC monitoring report and made appropriate recommendations for ensuring an effective structure for reporting evidence. Less than a year later, SACSCOC officially removed the institution sanction. Another institution, which had been placed on sanction by its accreditor, received a small FASTAP grant to assist in its response. The funds were used to pay for the accreditor’s site visit as well as consultant services to review and help prepare the final budget and finance fact-finding report, which was critical to lifting the sanction less than a year later. UNCF is confident that FASTAP assistance helped these institutions be more responsive to their accreditor and better prepared to be quickly removed from sanction.

CONCLUSION

Accreditation plays arguably the most critical role in an institution’s operational vitality and existence. Without accreditation, institutions are unable to receive federal funds or process federal financial aid to students. Furthermore, if they are unaccredited, employers may not hire applicants from there, and other institutions may not accept credits of transfer students from there. Ultimately, the loss of accreditation can lead to the closure of an institution, having a devastating effect on current students, alumni and the surrounding community. For HBCUs, institutions that inexplicably have to justify their existence on a regular basis, remaining in good standing with the accreditor is not only key to their survival but also reinforces their presence and contributions to the nation’s higher education enterprise. UNCF, with support from the Walmart Foundation, contributes to the strengthening of HBCUs and their ability to remain in good accreditation standing through FASTAP. Despite the impact of FASTAP with UNCF-member institutions, substantial work remains and additional investment is necessary to further build out the program.

“If [FASTAP] can do what they did for us for other schools, I think it is so beneficial. I believe that the timing was perfect for us and I just want to endorse the program and say that this is a very valuable tool for making sure that the viability of our campuses remains strong.”
– FASTAP presidential participant

Over the years of FASTAP’s existence, a number of key lessons and best practices have emerged that are beneficial to institutions challenged with complying with accreditation standards. As one president noted, over the years, FASTAP has provided valuable resources to member HBCUs undergoing the accreditation process at various stages. FASTAP interventions and resources help ensure that participating HBCUs are fiscally stable; have the appropriate systems, processes and procedures in

place to fulfill their institutional missions; and are prepared to meet the critical requirements of the regional accreditation process, especially those related to financial management and resources, enrollment management, institutional advancement and institutional effectiveness. FASTAP grantees received external support and financial resources to identify accreditation needs and develop an implementation plan for achieving their critical core objectives for audits, reviews and accreditation visits.

Across 25 participating institutions, three overarching themes and five best practices were identified. To meet regional accreditation standards and criteria, institutions sought to improve human resource capacities; strengthen internal operations; and update policies and procedures. Although institutions approached each overarching theme differently, five best practices emerged that document FASTAP’s impact.

Focusing on these core areas and practices positioned the institutions to better address the systemic challenges faced in a number of operational areas related to reaffirmation. It is evident that focusing on these common themes and engaging in these best practices can generate positive outcomes for institutions undergoing the accreditation reaffirmation process. The extensive investments and lessons learned from participating FASTAP institutions over the years are valuable for other low-resourced institutions challenged in complying with accreditation standards.



APPENDIX A

Below is a detailed description of the four FASTAP interventions.

1. REAFFIRMATION OF ACCREDITATION READINESS REVIEWS

Reaffirmation of Accreditation Readiness Reviews assist UNCF-member institutions with the financial management and institutional learning requirements of the reaffirmation process. It is offered to UNCF-member institutions up to three to four years prior to the scheduled reaffirmation visit. Selected institutions are assigned a designated FASTAP consultant (e.g., a president, provost or other senior-level administrator with extensive experience as an accreditation evaluator or an observer with subject matter expertise), who performs a thorough onsite assessment of the current state of the institution’s fiscal affairs and other compliance measures that accrediting agencies require through the reaffirmation process. The review culminates in a formal report presented to the institutional leadership with outcome-driven recommendations based on the issues and challenges identified.

Upon completion of the assessment, institutions are eligible for a \$20,000 mini-grant to implement the recommendations made by the FASTAP consultant, provided an implementation plan and budget is developed by the institution (with the consultant’s assistance if needed) and approved by UNCF. Institutions receiving grant support are required to report on the outcomes of the mini-grant within six months of receipt of funding.

2. DEEP DIVE INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENTS AND INTERVENTION

The Deep Dive Institutional Assessments and Intervention program enables UNCF to engage

selected member institutions in a transformative effort to address specific fiscal and administrative needs and opportunities over a one-year period. Informed by SACSCOC standards, each participating institution receives a comprehensive assessment at least three years prior to the start of the reaffirmation process. The assessment is focused on four key areas: financial management, enrollment management, institutional advancement and institutional effectiveness. Strengthening and aligning these areas has had a profound impact on both the fiscal viability and overall efficacy of the participating UNCF-member institutions.

With FASTAP recommendations in hand, each Deep Dive institution is eligible to receive an intervention grant of up to \$75,000, coupled with technical assistance by a FASTAP consultant or ICB staff member for implementing (and sustaining) the recommendations provided and infrastructure and policy changes suggested. An implementation plan and budget must be developed and submitted by the institution before funds are approved and released.

3. INTERIM FIVE-YEAR REAFFIRMATION READINESS REVIEWS

The Interim Five-year Reaffirmation Readiness Reviews constitute a new component to the suite of FASTAP interventions. It was implemented with Walmart Foundation funding in 2014 to assist member institutions earlier in the accreditation process with the preparation of their quality enhancement plan and other reporting requirements regarding institutional federal financial aid data, correspondence and audit responses, which must be submitted five years in advance of the reaffirmation of accreditation. The goal of this particular review is to eliminate or at least reduce the risk of any potential sanctions (e.g., warning or probation), which can be given at any point during the accreditation process, while also helping to institutionalize regulations and processes that lead to culture change—an important grant objective.

This FASTAP intervention involves matching an institution with a FASTAP consultant who will analyze data, correspondence and reports associated with fifth-year report requirements to determine area(s) of focus. This is followed by a two-day campus visit to provide onsite support with stakeholders and culminates in a report with specific recommendations and strategies for addressing the primary area(s) of need. The institution is eligible for a \$15,000 mini-grant to help implement the strategies and recommendations and to institutionalize the best practices that will be shared, provided an implementation plan and budget are submitted to and approved by UNCF.

4. HIGH-PRIORITY TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

High-priority Technical Assistance is a new intervention for institutions under sanction. In recent years, FASTAP has mainly served UNCF-member institutions entering the reaffirmation of accreditation process, with little, if any FASTAP support or technical assistance available to institutions under sanction. It involves matching an institution with a FASTAP consultant who will review all documents relevant to the sanction, participate in a multi-day campus visit and provide follow-up assistance to help ensure that the institution's response to its accrediting body effectively addresses the concerns responsible for the sanction imposed on the institution. No mini-grant opportunities are offered as part of High-priority Technical Assistance.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Gaston, P.L. (2014). Higher education accreditation. How it's changing, why it must. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
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- ³ U.S. Department of Education. Accreditation in the United States. Accessed in January 2016. <http://www2.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation.html>.
- ⁴ Council for Higher Education Accreditation. (2010, June). The value of accreditation. http://www.chea.org/pdf/Value%20of%20US%20Accreditation%2006.29.2010_buttons.pdf.
- ⁵ Eaton. An overview of U.S. accreditation.
- ⁶ A full list of national accreditors recognized by the U.S. Department of Education can be found on the department's website. <http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/agencies.aspx>.
- ⁷ Gaston. Higher education accreditation. How it's changing, why it must.
- ⁸ The value of accreditation. Council for Higher Education Accreditation.
- ⁹ Eaton. An overview of U.S. accreditation.
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- ¹¹ Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. Accrediting standards. Accessed in January 2016. <http://www.sacscoc.org/principles.asp>.
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> FISCAL AND STRATEGIC TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM:
**INSTITUTIONAL LESSONS FOR
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