Accreditation 101

Q. What is accreditation?
A. Accreditation is a form of self-regulation and quality assurance in higher education. In the U.S., accreditation is coordinated by a non-governmental non-profit organization, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). There are six regional accrediting organizations in the U.S. Rollins’s regional accreditor is the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC, pronounced “SACS C-O-C”). SACSCOC is authorized to accredit institutions in many southern states as well as in several international locations. SACSCOC, which is comprised of its members, Rollins among them, accredits institutions that have missions appropriate to higher education, devote resources to carrying out those missions, and can show that they do, in fact, achieve those missions.

Q. Does Rollins really need to be accredited?
A. For starters, institutions that want access to federal financial aid for their students must be regionally accredited. So, yes: Rollins needs to be accredited.

Q. Is accreditation something new?
A. No. As more and more students began attending colleges across the U.S., accreditation organizations formed in the late 19th and 20th centuries to ensure consistency in academic standards across institutions. SACS was founded in 1895. SACSCOC dates to 1912, “and was organized to develop standards and a process for accrediting colleges and universities in the South,” according to the organization’s website. Rollins was first accredited by SACSCOC in 1927 and has been continuously accredited since that time.

Q. How often must an institution seek reaffirmation of its accreditation?
A. An accredited institution like Rollins seeks reaffirmation of accreditation every 10 years by undertaking a detailed self-study of its practices and submitting a required Compliance Certification Report (CCR) demonstrating its adherence to regional standards. The CCR shows the extent to which Rollins complies “with each of the Core Requirements, Comprehensive Standards, and Federal Regulations [or Requirements] as presented in the Principles” of accreditation.

Q. How many requirements, standards, and regulations are there?
A. SACSCOC currently asks accredited institutions to write narratives that assure institutional compliance with about 100 standards. While some of these do not apply to Rollins (e.g., questions about the associate’s degree), we must still respond to each one, even if we only say, “This standard does not apply to Rollins.” The standards include the three categories noted above: Core, Comprehensive, and Federal.
Q. Give an example of a standard.
A. Here are four examples that show just some of the breadth and depth of the SACSCOC Principles of Accreditation standards.

- **Core Requirement 2.5 Institutional Effectiveness.** The institution engages in ongoing, integrated, and institution-wide research-based planning and evaluation processes that (1) incorporate a systematic review of institutional mission, goals, and outcomes; (2) result in continuing improvement in institutional quality; and (3) demonstrate the institution is effectively accomplishing its mission.

- **Comprehensive Standard 3.4.12 Technology Use.** The institution's use of technology enhances student learning and is appropriate for meeting the objectives of its programs. Students have access to and training in the use of technology.

- **Comprehensive Standard 3.6.2 Graduate Curriculum.** The institution structures its graduate curricula (1) to include knowledge of the literature of the discipline and (2) to ensure ongoing student engagement in research and/or appropriate professional practice and training experiences.

- **Federal Requirement 4.1 Student Achievement:** The institution evaluates success with respect to student achievement consistent with its mission. Criteria may include enrollment data; retention, graduation, course completion, and job placement rates; state licensing examinations; student portfolios; or other means of demonstrating achievement of goals.

Q. Reaccreditation sounds pretty demanding.
A. It is. Completing the CCR required the collaboration of the entire campus. In addition, each claim that Rollins made in the CCR had to be backed up by documentation, in much the same way that a scholarly article would footnote its sources. Nearly 2,200 documents were gathered in completing the Rollins CCR.

Q. What is the process Rollins will go through?
A. In brief, an offsite committee reviews an institution’s CCR. This committee then tells SACSCOC in writing to what degree it feels the institution meets SACSCOC’s standards. In response to the offsite committee’s concerns, the institution has a chance to provide additional information in what SACSCOC calls a Focused Report. Next March, a second committee (the onsite review committee) will visit Rollins and focus on these issues, on several federally regulated items that it is required to review, and on the College’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), which SACSCOC also requires.

The onsite visit lasts about three days and will be held March 17-19, 2015. While visiting, the onsite committee can ask for interviews with any member of the faculty, staff, or student body as well as access to any additional documentation it deems necessary. The onsite committee also fully engages with the Quality Enhancement Plan Proposal Development
Committee and the campus community to assess the College’s proposed QEP project.

Just before it leaves, the onsite committee lets the institution know its recommendations; in SACSCOC’s parlance, “recommendations” are things that an institution must do to be compliant. SACSCOC itself then accepts or rejects all or some of these recommendations. Obviously, a great site visit means that there are no recommendations, but this is an unusual outcome. Rollins does have a chance to respond to the onsite committee’s report in order to correct errors of fact. SACSCOC then meets to decide the final outcome, which is announced at the SACSCOC annual meeting in December 2015.

Q. What if Rollins undergoes a dramatic change? Does that affect our accreditation?
A. SACSCOC defines “Substantive Change” as “a significant modification or expansion in the nature and scope of an accredited institution.” Some changes require only that SACSCOC be notified in advance; others require that a prospectus describing the proposed change be submitted at least six months prior to the start date of a new program. Others may require not only a prospectus, but also full documentation and a site visit from a SACSCOC substantive change committee. Rollins had its most recent substantive change site visit when it desired to offer a doctoral degree; this proposal changed Rollins's SACSCOC institution level (from III, bachelor’s, to V, which allows us to offer up to three doctoral degrees) and, thus, required the onsite visit.

Q. Is SACSCOC emphasizing anything now?
A. SACSCOC is emphasizing assessment of student learning and demonstration of student achievement. That is why Rollins was placed on Monitoring Status for Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1.1 (assessment, essentially) following its fifth-year checkup with SACSCOC. Rollins was removed from Monitoring Status in summer 2014. This removal was the result of the hard work of the Demonstration of Learning Team and the engagement of 100% of academic programs in assessment.

Q. What is the Quality Enhancement Plan I’ve heard about?
A. The Quality Enhancement Plan, or QEP, has been a reaccreditation requirement for about 10 years now. SACSCOC asks all institutions to develop a QEP that is faculty-driven, budgeted, and improves the learning of most of the students on campus. Rollins has developed its QEP following extensive campus conversations; the QEP will focus on integrating career planning into academic planning and advising. Rollins can nominate at least two experts as QEP reviewers; SACSCOC will choose one, who will be part of the site-visit team.

Q. Have the campus and the Board of Trustees been kept in the loop?
A. Yes – we have done so in many ways: through written reports like the Accreditation Update, which has been shared with the campus
community; the many open fora, surveys and sessions; written and oral reports to the Education Committee of the Board as well as to the entire Board; regular meetings of the College’s Accreditation Leadership Team (ALT); reports to the College’s Planning and Budget Committee (P&BC); and more.

Q. What is the schedule, then?
A. The Compliance Certification report was due to SACSCOC and all members of the offsite committee on September 10.

Rollins’s QEP expert nominations are due October 1.

The QEP proposal and the College’s Focused Report are due to SACSCOC and all members of the onsite committee on February 1, 2015.

The SACSCOC site visit to Rollins is scheduled for Mar. 17-19, 2015.

Q. Where do I go for more information?
A. Go to http://www.sacscoc.org/faqs.asp for SACSCOC’s own “frequently asked questions” section.