Do Accreditors Really Have Standards?

A respected authority on accreditation once made an assertion in a public forum that gave voice to a widely-held assumption. “Surely,” he said, “every accreditor has a graduation rate below which they would not accept.”

I heard this as, “If you don’t have such a number, encased in policy by your agency, and applied evenly across all institutions, your standards must be really squishy. You can’t really mean that you have standards!”

As the newly appointed head of one of these agencies, I had to own that he was including my organization in that assertion. In order to process my thoughts in the moment, I opened my laptop and starting striking the keys. This is what I wrote:

- To say that ACCJC “does not accept a graduation rate” assumes that our resulting action for a below-the-line school will trigger either a new awareness of the issue or prompt some first-time efforts to address it. But it is never a surprise to the school. In every case, the school is already very concerned about its graduation rates and has been making noteworthy efforts to move the needle on this key number.

- The “unacceptable” number is never a single abstract ideal to be applied uniformly to all its members. It is always considered in the context of the mission, demographic profile, cultural setting, and history of the college – including its history with the accreditor. A number that would raise alarm for a college with a high input profile could be a different number, even an aspirational goal, for one that is serving a less prepared population.

- When a low graduation rate comes before the Commission, the question it ponders is: What is the most appropriate action to take to foster meaningful, effective action? Shutting down the school is not the first recourse. We do not embrace the often-inferred position that accreditors do their best work only when they impose serious sanctions on low-performing institutions or even withdraw their accreditation.

- The Commission begins by asking what is in the best interest of the students. For example, in one case when one institution lost its accreditation (for reasons not related to poor graduation rates), the Commission worked with a nearby accredited institution to take over its operations until it got its house back in order, thus allowing the students to continue their education. But ACCJC also accredits schools that are the only postsecondary opportunity for the entire country. To “punish” the school for low performance on this one indicator would destroy the key source of promise for the whole region. To do so on the basis of one success criteria would abuse the population beyond just the enrolled students.

- It is this regard for the students our colleges serve that is the real ACCJC Standard.

I am proud of our Commission for championing this ranking of standards, this priority of values, that honors the enduring commitment of our member institutions as they strive to improve, often against staggering odds.