

Have You Heard About the Two-Year Rule and Accreditation?

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At the second annual ASCCC Accreditation Institute (January 25-27, 2008), many were surprised to hear about the impact of the “two-year rule” implementation on our accreditation process. The “two-year rule” is a federally imposed mandate that requires accrediting agencies to place a two-year deadline on correction of all recommendations that relate to deficiencies. Following an accreditation visit, colleges usually receive commendations (indicating outstanding areas of quality education) and recommendations that may be either: 1) recommendations for improvement or 2) recommendations for correcting deficiencies. Since the Accreditation Standards represent the minimum qualifications for accreditation, fulfilling the standards are not something colleges must attempt to do, but rather are the minimum expected level of performance. If your college has not shown evidence that it meets this minimum expectation, the result will be a recommendation to correct this deficiency. But why haven't we heard of this short two-year timeline before?

When the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) was being reauthorized as an accrediting agency this fall, the reviewers discovered that this rule had not been enforced in the past, even though the federal government had required it for many years. The federal motivation for enacting this rule was to guarantee that students attending a deficient institution had an opportunity to see that corrected during the course of their study so that they did not receive a deficient college education. This is also why, when being accredited for the present year, the visiting team reviews the previous accreditation reports to see that recommendations have been addressed. So how will this impact your college?

Many faculty have commented that in the process of reviewing previous accreditation reports to write their current self-study, they found that some of the same problems were still alive and well. Recommendations have often indicated that institutions failed to meet previous recommendations adequately, allowing the deficiencies to extend into the next six-year cycle (and some for two accreditation cycles). In January, the ACCJC sent out a letter explaining that the two-year rule must be enforced and that it requires recommendations be corrected within a two-year period or increasing sanctions will be placed on the institution. This means that sitting on your laurels, waiting for the midterm report, will not be an option; instead, you may receive a one year visit to check on your progress. Perhaps even more significantly, factor in the timeline. The official report is received approximately 3-4 months behind the visitation date. Suddenly you only have about a year and a half to correct a deficiency and document that improvement with evidence. So what should your college do?

Begin early and gain a good understanding of the expectations.

Create committees and action plans for the self study that can realistically address issues sooner rather than later.

The ACCJC has found that three main areas often lead to recommendations about deficiencies and sanctions. Below is a summary of what we have learned about them.

1. **Program Review**—If colleges have not completed program review, have only spotty reviews, or have a review process that lacks objective data and analyses (thus ultimately failing to evaluate the

program's effectiveness), the institution will most likely see a recommendation. The ACCJC *Rubric for Evaluating Institutional Effectiveness—Part I: Program Review* provides criteria used to evaluate the program review processes. The commission expects colleges to be on the highest level called **Sustainable Continuous Quality Improvement**, which includes data on student achievement including course completion, persistence, program completion, graduation, and if appropriate job placement and licensure pass rate (such as for the Board of Registered Nursing or BRN). The programs should show evidence that they use relevant data to make decisions and improve student learning. See the ACCJC rubric for a more complete summary of the criteria.

- 2. Institutional Planning**—If an institution lacks a substantive planning process to identify strengths and weaknesses and mechanisms to improve, they are likely to see a recommendation concerning institutional planning. These processes should have clearly documented timelines, communications, and strategies that enable the college to set priorities, allocate resources, implement improvements, and engage in continuous assessment and improvement practices. Again, the commission expects institutions to be at the highest level (**Sustainable Continuous Quality Improvement**) of the ACCJC *Rubric for Evaluating Institutional Effectiveness—Part II: Planning*. At this level there should be ongoing and systematic review cycles that inform planning

and are aimed at improving student learning. See the ACCJC rubric for a more complete summary of the criteria.

- 3. Governance**—Problems with governance (either between the governing board and the college administrative leadership and/or faculty leadership) that keep the college focused on politics rather than achieving and improving mission is another major area where deficiencies are noted. Governance problems may be the result of many different issues, but when any entity has a vested interest in preserving dysfunctional governance, rather than correcting dysfunctional governance, quality education is at risk. There is no rubric for governance, but Standard 4 states the standard very clearly:

“The institution recognizes and utilizes the contributions of leadership throughout the organization for continuous improvement of the institution. Governance roles are designed to facilitate decisions that support student learning programs and services and improve institutional effectiveness, while acknowledging the designated responsibilities of the governing board and the chief administrator.”

For a thorough discussion of these major areas of deficiency by the ACCJC President, have a look at the power point on the ACCJC website under the President's Desk tab at http://www.accjc.org/directors_desk.htm **PowerPoint Presentation “What Executives Need to Know”** by Dr. Barbara Beno, ACCJC President. ■

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CURRICULUM INSTITUTE – JULY 10-12, 2008

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