



ACCREDITING COMMISSION for COMMUNITY and JUNIOR COLLEGES

Western Association of Schools and Colleges

Barbara A. Beno, President
Steven M. Kinsella, Chair

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Dear Colleagues in California Community Colleges:

At our January meeting, the Commissioners and staff of the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) committed to ongoing structural and procedural changes that make our accrediting organization more responsive to member concerns. We expect this to result in further changes, in addition to the many recent changes which you may not yet have encountered personally.

Many of the recent changes were made in response to feedback from member CEOs and ALOs, plus input from the ACCJC's hearings and listening sessions conducted around the region, from team training sessions, and from a variety of external reports, including now the Chancellor's Office Task Force report.

The Commission has heard feedback from the field that ACCJC's accreditation activities and decisions need to be re-balanced to emphasize greater support for institutional improvements to quality and less focus on compliance. There are also concerns that Commission communications have become more rigidly attuned to federal mandates to the detriment of meaningful engagement focused on improvement.

This letter is to share with you that the Commission has heard the concerns expressed, is taking them seriously, has been responsive in making changes, and will continue to aggressively make additional needed changes.

Background

As you know, ACCJC, in common with all other regional accrediting agencies has a dual mission: both to assure the existing quality (through accreditation processes of evaluation) and to support the continuous improvement in educational quality at our member colleges. The quality assurance portion of our work is also required to include verification of college adherence to many federal requirements.

ACCJC fulfills this dual mission by establishing standards of accreditation and related policies, and by establishing a process of peer review by higher education professionals and public members. Quality assurance and continuous improvement are then accomplished through institutional self-evaluations, and by peer evaluation of institutional quality by qualified professionals, by Commission directions given to colleges, and through college work toward improving practices.

The basic principles on which this peer-review accreditation process rests include:

- Collaboration, respect and trust among constituent groups;
- Clear expectations embodied in Accreditation Standards that are approved by the field;
- Peer review provided by well-trained teams; and
- Consistency by the Commission in assessing institutions and reaching its decisions on accredited status.

Changes Enacted in Response to Member Concerns

In 2011, ACCJC began a regular re-evaluation of Accreditation Standards and practices by seeking input from colleges, constituency groups and the public, and based on the input of hundreds of individuals, a number of positive changes were made. The new 2014 Standards were approved by the Commissioners after a period of review and comment by the member institutions, and after the Commission considered all comments and suggestions. The Commission has also changed some policies and practices to further the principles and goals of the new Standards. As these new Standards and corresponding policies/practices are implemented, we hope many of the member concerns will be addressed. Examples include:

- Simplifying, clarifying, and reducing redundancies in the Standards where possible. The new Standards—reduced by roughly 30%—are being used by all institutions for the first time in Spring 2016.
- Lengthening accreditation cycles by a year, from six to seven years.
- Augmenting the actions that ACCJC can take based on institutional reviews by adding a new action, *reaffirmation for 12 or 18 months*, which gives institutions time to correct deficiencies to avoid receiving a sanction.
- Working with other regional accrediting agencies to create a common definition of sanctions across all regions.

Further efforts to balance compliance with support for institutional quality and improvement include:

- The introduction of the Quality Focus Essay into the midterm process.
- Soliciting information from institutions as part of the self-study process about projects that improve student outcomes and success so the Commission can share these successes through the ACCJC News and at other forums.
- Providing a forum for member institutions to share and exchange information about good practices, and providing a broader opportunity for college members and all of their constituencies to learn about accreditation and best practices at an annual ACCJC conference, with a program and timing designed by an advisory group of member institutions. The first such conference is scheduled for Spring 2017.
- In response to the request for more support for institutional efforts to achieve best practices, ACCJC is adding workshops by academic experts in areas of institutional practice that are often cited in accreditation team reports. This spring, ACCJC is offering a one-day workshop, *Taking Assessment to the Program Level*, by Dr. Linda Suskie on March 1 and

March 3. ACCJC is also offering a one-day workshop, Fundamentals of Assessment, by Dr. Amy Driscoll on April 15. Institutions have already received notices of these workshops.

Other Areas Being Considered Based on Feedback

There are still more changes in store based on more specific feedback from the field:

- *Trainings:* The visiting team trainings have been criticized as being formulaic and with the same content being delivered in a lecture style over and over again.

The ACCJC has initiated a New Evaluator Training (first session is being held on February 26, 2016) to train beginning evaluators. Bringing the “newbies” up to speed will enable the ACCJC to change the Team Evaluator Training to focus more on the details of team evaluator work and the cases the teams are assigned. ACCJC is working to make both sessions more interactive and case-study based.

At a January 20, 2016 meeting of a group of commissioners with a subgroup of the State Chancellor’s taskforce, the commissioners committed to tapping the expertise CIO leadership and asking it to partner with the ACCJC staff in revamping the trainings, to present and facilitate discussions with an interactive, case study approach rather than a passive lecture style.

The joint training group will convene in late February or early March to design the content and the method for the training. The trainings starting in April will reflect the new design.

- *Communication:* Communications from ACCJC have been criticized as needlessly stress-inducing for the colleges that receive them: results of actions taken on accreditation status, direct communications with CEOs and ALOs, communications about the annual report submitted by colleges, etc.

In part, the recent change in tone of communications from ACCJC has been a response to demands from the federal Department of Education and from litigation that action letters be completely unambiguous regarding actions required to correct deficiencies.

In part, the “tone” that colleges hear is the result of their worries about accreditation.

ACCJC will explore with its members how to achieve necessary clarity without a harsh tone.

- *Composition of evaluation teams:* ACCJC has been criticized for not having balanced accreditation evaluation teams in terms of the different constituent groups.

Some critics confuse the principles of participatory governance as expressed in California – inclusive of all constituency groups – as a model for forming accreditation teams, but it is not the appropriate model. Evaluation teams are for the most part academic peer

reviewers, and accreditation is primarily a review of academic matters and related supporting organizational practices.

The evaluation team composition has to balance several factors: size and cost to the institution receiving the team, and that must pay expenses of the team; the need for adequate expertise on the team to cover effectively all the areas of institutional operation that accreditation standards cover; the desire to include three faculty members on all comprehensive evaluation teams; the conditions at an institution that may require specialized or extra team members; the federal regulatory requirements that teams include academics and administrators.

The U.S. Department of Education has its own definitions of “academics” and “administrators” that must serve on teams, but those definitions are not the same as the definitions often used by ACCJC’s member institutions. Because of a difference between ACCJC and the U.S. Department of Education, student services administrators cannot be counted as “academics” for purposes of involvement in teams, but most instructional administrators can be counted as “academics.”

ACCJC has been expanding its pool of faculty members available for visiting teams and ensuring a more consistent level of faculty participation. In passing, this will result in a temporarily increased number of “first-time” team members.

The Commission strongly encourages additional volunteers to make the visiting teams as diverse and representative as possible.

- *Level of sanctions:* ACCJC has been criticized that the level of the sanctions appears to be higher than those levied by other regional accreditation agencies.

The ACCJC’s sanctions have been applied to member institutions based on conditions at those institutions *vis a vis* meeting accreditation standards. The number of colleges given sanctions is now declining due to improved college practices. But recent information provided by the President of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (SACS), at a conference in California in January indicates that when the data is available (i.e., not private), ACCJC’s actions are not out of alignment with at least one regional commission, SACS.

ACCJC’s new Policy on Commission Actions on Institutions will afford many colleges time to comply with findings of noncompliance before a sanction is issued.

- *Difference between the evaluation team recommendation and the commission action:* Critics have incorrectly claimed that the Commission tends to decide on a higher level of sanctions than recommended by the evaluation teams in their confidential team recommendation.

In fact, Commission decisions on accredited status that differ from the confidential team recommendations are evenly balanced in the “more” and “less” severe directions. Some

voices have claimed that the Commission action should never be different from a team recommendation. But the Commission is required by federal regulations to make the decisions on accredited status, and in doing so tries to act with the consistency of actions that members correctly desire.

The Commissioners read materials for and evaluate *all* colleges rather than a single college, and listen to input from college representatives who write to the Commission prior to its meeting about the team report, or who attend and address the Commission meeting. The Commission often has more, and different, information than the team had when it reached its agreement on a confidential recommendation at the time of the site visit. The Commission will continue to strive for a balanced approach

- *Leadership Change*: It has been suggested that the ACCJC needs leadership change.

ACCJC leadership is evolving naturally and will continue to do so. Later this year Chair Kinsella will complete his two-year term as chair and be succeeded by Vice Chair Susan Kazama, a faculty member at Kapiolani College in Hawaii. A new Vice Chair will be elected. Several changes are taking place in the ACCJC staff with the recent departure of two Vice Presidents and the recruitment of replacements.

The Commission expects natural leadership change to continue.

Conclusion

In short, there has already been a rich and sustained dialog that has resulted in many improvements in ACCJC policies and practices, meeting a wide range of member concerns. The Commission commits to continuing this dialog as widely as possible and to continuous ongoing improvement.

We look forward to hearing your concerns, continuing that dialog, and to working with you to collectively ensure the success of our peer review system that assures and works to stimulate quality improvement of the education of our member institutions through the peer accreditation process.

Sincerely,



Steven M. Kinsella

For the Commission



Barbara A. Beno

SMK & BAB/cms