



ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR
COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES
WESTERN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

President's Message

March 2018

One Region, Two Systems: Why?

When I hear puzzlement about the word “regional” when discussing regional accreditation, it’s an opportunity to remind someone that accreditation arose from the academy; it did not descend from the government. Institutions within a geographical region came together to form associations that could validate and improve the quality of the institutions in their region. These regional associations began along the East Coast (New England, Middle States) moved westward (North Central) and South (Southern Association) and eventually reached the Pacific (Northwest, Western). These associations embraced institutions offering all degrees within the scope of higher education: Associates, Baccalaureate, Masters, and Doctoral degrees . . . with one exception: The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC).

In this region, covering California, Hawaii, and the Pacific Islands, the accreditation responsibilities devolved on two agencies. The agency that is now named the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) covers institutions offering Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral degrees, while the Accreditation Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) covers both public and private institutions that are predominantly defined as Associate degree-granting institutions. This includes the massive California Community College system with its 114 colleges and 2.1 million students – the largest system in the nation. It also includes the community colleges in the University of Hawaii system and in five of the Pacific Islands.

There are several historical forces that contributed to the creation of these parallel agencies. When regional accreditation arose in New England in 1885, there were no community colleges. Accreditation moved westward, arriving in California in the early 1950s, concurrent with the evolution of the concept of the community college. In California, the community colleges in the 1920s and 1930s were typically extensions of high schools, offering post-high school technical and career readiness training. They were often referred to as Junior Colleges. But by the time the Western Association of Schools and Colleges was formed in 1952, the community college had become more fully recognized as a distinct and valued sector of its own.

The evolution of this valuable educational experiment was given a boost with the creation, in the 1960s, of the California Educational Master Plan. The Plan parsed out the State’s higher education resources into three discrete sectors: The University of California, now with 10 campuses, offering up to the research doctoral degree; the California State University, now with 23 campuses, with a focus on baccalaureate and master’s degree and a few professional doctoral programs; and the California Community Colleges, with 114 institutions. At the institutional level, this model is echoed in the University of Hawaii system.

The community college is a distinctive creation, defined most critically by its open-access mission. It is a powerful force to democratize higher education, shifting opportunity from the exclusive realms of the selective and the elite colleges and universities. It serves a population of students that is incredibly diverse—a fact that often slips from the consciousness of those discussing higher education. Beginning in the 1950s, it became increasingly clear that these institutions would benefit from an accrediting agency that deployed standards and review processes closely aligned with their character and mission. Commissioners and peer reviewers drawn from within the sector would be in the best position to provide formative feedback, make accreditation decisions, and advocate for their mission in the higher education community.

ACCJC has carried this responsibility since its formation in 1952. In recent years, it has become more crucial that a focused and informed voice can speak on behalf of the community colleges in the national conversation. With ever increasing state and federal dollars being provided to students in our colleges, and with uninformed comparisons being made between their graduation rates and those of selective, traditional colleges, the stakes are high. Community colleges, both in our region and nationally, are vulnerable to being misunderstood and unfairly judged when viewed through the performance metrics used to assess all of higher education.

The region has engaged recently in some thoughtful conversations about whether its community colleges would benefit from being accredited by the same agency that accredits the baccalaureate and graduate institutions in the region—WSCUC. Those conversations were prompted in part by particular aspects of ACCJC's operational context. At the present time, those conversations have largely been set aside. From what I am hearing, the membership is open to a growing appreciation for what an accreditor can do on their behalf when it functions entirely and exclusively within the distinctive mission of community colleges. Some have expressed the idea that, rather than seeing our bifurcated structure as an anomaly among regional accreditors, they are pleased to have an agency that has more than six decades of experience in exclusively supporting the quality efforts of institutions that enroll one in four community college students in the nation.

My team joins me in reaffirming our commitment to respond ever more completely to meeting those high expectations.