

ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES
Western Association of Schools and Colleges

**POLICY AND PROCEDURES FOR THE EVALUATION OF INSTITUTIONS IN
MULTI-COLLEGE/MULTI-UNIT DISTRICTS OR SYSTEMS**
(Adopted June 1999; Revised January 2004)

Background

The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges has historically accredited colleges rather than districts or systems. However, almost half of the member institutions are part of larger systems, either by being part of a multi-college district/system or by being owned by a larger corporate entity.

ACCJC evaluates colleges based on the Standards of Accreditation regardless of how functions are organized. In single-college districts all functions are carried out by the same entity. For multi-college districts/systems, key functions that relate to the Standards are distributed among the colleges and the district/system in various patterns. In order for the Commission to evaluate colleges in single-college and multi-college organizations fairly, colleges must inform the Commission about their functional organization and involve those responsible for the functions in accreditation activities.

The integrity of the district/system programs and services falls within the scope of the institution's accreditation. The district/system auxiliary programs and services are subject to review if the program or service is executed in the name of the district/system or college, or if the district/system administers or the board authorizes the program or service.

Policy

The ACCJC ensures the equitable evaluation of all institutions regardless of the differences in organization and clarifies the Commission's expectations regarding the conduct and outcomes of institutional reviews in multi-college districts/systems.

Elements of this policy are the following:

1. Individual colleges are the unit of analysis for the accreditation evaluations and, regardless of their organizational structure, the Commission holds colleges accountable for meeting the Standards.
2. The central district/system plays a substantial role in the institution's ability to adhere to all the Standards of Accreditation and gain and sustain accredited status.
3. Institutions have the responsibility to describe and display clearly the particular way functions are distributed in their unique multi-college organization. There must be ongoing communication between the college and the district/system regarding the distribution of these functions. The Commission will use this description to identify the locus of responsibility for the institution's ability to meet accreditation standards.

4. When a team identifies serious inadequacies in the performance of a district/system function, such a deficiency could jeopardize the accreditation of one, some, or all of the district/system colleges. Responsibility for correcting this deficiency will be placed on the district/system office as well as on the college in question.
5. The Commission reserves the right to initiate direct interaction with district/system officers regarding the ability of institutions to demonstrate that they meet or exceed the Standards. When district/system officers are contacted regarding an institution, the college(s) will also receive the same communication.
6. A district/system may make a special request for an evaluation of the effectiveness of its central functions in conjunction with any institutional reviews. This activity is limited to issues related to the ability of colleges to demonstrate that they meet or exceed the Standards. The outcome of this activity does not result in any “accredited” status for the district/system.

Procedures

A. Self Study

1. As part of the self study process and in consultation with the district/system, the institution must specify whether primary responsibility for all or parts of a specific function is at the college or district level through an organizational “map,” which is a description of the delineation of functions of the district/system and the college. The “map,” provided in the self study, must accomplish the following:
 - define the major functions of the colleges and the district/system office,
 - account for every major function regardless of whether it is the responsibility of the college or the district/system office,
 - address all Standards,
 - make clear how the information it provides relates to the Standards
 - be factual,
 - provide sufficient information about each function, and,
 - reflect consultation between the college and the district/system.

Moreover, the Commission recognizes that institutions in a multi-college system may have lateral relationships with other institutions in the district/system which should be included in the map. For example, police services may be a district/system service for all colleges in a multi-college district/system, yet located at one institution in the district/system.

2. Individuals, whether on the campus or in the district/system office, must be actively involved in developing the self study based upon who has responsibility for the institutional function. As a result, close cooperation between and among the institutions and the district/system office is expected as a part of the institutional self study preparation.

3. In the self study, institutions are expected to include a discussion of how the identified district/system functions and decisions affect the colleges' ability to meet the Standards. For example, the board's role in adopting the college mission statement is addressed in the Standard dealing with mission; the district/system office responsibility for personnel is discussed in the Standard appropriate to faculty and staff; the district/system financial allocation system should be included in the Standard in which financial resources are addressed. The organizational map will provide guidance for this discussion.
4. The district/system chief administrator and governing board are expected to be involved in the process of developing the self study. The governing board must review and approve the final self study and certify broad institutional involvement in its development.

B. Team Composition

Just as for colleges in single-college districts, team composition for colleges in multi-college districts/systems is shaped by the institution being accredited. Teams visiting colleges in multi-college districts/systems will have the range of expertise appropriate for the college and also individuals with multi-college district/system perspectives. Institutions may request team members with special expertise in multi-college issues. The Commission makes every effort to include individuals who have experience in similarly situated institutions and multi-college districts/systems to serve as team chairs and team members.

C. Visit Organization

The Commission conducts evaluation visits to institutions in multi-college districts/systems simultaneously or in clusters of institutions. This arrangement allows the Commission to consider district/system issues when taking action on the accredited status of institutions in multi-college systems. It also improves the efficiency of self study preparation and evaluation visits.

D. District/System Visiting Team

Prior to simultaneous visits taking place in the colleges of a district/system, the Executive Director will name a coordinating chair from the team chairs involved. This coordinating chair, in consultation with the other institutional team chairs, will form a small district/system team which is drawn from all of the teams visiting the colleges. It will consist of all of the team chairs and such members of the respective teams as are needed to address the district/system issues identified in the self studies and by the evaluation teams.

The purposes of the coordinating chair and district/system team are to:

- evaluate the evidence provided in the self studies to confirm that the functions provided by the district/system enable the institutions to meet the Standards,
- explicitly identify issues pertaining to the Standards that are related to district/system functions,
- ensure commonality and comparability of team recommendations across institutional team reports when accreditation issues have district/system consequences, and,
- support the work of the teams evaluating each college.

This team will meet with the district/system administration before the visit to discuss prior district issues and will spend an appropriate period of time validating the portions of the self studies that pertain to centralized operations. Any recommendations regarding district/system functions will be included in the institutional team reports.

The coordinating chair may have a separate team assistant available to him/her solely for the purpose of supporting the district/system team and for performing organizational tasks related to this part of the evaluation visits. Team chairs on the special district/system team will receive the self study, the previous team reports, and Commission action letters from every college involved and will make the materials available to institutional team members on the district/system team.

E. Reports by the Institutional Teams and District/System Team

The district/system team will develop conclusions about any major issues pertaining to the district/system. Recognizing that some district/system observations may pertain to all colleges, and others only to particular colleges, the institutional team chair, working in conjunction with the coordinating chair and the members of the district/system team, will incorporate appropriate conclusions within the Standards in the individual institutional team reports. When the district/system team feels a recommendation that pertains to the district/system as a whole is in order, that same recommendation will appear in each of the institutional team reports.

At the end of each evaluation visit, the institutional team chair meets with the college chief administrator to discuss major findings. The team chair will then make a presentation of the team process and findings at an open meeting involving the entire college community. After the verbal exit reports are concluded at each of the campuses, the team chairs, led by the coordinating chair, will provide a verbal briefing to the district/system chief administrator. This discussion is limited to the district/system functions identified in the organizational map and the issues related to them which are identified in the institutional self studies and the findings of the institutional teams. The themes reported by the coordinating chair ought to be congruent with those shared with the chief administrator at each of the colleges.

Although the district/system policies may affect the accredited status of the institution(s), the district/system team will not make recommendations on the accredited status of the colleges. Confidential recommendations on the accredited status of the colleges will come from each of the institutional teams.

The coordinating chair will send a letter to the district/system chief administrator advising him/her of the results of the district/system visit with copies sent to the college chief administrators.

F. Commission Actions and Public Disclosure

The Commission will receive the following items for each college in preparation for Commission action: the self study, the team report, the catalog, and other pertinent documents. The Commission, using its reader system, will consider each institution separately in relation to the district/system and take the appropriate action for each institution.

The Commission will also discuss the district/system and develop a consensus on any matters to be communicated to the district/system chief administrator. In its action letters to the institutions, the Commission will comment on important district/system matters that impinge on or significantly enhance college quality.

In a case where one or more accreditation concerns relating to the district/system are identified, the Commission may request a written response from the district/system itself and may also specify a visit by Commission representatives to validate any such response. The Commission will make clear that significant inadequacies in district/system office functions can jeopardize the accreditation of one, some, or all of the district/system colleges. When correspondence is sent to the district/system chief administrator, copies will be sent to the appropriate college(s).

Should the Commission decide that a district/system response and visit are in order, the district/system team will normally include the coordinating chair, a member of the Commission, and additional persons with special expertise, as needed. The purpose of the visit is to validate the response from the district/system. This response could be the basis for subsequent Commission action relative to the accredited status of one or more of the institutions in the district/system.

G. Follow-up Activities

The district/system chief administrator is required to share the team report and Commission Action letter of any visit related to district/system functions with the governing board and appropriate staff at the district/system and at the colleges.

The Commission may issue special communications to college chief administrators on particular leadership issues. When the college involved is a member of a district/system, the district/system chief administrator will be copied on this correspondence.

H. Cost

The costs associated with the additional activities of a district/system visit may be billed directly to the district/system involved on an actual cost basis.

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