Accelerating AACSB improvement with organization development processes

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the efforts of a College of Business Administration at a regional university in the southwestern United States to apply organizational development processes to increasing faculty involvement towards maintaining its AACSB accreditation. To energize and galvanize the faculty around potential issues for the AACSB visit, the dean and the faculty chair of the AASCB effort initiated a series of day-long annual faculty retreats with a program based on ideas from organization development to involve and energize those most affected by change (Beckhard & Harris, 1987). These ideas include the use of accreditation and maintenance to promote organizational learning (Elliott & Goh, 1996); cultivation of "single loop learning" (Argyris & Schon, 1996); and use of assessment/evaluation as an inquiry process for learning (Preskill & Torres, 1999). The meeting created new knowledge useful to each discipline in assessing and revising their courses and degree programs. Meeting processes bridged disciplinary silos and advanced understanding across the college regarding assessment methods and tools, especially in the use of rubrics for assessing writing and critical thinking skills. In addition, meeting planners conducted a fast-paced exercise to drive a brainstorming process designed to gather contributions and ideas from all attendees to align the content of their courses and majors across the college.

Keywords: AACSB, accreditation, assessment, organizational development processes, organization, change

INTRODUCTION

For business schools, AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) accreditation is more important than ever (Thompson & Koys, 2010; Romero, 2008). Passing this accreditation process, with its exacting quality standards, can rank colleges of business among the best in the world. For all stakeholders, the AACSB seal means quality programs, faculty, and students with greater educational and career opportunities and often, greater access to the business community. In addition, the demands of certification processes put schools on an even playing field, enabling them to improve their ability to compete with assurances of quality instruction, programs, and scholarship (Thompson & Koys, 2010). As of 2015, 746 member institutions in 51 countries and territories had earned this highly valued certification (AACSB, 2016). Maintenance visits by assessors every five years following initial certification keep schools on the improvement track.

CERTIFICATION CHALLENGES FOR FACULTIES AND DEANS

Meeting the requirements of certification poses challenges for faculty and deans (Romero, 2008), since institutions must assume new ways of seeing themselves and their results. Certification means adopting processes focused on continuous improvement that ask faculty to cross disciplinary silos to focus on unified outcomes for the college through integrated curricula. Colleges also often must meet new requirements for publications and insure that faculty members are academically and/or professionally qualified with regular research and publication (Stanton, Taylor & Stanaland, 2009) or professional credentials. While AACSB certification can mean higher salaries for faculty (Bell & Joyce, 2011), demands for assessment of current curricula, teaching, and outcomes can create additional challenges for faculty members--and deans in gaining faculty buy-in—to make the changes required to earn initial certification and to continue improvement processes over time between maintenance visits.

The AACSB Curriculum Standards particularly require that the school engage staff, faculty, and students in assessing current offerings and in making changes to integrate courses and degree plans. Participant engagement standards address stakeholders and specify that there be sufficient numbers of qualified staff and faculty to fulfill the mission of the school. These constituents must work together to enact educational processes, including assessment and evaluation.

A starting point for assessing these educational processes is the articulation of learning goals. Learning goals must include knowledge (cognitive content) and skills (behavioral and process-oriented skills). Because many faculty identify more with their disciplines than with the school's degree programs, degree program learning goals may not be as important to faculty as to administrators, thereby producing a lukewarm response on the part of faculty in efforts to involve them in this aspect of the accreditation process (Zocco, 2011; Thompson & Koys, 2010).

Zocco (2011) described the AACSB's five steps (published in 2007) to achieve Assurance of Learning:.

1. Definition of student learning goals and objectives.
2. Alignment of curricula with the adopted goals.
3. Identification of instruments and measures to assess learning.

4. Collection, analyzing, and dissemination of assessment information.
5. Using assessment information for continuous improvement of the program curricula (p. 72).

As Zocco noted, implementing any of these approaches to Assurance of Learning requires leadership commitment and faculty support. Crossing departmental boundaries to accomplish steps 1 and 2 above can be challenging. However, accredited departments involve faculty extensively using a variety of processes to achieve a collaborative effort (Sinning & Dykxhorn, 2001).

Accomplishing these steps requires comprehensive horizontal assessments that cross link vertical programs in meaningful ways to create a continuum of learning. In most schools, curriculum development, like assessment, has been fractured into multiple components that match the vertical disciplinary organization. Historically, these disciplinary silos have overwhelmed the vertical elements, making AACSB requirements exceptionally demanding (Keeling, Wall, Underhile & Dungy, 2008).

From the dean's perspective, resistance from faculty to participation in the assessment of current curricula is a major obstacle to successful implementation (Kelley, Tong & Choi, 2010; Suskie, 2004). Requests for elaborate, lengthy assessment plans and reports can alienate faculty and stifle creativity and flexibility.

Ideally, faculty should guide assessment and should act as the directors for curriculum development, but a lack of processes, skills and knowledge in assessment and new demands for scholarship may interfere with such engagement (Garrison, 2014). The AACSB assumes that deans will take leadership in engaging the faculty and stakeholders to review the mission and to make curricular change. However, Henninger (1998) noted that, "simply assuming that by establishing new standards and designating the dean as change facilitator, the AACSB can and will reform business schools fails to take into account the distinctive characteristics of decision making in colleges and universities" (Henninger, 1998, p. 12).

Henninger (1998) identified "the dualism of control" as a source of these problems. He described this dualism as "a conventional hierarchy of administrators, and … a collegial structure through which faculty make decisions regarding issues within their presumed jurisdiction…The dual collegial and conventional hierarchical structures make traditional theories of managing change by flexing management power and control inapplicable" (p. 3). Faculty alignment with their disciplinary communities thus creates a challenge for the dean as change leader.

Despite this challenge, Henninger (1998) noted, "the authority to promote change is invested in the deanship" (p. 3). The dean can call chairs and faculty together to announce a priority in the college and further, can expect all constituents to accept it. Making deep changes, however, across the curricula requires the collaboration and engagement of faculty as having primary responsibility for curriculum (Garrison, 2014). To meet the challenges that these changes pose to faculties and deans, strategies and processes from the organizational change and organization development disciplines may prove helpful in encouraging faculty to interact with each other beyond their disciplinary silos.

THE ACADEMY AS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Complex change involving culture and basic assumptions is difficult for any organization, but may be particularly so for academia, given the historical division of power

between the administration and faculty. Involving and energizing those affected by change is a core principle in organizational development (Beckhard & Harris, 1987). Likewise, in the academy, engaging faculty buy-in around new pedagogical approaches and new ways of thinking is critical to achieving certification and to maintaining it over time with continuous improvement.

Theories and viewpoints from the literature on learning organizations can shed some light on approaches and challenges, especially as they relate to assessment of mission, curricula, and integration of elements in degree programs to achieve learning outcomes. To that end, Elliott and Goh (2013) asked whether accreditation promotes organizational learning, which originates in the theory and practice of organization development. Accreditation and maintenance can serve as a catalyst for change to motivate ongoing program improvement and continuous improvement.

The concept of organizational learning originated with Argyris and Schon (1996), and refers to both single loop learning and double loop learning. Single loop learning is also known as continuous improvement and is, consequently, at the center of AACSB accreditation efforts. Continuous improvement is incremental in nature, and refers to the ongoing detection and correction of errors. In contrast, double loop learning is deeper and more radical, involving questioning the underlying assumptions or values which are the basis for decision making.

Elliott and Goh (2013) cited a social constructivist perspective on learning which views learning as primarily a social process whereby individuals are active producers of meaning, situated in a social, historical, and cultural context. Extending this view, Preskill and Torres (1999) explained and defined evaluative inquiry as a process of the learning organization that facilitates learning through "(a) the collective creation of meaning, (b) action, (c) the development of new knowledge, (d) an improvement in systemic processes, and (e) the overcoming of tacit assumptions" (p. 49). They asserted that, "when individuals and teams disseminate their learning from inquiry throughout an organization, and action results from this learning, it can be said that the organization learns" (p. 49). Evaluative inquiry is a collaborative process of the learning organization of asking questions, collecting and analyzing data, and using what is learned from an inquiry to act on important organizational issues.

In their study of Canadian business schools engaged in the accreditation process, Elliott and Goh (2013) noted that respondents were more likely to feel that accreditation promoted single loop learning (continuous improvement), that it acted as a catalyst for change through the review of a school's mission/vision and alignment of strategic priorities, and that the dean was the main motivator and champion of accreditation. Effective deans orchestrated the change process successfully by ensuring that stakeholders were informed and engaged in the process, and took a deliberate, planned approach. While the dean leads the process, leadership should be broadly distributed among other members of faculty and staff, since increased participation and involvement assists in fostering ownership for the change. The dean should model and promote behaviors that support a culture of learning, including facilitating dialogue and reflection, being open to risk-taking, and surfacing underlying assumptions.

Preskill and Torres (1999) noted the need for a variety of ways to stimulate individual, team, and organizational learning, including question-driven, collaborative and participatory processes that surface new knowledge and contribute to examination and clarification of underlying assumptions. Torres and Preskill (2001) asserted that user participation in an evaluation's design and activities is necessary, and described organization learning as "…a continuous process of growth and improvement that (a) uses information or feedback about both

processes and outcomes to make changes; (b) is integrated with work activities, and within the organization's infrastructure (e.g., its culture, systems and structures, leadership, and communication mechanisms); and (c) invokes the alignment of values, attitudes, and perceptions among organizational members" (p. 388).

Harnar and Preskill (2007) conducted an exploratory study about the process used in evaluative inquiry, and asserted that stakeholders are affected by their participation in an evaluation. They defined "process use" as "changes in thinking and behavior, whether at the individual, program, or organizational level, as a result of one's participation in an evaluation, irrespective of the evaluation results" (p. 27). They also built on previous findings that participants changed how they did their work after an evaluation was completed and credited the changes to their experience with the evaluation, versus the evaluation results. They noted an increasing commitment to involving stakeholders in evaluation.

To meet the challenges of earning and maintaining AACSB certification, then, deans may consider the use of these engagement processes to involve faculty in their ongoing process improvement. This paper describes the efforts of a College of Business Administration at a regional university in the southwestern United States to apply these processes in increasing faculty involvement towards maintaining its AACSB accreditation.

INSTITUTING A FACULTY RETREAT

With its periodic maintenance visit two years away, the College of Business Administration had made progress in assessing the quality of its curricula and courses, but wished to make more progress in closing the loop between assessment findings and making meaningful changes to its courses and degree programs. To energize and galvanize the faculty around potential issues for the AACSB visit, the dean and the faculty chair of the AASCB effort decided to initiate a series of day-long annual faculty retreats with a program based on ideas from organization development. The objectives of the retreats were to:

- Involve and energize those most affected by change (Beckhard & Harris, 1987).
- Use accreditation and maintenance to promote organizational learning (Elliott & Goh, 1996).
- Cultivate "single loop learning" (Argyris & Schon, 1996).
- Use assessment/evaluation as an inquiry process for learning (Preskill & Torres, 1999).

Two faculty members from business communication, who had previous experience as corporate trainers, were asked to plan and design such a program for the annual retreat that actively involved 80+ faculty members from the College of Business Administration. In addition to the objectives mentioned previously, the purpose of the meeting was to create new knowledge useful to each discipline in assessing and revising their courses and degree programs. Meeting processes were designed to bridge disciplinary silos and advance understanding across the college regarding assessment methods and tools, especially in the use of rubrics.

Retreat Space

Because meeting planners expected some level of discomfort among attendees about the demands to be actively involved in the program versus being passive listeners, attendees chose

their own seating at round tables by disciplinary groups. The ballroom space thus included 12 tables to accommodate eight disciplinary groups set up in two groups of six tables, each color-coded by tablecloth colors (See Appendix: Figure 1). Meeting planners intended the room setup to facilitate process demands and to reinforce the sense among the faculty members of their autonomy in making choices for their curricula and students; round tables were chosen to facilitate discussion among the participants at each table. As a result of meeting processes, all groups would be generating and receiving information about their programs, and the planners hoped to create openness among to the groups for accepting data generated from the other disciplines.

In addition to several speakers who provided information on university online tools for assessment, meeting planners designed two processes designed to involve all participants in creating new knowledge and to create energy in the group around assessment challenges surrounding the upcoming AACSB maintenance visit.

Using Rubrics in Writing and Critical Thinking Assessment

The meeting planners and the faculty member chairing the AACSB assessment effort believed that the use of rubrics across the disciplines would aid assessment efforts but, despite previous efforts to introduce the subject, they had made little progress in gaining cross-disciplinary support for this practice. Two main factors informed this faculty resistance to using rubrics: a lack of familiarity with designing and using rubrics, and a resistance to changing their accustomed methods of evaluation.

To address these factors, planners created poster-sized copies of two rubrics mounted onto foamcore boards, and provided them to each table: one for a Written Communication Assessment, and one for a Critical Thinking Assessment (See Appendix: Figures 2 and 3). Faculty members at each table used a sample assignment from a finance class to assess the quality of writing and critical thinking; collectively, participants at each table used the rubrics to record their responses to the writing sample and were allowed to determine the percentage values of the performance categories, if they wished. Following this exercise, participants at each table from the various business disciplines posted their rubrics around the room for a Gallery Walk by all participants.

As faculty viewed the work of their colleagues, they discovered a variety of approaches and standards used by other disciplines. Some graded with higher standards than others, and the activity led to a discussion of standards across the disciplinary boundaries as well as a discussion on how to modify the rubrics to accommodate a variety of assignments in other disciplines. The conversation also exposed gaps in understanding and offered opportunities for clarification regarding the use of rubrics in the classroom and creating rubrics on the university's course management software system. The activity, and the faculty luncheon that followed, also allowed all participants to move beyond their disciplinary silos and engage in discussion with other colleagues, which yielded new understanding and knowledge across the college about using rubrics in the assessment process.

Opinions Across the Disciplines: What Do Majors Need to Know?

After lunch, the meeting planners conducted an exercise designed to gather contributions and ideas from all attendees regarding learning content required for all business majors.

Planners hoped that faculty in each discipline could use the results of the exercise to align the content of their courses and majors across the college. The college's previous efforts to gain faculty input through email and focus groups had not met with much success. However, because all faculty members were in the room, the retreat offered a unique opportunity to gather this information in real time.

Planners conducted a fast-paced exercise called "Pushing the Envelope" to drive a brainstorming process incorporating all tables (and representing all disciplines) in the room. A manila envelope with a discipline-specific question written on the outside was placed at each table (See Appendix: Figure 4). Disciplines named in the questions were matched to tables so that attendees began the exercise by generating ideas for their own discipline before passing the question on to disciplinary groups at other tables. A stack of blank sheets of paper and pens were provided at each table so that participants could record ideas generated during each brainstorming round. During the exercise, the white tables "pushed envelopes" with white tables; orange tables "pushed envelopes" with orange tables (See Appendix; Figure 1).

To begin the exercise, the meeting leader blew a whistle and allowed five minutes for attendees at each table to generate as many answers to the question on the envelope (pertaining to their own discipline) as they could. They recorded their ideas on a blank sheet of paper. At the end of the five minutes, the whistle sounded and idea sheets were inserted into the envelope. Then one person at each table moved the envelope: Table 1 moved its envelope to Table 6, Table 6 moved its envelope to Table 5, Table 5 moved its envelope to Table 4, etc. Using the new question for another business discipline, attendees at each table had another five minutes to generate ideas onto a blank sheet of paper. At the end of that five minutes, the whistle sounded, idea sheets went into the envelope, and the envelopes moved again. The process was repeated until each table had its original envelope back.

Faculty groups at each table removed the idea sheets from the envelope, read the ideas inside, and evaluated the ideas for value. The exercise allowed each disciplinary group a unique opportunity to collect ideas and information from colleagues in other disciplines to aid their thinking about their own discipline-specific curriculum and courses. Groups collected rich and detailed information in a very short amount of time as a result of everyone's participation. This information provided each academic discipline new knowledge with which to evaluate their current degree programs and to inform any revisions of those programs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Among the strategies for sustaining Assurance of Learning systems and enhancing faculty engagement, Garrison and Rexeisen (2014) listed annual assessment retreats as a way to instill and develop a culture of continuous improvement. As subject matter for these meetings, they recommended structuring an AOL process that is "(a) clear and easy to understand, (b) well organized with effective processes, (c) (able to) provide evidence that resources are properly aligned to direct the time and attention of faculty to appropriate AOL activities, and (d) continually demonstrating the value of the process to improving student education" (p. 88). In addition, Garrison and Rexeisen (2014) also identified the common use of instruments administered in courses to assess students as one of the main factors that contributes to faculty resistance and to the time required to assess.

The exercises used in the retreat addressed these practices and appeared to be successful in improving the overall assessment process for faculty and administration. For example, retreat planners and sponsors intended to advance knowledge about the use of rubrics to assess student learning in support of AACSB requirements. Although results of the exercise revealed deficits in understanding among faculty in how rubrics work and in how to use them, the rubrics session provided information and application which underscored the utility and versatility of that instrument across disciplines. Using the Writing Assessment Rubric marked during the exercise, retreat sponsors identified the following errors and benefits as defined by participants described in Table 1.

Table 1: Results of "Fun with Rubrics" Exercise

Errors in Use/Understanding	Benefits of Rubrics
• Failure to assign a point range to categories	• Forces the assessor to be objective and consistent in evaluating written work
• Confusion over assigned values in performance criterion	• Reinforces standardized expectations as pre-determined by curriculum-wide objectives
• Variation in scoring the rubric for performance levels (Using a 1 – 10 scale)	• Can be/must be tailored to the course/assignment.
	• Places appropriate values on content and grammar/mechanics

The faculty chair of the AOL committee who, together with the Dean, chartered the retreat, cited as an output of the meeting the accelerated development and approval for MBA assessment rubrics (D. Berg, personal communication, March 25, 2014). He attributed this progress to new shared definitions that enable action across the business school in all departments and further noted that MBA classes would be assessed in the fall semester for communication, critical thinking, and strategic decision making by using a simplified rubric. Figure 4 in the Appendix shows an example of the MBA Strategic Decision-making Rubric used in select courses to assess student learning.

Additionally, to reinforce the College of Business Administration's objective of producing graduates who are skilled written and oral communicators, and to reduce faculty grading time, the Dean sponsored a support program for those professors in the disciplines willing to allocate a percentage of point value for a written assignment to grammar/mechanics quality. A dedicated rubric supported this effort (See Appendix; Figure 6). Graders hired by the college marked the rubric to assess written work for mechanics, and the professor assigned a percentage of the assignment point value to the range of performance as described on the rubric. Disciplines participating in this initiative included Finance, Marketing, Management/Operations, and Entrepreneurship, an effort across the disciplines enabled, in part, by enhanced understanding gained at the faculty retreat.

Meeting processes also enabled learning and discussion to achieve better organization of AOL (Assurance of Learning) strategies and tools. Direct engagement by discipline with the use of a rubric to assess student work, along with the "Gallery Walk" to learn from others' approaches, showed differences in approaches and emphases among the disciplines, educated AOL leaders about gaps in understanding of the use of rubrics, and opened an important

discussion to advance the progress toward unified tools that will enhance student learning outcomes and save faculty time. A faculty attendee also noted the value of the comments from other disciplines to the construction of a content checklist for program review in his department. He noted, "it was very helpful to learn what others need from us in course content and to have had a vehicle to communicate our needs to others" (J. Kavanaugh, personal communication, March 25, 2014).

CONCLUSION

As Preskill and Torres (1999) predicted, using a variety of ways to stimulate individual, team, and organizational learning yields progress in AOL, and these processes represented, as they recommended, question-driven, collaborative and participatory exercises. Because all disciplines could be involved at once in the exploration of approaches, traditional boundaries that divide the disciplines are more easily bridged (Thompson & Koys, 2010; Zocco, 2011). The faculty leader of the AOL effort cited, as one of the benefits of this organization process, a new and shared vocabulary across the college. By sharing the same vocabulary regarding AOL, all stakeholders were able to talk intelligently about the effort and their part in it, versus wondering about its meaning (D. Berg, personal communication, March 25, 2014).

The College of Business Administration has repeated the retreat annually with several new initiatives that have used information generated in the original retreat. For example, the college is now using a rubric for writing correctly across all business disciplines to improve the quality of student writing. Faculty evaluates the *content* of writing assignments in their courses; graders assist with assessment of student performance in grammar, mechanics and style using a common rubric. Since the retreat, faculty groups have continued to align courses across the college with a common core of basic business knowledge required of all business majors. The College of Business Administration received its AACSB re-accreditation in 2016.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Retreat space layout plan

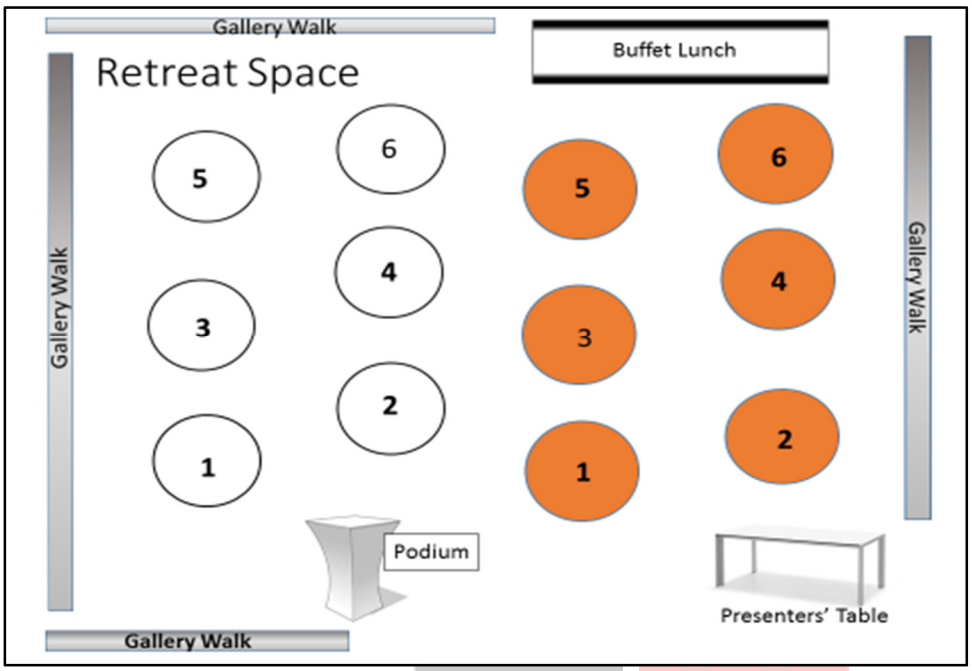

Figure 2: Written Communication Rubric

Performance Criterion	Characteristics	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Below Expectations
Document Format 10%	• Follows assigned format			
Content 65%	• Overview/thesis statement/ main idea • Strategy • Accuracy and completeness of information • Relevant details, definitions, and examples			
Organization 15%	• Unified paragraphs • Transitions and connectives			
Written Expression 10%	• Grammar and mechanics • Word usage and spelling			

Figure 3: Critical Thinking Rubric

Performance Criterion	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Below Expectations
Problem Recognition 10%			
Differentiation between relevant and irrelevant data 20%			
Development of appropriate argument or premise 30%			
Application of concepts, rules, formulae, and/or strategies to the appropriate data resulting in appropriate analysis 40%			

Figure 4: Pushing the Envelope Questions

Figure 5: MBA Student Assessment Rubric for Strategic Decision-making

SHSU-COBA Strategic Decision-making Rubric					
	Emerging			**Mastering**	
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1) Perform environmental scanning necessary for strategic decisions.	Fails to identify key factors involved in the situation			Identifies all kay factors and relevant issues involved in the situation.	
2) Identify and retrieve needed and relevant business information effectively and efficiently.	Fails to identify and select appropriate methods or systems, construct effective search strategy, and retrieve the needed information online or in person.			Identifies all relevant information and sects most appropriate methods or systems, implements exceptional effective search strategy, and successfully retrieves needed information with most efficiency.	
3) Integrate and synthesize strategic information in competitive analysis.	Failure to integrate and synthesize information of apply wrong theories or models in the analysis.			Synthesizes all relevant information and integrates all correct theories and models to address the problem.	
4) Generate plausible and innovative solutions to problems.	Solutions generated were unrealistic, implausible, or difficult to implement.			Solutions generated were completely plausible, very realistic and creative.	

Figure 6: College of Business Administration Writing Quality Rubric

SHSU College of Business Administration
Writing Correctness Rubric

Name:_____Date:_____Evaluator:_____Total:___/ XX pts

Performance Element	Criteria	Exceeds Expectations 0 – 2 errors per page X – X points	Meets Expectations 3 – 5 errors per page X – X points	Below Expectations 6+ errors per page X – X points
Sentence Errors	€ Lack of verb/subject agreement € Sentence fragments € Run-on sentences			
Comma Errors	€ Lack of commas to set off interrupters € Lack of commas in a series			
Verbs	€ Non-standard verb form € Tense switching in a sentence			
Pronouns and Adverbs	€ Objective pronoun as subject € Faulty adverb forms € "I" as object pronoun			
Usage	€ Double negatives € Non-capitalization of proper nouns € Misspelled words			

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