Compliance and Improvement: ACCJC’s Dual Mission

ACCJC has benefitted from the detailed and extensive feedback from the volunteer efforts of a group of regional members who came together as Workgroup I. Authorized by the CCC Board of Governors to find ways to improve operations at ACCJC, they generated dozens of suggestions and brought them to our attention in a setting of helpful dialogue.

Among the suggestions were comments that ACCJC’s review processes might focus less on compliance and more on improvement. I appreciate that this perspective was not framed as an either/or dichotomy but rather as a desired shift on a continuum. I propose that the place on that continuum where an institutional review lands is based on several factors. Let me mention a few of these factors.

Team Training. Our recently revised approach to preparing peer review teams for their critical task has placed a clearer emphasis on identifying and appreciating the good work that institutions are doing as described in their self-study report. Our experience is that member colleges are already seriously engaged in continuous improvement. These efforts are reinforced and enhanced when noticed and affirmed by their peers. Peer review teams are reminded that their job is not to conduct original research, “looking under the rocks to find scorpions” so to speak, but to clarify and verify the college’s self-evaluation report and its efforts at institutional improvement. The fear of a compliance-related “Gotcha!” from a team can undercut the candor that is required to foster improvement.

Compliance is Improvement. In a curious convergence of mission emphases, several ACCJC Standards in fact do require an institution to embed continuous improvement processes into the operations and culture of the college. Standards I.B.1, for example, includes major aspects of the college’s operations for inclusion in improvement processes: “The institution demonstrates a sustained, substantive and collegial dialog about student outcomes, student equity, academic quality, institutional effectiveness, and continuous improvement of student learning and achievement.” The continuous improvement motif is explicit in other Standards as well, such as I.B.6, 8, 9; II.A.2; II.C.2; III.A.14, III.D.5, 8; IV.C.8, 10: and IV.D.5. It is implicit wherever the use of performance data is linked to evaluation in the Standards.

Action Language. In order to clarify what is expected of institutions in the letters they receive following a Commission action, compliance issues will no longer be called “recommendations.” That term will be used for areas of improvement. When compliance with a Standard is at issue, the Commission will express a “requirement” related to the Standard. In keeping with federal criteria, a compliance requirement sets a two-year calendar window for the college to demonstrate compliance.

Workshops and Training. Beyond publishing Standards and expecting colleges to comply with them, the ACCJC team is expanding its commitment to help its members understand and embrace the principles that undergird them. Through significantly revised group training, updated manuals and website, and greater staff availability, members are supported in internalizing the process of continuous quality improvement.

College Frame of Mind. The way in which a college goes about preparing for a comprehensive review for reaffirmation can orient the participants more toward an improvement motivation. Accreditors sometimes speak of what they call “the tipping point” when it becomes clear to the campus team that this is for us and not for the accrediting agency! A seldom-stated but core outcome of the accreditation process is that it prompts candid, sustained, and productive conversations within and across all units at
the institution. As these conversations are framed by standards of good practice as developed and vetted by the membership, this is quality improvement.

Owning the Standards. An important perspective: Accreditation arose from the academy; it did not descend from the government. Our peers came together and agreed upon statements of good practice in higher education. Representatives of our members, the Commission, continuously review and refresh these statements as higher education evolves. They are not alien impositions; they belong to us. They are *descriptive* of how a college aspires to operate, not *prescriptive* of what someone tells a college it has to do.

A clear and effective focus on improvement does not mean that expectations for compliance go away and everyone gets a free pass. These are not antithetical foci. As a college keeps a keen eye on how well it understands and embraces the Standards, and on how well it can demonstrate this to its “critical friends” (the review team), by this process it is in fact improving.