

General Information on Accreditation¹

Accreditation as a system of voluntary, non-governmental self-regulation and peer review is unique to American educational institutions. It is a system by which an institution evaluates itself in accordance with standards of good practice regarding goals and objectives; the appropriateness, sufficiency, and utilization of resources; the usefulness, integrity, and effectiveness of its processes; and the extent to which it is achieving its intended outcomes. It is a process by which accreditors provide students, the public, and each other with assurances of institutional integrity, quality, and effectiveness. Accreditation is intended to encourage institutions to plan for institutional improvement in quality and effectiveness.

Each institution affiliated with the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges accepts the obligation to undergo a cycle of periodic evaluation through self-study and professional peer review. The heart of this obligation is conducting a rigorous self-study during which an institution appraises itself against the Commission's standards in terms of its stated institutional purposes. The cycle of evaluation requires a Comprehensive Self Study every six years following initial accreditation and a visit by a team of peers. The cycle includes a mandatory midterm report in the third year as well as any other reports requested by the Commission. All reports beyond the Comprehensive Self Study may be followed by a visit by Commission representatives.

Teams conduct a review following completion of a self-study in order to determine the extent to which an institution meets the standards. Team members, selected for their expertise from member institutions, make recommendations for improvement to an institution, commend exemplary practices, and provide both the college and the Commission with a report of their findings.

It is the responsibility of the nineteen-member Commission to determine the accredited status of an institution. In determining this status, the Commission uses the team report, the self study, and the accreditation history of the institution. The Commission decision is communicated to the institution via an action letter and is made public through Commission announcements.

Dialogue

As the Commission was developing the new standards, it became evident that if an institution is to ensure that its resources and processes support student learning and its continuous assessment, as well as the pursuit of institutional excellence and improvement, an "on-going, self-reflective dialogue" must become central to institutional processes. This dialogue, it was thought, should serve to provide a college community with the means to integrate of the elements of the standards, resulting in a comprehensive institutional perspective that would serve to verify integrity and "promote quality and improvement." Accordingly, the subtitle of the Introduction to the Accreditation Standards is "Shaping the Dialogue."

A dialogue is a group discussion among "colleagues," often facilitated, that is designed to explore complex issues, create greater group intelligence, and facilitate group learning. The idea of "colleagues" is important; dialogue occurs where individuals see themselves as colleagues. In order for the group to engage in dialogue, individuals must suspend their own views to listen fully to one another in order to understand each other's viewpoints. Groups engaged in dialogue develop greater insights, shared meanings and ultimately, collective understanding of complex issues and how best to address them.

Dialogue improves *collective* thinking. A practice of dialogue can have benefits for the individual as well as the institution. Dialogue can help build self-awareness, improve communication skills, strengthen teams, and stimulate innovation that fosters effective change. Dialogues are powerful, transformational experiences that lead to both personal and collaborative action. But dialogic

¹ Excerpted from the *Guide To Evaluating Institutions Using the ACCJC 2002 Standards* (p. 4-7).

discussions also allow controversial topics that may have in the past become sources of disagreement and division to be explored in a more useful context that can lead to greater group insight. The Standards emphasize dialogue as a means for an institution to come to collective understanding of what it means to be learning-focused in the context of a particular institution's history and mission; of what the meaningful student learning outcomes at the program and degree level should be, and on how institutional resources and processes might be structured to support the improvement of student learning. Unlike *debate*, in which most academicians are trained to seek to score points and to persuade, the goal of dialogue is mutual understanding and respect. Dialogue involves active listening, seeking to understand, giving everyone the opportunity to talk, and trying not to interrupt. A conscious commitment to engage in *dialogue* ensures that a group welcomes a range of viewpoints during its search for effective ways of addressing important issues. Retaining the use of a facilitator can help ensure that the ground rules are maintained and can help clarify themes and ideas. While dialogue may not lead to a resolution of a conflict, it can lead to a makeover of the way in which the conflict is pursued from one which is destructive and divisive to one which is constructive and leads to personal and institutional growth. Too often on campus, we avoid certain controversial topics or we take a perspective that leaves us in about the same place we started, with little to no additional understanding of the issue. By assisting in the discovery of common ground and by developing increased willingness to work collegially to illuminate and solve problems, dialogue has the potential to improve an institution's ability to deal with the inevitable disagreements that arise in the life of an institution. The new Standards' focus on student learning calls for higher education institutions to deal with a very complex issue, improving student learning. It also calls on institutions to change—and to learn. Dialogue can be a powerful strategy for generating the creative discussions and collective wisdom that can enable institutional change.

Themes

Several themes thread throughout these standards. These themes can provide guidance and structure to self-reflective dialogue and evaluation of institutional effectiveness. The themes are as follows:

Institutional Commitments The standards ask institutions to make a commitment in action to providing high quality education congruent with institutional mission. The first expression of this is in Standard I, which calls for an institutional mission statement that reflects the intended student population and the institution's commitment to student learning. Throughout the standards, the commission asks that institutions insure the consistency between mission and institution goals and plans and insure that the mission is more than a statement of intention — that it guides institutional action. The standards also ask that an institution commit to supporting student learning as its primary mission. The number of references to student learning outcomes throughout the standards are designed to guide this institutional commitment to student learning. The standards' requirement that the entire institution participate in reviewing institutional performance and developing plans for improvement of student learning outcomes is intended to help the institution sustain its commitment to student learning. Finally, the requirement that an institution regularly review its mission statement asks that the institution periodically reflect on its mission statement, adapt it as needed, and renew commitment to achieving the mission.

Evaluation, Planning, and Improvement

The standards require ongoing institutional evaluation and improvement to help serve students better. Evaluation focuses on student achievement, student learning, and the effectiveness of processes, policies, and organization. Improvement is achieved through an ongoing and systematic cycle of evaluation, integrated planning, implementation, and re-evaluation. The planning cycle begins with evaluation of student needs and college programs and services. This evaluation in turn informs college decisions about where it needs to improve, and the college identifies improvement goals campus-wide. Resources are distributed in order to implement these goals. When resources are insufficient to support improvement goals, the college adjusts its resource decisions to reflect its priorities or seeks other means of supplying resources to meet its goals. Once improvement plans

have been fully implemented, evaluation of how well the goals have been met ensues. Thus, the planning cycle is comprised of evaluation, goal setting, resource distribution, implementation, and reevaluation.

Student Learning Outcomes

The development of Student Learning Outcomes is one of the key themes in these standards. The theme has to do with the institution consciously and robustly demonstrating the effectiveness of its efforts to produce and support student learning by developing student-learning outcomes at the course, program, and degree level. This demonstration of effectiveness requires that learning outcomes be measured and assessed to determine how well learning is occurring so that changes to improve learning and teaching can be made. It requires that faculty engage in discussions of ways to deliver instruction to maximize student learning. It requires that those providing student support services develop student-learning outcomes and evaluate the quality of their policies, processes, and procedures for providing students access and movement through the institution. And it requires that student learning outcomes be at the center of the institution's key processes and allocation of resources. Ultimately, this theme requires that an institution engage in self-analysis leading to improvement of all that it does regarding learning and teaching.

Organization

The Standards require colleges to have inclusive, informed, and intentional efforts to define student learning, provide programs to support that learning, and to evaluate how well learning is occurring. This requirement means that the institution must have in place the organizational means to identify and make public the learning outcomes, to evaluate the effectiveness of programs in producing those outcomes, and to make improvements. This requirement for adequate staff, resources and organizational structure (communication and decision making structures) is not new to accreditation standards, but the new expectation is that these be oriented to produce and support student learning. Consequently, they will be evaluated, in part, by how well they support learning.

Dialogue

The standards are designed to facilitate college engagement in inclusive, informed, and intentional dialogue about institutional quality and improvement. The dialogue should purposefully guide institutional change. All members of the college community should participate in this reflection and exchange about student achievement, student learning, and the effectiveness of its processes, policies, and organization. For the dialogue to have its intended effect, it should be based on reliable information about the college's programs and services and evidence on how well the institution is meeting student needs. Information should be quantitative and qualitative, responsive to a clear inquiry, meaningfully interpreted, and broadly communicated. The institutional dialogue should result in ongoing self-reflection and conscious improvement.

Institutional Integrity

This theme deals with the institution's demonstrated concern with honesty, truthfulness, and the manner in which it represents itself to all stakeholders, internal and external. This theme speaks to the intentions of an institution as well as to how it carries them out. It prompts institutional assessment of the integrity of its policies, practices, and procedures and to how it treats students, employees, and its publics. It asks that the institution concern itself with the clarity, understandability, accessibility, and appropriateness of its publications; that its faculty provide for open inquiry in their classes as well as student grades that reflect an honest appraisal of student performance against faculty standards. It has an expectation of academic honesty on the part of students. It requires that the institution demonstrate regard for issues of equity and diversity. It encourages the institution to look at its hiring and employment practices as well as to its relationship with the Commission and other external agencies. Finally, it expects that an institution be self-reflective and honest with itself in all its operations.