



ACCJC

ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR
COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES
WESTERN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

Guide to Accreditation for Governing Boards

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September 2020
Edition



Table of Contents

Introduction	1
1. U.S. Accreditation and ACCJC	2
1.1 Accreditation: History, Purpose, and Structure	2
1.2 Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)	3
2. Eligibility Requirements (ERs), Accreditation Standards, and Commission Policies and Processes	4
2.1 Focus of ACCJC Accreditation Standards:.....	4
2.2 Accreditation Processes	5
Obtaining Initial Accreditation	5
Comprehensive Review	5
Other Reports and Review Visits.....	6
3. Roles and Responsibilities of Governing Boards in Accreditation.....	7
3.1 Governing Boards and ACCJC Standards.....	7
3.2 Governing Boards and ACCJC Processes.....	8
3.3 Governing Boards and Effective Leadership and Governance.....	8
4. IN CONCLUSION	10
5. RESOURCES	10

Introduction

The *Guide to Accreditation for Governing Boards* is designed for college governing board members as an introduction to accreditation and to the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACCJC). Governing boards have leadership responsibilities for college mission, institutional quality and improvement, institutional integrity and, ultimately, for student success. Accreditation Standards define the important role of governing boards in ensuring student success and the Standards place responsibility on the Board for its institutional leadership role. Governing boards develop policy and delegate responsibility for institutional operations to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). It is the CEO's role to implement governing board policies and plans and to manage the internal operations of the institution. Defining the policy role of governing boards and distinguishing that role from the delegated role of institutional operations is a fundamental principle that informs effective governing board practice, and is clearly articulated in the ACCJC Accreditation Standards.

Section 1 of this *Guide* begins with general information on accreditation, including its history, purpose, goals, and organizational structure. This section also introduces the purposes and structure of ACCJC.

Section 2 introduces the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies (together ACCJC's Standards), as well as an overview of ACCJC's peer review procedures and processes.

Section 3 focuses on the roles and responsibilities of governing boards in accreditation. This section emphasizes the leadership role the governing board plays in defining the college/district/system mission and policies, as well as their role in ensuring academic quality, student success, and appropriate governance structures and practices.

1. U.S. Accreditation and ACCJC

1.1 Accreditation: History, Purpose, and Structure

In the United States, accreditation is the primary process for assuring and improving the quality of institutions of higher education. Accrediting commissions across the country carry out the accreditation of the nation's colleges and universities through the peer review process. These accrediting agencies are nongovernmental, nonprofit, and essentially voluntary membership associations. Because the concept of the community college had become solidified in American higher education by the time the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) was organized in 1962, California and the western region chose to have two higher education accrediting commissions. One commission serves institutions primarily awarding associate degrees (ACCJC) and the other serves colleges and universities that primarily award bachelor's degrees and/or graduate degrees (WSCUC).

Accreditation in the United States is based on a peer review process in which professional educators and persons representing the public interest review an institution using rigorous standards that represent good institutional practice and high academic quality. Accreditation arose from the academy; it did not descend from the government. While each accrediting commission develops its own standards and policies, the ideas and content of the standards are broadly shared across the national higher education community. This leads to broad acceptance of institutional credits and degrees among accredited institutions across the country.

Colleges are reviewed within the context of their unique institutional mission. This requires accreditation standards to be broadly applicable to a variety of institutional missions. A central focus of an institutional review is the degree to which the institution meets its own mission.

Following a review by a team of peers, accrediting commissions determine the accreditation status of the institution. Colleges seek reaffirmation of accreditation on a regular basis. They are also required to prepare an application for review when they seek to make substantive changes to the institution's mission, programs, location, mode of delivery, or population served.

The US Department of Education (ED) relies on accrediting commissions to verify institutional quality and integrity and, in so doing, bases its decisions to award federal financial aid on the accredited status of an institution. For this reason, accrediting commissions must be recognized by the Department as reliable judges of educational quality. Accrediting commissions petition for renewal of recognition every five years. ED also sets regulations for institutional quality, some of which are incorporated into the accreditation standards of all recognized accrediting commissions. Participation in federal financial aid processes brings additional federal requirements.

While the standards of each accrediting commission might be organized differently or use different wording, overall commissions follow very similar practices and have very similar standards of quality. Today's accreditation enterprise is based on decades of experience and refinement, both leading and reflecting the evolution of American higher education. Current accreditation standards go beyond the historical emphasis on inputs and processes. *There is a consistent emphasis on student outcomes as a key measure of quality.* Accreditors work with colleges and universities in monitoring completion rates and developing student learning outcome metrics, all with the goal of improving institutional effectiveness.

1.2 Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)

ACCJC accredits public, private non-profit, and private for-profit associate degree-granting institutions in California, Hawai'i, and the Pacific Islands. The ACCJC accreditation process assures the public that member institutions meet ACCJC's Standards, ensuring that the credentials earned at these institutions are of value to the students who earned them, to employers and trade or profession-related licensing entities, and to other colleges and universities.

ACCJC Commissioners make decisions on the accredited status of institutions and set policies and Accreditation Standards. Commissioners, whose work is voluntary, represent the interests of the public and member institutions. Commissioners are elected by ACCJC membership for three-year terms and generally serve two terms. The Commission is led by a Chair who serves for two years. If elected to an officer position, a Commissioner may serve the time necessary to complete the officer role(s).

ACCJC's staff is led by the President, who is hired by the Commission. Much like colleges and universities, the Commission delegates the operations to the President and holds them accountable for ensuring consistent adherence to Commission policies and procedures.

2. Eligibility Requirements (ERs), Accreditation Standards, and Commission Policies and Processes

The Accreditation Standards, which include Eligibility Requirements (ERs), Accreditation Standards and Commission policies, are the core of the accreditation process. These standards are developed, adopted, evaluated and revised by the Commission through effective practices derived from years of experience from member colleges and sound educational research and practices. Both the Standards and Commission policies are also informed by federal regulations.

2.1 Focus of ACCJC Accreditation Standards:

Standard I: Mission, Academic Quality and Institutional Effectiveness, and Integrity

- mission and purposes of each institution and institutional effectiveness of achieving the mission
- data-driven assessment and continuous quality improvement of student achievement and learning
- clarity, accuracy and integrity of institutional information and processes

Standard II: Student Learning Programs and Services

- quality and rigor of instruction, student support, learning services
- academic policies and processes

Standard III: Resources

- capacity of human, physical, technological and financial resources to support achievement of mission and maintain institutional integrity

Standard IV: Leadership and Governance

- decision making roles and responsibilities and the capacity of leadership to support and achieve mission and student success
- the effectiveness of the governance structure, the CEO, and the governing board, including leadership roles and responsibilities in multi-college districts or systems

Eligibility Requirements are preaccreditation standards that institutions who are seeking to earn initial accreditation must demonstrate compliance with before they can begin the preaccreditation process. For more information on preaccreditation, please see ACCJC's publication, [Eligibility, Candidacy, and Initial Accreditation Manual](#), which is posted on ACCJC's website.

For institutions seeking reaffirmation of accreditation, the Eligibility Requirements (ERs) are verified as being met through its compliance with the Accreditation Standards as most of the ERs are subsumed (ERs 6 - 21) within the Standards. ERs 1 - 5 are separately addressed in the college's Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER) and confirmed by the peer review team during the comprehensive review process.

ACCJC policies address other requirements and procedures as they apply to different aspects of the institution's operations. The Commission regularly reviews and, if necessary, revises its policies in response to changes in the educational environment, federal regulations, or other Commission findings. Peer review teams ensure the college's compliance with relevant ACCJC policies.

2.2 Accreditation Processes

Obtaining Initial Accreditation

As stated in the previous section, ACCJC publishes the [Eligibility, Candidacy, and Initial Accreditation Manual](#) that details the specific steps for an institution to achieve initial accreditation from ACCJC. The process begins with preparation of an eligibility review application to establish the institution's compliance with the Eligibility Requirements (ERs). This application is reviewed by the Commission's Eligibility Review Committee. If the institution meets the ERs, it will be approved to prepare an Institutional Self-Evaluation Report for application for Candidacy status. This step entails a site visit by a peer review team, followed by Commission action. If the institution meets ACCJC's Standards, it will be granted Candidacy status for a period not to exceed four years. During that time, the institution will prepare a second report for Initial Accreditation. Initial Accreditation is granted after a comprehensive institutional review demonstrates the institution is in compliance with the ERs, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies. Once regarded as a Candidate institution, a nonprofit institution is eligible for federal student financial aid and federal grants and contracts. A for-profit institution must achieve Initial Accreditation before being so eligible.

Comprehensive Review

Per policy, ACCJC institutions undergo a comprehensive review every seven years to verify the degree to which they meet the Commission's Standards. The review process also validates that institutions are engaged in sustainable efforts to improve educational quality and institutional effectiveness. The review process has four steps: institutional self-evaluation, an external review by a team of peers, Commission review and accreditation action, and institutional continuous quality improvement.

The review begins when the institution conducts a self-evaluation using ACCJC's Standards as its evaluative framework. The outcome is expressed in the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER), which is submitted to the ACCJC peer review team to use. The ISER provides narrative and evaluation, supported by evidence, to affirm the institution meets the accreditation Standards. The ISER also describes the institution's plans for improvement and a Quality Focus Essay that discusses two or three quality-focused projects the institution will engage in to improve student learning and achievement.

The Commission appoints a team of trained peer reviewers, which may include members of governing boards. All members of a peer review team are selected on the basis of their professional expertise in higher education, areas of specialization, and commitment to apply standards objectively to the institution they will review.

The team examines the ISER, visits the institution to clarify and verify the contents of the ISER, and writes a team report stating the team's findings related to the institution's compliance with ACCJC's Standards. The team report may make recommendations where the institution needs to meet Standards, it may also make recommendations for improvement and provide commendations identifying where the institution has exceeded Standards, when appropriate.

After the institution has had an opportunity to correct any errors of fact in the draft report, the chair of the peer review team submits the report to the Commission. The Commission evaluates the ISER and team report, and then makes a decision on the accredited status of the institution. The Commission may also give the institution additional recommendations and direction for improvement. The Commission may impose a sanction and define deadlines for the institution to resolve any noted deficiencies. (See the [Policy on Commission Actions on Institutions](#) for actions the Commission may take on member institutions, which is located on the ACCJC website.)

The Commission communicates its decisions via an action letter to the institution and through public announcements on the Commission website within 30 days following the Commission's January or June meeting. Member institutions are required to share the peer review team report, the ISER, and the Commission action letter by posting these documents on the institution's website.

The final and ongoing phase in the comprehensive review process is continuous quality improvement. The Commission requires the institution to resolve any deficiencies cited as compliance requirements in the peer review team report within a maximum of four years. ACCJC's Standards also require institutions to implement processes for improvement by practicing ongoing, evidence-based assessments of institutional effectiveness and making improvements as needed.

Other Reports and Review Visits

ACCJC requires institutions to submit a Midterm Report in the fourth year after the comprehensive peer review team visit. The Midterm Report includes an update on the status of the institution's plans for improvement and the quality focused projects as described in the Quality Focus Essay, as well as an institutional analysis of the data trends from their Annual and Financial Reports.

Federal regulations require institutions to submit applications and receive approvals for substantive changes to mission, scope of programs, nature of its student constituency, location (or geographical area served), control of the institution, content of programs (when changes are a significant departure from current status), credit awarded for program or course completion, or any other change the Commission deems substantive. A Substantive Change Application is submitted in accordance with the Commission's [Policy on Substantive Change](#) and the [Substantive Change Manual](#), which are posted on the ACCJC website.

3. Roles and Responsibilities of Governing Boards in Accreditation

3.1 Governing Boards and ACCJC Standards

The four Accreditation Standards describe the educational and institutional practices, organizational structures, resources, and institutional decision-making processes necessary for a high quality institution and student success. Standards I and IV describe some of the specific roles of governing boards in achieving these outcomes. A governing board's responsibility for institutional effectiveness is exercised through its policy-making role and the delegation of policy implementation to the institution's Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

The governing board is also responsible for the fiscal integrity of the institution. The board exercises this responsibility through policy development, review of the annual external audit, and approval of the institution's annual spending plans. The governing board is responsible for developing the expertise needed to make sound budgetary decisions that support educational quality. This includes an understanding of an institution's current and projected revenues and expenditures, as well as the institution's long-term obligations created through contractual agreements, obligations for retirement funding, borrowing, or plans for institutional expansion.

Depending on the nature of the institution, governing board members are either elected in a local election, appointed by an oversight body, or recruited and vetted by the existing board through a board development committee. Per Accreditation Standards, and effective governing board practice, board members, once elected (trustees) or appointed, must ensure their allegiance is to the college and not to any constituent person or organization. As such, governing board members do not *represent* specific constituencies in the sense of taking board actions in favor of their interests. All governing board members, appointed or elected, have a fiduciary responsibility to the institution and are expected to bring to board deliberations a broad understanding of the college's role in serving all students and the institution's multiple stakeholders. There must be no implied obligation for any governing board member to serve the interests of a specific constituency over the interests of the broad mission of the college.

The governing board is integral to maintaining an institution's mission-based standards of excellence and performance in alignment with all four Accreditation Standards. For example, the board is responsible for the mission of the institution, and the Standards require regular review of the institutional mission (Standard I.A). The board is not concerned just with the review of the wording of the mission; it should be concerned with the institution's achievement of the mission. That assessment requires data on the outcomes achieved by the students identified in the mission. Similarly, the mission broadly defines the scope of programs and services offered by the institution, and the Standards require institutions conduct regular program reviews of all programs and services to assess their effectiveness (Standard I.B). The governing board should have a program review policy for both the academic and service units and require regular data-supported reports to inform decisions for improvement.

By focusing on the *what* (mission, quality, outcomes, and improvement) and not the *how* (operations and the means to achieve outcomes, which is the responsibility of the CEO), effective governing boards demonstrate their policy-and mission-directed leadership role. ACCJC promotes the use of common measures of institutional effectiveness such as course completion, persistence, completion of certificates and degrees, transfer and job placement, and mastery of learning outcomes. In addition, the Commission requires that colleges generate mission-appropriate standards for student achievement, the achievement of which it then assesses. By focusing on the *what*, governing boards obtain information and data that allow them to fully assess institutional effectiveness.

3.2 Governing Boards and ACCJC Processes

Standard IV.C stipulates, “The governing board is informed about the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, Commission policies, accreditation processes, and the college’s accredited status.” Governing boards receive training in these responsibilities. In addition, the governing board participates in the evaluation of its roles and functions in the accreditation process. The board should receive regular reports on the progress of the review process and development of accreditation reports the institution will be submitting to ACCJC.

The board should be informed about institutional reports submitted to the Commission and of communication from the Commission to its institution, including recommendations for compliance or improvement. Board action should indicate a commitment to implementing institutional improvement that has been planned as part of the institutional self-evaluation processes. Those improvement plans should take their place among important institutional priorities that the board ensures are addressed and adequately resourced.

In multi-college/multi-unit districts or systems, the board carries the same responsibilities for institutional mission(s) and for policy as the board in a single-college district/system. In these districts or systems, the district or system CEO is directly responsible to the governing board, while CEOs of colleges within the district or system are responsible to the district/system CEO. The district/system has clearly defined roles of authority and responsibility between the colleges and district/system, and the district/system acts as liaison between the colleges and the governing board. In these district/system configurations, the governing board should maintain and review policies that clearly articulate the delineation and distribution of responsibilities and authorities between the district/system and the colleges/units.

It is important to note that the Commission evaluation is based on ACCJC’s Standards, regardless of organizational structure. All boards are required to meet Accreditation Standards and to support the quality of the institutions they govern.

3.3 Governing Boards and Effective Leadership and Governance

The following principles are drawn from Accreditation Standards, and reflect effective board practice in publications of the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) and the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT).

Governing Boards Act as a collective entity (IV.C.2) - The board is a corporate body; it governs as a unit with one voice. This principle means that individual board members have authority only when they are acting as a board. They have no power as individuals to act on their own or to direct college employees or operations.

Governing Boards Represent the Common Good (IV.C.4) - The board exists to represent the public or, in the case of private institutions, its owners. The board is responsible for balancing and integrating a wide variety of interests and needs into policies that benefit the common good and the future of all its constituencies.

Governing Boards Set Policy Direction (IV.C.5, 12) - The board establishes policies that give direction and guidance to the CEO and staff of the institution. A major board responsibility is to define and uphold an institutional vision and mission that clearly reflect student and community expectations, as well as a realistic assessment of institutional resources necessary to accomplish the mission and related goals.

Governing Boards Employ, Evaluate and Support the CEO (IV.C.3, 12) - The successful board maintains a good relationship with the CEO. The board empowers the CEO to oversee the operations of the institution and avoids intruding into those operations.

Governing Boards Set Policies for Institutional and Board Operations (IV.C.7, 10, 11) - The successful board adopts policies that set standards for quality, ethics, and prudence in institutional operations and in the operation of the board itself.

Governing Boards Use Resources to Achieve Mission (IV.C.1, 8) - The successful board ensures the institution's mission is periodically evaluated and adequately funded. The successful board also ensures its policies and resource allocations are linked and align with the educational priorities defined through the institutional mission and plans.

Governing Boards have Responsibility for Financial Integrity (IV.C.5) - The successful board regularly monitors financial performance and policy. The board should require institutional leadership to maintain adequate reserves and to quickly address any issues discovered through external audits and reviews. The short- and long-term fiscal sustainability of the institution is a primary board responsibility and is particularly critical at time of financial stress.

Governing Boards Monitor Performance (IV.C.8) - The successful board holds institutions accountable for student success and institutional effectiveness. The board adopts the institution's direction and broad goals as policy and then monitors the progress in achieving those goals. Board policy should set expectations for the use of sound student outcome data in program and institutional reviews and planning. For example, if the board adopts a policy goal that the institution will train workers for a particular industry, the board should receive regular reports on progress toward that goal, including from the target industry.

Governing Boards Create a Positive Climate (IV.C.9, 11, 13) - The successful board sets the tone for the entire institution. Through the behavior of board members and the board's policies, the successful board establishes a climate in which learning is valued (including learning by board members), where assessment and evaluation are embraced, and where student success is the most important goal. Effective boards are ethical and act with integrity, which also promotes a positive climate. The board must have a code of ethics and policies for dealing with behavior that violates its code.

4. IN CONCLUSION

The role of the governing board is closely related to the goals of the accrediting commission as both entities fulfill their commitment to support strong and effective institutions, on behalf of their students.

5. RESOURCES

ACCJC Eligibility Requirements: <https://accjc.org/wp-content/uploads/Eligibility-Requirements-Adopted-June-2014.pdf>

ACCJC Standards: https://accjc.org/wp-content/uploads/Accreditation-Standards_-Adopted-June-2014.pdf

Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT):
<https://www.acct.org/governance-basics>

Association of Governing Boards (AGB): <https://agb.org/knowledge-center/board-fundamentals/board-roles-responsibilities/>