I was in high school when I first encountered – though in nascent form – the concept of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. I even tossed the big words around during cafeteria lunch to see if I could impress anyone; a wasted effort, as I recall. But it resonated with me partly because, as a product of a conservative religious family, I knew only the extrinsic form of motivation. There was this ultimate authority in the sky that said, “You must,” or (more often) “You must NOT!” These detailed moral commands were framed within a reward/punishment paradigm in which I had to satisfy the Lawgiver that I deserved the promised blessings rather than the threatened distress.

Living in the extrinsic reward/punishment paradigm carried low-grade existential anxiety, so I was fascinated with the emerging possibility that, perhaps, I could be trusted to understand and embrace the intrinsic values that informed good choices. The locus of accountability for making those choices began to shift from the external authority-figure-in-the-sky (and the church people who claimed to be channeling that authority) to my own adolescent mind. Being accountable for my own choices was both scary and liberating. To the dismay of my elders, I began at the same time to step back from unquestioned submission to the extrinsically imposed imperatives of my church-of-origin.

To be clear, this was the beginning of a life-long journey. The process of discerning and clarifying the internal values by which we guide our lives never ceases as we face ever more complex issues. We also discover that establishing an intrinsic motivational compass applies to far more than morally implicit values. It touches on the full range of principles, standards, and decision criteria by which we order our lives.

It should not be difficult, then, to figure out the cognitive levers that were pulled when someone said to me (with evident annoyance), “When will ACCJC stop cramming student learning outcomes down our throats?!” Here was someone who saw the accrediting agency as the big authority-in-the-sky, making arbitrary commands, and threatening sanctions upon refusal to comply with SLO expectations.

Could I have re-scripted that brief interchange, it might have sounded more like, “Help me understand how framing student learning outcomes helps me better serve my students? How can I use SLOs to verify that my goals as a faculty member are being achieved? Why do the ACCJC members regard SLOs as a mark of good educational practice?”

One way to frame this dichotomy is to view the ACCJC Standards not as prescriptive commands for what an institution must do to avoid sanctions but rather as descriptive statements of what the higher education community has agreed represents good practice. The posture of openness and curiosity (“Help me understand . . .”) is a key marker in the journey toward intrinsic motivation to embrace the Standards.

Motivation matters! When busy professionals are called upon to implement practices that feel imposed by extrinsic sources of authority, the results can be mechanical, begrudged, even avoided. When the practices make sense, when they are linked to reasonable ideas and actual
outcomes (an essential criterion for intrinsic motivation), these busy people can feel their professionalism being honored and their time being used wisely.

This is not to say that the ACCJC Standards, in their present form, are all expressed in a manner that supports an intrinsic response. The Commission and staff are in agreement that the periodic timeline leading to the scheduled revision can’t come too soon. One of the goals of that review and update will be to ensure wording on each of the Standards that conveys a descriptive approach, making it clear that each Standard is based on an accepted principle of educational quality.

In the meantime, as I accompany teams conducting comprehensive reviews, I am hearing peer evaluators speak with clarity about the principles underlying the ACCJC Standards. They get the intrinsic drivers. And I smile.