



ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES

Western Association of Schools and Colleges

ACCREDITATION 2013 AND BEYOND

by

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Introduction

Thank you all for being here. Dr. Susan Clifford, Dr. John Nixon and I attended this workshop last year and were impressed with the expertise on quality practices in higher education that were shared in all the sessions at the workshop. I hope that you all find the 2013 workshop helpful as you go back to your own campuses and *lead the way forward*.

Thank you ASCC, and its President Michele Pilate, for inviting me to open up this conference with a discussion of "Accreditation 2013 and Beyond." Michele and I have been on a few panels this year at various conferences, always talking about community college quality and leadership, and I've enjoyed the various conversations with her.

And perhaps that's where I'll begin – with a few comments about role of accreditation in establishing standards for quality, assuring institutional quality to the public, and providing guidance and support for college leadership in their pursuit of quality. Then I'd like to talk a bit about the national discussions about institutional quality, and where I think the next Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act will be heading. Then I'll move to ACCJC accreditation – this year, and beyond. I know we'll have plenty of time for questions as well.

The Role of Accreditation in Higher Education Quality and Quality Assurance

First, let me share few facts as a refresher course. The ACCJC is a *membership organization*, and its members are institutions. The American Association of Community Colleges is an institutional membership organization, as is the American Council on Education. So, our constituents are the individual colleges who are members; our policies require us to act and communicate to institutions through the CEO.

The ACCJC is one of the regional accrediting commissions that operate in six geographic regions of the United States and its territories. The *Western Region* is comprised of California, Hawaii, and the Western Pacific, including the Republic of Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, The Federated States of Micronesia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas; and the territories of American Samoa and Guam.

The ACCJC accredits public and private institutions, for profit and non-profit institutions, secular and faith based institutions. It accredits institutions that offer the associate degree, and a few that offer a baccalaureate degree as well.

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The **first purpose** of accreditation is to provide quality assurance to the public that institutions are meeting quality standards, and that institutions achieve their stated educational mission. A **second purpose**, and an effect of the accreditation process, is to stimulate and support institutional improvement.

However, if we take a moment to consider the first purpose – quality assurance – one can think of accreditation as a “stamp” or “badge” of quality that the public can count on. It’s perhaps like LEED certification – a set of standards that the public does not really understand in detail, but that the public respects, understands to represent a certain kind of important quality, and counts on.

So that fact, that accreditation is the stamp of quality, the certification of quality, leads me to one more refresher fact: an **accredited institution is certified to meet standards** through an accreditation review, and is supposed to meet standards at all times. Think of LEED certification – it would be meaningless if you bought a house with that certification and the house only met the standards for the certification for a few months, or a year.

The ACCJC is an independent body that is required by federal law to be free from political influence or the influence of the professions or their associations. However, it is accountable. The ACCJC undergoes **two recognition reviews**. One is by the **Council for Higher Education Accreditation**, or CHEA, every ten years, and that can be likened to a **peer review** process. CHEA’s members are institutions from across the country, and its recognition standards are created by a Board in consultation with its member institutions and with accreditors. The CHEA review includes a lot of focus on best practices in accreditation.

The ACCJC also undergoes a recognition review by the **U.S. Department of Education**, every five years. This review examines the **compliance** of ACCJC policies and practices with federal laws passed by Congress, and associated regulations adopted by the U.S. Department of Education. The Congress changes its legislation every five or so years through the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, wherein Part H usually pertains to accreditation. The Department of Education can change its regulations at any time by following a required federal process called negotiated rulemaking. The Department has been changing its regulations, and its instructions on how accreditors are to meet regulatory requirements, pretty steadily since 2009. It is US Department of Education recognition that makes ACCJC a gatekeeper for federal financial aid and grant funds, and it is ACCJC’s efforts to retain this recognition that step up accreditation on an increasingly frequent level.

Last refresher point: The Accrediting Commission carries out the **voluntary system of self regulation** for two year colleges in this region. It is a peer-process. Its standards are developed with institutional input, and reflect good practices in the region. The decision making body of the Commission is comprised of nineteen individuals. Twelve of them are your peers and higher education colleagues – faculty and administrators from the Western Region’s two year colleges. There is one from each of the other two Western Association commissions – the ACSCU and the



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ACS. There are five representing public interest, but some of those are former educators or trustees. I'm pleased to note that three faculty from the Commission are here: Commissioners Virginia May, Joseph Bielanski, and Richard Mahon.

If I may take off on what the cartoon figure Pogo said? "We have met the accreditors, and they are us." The peers on the commission, the peers on the evaluation teams, are us. But I'm glad to know that those of you here understand that if our *personal and professional commitment is to educating students*, then we need to be consciously reflective about how well we are doing with our own teaching, in our own classes, in our programs, and at our institution. We need to develop and improve our practices over time, and in response to new student populations, new societal needs, new labor market demands and a changing nation and world.

There is nothing more frustrating than being an excellent teacher or a needy but eager student in a dysfunctional institution that does not support quality education. Those of you here probably recognize our quality assurance system is a means of helping our institutions provide quality education to those students, a means of keeping us on our toes, progressing, moving forward in quality. The theme of this conference, "evolving accreditation," really means "evolving, and improving the quality of pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and feedback strategies, and student support services, all with a goal to supporting and improving student success.

National Discussions About Higher Education Quality and Accreditation

If you read Inside Higher Education, or the Chronicle of Higher Education, you get a flavor for the discussions and debates in Congress and in the political world – the Department, the "think tanks" of various kinds, the blogosphere, the newspapers, and the increasingly significant role of foundations. These discussions can be summarized pretty readily:

- **\$\$ and Public Investment:** Higher education institutions get a lot of federal funding, and there needs to be better return on that national investment. You've seen recent discussions that student debt and the ability of students to repay their college loans generate another crisis like the mortgage loan crisis in the near future. Senator Harkin's report (2012) refers to \$128 billion in federal financial aid dollars! This amount of money leads to questions about return on investments. ***Congress and others are looking for metrics to assess the return on investment.*** Admittedly metrics of college output are often confused with the full meaning of college "quality," but it is inescapable that we in higher education will have to supply more measures of college output and outcomes. Percentages – for example, "45% of entering freshman graduate from a community college after three years" are wildly popular as metrics, even though we know they can be flawed. The measures will have to be simple enough for the general public to understand, and we are going to have to deal effectively with the statistical problem of figuring out the denominator for calculating some percentages. Graduation or completion rates, time to degree, the labor market applicability of the degrees earned are all concerns that arise out of the concern with money.



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- **The completion agenda:** The papers these days often refer to the “completion agenda,” the President’s goal of increasing the number of persons with higher education degrees and certificates significantly by 2020. There is a drive to focus institution’s attention on measuring completion, and on improving completion – of a degree or certificate, of a meaningful chunk of education that will provide defined benefits for students and possibly for society. *For an excellent discussion of the completion agenda, I refer you to “Moving the Needle on College Completion, Thoughtfully” by President Sanford Shugart of Valencia College in Inside Higher Education on February 7, 2013.*
- **Quality of Graduates:** Several national research studies, the book Academically Adrift, by Richard Arum with Josipa Roksa (2011) and the perspectives of the business community suggest that the persons graduating from higher education institutions don’t have the reading, writing, computation, communication and critical thinking skills that a college graduate should have, or used to have. What are students learning, and how can that learning be certified? These questions have led to a greater interest in learning outcomes, and in the meaning of a degree, as well as in whether there is a discipline-based means of defining the core learning requirements of a “major.”
- **Global Competitiveness is related to the quality of graduates and the completion agenda:** The European Union has developed new approaches to certifying quality of higher education; China is producing more college graduates each year than the U.S. produces in several years. In India and many other places all over the world, higher education is expanding rapidly. The US has had the benefit of a brain drain from other nations to the US through its practice of educating graduate and professional students from all over the world. Expanding education opportunities in home countries, and expanding economies, will likely reduce the number of “best and brightest” that come here from elsewhere. There is a great interest in increasing the number of college graduates in key areas that support technological and other innovations, and that help the United States maintain its position in the global political economy.
- **The Achievement Gap:** American higher education graduates more students of Caucasian and some Asian descent than of Black and Hispanic descent. There is a growing socioeconomic gap between people of upper middle and upper socioeconomic class backgrounds, and people from lower middle class, working class (“blue collar”) and poor socioeconomic backgrounds, with an overlay of ethnic culture and background. But overall, there is a growing disparity of income and lifestyle in the United States. *See recent work by Robert Reich for a discussion of this gap.* Higher Education, and community colleges in particular, are a means of addressing the growing inequality in American society. This is probably the most important moral imperative of our time, and of our profession. We’ve got to adapt our strategies to improve the success of socioeconomically and ethnically diverse students. Workforce education that improves worker skills and job mobility is an imperative.



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New National Directions for Accreditation and ACCJC Responses

For accreditation, these and other drivers mean that accreditation is asked to do the following:

1. **First, focus more on student outcomes**, and develop the means to report these, or require colleges to report these, to the public. In discussions with the Congressional committees that deal with higher education, regional accreditors are repeatedly asked to define the “magic metric” that measure quality, and tell Congress what it is. We are asked to develop comparative metrics that allow people to compare institutional productivity. While we explain the complexities of institutional mission, varieties of students entering college, and so forth, we frequently encounter disbelief. There are provisions of the current federal law that allow or require institutions to set their own academic standards; the author of that piece of the law has said that if higher education does not step up, he’ll no longer defend institutions against possible federal definitions of academic standards.

The ACCJC recently sent a memo to the member institutions that told them federal regulations require:

- institutions to “to set standards for student achievement for programs and institutions”;
- accreditors to require institutions to assess their own performance against those standards,
- require accreditors to evaluate the reasonableness of the institution-set standards, and to examine the institution’s own data and analyses, performance, and plans for improvement when conducting accreditation reviews.

The ACCJC is asked during its recognition reviews, “how does the ACCJC assess quality.” This is one of the required ways we will assess quality.

2. **Look at time to degree and completion rates**, and other desired student outcomes, and do something about the institutions where these rates are “too low.” At its most basic level, this driver asks accreditors to stop accrediting, or to terminate the accreditation of, low performing institutions. Sometimes at recognition hearings, we are asked, “how many institutions have you denied accreditation to, or terminated the accreditation for?” A few years ago, we responded to a Department of Education survey on that very subject. Some in Washington regard terminations as the sign of a “good accreditor.” Ouch. That’s not what we want to do. But it is an increasing possibility in an environment that is constrained by such things as the “two year rule” that requires accreditors to terminate the accreditation of an institution out of compliance for two years or risk termination of recognition.

There are some bad actors in the higher education community, and accreditors and the federal government are tightening requirements to either bring those institutions in line or to eliminate their eligibility for federal aid. They are not all for profit, publicly traded institutions. Some of you saw the press recently about a public college in Oklahoma that was provide three credit



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courses with passing grades to athletes from all over the country who would enroll for the ten day session.

2. **Address the quality of graduates** and the knowledge and skills they are certified to have. Include in this assessment a greater emphasis on readiness to participate in the labor market, on job-applicable skills. STEM areas are also important. The ACCJC's requirement that institutions define and assess course, program and institutional learning outcomes, that they put into college catalogues and other official documents the intended learning outcomes, has been the ACCJC's way of responding to this imperative – *the Standards get accredited institutions thinking about the quality of completers and graduates themselves.*
3. **Make more information available to the public** – disclosure of accreditation information and of institutional performance data is required. ACCJC has recently asked colleges to put accreditation related data "one click away from the home page" so that folks can find it. In a recent review of ACCJC, CHEA evaluators went to the web pages of a random set of our institutions, and could not find any data on student outcomes. Yet our Accreditation Standards have said for years that institutions can demonstrate that they achieve their mission. Somewhere along the line, some colleges stopped providing data on student achievement to the public and to students, through fact books and annual reports. Now the pressure is for such information to be provided on the institution's web page, readily available to the public and to accreditors.

A Direction for Community Colleges

The AACC has summarized its suggestion for the direction colleges ought to take in a chart called, "Framework of Institutional Responses Needed to Move Community Colleges Ahead," which appears in the report, "Reclaiming the American Dream: A Report from the 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges." If you have a chance to look at that, you'll find it helpful.

ACCJC Accreditation 2013 and Beyond

I've given you a brief summary of national and federal discussions. Let's turn now to where the ACCJC is headed, and then we'll move quickly into the discussion portion of this session.

As you know, the ACCJC is undergoing a review and revision of the Accreditation Standards and Processes this year and next. In the last 12 months, we've held three open hearings and invited people to come give ideas and criticisms to the Commission. They were held in March in southern California, June in northern California, and September in Hawaii for the Pacific region. About 30 or so persons have attended and made comments; the response in the Pacific region was especially lively and helpful and specific.

The general messages on Accreditation Standards were as follows; tweak the standards to reduce redundancy, improve clarity, and improve the "outline format" of the current Standards, which is



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“awful.” Focus more on outcomes. Focus less on processes. Clarify governance sections if you can. Centralize all the requirements about assessment. Add some standards on institutional integrity. Improve quality of “Program Review” requirements, if possible.

The ACCJC has put together some advisory bodies and task forces to help us better understand what might be needed in fiscal standards, distance education, in student learning outcomes, and most recently, a group that will meet later this month – in assessing academic quality.

The ACCJC asked a renowned higher education and accreditation expert, Dr. Peter Ewell, to give it some suggestions for the needs of accreditation in the future, and Dr. Ewell’s paper, a New Ecology of Accreditation,” can be found on the ACCJC website. We’ll be incorporating his suggestions into our work.

The Commission is now working on format changes to the format of the standards, the arrangement of existing components of the Standards, and will create for the Commission some proposed format revisions by March. After the Commission’s development workshop, where the Commissioners will discuss format and contents additions, the Commission staff will take a crack at adding new requirements and emphases, if any, and subtracting what is not seen as needed anymore. Another, public Commission discussion will be held at the June Commission meeting. Then a working group will move quickly into redrafting standards language, and sharing it with relevant, knowledgeable advisory groups, in order to have a first draft available for public review and comment at the January 2014 meeting. Following five more months of comment and adjustment, we hope to have a final version for adoption at the June 2014 Commission meeting.

These are the areas of likely change in content:

- More focus on student learning outcomes, and on student achievement outcomes; focus on the achievement gaps through disaggregated data and analyses; specification of the achievement goals and intended learning outcomes for the three sorts of core college missions – remedial education, academic education, and technical and career education.
- Increased emphasis on institutional data and analysis on student outcomes, required presentations and analyses of data in the self evaluation reports.
- Increased emphasis on institutional culture and practice that support sustainable focus on student success and on institutional improvement, including governance issues.
- Increased emphasis on institutional internal quality assurance systems, integration, decision making, and more clarity on program review if needed.

These are likely areas of change in format:

- Reduced complexity of the “outline” format
- Consolidation of some elements that appear across standards into one or a few standards



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- Addition of something more substantial in institutional integrity, perhaps a section or a standard on that topic
- Probably shorter – less paper – as we reduce unnecessary redundancies

Conclusion

I hope this information has provided some context for you, Accreditation 2013 and beyond. Let's have some discussion.