**Academic Senate Resolutions on Accreditation 1986 to the Present**

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When an accreditation issue or controversy arises across the state, representatives of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) are sometimes asked, “What’s the Senate’s position on this matter?” This might seem like an easy straightforward question to some, but, as a democratic organization committed to reflecting the will of the whole rather than an individual or small group, the Academic Senate relies instead on a formal resolutions process in which positions are drafted, debated, and ultimately voted upon by the entire organization.

With respect to the topic of accreditation, the Academic Senate has adopted over 100 resolutions since 1986. Thus, the ASCCC does not have just one position on accreditation; rather, it has an evolving set of positions informed by nearly three decades worth of resolutions. The purpose of this article is to describe this varied and nuanced body of work by identifying the Senate’s major positions on accreditation and to chronicle the ASCCC’s efforts to respond to changing accreditation standards and processes.

Some of the early resolutions from 1986 and 1987 demonstrate the Academic Senate’s desire to strengthen the role of local academic senates in the accreditation process. Resolution 1.03 (Fall 1986) recommended that local senates “accept accreditation as a primary responsibility” and “ that they be intimately involved in the various stages of the accreditation self-study and its recommendations.” The ASCCC was particularly concerned that academic senate presidents have *sign-off authority* on self-studies and annual reports (Resolutions 2.04 [Fall 1987] and 2.01 [Fall 1989]). To current faculty, the need for positions regarding the Senate’s role in accreditation will seem puzzling. After all, the faculty’s seventh recommending responsibility of the 10+1 academic and professional matters is “faculty roles and involvement in accreditation processes, including self-study and annual reports.” It must be remembered, however, that these positions were taken *prior* to the passage of AB 1725 (1988, Vasconcellos) and the Board of Governors’ subsequent adoption of the 10+1 academic and professional matters. Indeed, these very resolutions about the senate’s role in accreditation may have informed the discussion as the seventh academic and professional matter was being formulated.

Timeliness and accuracy are two themes reflected in the body’s resolutions in the late 1980s. Prior to 1987, accreditation of California community colleges occurred on a 10-year cycle. The ASCCC felt it should be more frequent and supported moving to a 5-year accreditation cycle instead (R2.01 F1987). Since that time, we’ve settled into a pattern of every 6 years. Given the quick time frame of most team visits, there have been on-going concerns about factual errors appearing in the team report. Colleges are typically given a period of time to correct the factual record before the team report is submitted to the Commission. The ASCCC recommended that the Commission allow the academic senate president to review the accreditation team report along with the college for factual errors (R2.02 F1989). Unfortunately, it is still the case that the team report only goes to the college president, preventing academic senate presidents (who, by the way, have recently been recognized as being some of the most knowledgeable individuals about the college’s overall accreditation efforts [Tharp, 2012]), from participating. To ensure that all perspectives are heard during the accreditation process, a spring 1988 resolution asked the Commission to set policies and guidelines for receiving minority reports (R11.06).

It’s clear that the ASCCC has a sincere respect for the importance of accreditation and has encouraged local academic senates to work with the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) to receive training and improve processes. Over the years, the ASCCC has encouraged local academic senates to provide testimony and suggestions to the Commission with respect to the Accreditation Handbook (R2.02, Spring 1989), to work with the ACCJC to implement the recommendations in the adopted paper *Strengthening the Accreditation Process* to the greatest extent possible (R2.01, Spring 1992), and thanked the ACCJC for “receiving, respecting, and responding to the recommendations” submitted by faculty (R2.06, Spring 1996). Since 2007, the Academic Senate has hosted an annual Accreditation Institute that provides training, information, and support for colleges preparing for their self-study or addressing accreditation recommendations.

Just as colleges are evaluated on a regular cycle, the Commission’s accreditation standards are themselves revised and updated periodically. The Academic Senate has provided input each time the standards have been modified. In some cases, the suggested change was simple wordsmithing. In 1990, for example, the ASCCC suggested that a proposed standard say “faculty have a substantive voice in academic or professional policy matters” rather than “faculty have a substantial voice in academic or professional policy matters” (R2.02, Spring 1990). In other cases, the ASCCC preferred that the new standards include specific language from the previous standard (e.g., R2.13, R2.15, & 2.16, Spring 1996). At other times, the ASCCC has asked the commission to enhance a standard. For instance, the ASCCC encouraged the ACCJC “ to strengthen proposed accreditation Standard 6.2 by making a stronger statement of expectation regarding the faculty role in selecting, acquiring, organizing and maintaining educational equipment and materials” (R2.06, Spring 1996).

Perhaps the Academic Senate’s greatest effort with respect to accreditation has been to ensure adequate faculty representation on visiting teams and other accreditation committees and roles. The ASCCC takes as a fundamental principle that faculty’s front line role in providing direct instruction and support to students is unique and complex and is best understood by faculty peers. Thus, it’s a matter of both fairness and legitimacy that evaluation teams include sufficient numbers of faculty to understand and review the college’s educational activities.

While acknowledging the reality at the time that “visiting teams are consistently made up of a majority of administrators,” the ASCCC reaffirmed its principled ideal in this matter by “calling for a faculty majority on the accreditation visiting teams” (R2.01, Fall 1996). In Fall 2002, the ASCCC was asked to “research and document the evolving composition of ACCJC and of accrediting teams, particularly with regard to the numbers of and balance between faculty and administrators” (R2.05). Almost a decade later, the ASCCC endorsed a specific minimum level of faculty representation on visiting teams. The ASCCC urged “the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) to ensure that faculty comprise a minimum of 25% of the site visiting teams” (R2.04, Spring 2009). Also in Spring 2009, adopted Resolution 2.03 noted, “there is still no consistent process to assure all visiting teams include faculty” and resolved that that Academic Senate “work to ensure that the entity that accredits the California community colleges adopt a policy that requires, and develop processes that ensure, that all visiting teams include a minimum of three faculty.”

Interestingly, resolutions in the late 80s suggest that faculty were represented on accreditation visiting teams even at the level of chair, an unheard of occurrence today. In Spring 1989, Resolution 2.03 commended the ACCJC “for appointing an increasing number of faculty members to chair accreditation teams.”

The ASCCC also understands the importance of having faculty who are well qualified and autonomous. It does no one any good to send an untrained faculty member to visit another college, and it’s also critical that faculty members be able to make an independent assessment of the situation at another college and not be beholden to other interests. At one time, it appears that the Academic Senate had a role in nominating qualified faculty to the ACCJC for assignment to accreditation visiting teams. That agreement ended unfortunately, but there have been several resolutions attempting to steer us back to those practices. In Spring 1995, the Executive Committee of the ASCCC was directed “to enter into dialogue with the Accrediting Commission for the purpose of developing a process by which the Academic Senate can help prepare faculty members to participate on accreditation visiting teams and develop a pool of promising faculty members for such training” (R2.01). In Spring 1998, the ASCCC adopted “the procedures in the proposals *Process to Nominate Faculty Members for Accreditation Visiting Teams* and *Supplemental Training for First-time Faculty Team Members, Conducted by the Academic Senate*” (R2.01). More recently, the ASCCC recommended that the ACCJC “develop and implement more complete and thorough training for evaluation teams” (R2.06, Fall 2008) in order to provide consistent interpretation of the standards across visiting teams.

Lastly with respect to faculty representation on visiting teams, the ASCCC recognizes the need to support faculty who choose to serve on teams. For faculty who meet regularly with students, it is often difficult to carve out time from busy schedules to serve on visiting teams. Several ASCCC resolutions have called upon local colleges and districts to recognize and aid faculty serving on visiting teams. For example, Resolution 2.01 (Fall 2007) asked the ASCCC to request that the ACCJC “consider faculty assignments and accommodate classroom obligations” when forming accreditation visiting teams. And in Fall 2000, so that faculty did not have to choose between accreditation service and their professional development/responsibilities, Resolution 2.01 urged the “the Accrediting Commission to better coordinate site visitation dates with the Academic Senate's plenary sessions and other significant academic conventions.”

An important concern that the ASCCC has had with the ACCJC was related to its introduction of student learning outcomes and their assessment in the standards in the early 2000s. It was not so much that the Academic Senate objected to the notion of an SLO *per se*. After all, it’s hard to conceive of educators being opposed to

articulating what students should learn (SLOs) and then figuring out if the students have learned these things (SLO assessment). The Academic Senate’s concern was more about *how* SLOs and SLO assessment would be used in the evaluation of institutions. Educators know that learning is multifaceted, and that student success depends on many variables, many of which are not under the faculty’s control. The fear at the time was—and to a certain extent still is—that faculty and institutions will be evaluated with simplistic and reductionist outcome measures.

Even before widespread use of the term student learning outcome, Resolution 2.01 (Fall 2001) urged “the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges to reconsider its proposal to refocus accreditation primarily on management by objective and the use of quantitative assessment and outcomes, and to reinstate appropriate concern for minimum standards, educational quality and institutional integrity.” Furthermore, given the complexity of teaching and learning in which the student must be a committed participant in order to be successful and because faculty evaluation processes in California community colleges are typically collectively bargained, the ACCJC was asked to “remove from the new accreditation standards any reference to faculty evaluation on the basis of learning outcomes measures” (R2.06, Fall 2001; Reaffirmed in R2.05, Spring 2002; see also R2.01, Fall 2008). Members of the Academic Senate at the time were particularly keen that the ACCJC provide evidence for this new approach to accreditation. Of the ACCJC, they requested “the background evidence and supporting research that would justify recent radical restructuring of the Accrediting Standards by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges ” (R2.04, Fall 2002; see also R2.06, Spring 2002).

The Academic Senate did not object to the use of SLOs and SLO assessment when used as tools for continuous improvement. Indeed, once the SLOs were adopted into the standards, the ASCCC wanted to help local senates implement them in a responsible way. The ASCCC encouraged “local senates to employ methodologies that aggregate Student Learning Outcomes data, such as summaries, reports, and fact sheets, so that they may, in effect, create a blind between individual class sections and the institution” and “stress[ed] adherence to the 1974 Federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), as well as statements on academic freedom and privacy adopted by the Academic Senate and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP)” (R2.01, Fall 2003). In a separate resolution that same session, the ASCCC “recommend[ed] that colleges and districts provide adequate institutional support for any faculty-driven process that coordinates, manages, and integrates Student Learning Outcomes” (R2.02).

In response to the SLO accreditation mandate, a new position emerged at many California community colleges, that of the Student Learning Outcomes Coordinator. In Fall 2007, to support the work of this new faculty role, the ASCCC adopted and published the senate paper *Agents of Change: Examining The Role of Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment Coordinators in California Community Colleges* (R2.07). As an aid for faculty charged with identifying and writing student learning outcomes, the ASCCC supported the creation of a statewide library of student learning outcomes at the course, program, general education, and institutional levels (R9.01, Fall 2008).

Over the years, the ASCCC has expressed concern about accreditation costs in terms of both resources and time. As the 2002 Accreditation Standards were being rolled out, the ASCCC was concerned about the likely “high cost to taxpayers” and resolved to “formally request investigation by a statewide body, such as the Joint Legislative Audit Committee or a commission appointed by the Legislature, … the cost of implementing the proposed Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges' accreditation Standards.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In Fall 2008, the ASCCC recommended that local senates “consult collegially about their local accreditation process and how that is reflected in the budget process and use this information to hold robust conversations about faculty involvement and costs of accreditation” (R5.01).

Although the Academic Senate values peer review and evaluation as tools for improvement, it has periodically asked whether the ACCJC’s accreditation process is the best or only review and accountability system available to us. In Fall 2001, the Academic Senate was asked to “develop alternative structures and/or approaches to replace the current accreditation commission” (R2.05). And, again in Spring 2010, Resolution 2.04 directed the Academic Senate to “research the options available for peer review and accreditation other than the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges.”

With over a 100 resolutions in almost 30 years, the Academic Senate positions on accreditation are varied and nuanced; nevertheless, several key positions permeate the body’s work:

* Faculty and academic senates have a primary role in the accreditation process.
* In order to be meaningful and fair, visiting teams must include faculty representatives who have received appropriate training and have been appointed in a way that allows them to complete an independent evaluation.
* Faculty and senate leaders should be given an opportunity to develop and review accreditation documents for accuracy.
* Faculty and academic senate input is crucial as accreditation standards are being revised.
* Accreditation standards should be based upon evidence and research rather than trends.
* The Academic Senate opposes the reductionist imposition of a corporate/business model of evaluation on the complex reality of teaching and learning.
* The Academic Senate rejects efforts to tie faculty evaluations to student attainment of learning outcomes because there are so many variables outside the faculty’s control impacting student success. Furthermore, having an accreditation standard that mandates aspects of faculty evaluation is problematic because California community colleges determine faculty evaluation processes via collective bargaining.
* Although the Academic Senate understands that any accreditation process entails certain necessary expenditures, the Academic Senate is concerned about the growing resource costs and time expenditures required to conform to recent accreditation mandates and processes.
* The Academic Senate is open to exploring other methods and organizations for accreditation purposes.

References

Tharp, N. (2012). *Accreditation in the California community colleges: Influential cultural practices.* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). California State University, Sacramento.

1. The Academic Senate was somewhat ahead of its time with this resolution. On August 21, 2013, the Joint Legislative Audit Committee (JLAC) on a 10-1 vote asked the Bureau of State Audits to review the ACCJC with respect to the accreditation process at three California community colleges, at least two of which are on sanction. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)