The Cost of Accreditation: Calculating the ROI

“If the institution recognizes its value,” my colleague observed, “then accreditation is not an institutional cost; it is an investment in its future.” This experienced accreditation leader was addressing a national conference of higher education trustees. I could sense some in the audience struggling to shift their paradigm as he spoke.

When a college seeks to achieve or retain its accreditation, it is making a notable financial commitment. The accreditor will invoice the college for annual dues, which are typically based on enrollments or gross operating revenue or some combination of these. Accreditors also invoice for the travel and logistical costs of the peer review visit – though not for the considerable time and effort of the volunteer educators who conduct the review. They charge fees for additional services such as substantive changes, and they anticipate the college will support its members’ participation in the agency’s conferences and workshops.

Back home on the campus, colleges keep track of faculty and staff time required to conduct a thorough self-study report and document the costs for publishing their reports. I recall a major university that wanted to charge faculty time for creating student learning outcomes against their accreditation costs – a novel approach, to be sure. However, their accreditor suggested setting learning outcomes should have been happening anyway.

In terms of the total operating budget of an institution, accreditation costs can be a very small component, though the people who write the checks still occasionally wince. Seen in the context of the accreditor’s gatekeeping role to validate the flow of federal, state, and (often) foundation and donor dollars to the college, it is still a bargain.

Nonetheless, ACCJC is taking a number of steps to minimize the financial burden on its members. Following several years of significant increases in annual dues, the Commission did not raise the dues rate for the current year and will add only two percent as a COLA adjustment for the following year. We are finding sponsors for our conference to keep registration costs low. The printing costs for the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER) are significantly reduced as the reports are now submitted only in digital format. (I have a 620-page hard-copy, full-color ISER in my office that I’m sure rivaled the cost of a fine coffee table book.)

In fall 2017, we rolled out of what we call the “portfolio model,” in which each ACCJC vice president has a portfolio of institutions to which they are assigned as the staff liaison. In addition to being the college’s primary point of contact at the office, the vice presidents travel to their colleges to conduct advanced ISER training and assist the college in planning for the visit. They then accompany the accreditation team on these comprehensive visits to clarify team roles, to ensure that the review process is understood and followed, and to address concerns as they may arise. The Commission views this enhanced personal engagement as essential to its work and has decided that a vice president’s travel-related costs for this range of services should not and will not be passed on to the college.

One of ACCJC’s core goals is that the continuous quality improvement dimensions of accreditation become baked into the DNA of our member colleges. Through on-site training, workshops, conferences, staff engagement (in person and by email and phone), and meaningful
policies and procedures, we facilitate ongoing learning about this changing body of knowledge. With reference to this range of services, I have heard institutional leaders comment that, dollar for dollar, accreditation is the best consulting deal they have found. And since these “consultants” are in fact their peers who are also learning about improvement in the process, it really is a collective investment in the region’s future.