

# Academe Online

## Making Faculty Count in Higher Education Assessment

*Making accreditation and assessment meaningful while fighting a growing marketplace ideology and increasing federal mandates isn't easy. But it's possible.*

By Greg Gilbert

The experience of professors at community colleges in California shows that a well-organized faculty can advocate for meaningful academic principles—by getting involved in local accreditation, serving on visiting teams, and sitting on the accreditation commission itself.

But the national percentage of regional accreditation commissioners who are faculty members, not including California's two higher education commissions (which each have 20 percent representation), is less than 8 percent—a lamentable ten faculty members nationwide. When this low percentage of faculty commissioners is coupled with the eroding percentage of tenured faculty members in the United States and the small number of faculty members serving on many of the nation's visiting teams, the declining ability of the faculty to broker effectively for high academic principles becomes distressingly obvious.

It should come as no surprise that spaces on accreditation bodies and within administrative ranks are eagerly filled by those for whom budgetary and curricular decisions are driven by marketplace factors, such as student test scores, transfer and graduation rates, and costs associated with education. Decision making based on market-driven data is, at its root, in competition with an academic model that, while embracing accountability and sensible uses of data, is committed to local missions, faculty-driven decision making, and comprehensive, high-quality education.

Though the effort to standardize higher education was apparently narrowly averted in 2008—more a stay than a pardon—accountability, in all of its positive and negative guises, remains on the federal “to do” list. In California, faculty members at community colleges are stepping forward to answer the challenge of encroaching federalism and to defend their students, their missions, and the very existence of regional accreditation and collaborative peer review.

California's community colleges are not in harmonious accord with outcomes-based accountability. Even amid the complaints that outcomes-based accreditation is an unfunded mandate, a passing trend, or, worse, a gateway to federal standardization, faculty members are employing data in support of student success and trying to align resources and institutional budgetary processes with course and program needs. If along the way such efforts bolster an institution's accreditation status and empower the professoriate, better still.

To help build an informed faculty presence throughout California, in 2007 the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) established an annual accreditation institute, a two-day event at which faculty members participate in general sessions and breakout meetings led by fellow professors, administrator-faculty teams, legislators, and members of the accrediting commission. In addition, the ASCCC has created separate regional workshops and a Listserv to support faculty members who have specific local accreditation responsibilities. In California, most community colleges have faculty members who serve as student learning outcome coordinators, many with reassignment time. The coordinators facilitate a college-wide dialogue that results in measurable program outcomes reflected in all course syllabi. While each college approaches accountability in its own distinctive manner, local faculty members take leading roles in determining the qualitative and quantitative measures for all courses and programs.

The effort to shape the future of higher education in California through involvement in accreditation can provide useful insights to others. I offer the following recommendations, based on my experience in California, for faculty members at the local level:

**Develop clear outcomes.** Regional accrediting commissions want to see plans for assessing what students know upon completion of courses, programs, and degrees and documentation of how assessment results will be applied to future planning. The dialogic act of defining academic outcomes and measures unites the faculty and establishes evidence-based arguments for fiscal priorities that support high-quality instruction, advising, and counseling.

**Conduct meaningful program reviews.** An important component of the accreditation cycle is the thorough review of program data (retention, attrition, rigor, student satisfaction, and so on). For example, while external research may find increased student satisfaction, improved retention, and higher grades in some online courses and in courses offered in abbreviated time frames, local faculty members will likely ask more penetrating questions. Is course rigor comparable over time to that of traditional courses? Are assessments similar? How does student success compare over time in subsequent courses or in the workplace? Not only does support for such outcomes benefit programs and courses, it also results in stronger self-studies, an outcome that will have its own special appeal to politically astute college boards and administrators.

**Participate.** Volunteer to participate in local accreditation planning and development. Participation demonstrates the role of the faculty in the profession. Faculty members should also serve on visiting teams. The resultant training and the experience gained by visiting other campuses can benefit home institutions and programs as well as one's own professional standing.

I also recommend that local faculty senates and unions assume the following roles in accreditation:

**Clearly establish both the players and the process.** It is important that local faculty participants be selected by a central faculty governing body so that one set of core academic principles reigns and administrators cannot cherry-pick individual faculty members. Where possible, establish local bargaining criteria that detail faculty roles in the accreditation process and communicate openly and transparently with all involved, faculty members as well as administrative liaisons. Areas of faculty oversight should include curriculum, program review, grading criteria, related budgetary priorities, degree and certificate requirements, program development and discontinuation, and services provided by librarians and counselors. Faculty involvement in the self-study means that the faculty voice may be considered by external reviewers, what one colleague refers to as the "bigger dog."

**Protect anonymity.** Local senates are strongly advised to employ methodologies that create a blind between individual class sections and the institution to protect the privacy of students and teachers. Report data, not names. Institutions should adhere to the 1974 federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act as well as the AAUP-supported joint 1940 [Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#).

**Defend sensible data usage.** Discredit any effort to compare institutions based on simplistic aggregates. Institutions have very different missions to serve a variety of demographic and economic groups and cultures. Any effort to aggregate and rank institutions in terms of overall student success and retention, transfer, and graduation rates fails to recognize the distinct demographics, missions, and economic realities of individual institutions.

**Preserve collegial consultation.** Where the percentage of tenure-line faculty members is low, self-studies should point out the cost to the institution's programs and courses. Tenure-line faculty members provide the curriculum management, planning, interdisciplinary participation, general education oversight, and committee service that is essential in an academic setting. The single best defense against creeping federalization is comprehensive, evidence-based faculty consultation throughout our institutions.

Finally, regional accreditors should encourage local faculty involvement in the following ways:

**Provide support.** While the California model offers accreditation institutes, student learning outcome coordinator workshops, and Listserv networks, such support may not be readily available to many among the nation's professoriate. Regional accrediting agencies are well advised to collaborate with local faculty members on the development and provision of such tools and training.

**Work with faculty members.** By working in cooperation with local faculty senates and unions to coordinate and provide accreditation training, by increasing the size of faculty pools, and by increasing the percentage of faculty members serving on commissions, regional accreditors will demonstrate their commitment to evidence-based peer review and academic freedom.

**Embrace faculty participation.** The inclusion of administrators, lawyers, business executives, and community leaders in commission rosters makes perfect sense. In California, the commission distributes applications to local colleges, and all regional accreditors should be encouraged to distribute applications to college presidents and faculty members alike. Faculty expertise is crucial. It concerns the direct needs of students, courses, and programs at the point of delivery, where the largest and most vital components of education reside.

The federal government's determination to control regional accreditors is increasing. The demands on local accreditation are becoming more arduous and prescriptive. Rather than abandon accreditation as the sole province of administrators or allow the federal government to control traditional areas of faculty decision making, such as transfer of credit, the credit hour, graduation rates, and curricula, faculty members must step forward and take a leadership role in accreditation.

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