



# Still Striving

What HBCU Presidents Need to Know  
About SACS Accreditation



[www.southerneducation.org](http://www.southerneducation.org)

## The Southern Education Foundation

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF), [www.southerneducation.org](http://www.southerneducation.org), is a non-profit organization comprised of diverse women and men who work together to improve the quality of life for all of the South's people through better and more accessible education. SEF advances creative solutions to ensure fairness and excellence in education for low-income students from pre-school through higher education.

SEF depends upon contributions from foundations, corporations and individuals to support its efforts. SEF develops and implements programs of its own design, serves as an intermediary for donors who want a high-quality partner with whom to work on education issues in the South, and participates as a public charity in the world of philanthropy.

### SEF's Vision

We seek a South and a nation with a skilled workforce that sustains an expanding economy, where civic life embodies diversity and democratic values and practice, and where an excellent education system provides all students with fair chances to develop their talents and contribute to the common good. We will be known for our commitment to combating poverty and inequality through education.

### SEF's Timeless Mission

SEF develops, promotes and implements policies, practices and creative solutions that ensure educational excellence, fairness, and high levels of achievement among African Americans and other groups and communities that have not yet reached the full measure of their potential.

### SEF's Values and Principles

SEF is committed to:

- top quality work, assessment and continuous improvement to achieve high impact
- collaborative efforts that draw on the best of diverse institutions and communities in support of educational excellence
- creative problem solving
- integrity, accountability and transparency
- adaptability, flexibility and future-oriented approaches, and
- honest and intelligent advocacy to achieve results

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## Foreword

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF) is the South's oldest education philanthropy, working region-wide to advance equity and excellence in education from pre-school through higher education. It is also the South's only African American led and focused institution with such scope and interests. SEF's website, [www.southerneducation.org](http://www.southerneducation.org), provides a detailed history of the major contributions made by SEF over time to improve education policy and practice in the South.

Tracing its origins back to 1867, SEF has, over much of its 140-year history, supported and worked with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the South in diverse ways. SEF has recognized the vital role that HBCUs play as part of the needed response to the Southern legacy of exclusion and/or underinvestment in access to higher education for African Americans. Though SEF promotes diversity and inclusion at traditionally White institutions of higher education (TWIs), it affirms the continuing value and place of HBCUs as part of a constellation of institutions needed to meet diverse student needs.

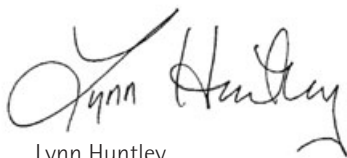
In recent years, SEF has helped HBCUs raise monies for operations from alumni and other new sources through a demonstration project funded by the Kresge Foundation. In a report called *Igniting Potential*, SEF documented the contributions of HBCUs in training African Americans in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. It has convened consortia of HBCUs to help faculty learn how to improve teaching skills and student learning outcomes through strategic uses of instructional technology. SEF has also invested in helping HBCU librarians and administrators enhance research capacities and technology access.

Since 2003, SEF has, with support from the Andrew W. Mellon and Charles Stewart Mott Foundations, mounted a special effort to help HBCUs prepare to meet accreditation requirements promulgated by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). Under the aegis of SEF's Center to Serve HBCUs, directed by Dr. Darryl Peterkin, SEF has provided information about best practices in reaffirmation preparation, mini-grants, travel study awards and held consultations on diverse subjects such as the role of accreditation liaisons, institutional effectiveness measures and research, and fiscal management and stability.

I wish to thank the Andrew W. Mellon and Charles Stewart Mott Foundations for understanding the important mission and achievements of HBCUs. Also I here acknowledge with great appreciation the qualities of mind and spirit exemplified by Dr. Leroy Davis, the author of this monograph.

Dr. Clinton Bristow, the president of Alcorn State University, served for several years on SEF's Board of Trustees and was a member of the Advisory Committee to the Center to Serve HBCUs since its inception. Dr. Bristow died in 2006. We mourn his untimely passing still. Dr. Bristow's high standards and leadership were important, and his contributions to equity and excellence in education many.

In all of our efforts, SEF's aim is to help HBCUs provide the high quality education which students deserve and require. HBCUs have helped African Americans thus far along the way. SEF looks forward to continuing to support them in their valued endeavors.



Lynn Huntley

President

The Southern Education Foundation



# Still Striving

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## What HBCU Presidents Need to Know About SACS Accreditation

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### Introduction

College and university presidents are expected to give attention to a wide range of programs and activities that ultimately define the health and well-being of their institutions (June, 2006). Accreditation is one such activity that demands much of a president's time and commitment. The benefits of accreditation are, however, well worth the effort. Attainment of accreditation by an institution provides the public with assurances of institutional quality; ensures institutional eligibility for participation in federal student financial aid programs; and serves as a prerequisite for additional programmatic and specialized accreditation memberships.

Accreditation for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is especially important because most HBCUs have relatively small endowments, serve many aid-dependent students, and face escalating costs for infrastructure maintenance and staffing. With so much dependent on the institution's membership and good standing in a regional accrediting body, every HBCU president must understand the dynamics of accreditation and take the necessary steps to ensure that his/her institution's membership is not jeopardized. The president must be the primary leader of institutional accreditation activities.

At first glance, the accreditation process may appear to be complicated and overwhelming. However, upon further examination, the process is orderly and easy to comprehend. In this paper, we use the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) as the accreditation model. We select this regional accrediting body to examine in depth because it is responsible for accreditation decision making for 77 HBCUs located in the South, the area served by the Southern Education Foundation (SEF).

Our goal is to provide HBCU presidents with a better understanding of the accreditation process and to offer recommendations for strengthening their roles as institutional accreditation leaders. In our other monograph, *The Boards of Trustees of Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the Accreditation Process of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools*, the role of Trustees in ensuring accreditation compliance is examined.

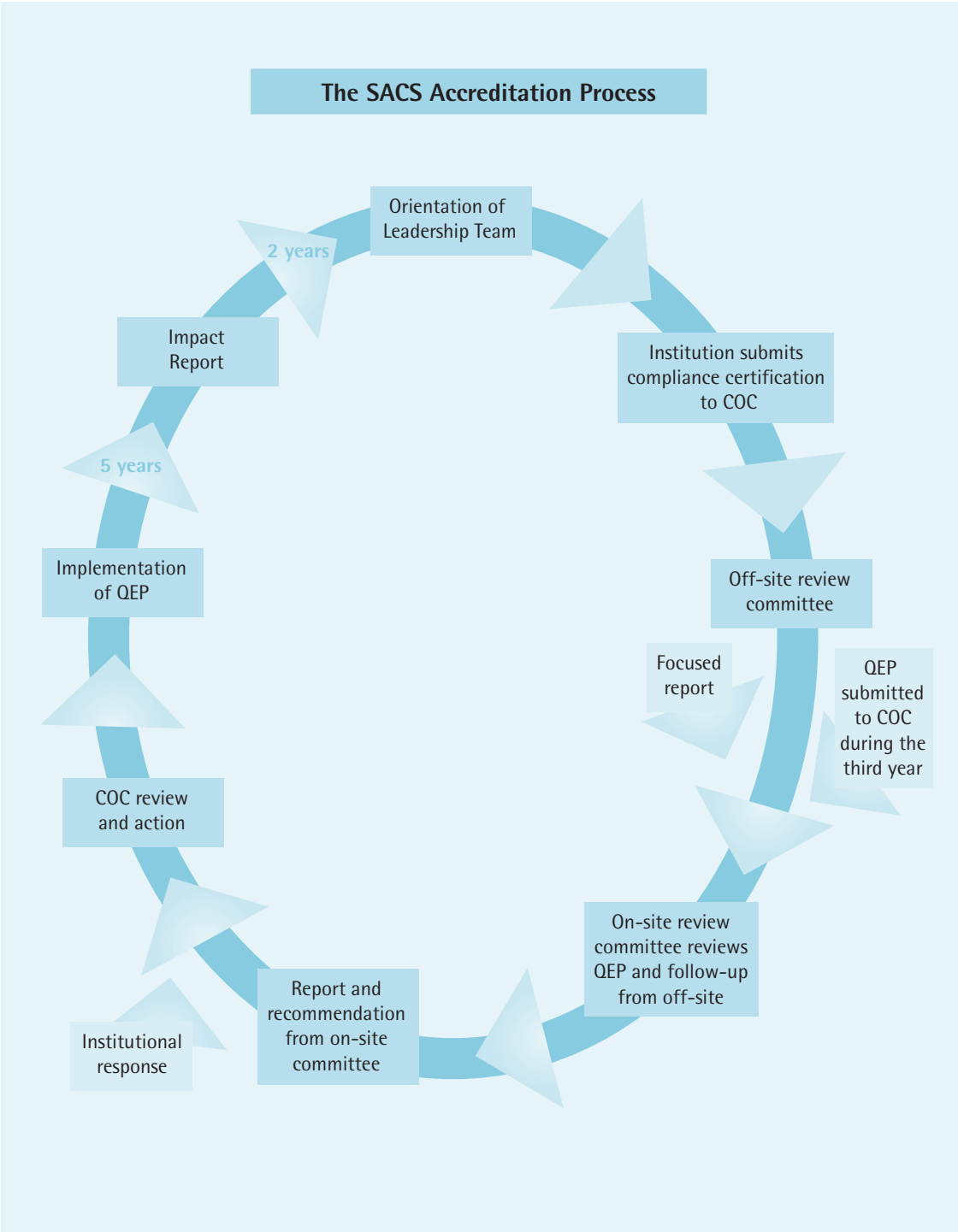
### An Overview of the SACS Accreditation Process

The SACS Commission on Colleges (COC) is a voluntary association of more than 750 member institutions. Institutions seeking initial membership must petition the Commission, apply for candidacy, and engage in a comprehensive self-assessment. If the institution meets all of the membership requirements and demonstrates compliance with all of the standards set forth in the handbook, *The Principles of Accreditation: Foundation for Quality Enhancement (Principles of Accreditation)*, membership will be granted. Member institutions are required to engage in a renewal or reaffirmation of their accreditation status every ten years.

Preparation for reaffirmation requires strategic planning, research and other efforts designed to ensure excellence in institutional performance and pursuit of institutional mission, quality stewardship of resources and robust student learning outcomes. It is important for presidents and their staffs to understand both the content and mechanics of the process and the presidential leadership role in relation thereto.

The SACS COC reaffirmation process can be separated into eleven distinct steps. Some of these steps are overlapping, and others occur simultaneously. It should be noted that the SACS COC, like other accrediting bodies (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002), periodically revises accreditation processes and standards.

For the purpose of understanding how the contemporary accreditation process works, the figure below illustrates steps that should be taken to ensure appropriate preparation for reaffirmation. Though different institutions may proceed in ways not identical to these steps, the important thing is to ensure that the activities described below are undertaken.



### **The Leadership Team is Appointed and Oriented**

At least 3 or 4 years prior to the date of an institution's reaffirmation, the president should appoint a Leadership Team of institutional officers, faculty and other constituents. The primary purpose of the Team is to provide direction and guidance for the reaffirmation process. The Team essentially functions as a steering committee. The president and key administrators generally constitute this Team of 5-15 persons.

Three years prior to reaffirmation, the COC will invite the Teams for all of the institutions in a particular reaffirmation class for an orientation session at an off-campus location. The COC will provide an overview of the reaffirmation process, emphasize due dates for reports, describe the available resources for institutions, and define roles and responsibilities. In many respects, the orientation of the Team signals the official beginning of the reaffirmation process.

### **The Compliance Certification Report is Submitted to the COC**

The Compliance Certification report is a comprehensive document that certifies the institution's status of compliance with the accreditation requirements. COC requires the submission of such reports during the second year of the process. Detailed evidence and supporting documentation must be provided by the institution for each requirement set forth in the *Principles of Accreditation*.

The preparation of this document is usually coordinated by the Team or a Special Committee. Its preparation requires input from departments throughout the institution. It is not uncommon to spend 12 to 18 months preparing the Compliance Certification report. Prior to submission, the authenticity and correctness of the report must be attested to by the president. Presidential leadership is vital to ensure that the submissions to COC reflect the institution's best thinking and have support from the top down and bottom up. Other accrediting bodies refer to a similar type of document as a "self-study" report.

### **An Off-Site Review Committee Studies the Compliance Certification**

The Off-Site Review Committee, comprised of peer reviewers from other COC member institutions, examines the Compliance Certification and determines the level of institutional compliance. On each compliance issue, the Committee may conclude "full compliance," "partial compliance," "non-compliance," or "unable to determine." The Committee works at a neutral, off-site location and reviews the reports of all of the institutions to be considered for reaffirmation in a given class. The Committee's report is provided to the COC and the On-Site Review Committee.

### **The Institution May Elect to Submit a Focused Report Responsive to the Off-Site Review Committee Findings**

The COC provides a copy of the Off-Site Review Committee report to the college or university that is under review. The institution is given the opportunity to respond to the Committee's findings in a focused report. Submission of a focused report in response to the Off-Site Review Committee report is not mandatory, but can be a useful means by which to provide additional information and explanations to help resolve compliance issues.

## **The Institution's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)**

The QEP, which is submitted to the COC during the third year, is the second major accreditation document prepared by the institution. Its primary purpose is to demonstrate the engagement of the institution in addressing one or more issues that affect student learning and institutional quality. It is, in effect, evidence of an active culture of continuous improvement on campus. Involving the entire institutional community, the QEP should be focused, succinct and well-researched. The QEP is implemented over time.

## **The On-Site Review Committee Visits the Campus**

The On-Site Review Committee, comprised of peer reviewers from COC member institutions, visits the college or university campus. Its two major functions are to evaluate the appropriateness and quality of the QEP, and address and resolve compliance issues identified by the Off-Site Review Committee. The Committee remains on campus for 2 or 3 days and spends most of that time reviewing the QEP.

## **The On-Site Review Committee Develops Its Report and Recommendations**

Using information gathered from its review and that of the Off-Site Review Committee, the On-Site Review Committee prepares a report for the COC with a recommendation on the accreditation status of the institution.

## **The Institution May Elect to Respond to the Summary of the On-Site Review Committee's Report**

Once the On-Site Review Committee's report is received by the COC, the institution is provided a summary of the Committee findings. The institution may choose to submit a written response to the Committee's report. The Committee's report and the institution's response are used by the COC in deciding the institution's accreditation status.

## **COC Reviews the Reports and Determines Accreditation Status**

The COC meets two times a year to make decisions on reaffirmation of accreditation. Its final decision may be to reaffirm accreditation, continue accreditation, or withdraw accreditation from the institution. The results of the deliberations are publicly announced.

Though not addressed here, it is important to note that COC has an appeal process and rules and regulations in this regard. If an institution is found not to be in full compliance, it has specified periods of time within which to "cure" the found violations of the Principles. A maximum two-year monitoring period can be provided by COC for institutions that fail to comply with the requirements. Failure to make adequate progress toward compliance during the two-year period or failure to fully comply at the conclusion of two years may result in COC action to remove an institution's accreditation. Removal from membership is an action that can be appealed.

## **The Institution Implements Its QEP**

Assuming that the institution is reaccredited, work begins on the Quality Enhancement Plan. Results and findings are closely monitored over the next five years.

Even if the institution is not fully reaffirmed, it is not excused from continuing compliance with the *Principles*, while it works to address deficiencies.

### **The QEP Impact Report is Submitted by the Institution**

At the end of the fifth year after reaffirmation, the institution is required to submit to the COC a report describing the impact of the QEP on student learning and institutional quality.

### **Summary of the Process**

The SACS COC accreditation model is dependent on institutional integrity, compliance with the accreditation standards, enhancement of institutional quality and demonstrated student learning outcomes. QEPs must reflect broad patterns of engagement by diverse elements on the campus. QEP implementation requires institutional involvement throughout the decennial cycle. The ongoing nature of the QEP means that accreditation is a process, not just an event. (Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2005a). The engagement of all constituencies, including the president and Team, board, faculty, staff, students and other stakeholders in this process, is the hallmark of those institutions that are successful in the accreditation process.

If one steps back from the steps and processes described above and contemplates the whole accreditation process, it becomes clear that what SACS COC is endeavoring to do through the Principles is to establish some baselines of quality practice against which to assess institutional operations. It uses peers from colleges and universities to apply those principles to discrete institutions. Institutions that are committed to and have good strategic plans which are updated and periodically reviewed will see in the COC review process similarities to strategic planning efforts already underway. SACS COC wants to see, in essence, evidence of quality strategic planning and implementation.

Though reaffirmation may take time and effort, at the end of the day, having quality institutions and robust student learning outcomes are the *raison d'être* of every college or university leader. The COC process is a guide to helping colleges and universities become better, more effective places of learning.

### **Advice on Accreditation for HBCU Presidents**

As noted above, presidents are the institutional leaders on matters related to regional accreditation. This is not to suggest that Boards of Trustees and other parts of colleges and universities have no role. To the contrary. But the "buck" stops on the president's desk!

Because presidents cannot know everything about accreditation, below accreditation-related recommendations are set forth to help streamline and enhance the management of the accreditation process, while allowing presidents adequate time to address other institutional matters.

### **Accreditation-Related Recommendations**

**STUDY THE PRINCIPLES OF ACCREDITATION THOROUGHLY AND WELL.** Every president should take the time to master the content and goals of the accreditation process articulated by COC. A good beginning is to study in detail the *Principles of Accreditation* and think about the kinds of information that should be amassed to demonstrate compliance.

**REVIEW YOUR INSTITUTION'S MOST RECENT SELF-STUDY** (and/or Compliance Certification) and any other materials related to COC. The president should not only know his/her institution's current status with COC, but have knowledge of his/her institution's recent history. Were there institutional commitments made in the last self-study?

What, if any, were the issues that required additional follow-up? Was the institution sanctioned during the last reaffirmation? The answers to these questions provide the context for the current reaffirmation process.

The accreditation process is cyclical, and the president needs to know about any recent issues that have been or need to be resolved. A review of the previous self-study document and COC communications will give the president an accurate view of the institution's recent history and provide a point of departure for planning future efforts.

**DEVELOP PERSONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CALENDARS** of upcoming reaffirmation and accreditation visits. Adequate planning time is most important in the accreditation process. Time is a major factor in ensuring compliance with accreditation processes and principles. For example, hiring a faculty member with the proper credentials or demonstrating financial stability are activities that may require considerable time. Presidents should know about all of the institution's accreditations, including the programmatic or specialized areas (e.g., AACSB, ABET, NCATE, ACS). Reaffirmation planning should begin several years out to ensure a successful outcome.

An "accreditation calendar" helps the president, board and staff prepare adequately for this important activity. Including accreditation visits on the institution's annual calendar is important. Maintenance of a multi-year calendar for the Team, cabinet level officials and the board is also advisable.

Above all, presidents should maintain a long-term personal calendar of upcoming accreditation events.

**ASSIGN RESPONSIBILITY TO KEY INDIVIDUALS** for compliance activities and review efforts periodically. Although the president is the accreditation preparation leader, he/she cannot manage the nuts and bolts of accreditation. The president's cabinet or designated leaders have to be held accountable for compliance-related efforts to which they are assigned. The president should also work closely with the board on governance-related compliance matters. Compliance with standards related to faculty, planning and evaluation, resources, student affairs and educational programs should be the primary responsibility of executive staff.

Examining institutional compliance should not be a "once-every-ten-year" event. It has to be an on-going process. The president should plan for periodic (once or twice each year) compliance status reports (formal or informal) from each responsible cabinet member. Adopting such a method can help ensure a smooth compliance audit during the actual reaffirmation process. It is well worth the effort.

**OBTAIN ALL ACCREDITATION HANDBOOKS, MANUALS AND OTHER RESOURCES** and use them and provide copies to key staff. SACS produces an assortment of excellent publications that are designed to help staff at member institutions understand the accreditation process. These include policy manuals, as well as "how to" handbooks, that provide detailed information on every aspect of accreditation. For presidents and their staffs, these publications are indispensable. Many are on-line and can be downloaded. Others are in print version, but are inexpensive. Presidents should ensure that they and their staffs have all of these publications. The president should also use these references in fulfilling another vital responsibility – educating the board about its duties and obligations.

**ATTEND ALL SACS COC MEETINGS** and if possible, require key staff (and invite board members) to attend periodically. One to two years prior to reaffirmation, the entire leadership team should attend such meetings. The SACS COC Annual Meeting is held the first week of December each year. SACS also holds workshops and seminars throughout the year, including a summer meeting on Institutional Effectiveness. The Annual Meeting should be

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attended by every HBCU president whose institution is subject to reaffirmation by SACS. It provides unlimited networking opportunities for presidents and their staffs. Scores of presentations and workshops are conducted on virtually every major accreditation topic. Methods and best practices are discussed and shared by colleagues from other member institutions. It is one of the best sources for professional development in the area of accreditation.

Vice presidents, accreditation liaisons, institutional researchers and other key staff members should also attend on a regular basis and develop relationships with their peers. There should also be an effort to ensure that the entire Team attends at least one Annual Meeting to learn about the reaffirmation process from peer institutions that have recently completed it. Based on the president's judgment, consideration should be given to arranging for a board member to attend this meeting occasionally. This would help emphasize the importance of the board's role in the accreditation process.

**RECOMMEND STAFF TO SERVE AS PEER REVIEWERS** whenever the SACS COC makes such opportunities available. The experience gained by serving as a member of an accreditation peer review committee can be invaluable to an institution going through the reaffirmation process. This first-hand knowledge is beneficial in preparing accreditation documents and planning for committee visits to campus.

SACS maintains a pool of peer reviewers from member institutions. Periodically, presidents are asked to submit nominations for the SACS peer review pool. Presidents should carefully select staff members who have the experience and other attributes that make for good reviewers. Presidents should not pass up such an opportunity to enrich their institutions with this type of experience. SACS wants and needs to have a diverse pool of peer reviewers. HBCUs have much to contribute in this regard.

**CONDUCT MOCK CERTIFICATION AUDITS EVERY 2-3 YEARS** to identify compliance issues in need of attention. Compliance certification is a major part of the SACS reaffirmation process. Institutions should not wait until reaffirmation officially begins to check compliance. For each of the *Principles of Accreditation*, the president and the executive staff should ask, "Are we in compliance?"

Presidents should plan an institution-wide self-assessment every 2-3 years. This may be coordinated by the executive team members as a part of their reporting on accreditation to the president. Every standard should be thoroughly reviewed and corrective measures proposed for each one needing additional work.

**BECOME ACTIVELY ENGAGED IN SACS ACTIVITIES.** Chair peer review committees and consider seeking a seat on a governing board. SACS is a voluntary association of member institutions. All major policy decisions, including those involving the accreditation standards and principles, are made by the membership. Presidents represent their institutions and are actually the voting members. Presidents should discuss proposed changes with their staffs and actively participate in discussions at the Annual Meeting.

Serving as a chair of a peer review committee provides another opportunity for presidents to gain knowledge and experience that will be extremely helpful during the reaffirmation process. SACS maintains a corps of chairs made up primarily of college and university presidents. HBCU presidents should volunteer for chair training and participate in these leadership roles.

HBCU presidents often bring a much needed perspective to the accreditation process. The modest amount of time invested into this service is well worth the benefits that will be gained.

The governing board for SACS is a 77-member body which is made up primarily of college and university presidents. Election to this body begins with recommendations from state delegations and ends with final approval by the membership. Serving as a member provides a rare opportunity to influence policy and participate in action decisions involving institutions. The presence of HBCU presidents is a major benefit to SACS, as well as to the individuals who provide service at this level.

**KEEP YOUR BOARD INFORMED ON ACCREDITATION ISSUES** and provide periodic updates. Board education is a major responsibility for presidents. Although the board should provide broad oversight for the accreditation process, often board members lack detailed knowledge of accreditation requirements and the implications for resource allocation and institutional life. Presidents should work with their board chairs to provide workshops and other professional development opportunities related to accreditation. Presidents should also update their boards when major changes which impact the institution are being made by SACS COC.

During the reaffirmation process, presidents should prepare an action plan for the board to assist it in monitoring the progress of the process. The relationship between the president and the board on accreditation matters is important (Hopps, 2006). By sharing this responsibility with the board, presidents can focus on providing the necessary leadership to keep their institutions in good standing with the accrediting body. Boards that partner with the president on accreditation are more likely to support the changes necessary to keep the institution in compliance with the standards.

**REVIEW AND UNDERSTAND THE FINANCE-RELATED REQUIREMENTS** and work with your Chief Financial Officer (CFO) to ensure and monitor compliance. Begin now! Demonstration of financial adequacy and stability are major accreditation requirements. SACS describes both in its Core Requirements and Comprehensive Standards as set forth in the *Principles of Accreditation*. Institutions should constantly assess their financial status in relation to these requirements. The president and the CFO should assume the responsibility for this assessment.

A number of smaller institutions, including some HBCUs, are constantly challenged by financial issues. In many cases, years of corrective action are needed for these institutions to demonstrate financial stability and adequacy. The worst possible time to learn that an institution is not in compliance with the financial standards is during the reaffirmation process when time is a major factor. Presidents need to understand financial accreditation requirements and work with their staffs and board to ensure compliance.

**REVIEW AND REVISE YOUR INSTITUTIONAL MISSION STATEMENT AND STRATEGIC PLAN PERIODICALLY** and obtain board involvement and approval. An institution's mission statement defines its specific educational role or purpose. It also represents the official posture and practice of the institution. The president should ensure that the mission statement and strategic plan are reviewed and updated on a periodic basis. The president must also ensure that the board's philosophy is reflected in the mission statement and that the final document is approved by the board.

The actual process of developing or reviewing the mission statement and planning documents should include a representative group of the institution's stakeholders, with the primary leadership provided by the president. The accrediting body will often refer back to the mission statement when reviewing an institution's policies, programs and services (Commission on Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2005b).

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**DEVELOP A STRONG INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH CAPACITY** and plan and assess institutional effectiveness frequently. Make sure that the institution engages in systematic, integrated and institution-wide, research-based planning and evaluation processes and services. SACS COC expects its member institutions to demonstrate that they are effective at achieving their missions. Institutions should develop plans to assess the effectiveness of their academic and non-academic programs. They are also expected to have institutional research departments or offices to coordinate planning and assessment efforts. Throughout the institution there should be a seamless program for measuring effectiveness. Indeed, the campus culture should be one that embraces assessment and the subsequent use of results to improve effectiveness.

The president must also ensure that adequately trained personnel and resources are available to fulfill this important requirement. Demonstrating institutional effectiveness through research and evaluation is a major part of the reaffirmation process.

**REVIEW INSTITUTIONAL FILES DOCUMENTING FACULTY CREDENTIALS ANNUALLY.** Presidents should require their staffs to review and update faculty files every year. All too often, institutions only give attention to faculty files during the reaffirmation process. SACS continues to issue a substantial number of sanctions based on inadequate faculty files. These may include missing documents, inappropriate credentials for the teaching assignments or questionable academic credentials. Presidents need to emphasize to their academic affairs officers the importance of maintaining accurate and complete faculty files.

**BEGIN DEVELOPMENT OF THE QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PLAN (QEP) EARLY** in the reaffirmation cycle. The QEP describes efforts through which the institution will focus on improving an aspect of institutional operations and student learning for most of the 10-year reaffirmation cycle. The QEP provides an institution with the opportunity to work on an important problem or concern. The development of the QEP should be a thoughtful, deliberative process that involves the entire institution. The president should be actively involved in the process of selecting a QEP topic. The goal is to have institution-wide "buy-in" and ownership of the QEP and engagement in its implementation from the top down and the bottom up.

When developing a QEP for the first time, adequate time must be set aside for review of institutional data, problems and issues of prioritized concern. The president should help to facilitate the area on which the QEP will focus but not seek to dictate final outcomes. An institution can use a well-conceived QEP to motivate and inspire stakeholders inside and outside of the institution. At least two years should be allocated for the selection of a QEP topic and the development of the plan that follows.

**DEVELOP BUDGET LINE ITEMS FOR ACCREDITATION PLANNING.** Don't expect your staff to do the work without adequate resources. There are real costs associated with the reaffirmation process. At various stages of the process, costs may increase or decrease. Typical expenses might include clerical and technical personnel, consultants, travel to meetings, library resources, hiring additional faculty for compliance, etc. The president and the Team should anticipate costs while planning for the reaffirmation.

Some institutions establish a specific accreditation budget. Whether developed separately or as part of an overall budget, adequate resources must be set aside to defray expenses related to reaffirmation. Staff morale can suffer if accreditation expenses must come from regular operating funds.

Accreditation is too important to be unfunded or under-funded. The president should ensure that the budget reflects the anticipated expenses for this necessary activity.

**DESIGNATE THE LEADERSHIP TEAM AS SOON AS POSSIBLE** and be involved from start to finish. As noted above, at least three or four years before reaffirmation review, the president should appoint a Team. This Team functions as the official "steering committee" for the reaffirmation. It should consist of the accreditation liaison, key executive staff and other faculty/staff with important roles in the process. Some presidents include student representation and, occasionally, a board member. While SACS does not define the size of the Team, it should not be too large to be an effective body.

The orientation of the Team is the first official activity that SACS initiates with the institution to begin the reaffirmation process. Presidents should have their Teams appointed and functioning well in advance of this orientation. The president should either be on the Team and/or be prepared to assume the major leadership role in the process. Leading the institution's reaffirmation is too important to delegate completely to others.

**SET INTERNAL DEADLINES** to have ample time to review all institutional reports and exhibits, including annual Institutional Profile Reports, prior to submission to SACS COC. It is never too early to begin the reaffirmation process. The institution's accreditation action plan should include deadlines that provide adequate time for the president and the accreditation liaison to read all reports before they are sent to the accrediting body. As busy as presidents are, they should read all accreditation reports before they leave the institution. To emphasize how important this is, SACS requires the president and the accreditation liaison to sign the Compliance Certification document before it is officially sent from the institution.

Likewise, the SACS annual Institutional Profile Reports must also be signed by the president. There are examples of presidents not reading important accreditation reports, often leading to disastrous results.

**IDENTIFY AND APPOINT THE MOST COMPETENT PERSON ON YOUR CAMPUS** to serve as accreditation liaison and work with the accreditation liaison on a regular basis. SACS requires institutions to designate "accreditation liaisons." The accreditation liaison interfaces with the president on matters related to accreditation and also with SACS COC. This appointment provides the president an excellent opportunity to designate a person who will provide critical assistance and advice. The person selected should be one who is willing and well qualified to serve, as well as respected throughout the campus community.

The accreditation liaison should be included on the Team and be aware of all institutional matters related to accreditation. The president should have regularly scheduled meetings with the accreditation liaison for updates and progress reports. All accreditation documents should be reviewed by the accreditation liaison before being submitted for the president's review and approval. Finally, the president should support the accreditation liaison by providing adequate financial resources and giving him/her the opportunity to report on accreditation to various campus constituents.

**WORK WITH YOUR SACS COC REPRESENTATIVE** to secure an opportunity for the accreditation liaison or other key campus leader to serve as an observer on a SACS COC On-Site Review Committee visit to a peer institution's campus. These rare opportunities can be provided by having the president make such a request of SACS COC. An observer can "shadow" the On-Site Review Committee throughout a visit, but cannot participate in the Committee's decision-making. The total costs for the observer would have to be paid by your institution. These opportunities are not guaranteed, but the president should make the request, if the experience is needed.

## What HBCU Presidents Need to Know About SACS Accreditation

**DEVELOP A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SACS COC STAFF MEMBER** assigned to your institution and consult with him/her when you need direction or advice. SACS assigns a staff member to each member institution to assist it on matters related to accreditation. If an institution has a question or needs clarification on an accreditation-related issue, the president may contact the assigned SACS staff member for assistance. Generally, SACS staff are efficient and timely in responding to the concerns of institutions. The president may also designate the accreditation liaison to make contact with the SACS staff member. All other faculty and staff should refrain from making contact without prior presidential approval.

**EMPHASIZE TO STAFF THE NEED TO DEMONSTRATE PERSONAL, PROFESSIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY** throughout the accreditation process. Undergirding all of the standards and actions of the accreditation process is the principle of integrity. SACS expects institutions to be honest and truthful in their reporting. Data should be accurate and verifiable. Checks and balances are built into the accreditation process to help guarantee integrity. Presidents should remind their staff frequently of the need to always represent the institution and themselves with the highest degree of honesty and integrity.

Integrity is the basis upon which the self-regulatory activities of accrediting agencies such as SACS COC operate. Without the ability to rely upon accurate self-reporting, SACS COC would have to adopt a much more punitive and investigative approach. Every institution from top to bottom must make accuracy and integrity watchwords for all submissions and representations to SACS COC.

### Helpful Hints for New Presidents

Accreditation is just one of many major issues that new presidents have to address (Leubsdorf, 2006). At first, it may be challenging to devote adequate time to each important institutional issue. In fact, it may be best for most new presidents to set a goal of 12-18 months for completing the initial phases of understanding the reaffirmation process and the institution's current accreditation status.

Each new president will bring his/her own experiences on accreditation to the position (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2005). Some presidents may have limited or no experience with SACS while others may have years of rich experiences in working with SACS or other accrediting bodies. What each new president needs to know will depend on his/her level of experience with accreditation, the type of institution that he/she is leading, and where the institution is in the reaffirmation cycle. Each presidency will be unique and therefore, the accreditation needs of the president will also be unique. In the previous section we highlight many bits of advice to which new presidents should be especially attentive. Below are set forth helpful hints for presidents who have little or no experience with the SACS accreditation process.

It bears repeating here for emphasis purposes that, in addition to obtaining and mastering the *Principles of Accreditation* and other related handbooks developed by SACS COC and reviewing recent courses of dealings with SACS COC, the president must be especially attentive to his/her institution's previously submitted annual Institutional Profile Reports on enrollment and finances. The data contained in these documents will help the president to understand what SACS requires of its member institutions annually.

The new president should also make a conscious effort to know the institution's previous self-study director. This person can share with the president important issues that emerged during the last reaffirmation and describe any commitments that were made on behalf of the institution. Institutional culture, best practices and reliable personnel are other topics that this person can share with the president. Former self-study directors (especially those who were successful) can be very valuable resources for the institution and the president.

During the first six months of his/her tenure, the new president should contact the assigned SACS staff member. The new president should introduce him or herself and express a desire to be actively engaged in the work of the accrediting body. If appropriate, a face-to-face meeting between the president and the SACS staff representative should be scheduled. Building a good relationship with this person will be extremely helpful to the president throughout the reaffirmation process and beyond.

New presidents should give careful thought to whom they designate as the accreditation liaison. Not only should this person be competent at fulfilling the duties of the position, they should also be comfortable in working with the president. In addition to being the president's "eyes" and "ears" on accreditation matters, they must also be loyal.

Before making such an important appointment, the president may want to have all or most of his/her executive team in place. The president can discuss this appointment with them and even solicit input and recommendations before making a final decision.

Finally, a new president may wish to develop a mentor-mentee relationship with a trusted, more experienced colleague. Having a colleague outside of the campus environment to consult with on accreditation and a host of other issues can be most helpful. (Leubsdorf, 2006). A president who has led an institution successfully through a reaffirmation cycle can provide valuable insights about the experience to a colleague who is just getting started. Many experienced presidents would welcome the opportunity to be helpful – if asked.

## Conclusion

Presidents have many opportunities to significantly influence the current and future directions of their institutions (Ingram, 1993; June, 2005). With so many issues confronting them and competing for their time and attention (June, 2006), presidents must often manage their activities by level of importance. Presidents should rank accreditation among their top priorities. Very few activities can have as great an impact on an institution as accreditation. Essentially every activity that occurs at an institution has some relationship to accreditation, directly or indirectly.

HBCU presidents are especially challenged to devote sufficient time to accreditation-related activities, given the myriad of critical and complex operational, management and financial issues that they confront on a daily basis (Hopps, 2006). However, the downward spiral of institutions that have lost accreditation membership provides additional motivation for these leaders to become active in the process. The extent to which they assume this leadership role could very well determine whether their institutions prosper and fulfill their true potential for achieving excellence. What presidents do about accreditation can not only determine their own futures, but the future of the institutions they lead.

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