

NCCC's accreditation is up for review in September and I need your help to make sure we have the smoothest process possible. Accreditation only lasts about 10 years maximum and our last visit from the accreditors was about 10 years ago. Accreditation is extremely valuable to an institution. It determines whether or not that college can give federal financial aid. It determines if credits transfer from institution to institution. Basically, it gives the degree or certificate earned meaning and value. What is the difference between Harvard University and those email offers for a degree in two weeks? Accreditation.

So who is coming to check us out to make sure that we are a "real" college worthy of your tax dollars?

"We're from the government and we're here to help." If that statement doesn't make you a little nervous, then you have never had many dealings with federal regulators. Those of us that have had visits from US Government offices can tell you that it can be quite unnerving. Federal regulators often don't fully understand what you do at your business, because they don't do that line of work. They are in the bureaucracy business and business is booming. One could successfully argue that they are perhaps more interested in how the forms are filled out rather than what is actually being accomplished. Isn't there a better way to insure that quality expectations are being met or surpassed using people who actual understand that line of work?

In higher education, there is. Our quality assurance is done by six regional accreditation organizations, not the US Federal Government. The US Department of Education authorizes these six groups to investigate and approve all aspects of the colleges and universities in the United States and its territories. Here in the Midwest/plain states we are accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the largest of the six organizations.

Instead of federal regulators, they use peer-reviewers. As the name implies, these are not fulltime employees of the government or even the HLC. They are people who work at other colleges and universities across the region. They are presidents, chief financial officers, faculty, advisors, student service deans and others from all levels of higher education. One applies to be a peer-reviewer, and if accepted, goes through extensive training before being deployed to check the quality of an institution. It is an exhaustive process to become a peer-reviewer.

Institutions who wish to get accredited or remain accredited must measure themselves against the criteria for accreditation and complete a self-study. It is quite exhausting to look at the institution. How exhaustive? There are 5 main criterion, 21 core components, and 68 sub-components as well as 19 assumed practices that must be examined and reported on. Yeah. It's a long report.

When it is time to review an institution, the HLC puts together a team of peer-reviewers to conduct the visit. The team size is relative to the institution, but to give you an example, at NCCC we had a team of five last time in 2004. The peer-review team receives these self-study reports (usually about 200 pages) along with all publications of the institution that are relevant. After reading all of that information they come to the campus and verify if the information is true. Failure to meet any one of the five criterion means sanction and perhaps the loss of their accreditation.

NCCC is right now completing our self-study and preparing for a visit from the HLC peer-review team in September. One of the things I need your help with is gathering comments from our service area on the College. Every few weeks you'll see an ad in the paper and posted on our website a solicitation for comments about NCCC. You can send these comments directly to the HLC at Public Comment on Neosho County Community College, The Higher Learning Commission, 230 North LaSalle Street, Suite 7-500, Chicago, IL 60604-1411.

If you have something to say to the HLC, positive or negative, please send it in. Especially if it is positive. Ok, that was a joke (but not really).

If you doubt that the peer-review system is real and robust, look no further than NCCC. Those of you who know our checkered past knows that we were, at one time, in danger of losing our accreditation. We needed a kick in the pants by the HLC and that got us moving in the right direction quickly. We were able to make remarkable change in a short amount of time which earned us a full ten year accreditation. To go from probation to a full 10-year accreditation had never happened before in the history of HLC. I was quite proud of everyone at the college that made this happen. That was 10 years ago when the probation ended. I am so excited to host the peer-reviewers this September and show them just how we have improved since they were here last in 2004.

I believe in the peer-review system so much I became one. For the past five years I have traveled to many different colleges and universities in our region making sure they meet those standards and uphold the value of accreditation. It is a time-consuming and thankless job in many ways, and I may not do it forever. But, I can tell you first hand, it really works. We must guard accreditation and ensure that every college and university is of the highest quality so that accreditation means something, your taxes are well spent and, most importantly, your degree or certificate has value.

"I'm from the HLC and I'm here to help." And I think I do help. If you have any questions or comments please send them to me at binbody@neosho.edu