Experiences with Accreditation
Midwestern Higher Education Compact
Chicago, Illinois – November 17, 2015
David L. Eisler, president

It is a pleasure to be a member of this panel today and to share some thoughts on accreditation from an institutional perspective. This is my 40th year in higher education, and accreditation has been a constant companion throughout this career. In that context the comments I provide here today are not the official position of my university and are mine alone. As a result I and not my institution bear the responsibility for them.

My first 14 years were as a faculty member and associate dean at Troy State University in Alabama where our regional accreditor was the Southern Association. The next six years were as a dean at Eastern New Mexico University where our accreditor was the North Central Association. Beyond the obvious geographical questions – New Mexico is neither north nor central – this was a time when North Central was the national leader in urging assessment for learning efficacy. At Eastern we were able to leverage our work in assessing student learning into receiving the Pew Leadership Award for the Renewal of Undergraduate Education.

During my seven years as provost at Weber State University in Utah I worked with the Northwest Association. On entering that position I was faced with a number of accreditation recommendations relating to a previous review that needed to be addressed. The most difficult of these was a finding on the inadequacy of our library holdings in some areas, an expensive and costly deficiency to correct. In correcting these finding, we did emerge as a stronger institution, better prepared to support our academic mission and the scholarly/ pedagogical efforts of our faculty.

This is now my 13th year at Ferris State University as their president, where we are accredited by the now renamed Higher Learning Commission. At Ferris we were reviewed by the HLC in 2010-11 and received full ten-year accreditation without any requirements for additional reports, focused visits, or required actions. This is a significant achievement for a multi-campus university and something we had not achieved in the past.

Looking back at forty years of regional accreditation, each of these experiences has included analysis of accreditation assumptions and expectations, preparation of self-study reports, hosting visiting teams, and responding to accreditation findings. In this process I have also served as a peer reviewer and evaluator. In essence it has been my opportunity to look at accreditation from both sides of this process, and on occasion as someone caught in the middle.
Beyond regional accreditations I have also dealt with many specialized disciplinary accreditors. This session will not focus on specialized accreditation, but it is important to remember this in the context of accreditation from an institutional perspective. Ferris is a career oriented university with a significant number of specialized accreditations, at last count there were 73! In some cases these are instances where we have chosen to be measured by national standards, in others accreditation is necessary to offer the program or for graduates to be certified for employment. Many specialized accreditors are helpful in encouraging improvements in our programs, but some make significant demands in terms of the commitment of resources and people for the discipline. In any case this is a significant investment in time and energy to keep up with these accreditations and changes in standards.

From an institutional perspective there are several essential components to successful accreditation:

- First is attention to the standards. For your campus or organization there needs to be a person actively involved with the accreditation agency who is knowledgeable about the standards, is tracking changes in them, and making certain there is an ongoing process where the standards are integrated in the ongoing development of the college or university. It is far easier to prepare for accreditation when there are active quality measurements and improvement efforts embedded in your organization.

- Second, is the preparation for an accreditation review. Typically this is a self-study or a quality-improvement project. Best practice is to engage as much of the university as possible in this process. Together with strategic planning, accreditation can be an opportunity to empower people throughout your institution and to focus attention on these processes, improvements, and academic quality. The internal preparation review can be as helpful, or even more helpful, than the external review for your college/university.

- Third, is the actual accreditation visit. Accreditation is based on the concept of peer review. Central to the quality of a regional accreditor assessment is the work of the peer reviewers. These are faculty and administrators from other colleges and universities within the region. It is important they understand and follow the standards. They will be far more helpful to your university if they read, observe, and listen, rather than arrive on site with preconceived opinions and predetermined outcomes. While there are multiple levels of review team reports and recommendations, the usefulness of the accreditation process will depend greatly on the leadership for and work of the team.

- Finally there is the team report and findings together with the accreditation recommendation. In some cases there will be follow-up visits on specific issues. In others there may be required reports to demonstrate the institution’s compliance with specific standards. Follow through on the institutional level with strong support from leadership can make this process one that creates meaningful change and improvement. It can also help address shortcomings so that they do not appear in future reports. This is also the time to make certain that necessary measurements and improvements are embedded in the organization.
In the time remaining I would like to offer some reflection gained from these experiences. Perhaps most importantly, it is important to remember that accreditation standards are minimums. Our goal should not be to meet these, but rather to exceed them. It is often useful to have this external review as a mechanism to highlight and address improvements needed. It can also be painful when the findings for whatever reason do not reflect what you believe is the true state or quality of your institution. Certainly there have been times in the experience of these many, many reviews when I believed the team was wrong, not understanding how the uniqueness of our institution addressed a particular expectations. In working with the Higher Learning Commission I have found that the multiple layers of review after the campus visit have been an effective mechanism to address concerns.

Certainly, there will always be exceptions, differences of view and interpretation. New standards can create tensions, and almost certainly change practices. Campus communities and other communities of teaching practice do not actively dislike change; however, they themselves do not want to be changed. When campuses or organizations dispute or disagree with new standards they choose a best-practice example to refute a charge, rarely looking at other lesser practices to see if they also come close to producing the same result.

Most recently the Higher Learning Commission attracted considerable attention regarding its Assumed Practice in Determining Qualified Faculty. This has drawn considerable criticism regarding dual enrollment programs, especially in terms of those in rural areas. While I did not participate in the development or approval of this Assumed Practice, I do believe this action can and will help improve academic quality. I also believe their extraordinary action to extend the period of compliance to 2022 for dual enrollment, from my perspective an unprecedented accommodation, suggests to me that they are listening to concerns.

At Ferris when we began dual enrollment programs we wanted to use high school faculty as classroom instructors for these courses, which are lower division, and primarily general education offerings. Our approach was to ask our academic departments on campus to review and recommend the high school faculty who would do this teaching, much as they would do for any academic course at our university. The standard they adopted closely parallels the HLC Assumed Practice of a master degree in the subject area field. As an outcome we now include these high school faculty in our academic departments, much as we do the high school students who are dual enrolled in our student body. This has created a relationship with our dual enrollment partners that I believe is extraordinary. In some very interesting ways, it is bridging the gap that should not exist between high school and college.

Certainly through department review of dual enrollment faculty, there were some areas where initially no faculty from a school were approved. To address this our high school partners have made hiring faculty with a masters degree in subject areas, or improving the preparation of selected faculty a priority. Over time I believe this will improve the education that together we both deliver. We also had the unexpected outcome from the departmental review of proposed high school faculty, where some high school faculty were judged more qualified. My favorite example is a high school mathematics teacher who has been approved to teach three levels of calculus courses.

Experiences with Accreditation, page 3
In closing I would offer these thoughts. There will always be pressures on education which push for greater access, less cost and quicker delivery. As an institution we understand this and are committed to meeting this need. Currently we teach nearly 1,000 dual enrolled students, offer bachelor degree programs at 20 community colleges, and 14 on-line degrees. However, we also understand that these pressures can push toward the lowest common denominator in terms of educational quality. As a result we set quality expectations before creating these partnerships. For each student we teach there is only one opportunity to touch them with a particular course offering. It is an unacceptable compromise that we offer them something we intend to improve; rather, we must do the best we can, each and every day, seeking to continually improve the education we provide.

Accreditation is a mechanism that creates common expectations of quality and can be an important factor in elevating the education students receive. Accreditation is by no means a perfect, consistent process. Any approach applied by human beings in a wide variety of settings, situations, and contexts will be only as good as the people implementing it, and the commitment and integrity they bring to their job. It is, however, an important, critical, and independent component that has helped make American higher education the standard by which other countries judge themselves.

These remarks are available on-line at –
http://ferris.edu/president/presentations/2015-2016/index.htm

Contact Dr. Eisler at – eislerd@ferris.edu