All This Work with No Pay: Why Be a Commissioner?

As both a staff member and a Commissioner with three different accrediting agencies, over a span of fifteen years, I’ve participated now in more than 55 full Commission sessions. These demanding gatherings, typically three- to five-day events, requiring days of preparation by each participant, can be exhausting and weighty decision-making marathons. On several occasions, as I walked back to my hotel room on the final evening of a session, I have called my wife on my cell phone and said, “I feel like I’ve spent the day walking among giants!”

The aggregation of wisdom and commitment in evidence at a Commission meeting cannot help but be impressive. These are busy people, most with full-time careers back home, with no one doing their work for them while they volunteer their time and talents in a hotel conference room. With a cloud-linked device open in front of them, on which they have accessed and reviewed often a thousand or more pages of evidence, they enter into a brisk dialogue with their peers to form an accurate picture of each college being reviewed. They then frame that picture in the context of the agency’s standards and ponder the most appropriate action.

Commissioners bear a multi-directional responsibility. They look outward to several key stakeholder groups to assure them that the institution is both stable and effective. They tell students and their families that it is safe to invest their time and resources in pursuit of a quality education. They tell employers that a credential from the college has substance. They assure other higher education institutions that credits and degrees earned at this institution represent real learning and can be applied to additional credentials. They tell state and federal governments, and the taxpayers they represent, that supporting students at the institution is a sound investment.

The Commissioners then turn inward to the institution. They communicate that they have seen, validated, and appreciated the good work the institution has done to prepare for its review. Even more, they note the extensive efforts of the institution to ensure that it does in fact meet the Standards. They also affirm the specific findings of the peer review team, particularly as the team has identified areas in need of additional development under the Standards. When critical issues of non-compliance have been found by the team, the Commission shoulders the responsibility to issue a sanction in keeping with the severity of the issues.

The Commission’s action carries the authority granted to it by its member institutions and by its standing as a federally recognized gatekeeper for student financial assistance. I cannot recall ever seeing a Commissioner carry this responsibility lightly. They know that they are the bulwark against any loss of rigor, any tendency toward slippage in integrity, or any failure to ensure stability in American higher education.

Commissioners take a high-altitude view of the status of an institution. They begin by taking very seriously the on-the-ground work of the peer review team. The First and Second Readers, in particular, have examined in detail the institution’s self-study, the team’s report, and other historical and current performance metrics. They are prepared to launch a rich discussion
among their peers about their findings. Many years of collective experience are represented among the assembled Commissioners; they are able to calibrate their conclusions with reference to a large number of similar actions taken in prior years.

The Commission is composed of persons representing areas of experience in the academy—faculty, administrators, business officers, and student services, for example. One member in seven is a representative of the public, with no institutional affiliation. These professionals bring to this task the wisdom from their years of experience in these roles. They do not represent the roles associated with their titles at their home institutions. The decisions they are required to make are aligned with the ACCJC Standards and not with their institutional roles.

Since service on the Commission is limited to two three-year terms, I have often heard Commissioners who are terming out comment on how rich the experience has been for them and how they wish they could continue to serve. They speak of their expanded awareness of what quality assurance looks like when applied across many distinctive institutions yet with common issues. They recall the formal interactions and informal conversations with colleagues who share a similar passion for the power of peer review. And they recall the deep satisfaction of knowing they have made a difference in education – civilization’s best gift to itself. It reminds me how central it is to American higher education to give back to the profession that means so much to our collective future.