ABOUT THOSE VERBS

Words both shape and reveal our understandings. What do key words reveal about one’s understanding of the relationship between an accreditor and a member institution? While prepositions are the key relationship words, verbs can also describe interactions between entities. For the moment, let’s go with some verbs.

I participated in a convening that (among many topics) explored the role of accreditors in relation to how their member institutions deliver an education marked by both quality and equity. Quality and equity: These are indeed core values in American higher education. As I listened to the lively conversations and panel presentations on these values and read some of the study documents, I had some moments of discomfort as certain verbs slipped into the dialogue. These verbs made me wonder about the (possibly unexamined) assumptions about how accreditors work with their members in this space.

Some of those verbs:

“...accreditors drive quality in their institutions...”

“...accreditors need to require their institutions to disaggregate achievement data...”

“...accreditors must hold members accountable to do better work with minorities...”

“...accreditors have to monitor each institution’s student achievement data to make sure there are no gaps among different groups...”

These verbs, if unexamined, allow two assumptions to linger about the relationship between an accreditor and its members.

The first is the assumption about the locus of accountability for performance. To whom does the public look when asking who is accountable for quality and equity? Is it the institution or its accreditor? After all, it is the institution that is in fact delivering the educational experience. The institution must discern the meaning in the performance data and set initiatives to make improvements. The accreditor does not do these on behalf of the institution. In some sense, perhaps, it’s not entirely an either/or answer, since it can be structured that it’s the accreditor’s job to ensure that the institution fully embraces its own accountability. And the accreditor does seek to build capacity within the institution to more fully embrace its own accountability.

Which links to the second assumption, which is the notion that, if an accreditor were not wielding its big stick, the institutions would slack off and ignore these key performance areas. It’s as though, if the accreditor were not “policing the beat,” their institutions would misbehave.

For three years now, I have been able to observe more closely the spirit and performance of the community colleges in ACCJC’s sphere of influence. I suspect you know where I would come down if I were asked, “Does this college care about equity because ACCJC requires it to care?” In fact, the vector of energy goes quite the other direction. I watch how wisely and passionately these colleges care about the diverse students who come to their campuses seeking a quality experience. And I find myself asking, “How can the accreditation process both validate and
more fully honor the great efforts we witness? How can this agency add value to the broad, sophisticated, and professional strategies embedded in the college’s very DNA? How can we capture and feature these effective practices for sharing with other members?"

For instance, ACCJC has promulgated a standard defining how its members will disaggregate student achievement data by demographic categories, analyze these data to discover any gaps in achievement among these categories, and implement plans to close those gaps (see Standard I. B. 6). The Standard does not require that these data be forwarded to ACCJC, since it is not the accreditor’s role to analyze the data and create the plans. During its comprehensive review, peer reviewers verify that the college is, in fact, obtaining and using the data as intended.

The difference between driving quality and verifying it through peer review is a subtle but vital distinction. To be sure, when a college undertakes to tell its story about equity and quality to its accreditor, it has to be sure that it does, in fact, have a story to tell. ACCJC provides the prompts, the occasion, and the criteria for this self-evaluation, but it does not presume to provide the driving force behind what the college is doing.

After all, the accreditor is the creation of its members and not the other way around.