

president's take

ACCREDITATION: VALUE CLOUDED IN CONTENTIOUSNESS
BY DENNIS FRISCH

AS I write this, 27 California Community Colleges (25% of the 112 colleges) are on some form of sanction—show cause, probation, or warning—by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC). Since no regional accreditation commission has even been close to sanctioning so many institutions, we must ask what makes our dynamic in the West so completely different from other areas?

First, let's establish that most faculty agree that accreditation is a useful and necessary tool to assess a college's performance and achievements. In the past, accreditation was viewed as an opportunity to critically examine educational processes. Faculty have always engaged at this level, viewing the process as positive, constructive, and yes, even needed.

Today, however, many faculty question the validity of the standards, and, to no great surprise, are openly asking whether the ACCJC has exceeded the scope and purpose of its own mission. In particular, faculty have noted the greatly increased amount of time and money spent to complete a self-study and host an accreditation team. As President of FACCC, and as an active campus and state level union leader, I have heard an unprecedented level of anger, frustration, and cynicism at this entire process. There is a growing perception, right or wrong, of the ACCJC adopting an overly punitive approach

to institutions resisting its expansive agenda. While this concern is not confined to faculty, administrators and classified staff have been less public in their criticism (retribution remains a perceived or genuine threat).

The accreditation process entails identification of accomplishments and strengths while also noting areas for improvement. Usually, that kind of assessment is contained in self-study presented in the early stages. What generates frustration and anger is the opinion that, as implemented now, the final accreditation report fails to fulfill its intended purpose: noting positive accomplishments, developing a plan for improvement, and assisting colleges to address shortcomings. Rather, the reports seemingly function as a weapon to punish institutions and publicly challenge their effectiveness and credibility.

When these reports are publicized, the first question typically asked is, "why are the faculty

not doing better?" The faculty perceive they are being blamed for the criticisms (and resulting sanction), even though the reports emphasize the more serious problems lie with the roles and responsibilities of the trustee board, financial management and stability, and planning.

At College of the Redwoods, administrative problems were at the center of the negative report and the show cause sanction. For City College of San Francisco, the author of the Financial Crisis Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) report emphasized that the problems were not the result of faculty shortcomings, but financial mismanagement. Despite this, an opinion editorial was published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* ascribing blame for the college's accreditation on the local academic senate's role in college governance. FACCC helped craft an answer to the newspaper piece and immediately met with faculty leaders to develop additional responses.

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– Dennis Frisch

What to do? A few years back, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office created an Accreditation Task Force which produced a forceful response to the ACCJC from the Chancellor and a letter to the U.S. Department of Education about our problems with the process. With 27 colleges on sanction, I am pleased to report that this Task Force is reconvening.

We may also consider sponsoring a request to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee to order an audit measuring the costs of complying with accreditation standards. Having suffered \$809 million in budget cuts over the last three years, should we not at least know how much is spent by our institutions to comply with the ACCJC standards? My hunch tells me it's an extraordinary sum when it should be only an ordinary sum.

Local faculty should also work closely with their unions and academic senates in the conversations already occurring on accreditation compliance and reform. The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges has demonstrated positive leadership in this arena in working with the ACCJC and sponsoring an Accreditation Institute. Additionally, the Research and Planning Group has published a valuable research paper to guide us in these efforts.

With the appointment of a new State Chancellor, it is time for a new level of system engagement in this very important subject. Accreditation is not an exclusive concern of the faculty; indeed, all parties in the system need to participate. Faculty must, however, speak out on the need for accreditation reform – in whatever form that takes. We, the educators, need to be prominent in this discussion as we develop common strategies to return accreditation to a more positive and constructive set of standards and processes that genuinely serve to improve higher education and the advancement of our students. ■

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