SPOTLIGHTS

College Experiences in the Institutional Effectiveness Partnership Initiative

An Evaluation Activity

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IEPI

INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE

Participate | Collaborate | Innovate

This vignette is the sixth in a series of college spotlights relating the experiences and benefits gained from participation in the Partnership Resource Team (PRT) process and from the goal setting activities using the framework of indicators under the Institutional Effectiveness Partnership Initiative (IEPI).

The PRT process provides technical assistance to institutions to help identify, develop and implement ways to improve their institutional effectiveness. The indicator framework is designed to help colleges assess progress primarily for internal planning purposes.

This document represents an evaluation activity with two objectives: First, to share the experiences of the participating institutions with the field to build collective learning; and second, to help gauge the effectiveness and significance of the IEPI components.

The vignette is based on structured interviews with institutional leaders focusing on the Southwestern College's experience using the PRT process proactively to prepare a response to its accreditation sanction.

SWC

SOUTHWESTERN COLLEGE

Partners & Experts:

PRT Role in Helping Address Accreditation Recommendations

On June 23, 2017, Southwestern College (SWC) received word that the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) acted to reaffirm the institution's accreditation for the remainder of its seven-year cycle and, in doing so, removed the warning sanction that had been issued by the Commission 18 months earlier.

> "We had to get to work right away. In fact, we acted ***even before*** we received our letter from the ACCJC."

"We were elated," said Linda Gilstrap, dean of Institutional Effectiveness and the Accreditation Liaison Officer at SWC, "but it came after a lot of hard work."

Indeed, SWC's action letter, dated February 7, 2016, called for the college to demonstrate resolution of "all deficiencies and meet accreditation Standards" including a follow-up report by March 15, 2017. In addition, the letter required a site team visit in spring 2017 to evaluate the college's progress.

This schedule afforded the college just over a year from the official notice to take the necessary steps to make the grade.

At first blush, a year may look like ample time to take the necessary steps, but quick pivots in institutional practices are often problematic for community colleges. Governance and planning processes move methodically and deliberately, making rapid change dicey.

Change theorists posit that a seminal step to change is an organization's sense of urgency to change. Receiving an adverse ACCJC action letter often acts as a catalyst for more rapid change to occur than might otherwise take place given a college's structure and culture.

"At Southwestern, we had to get to work right away. In fact, we acted even before we received our letter from the ACCJC," noted Gilstrap. In November 2015, the college submitted a letter

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The college needed assistance in implementing a common process to ensure goals are met in terms of the enrollment targets and the needs of students.

expressing interest in receiving technical assistance through an IEPI Partnership Resource Team (PRT).

MODES TO IMPROVEMENT

As background, the ACCJC has historically used a sliding scale of "sanctions" as the principal lever to nudge colleges from noncompliance to reaffirmation. Sanctions vary in severity depending upon the gravity of the college's deficiencies and its history of accreditation compliance.

However, in practice, the decisions about and rationale for sanctions were often unclear to colleges, with a good number of penalties appearing misaligned with the severity of the deficiencies noted.

Moreover, questions began to arise in the field as to the lasting effects of negative sanctions as a motivator for sustained, positive improvement.

As a result, in 2015, the ACCJC modified the *Policy on Commission Actions on Institutions*, broadening the spectrum of possible actions short of sanction that may be taken on an institution based on the comprehensive evaluation.

Under the policy, reaffirmation could be approved for the full seven-year accreditation cycle or for a shorter, 18-month period, requiring the college to produce a follow-up report addressing progress on meeting the Standards.

Indeed, since the adoption of the policy, the number and severity of accreditation sanctions have abated, though compliance recommendations are still imposed.

However, the 18-month reaffirmation status itself was confusing to some colleges, and the Commission is considering revising the policy again to clarify the definition of reaffirmation.

SANCTION AS LEVER

Sanctions serve as a gauge of the severity of noncompliance and range from warning, to probation, to show cause.

A *warning* sanction indicates the ACCJC has determined a college does not meet one or more Standards such that reaffirmation is not warranted.

Warning also covers those instances where a more serious sanction is warranted, but the college acknowledges its shortcomings in its self-evaluation and has taken clear steps to improve.

When the level of concern about compliance increases, the Commission may issue a sanction of *probation*, indicating the college has deviated significantly from the Standards.

Show cause, the final level of sanction, is reserved for substantial noncompliance with the Standards or

SANCTION AS LEVER

- ***WARNING*** indicates that the ACCJC has determined that a college does not meet one or more standards such that reaffirmation is not warranted. (Warning also includes those instances where a more serious sanction is warranted, but the college acknowledges its shortcomings in its self-evaluation, and has taken clear steps to improve.)
- ***PROBATION*** reflects a higher level of concern about compliance where the college has deviated significantly from the standards.
- ***SHOW CAUSE*** denotes substantial noncompliance with the standards or cases where the college has not responded to previous conditions imposed by the Commission.

The college acknowledged that it needed PRT assistance improving institution-wide communication and connecting program review and planning to resource allocation.

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SWC received a warning sanction, the lowest level of penalty by the Commission. Nevertheless, the college took the penalty seriously.

NO WAITING FOR THE LETTER

"When we listened to the site team report out its general findings and conclusions to the college, we suspected that we might be placed on a sanction," said Gilstrap. "This was in October 2015, and we got to work right away. We were not going to lose time waiting for the ACCJC letter when we already felt that we knew what it would say."

SWC's *Letter of Interest* in PRT assistance identified the three key areas of accreditation where college leaders felt most vulnerable: enrollment management, institutional planning and budgeting, and institutional processes.

In the area of enrollment management, the college needed assistance in implementing a common process for all schools and centers to assure proper budget and productivity goals are met in terms of the scheduling of courses/programs to meet enrollment targets and the needs of students.

For institutional planning and budgeting, SWC needed help strengthening processes linking planning and budget development efforts and creating a more transparent and accurate budget.

Finally, for institutional processes, the college sought improvements in fiscal processes to support human resources, benefits, and payroll.

"Through a workshop, we had learned about the PRTs and IEPI, and college leadership was enthusiastic to get a team down here and help us out," recalled Gilstrap.

To support their efforts, SWC also made hires in key positions that had been vacant or filled with interims.

One hire was Tim Flood, vice president of Business and Financial Affairs, who noted, "There was an earnestness throughout to resolve the sanction issue."

VALUE IN PRT VISITS

The efforts of IEPI's Partnership Resource Teams (PRTs) to date extend beyond advancing the state policy goal of decreasing sanctions to improving college practices overall, whether or not the institution is under some accreditation sanction.

BUILDING UP YOUR BENCH

The second reason SWC requested PRT visits was to bring expertise in some areas where the college had gaps.

The college acknowledged that it was plainly struggling with communication and with connecting program review and planning to resource allocation.

"We had a team of six members, which was a big team, but they were all respected individuals in their fields of expertise and brought with them a professionalism that we appreciated," recalled Gilstrap.

Flood added, "We all have skills, knowledge, and gifts that we bring to our jobs, but the benefit of the PRT was to build up our bench by providing additional skills, insights, and expertise that we did not have. It is impossible to have all the skills at one college; the PRT provided us a rounded group of perspectives from around the state. At the end, I felt that I would like to be part of a PRT visit."

IN THE REPORT, WITH THE TEAM

SWC included its participation in the PRT process in the follow-up report and shared it with the ACCJC visiting team members in person.

The PRT helped develop a roadmap to resolve issues faced in the accreditation report.

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The college saw its participation positively and as credible evidence to the Commission that SWC earnestly wanted to improve.

"We shared three key aspects of the PRT process with the Commission," explained Gilstrap. "First, we worked collaboratively with experts to identify issues and implement strategies for improvement. Second, we worked with the PRT to strengthen a self-identified area of growth: the relationship of enrollment management to budget development. Third, we worked with the team specifically to learn about best practices for linking planning and budget allocations. We saw this work as a badge of collaboration that represented our efforts to seek professional assistance in areas where we needed outside help. Participating with the PRT benefited our college greatly, and why wouldn't we want to share the experience of working with the IEPI/PRT resource with the Commission?"

Flood added, "We shared our efforts in the meetings with the ACCJC visiting team, not just in the report, and the members responded positively to our work of getting the help we needed to get the work done."

ROADMAPS

The college's efforts paid off with the reaffirmation letter, but equally important is sustaining the efforts and improvements made to date, and SWC sees future PRT visits as one way to ensure this happens.

"It is adding tools to one's toolbox, where we can borrow and share with others in our field to become better," noted Flood.

"We would definitely use a PRT in the future if the college faced some stumbling blocks where we needed support, before an accreditation sanction tells us to do it," he added.

"Yes, we are responsible, going forward, to build on what we have done, but the PRT helped us develop a roadmap to resolving the issues we faced in our accreditation report. It was a very positive experience for us," concluded Gilstrap. ■

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