

Recap of SACS Self-Study Kick-off Visit

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FS mtg.

Dr. Jack Allen arrived on campus for a two-day visit beginning Wednesday, February 9, 2000. He initially met with Chancellor Richard Eakin. Afterwards, he addressed the SACS Self-Study Steering Committee members on the first day of the visit as well as the Chancellor's Cabinet and Associate VCs and Academic Deans on second day.

He shared a brief history of SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) and the accreditation process. His presentation was both enlightening and interesting. A summary of the key points shared by Dr. Allen at this meeting (and subsequent meetings scheduled on the following day) is presented below.

Summary of Key Points

Dr. Allen began his remarks by commending the SACS Self-study Steering Committee for the appropriateness of the alternative study selected by ECU. He noted that the proposal received a commendation (which is a rare occurrence) because of its appropriateness, how the teams were organized, and how well the proposal was written. He then provided a brief review of SACS. He noted that SACS was established in 1895 as a result of twelve universities meeting in Atlanta to define what a quality education should be. The impetus for this meeting was the lack of a common definition of what constituted quality in higher education. At the time, there was no federal presence, very little state presence, and a great deal of competition for students in higher education. There was a blurred common definition of a college. The universities wanted to bring order to this chaotic situation. The universities decided to define exactly what was a college. Much time was spent in specifying an articulation agreement between high school and college. The result was to focus on admissions -- what kinds of students would be admitted to college. Dr. Allen referred to this definition of quality as "The Greek Option."

"The Greek Option" Definition of Quality - 1895

- ◆ Admission was the key to quality.
- ◆ Required entrance exams in English, History, Geography, Mathematics, Latin, and Greek (certification from duly accredited prep schools).
- ◆ No student under 15 years of age would be admitted.

Not many colleges could meet the standards set. Only six of the twelve universities that attended the meeting in Atlanta met the standards of quality that were defined in 1895. These universities included: Vanderbilt, University of Mississippi, University of North Carolina, Duke, University of the South, and Washington & Lee.

In 1920, SACS decided to require additional standards, this time in a quantitative manner. There were 20 different quantitative standards established. These standards focused on such areas as the number of volumes contained in the university library (10,000 volumes), an adequate teacher salary, the maximum number of hours faculty could teach (15 hours per week), the minimum number of distinct degrees offered (8), the minimum endowment required (private colleges needed a \$500,000 endowment), and the existence of a strong liberal arts institution. Thus, the Commission on Colleges was established. When these standards were approved, one-third of the current members didn't meet the standards.

Over the next thirty years, additional types of colleges were admitted. In the 1920s, junior colleges (2 year colleges) were admitted. Next the A&Ms were admitted. It wasn't until the 1940's that Teacher's Colleges were admitted. Finally, in the 1950's, medical schools and theological schools were admitted. During this time, there were separate sets of standards established for each type of college. To apply for accreditation/reaccreditation, institutions would send in a brief report addressing the quantitative standards.

In the late 1950s, the assessment process and standards were again drastically changed. With the previous quantitative assessment, colleges had lost their emphasis on improvement -- the key reason the Commission on Colleges was originally established. This time only one set of standards would exist, regardless of the

type of college admitted. The standards would also include very few quantitative standards (only a few that apply to junior colleges versus senior colleges). From the late 1950's through the 1970's, the accreditation process focused on issues important to the institution. It was much more of a creative process than the "traditional" format of today. Institutions would analyze their strengths and weaknesses every 10 years and develop strategies for improvement. This self-evaluation was coupled with a peer review process.

In the early 1980s, the commission debated the nature of high schools and colleges and accountability issues. There was an input focus (such as adequate libraries) with very little emphasis on output. Students were arriving at colleges without adequate preparation. Students couldn't read, write, or perform adequately in math. During the 1980s, the focus shifted to "Institutional Effectiveness." Institutions were to document programmatic goals and objectives. There was a shift in emphasis in the self-study to analysis on continuous assessment. Concern was placed on competence in basic skills – reading, writing, math, oral communication, and computers (most recently added). Now, procedures and processes must not only be followed but must be adequately documented. This requirement is one of the most difficult for most universities to meet. Dr. Allen indicated SACS does not specify that certain outcomes be met, but that the university must have a prescribed, documented, systematic manner for addressing requirements. It is left up to the university to define a level of competence. Naturally, if a school were to continually have the majority of its students failing a national standardized test for a given profession (such as accounting, education, or nursing), then a peer review might cite that area as a problem. But for the most part, the commission is concerned about whether an institution has a systematic method of assessment.

On several occasions during the visit, Dr. Allen encouraged faculty and administration to consider serving as a SACS evaluator. Forms can be found on the SACS website (<http://www.sacscoc.org/>). Potential committee members are nominated for the committee registry by chief executive officers, visiting committee members, and members of the Commission on Colleges staff.

Questions and Responses

Dr. Allen also addressed questions from each of the groups with which he met. These questions and his responses are below:

How would an institution demonstrate effectiveness? One way to demonstrate effectiveness is to document how your institution compares with peer institutions. The objective is to convince the peer review team that you meet the standard in a convincing way. Where possible, include national comparisons to support your statements of effectiveness.

How should we organize the Self-Study report? Dr. Allen indicated that the university could decide to separate the reports or include merge both parts of the SACS self-study into one report. Thus the report could be organized as separate documents (one for the compliance portion, one for the alternative study, and one for NCAA [given ECU plans to conduct a joint study]). However, Dr. Allen recommended that the steering committee consider producing one report for the peer review team that included three sections: an introductory section, a compliance section, and an alternative self-study section. Each member of the team should receive all parts of the self-study. The NCAA group would not necessarily receive the entire SACS report. The Introductory Section would contain:

- ◆ Organizational structure of the institution
- ◆ Where students come from
- ◆ How ECU fits into the UNC system
- ◆ Programmatic approach
- ◆ Names of Self-study Steering Committee members

The report should contain a record of what we find. It is not expected that a university will be 100% in compliance at this stage of the evaluation. Dr. Allen referred to one institution that reported 100% compliance in its self-study when in reality, the institution identified problems in its study and corrected them before submitting the self-study report. Needless to say, "red flags" were waved! Dr. Allen recommended that the university document the actual status of the compliance and produce an update report between the submission of the self-study report and the actual visit to identify any improvements the university has made to come into compliance. *He also indicated that he anticipated that an increasing number of universities will be utilizing electronic databases and on-line documents to document the procedures followed in addition to the traditional printed version of the self-study report.*

How are the NCAA study and the SACS study coordinated? Dr. Allen referred to a crosswalk between the SACS self-study and the NCAA study. The SACS Self-study director will need to obtain a copy of this crosswalk from Dr. Allen. The university should attempt to find a person to serve on the peer review team who has served on both NCAA reviews and SACS reviews (such as Chancellor Eakin has done).

Are there areas on which the university should focus during the compliance self-study? Distance Education and Off-Campus programs. Dr. Allen indicated that the university has changed significantly in these two areas since the last SACS self-study. As such, we can expect a thorough review of these areas by the peer review team. Also, faculty credentials are always a key area of concern by peer review teams.

What will be the size of the peer review team? Dr. Allen indicated we would probably have around 10 persons serving on the compliance portion of the review (versus 25 in traditional self-studies) and another 10 on the consulting/alternative portion. It will be up to the university to recommend the size and type of persons it would like to see serve on the consulting team. The university would specify the consultants and formulate a guide for what it would like to see the consultants do (given the time frame of the study – e.g., they would be expected to read material sent to them before the visit and then help us during the 3 or 4 days they would actually be on campus.) He indicated that the compliance team would be smaller for an alternative study than a traditional study. The primary difference in compliance team composition is that in an alternative study, because there are fewer persons serving, the individuals chosen should have broader experiences (generally the team has fewer faculty and more administrators because of their broad experiences.). He also noted that there will be fewer compliance interviews across campus and that the report from the compliance peer review team would be shorter than the traditional self-study.

How should we go about addressing criteria? Dr. Allen recommended that we group criteria by natural or logical sets. Many criteria are logically related and procedures within the university often address multiple criteria. Addressing each of the 400+ criteria would be redundant. He suggested we develop a matrix to indicate compliance.

Will there be major changes in the standards prior to our self-study submission? Dr. Allen did not expect to see major changes in criteria prior to the self-study visit. The next major set of changes would occur at the earliest in December 2002 (after our SACS visit). He did indicate that there may be a few federal requirements that could change.

Will the separate peer review teams meet together? Dr. Allen recommended three separate meeting rooms – one for the compliance team, one for the alternative study team, and one for the NCAA team. He indicated that typically all groups will meet together at the beginning of the visit. Then the NCAA team will do its own work. In the afternoon, the NCAA liaison person would meet with the SACS teams to report on issues relevant to SACS. He also noted that the members of these teams should not be “hidden in rooms” without exposure to the campus...They expect to meet faculty, students, and administration during their visit.

Sources for the Steering Committee:

- a. Furman web site has all of the SACS reports (including their response.) Dr. Allen suggested we not post draft reports of the peer review team...
- b. Locate other web sites that have SACS information as well (Virginia Tech).