

U.S. Department of Education

**Staff Report
to the
Senior Department Official
on
Recognition Compliance Issues**

RECOMMENDATION PAGE

1. **Agency:** WASC Accrediting Commission For Community and Junior Colleges (1952/2008)
(The dates provided are the date of initial listing as a recognized agency and the date of the agency's last grant of recognition.)
2. **Action Item:** Interim Report
3. **Current Scope of Recognition:** The accreditation and preaccreditation ("Candidate for Accreditation") of two-year, associate degree-granting institutions located in California, Hawaii, the United States territories of Guam and American Samoa, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, including the accreditation of such programs offered via distance education at these colleges.
4. **Requested Scope of Recognition:** Same.
5. **Date of Advisory Committee Meeting:** December, 2011
6. **Staff Recommendation:** Accept the report.
7. **Issues or Problems:** None.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE AGENCY

The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC-ACCJC, Commission or agency) is an institutional accreditor. The Commission's institutions are voluntary members that offer two-year educational programs and award associate degrees. They include community colleges, private religious institutions, for-profit and independent nonprofit vocational institutions, and independent junior colleges.

The agency has approximately 140 accredited member institutions. The member institutions are located in California, Hawaii, the United States territories of Guam and American Samoa, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. The majority of the Commission's member institutions offer at least some courses via distance delivery modes.

The agency's recognition enables its institutions to establish eligibility to receive Federal student assistance funding under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended (Title IV). The agency demonstrated that it serves as the Title IV gatekeeper for at least one institution it accredits. Consequently, the agency must meet the Secretary's separate and independent requirements.

Recognition History

The agency was one of the three original commissions that made up the Western College Association (now the Western Association of Schools and Colleges), which was first recognized by the U.S. Commissioner of Education in 1952. In 1962, the Commissioner of Education recognized the present Commission separately. Since that time, the agency has been periodically reviewed and has been granted continued recognition.

WASC-ACCJC last came before the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity for a full review in December 2007, and was subsequently granted continued recognition for a period of five years. The current report was also requested. (Originally, the agency was asked to submit its report by December 2008. However, due to passage of the HEOA, the agency's report was put on hold until the NACIQI was reconstituted and the backlog reduced.)

The Department received no third-party comments in connection with the

agency's compliance report.

PART II: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

§602.20 Enforcement of standards

(b) If the institution or program does not bring itself into compliance within the specified period, the agency must take immediate adverse action unless the agency, for good cause, extends the period for achieving compliance.

Previous Issue or Problem: During its 2007 review of the agency, Department staff noted that the agency's "Policy on Public Disclosure" permitted the Commission, for good cause, to extend the time allowed for an institution to demonstrate that it meets or exceeds the agency's standards, eligibility requirements and policies. However, the basis upon which the agency could grant those extensions was unclear. Consequently, WASC-ACCJC was asked to describe the mechanism or criteria it applied in determining what institutional circumstances typically must exist for a "good cause" determination to be made.

In response, the agency reported that an institution with deficiencies that significantly impact its integrity or educational quality would be expected to correct those problems within two years and would not generally be granted an extension for good cause. Conversely, the agency could consider granting an extension for good cause to an institution where the deficiencies "are not directly and immediately affecting educational quality, but have longer term direct or indirect effects on educational quality or integrity."

The agency's response also provided several examples to illustrate how a determination to grant an extension for good cause was made. Department staff found most of the examples readily defensible and requiring relatively brief extensions of time to come into full compliance for good cause. However, one example potentially allowed an institution its entire six-year period of accreditation to come into compliance with some of the WASC-ACCJC standards.

Specifically, the agency reported that it considered "providing time for an institution to demonstrate that it has fully implemented standards that require several years to implement: In extending good cause, the Commission considers whether its standards require multiple years to fully implement." WASC-ACCJC noted, for example, that its standards "require institutions to institutionalize regular program reviews and assessments, to develop short and long term integrated planning, to assess the results of their attempts to improve educational quality before developing subsequent plans. It may take an institution several years to demonstrate that it has accomplished all stages of this assessment-planning-improvement cycle."

The issue, however, was that the good cause extensions of "several years"

allowed by the agency exceeded the normal two-year timeframe expected by the Secretary's Criteria and went significantly beyond the "good cause" exception envisioned in the Criteria. Consequently, WASC-ACCJC needed to demonstrate that it ordinarily requires compliance within the maximum two-year period envisioned by the Secretary's Criteria, and that the extensions it granted were exceptional and of limited duration.

Agency Response and Discussion: The agency reported that it has taken several steps regarding various aspects of its operations to address the identified concern. First, the agency began training its Commission on the importance of the Secretary's expected two-year maximum for schools to come into compliance with the agency's standards. That training first took place at the agency's January 2008 decision-making meeting and has been repeated periodically since that time. Furthermore, the agency's training materials for new commissioners were revised to incorporate the emphasis on timely compliance, and all new commissioners have been given that revised training since 2008.

Along those lines, the agency's standardized forms for its Commission readers were revised to specify when an institutional problem was first noted and to specify when the problem must be corrected within a two-year timeframe. If a previously noted problem was extended beyond the maximum timeframe, then a limited and specific extension for good cause, or a show cause determination, is now required. In addition, the agency's official action letters to the institutions have been revised to specify the date when a deficiency must be corrected. If an extension for good cause was granted, then the final deadline for compliance is given, together with the basis for that decision.

The specific criteria that can justify a limited extension have been reduced by the agency to include the following four basic reasons: (1) when the institution must reasonably take more than two years to correct a deficiency, while demonstrating substantial progress, such as the restoration of fiscal reserves and securing enrollment growth, (2) when an external agency is involved that requires sequential steps to take action, such as the Department of State Architecture with its approval timelines for building renovations and/or construction, (3) when consultants and others external to the institution are retained to assist in the resolution of the deficiency, such as the development of a comprehensive fiscal recovery plan linked to enrollment management and institutional planning, and (4) when an external agency is a participant in resolving the compliance issue, such as auditors or state regulatory personnel who are overseeing an activity. Even when those criteria are used to grant an extension for good cause, those extensions are clearly limited in duration.

The agency has made a concerted effort to inform its constituencies that deficiencies must normally be corrected within the two-year timeframe specified by the Secretary's criteria, and that simply showing progress will no longer be sufficient. Those educational efforts included a written advisory to all member institutions, and various agency-conducted workshop/training programs that have been attended by on-site visiting team members, chief financial officers,

governing board members, accreditation liaison officers, presidents, faculty senate leaders, self-study committees, and members of local and state government agencies/legislatures with responsibility/authority over agency-accredited institutions.

Beginning in January 2008 the agency's decision-making meetings have been used as opportunities to emphasize the focus on timely compliance. Since that time the agency reported that the number of cases where the Commission has applied a "good cause" extension has been reduced from 17 in January 2008, to 3 in June 2008, 9 in January 2009, none in June 2009, 2 in January 2010, none in June 2010, and 2 in January 2011.

In addition, since 2008 the agency has had no examples where institutions have not come into compliance within the timelines set by the Commission, and the agency has not been required to take adverse action based solely on lack of compliance with the two-year rule. Furthermore, responsible parties both internal and external to WASC-ACCJC institutions have taken note of the substantially reduced timeframes granted by the agency to demonstrate compliance, and have expedited their processes accordingly. As a result, the agency meets the requirements of this section of the criteria.

PART III: THIRD PARTY COMMENTS

The Department did not receive any written third-party comments regarding this agency.