

## **Accreditation Workgroup II**

### **Report to the California Community Colleges Chief Executive Officers**

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#### **Pursuit of Clarity and Improvement**

Regional educational accreditation in California, Hawaii, and the Western Pacific is composed of three commissions under the heading “Western Association of Schools and Colleges” (WASC): the Senior College and University Commission, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, and the Accrediting Commission for Schools.

Since 2009, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors, Chancellor’s Office, and individual community colleges and districts have been discussing suggestions and concerns regarding accreditation under its present agency, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), and reviewing options. As part of the effort to address issues pertaining to the functionality of the present system of accreditation in the western region, two workgroups were formed in March 2016:

- 1) Workgroup I, to address immediate improvements needed in ACCJC, and
- 2) Workgroup II, to explore long-range goals and structure for alignment of higher education accreditation in the region.

Workgroup I has developed extensive recommendations for improvements in five critical areas and is working with ACCJC on monitoring and implementation.

Workgroup II has reached a consensus point outlined below and is now garnering input from constituent groups to complete its charge of identifying the best approach for regional alignment of higher education accreditation and steps for implementation. This report and the discussion at the upcoming CEO Symposium are among consultation processes underway to ensure that all concerned have a chance to fully review and share their perspectives on this important matter.

#### **Membership of Workgroup II**

##### California Community College CEOs

Cindy Miles, Chancellor, Grossmont-Cuyamaca CCD, Convener  
Lori Adrian, President, Coastline CC (Coast CCD)  
Sandra Caldwell, President, Reedley College (State Center CCD)  
Constance Carroll, Chancellor, San Diego CCD  
Debbie DiThomas, Superintendent/President, Barstow CC  
Ron Kraft, Superintendent/President, Napa CCD  
Willard Lewallen, Superintendent/President, Hartnell CCD; ACCJC Commissioner  
Dena Maloney, Superintendent/President, El Camino CCD  
Cheryl Marshall, Chancellor, North Orange County CCD  
Brian Murphy, President, De Anza College (Foothill-De Anza CCD)  
Bill Scroggins, President/CEO, Mt. San Antonio CCD  
Susan Sperling, President, Chabot College (Chabot-Las Positas CCD)  
Joe Wyse, Superintendent/President, Shasta-Tehama-Trinity CCD

##### University of Hawaii community colleges

Lui Hokoana, Chancellor, Maui College, University of Hawaii

### Western Pacific community colleges

Melinda Nish, Executive Advisor, College of the Marshall Islands

### Private Colleges with membership in ACCJC

Jeff Akens, Retired President (Carrington College)

### WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)

Mary Ellen Petrisko, WSCUC President

William Ladusaw, Professor of Linguistics, UCSC; WSCUC Chair

### Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)

Raul Rodriguez, Chancellor, Rancho Santiago CCD; ACCJC Chair

### Ex-officio/Resource Members

Brian King, Chancellor, Los Rios CCD, CCC-CEO Board President

Jamienne Studley, National Policy Advisor, *Beyond 12*; Former Deputy Under Secretary, NACIQI Chair,  
US Dept. of Education

The membership of Workgroup II reflects the fact that accreditation is a regional activity. The Western region includes community colleges in California, both public and private, as well as institutions in Hawaii and the Western Pacific. Therefore, any final decision and plan would necessarily involve these three segments. Workgroup II membership also reflects the fact that a long-range solution also involves the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC), given the goal of alignment of all segments of higher education.

## **Background**

The review and planning effort arose from concerns largely expressed by public community colleges in California. Workgroup II noted these concerns, which were being addressed by Workgroup I, but focused its attention on the long-range needs and goals of the region. Workgroup II noted community colleges in California face unique challenges and issues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which call for new approaches, potentially including new approaches in accreditation. Thus, the first attention of this effort was devoted to California.

The California Community Colleges (CCCs) are one of three sectors of public higher education in California, along with the University of California (UC) and the California State University (CSU), serving the rising needs of rapidly changing student populations and public demands. Over half of all California undergraduates (approximately 2.1 million students) attend one of the state's 113 community colleges. With successful intersegmental articulation and curriculum programs such as the Course Identifier System (C-ID) and the Associate Degrees for Transfer created by AB 1440 (Padilla, 2010), and with the establishment of community college bachelor's degrees through SB 850 (Block, 2014), the lines between the curriculum, services, and needs of two- and four-year colleges are increasingly blurred.

California's community colleges grew out of the K-12 adult education system; as a result, critics have frequently characterized them as an extension of high school rather than true higher education entities. The system of CCCs was formed and defined as part of the Master Plan for Higher Education, although the system has remained fiscally joined in statute with K-12 in state funding and other considerations. The current accreditation structure reinforces the notion that community colleges are separate and apart from higher education. Over the past decade, the focus on student success and building durable, smooth pathways to certificates and degrees has amplified the role of the system as a provider for regional higher education.

Workgroup II examined models of regional accreditation in the nation and explored differences in their structures and cultures. It was noted that all regional accreditors involved in higher education

accreditation in the United States maintain reciprocity with each other to ensure the transfer of student credits and units, as well as other considerations pertaining to quality assurance. However, the Western region is unique in its bifurcated approach to higher education accreditation. The other five regions employ a single accreditation structure that includes all segments of higher education—community colleges, as well as four-year colleges and universities—within the same accrediting commission. This makes ACCJC a unique structure in the nation, despite its member’s similarities in accountability and service demands to that of other national higher education providers. The regional accrediting commissions are as follows:

- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE)
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)
- Higher Learning Commission (HLC)
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)
- WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)
- Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)

The standards, policies, and procedures of all seven commissions are readily available and similar in many regards.

### **Workgroup II Consensus re: Long-Range Model for Higher Education Alignment**

Workgroup II members analyzed several options, evaluating pros, cons, and long-term implications of each. It was noted that for some constituents, the perceived problem had to do solely with the tenor and style of ACCJC, with the feeling that once that was corrected, the accreditation problem would be solved. Others noted this did not answer the larger question of higher education alignment for the best services to students. Some called for a solution of better collaboration between ACCJC and WSCUC. More members held that the greater needs of students in the region should be addressed in a deeper, more sustainable manner, particularly in light of the changing landscape of higher education.

Some suggested that an accreditor focused on two-year colleges has the advantage of expertise and commitment to this type of institution. Others observed that the singularity of an accreditor focused almost exclusively on California community colleges seems to engender intrusion into details not found among other accreditors with more diverse institutional types, and pointed to advantages with a more diverse membership.

The notion of choice was explored, a scenario whereby institutions could select which of the accrediting commissions in the region they wished to be affiliated with, ACCJC or WSCUC, noting that this had already occurred in Hawaii and the Western Pacific, for institutions offering bachelor’s degrees. Workgroup II members determined that this approach might cause serious inconsistencies in quality assurance and public understanding within the system. However, these and other proposals were respected and fully explored.

After six months of meetings, research, consultation with accreditation experts and the U.S. Department of Education, and deliberation over a number of options and scenarios, **Workgroup II members reached unanimous agreement that the long-term needs of our students, colleges, and communities, especially in California, would best be served by affiliation with an accreditor that encompasses all segments of higher education for the Western region.**

## Rationale

Numerous reasons exist for aligning the accreditation structure of the California community colleges with that of four-year institutions:

- Strong course articulation and graduation requirements are already in place between segments.
- Transfer from the CCCs to California's universities is an increasingly vital pathway for students: 28% of UC graduates and almost 50% of CSU graduates begin their academic careers at a community college.
- CCCs have established over 2,000 Associate Degrees for Transfer to the CSU system, and in 2015 the UC system released its first set of transfer pathways designed for community college students.
- Several California state budgets have included hundreds of millions of dollars for community colleges to work with the CSU system to provide basic skills instruction to CSU students.
- Community college transfer students represent high proportions of students traditionally underrepresented in higher education, who otherwise have fewer opportunities for entering the four-year college and career pathway.

These and other trends and initiatives, in addition to the Community College Baccalaureate Pilot Program and the successful C-ID articulation system, demonstrate the many ways in which CCCs now work closely with and serve the same students as their university partners. Further alignment, consistent quality assurance, and evaluation of all these overall pathways through accreditation would clearly identify community colleges as part of the larger higher education pathway for students.

Moreover, the accreditation standards of ACCJC and WSCUC are similar, reflecting commonalities in the undergraduate mission of the institutions served by the two commissions. A shared commission introduces opportunities for communities of practice and shared learning communities to address common student issues and needs. Currently, the four-year and two-year institutions do not routinely benefit from sharing evaluators during accreditation cycles, missing direct opportunities to become more familiar with and to learn from each other as higher education professionals.

Especially in California, ACCJC evaluation teams for community colleges tend to be homogenous, and sometimes parochial and self-referencing, versus those in other regions that bring a diversity of viewpoints and experiences to focus on big-picture matters of academic quality. Cross-segmental teams (composed chiefly of representatives from like institutions, but also including diverse representatives) offer a broader look into how the institution is achieving its mission as well as linkages across the sectors, which would benefit both community colleges and four-year colleges and universities of the region.

Workgroup II concluded that, given the increasingly similar requirements and functions of all institutions of higher education in the region and the benefits of a closer accreditation evaluation relationship, the region's best interests in alignment and consistent standards would be served by breaking down barriers between higher education accreditors. In other words, Workgroup II believes that the Western region should adopt the same structure that all the other accrediting regions use.

Additionally, all regional accreditors, both nationally and in the Western region, have a long history of using institutional self-evaluation and peer review as the foundation of their process of review, quality assurance, and actions regarding accreditation. Nevertheless, these principles have been under recent attack, with mounting public accountability demands and federal restrictions on our voluntary, nongovernmental model of academic self-regulation. Workgroup II sees value and strength in being united with a single regional higher education accreditor in the face of such threats.

Finally, Workgroup II believes that a unified and integrated higher education system would provide the best potential future for students across all segments of its institutions – modeling the pathways and partnerships to which most students aspire in their stated educational objectives.

Workgroup II views this as a long-term goal that, if adopted, would be gradually phased-in, a process that would take up to a decade to complete.

### **Planning and Steps to Achieve a Single Accreditor for the WASC Region**

Moving toward a single accretor would be a stepwise effort, requiring thoughtful review and attention to detail, logistical balance, collaboration, and time. Ultimately, the decision is not a “system” decision, but a decision of the member institutions, in collaboration with their chosen accretor. Input from the field would be sought and included along the way.

Moving toward this long-range goal would include the following steps:

1. Following adequate deliberation, the member-accredited colleges of ACCJC (including the public and private community colleges of California, Hawaii, and the Western Pacific), as expressed by their CEOs, would decide they want to pursue this direction and then express this desire in a petition to WSCUC for membership.
2. The member-accredited colleges and universities of WSCUC would determine if they want to pursue this direction and amend their policies to include community colleges.
3. Should all concur, WSCUC would undertake steps for such an expansion, including obtaining recognition for a modified recognition of scope from the U.S. Department of Education (generally, a one-year process) and implementing any changes in Commission membership, staff, documents, training, etc. needed to ensure that it is prepared to appropriately serve community colleges.
4. In California, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors and Chancellor’s Office would need to amend current policy to authorize this proposed structure. The Hawaii and Western Pacific institutions would also take needed steps to formalize their policies.
5. The following considerations would enter into developing staged transition plans:
  - Each college maintains its current status, terms, and accreditation cycle, remaining accredited by ACCJC until the time of transition to WSCUC.
  - At the first natural juncture for renewal of accreditation, each college will shift to WSCUC, following WSCUC standards and practices.
  - The CCC Chancellor’s Office will provide a crosswalk document highlighting the relationship and alignment of the pre-existing standards and WSCUC standards to aid in the transition.
  - The CCC Chancellor’s Office will work with WSCUC to provide additional training and support for colleges making the transition.
  - Throughout the process, efforts to make further improvements and increase alignment and collaboration between the two commissions will continue.

This is a critical decision for all of us to make, as it will define the future of higher education accreditation in our region. Workgroup II respectfully offers this report and recommendation for the review and discussion among the higher education constituents of the Western Region.