

Strengthening The Accreditation Process

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Ad Hoc Committee

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This document, "Strengthening the Accreditation Process," was adopted at the 1992 Spring Session with direction to the Executive Committee "to work with the Accreditation Commission to implement the recommendations to the greatest extent possible." The recommendations include suggestions for composition of visiting teams and for making the work of visiting teams more effective. There are also suggestions for the work of the Commission and for the Academic Senate itself in strengthening accreditation.

As the Senate works with the Commission concerning the recommendations in this document, we would appreciate comments from local senates concerning accreditation. Please send your comments to the Academic Senate Office or to any member of the Ad Hoc Committee.

The Senate wishes to thank John Petersen, Executive Director, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges and Commissioners Carmen Decker, Cypress College, and Barbara Schnelker, Palomar College, for their help.

The general goal of the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges¹ might almost be a statement of the overall goal of the Academic Senate as well:

While the Commission works to establish minimum standards of quality for institutions, its primary focus is to foster educational excellence....The Commission tries to deal with institutional differences in ways that protect both general standards of excellence and individualized educational philosophy and practice.²

The goals of the Senate and the Commission are so nearly the same, that we should be working in active cooperation to achieve those goals. This paper has been developed in the hope that it will be only the first phase of a Senate commitment of its energy and resources to strengthen faculty participation in accreditation. The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges is already a leader among accrediting commissions both in the level of challenge it brings to its member institutions and the

¹ The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges does not only accredit California's public community colleges. These recommendations are intended to be appropriate to all kinds of colleges. Of course, some of the current standards already apply to some but not all of the colleges. For example, standard 8D1 requires senates but permits private colleges to have "a formal process for providing input: which need not be a senate. Therefore, they could be adopted only for the California community colleges or, perhaps with some modification, for all the colleges the Commission accredits.

² "Handbook of Accreditation and Policy Manual," Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, 1990 Edition, p. 1.

amount of participation by faculty on Visiting Teams and on the Commission itself. Yet, the Senate sees the potential for accreditation to function far more effectively with some changes. The hope is that the Senate can work closely with the Commission to implement these proposals in reasonable and effective ways and to increase the faculty's awareness of the importance and potential of the accreditation process.

This particular document focuses primarily on the procedures of the Accrediting Commission itself. This document also contains, however, the recommendation that the Senate further strengthen accreditation by committing more of the Senate's own energy and resources to improving the preparation of faculty to participate in accreditation whether at their own college or as members of Visiting Teams. In these ways, among others, cooperation and communication between the Commission and the Senate can make a substantial difference to educational excellence at community and junior colleges, both California's public community colleges and the other colleges, which are served by the Commission.

Strengthening the Self-Study

The Commission's "Guide to Institutional Self Study and Reports to the Commission" already makes clear that the self-study should be developed with wide involvement, that it should include responses to the recommendations in the final report of the previous accreditation review, and that faculty should play a major role in the development of the self-study. The Senate and the Commission should work together to ensure the following occur as well:

1. The self-study should be used together with the final report in the college's planning processes. They should be utilized by the college and district planning and budget committees and the major recommendations, at least, should be incorporated into the planning documents, the budget, and the college and district goals.
2. All who participate in the development of the self-study should portray both the strengths and the weaknesses of the college accurately and fully.

Strengthening the Visiting Team Report

Collegiality and the role of faculty in determining policies on academic and professional matters have been a central part of the reform of California's public community colleges in recent years. However, collegiality and a strong faculty role are widely regarded as the appropriate form of governance for institutions of higher education in general. The role of faculty on the Visiting Teams must be strengthened so that the accreditation process itself will truly be a model for the role of faculty on issues of academic quality and effectiveness.

1. Faculty should comprise not less than half the members of the Visiting Team.

At the California community colleges, administrators are no longer a majority on college committees on academic and professional matters. For the same reasons, administrators should no longer comprise a majority on Visiting Teams. Although in practice faculty often comprise only 25% of teams and sometimes even less, the policy is that four to five members out of the ten that make up a typical team should be faculty. This policy should be strengthened and the implementation problems should be resolved so that the policy is carried out consistently.³

2. Not only faculty but also instruction and student services administrators should be given more opportunities to be Visiting Team leaders.

Many faculty could serve very effectively in this role as could administrators other than the chief executive officers. There are some colleges where it would be particularly meaningful and effective to have a faculty member as the leader of the team. It would convey better than any words the commitment to collegiality that is so important to effective operation of colleges and universities. Just as the percentage of faculty on the Commission has increased, just as the percentage of faculty on teams has increased and will continue to increase so should the leadership role be given increasingly to faculty. The raised that faculty does not usually have but certainly colleges would be willing to secretarial support. For many faculty, leader's role would entail too many days of missed classes. However, for many others it would be possible to plan carefully and perform this important role without ceasing to perform their own faculty role at their campus effectively. Indeed, an administrator who performs this role will also have to do some careful planning and accept some price in terms of their activities at their own college.

3. To the extent possible consistent with the legal obligations of the Commission to be independent of certain types of external organizations, faculty members of teams as well as faculty members of the Commission itself should be selected from those held in high regard by the faculty. The Academic Senate should establish a process to develop a list of well-qualified candidates and submit that list to the Executive Director and update it regularly. The Executive Director should rely to a large extent on that list when selecting faculty to serve on Visiting Teams.

The intent of this recommendation is not to exclude the names of those faculty who have already served effectively as members of teams. In addition, there is no intent to try to control the Executive Director. The Senate could provide a very long list with many faculty in each of the various categories needed: by geography, sex, ethnicity, and

³ Specifically, the staff has had difficulty finding replacements for faculty who are forced to withdraw from a team at the last minute. Secondly, sometimes a faculty member becomes an administrator in the interim between being appointed to the team and the team visit. When this happens, the person is still permitted to be on the team. In addition, since the same responsibilities make one an administrator in one district but a faculty member in another, it is sometimes difficult to tell who on the team is faculty and who is not. Lastly, faculty have a more difficult time leaving campus for the visit than do administrators. None of these obstacles seems particularly difficult to solve, and the Senate looks forward to working with the Executive Director to ensure that practice reflects policy, and faculty truly constitute half the members of teams or even more. One way to solve these problems would more be campus support for faculty going on visits, for example, by providing substitutes.

discipline. The point is only to ensure that the faculty selected are highly respected by other faculty. If the Commission feels that this process would draw its independence into question, then other approaches should be explored that protect both the Commission's independence and ensure that the most effective faculty are selected.

4. The Visiting Team should review academic standards at the college. As at least one part of this review, course outlines, Academic Standards forms where required,⁴ syllabi, ~~and~~ exams, and related course materials for a sample of courses should be considered to see whether degree-applicable courses are indeed baccalaureate level.

A basic part of accreditation should certainly be academic standards. If there is substantial question about whether the degree-applicable courses truly are, on paper and in practice, college-level, the college would not deserve accreditation.

5. The president of the academic senate should be invited to attend the meeting when, prior to the exit report, the Visiting Team leader meets with the college president.

6. The final Visiting Team report including the action of the Commission should be provided at a minimum to all who sign the self-study. If the college president suggests factual changes to the draft copy of the team report, the same people who sign the self-study should sign that letter.

For the same reasons that all these people sign the self-study itself, they should also be given a copy of the Visiting Team's preliminary report and a chance to indicate agreement with the suggested factual changes. To include them in these other stages is no more an impugning of the president's integrity than is including their signatures on the initial self-study. The credibility of the accreditation process can only be strengthened by removing even the possibility or appearance of its being influenced in inappropriate ways by any constituency.

7. Every team member should be made aware that minority reports should be submitted when needed so that the Commission hears about important matters on which consensus was not reached. Such reports should continue to be made part of the final report.

8. The team leader should get the draft report to the members of the team promptly and, at a minimum, in sufficient time so that the team members have at least ten days to review the report carefully.

9. The team should meet via a conference telephone call once their complete report is in writing to ensure that the report genuinely represents a consensus of the Visiting Team. Face-to-face teams meeting for this purpose should be held if requested by at least three members who feel there are substantial unresolved questions.

⁴ These are forms which are required for California community college courses by Title 5 to ensure courses are baccalaureate level.

Such a meeting would be very expensive and usually unnecessary. However, where there are areas of fundamental disagreement, that option should exist.⁵ However, the three days of the visit itself do not provide enough time to gather all the information necessary and to get all the reports and recommendations into a written document with time left to bring the team to consensus around those recommendations.

10. The evaluation of the team leader by the members of the team should occur after the entire process is completed, and the team has received the team report, as it will go to the Commission.

11. The Visiting Team should be evaluated by some people from the college that is being visited.

12. In addition to college and district accreditation visits, there should be a visit to review statewide practices and policies by a team composed of faculty and administrators from the very best community colleges from outside of California as well as university faculty and administrators.

Usually all the members of the team visiting one California community college are currently employed at other California community colleges. Consciously or not so consciously, the standard then begins to become skewed towards whether this particular college falls short of or exceeds the norm as determined by the other California community colleges. Since more and more of what the California community colleges do is shaped by state budget decisions as well as by state law, both regulation and statute, the question becomes whether the norm itself may not be questionable at least at some future date. At best, having teams almost exclusively made up of members from other Californian community colleges risks making the frame of reference unnecessarily limited. At worst, it may lead us to accept even egregious faults because they have been fostered or imposed by Sacramento. Ideally, the national perspective should be present as a dimension of every team's report. However, it would be unreasonably expensive to add additional members from outside the state to every team. Therefore, the proposal here is to bring a team every few years to look at the state and report their commendations, concerns, and recommendations. The state Chancellor should work with the Academic Senate and others to develop a self-study, and the team should visit a small number of colleges chosen to be as representative as possible of the system. That team's recommendations should be appended to each college's self-study to alert that college's accreditation team to possible problems that stood out from another frame of reference. Each college self-study and each Visiting Team would be expected to respond to those recommendations.⁶

⁵ Team visits or the Commission's own meetings might need to be scheduled in a new way to allow for the additional time some team reports would take under this proposal.

⁶ Since the process would not result in the accreditation of the state system but only in providing another dimension to the accreditation of the individual colleges, the Commission may feel these activities are not something it should be requiring. Its endorsement of the value of this information would still be welcome as other approaches are investigated as a way to accomplish it. The question would still remain, however, of how should the Commission respond to the reality that state policies, whether budget decisions or statutes and regulations, are a key component in the quality of the individual colleges and that teams from

Strengthening the Commission

The membership on the Commission itself should be changed gradually until there is a balance of administrators and faculty.

These additional faculty need not be from the California community colleges. Four of the members of the Commission come from colleges and universities outside the California community colleges. If these groups would agree to be represented by a faculty member alternately with an administrator, that would achieve the balance sought.⁷

Strengthening the Standards

The Accrediting Commission only recently conducted a complete review of the standards. Therefore, the Senate has not made extensive recommendations at this time about the standards themselves. Rather, the Senate intends to review the standards in the future and will make recommendations at that time. However, there are two areas that deserve prompt attention from the Commission:

1. Representatives of the Commission and the Senate should meet to discuss how to incorporate the Senate's proposals on evaluating a college's faculty into the accreditation standards.

At the Commission's request, the Academic Senate developed extensive material for the standard on evaluating the college's faculty. This document was unanimously accepted as an official position of the Academic Senate by resolution at the spring 1990 Session.

2. The Commission should incorporate into the accreditation standards the principles contained in the Senate's recommendations to the Board of Governors on student equity.⁸ The issue of increasing the effectiveness of community colleges in helping students from ethnic minority groups make it into the economic mainstream is so critical to the future that everything possible should be done to foster that effectiveness. The issue of staff diversity is already addressed in the standards themselves. (Available from Senate Office)

the other colleges which are also operating under the same constraints are at some disadvantage in evaluating these constraints. They may fail to criticize them just because they are so familiar and known to be beyond the college's control and even should they criticize them it may appear self-serving, part of an effort to put pressure on the state.

⁷ The Commission is currently composed of five faculty, nine administrators, and three public embers, who are often trustees. The proposed change would result in seven administrators and seven faculty. If some of these outside groups are unwilling to be represented by faculty, perhaps representatives of the UC and CSU Academic Senates could be added, which would also achieve better balance. Since the Commission meets rarely, the additional cost for one or two more members would not be a substantial obstacle.

⁸ Since there has been some criticism from members of Congress and others that affirmative action was incorporated into accreditation standards, the Commission might prefer to set the standards only in terms of collecting appropriate data on the access and success of various groups and, where it appears the college is failing to foster access or success for particular groups, that it has some process in place to determine the cause and possible remedies of those problems.

Further Senate Activities

1. The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges should direct its Executive Committee to strengthen the preparation of faculty who participate in the accreditation process by helping develop their own college's self-study or by serving on Visiting Teams. Specifically, the Executive Committee shall:
 - a. Revise the Senate document "Faculty Role in Accreditation."
 - b. Offer staff development opportunities on the faculty role in accreditation in cooperation with the Commission, at the Fall and Spring Sessions, at the Senate's Summer Leadership Institute, or as a workshop.

2. The Executive Committee shall review the accreditation standards and present recommendations for change to a future session.

For more information on accreditation see Accreditation: Evaluating the Collective Faculty