Accreditation Institute co-sponsored by Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) and Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) in San Jose, February 8-9, 2013.

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In lieu of notes for each of the session I attended, I am offering some of what I learned organized by theme. The full program, handouts and power points for many of the sessions are available at http://asccc.org/events/2013/02/accreditation-institute (avoid Explorer).

City College of San Francisco was well represented at the Institute by Board President John Rizzo, Board Vice President Anita Grier, Chancellor Thelma Scott-Skillman, Accreditation Liaison Officer Gohar Momjian, and Academic Senate President Karen Saginor.

Clarity of Role and Responsibility
This theme was discussed in many sessions pertaining to integrated planning, the preparation of self evaluations and other accreditation reports, the role of the Board, the role of faculty and other contexts. The institutional structures that succeed in providing clarity of role and responsibility vary widely. It appears that a majority of colleges, administration, faculty, classified staff, and (to a lesser extent) students share major decision making through robust participatory governance bodies. Some rely on strong administrative roles, but certainly not all. Monterey Peninsula College has a successful structure with only four deans reporting to the Vice President of Academic Affairs. At MPC, the pivotal group is the Academic Affairs Advisory Group: with a preponderance of faculty including the faculty division chairs. Dr. Nathan Tharp, who recently completed a dissertation on Accreditation in California Community Colleges, reported that a key difference between colleges that have been very successful in meeting accreditation standards and those on sanctions is not who decides what, but whether there are clearly recognized and respected processes for decision making. Other speakers talked about the importance of congruity between written procedures and actual practice.

Data and Evidence
Another theme that surfaced repeatedly throughout the sessions is the need for data and evidence to be used in decision making, and to be readily available to everyone at the college. We were also warned to expect greater emphasis on accountability metrics. In her initial address to the entire group, Commission President Dr. Barbara Beno talked about pressures from the federal government, and told us that colleges will soon be asked to set standards for student achievement – not as goals to aspire to, but as yardsticks by which colleges measure success or failure. If we find that metrics in common use, such as graduation rates and time to degree, are inadequate to capture information about the success of our students, we can (really, we must) participate in developing measurable data that is more meaningful for our students, and set standards for ourselves using those. Roberta Eisel of Citrus College told a breakout session that the push for accountability data is relentless. The best defense is to become masters at interrogating data to ask the right questions.
Accreditation is ongoing

At many sessions it was stressed that key to accreditation success is integrating accreditation awareness into institutional work at multiple levels. Regarding Accreditation as an event requiring heroic preparations is much less likely to be successful than having accreditation concerns woven into the fabric of the college. A session on faculty leadership in accreditation, that both Board President Rizzo and Vice President Grier attended with me, made suggestions on how to relate specific standards to the 10+1 areas of Title 5 and governance committees.

Focus on governing boards.

The roles of governing boards both in meeting accreditation standards and in preparing accreditation reports were discussed in several contexts. The session that focused particularly on governing boards was attended by all from CCSF. An important way in which governing board members contribute to meeting standards is by reading colleges plans and reports to ensure that broad policies are being followed and any difficulties identified. Because governing board difficulties have been trending up as the basis for sanctions, the ACCJC Summer newsletter contained an article on board roles and responsibilities (http://www.accjc.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Final-summer-2012-newsletter-CORRECTED_10-4-12.pdf). ACCJC recommended technical assistance help from ASCCC and the Community College League of California (CCLC) for colleges with concerns in this area. (Find the Technical Assistance report written for CCSF at http://www.ccsf.edu/ACC/CCSF-FINAL-GOVERNANCE.pdf)

Why are so many California Community Colleges on sanction?

Dr. Beno was asked this question. She responded that California Community Colleges have significant dysfunctions of governance and she suggested that struggling colleges should look at districts that work well, to learn how to create practices and a culture and an agreement to function well. She added that specific reasons are detailed in reports, and that ACCJC publishes a report annually in the summer newsletter about trends in deficiencies. (http://tinyurl.com/d7eb6og) Dr. Beno commented that in general among community colleges, there’s been a move away from data-driven decision making. Boards and CEOs have failed to fund research offices and colleges have counted on the power of anecdotes. She said that all who are interested in quality education must be interested in numbers and the stories told by numbers. Dr. Beno said that California colleges suffer from inertia: some senate leaders, administrative leaders, trustee leaders struggle to get the college to change. Dr. Beno also said that comparing California with other regions is apples and oranges. Community colleges in other regions mostly have fewer of the many factors that we have in California: overlays of law and regulation, locally elected governing boards, unions, academic senates.

Nathan Tharp, “Accreditation in the California Community Colleges: Influential Cultural Practices,” struck me as particularly relevant and useful for CCSF as we seek transformation from being a college on sanction to being a college that fully meets every standard. I spoke with him about whether he might come give us his presentation.
and have asked Gohar Momjian and Chancellor Scott-Skillman to invite him. In the meantime, here’s his dissertation abstract. His full dissertation (Spring 2012) may be found online at:

http://csus-dspace.calstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10211.9/1772/dissertation-ntharp%20hard%20copy.pdf?sequence=1

OR http://tinyurl.com/asfsbvx

Abstract:

Too many California community colleges struggle with accreditation. From 2003-2012, 62 of the 112 colleges have been placed on some form of sanction and 40 of them more than once. Unfortunately, there is little research into what institutions can do to improve accreditation results. This study begins to address this gap. It is a qualitative comparative case study of four California community colleges, two that have been place on sanction five or more times (A schools) and two that not been placed on sanction (B schools). Data was collected via interviews with fourteen participants who spanned a range of positions, tenure, and degree of involvement with accreditation. Data was analyzed using activity and grounded theories.

Differences between the A and B schools emerged under the themes of division of labor, motivation, and integration. Under division of labor, participants at the A schools reported more often that institutional roles were not universally agreed upon and abided by, that there were higher level of conflict around the division of labor, and that progress was made in spite of conflicts. Participants at the B schools reported more often that roles were clearly defined and abided by, that there were low levels of conflict, and on tools for resolving conflict. Interestingly, both A and B schools reported little difficulty with the division of labor with regards to accreditation-specific activities. Under motivation, participants at the A colleges reported more often that accreditation had not been universally interpreted as important, motivation was externally sourced, and accreditation processes had not been consistently enforced. Participants at the B colleges reported more often that accreditation was widely seen as important, motivation was internally sourced, and accreditation processes were consistently enforced. Both A and B college participants reported that the notion of a critical mass was important to sustaining motivation. Under integration, participants at the A college reported that contact with accreditation processes was variable, that accreditation processes had not historically had integrity, less on interconnecting activities, and that there were fewer resources available. Participants at the B colleges reported more on constant contact with accreditation processes, that processes were considered to have high level of integrity, that individuals and groups were interconnected with regards to accreditation, and that substantial resources were available for accreditation.

Based on an analysis of these findings using activity theory, the following recommendations are made to college leaders: 1) define institutional roles and responsibilities abide by them, 2) resolve conflict when roles and responsibilities are not clear, 3) establish accreditation as important, 4) account for different perceptions of accreditation among groups, 5) reframe accreditation as internally motivated, 6) enforce accreditation activities, 7) maintain a critical mass of motivated individuals and groups, 8) maintain ongoing contact with accreditation processes, 9) develop accreditation tools that align with existing campus rules/norms/customs, 10) maintain the integrity of accreditation processes, 11) interconnect parties across the institution with formal and informal accreditation processes, and 12) prioritize resources for accreditation.