Is It Bright Lines or Processes?

While it’s not really an either/or answer, knowing the difference can be profound. Let me amplify the question.

To what should an accreditor look when evaluating an institution’s effectiveness? There are some strident voices in the national debate about accreditors who insist that we should look mostly at numbers. Furthermore, they claim, we should set minimum thresholds for these numbers and deny accreditation to any institution that drops below those numbers. This has become known as the “bright line” position. With evidence sincerity they will ask, “How can you possibly accredit an institution with less than a 10% graduation rate?”

The appeal for this argument seems to rest on the notion that bright lines are both simple and consistent. They’re simple in that anyone can pull up an online database, read a number, and draw a conclusion as to whether an institution is worthy of our trust. Above the bright line is good; below is bad. It’s that simple.

And it’s consistent because you can take this single measure and apply it straight across the board to any number of institutions. The accreditor, then, could not be accused of showing favoritism to one institution. If the institution drops below the bright line, regardless of other factors, it goes on sanction – or worse.

Should reviewers adopt this “low-hanging fruit” approach, they would need only to read a spreadsheet of key numbers and make their judgments. Campus interviews could be reduced or even dropped. No need for complex analyses; hand-held calculators could do the job. Since everyone would understand the basis for accreditation decisions, critical voices would be silenced.

You may be reassured to learn that ACCJC’s peer review teams are not trained to make determinations based on bright lines. The alternatives, however, rather than being simple and consistent are complex and adaptive.

For example, a peer reviewer may notice what appears at first to be a lower than anticipated graduation rate. This would begin the analysis rather than end it. The reviewer would want to explore key process questions: Are the data recent and reliable? Are they disaggregated to identify learning gaps among different student populations? What group is responsible for reviewing and acting on these troubling graduation rates; and is there evidence that they really own this responsibility? What changes have been made in counseling, pedagogy, or curriculum to improve student outcomes? How do they know if the changes are effective? Are human and fiscal resources available and wisely applied to address completion concerns? Is there evidence that all institutional units are working together to effect change?

These are process-type questions; and they take the accreditation review in a very distinct direction. Should the review team be concerned with bright lines, their resulting recommendation would be, “Improve the number!” By contrast, a process-oriented review supports recommendations about adjusting the inner workings, the multiple relationships, priorities, insights, and interactions of the institution – which will, in time, improve the numbers. This is, in fact, how accreditors take the long view toward institutional improvement.
Bright lines are static. They capture a moment in time, or a narrow trend over time, with little information about why the number or trend is so. They seldom illumine interactions or relationships. They are typically reductionist, leading to misguided or too-simple remedies.

Processes, by contrast, are dynamic, expressive of the interplay among many moving parts. A process-focused review approximates what is known as a Root-Cause Analysis (RCA) used in sectors such as healthcare. The RCA seeks to identify the specific points in a system where improvements can be made. It calls for a careful analysis of multiple elements and their interplay. Reviewers ask a different type of question, seeking to discern how well the institution integrates and supports the structures that lead to student success.

Process reviews are also adaptive to the distinctive character of each institution – to the student demographics, degree mix, resources, and operational history of the institution. This allows a team to produce a report that is vastly more useful than simply “you must improve those numbers!”

The downside of a process review, of course, is that the armchair critic, looking on from a distance, seldom appreciates its value. Should an accreditor reaffirm the status of an institution with a graduation rate below the critic’s self-conferred “bright line,” the accreditor might be accused of making excuses on behalf of the college.

In the more than 150 comprehensive accreditation reviews that I have facilitated, I have yet to see a peer reviewer make excuses for an institution. Rather I have seen them bring impressive insight into helping the institution thrive – in the application of its processes.