



the Research & Planning Group
for California Community Colleges

Report Back from the Field

Practitioner Ideas for Improving the Accreditation Process

During 2009-2010, the RP Group conducted a study that compared accreditation processes across the nation and perceptions of accreditation in three regions. The key findings of this research were summarized in a discussion brief called *Discussing Accreditation: Findings and Discussion Questions on Community College Accreditation Policies and Practices*. The RP Group distributed this document to key constituency groups throughout California in October 2010. During the following two months, extensive discussions were held with the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) staff; the chief executive officer, trustee, chief instructional officer and chief student service officer boards; the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges executive committee; and the California Community College Chancellor's Office cabinet. The document was also discussed by a mix of community college practitioners at a Community College League of California conference session.

These meetings were notable for two things. First, all parties were eager to explore ways to enhance the accreditation process and improve the relationship between ACCJC and the colleges. Great appreciation was expressed for training opportunities that were jointly presented by the commission and various practitioner organizations during 2010. Second, clear themes emerged about specific changes that could be made so that accreditation fosters excellence and ensures that minimum standards are consistently met. These changes involve amending existing standards and accreditation processes, strengthening training and support and building collaborations among constituency groups, colleges and accrediting agencies to provide this support.

These changes are ones that would be most effectively implemented through a partnership of ACCJC, its member institutions and practitioner groups that can help to augment key functions such as offering training, sharing effective practices and providing support to colleges at risk of not meeting accreditation standards. To emphasize where colleges, knowledgeable practitioners and constituency organizations can support the work of the commission, the ideas below indicate items that might be led by the commission, led by the field or jointly undertaken by these various entities.

The RP Group is publishing this list of ideas in hopes that it will be used to launch a productive, statewide conversation about how to best support quality assurance and improvement, particularly in an era of scarcity.

Amending Standards and Processes

1. Emphasize quality and improvement through:

- a. An accreditation process where the standards, self-study and the accreditation visit focus more on teaching, learning and student success and less on internal systems (ACCJC-led effort)
- b. A consortium of colleges that actively works to meet a set of quality standards that go beyond the accreditation standards (field-led effort)

2. Recognition of the limited capacities of colleges to continuously address the current accreditation workload as exhibited through:

- a. A set of simplified standards that evaluate quality with minimum redundancy (ACCJC-led effort)
- b. A more streamlined system for developing self-studies, reports and college visits (ACCJC-led effort)

3. Greater participation of the public in the accreditation process through:

- a. A community college trustee assigned to every visiting team to represent the public (joint field and ACCJC effort)

Strengthening Practitioner Training and Support

4. Stronger understanding of accreditation processes and effective practices through:

- a. A commission staff person or member of the commission assigned to every visiting team to guide the interpretation of standards (ACCJC-led effort)
- b. Learner-centered training programs for college faculty and staff (joint field and ACCJC effort)
- c. Regional venues for colleges to share promising practices related to the accreditation standards (field-led effort)

5. Colleges facing sanctions or on sanction could better meet or exceed the accreditation standard minimum with:

- a. A period prior to an accreditation team visit where colleges can opt for help from a technical assistance group comprised of experienced peers that is approved by the commission (joint field and ACCJC effort)
- b. A period after a college has been placed on sanction where a college can opt for help from a technical assistance group comprised of experienced peers that is approved by the commission (joint field and ACCJC effort)

Collaborating with Constituency Groups and Accrediting Agencies

6. ACCJC would gain additional capacity by:

- a. Constituency groups such as the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges or the California Community Colleges Chief Instructional Officers offering training using content that is approved by the commission (joint field and ACCJC effort)
- b. Expanding collaboration with WASC Senior to implement specific components of accreditation (ACCJC-led effort)
- c. Increasing dues to hire more commission staff, provide additional outreach and support training (joint field and ACCJC effort)