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Introduction

On behalf of the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), thank you for accepting the invitation to serve as a peer reviewer. The Guide for Peer Review Team Members is designed to be used by persons serving as peer reviewers for colleges undergoing a comprehensive peer review visit for reaffirmation. This manual is intended for use with the Guide to Institutional Self-Evaluation, Improvement, and Peer Review, which provides additional and important information for peer review teams regarding Accreditation Standards, and Commission and federal policies.

Private, non-governmental accreditation is based on a model of peer review that involves both internal and external analysis of an institution. The accreditation paradigm includes the following elements:

- standards of good practice that are accepted by member institutions;
- internal, self-evaluation by the institution at periodic intervals;
- assessment of the self-evaluation and the institution against the Commission’s Standards by a peer review team with recommendations to the institution and the Commission;
- decision by an independent Commission regarding the accreditation status of the institution;
- follow-up by the institution to address the institution’s own plans for improvement as well as the team’s recommendations identified in the peer review team processes;
- further review and decision by the Commission; and
- possible follow-up visits by Commission representatives.

As a peer reviewer, you will participate in a careful and thorough evaluation of the institution. The peer review team:

- develops Core Inquiries and conducts a Focused Site Visit to evaluate whether all Standards are met, identifies areas for institutional improvement, and notes areas of institutional excellence;
- reviews the institution using the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies (together Commission’s Standards);
- reviews evidence that supports the narrative of the ISER;
- notes areas that may have been inadequately recognized by the college itself;
- verifies that the institution has set standards for satisfactory student achievement (successful course completion; program, certificate and degree completion; graduation and transfer rates; licensure pass rates; and job placement), determines that the standards are reasonable, and reviews the institution’s actions in regard to its performance on its standards; and
- reinforces the institution’s commitment to educational quality and institutional effectiveness.
Overview: Comprehensive Peer Review Model

The comprehensive peer review for reaffirmation is divided into two components: the (formative) Team ISER Review and the (summative) Focused Site Visit. The Team ISER Review will occur approximately six (6) months prior to the Focused Site Visit. The team will specify where the college meets Standards and where the team has validated no concerns remain. The team will narrow the focus of the site visit by providing Core Inquiries of Standards that the team will pursue to validate compliance, improvement, or areas of excellence. The team will communicate the Core Inquiries to college leadership so that additional information can be provided or improvements can be made prior to the Focused Site Visit.

The semester following the Team ISER Review, the college will prepare for the Focused Site Visit. At the time of the visit, the college will have produced additional supporting evidence, as specified by the Core Inquiries, and will have documented the continued maturation of its structures or processes in order to demonstrate alignment and compliance with ACCJC Standards and policies. The team’s interviews while on campus are guided by the Core Inquiries, and the visit serves as an opportunity for the team to validate all Standards and policies are met. The team report to the Commission is based on the status of the institution at the time of the Focused Site Visit, confirming and validating the team’s review of all standards, addressing any issues which may have arisen since the Team ISER review, and reflecting any progress achieved in the interval following the Team ISER Review.

The completed team report is forwarded to the Commission to inform its decision about the college’s alignment and compliance with the Standards, as well as Commission policies, recommendations for improvement, and commendations. All of these elements lead to the Commission’s final action on the college’s accredited status.

Comprehensive Peer Review Goals

1. To eliminate any element of fear or surprise on the part of the college that often accompanies a comprehensive peer review.

2. To underscore the importance of the comprehensive peer review as an occasion to foster and guide institutional improvement.

3. To concentrate the Focused Site Visit on core accreditation issues and validation of already-confirmed alignment and compliance on operational matters demonstrated in the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER).

4. To more fully utilize the wisdom of the peer review team by providing time for an institution to consider and adopt the team’s advice as an integral part of the comprehensive peer review – and while the issues are current and advice is relevant.
Visual Representation of the Comprehensive Peer Review Process

Glossary of Terms

TEAM ISER REVIEW
The Team ISER Review is a one-day, off-site preliminary analysis of an institution’s self-evaluation report. The team develops a series of Core Inquiries based on the provided narrative and evidence.

CORE INQUIRIES
Core Inquiries are a means for communicating questions and potential areas of institutional improvement that arise during the Team ISER Review. Core Inquiries fall into two categories: Additional Information Requests or Interview/Observation Requests.

- Additional Information Requests can be addressed immediately or during the Focused Site Visit.
- Interview/Observation Requests are intended to be addressed at the Focused Site Visit.

Core Inquiries highlight areas in the ISER that require clarification or expansion and are used to develop both recommendations and commendations.

FOCUSED SITE VISIT
During the Focused Site Visit, the team will gather additional information via interviews, data requests, and observation sessions to confirm progress made on the Core Inquiries and validate overall compliance with the Standards and policies. The Focused Site Visit is guided by those issues directly related to the Core Inquiries as previously communicated to the institution – thus, the team is reduced in size as only those team members assigned to the specific Core Inquiries will attend the Focused Site Visit.
DRAFT TEAM REPORT
Teams develop an initial report based on the findings of the Team ISER Review and update it during the Focused Site Visit to reflect the status of the institution at the time of the Focused Site Visit, confirming and validating the team’s review of all standards, addressing any issues which may have arisen since the Team ISER review, and reflecting any progress achieved in the interval following the Team ISER Review. This draft report is then presented to the institution.

ERRORS OF FACT
The institution has the opportunity to review the Draft Team Report and identify any errors of fact.

COMPLETED TEAM REPORT
The Completed Team Report identifies commendations, compliance issues, and recommendations for improvement.

COMMISSION ACTION
ACCJC meets to decide on the institution’s accredited status. The decision is based upon the ISER, evidence, and Final Team Report.
The Role of the Federal Government

The 2008 Higher Education Opportunities Act, and subsequent changes to federal regulations by the U.S. Department of Education (ED), put into law several requirements for accrediting agencies that seek federal recognition. ACCJC holds ED recognition and therefore must ensure institutions adhere to certain federal regulations.

Therefore, all teams that participate in peer review are required by federal law to examine the following:

- the institution’s continued compliance with the Commission Standards;
- the institution’s distance education and correspondence education programs and support services to students;
- the off-campus locations where 50% or more of a program is offered;
- data on Student Achievement and Student Learning;
- data on student success with respect to student achievement in relation to the institution’s mission (institution-set standards);
- data on the institution’s fiscal condition including increases or decreases in revenues and enrollments;
- records of formal student complaints;
- all student and public information the college releases about its credit requirements for programs, certificates, and degrees; length of programs; costs; student degree/certificate completion rates; transfer rates; job placement; licensure pass rates; and federally required campus crime statistics; and
- information on the health of the financial aid program(s) on the campus including loan default and repayment rates over the past three years, plans to reduce those rates where needed, reviews of financial aid program(s), and audits of same.

Each time federal regulations change, the Commission reviews its policies and requirements and revises them as needed to ensure that its members remain in compliance. Any changes in requirements are communicated to institutions and peer review teams in advance of a comprehensive peer review.
2 The Role of the Accrediting Commission Staff

2.1 Communication with the Institution

About two and a half years before the anticipated date of the Team ISER Review, the ACCJC staff liaison advises the institution of the upcoming comprehensive peer review process and provides training on self-evaluation and the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER). The college and Commission staff work together to select dates for the Team ISER Review and Focused Site Visit.

2.2 Team Chair and Vice Chair Selection

The Commission staff invites volunteers to serve as chairs and vice chairs of peer review teams. Team chairs and vice chairs are selected based on their expertise and accreditation experience, taking into consideration the mission, culture, and uniqueness of the institution. Team chairs generally have experience as a chief executive officer of an institution; others with senior level executive leadership experience may also chair. In order to keep replenishing ACCJC’s pool of team leaders, team chairs mentor vice chairs, who participate alongside the team chair through the entire process including Team ISER Review and the Focused Site Visit.

2.3 Team Selection

The Commission staff develops the peer review teams from a roster of experienced educators from across the region, who have exhibited leadership, a commitment to peer-based accreditation, and balanced judgement. In compliance with federal regulations, teams comprise both academics and administrators. A typical team has three academics; instructional and student services administrators; a chief executive officer; a financial services administrator; and a researcher.

2.4 Peer Review Team Training

All team chairs, vice chairs, and team members must attend a Peer Review Team Training prior to the comprehensive peer review. The Peer Review Team Training helps all peer reviewers understand how to conduct the review in the context of the institution’s mission and provides time for the chair to work with the team and begin the review process. Training topics also include interpreting the standards, writing effective recommendations and commendations, and Commission policies and federal regulations.

During the training, the team will spend a significant portion of its time with the team to discuss its preliminary observations based on a holistic review of the ISER. The team members are expected to have completed Assignment 1 prior to Peer Review Team Training per the chair’s instructions.

2.5 Materials from ACCJC and the College

The Commission provides resources to support the work of the team members, including manuals and other resources necessary to conduct a complete review. At least eight weeks before the Team ISER Review, the college sends to the Commission an electronic copy of the
Institutional Self-Evaluation Report, college catalog, most recent class schedule, and institutional data in support of its petition for reaffirmation of accreditation. The Commission will upload this information to a collaborative team workspace for the team chair, vice chair, and team members to access.

2.6 Role of the ACCJC Staff Liaison

One of the vice presidents at ACCJC serves as the staff liaison to the college and to the team. The primary role of the staff liaison is to support the team and the college through the peer review process. The staff liaison is not a member of the peer review team and therefore will not review the college, nor influence the team on findings. The staff liaison abides by the Policy on Conflict of Interest for Commissioners, Evaluation Team Members, Consultants, Administrative Staff, and Other Commission Representatives. Expenses of the staff liaison are covered by ACCJC and not the College.

Before the comprehensive peer review begins, the staff liaison has helped to prepare the team by selecting a team chair, vice chair and team members and by assisting during Chair Training and Peer Review Team Training. The staff liaison serves as a resource to the team chair, vice chair, and the college and can answer questions about logistics, the peer review process, etc. The staff liaison also reads the ISER and is familiar with the college. The staff liaison can bring perspective to the team regarding the culture and concerns of the institution.

The staff liaison will accompany the team as a resource during the Team ISER Review andFocused Site Visit to support the peer review process by assisting with any matters that arise as needed. The staff liaison is a resource for the team to help with interpretation of Standards and to answer questions. They may participate in interviews as an observer.

The staff liaison reviews drafts of the team report as the team develops it, ensuring the report stays focused on ACCJC Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies. They also ensure that conclusions, commendations, and recommendations are consistent with the findings, supported by details in the narrative. The staff liaison will point out inconsistencies between the findings and the conclusions or areas of the draft report that may be unclear or misunderstood by an audience. The staff liaison also assists the team chair in the final preparation of the draft report for the Commission.

Because the staff liaison serves as a resource for the team, they should be copied on all communications between the team chair, vice chair, and college.
3 The Role of the Peer Review Team Member

3.1 Peer Review

The peer review team provides an independent review of an institution. The team uses the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies to prepare a report for the institution’s use, which analyzes the adequacy of its resources, the effectiveness of its procedures, the quality of its performance in pursuit of its stated mission and goals, and its evidence of student achievement and student learning. The team seeks to verify quality and integrity and to encourage continuous improvement of institutional performance. The role of the peer review team is to determine that the college continues to meet the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies, provide guidance for institutional improvement, acknowledge areas of excellence, and provide findings by which the Commission will make a decision on the accredited status of the institution.

3.2 Conflict of Interest

The Commission makes a special effort to maintain the integrity of the accreditation process. To this end, peer reviewers are expected to disclose any possible conflict of interest before accepting an assignment. Commission policy identifies the following conditions under which a peer reviewer should decline an invitation to serve or ask for an assignment to another team. As prescribed by the Commission’s Policy on Conflict of Interest for Commissioners, Evaluation Team Members, Consultants, Administrative Staff, and Other Agency Representatives, the Commission will not knowingly invite or assign participation in the evaluation of an institution to anyone who has within the last five years:

- any current or prior employment at the institution/district/system being evaluated;
- current or prior candidacy for employment at the institution/district/system being evaluated;
- any current or prior service as a paid consultant or other business relationship with the institution/district/system being evaluated;
- any written agreement with an institution/district/system that may create a conflict or the appearance of a conflict of interest with the institution/district/system;
- personal or financial interest in the ownership or operation of the institution/district/system;
- close personal or familial relationships with a member of the institution/district/system;
- other personal or professional connections that would create either a conflict or the appearance of a conflict of interest; or
- received any remuneration, honoraria, honorary degrees, honors or other awards from the institution/district/system.

Team members, team chairs, or vice chairs who have any questions about possible conflict of interest should contact the ACCJC staff.
3.3 **Expectations of Peer Reviewers**

Peer Reviewers are expected to:

- have a working knowledge of the Eligibility Requirements (ERs), Accreditation Standards, and pertinent Commission policies;
- understand that institutions are accredited using ACCJC’s Accreditation Standards rather than the regulations or requirements of other groups.¹
- understand that peer review is the basis of the accreditation process;
- remember that team members are peers who represent the Commission;
- review the college in the context of its mission;
- maintain objectivity and flexibility by refraining from imposing the opinions and beliefs of others and having a willingness to appreciate the uniqueness and individuality of the institution being evaluated;
- rely on evidence in making judgments about the institution;
- communicate clearly and concisely, both orally and in writing;
- work as part of a team; and maintain confidentiality².

Participation in Peer Review Team Training and the Team ISER Review are mandatory aspects of service on a peer review team. Under the comprehensive peer review model, team members should note that the Focused Site Visit will be a shorter visit with a smaller team; nevertheless, team members are expected to hold the entire week for the Focused Site Visit per the invitation to serve on the team. The selection of team members to participate in the Focused Site Visit will be determined by the team chair and ACCJC staff and will be contingent upon the areas of focus developed for the Core Inquiries.

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¹ As a voluntary, nongovernmental agency, the Commission does not exercise the regulatory control of state and federal governments, nor apply their mandates regarding collective bargaining, affirmative action, health and safety regulations, etc. Furthermore, the Commission does not enforce the standards of specialized accrediting agencies or other nongovernmental organizations, nor the laws and regulations of state agencies although institutions may wish to review the publications of such other agencies as part of the self-evaluation process. The Commission has its own standards and expects that institutions and teams will apply them with integrity, openness, and an attitude of concern for students and the public interest.

² The Commission’s [Policy on Rights, Responsibilities, and Good Practice in Relations with Member Institutions](#) requires that team members keep confidential “…all institutional information examined or heard before, during, and after the team visit and after the Commission acts.” The Policy on [Public Disclosure and Confidentiality in the Accreditation Process](#) requires evaluation team members “to refrain from discussing information obtained in the course of service as an evaluation team member. Sources of information that should remain confidential include the current Institutional Self-Evaluation Report; previous evaluation team reports; interviews and written communication with campus personnel, students, governing board members, and community members; evidentiary documents; and evaluation team discussions”.

3.4 Multi-College/Multi-Unit Districts or Systems

The Commission schedules the comprehensive peer review for the colleges in multi-college districts/systems simultaneously. This includes the process for the Team ISER Review, and the Focused Site Visit.

The Commission requires that a description of the college and district/system delineation of responsibility and authority in multi-college district/system (sometimes called a “Functional Map”) be provided with the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report. Its purpose is to provide teams with a clear description of roles and responsibilities in areas addressed by the Accreditation Standards, and to provide the Commission with a consistent picture of this delineation so that it can understand how an institution meets Accreditation Standards as well as make appropriate recommendations for improvement.

In order to facilitate peer review team evaluation of multi-college districts or systems, a “chair of chairs” will be identified to lead the district review team. Team members may be selected from amongst the members of the college teams, or a separate (from the college chairs and teams) district team with a district team chair may be assigned. The size and structure of the district/system review depends on the needs and size of the district/system. In large, multi-college districts/systems, review may be augmented by a separate district/system team.

In either case, the chair-of-chairs is asked to consult with the other team chairs early in the preparation for Team ISER Review and the Focused Site Visit, and to develop a strategy for coordinating meetings and interviews with district/system representatives and board members in order to eliminate unnecessary redundancies. Accreditation Standards cover many aspects of administrative operations, finance, and governance as well as academic matters, and in multi-college districts, the district’s adherence to Standards is necessary for the colleges to meet Standards. In addition, Standard IV directly addresses district or system/college relationships.

The Commission’s Policy on Evaluation of Institutions in Multi-College/Multi-Unit Districts or Systems can be found on the ACCJC website.

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3 See Policy on Evaluation of Institutions in Multi-College/Multi-Unit Districts or Systems.
4 The Role of the Team Chair and Vice Chair

Team Chair:
The team chair is the leader, manager, and spokesperson for the team. The team chair sets the work flow in preparation for the Team ISER Review, makes necessary arrangements for the team to complete its work, speaks for the team, and is the author of the Peer Review Team Report that the Commission will review in its decision making process. The team chair works with the assistance of a vice chair to organize team discussions, see that all necessary contacts are made, see to the needs of the team, and assure that the team’s time is used effectively.

Vice Chair:
The team’s vice chair will work collaboratively and closely under the leadership of the team chair to learn best practices leading a team, be ready to chair teams in future accreditation visits, and step into the chair role if the team chair is unable to fulfill their duties. The vice chair collaborates and partners with the team chair to plan and facilitate the peer review process, including the Team ISER Review and the Focused Site Visit. The vice chair must attend Team Chair Training, Peer Review Team Training, and participate in the Pre-Visit, Team ISER Review, and Focused Site Visit.

4.1 Communication with the Institution

Before Team ISER Review:
In preparation for Team ISER Review, the team chair and vice chair are expected to conduct a pre-Team ISER Review conversation (either via phone or videoconference) with the college CEO and ALO. The purpose of this conversation is to help the team chair (with vice chair) and college CEO and ALO to develop a collegial relationship, built upon the common goal of assisting the college within the context of the comprehensive peer review. The pre-review conversation also allows the CEO and ALO an opportunity to notify the team chair (and vice chair) of major changes that may have occurred since the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report was completed and that may materially affect the course of the team’s ISER review.

During this pre-Team ISER Review meeting, the dates/times for the Meet and Greet and Open Forum will be determined.

Before the Focused Site Visit:
In preparation for the Focused Site Visit, the team chair and vice chair will conduct a pre-visit conversation to discuss changes since the Team ISER Review and in response to the Core Inquiries. This pre-visit will also help to establish the logistical requirements of the focused site visit—hotel accommodations, transportation to/from the hotel and college, the availability of food, logistics for visiting off-campus sites, and access to electronic data and files that the institution may have compiled in support of its application for reaffirmation of accreditation.
Communication between the institution and the team should only occur through the team chair and/or the Commission office. Contacts by individuals from the institution regarding the team’s activity, findings, or conduct should always be referred to the team chair or the Commission office.

4.2 Correspondence with the Team

The team chair corresponds with the team members to welcome them to the team, to make assignments, to gather information in preparation for the Team ISER Review, to provide information about travel and accommodations for the Focused Site Visit, to indicate the team schedule, and to set the tone for the entire visit.

4.3 Manager of the Peer Review Team

The team chair is responsible to the Commission for the successful completion of the Team ISER Review, development of the Core Inquiries, and the Focused Site Visit. In this capacity, the team chair guides the team leading up to the Team ISER Review, crafting the Core Inquiries, and through the Focused Site Visit, ensuring that the institutional outcomes are assessed in light of the institution’s mission and the Accreditation Standards, and that team members have the support necessary to complete their assignments and work throughout the comprehensive peer review process.

4.4 Author of the Peer Review Team Report

The team chair is responsible for writing a clear, concise, well-organized and coherent document that will stand up under the careful scrutiny of a wide variety of readers. The report should honestly reflect the views of the team, identifying strengths of the institution and areas of excellence, noting the limitations and difficulties that the college may be experiencing, and supporting the plans and potential it has for overcoming them. When individual reports from team members are well written, the team chair can often use major portions in the final report. However, team members should understand that the team chair, as the final author, is expected to produce a coherent, unified account of the team’s findings. In doing so, the team chair has considerable editorial latitude in constructing and editing the final report.
Before Team ISER Review

5.1 Analysis of the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report

Each peer reviewer will look at how the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER) was developed, written, and edited; what evidence exists of broad involvement by campus constituencies; and the nature and quality of the evidence offered in support of the college’s assertions. Evidence cited in the ISER should provide the means for determining the extent to which the institution meets or exceeds the Eligibility Requirements (ERs), Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies.

Peer reviewers should verify that the evidence referenced in the ISER clearly demonstrates that the institution meets or exceeds the ERs, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies and that the institution is achieving its mission, educational goals, and objectives. The college should provide evidence that systematic and effective institutional planning and evaluation are being incorporated into institutional decision-making and resource allocation processes. In its ISER, the college should also identify issues of concern to the institution.

Team chairs will provide three homework assignments, discussed below, to facilitate the review of the ISER, drafting components of the Peer Review Team Report, and development of the Core Inquiries during Team ISER Review. The Core Inquiries will further be explored during the Focused Site Visit. Team members must follow the schedule set forth by the team chair to ensure a meaningful review process.

5.2 Additional Items to Review

Teams will review the items noted below in advance of the Team ISER Review. If the teams cannot verify that the Commission’s Standards and/or policies are met based upon the evidence, then these must be included in the Core Inquiries, and further explored during the Focused Site Visit.

Distance Education and Correspondence Education

One or more team members will be assigned to review distance and/or correspondence education, if any, per ACCJC’s Policy on Distance Education and Correspondence Education and the guidelines provided in Section 11 below.

Records of Student Complaints

(Addressed in the College’s response to the Policy on Student and Public Complaints Against Institutions)

Teams will review the formal complaints/grievances filed by members of the institution (faculty, staff, students) to determine that relevant policies and procedures are being followed and whether patterns to the complaints are obvious that could indicate a need to be addressed by the institution. The institution is expected to provide, for the team’s review, access to complaint files for the period since the last comprehensive peer review. The team
will also ascertain whether the college website informs the public how to file a complaint with ACCJC.

The ACCJC staff liaison may also ask team members to look into a specific complaint against the institution in accordance with the Commission’s Policy on Student and Public Complaints Against Institutions to verify that the institution addressed the issue.

Off-Campus Sites
(Addressed in Standards II.A, II.B, II.C, and III.B)

The team through its review of the ISER and evidence must verify whether equitable services are provided and proper administrative oversight is established at any off-campus sites where 50% or more of a degree, program, or certificate is offered. Per statutory and regulatory requirements, ACCJC will need to conduct a future physical onsite visit that will be conducted as part of the Focused Site Visit.

Checklist for Compliance with Federal Regulations and Commission Policies

ACCJC provides its peer review teams with a checklist to use when verifying compliance with specific federal regulations and Commission policies. Teams are asked to use the checklist to evaluate compliance with specific policy elements, reach a conclusion regarding the institution’s compliance, and provide a brief narrative to support their conclusion.

NOTE: This checklist will become part of the Peer Review Team Report and is embedded in the Peer Review Team Report template.

5.3 Team Assignments

The peer review team is expected to read, understand, and analyze the college Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER) prior to its Team ISER Review. To facilitate the Team ISER Review, the team chair provides team members written assignments (“homework”) that must be completed per the chair’s due dates. These include:

- Assignment 1: General Observations and Initial Assessment
- Assignment 2: Initial Findings and Evidence of Assigned Standard
- Assignment 3: Formative Discussion Tool for Team ISER Review

Assignment 1: General Observations and Initial Assessment

The first team assignment, completed by Peer Review Team Training, helps the team acquire an overview of the ISER and develop a broad, holistic understanding of the ISER. This assignment will require the team members to read the entire ISER and any supporting evidence supplied by the college in advance of the comprehensive peer review, keep a high-level, holistic perspective of the institution and its mission, and focus on their preliminary observations and impressions. For this assignment, it is not necessary to evaluate the evidence for alignment with Standards; instead, team members will consider the evidence to enhance their understanding of the institution and the ISER narrative. Team members must complete Assignment 1 prior to Peer Review Team Training. Assignment 1 will be the basis for
a team discussion during the Peer Review Team Training to norm observations and support team dialogue and deliberations.

**Assignment 2: Initial Findings and Evidence of Assigned Standard**

The second team assignment helps team members conduct a deeper analysis of the Standard(s) they have been assigned. The assignment is intended to:

- a) assist team members with writing the first draft of their assigned Standards of the Peer Review Team Report;
- b) document assessment of whether the college meets Standards based on the narrative and evidence team members reviewed in their assigned area; and
- c) identify areas where team members require further clarification or additional evidence in order to confirm the college meets the Standard.

Assignment 2 will aid the team chair and vice chair to request reasonable additional data or evidence from the institution prior to the Team ISER Review. These requests are not Core Inquiries.

**Assignment 3: Formative Discussion Tool for Team ISER Review**

The third team assignment will aid the team chair in facilitating deliberations during the Team ISER Review and will assist with the development of the Core Inquiries. This assignment is grounded in the work of Assignment 2 and each team member is asked to identify those Standards that were met based on their review of the ISER, as well as clearly identify potential Core Inquiries that will be examined during the Focused Site Visit. Namely, Assignment 3 requires team members to identify areas of strength (potential commendations), areas in which they are seeking clarification, and areas in need of improvement (potential recommendations) based on their preliminary analysis. In Assignment 3, team members will identify additional information or interviews they believe will help advance their understanding and analysis to determine whether the college meets or exceeds Standards.

These assignments help the team prepare for the Team ISER Review meeting, the development of Core Inquiries, and the Focused Site Visit. The team chair will use team members’ completed assignments to frame discussions during the Peer Review Team Training and Team ISER Review, in the development of Core Inquiries, and to develop the first draft of the Peer Review Team Report. The Commission provides a template to the team chairs and vice chairs for the Core Inquiries report and the Peer Review Team Report.

### 5.4 Meet and Greet and Open Forum

Prior to the Team ISER Review the college will hold a virtual meet and greet where college personnel and the team can informally meet one another. This meeting will occur virtually and all team members are expected to attend the meet and greet. The meet and greet may be held during the first hour of Team ISER Review or on another day determined during the Pre-Team ISER review meeting.

One open forum will also be held prior to Team ISER Review. The open forum shall be widely communicated to the college community noting that this is the opportunity for members of
the college community to share their perspectives with the team on the college’s efforts to meet Accreditation Standards. The open forum is not a presentation by the team. The college president, senior staff such as vice presidents, and board members must not attend in order to foster a more open environment for comments from those who may not have had prior opportunity to meet with the visiting team

5.5 Peer Review Team Training

Each peer reviewer is expected to attend a one-day Peer Review Team Training event. Commission staff will facilitate the training and will provide team members with a framework and tools that will help them conduct an effective and successful comprehensive peer review. During the training, teams will spend significant time together to discuss initial observations of the institution based on the first reading of the ISER and their completed Assignment 1.

5.6 The Guide to Institutional Self-Evaluation, Improvement, and Peer Review

ACCJC’s Guide to Institutional Self-Evaluation, Improvement, and Peer Review was referenced in the Introduction to this Guide. This Guide is designed to be used by institutions conducting a self-evaluation and preparing an ISER as well as by teams conducting a comprehensive peer review. The Guide is meant to provoke thoughtful consideration about how the institution aligns its policies and practices with the Accreditation Standards, and it is also intended to provide guidance for a holistic, systemic review of an institution and its quality. The Guide reflects the belief that both institutional members and team members use the Standards to assess the institution, and therefore use the same tools to conduct their respective assessments.
6 Team ISER Review and Core Inquiries Report

6.1 Team ISER Review

The one-day Team ISER Review is conducted in a virtual format with all team members participating in the discussion. The day is broken into primary blocks of time to ensure meaningful discussions, to identify standards that are met based on the evaluation of the ISER, and to identify the Core Inquiries that form the basis for the Focused Site Visit.

Morning

The team chair (and vice chair) will set the tone for the day by reminding the team about the purpose and goals for the day, and will engage team members in an initial discussion on thematic findings based on the draft team report. Team members will refer to Assignment 3 and discuss for each main Standard potential areas of improvement and commendation. During the Team ISER Review, the team will also review and complete the Federal Regulations and ACCJC Policies Checklist.

Afternoon

The team chair will gain team consensus on the areas that form the basis for the draft Core Inquiries Report, and related requests for additional information and interviews/observations. The team will have nominal working time to polish the draft report sections where Standards were identified as met. The team chair will conclude the meeting noting the timeline and next steps for the team members.

After Team ISER Review

Within 48 hours of Team ISER Review, the team chair and vice chair will meet with the institution’s CEO and ALO to brief them on the content of the Core Inquiries Report. The team chair will finalize the Core Inquiries Report, send it to the assigned ACCJC staff liaison for review and comment, and thereafter send it to the institution. Within one month of Team ISER Review, the team chair (and vice chair) and the ACCJC staff liaison will confirm the team members who will participate on the Focused Site Visit, which occurs the following semester.

6.2 Core Inquiries Report

The Core Inquiries Report is a summary of the areas that will be further evaluated during the Focused Site Visit. A template of the Core Inquiries Report is available in ACCJC’s collaborative team workspace and the team chair and vice chair bear the responsibility of completing it. The following provides general principles and guidance to teams for developing the Core Inquiries Report, in accordance with the Core Inquiries template and timeline and checklist for the Team ISER Review and Focused Site Visit.

6.3 General Principles

A. Team ISER Review will culminate in the development of Core Inquiries that highlight areas in the ISER that require clarification or expansion, additional information requests, and/or observation and interview requests.
B. Core Inquiries will describe the areas of emphasis for the Focused Site Visit to determine whether Accreditation Standards and policies are met and to further explore areas of commendation or recommendation.

C. Core Inquiries will serve as a planning tool for the college in preparation for the Focused Site Visit. In the course of the Focused Site Visit, if new or emerging issues arise out of the discussions on Core Inquiries, the team chair will consult with the ACCJC staff liaison.

D. At the conclusion of Team ISER Review, the team chair and vice chair will conduct a conference call with the college CEO and ALO and ACCJC staff liaison to summarize the Core Inquiries. This is an informal briefing. The CEO should refrain from discussing their interpretations of the findings during the core inquiries briefing, which is part of the Formative component of the peer review process.

E. The team chair will send a formal Core Inquiries Report to the CEO within two weeks of Team ISER Review.

F. Two weeks prior to the Focused Site Visit, the college will provide an update on the core inquiries using the ACCJC template and append available requested evidence. The College is not to prepare an immediate formal response to the Core Inquiries. Per the Core Inquiries, the College will use the time to prepare for the visit.

G. The Core Inquiries Report will be appended to the Draft Peer Review Team Report submitted to the Commission for its deliberation. Before final submission to the Commission, the team chair will provide an opportunity for the CEO to review errors of fact in the Draft Peer Review Team Report.

6.4 Instructions for Teams

A. Review the Core Inquiries template at the start of Team ISER Review as reminder of the expected outcome for the day.

B. Complete the Core Inquiries template based on information and discussions emanating from Assignment 3: Formative Discussion Tool for Team ISER Review.

C. Follow the steps below to complete each section for each Core Inquiry:

1) **Summarize** in 1-2 sentences the area that needs clarification or further development based on the review of the ISER and evidence – key words will be needed to frame areas of exploration (e.g. is it a process concern, policy issue, policy implementation, issue of exercising appropriate roles, frequency of implementation, etc.)

2) **List relevant Standards and/or policies** under review that relate to the Core Inquiry (this itemization should be limited to the most relevant Standards, not all Standards that are remotely related to the issue)
3) **Describe the Core Inquiry** in further detail:

   i. Cite evidence the team reviewed and relevant observations leading to the Core Inquiry

   ii. Identify the issue that requires clarification or expansion based on the team’s initial analysis of the ISER narrative and evidence, explain gaps or exemplary practice(s) exceeding Standard

4) **List topics of discussion for interviews** during the Focused Site Visit which will help the College clarify the Core Inquiry (e.g. use of disaggregated assessment data; status of improvement plan on employee evaluations; facilities planning and total cost of ownership).

5) **Identify additional information/evidence** the team will need to review during the Focused Site Visit for the Core Inquiry

6) **Identify observations/interviews** the team will need to conduct during the Focused Site Visit for the Core Inquiry

D. In describing the Core Inquiries, be sure to reflect on the evidence you already reviewed.

E. Be sure topics are directly related to Accreditation Standards and Policies.

F. Be clear and direct in the requests for evidence and topics of discussion you identify.

G. Engage the appreciative inquiry approach to peer review in your discussions and documentation per ACCJC’s Peer Review Team Training.

### 6.5 Instructions to be Given to Colleges

The ACCJC staff liaison and team chair will provide the following instructions to colleges to clarify expectations for the Focused Site Visit.

A. Do not send an immediate narrative response or evidence to the Team or ACCJC upon receipt of the Core Inquiries.

B. Carefully review the Core Inquiries to plan for the Focused Site Visit. Core Inquiries describe the areas of emphasis for the Focused Site Visit to determine whether Accreditation Standards and Policies are met and to further explore those areas of inquiry for commendation or recommendation.

C. Remember that during the Team ISER Review, the team validates the good work of the college and identifies those standards that were met per the college’s ISER and evidence, discusses areas of potential concern and areas for potential commendation; and develops Core Inquiries which provide formative feedback to the college and are the areas which the team will follow up with the college during their focused site visit.
D. The college should use the Core Inquiries and time leading to the focused site visit as an opportunity to gather needed evidence, collate information, and to strengthen or develop processes in the continuous improvement cycle.

E. Prior to the focused site visit, institutions should use the ACCJC template to provide a college update describing any institutional improvements, strengthening of processes, documented outcomes, discussions or reflections which have occurred pertaining to each core inquiry. This document and all additional evidence should be submitted to ACCJC no later than two weeks before the date of the focused site visit. ACCJC will distribute this information to the team for review.

F. The Team Chair, Vice Chair, Staff Liaison, and CEO and ALO will hold a pre-visit conversation no later than two weeks in advance of the Focused Site Visit to discuss updates and set expectations to prepare for the Focused Site Visit.
7 Focused Site Visit

The Focused Site Visit will occur the semester following Team ISER Review during a one or two-day visit to the college. The length of the Focused Site Visit will depend upon the nature and number of the Core Inquiries. Core Inquiries will describe the areas of emphasis for the Focused Site Visit to determine whether Accreditation Standards and policies are met and to further explore areas of commendation or recommendation. During the Focused Site Visit, the team will gather additional information via interviews, data requests, and observation sessions to conclude the team’s findings and complete the draft Peer Review Team Report. The team will validate the confirmed alignment and compliance on operational matters demonstrated in the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER).

7.1 Initial Meeting of the Peer Review Focused Site Visit Team

The team will meet in advance of the visit to the college. The team chair sets the time for the meeting, and team members are expected to arrange their travel in order to be present for this meeting. Team chairs and vice chairs will communicate with the team early in the process to set expectations for the team in the following ways:

- Provide an overview of the purpose of the Focused Site Visit and reinforce the team member role.
- Revisit the Core Inquiries report, themes and questions that the team will address.
- Share information about issues and events that have occurred at the college since the Team ISER Review. If there are controversial issues, develop a team strategy for dealing with them.
- Discuss the status of team member reports for Standard(s) that required additional clarification.
- Review the team schedule, meetings, interviews, assignments, schedules for visits to centers or campuses or a district or system office; and plans for review of Distance Education and/or Correspondence Education programs and services.
- Remind the team to recognize the great work the college is doing by actively looking for areas where the college exceeds the standards (commendations). Remind the team to distinguish between recommendations that address deficiencies in meeting Accreditation Standards and those that are recommendations for improvement.

7.2 Meeting with Institutional Staff

During the Focused Site Visit, team members will meet with institutional personnel as appropriate to ask questions related to the Core Inquires. The team chair will have a set schedule of meetings between team members and institutional staff; however, if team members determine there are other individuals they would like to meet with, they should work with the team chair to schedule those meetings. It is important to keep scheduled meetings with institutional staff.
7.3 **Remainder of the Focused Site Visit**

Team members continue to meet with college personnel to validate all Standards, gain clarity around the Core Inquiries, attend team meetings scheduled by the team chair, and review evidence. The team will schedule one or more open forums where administrators, faculty, staff, and students of the college may meet with team members to share their thoughts on aspects of the self-evaluation. These sessions should be informal listening sessions, not large meetings for formal presentations by special groups. It is not required that all team members attend these forums; however, a robust turnout signals the team’s support and encouragement for the college.

Occasionally, someone at the institution challenges the accreditation process, self-evaluation, or comprehensive peer review. Information concerning these situations should be brought to the attention of the team chair.

7.4 **Team Meetings during the Focused Site Visit**

The team holds meetings several times during the visit to summarize the work accomplished, to share concerns, and to plan for the remainder of the visit. On the final day, the team meets to review findings, recommendations, commendations, and completes its written work on the Peer Review Team Report.

Team members should come to these meetings prepared to summarize the key issues they have identified based on the review of any additional evidence provided and interviews conducted.

7.5 **Team Recommendations and Commendations**

The team will finalize its recommendations for institutional improvement or for resolution of deficiencies by the end of the Focused Site Visit. The team will also finalize any commendations where the college exceeds Standards. The team chair will share the subject of these recommendations and commendations with the institution’s CEO during their private meetings. However, given that the team chair has not yet edited and reviewed the complete team report, neither the chair nor members of the team should share the exact wording of the team recommendations or commendations with the institution or anyone else.

7.6 **Exit Report at Conclusion of the Focused Site Visit**

The team chair conducts a final Exit Report with members of the college community. All Focused Site Visit team members are expected to be present. At this meeting, the team chair provides an Exit Report that articulates the major team findings but does not share specific recommendations. While team members are expected to be present for this final meeting, the team chair is the spokesperson for the team. The Exit Report should not be filmed or recorded by the institution.

Focused Site Visit team members should depart at the end of this meeting. Expressing thanks for assistance, enjoyment of meeting people or observing institutional activities is appropriate, but team members should avoid engaging in extended conversations about the comprehensive peer review or the team’s findings. Team members should not respond to questions from the college community or the press any time after the visit.
8  After the Focused Site Visit

8.1  Team and College Review of the Draft Peer Review Team Report

Following the Focused Site Visit the team chair submits a draft of the report to the full peer review team, including members who participated in Team ISER Review, for comment. It is very important that team members communicate with the team chair about the draft in a timely manner. After the team chair revises the report in response to the comments as appropriate, they send the draft report to the ACCJC staff liaison for review and then sends a final draft to the CEO of the institution for correction of any factual errors.

After the institution’s CEO has had an opportunity to check the report for errors of fact, the team chair submits the completed draft report to the staff liaison who ensures that the report is available to the Commission for their decision-making process.

8.2  Expenses and Reimbursements to Peer Reviewers

ACCJC reimburses each team member for necessary travel, food, and lodging expenses. The team chair will inform team members participating on the Focused Site Visit the date and time when they are expected to arrive for the initial team meeting and the date and time of the final Exit Report, after which team members return to their home institutions. Exceptions to the arrival-and-departure scenario set by the team chair must be pre-approved both by the team chair, who needs to know when team members will arrive and depart, and by Commission office staff, who need to be aware of exceptions when they process the expense reimbursements. Team members who require travel arrangements outside the arrival-and-departure times established by the team chair should not make airline or hotel reservations until after they receive confirmation from ACCJC staff that they have been approved for such arrangements.

The Expense Reimbursement form is available on the ACCJC website and provides details of allowable and unallowable expenses: https://accjc.org/forms/. Team members make their own travel and lodging reservations as directed by the team chair and are reimbursed after the Focused Site Visit. Team members must attach original receipts for transportation, lodging, and meals to the expense form. Team members must secure approval in advance from Commission staff for rental cars. All expenses claimed by the team must be submitted with original receipts within 30 days of the Focused Site Visit.

Individual peer reviewers will be reimbursed by ACCJC. Ultimately, however, the host institution incurs the total cost of the team’s Focused Site Visit. ACCJC staff will invoice the college for the total amount of the expenses claimed by the team. Because the college bears the cost of the Focused Site Visit, ACCJC is respectful of the impact a Focused Site Visit can have on an institution’s financial resources. Accordingly, the Expense Reimbursement Form explains allowable and unallowable expenses, which team members should review before making reservations. Personal expenses not listed as allowable expenses on the reimbursement form are the responsibility of the team member.
8.3 Evaluation of the Peer Review Process

As part of its ongoing efforts to ensure the effectiveness of the peer review process and provide opportunities for member feedback and input, the Commission asks that each team member participate in a brief (approximately 5 minutes) evaluation survey at the conclusion of the Team ISER Review and the Focused Site Visit. Each survey will be distributed to all team members via email. ACCJC staff use the survey results to guide and inform improvements to the peer review process.
9 The Comprehensive Peer Review Team Report

In the comprehensive peer review model, team members will have developed a working draft of the Peer Review Team Report prior to the Team ISER Review based on their analysis of the ISER and completion of Assignments 1 and 2. During the Focused Site Visit, after further analysis of the Core Inquiries, the Focused Site Visit team members will complete their draft of the Peer Review Team Report, including recommendations and/or commendations.

9.1 Preparing the Peer Review Team Report

The Peer Review Team Report should be a constructive document that the Commission can use in making a decision about the accredited status of the institution as well as a document that the institution can use for improvement. The report should:

- evaluate the institution in light of its own stated mission and objectives, the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies;
- provide a fair and useful estimate of the effectiveness of the institution;
- emphasize student achievement and student learning outcomes;
- make favorable comments and provide evidence to support conclusions when commendations are made;
- provide evidence to support conclusions and the recommendations of the team;
- avoid naming individuals, either in praise or blame. Comment, if necessary, on the office, not the officeholder;
- avoid being too prescriptive, leaving the specific remedy to be developed and implemented by the institution;
- serve the institution well for the next six or seven years; and
- be comprehensive in its scope.

9.2 Considerations for the Report

In preparing the written report, consider the following:

- **Internal Consistency**
  Does the report have internal consistency and flow logically, with no mixed or conflicting messages?

- **Clarity**
  Does the report say exactly what is intended so that there can be no accidental or deliberate misinterpretation?

- **Perspective**
  Does the language of the report clearly represent observations, findings, conclusions and recommendations as coming from the team as a whole, not just one member or one point of view?
• **Institutional Focus**
  Does the report deal fairly with the entire institution, without advocating selectively for constituency or other special interests?

• **Documentation**
  Does the narrative of the report support the recommendations and commendations? Do the observations, findings, and conclusions clearly state the context or evidence on which the recommendations or commendations are based? Are the specific Standards correctly cited to refer the institution to statements of best practice and Commission expectations?

• **Tone**
  Is the tone of the report appropriate to the circumstances and the intended effect? The report should encourage the institution to take appropriate actions and to engage in continuous institutional improvement. Accreditation employs the language of diplomacy, while being direct and clear as to meaning. Unduly harsh criticism or punitive language can affect the climate of an institution and can be harmful to individuals.

• **Restraint**
  Does the report stray into enforcement or advocacy of matters outside the purview of the Commission’s standards of good practice? Advocacy of other positions, state or local regulations, objectives, or compliance requirements, no matter how praiseworthy or fashionable, must be cast within the language of the Commission’s Standards.

• **Audience**
  Consider who might read the report, and with what purposes in mind. The document will be available on the college’s website after the Commission makes its decision on the accredited status of the institution, and will be available to any public member, including the press, government agency, or legislator. Review the report through public eyes.
10 Principles of Effective Recommendations and Commendations

One of the most difficult tasks of the peer review team is drafting recommendations and/or commendations to the college. The team needs to choose, based on its findings and deliberations, whether a recommendation is needed to increase effectiveness or to come into compliance with Standard(s).

Similarly, for any commendations the team needs to conclude that what the college is doing goes above and beyond what is expected by the Standard(s).

The content of the findings sections of the Peer Review Team Report should clearly and specifically state the issues and reasons for any recommendation and/or commendations the team makes. It should be obvious by someone reading the findings sections for the standards cited in a recommendation or commendation why they exist. Furthermore, the college will have difficulty responding to and understanding the rationale for a recommendation where there is not a clear description of the issues and findings in the team report.

The peer review team should review all draft recommendations and/or commendations as a group during and at the conclusion of the comprehensive peer review. However, the chair is ultimately responsible for editing them later to improve clarity and eliminate any inconsistencies that may exist.

The following provides guidance on recommendations and commendations:

1. Recommendations and Commendations should reference Accreditation Standards.

Both the institution and the Commission should be able to tell at a glance which ER(s), Standard(s), and Commission policies are being referenced. This is done by citing the Standard at the end of the recommendation or commendation (i.e., Standard II.A.6, Policy on Distance Education and on Correspondence Education). Examples:

   “In order to meet the Standard(s) the team recommends the College establish clear, written policies and procedures delineating roles and responsibilities of the various campus constituencies that participate in institutional governance. (Standards IV.A.2, IV.A.3)

   “The team commends the College for ensuring equity of access to education for all its students by expanding educational programs and support through investment in technology and people. (Standard III.A.14, III.C.2)

Note: ERs may be cited for recommendations to meet Standards only if the team determines that the institution does not meet the Eligibility Requirement, in addition to not meeting the related Standard. ERs should not be cited for recommendations to increase effectiveness.
2. **Recommendations to come into compliance should begin; “In order to meet the Standards, the team recommends that the college...”**.

   To avoid confusion, to the extent possible, language from the Standards should be used for recommendations to meet Standards.

   For recommendations to meet Standards, the conclusion section should indicate which Standards are not met. For example, “The College meets the Standards except IV.A.2”.

3. **Recommendations to increase effectiveness should begin; “In order to increase effectiveness, the team recommends that the college...”**.

   For recommendations to increase effectiveness, be sure to set expectations that an institution take an action or complete a task using language such as “complete the program review,” “implement the new budgetary process,” etc. Recommendations that tell an institution to “design a new budgetary process” often result in an institution’s failure to implement the recommendation, and recommendations that tell an institution to “review” or “consider” something frequently result in no action or improvement.

   Example:

   “In order to increase effectiveness, the team recommends that the College expand disaggregation in the collection and analysis of data on outcomes and achievement to better represent the diverse subpopulations of students. (Standard I.B.6)”

4. **Commendations should only be given for practices directly related to a Standard(s), and only when such practices exceed what the Standard(s) require.**

   Commendations should only be given for things the college is doing that go above and beyond the bench of what is required to meet the Standard(s). One way to decide whether something should be a commendation is to think, is what the college is doing in the context of a Standard something that is conference worthy and others could benefit from? Since commendations go on the Commission’s action letter, it is important that they meet this high bar.

5. **Recommendations or Commendations that relate to several Standards can be combined into an overarching recommendation.**

   It is important for such overarching recommendations or commendations that the findings for each referenced Standard in the team report describe the related deficiency that is impacting the college’s ability to meet the Standard, or substantiate exemplary practice in the case of commendations.

   Overarching recommendations should be presented in their complete form after the Standard section where they first occur and referenced thereafter. For example:

   **Sample Recommendation 1:**

   “In order to meet the Standards, the team recommends that the College institutionalize its planning, program review, and budgeting processes by implementing and regularly using them. (Standards I.B.5, I.B.9, II.A.2, II.B.3, and II.C.1)”
Sample Reference:

See Recommendation 1

Keep in mind when combining recommendations to avoid a “Standards dump”. Recommendations are intended to give clear direction on the areas where the college needs improvement. “Standards dumps” may confuse or overwhelm the college. Cite only those Standards that will be directly impacted by the recommended action, not those that will be indirectly impacted.

Similarly, since commendations should only be given for Standards where the college is exceeding the Standard(s), only cite those Standards that directly relate to the specific exemplary practices the team observed.

6. Recommendations and Commendations should not contain references that are not part of the ERs, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies or based on standards and requirements of other governmental agencies, the legislature, or organizations.

Avoid using terms that are not embodied in the Accreditation Standards. For example, terms like “Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA),” “shared governance,” “matriculation,” and “collegial consultation”. While the principles included in these terms may be embodied in the Accreditation Standards, avoid creating confusion that may result from the use of these specialized terms. Use Standards language instead.

Similarly, teams should avoid recommendations about compliance with external laws or regulations. The following is an example of an inappropriate recommendation.

“The College president should ensure the full implementation of the new college quantitative program model and ensure implementation of the Accountability Model derived from Assembly Bill 1725.”

7. Recommendations should not be prescriptive or tell the college to continue to engage in a particular activity.

Deciding how the issue should be addressed should be left up to the institution. The following are examples of what to avoid.

“The ventilation fan in the Central Duplicating area should be replaced with a heavy-duty model.”

“The College should have a Diversity/Affirmative Action Officer on campus in order to coordinate training for faculty screening committees and to provide multi-cultural awareness training for all staff.”

Recommendations are intended to provide advice in areas where the college needs direction that will enable it to meet the Standards or improve. Recommending that a college “continue” implies that it is already working on improvements. Such recommendations are moot.
8. **Commendations and Recommendations should be consistent with findings and evidence presented throughout the report.**

Complimenting a college and making a recommendation on the same issue elsewhere in the report leads to confusion, and such inconsistencies will only serve to weaken the usefulness of the report. Commendations should be consistent with the findings and evidence, and conclusions sections of the Peer Review Team Report, as should recommendations.
11 Distance Education Review Guidelines

Introduction

The Commission Policy on Distance Education and on Correspondence Education (in compliance with federal regulation 34 CFR § 602.3) specifies that all learning opportunities provided by accredited institutions must have equivalent quality, accountability, and focus on student outcomes, regardless of mode of delivery.

In line with ACCJC’s commitment to academic quality and continuous improvement, the review of distance education courses will follow the provisions outlined below. “Section 3. Consideration for Recommendations” includes questions related to the effects of the pandemic that peer review teams should take into consideration as part of their deliberations concerning any recommendations. These questions will provide peer review teams a broader context of the college’s planning efforts and current situation and inform the team’s review of the college’s alignment with federal regulations and Standards concerning distance education.

Guidelines for Reviewing Distance Education

The guidelines below are suggested activities intended to promote consistency (1) in the way that institutions prepare for the peer review team, and (2) in the way that peer review teams observe distance education, especially online classes.

Guidelines for Institutions

• The college should inform distance education faculty that the peer review team will “observe” a randomly selected cadre of distance education classes from the semester prior to the comprehensive peer review.

• The college should work with the team chair to provide a random sample of fully online distance education courses to observe. This sample should constitute 5% (not to exceed a maximum of 50) of the total number of distance education sections that were offered during the semester immediately preceding the semester of the comprehensive peer review.

• The college will provide peer reviewers with access to archived distance education classes from the semester immediately preceding the semester of the comprehensive peer review, affording them the opportunity to observe “regular and substantive” interaction through a full semester, quarter, or shortened term. Review of archived classes also ensures that the reviewers’ presence in the online class will not interfere with instruction or course design.

• The college should inform the peer review team of instructions for access to the randomly selected classes.

• In accordance with the Commission Policy on Public Disclosure and Confidentiality in the Accreditation Process, the college should expect that the peer review team will maintain confidentiality of student and instructor information.
Guidelines for Peer Reviewers

- The team chair will appoint one or two team members to observe distance education classes.

- Peer reviewers should conduct their review of the random selection of courses provided by the college as part of their review of the ISER and evidence prior to the comprehensive peer review.

- Peer reviewers should evaluate the courses using the institution’s own definitions and expectations for regular and substantive interaction, ensuring the institution’s definition includes at least two of the methods as defined in the Policy on Distance Education and on Correspondence Education.

- Considering the sensitive nature of such observations and acting in accordance with the Commission Policy on Public Disclosure and Confidentiality in the Accreditation Process, the peer reviewers will maintain confidentiality throughout the observations and report writing.

- Peer reviewers should triangulate their findings by confirming their observations through interviews with faculty and students who participate in distance education, and with managers or administrators who oversee distance education, and by using those interviews to uncover the root of deficiencies that they may have found in their observations.

- In keeping with federal policy § 602.17(g), peer reviewers should be able to ensure that effective student verification processes are being employed; that student privacy is protected; and that, if there are any additional charges for these services, the college has written policies that students will be notified of such charges at the time of registration or enrollment.

Considerations for Recommendations

Determining if a recommendation is necessary, and the type of recommendation, compliance or improvement, should be based on the careful consideration of several factors. For example, if less than half of the distance education classes observed demonstrated evidence of regular and substantive interaction, the team should explore through its interviews with members of the college community, including faculty, students, and administrators, and review of all evidence, the issues pertaining to the low percentage, before deciding if a recommendation is necessary and the type of recommendation.

The team should also take into consideration the context in which the institution transitions courses to the distance education modality. Considering the following question will help the team understand how the college prepares for this transition, and their plans for ensuring all distance education courses meet the same academic and professional standards as any other course.

- How does the college plan for transition of courses into the distance education modality?
- What professional development has been made available to ensure faculty are aware of policies and procedures related to distance education including understanding of the college’s definition of regular and substantive interaction?
• What provisions does the college have in place to ensure all distance education courses meet academic and professional standards?

• How does the college validate that regular and substantive interaction, as per the college’s definition, and in alignment with ACCJC’s *Policy on Distance Education and on Correspondence Education*, is being consistently implemented in all distance education courses?

• How has the college made available or expanded student support services to serve the needs of significantly greater distance education students?

Understanding the broader context of the college’s planning efforts and current situation regarding distance education courses will help the team carefully and thoughtfully document any challenges or issues in its findings, as well as write recommendations appropriate to the severity of the deficiencies.

In considering recommendations, the team will want to clearly identify the Standards in which the institution is deficient or needs to improve. Moreover, the team should ensure that in the discussion of the findings for those Standards, the deficiency in distance education is specifically identified in the team report.

In the final Team Report, the team must also ensure that its responses to the checklist questions pertaining to the *Policy on Distance Education and on Correspondence Education* are consistent with its findings and recommendations in the body of the report.