

# Discussing Accreditation

## Findings, Discussion Questions and Report Back from the Field on Community College Accreditation Policies and Practices

*The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) presents the following summary of findings and related discussion questions resulting from an examination of community college accreditation policies and practices across the United States. **This document is not a traditional research brief.** Representing a new approach to engaging stakeholders with our research, the RP Group originally produced a draft of this document that was used in discussions with key constituent groups in California, including Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges staff; the chief executive officers, trustee, chief instructional officers and chief student services officers boards; the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges executive committee; the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office cabinet and the Consultation Council's accreditation taskforce. As a result of this process, we offer a final version of this discussion guide, which incorporates additional feedback and insights from the field.*

### Introduction

Each year, public community colleges across the nation undergo accreditation review and reaffirmation. Completion of this external evaluation ensures that an institution meets a level of quality and accountability. As an accredited institution, a college can obtain key resources and support its students in securing financial aid, transferring credits and signaling to employers their readiness for the workplace. Who performs this review, how colleges engage with this process and when it takes place vary according to the region in which an institution is located. In California, community colleges must engage in accreditation review every six years through the Western Association of Schools and Colleges-Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC).

With accreditation reaffirmation comes the opportunity for quality assurance *and* continuous quality improvement—a chance to focus on organizational excellence and student success. Yet, in recent years, a disconnect developed between California's community colleges and ACCJC about whether or not the current process in fact promotes a focus on continuous quality improvement. In 2009, the RP Group decided to add new perspective on this issue by doing what it does best—research.

The RP Group is an organization comprised of researchers and planners often deeply involved in their own institution's reaffirmation process as well

The RP Group is a nonprofit organization working to build a community college culture that views planning, evidence-based decision-making and institutional effectiveness as key strategies for student success.

as in the review of others. In turn, we became particularly interested in what could be learned from the work of other accrediting commissions across the nation. Through this investigation, the RP Group ultimately aimed to **offer contextual information about accreditation policies and practices nationwide** and **engender a productive discussion** among ACCJC, the state's community colleges and key constituent groups about how these findings might assist in optimizing the accreditation process for true quality improvement.

The RP Group, much like the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, believes that students are more likely to benefit from systems that focus on quality improvement (CHEA, 2003 & 2010; Harvey, 2005). When review systems use a quality assurance lens, they are designed to identify deficiencies and ensure that steps are taken to correct these problems, thus focusing efforts on process improvements. Quality improvement-focused review systems are designed to proactively improve the entire institution so that the focus is put on the quality of what students receive. Furthermore, quality assurance alone does not naturally lead to quality improvement; quality assurance encourages a process that is narrowly focused on accountability, which can discourage improvement efforts (Dano & Stensaker, 2007; Leef & Burris, 2004; Middlehurst, 1997).

The RP Group launched this accreditation study in spring 2009 by examining policies and practices of the nation's seven regional accrediting agencies. With support from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, the RP Group extended its research in spring 2010 to explore the perspectives of individual community colleges engaged with three select commissions. A final phase of this work, conducted during October 2010-February 2011, centered on sharing key findings from this research with both the ACCJC staff and California community college constituent groups and discussing potential future action.

## Reader's Guide

The RP Group presents the following discussion guide which:

- Summarizes information discovered through our investigation
- Incorporates feedback gathered through conversations with key constituents designed to validate and augment this research
- Aims to promote further dialogue about what these findings mean and how they can be used by all involved parties to ensure accreditation achieves both quality assurance and quality improvement

The guide starts with an overview of the study's methodology and a table profiling the three regional commissions investigated in-depth by the RP Group. The subsequent sections outline key findings, found in italics, that emerged from the research related to processes employed and supports offered by these commissions with the intention of promoting quality improvement. These key findings are accompanied by questions that can be used to facilitate discussions about accreditation in California community colleges. The guide concludes with a report back from the field on potential action steps.

While the RP Group did integrate input and insights from the field into this final guide after discussions with constituent groups, the content remains largely the same as the original draft with one primary exception. Based on questions and comments that arose during these conversations, we added a new section summarizing our research findings on how commissions foster relationships with their member colleges. Otherwise, discussions with constituents primarily focused on future steps individuals and organizations might take as a result of the research findings, which are reflected in the final section.

Readers can find an extensive and detailed description of this research in *Focusing Accreditation on Quality Improvement: Findings from an Exploration of Community College Accreditation Policies and Practices* at [www.rpgroup.org/projects/accreditation](http://www.rpgroup.org/projects/accreditation). We include in this report an overview of the history and purpose of accreditation, a full explanation of the study's methodology, an in-depth presentation of accreditation policies and practices from the three selected commissions paired with member colleges' perceptions of their efforts and a discussion of these findings.

## Methodology

The RP Group began its investigation by reviewing the websites of and key documents from all seven regional commissions (see sidebar “Regional Accrediting Commissions”) and engaging in phone interviews with representatives from these commissions including chairs, presidents and staff. This first stage of the study focused on: (1) what process and practices each commission employs during its review, (2) how commissions train both visiting teams and colleges in preparation for reaffirmation, (3) how colleges in each region learn about effective practices aligned with accreditation standards and (4) how the region's two- and four-year institutions engage with one another as it relates to accreditation.

To extend this research and add the voice of colleges affected by the policies and practices of different commissions, the RP Group selected three accrediting agencies for deeper investigation including ACCJC, SACS and NCA-HLC. We chose SACS and NCA-HLC because these commissions emerged in the first stage as particularly innovative and quality-driven. We selected ACCJC because it directly impacts the California community colleges, which the RP Group serves. The RP Group contacted representatives from colleges within these regions representing a range of size and location and

### Regional Accrediting Commissions

Middle States Association of Colleges & Schools – Middle States Commission on Higher Education

New England Association of Schools & Colleges – Commission on Institutions of Higher Education

North Central Association of Colleges & Schools – Higher Learning Commission (NCA-HLC)\*

Northwest Commission of Colleges & Universities

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools – Commission on Colleges (SACS)\*

Western Association of Schools & Colleges – Accreditation Commission for Community & Junior Colleges (ACCJC)\*

Western Association of Schools & Colleges – Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities

*\*Investigated in depth through Phase II*

including those institutions that had successfully achieved reaffirmation as well as those that had been or were currently on sanction. A total of 29 interviews involved chief executive officers (CEOs), accreditation liaison officers and faculty from 11 different institutions.

These interviews built on the four abovementioned areas for investigation and added questions related to: (1) how colleges perceive the definition of and balance between compliance and improvement within the accreditation process, (2) how colleges view their commission’s efforts to ensure the consistent application of standards and (3) how colleges assess their return on investment from accreditation. When necessary, the research team also reconnected with representatives from these commissions for further information and clarification on data.

The table below offers a profile of the three regional commissions studied in-depth.

### Regional Accreditation Commission Profile

	ACCJC	NCA-HLC	SACS
<b>Year Founded</b>	1962	1895	1895
<b>Geographic Region</b>	California, Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Micronesia, Marshall Islands	Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming	Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Latin America
<b>Type of Institution Served</b>	Associate degree-granting institutions	Institutions of higher education	Institutions of higher education
<b>Number of Institutions Served</b>	135	~1,000	796
<b>Number of Commission Staff</b>	8	40	42
<b>Number of Standards &amp; Subsections of the Standards</b>	4 standards 127 subsections (135 for multi-college districts)	5 standards 21 subsections	4 standards 75 subsections
<b>Length of Review Cycle</b>	6 years with required Midterm Report	7 - 10 years depending on process selected	10 years with required Fifth Year Report

## Discussion of Findings

The RP Group used this study to gather information about the processes and supports employed by the selected commissions and the experiences and perceptions of colleges involved with these agencies. This research offers insight into how the accreditation of California community colleges might evolve to achieve maximum effectiveness for all parties involved.

The following section offers a series of key findings and related discussion questions organized by how commissions might: (a) set the stage for quality improvement, (b) develop their relationship with member colleges, (c) support institutions in achieving reaffirmation, (d) consistently apply standards and effectively use sanctions throughout a review and (e) generate a positive return on an institution's investment.

At the same time, colleges and their constituent groups have an important role in supporting quality improvement; in some cases, we present findings and questions that specifically address the responsibilities of institutions in the accreditation process.

### A. Setting the Stage for Quality Improvement

The commissions studied represent a continuum of approaches to balancing quality improvement and compliance in their reaffirmation processes. This investigation suggests that *shifting the focus to quality improvement requires a reinvention of the accreditation process*. NCA-HLC's Academic Quality Improvement Process (AQIP) offers a reaffirmation model that fully integrates continuous quality improvement through a series of activities completed during a seven-year review cycle (see sidebar "Spotlight on NCA-HLC's Academic Quality Improvement Process"). Colleges choose AQIP participation and must demonstrate a commitment to quality improvement through an initial self-assessment of strengths, weaknesses, culture and systems as well as ongoing participation in dialogue,

#### Spotlight on NCA-HLC's Academic Quality Improvement Process

NCA-HLC launched AQIP in 1999 with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts. AQIP includes the following seven events:

*Application and Self-Assessment* – internal evaluation of college commitment to improvement

*Strategy Forum* – intensive, commission-sponsored conference designed to support colleges in debating organizational change needs & selecting "action projects"

*Action Projects* – a series of initiatives that demonstrate a college's commitment to quality improvement; institutions must show continuous engagement with three action projects including one focused on teaching & learning

*Systems Portfolio* – a college's inventory of best practices & areas for growth submitted every four years to demonstrate achievement of accreditation criteria to NCA

*Systems Appraisal* – NCA's peer-review of a Systems Portfolio resulting in an extensive report to the college and commission

*Quality Checkup Visit* – a two-day onsite meeting conducted within two years of reaffirmation

*Reaffirmation for Accreditation* – a summative review of a college's accreditation standing based on these activities and their submission of related documents

planning, action and reflection. According to those involved with AQIP, the process naturally enables institutions to meet NCA-HLC standards. In the words of one college president, “If we focus our efforts on quality improvement, then we have compliance and transparency.”

SACS partially integrates quality improvement efforts into a more traditional review approach through its Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). In addition to submitting documentation of compliance with commission standards, SACS institutions also complete a plan for improving a particular aspect of student learning. College representatives generally appreciated SACS’ effort to focus on quality improvement through the QEP with some respondents specifically noting the value of honing in on an issue of unique importance to a given institution. One area for improvement some interviewees mentioned for SACS included more clear and consistent direction regarding what makes an acceptable QEP.

A review of ACCJC standards and interviews with commission staff indicate that ACCJC clearly aims to promote quality improvement through accreditation. At the same time, the commission does not employ a process comparable to those of NCA-HLC and SACS, which actively engages colleges with quality improvement efforts. As a result, college interviewees remarked that by default the emphasis falls on compliance which, while critical, can detract from institutional improvement priorities—implying a disconnect between the intentions of the commission and the experience of the colleges.

At the same time, both commission and college respondents noted that *institutions develop and drive a culture of improvement—regardless of the accreditation process*. Interviewees collectively expressed that college leadership particularly plays a vital role in generating a focus on quality improvement. However, frequent turnover in administrative leadership makes it difficult for colleges to achieve and sustain this kind of culture.

### **Discussion questions:**

- How might the accreditation process improve to specifically engage institutions in activities designed to foster quality improvement?
- What can college leadership, particularly CEOs and presidents, do to support a culture of improvement that enables their institution to maximize the accreditation process for organizational renewal and change?

## **B. Developing a Relationship between the Commission and Colleges**

Interview results underscore that the relationship each commission develops with its member colleges is a critical component of the accreditation process. Colleges in all three regions were generally positive about direct interactions with their commissions, citing staff responsiveness and willingness to help. For the colleges interviewed, maintaining a good relationship with their commission surfaced as a key factor in their successful navigation of the accreditation process.

This research suggests that a key component of a healthy and productive relationship is the opportunity for institutions to provide feedback to their commission on matters related to their own experiences and accreditation at large. Two primary elements surfaced as critical to these

feedback loops: receptivity and security. This research indicates that *transparent, open and honest opportunities for feedback without fear of retribution are critical to a commission's relationship with member colleges. Moreover, when a commission demonstrates that it takes into account colleges' feedback, institutions feel heard and a valued part of the overall process.*

In this regard, interviews suggest that the relationship between a commission and its member colleges varied across the three regions studied. NCA-HLC respondents cited being satisfied with intentional opportunities to provide feedback both in the commission's annual meetings and trainings. One respondent noted a particular example where the commission implemented a change based on college feedback and then explained where the change originated at the next annual meeting. Additionally, NCA-HLC significantly redesigned its Action Project Directory based on institutional input, which the commission noted on its website and respondents themselves recognized in interviews.

SACS interviewees indicated that the commission offered adequate opportunities for feedback, but noted potential consequences for providing input. Respondents from two of the three colleges interviewed expressed a concern about providing candid feedback for fear of retaliation from SACS. Respondents from the third college studied were clearly satisfied with their opportunity to provide input, have done so on numerous occasions and did not cite any negative consequences that had occurred as a result.

This research indicated a difference in opinion between ACCJC and the institutions interviewed about opportunities for colleges to provide feedback to the commission. Commission staff reported that they are open to input from colleges and are frequently collecting data in this regard. However, the colleges interviewed found ACCJC generally unreceptive to constructive criticism and expressed a fear of retaliation. As an exception, two college CEOs interviewed expressed satisfaction with their ability to provide feedback to the commission. They suggested this comfort resulted from personal relationships they had with certain commissioners and/or commission staff that allowed them the chance to provide input without the fear of it negatively impacting their institutions.

One key observation made by a president from a SACS institution is that colleges in his region view SACS as "our" commission, but that colleges in the ACCJC region view ACCJC as "the" commission, connoting a lack of ownership or collegiality.

### **Discussion questions:**

- How can ACCJC and colleges collectively examine the perception of "the" commission versus "our" commission?
- What do the colleges need to understand better about ACCJC and the work it does?
- What does ACCJC need to understand better about what the colleges experience and perceive?

## C. Supporting Colleges in Achieving Reaffirmation

**1. Training constituents involved in reaffirmation.** The RP Group's investigation indicates *a training program that is comprehensive, learner-centered, inclusive and integral to the accreditation process is most useful to institutions in their pursuit of reaffirmation*. For example, SACS offers a multi-pronged training approach designed to meet the needs of different stakeholders involved in accreditation. Their program includes three commission-sponsored events for training and effective practices sharing, extensive written and web-based resources for institutions and review committees as well as a staff position designed to collect feedback from colleges and incorporate it into training efforts. Representatives from colleges served by SACS universally described these efforts as highly useful to their reaffirmation preparation.

NCA-HLC and ACCJC also provide a range of training opportunities and support; however college interviewees were less satisfied with their experience. NCA-HLC offers a multi-year Academy for Assessment of Student Learning, an annual conference, ongoing workshops and the abovementioned Strategy Forum. ACCJC conducts specialized workshops, taps existing conferences and meetings of professional organizations to make presentations and responds to requests from individual institutions for ACCJC staff to make an in-person visit. NCA-HLC respondents expressed the desire for more prescriptive content that could be applied directly to their colleges. ACCJC respondents indicated that the commission's training lacks cohesion and shared concerns about the timing, quality, consistency and relevance of the commission's offerings. At the same time, the commission asserted that they do not have the capacity to deliver a full professional development program and believed that colleges need to take greater responsibility for these kinds of trainings as well as effective practices sharing.

All college respondents noted that *positive learning occurs when serving on a review team—both in understanding how to be an effective reviewer as well as how to best prepare for reaffirmation as an institution*. Both NCA-HLC and ACCJC, for example, rely heavily on face-to-face training and web-based resources to provide an overview of the review process and evaluator responsibilities. SACS offers a tutorial video clip that evaluators can access online in addition to extensive, detailed written materials.

NCA-HLC respondents reported that these practical resources are instrumental to their understanding of the evaluation process. SACS respondents were appreciative of the training provided at the annual meeting, but felt the video left something to be desired. While ACCJC respondents appreciated the opportunities provided by the commission for reviewers, the majority of interviewees were less content with the quality of the face-to-face training sessions, citing dissatisfaction with the minimal opportunities for participant engagement and practical application that would be helpful in preparing to serve on a review team. However, what was common across all three commissions is that several interviewees noted that they are motivated to attend evaluator training for the increased insight they can share with their campuses in preparation for reaffirmation and that the actual experience of serving on a team provides the best training of all.

**2. Sharing effective practices.** All commissions offer formal opportunities designed to showcase effective practices that demonstrate achievement of accreditation standards. NCA-HLC in particular builds effective practices sharing into the AQIP process—making it a natural



extension of reaffirmation rather than an additional support provided by the commission. However, the study indicates that *formal and informal networks created by the colleges themselves are particularly effective in offering peer guidance and specific “nuts and bolts” information*. For example, administrators from NCA-HLC colleges implementing AQIP maintain a statewide matchmaking system to connect institutions and encourage idea sharing; moreover, at least eight states maintain formal AQIP associations. SACS colleges host peer institutions for professional development events focused on accreditation.

At present, California’s community colleges do not come together across constituency groups solely for the purposes of sharing effective practices in preparation for accreditation review. ACCJC both co-sponsors conferences and leverages existing venues to present effective practices. However, college interviewees explained that they do not necessarily avail themselves of these opportunities and when they do, they do not find them particularly informative.

**3. Helping institutions interpret and meet standards.** While all accrediting agencies offer different opportunities for training and effective practices sharing, nearly all college interviewees across the three commissions studied underscored that *institutions need practical, specific and direct guidance on how to understand and achieve standards*. Interviewees from smaller colleges particularly expressed the desire for a more prescriptive process while, in some cases, those from larger institutions appreciated a flexible approach that allowed them to maintain their unique identity and way of being.

ACCJC in particular has responded to feedback from its constituents about the need for direction by introducing rubrics that aim to codify how well a college has done in reaching compliance with certain standards as well as pinpoint what steps need to be taken to fulfill these standards. College respondents appreciated these efforts and commended the utility of these tools.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- How can ACCJC and California’s community colleges work together to design training opportunities that demonstrate the principles of quality improvement and explicitly guide institutions on how to meet accreditation standards?
- How can the commission build on and extend the “learning-by-doing” opportunity afforded by review team participation?
- How can California community colleges take responsibility for organizing among themselves to share effective practices?

## **D. Consistently Applying Standards and Effectively Using Sanctions**

**1. Ensuring consistent application of standards during the review process and status recommendation.** Commissions have the responsibility of ensuring the fair and equal treatment of colleges throughout the accreditation process. Regional accrediting bodies take different approaches to assuring the consistent application of standards both in how they utilize review teams to assess colleges and in determining a college’s status. This research suggests *commissions promote integrity in the assessment of colleges when they implement a multi-layered, transparent review process that (1) relies on an evaluation team’s specific*

*recommendations for improvement and (2) leaves all aspects of the decision on accreditation status under the sole purview of the commission.*

For example, SACS implements efforts designed to create consistency between the commission's expectations, the assessment of review committees and the ultimate reaffirmation of a college. SACS assigns a staff member or an "institutional liaison" to each review team who participates in reviewer trainings and takes part in college visits. In the words of one college's accreditation liaison officer, these staffers have a "tremendous impact" on achieving fidelity across teams.

SACS review committees only offer feedback to the commission about a college's need for improvement as related to specific standards and do not make any recommendations related to reaffirmation status. The commission takes visiting team input and suggestions through a two-part internal review and ultimately makes a recommendation to its trustees who finally determine a college's status. NCA-HLC similarly applies a three-pronged process that includes an initial assessment by a reaffirmation panel that is forwarded to an Institutional Actions Council (IAC) of experienced peer reviewers who review the recommendations. The IAC then makes a final recommendation to the commission, which votes on a college's reaffirmation.

Interviewees from colleges involved with ACCJC expressed particular concern about the consistent application of standards in both the review and reaffirmation of California community colleges. Unlike SACS and NCA-HLC, ACCJC does not implement an intermediate review of visiting team recommendations before the commission determines a college's status. Respondents referenced personal experience with commission staff having revised visiting team reports and the commission making decisions on accreditation status that were more severe than review team recommendations—both alluding to potential inconsistencies between what the commission enforces and what review teams identify as meeting standards during the visit. This finding may result from the fact that ACCJC staff members take into account a longer history of information on a college's actions (12 years) versus visiting teams, which only consider information gathered and reports produced during the previous accreditation cycle (6 years). It is important to note that ACCJC staff refuted claims that it changes visiting team reports without the direct involvement of the team chair.

While respondents from all three commissions discussed inconsistency across review teams including issues of team member selection and qualifications, team composition and teams' abilities to produce quality reviews, ACCJC respondents felt that these inconsistencies occurred more commonly than the respondents from SACS and NCA-HLC. ACCJC respondents also noted problems with the high intensity of review team workload coupled with the short length of the visit.

**2. Holding all institutions of higher education to the same standards.** NCA-HLC and SACS accredit all public institutions of higher education in their region, unlike ACCJC, which only reviews and reaffirms the accreditation of two-year institutions.<sup>1</sup> NCA-HLC and SACS colleges remarked that *holding community colleges to the same standards as their baccalaureate-*

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<sup>1</sup> A history of WASC's separation of the accreditation of two- and four-year institutions can be found in the RP Group's full report of accreditation research and findings at <http://www.rpgroup.org/projects/accreditation>.

*granting counterparts can promote consistency in culture, quality and expectations for students.* Conversely, some interviewees representing ACCJC colleges felt they had little to learn from four-year institutions in their region. At the same time, others noted that the lack of two- and four-year integration may lead to the negative perception that these segments are held to different standards and have different expectations for students.

At the same time, many respondents from all three regions expressed concern about two-year institutions meeting the same mounting expectations for planning and requirements for reaffirmation as baccalaureate-granting institutions without the same resources or capacity.

**3. Implementing sanctions.** Interviews with commission and college representatives ultimately agree that *sanctions can motivate positive action* when a college is not meeting accreditation standards. The research also reveals that *how and when a commission applies a sanction can influence a college's response*. Both NCA-HLC and SACS expressed that their primary goal is to work with their respective institutions to keep them off sanction; in turn they have built steps into their reaffirmation process that essentially provides for a “cure period” during which colleges can remediate a concern before receiving this designation. In turn, very few colleges served by these commissions are on sanction and interviewees considered a sanction to be a very serious and negative outcome to be avoided at all costs.

A proportionally larger number of community colleges accredited by ACCJC are on a sanction (as of January 2010, 1% and 3% for NCA-HLC and SACS institutions respectively compared with 14% of ACCJC colleges). As reported by ACCJC, the commission uses sanctions to enforce the US Department of Education’s “two year rule”—a regulation indicating that institutions have two years to meet recommendations once made. ACCJC has a series of actions they assign colleges ranging from reaffirmation to probation; however, the commission does not apply these actions in a uniform sequential manner where all colleges have a chance to remediate issues discovered during their review before being placed on a sanction. For example, in one case a college might be placed on probation while another may have the chance to fix an issue and document this change through a short-term progress report.

The research indicates that this application of sanctions provokes a range of reactions from ACCJC colleges. Some college respondents noted the urgency a sanction inspires while others expressed confusion about what causes one institution to be placed on sanction over another. Still others shared that the number of institutions in the region on a sanction actually diminished the significance of this status at their college and in turn, their sense of exigency toward improvement.

### **Discussion questions:**

- What additional steps are required in the accreditation review process to ensure the consistent application of standards and awarding of reaffirmation across all California community colleges?
- How might California community colleges benefit by being held to the same standards as baccalaureate institutions? Should the WASC consider a merger of its two commissions?

- What should be the role of sanctions in motivating institutional change? How can the commission encourage a sense of self-efficacy among its colleges that results in organizational improvement?

## E. Generating a Positive Return on Investment

Ultimately, commissions have the opportunity to generate a sense among their respective colleges that undertaking the accreditation process is worth the substantial commitment of time and resource required for reaffirmation. This investigation suggests *commissions engender a positive return on a college's investment when they demonstrate theoretically and practically that they value quality rather than quantity throughout the review process.*

NCA-HLC AQIP participants cited enhanced faculty dialogue, increased attention to institutional improvement and the opportunity to extend the application of AQIP principles to other parts of their colleges as significant benefits resulting from their accreditation efforts. Similarly, interviewees from SACS colleges noted the focus on quality afforded by completion of their QEP and the ability to rapidly advance action through reaffirmation as particularly worthwhile. Colleges involved with ACCJC also expressed satisfaction with the ability to leverage accreditation for institutional change. However, unlike NCA-HLC and SACS interviewees, several ACCJC respondents questioned the value of the review process given the amount of time, effort and resources required for reaffirmation.

Some respondents from across the commissions studied noted that *colleges realize a positive return on their investment when they integrate accreditation requirements into everyday institutional practices.* Interviewees noted that on one hand, colleges must take responsibility for doing so and those that have linked accreditation with their planning processes cite greater ease with preparing for review. On the other hand, respondents indicated that when a commission takes an approach to reaffirmation that emphasizes compliance rather than improvement, real and lasting change is difficult to achieve.

### Discussion questions:

- How can the commission act to ensure that there is a balance between the work required for accreditation review and the results achieved (i.e., positive return on investment)?
- What can California community colleges do to integrate accreditation requirements into planning efforts?

## Report Back from the Field

As noted above, the RP Group held extensive discussions about the research findings with the ACCJC staff; the chief executive officer, trustee, chief instructional officer and chief student service officer boards; the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges executive committee; the California Community College Chancellor's Office cabinet and the Consultation Council's accreditation taskforce. The results were also discussed by a mix of community college practitioners at a Community College League of California conference session.

These meetings were notable for two things. First, all parties were eager to explore ways to enhance the accreditation process and improve the relationship between ACCJC and the colleges. For example, both the commission staff and numerous constituency groups noted that they were encouraged by the trainings that were jointly presented by the commission and various practitioner organizations during 2010, with the new interactive components being especially appreciated by the field.

Second, clear themes emerged about specific changes that could be made so that accreditation fosters excellence and ensures that minimum standards are consistently met. These changes involve amending existing standards and accreditation processes, strengthening training and support and building collaborations among constituency groups, colleges and accrediting agencies to provide this support.

These changes are ones that would be most effectively implemented through a partnership of ACCJC, its member institutions and practitioner groups that can help to augment key functions such as offering training, sharing effective practices and providing support to colleges at risk of not meeting accreditation standards. To emphasize where colleges, knowledgeable practitioners and constituency organizations can support the work of the commission, the ideas below indicate items that might be led by the commission, led by the field or jointly undertaken by the two.

The RP Group is publishing this list of ideas in the hope that it will be used to launch a productive, statewide conversation about how to best support quality assurance and improvement, particularly in an era of funding scarcity.

## **1) Amending Standards and Processes**

### **Emphasize quality and improvement through:**

- An accreditation process where the standards, self-study and accreditation visit focus more on teaching, learning and student success and less on internal systems (ACCJC-led effort)
- A consortium of colleges that actively works to meet a set of quality standards that go beyond the accreditation standards (field-led effort)

### **Recognition of the limited capacities of colleges to continuously address the current accreditation workload as exhibited through:**

- A set of simplified standards that evaluate quality with minimum redundancy (ACCJC-led effort)
- A more streamlined system for self-studies, reports to the commission and college visits (ACCJC-led effort)

### **Greater participation of the public in the accreditation process through:**

- A community college trustee assigned to every visiting team to represent the public (joint field and ACCJC effort)

## 2) Strengthening Practitioner Training and Support

### Stronger understanding of accreditation processes and effective practices through:

- A commission staff person or member of the commission assigned to every visiting team to guide the interpretation of standards (ACCJC-led effort)
- Learner-centered training programs for college faculty and staff (joint field and ACCJC effort)
- Regional venues for colleges to share promising practices related to the accreditation standards (field-led effort)

### Colleges facing sanctions or on sanction could better meet or exceed the accreditation standard minimum with:

- A period prior to an accreditation team visit where colleges can opt for help from a technical assistance group comprised of experienced peers that is approved by the commission (joint field and ACCJC effort)
- A period after a college has been placed on sanction where a college can opt for help from a technical assistance group comprised of experienced peers that is approved by the commission (joint field and ACCJC effort)

## 3) Collaborating with Constituency Groups and Accrediting Agencies

### ACCJC would gain additional capacity by:

- Constituency groups such as the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges or the California Community Colleges Chief Instructional Officers offering training using content that is approved by the commission (joint field and ACCJC effort)
- Expanding collaboration with WASC Senior to implement specific components of accreditation (ACCJC-led effort)
- Increasing dues to hire more commission staff, provide additional outreach and support training (joint field and ACCJC effort)

### For more information...

For the full report of the study's findings, visit: [www.rpgroup.org](http://www.rpgroup.org).

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