

2013 ASCCC Accreditation Institute Report
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Barbara Beno's Opening Address

Beno begins by emphasizing that the goal of accreditation is to make the "whole institution function well". It is NOT the evaluation of individual classes or individual teachers. It is institutional in nature, and the bylaws of the ACCJC require that they communicate through the CEO of the institution. The Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO) is the secondary contact.

All Accrediting Commissions are getting squeezed by the feds. ACCJC gets its power through the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act every five years. This is where institutions get the ability to receive federal grants and scholarship. Beno feels the criticism (from Washington) that accreditation is a self-serving system of accrediting poor education as quality education. Accreditation is a self-regulation system. That means we have peer review. Beno reports that politicians are having trouble defending this model of self-regulation if academia cannot produce metrics validating the system.

In talking about the threats to this self-regulated system, Beno cites foundations such as Gates, New America, and Lumina who are pushing the completion agenda. They are connected, influential and are starting to guide education policy.

Beno indicated that she is well aware of the over-use of metrics and the problems of the completion agenda. I was heartened that she mentioned the "denominator problem". Let me know that she is well aware that not all of our students are seeking degrees, certificates, or transfer. Nevertheless, she recognizes the need for metrics that are meaningful, yet understandable to the public.

Beno said that at the heart of all this is a dialog and articulated definition of what the degree "really" means. She mentioned that the SLO may wind up being our best weapon against those pushing the completion agenda. In other words, we could use the SLO to demonstrate the value of the degree.

Beno described current directions for the ACCJC:

1. Focus on the SLO and developing the means to report the results. Note the verb, "developing".

We need to find the "magic metrics". She doesn't know what these magic metrics are. She only knows that these are very difficult questions. But if the institutions don't develop some, then the ACCJC or somebody else will develop some, and that will be everybody's worst nightmare.

2. Focus on completion rates, and the de-aggregation of completion rates into different cohorts of students: Latinos, whites, African Americans, Asian, etc...
3. Address the quality of graduates. Beno did not talk about "institutional outcomes", she talked about the qualities of completers.
4. Beno talked about "competitiveness driving quality". I'm not sure what she was getting at here, but the next sentence was about asking institutions to put student achievement data one click away from the home page, similar to where accreditation information now resides.

5. ACCJC is currently revising the standards. They expect to have a draft out for review in January 2014 and a final draft by the summer of 2014. A few of the things Beno says we can look forward to include the following.
 - Remove confusing numbering system
 - Focus more on outcomes
 - Focus less on processes
 - Really want to emphasize the “impact on student learning”

I read this conversation on the revised standards as a “shift of emphasis”. The intent and major aim of the standards will not change. The emphasis will shift slightly, and hopefully they will be organized better.

MPC will probably just miss being among the first colleges required to meet the revised standards. She mentioned Fall 2016 as possibly the first time for when colleges will be asked to the revised standards (assuming our next visit is in Spring 2016).

6. Beno derided the power of the anecdote. She maintained that numbers tell a good story as well, and one that we need to look at. She sounds as committed as ever to this principle.

Beno wrapped up her introductory remarks by recognizing that metrics, the completion agenda, the political interest in specific job skills are pulling us away from what she called the “classic education”. This is the humanities. It’s not an attack on the humanities and the arts, it’s just that the value of a liberal arts education does not currently have a strong voice in Washington. I think Barb was “classically educated” and I believe she sees this move away from liberal arts as a bad thing.

I believe that Beno is saying that institutions should make an effort to decide and articulate what is important to them, and then devise ways to demonstrate to the public and to stakeholders that they’re doing a good job. And anecdotal stories ain’t gonna cut it.

Keynote address by Nathan Tharp.

Nathan did a PhD thesis on the differences between colleges that were consistently on some type of sanction versus those that were consistently reaccredited. Main conclusion was that there were cultural differences between the two colleges. This may not be *why* they were put on sanction consistently, but it might point to some of the reasons why they are not able to pull themselves out and get off sanction.

A big emphasis was on attitude towards meeting challenges, ability to work together collaboratively to get things done, knowledge and acceptance of college processes, and culture of addressing accreditation needs through their normal work load. Clearly, consistent leadership to guide these efforts is a key component.

Panel Discussion with Barbara Beno (ACCJC Pres), Michelle Pilati (ASCCC Pres), Greg Gilbert (a member of a CCC Board of Trustees), and an administrator of a CCC whose name I didn't write down

Before the conference, the organizing committee, of which I was a part, was asked to develop some questions. I submitted a few, one of which dealt with the evaluation standard in what I thought was a very fair way. Beno vetoed the question. Despicable.

They took written questions from the audience.

How Should CCCs deal with the Self-selected Standards?

This new requirement is the result of political wrangling in Washington. The USDE wants to set student achievement standards for colleges, whereas the colleges want a self-regulated system based on peer review. The end result of the wrangling is that:

- Institutions must set their own standards using student achievement data (retention, persistence, graduation rates, etc...
- Institutions must evaluate themselves against their own standards.
- Visiting teams must evaluate the reasonableness of the self-set standards and
- Visiting teams must evaluate the institution's performance against their own standards.

Michelle Pilati indicates that the CCCs will already be using much of this student achievement data with the new institutional scorecard. The chancellor has said that "when the CCCs roll out the scorecard, the CCC's will be one of the most transparent, accountable institutions around". Beno nodded her head during this discussion. I interpret this to mean that in the future, all CCCs will use the new scorecard to address these self-selected standards.

What about institutions that educate many students who enroll for a wide variety of valid reasons, but who have no intention of obtaining a degree or transferring or desire to completing anything?

The answer reflected the pressures felt by the accrediting agencies. Beno indicated that they have this conversation with the USDE all the time. The USDE is not satisfied with students who leave before graduation. Having conversations with DC about this subject is "like banging your head against the wall." Beno thinks we're going to have to come up with more ways to track our students.

Admin guy said that we need to come up with a description of a completer that is not currently available. He added that we need a political conversation about completers. Beno mentioned that perhaps colleges should only track the students that say they want to graduate or complete something.

Pilati said that we need to take a step back and look at what those degrees mean, and that this is the only defense against the completion agenda. My interpretation is that student learning outcomes are our friend.

Beno's answer was reasonable given the context she operates in, but disappointed us in its myopic view of goal-oriented completers as the most important college students. It seems the ACCJC is letting the USDE force it into the same trap of exclusivity that they try to argue against.

With new USDE regulations and revision of ACCJC standards, how will the ACCJC look at self-evaluations differently?

Beno indicates there will be less interest in process and more interest in the outcomes brought about by the actions. In fact, she indicated that she would be perfectly happy if she never heard the word “dialog again.” In other words, “show us the data.” Institutions won’t satisfy the the commission by saying that they only have dialog. They want to know what happened as a result of the dialog.