

ACCSC

Accrediting Commission
of Career Schools and
Colleges



ACCSC Monograph Series

Maximizing Program Advisory Committees



About ACCSC

Since 1965, the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC) has been committed to establishing and advancing quality education at postsecondary career schools and colleges.

ACCSC scope of recognition includes the accreditation of non-degree granting institutions and degree granting institutions that offer career, technical, and vocational training programs at the postsecondary level. ACCSC is dedicated to ensuring a quality education for more than 200,000 students who annually pursue career education at over 700 accredited institutions across the United States, Puerto Rico, and abroad.

ACCSC has been continuously recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a reliable authority for the quality education since 1967. In 2011, ACCSC's recognition was renewed for five years, the maximum timeframe allowed under current federal regulations.

ACCSC's mission is to serve as a reliable authority on educational quality and to promote enhanced opportunities for students by establishing, sustaining, and enforcing valid standards and practices which contribute to the development of a highly trained and competitive workforce through quality career oriented education.

ACCSC's mission has two primary objectives:

- To assure students and the general public of the quality of educational training provided by ACCSC-accredited institutions and their programs and
- To assist institutions in continuously improving themselves and the training they provide students

As a way for the Commission to continually meet its mission in a committed fashion, ACCSC has established a values-based framework supported by the following foundational core values.

INTEGRITY

Accomplishing our mission with a commitment to ethics, honesty, trust, consistency, and fairness.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Fulfilling our responsibilities to one another, the higher education community, and the public.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Cultivating personal and professional growth through learning, goal setting, innovation, commitment and participation.

COMMUNITY

Fostering a free and timely exchange of ideas and information in a collegial environment through the establishment of strong partnerships that emphasize respect and mutual support.

Welcome to the ACCSC Monograph Series

As higher education continues to expand and diversify in the United States, it has become apparent that now, more than ever, postsecondary school leaders need better tools to achieve their strategic goals and to ensure institutional and student success. Higher education in the United States continues to change in profound ways. With increased globalization, a greater reliance on technology, and more competition among education providers both domestically and internationally, America's higher education system must embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement as a means to remain viable and a global leader in postsecondary education.

The Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC) developed a series of brochures — *the ACCSC Monograph Series*— on topics critical to institutional success. These brochures are designed to provide guidance on some of the more technical areas of ACCSC accreditation. Through the *ACCSC Monograph Series*, the Commission hopes to help accredited schools to comply fully and accurately with the *Standards of Accreditation*, achieve institutional success, and ensure that students are well prepared to enter the workforce.

This brochure, *Maximizing Program Advisory Committees*, explains why your institution needs effective Program Advisory Committees (PACs), describes how to establish and operate a committee, and provides ideas on how to evaluate and reap the benefits of a PAC's success to meet the program's need for continuous performance improvement.

Why Program Advisory Committees?

No organization exists in a vacuum. This adage applies aptly to educational institutions — particularly those that serve to embellish the workforce — in significant ways. The opportunity to obtain input, feedback, ideas, and multiple perspectives from individuals with a vested interest in the success of the institution and the student population is a paramount component to the success, growth, and improvement of a career school or college, as well as the design, development, and improvement of its programs of study. In large part, this is the role of Program Advisory Committees (PACs). PACs are comprised of appropriately qualified representatives external to the institution (i.e., nonschool employees) who are able to provide a meaningful review of the school’s programs, and supporting resources and materials. ACCSC believes that PACs exist for the purpose of structuring and improving an institution’s programs as part of an institution’s overall plan for improvement and increased effectiveness. Accordingly, ACCSC has established standards related to PACs which require each accredited institution to have an independent PAC for each occupational program area as a means to enhance institutional success and to provide students with employment ready knowledge, skills, and competencies.

What do the ACCSC *Standards of Accreditation* Require?

Scope

The *Standards of Accreditation* require that an institution has a PAC for each program or group of closely related programs referred to as a program area. Generally, the test for what constitutes closely related programs has to do with curriculum content and whether one PAC could competently comment on multiple disciplines. For example, an institution may offer several “allied health” programs such as Medical Assistant, Dental Assistant, Respiratory Therapy, and Surgical Technology. Although these programs are all in health related areas, the programs themselves are not related. A Medical Assistant likely could not competently comment on or review a Dental Assistant program and vice versa. Thus in our example here, this institution would need four distinct PACs, one for each program. An example of a group of related programs might be Medical Assistant, Phlebotomy, Medical Front Office, and Medical Billing and Coding programs. As a point of reference, when you see a reference to “the program,” in this monograph, this can mean either the single program or the group of programs under study.

Membership

According to the *Standards of Accreditation*, the purpose of the PAC is to review the established curricula of the program, instructional-related program materials, equipment and facilities, and student achievement outcomes as a means to provide the school with an external review of its programs.¹ These standards have been established in a tiered approach so that for each additional level added to an institution and its programs, additional PAC requirements attach. The outline below shows how this progression of requirements works:

All Program Areas Must Have:

- a diverse PAC that includes representatives from the employment community, practitioners, and others from the field of education.
 - at least three members in attendance at each meeting that represent the employment community and /or practitioners from the program area.²
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Graduate Degree Programs Areas Must Also Have:

- at least two individuals with graduate level education experience qualified to review and comment on the school's graduate level education.

Institutions with Distance Education Programs Must Also Have:

- at least one additional individual with experience in the delivery and administration of distance education programs who can review and comment on the school's distance education platform, methods, processes, procedures, and infrastructure in the context of the program/course content and objectives.



Meeting Requirements

The *Standards of Accreditation* require that at least two regularly scheduled meetings are conducted annually, one of which is to be held at the institution in order to afford each PAC with an opportunity to assess the facilities and equipment in place to support the established program objectives. The *Standards of Accreditation* permit multiple affiliated schools to use a single PAC to review the same established curricula of a program area and student achievement outcomes across the system of schools, however, the physical review of a school's learning resources, facilities, and equipment must be fulfilled via an on-site review at each individual campus at least once per year. Furthermore, the *Standards of Accreditation*

require that written and detailed minutes of each meeting are maintained and include a description of all members in attendance (i.e., titles and affiliations); the date, time, and location of the meeting; and a comprehensive and clear description of the review of and commentary made by the school representatives and the PAC members. ACCSC accredited institutions must also provide evidence that it gives consideration to PAC input.

According to *Section II (A)(5)(d), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation*, Program Advisory Committee review and comment activities must:

- I Review, at least annually, the established curriculum of the program and comment as to the appropriateness and adequacy of the program objectives, program length, curriculum content (including academic general education or applied general education as appropriate), learning resources, and the adequacy of facilities and equipment.
- II Review and comment, at least annually, on student graduation, graduate employment, and where required, state licensing examination outcomes of each program.
- III Review and comment on the appropriateness of curriculum objectives, program length, and curriculum content of all new programs prior to submission for Commission approval.

Taking good minutes of the meeting is essential for a number of reasons. The record of the meetings show who attended — remember there are requirements about who attends outlined above — and what was discussed — remember there are requirements that each PAC “review and comment” on specific areas and that the school demonstrates consideration of PAC input. Thus, a good set of minutes will clearly show that these elements of the standards were accomplished. But, also equally if not more important, meeting minutes serve as the record and evidence of program evaluation and evolution, and can provide continuity to a group that may meet infrequently (i.e., twice a year). Lastly, do not delegate the task of taking minutes to a staff member who has no contextual knowledge of the conversation that will be taking place at the meeting. Minutes will be more effectively taken and serve a more effective purpose when a program leader (e.g., the head of the department, or a lead faculty member) records the conversation ensuring that the proper background, context, and level of specificity are included in the minutes.

Now that we have established a basic foundation regarding the requirements for Program Advisory Committees, let’s discuss the role that PACs play as part of an institution’s overall plan for continuous improvement and success.

Understanding the Role of Program Advisory Committees

Institutions can establish advisory committees at various organizational levels. A committee may exist for the entire school, a college department, a program, or group of related programs. While PAC operation remains similar, the specific roles, responsibilities, and goals may differ based on these levels. As referenced earlier, the ACCSC *Standards of Accreditation* for Program Advisory Committees provide a basic framework for setting up your committee and specify the roles and functions the committee must play at a minimum. ACCSC believes that by adhering to the standards, an institution can positively impact the effectiveness and success of its programs, and ultimately its students and graduates. Beyond the accreditation requirements, institutions can obtain greater benefits by expanding the committee’s purpose. This expansion might include, for example, opportunities for skill application in a realistic environment through internship, part-time employment, and /or providing equipment, materials, or work situations in which the students can practically apply their skills.

PAC members can also help the reputation of an institution and further ensure the success of its program offerings by promoting the institution to the community. Positive

Support and promotion from a recognized employer or industry leader enhance the reputation of the program. A good reputation can attract quality students, faculty, and staff; and a well-respected program helps your graduates find desirable employment.

This monograph describes the requirements for PACs captured in the *Standards of Accreditation*, however, institutions are not limited by these minimum requirements and should consider including a more expansive list of typical priorities for an advisory committee, such as:

- Curriculum;
- Staff development;
- Career development and work-based learning;
- Marketing and advocacy;
- Student recruitment, mentoring, and placement;
- Program resources; and
- Evaluation.³

Reaping the Benefits of a Program Advisory Committee

An institution may find other unique roles for your committee members depending on the nature of the program and the resources available to the member. To foster these additional opportunities, provide action items based on your specific needs that the institution hopes will improve the program or particular courses. For example, a PAC member can have their company or organization summarize current required job competencies in an effort to identify potential gaps in the program that might be limiting a graduate's ability to transition into the workforce. Further, given that for most ACCSC-accredited institutions, a significant number of students that attend are from the local community, consider expanding PAC membership beyond what is required by the standards and include representatives from local community organizations, like the Chamber of Commerce, to provide feedback from a local business perspective. Make your PAC work for your program by exploring the possibilities with each member and taking advantage of available opportunities.



Budgeting for Program Advisory Committees

The benefits of a PAC are evident and far outweigh the costs, yet to establish a committee means to first establish a budget. The first step of creating and implementing an effective budget will be to develop your goals and objectives for the PAC over the next year, including a budget to help support PAC recruitment activities. Having an established budget will provide a framework as the institution begins to identify, recruit, and retain existing members in order to get the desired make-up of the PAC which effectively contributes to improving the institution and enhancing program offerings.

The financial outlay for the PAC includes items such as paying for meeting space (if it is not at the school), providing meeting refreshments, paying stipends if the school chooses, and the cost of copying and distributing minutes, orientation packets, and other PAC-related communications such as conference calls. Institutions might also consider factoring in the manpower 'cost' of employee participation in PAC meetings into the budget in order to gain a better understanding of the fiscal impact involved with facilitating an effective PAC meeting. Many institutions also pay for service awards, such as providing a Certificate of Appreciation or Certificate of Dedicated Service in order to recognize the significant contributions that a PAC member has made. Given that the *Standards of Accreditation* require only one meeting to take place at the institution, consider budgeting for a special event, such as a dinner at a local restaurant, for the second meeting. This is just one more way to incentivize the PAC members. But in order to institutionalize the use of PACs, a school should budget these costs annually, and although it requires the dedication of additional fiscal resources, consider it an investment opportunity to be gained by improving your programs.

Determining Member Qualifications

Employers, industry representatives, and practitioners comprise the majority of a successful Program Advisory Committee. A goal that all institutions should have is to populate the PAC with representatives with the expertise, experience, and interest who can understand how the jobs relate to the education and training provided at the institution and can communicate the goals, objectives, and desired qualifications. All members must be able to work collaboratively with others in order to complete the established PAC goals. Non-employer representatives might include retired professionals, representatives from local community organizations, representatives from other educational institutions, or graduates who now have professional experience. Consideration should also be given towards including a student representative on the PAC. This individual, currently enrolled in the program area, will be able to share a unique perspective on the strengths and challenges of the program. Some institutions have facilitated a student body election, providing an opportunity for the students to elect their designated PAC representative. In addition to the PAC members, the institution should identify faculty and staff members to support the committee, talk about program specific objectives and activities, as well as outline admissions trends and other institutional activities and initiatives. Staff can offer input, answer questions, and help to facilitate communications such as meeting logistics and the distribution of minutes and agendas.

What are the particular desirable characteristics of a PAC member? No single ideal exists for a perfect PAC member, but certain qualities aid in the functioning and productivity of the PAC. Institutions should balance the use of this list of qualities with the goal of establishing and maintaining a committee with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints that will ensure a well-rounded perspective is brought to the table:

- **Good communicator:**
Clearly and assertively gets point across and listens and considers others' input; adequate writing skills;
- **Knowledgeable:**
Understands the skills and knowledge required in the profession and can connect that with the course and the program of study;
- **Committed:**
Consistently attends meetings, is prepared, and provides a meaningful review of the program;
- **Reliable:**
Completes assigned tasks on time;
- **Respected:**
Holds a good professional reputation in the applicable field and/or is associated with a reputable employer.

Ask for recommendations from staff, faculty, graduates, employers, and local business partners for qualified, interested professionals that exhibit these qualities. Create a job description for the PAC, which explains the responsibilities and duties, and includes a list of the qualities that the institution is seeking in an ideal candidate. Interview committee candidates and choose carefully as it is often more difficult to deal with a

committee member who is not working out than it is to select carefully.

In order to ensure the effective leadership of the PAC, institutions should consider appointing a PAC Chairperson. The leader or chairperson of the PAC should have additional qualities related to managing the group. First, the leader must be able to establish and follow an agenda. Staying on course is not always easy but it is essential to accomplishing the goals of the meeting and of the group. In addition, managing various personalities can be a challenge. A good leader can get input from each member of the PAC and will tactfully handle any inappropriate input or attempts to dominate the discussion.

The leader must also have a skill set which includes problem solving and group decision-making. While selecting PAC members, include several people with these skills in order to provide an opportunity for designated individuals with these qualities to step into a leadership role at the appropriate time. Consider implementing term limits for both PAC members and the PAC Chairperson in order to ensure a timely change in leadership and membership which can help facilitate bringing in new perspectives.

Identifying and Recruiting Members



Now that we have identified some of the desired qualities of a PAC member, the next step is determining where to find them, and to discuss how to entice these working professionals to serve on your committee. Some of the resources for finding members include:

- Employers in the community;
- Professional organizations;
- Alumni information;
- Trade representatives and trade associations;
- Union representatives;
- Retired trade professionals;
- Recommendations by current or former PAC members; and
- Other individuals in the community who can provide meaningful input for the school.

Institutions should identify a specified number of committee seats to fill each term in order to ensure that the size of the committee remains manageable. If an institution finds more available candidates than needed, keep a file and follow up regularly in order to remain connected with these potential future PAC members.

As recruiting for committee work can often be perceived as extra work, the most important question to answer might be:

What's in it for me?

PAC members need to know the advantages of getting involved in this “extra” work. Here are a few questions that you would ask (or consider asking) if you were in their position:

- How does this help me/my organization?
- What is the level of my involvement?
- What is my time commitment?
- Will it improve the institution?
- Do I believe in it?

Institutions can answer the questions about involvement and time commitment based on the person’s potential role and information from past committee members. It is critical to be specific about the time commitment, obligations, and expectations so that a potential PAC member understands the breadth of their involvement. In order to highlight the value of participating as a member of the PAC, and given that accrediting standards require institutions to give consideration to PAC feedback, institutions can show how they have incorporated previous PAC feedback as a sign of the school administration’s commitment to partnering with the PAC in order to improve the institution. Other benefits that may be important to consider are more specific to the individual, such as:

- Professional recognition and respect;
- Meeting their employer’s expectation for professional development;
- Personal achievement;
- Resume builder;
- Networking opportunities;
- Learning and development through working with new topics and people; and
- Pride for being part of the institution’s success.

There may also be other incentives for potential PAC members, such as providing complimentary access to the institution’s facilities, classrooms, or offices for corporate events, or providing an opportunity for PAC members to

audit certain classes as part of their own professional development. Institutions have also offered to cover all travel expenses incurred by PAC members attending meetings, such as mileage and meals, and some have even offered nominal stipends as a way to recognize the significant commitment made by PAC members. In any regard, discussing the opportunities for these and other benefits can help an institution to recruit qualified, interested PAC members.

The institution's leaders should also expand the PAC membership beyond the minimum requirements outlined in the *Standards of Accreditation*. Ensuring strong attendance at a regularly scheduled PAC meeting can be a tremendous challenge given that PAC members, particularly practitioners and those from industry, often have significant job responsibilities that may interfere with their ability to engage in PAC meetings on a regular basis. Keep in mind that at least three members from the employment community and /or practitioners from the program area must be in attendance at all PAC meetings in order to demonstrate compliance with accrediting standards. By expanding the membership of the PAC, an institution can have a greater chance of success in terms of meeting the requirements for member participation. Another way to ensure strong attendance is to be flexible with the meeting dates and to engage the PAC members in the scheduling process months in advance of the actual meeting.

The *Standards of Accreditation* do state that a PAC should be "diverse" and include representatives from the employment community, practitioners, and others from the field of education. Consider a guidance counselor, teacher, or administrator from your local high school as a means to show how well your school takes care of and prepares students for success in the workplace. Consider a local community librarian to assist in the review of your own learning resource system. Consider a representative of your local Chamber of Commerce as means to show how your school contributes to the local economy and workforce development. The point here being that your PAC can and should be used in dynamic ways to help the school and its programs develop and improve.



Teambuilding

The highest performing PACs work together as a team; and a lack of can lead to less meaningful results and unmet goals. Although dysfunctional committees can essentially produce some results and meet various goals, it is unlikely that the results reflect the true feelings of the entire group. Teambuilding facilitates the production of high quality work in an efficient and effective manner that best reflects the purpose and intent of any advisory committee.

The PAC Chairperson should incorporate teambuilding into the committee meetings, but may need assistance from the institution's staff or faculty designated to support the committee's efforts. Listed on the next page are a few ideas to promote a team environment:

- Ask members to submit brief biographical information and photos to distribute to all members via mailing or a website.
- Provide networking opportunities for members in addition as part of any scheduled activity. These activities will help PAC members to gain a better understanding of their fellow committee members' backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.
- Provide member orientation and updates so that everyone understands and can contribute to PAC discussions.
- Model appropriate speaking and listening skills during meetings.
- Introduce techniques and provide a framework for the group discussions to ensure that all members have the opportunity to participate in a meaningful fashion.
- Use decision-making tools that promote consensus in the group.
- Address any obstacles to teambuilding through directly addressing the involved member(s), or through highlighting appropriate actions at the meetings.
- Show your appreciation and support for member efforts through recognition and reward such as implementing a PAC Wall of Fame in the lobby of your school, or publishing the photos, names, and affiliations of your PAC members in your catalog.

When a conflict arises amongst the members of the PAC, or if consensus cannot be reached, the PAC Chairperson should address any critical concerns with a school administrative representative. Following are a few examples of techniques for participation, conflict management, and decision-making that promote teambuilding:

Participation

Strong leader communication skills encourage input from all members. When this fails, the leader might try brainstorming and input techniques that force each member to take a turn. If the leader perceives a reluctance of a member to state a point of view, a technique that involves reflection writing might

facilitate a better response. Anonymity can breed honesty. Small group discussions might bring out a quieter member, and breaking complex issues down into smaller bites may help the group members understand and respond.

Conflict Management

Often, parties in conflict want some of the same end results. Ask the parties to identify their goals for the issue or what they want to achieve in the discussion. Start by finding shared goals, purposes, strategies, and any points in common. Let each party have uninterrupted, but limited, time to give their input. Then work at the best ways to achieve the shared goals and diminishing the differences. Members in conflict who are shown common goals and ideas can let down some of their defenses by beginning with points of agreement.

Decision-making

Gaining consensus means that all of the group members worked toward a decision which they all could agree on. Consensus does not indicate an optimal solution for individual members of the group, but it should get close to the optimal group decision. A group may often use the conflict management skills in gaining consensus. A modified Delphi technique can help with complex decisions or where there is major disagreement. In this approach, members vote on solutions or actions from a series of options. The number of options is cut in half based on the most votes. Each following round repeats the process until the group comes to one final desired option.

Teambuilding, procedures, and member qualifications must be considered in establishing a new PAC. If you already have a PAC, review your current practices against the recommendations and update your practices accordingly.

Program Advisory Committee Responsibilities

In our discussion on recruiting PAC members, one of the questions of the potential member was: “what is the level of my involvement?” Part of the answer to that question involves the requirements of every committee member. If a particular member takes on a specific role such as chairperson or secretary, that member will have additional responsibilities. Further, the roles and responsibilities may follow certain procedures defined by the institution. Create a mission statement and committee description that provides a construct for the PAC and outlines the process for the PAC to establish its focus, roles, requirements, and procedures. These policies and procedures should include the following at a minimum:

- Mission or purpose of the PAC;
- General expectation of outcomes;
- Membership qualifications, recruitment, selection process, number of members, term length and limit;
- Member roles and responsibilities;
- Officer roles and election procedures;
- Meeting frequency and duration;
- Attendance and participation requirements;
- Meeting procedures including agenda and minutes recording /distribution and the use of parliamentary procedure;
- Guidelines for interaction with school personnel and students;
- Formats and requirements for reports and communications;
- Requirements of accreditation standards; and
- School support for budget, communications, and meeting set-up.

Some of the above items require further understanding and will be explained in the next and other sections of this document.



Helping New Members to Understand Compliance

As previously discussed in this brochure, the *Standards of Accreditation* outline the PAC membership and meeting requirements and identify the areas of focus for a school’s PAC. However, new members may or may not understand specifically what the process of review and comment entails. In order to effectively orient new members to this process and to provide refresher training for existing PAC members, customize and provide orientation training using information from the next section which describes the review and comment process, and expected outcomes.

Reviewing and Commenting on Key Areas

During every PAC meeting, an institution must document the discussion of key areas which can be used as benchmark evaluation data. It is expected that each PAC meeting be useful in guiding the institution's success and that PAC meetings provide opportunities for the review and comment on key areas including equipment, facilities, program curriculum, and student outcomes. In order to ensure compliance with accrediting standards, institutions are encouraged to incorporate each required area of focus, identified in *Section II (A)(5), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation*, onto each PAC meeting agenda. This practice will ensure that the institution, at a minimum, is meeting the Commission's expectations for review and commentary made by PAC members. Institutions certainly are not limited to these topics alone and can incorporate additional agenda items onto the agenda as warranted.

As part of the accreditation process, ACCSC's on-site evaluation team is charged with evaluating that the PAC is meeting the requirements outlined in *Section II (A)(5), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation*. Accordingly, the institution should be able to readily produce minutes from PAC meetings that demonstrate compliance with accrediting standards for review and consideration by the on-site evaluation team. However, all too often advisory committees are seen as just another requirement of accreditation and the minutes do not accurately reflect a detailed review of the required elements outlined in the *Standards of Accreditation*.

If the school is unable to demonstrate that it is utilizing its PACs in accordance with accrediting standards, the institution may be subjected to additional compliance monitoring on a go-forward basis. Thus, it is important to ensure that the minutes accurately reflect the discussions of the PAC, and that the staff member responsible to take minutes is well versed in the agenda topics for the PAC meetings and can produce the minutes in a timely and meaningful fashion. The school's leadership should review all meeting minutes to ensure accuracy and that those minutes are complete prior to being finalized and distributed.

New Programs

In many scenarios, PACs serve as an institution's formal link to industry standards and are a formalization of any institution's commitment to produce graduates with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes demanded by the employment community served. Without PACs, an organization will be limited in its effort to effectively assess student readiness for employment. PACs should include your most highly valued employers and institutions should respect this role and provide them with the necessary resources to be successful. Further, given that the PAC plays a powerful role in holding the institution accountable for the students, graduates, and employers served, the institution's leadership should make a concerted effort to ensure that the PACs focus on assessing the effectiveness of a program and determining whether or not graduates from that program possess:

- Knowledge of the philosophy, traditions, and practices of their industry;
- Skills needed to perform the job duties and tasks;
- Workplace skills that help them to effectively communicate and work collaboratively with other employees; and
- Problem-solving skills that will help them overcome challenges in the workplace and will assist their employers to be leaders in their industry.

The overarching question guiding the PAC's evaluation of an institution's program offerings is whether or not the training offered provides potential employers with the quality employees they need. If so, PACs will become an institution's greatest ally in a competitive market. The key to involvement of PACs is the institution's commitment to producing highly qualified employees. There must be a visible demonstration of this commitment in the organizational planning documents and in the daily commitment to workplace standards.

The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) provides a three-part foundation of skills that ALL students need to succeed in the world of work:

- Basic Skills (reading, writing, arithmetic/mathematics, listening, speaking);
- Thinking Skills (creative thinking, decision making, problem solving, seeing things through the mind's eye, knowing how to learn, reasoning); and
- Personal Qualities (responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, integrity/honesty).

Additionally, SCANS lists five workplace competencies that every employer expects of their employees:

- **Resources:**
Identifies, organizes, plans and allocates resource (time, money, materials & facilities, human resources);
- **Interpersonal:**
Works with others (member of a team, teaches others, serves as a client/customer, exercises leadership skills, negotiates, works with diversity);
- **Information:**
Acquires and uses information (acquires, interprets, organizes, maintains, evaluates, communicates information);
- **Systems:**
Understands complex inter-relationships (understands systems, monitors and corrects performance, improves or designs systems); and
- **Technology:**
Works with a variety of technologies (selects, applies, maintains, troubleshoots).⁴

As institutions implement new programs, these skills identified in the SCANS report should be integrated in each program regardless of the career area. The PAC is a great resource to understand where these skills integrate into the daily workplace and can guide the institution on how to integrate these skills into a proposed curriculum. The following are key questions that should be answered by garnering input from the PAC before you begin developing new programs. It is of critical importance to record the answers to each of these questions as a result of discussion with the PAC:

- How does this program fit within the career field?
- Are resources currently available to support this program? If not, can employers assist in a plan for obtaining these resources prior to the first student entering the program?
- What are the admission standards for students entering this program?
- What are the student learning outcomes for this program?
- What is the first date that students will graduate from this program?
- What are the employment opportunities of program graduates?
- Are current faculty qualified to teach this program?
- Are current classrooms and labs adequate for the school to offer this program?
- Are current facilities/space capable of supporting this program?
- Are the educational institution's library and/or learning resource center capable of supporting this program?
- What is the projected amount of the educational institution's overall resources invested in this program, and are these projections adequate?
- Are operational, management, and physical resources available for this additional program?
- Are there any special challenges to offering this program?
- Will current faculty and staff have the time to develop the new program?
- Will current staff have the time to support the new program?
- Is there a commitment of support from PACs, administration, faculty, and staff for the new program?

Of course, there is an endless amount of questions that should be addressed before developing a program. However, it often comes down to "this is something everyone wants us to do." The follow-up question must be "are we capable of producing graduates that have the skills necessary to be successful?" The answers to the above list of questions will help the PAC assist the institution in determining whether sufficient capacity exists to offer a high quality educational program.

Current Curriculum

Ideally, each PAC meeting should minimally include a discussion on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) to the current curriculum. The SWOT analysis was originally employed by the General Electric Growth Council in the 1980’s because it concentrates on the issues that potentially have the most impact. Further, the SWOT analysis is useful when a very limited amount of time is available to address a complex strategic situation.⁵ SWOT is best understood with an example. In this case, we will refer to a fictitious New Image College of Technology and their Medical Assistant program:

New Image College of Technology: Medical Assistant Program Evaluation

Strengths:	Weaknesses:	Opportunities:
<p>Over the past three years, 93% of graduates from the New Image College of Technology’s Medical Assistant program have successfully gained employment in the field within 3 months of graduation.</p> <p>The Medical Assistant program uses up-to-date equipment that reflects current occupational practice which prepares students for employment.</p>	<p>There are not enough qualified faculty to adequately provide one-on-one instruction for students in the labs.</p>	<p>The Medical Assistant program should explore opportunities to identify new techniques utilized in the career field.</p> <p>The Medical Assistant program should explore expanding the internship program to ensure more guided teaching in a work environment.</p> <p>Graduate employment rates have decreased in the previous two quarters.</p> <p>Loss of two teachers in the Medical Assistant program in the last year.</p>

The institution should afford the PAC with an opportunity to react to the SWOT analysis. When the results of the PAC review and evaluation are received, program faculty and school administration should have the opportunity to view the PAC’s report in order to promote and enhance the program strengths, and create and implement action plans to remedy those areas that are not meeting expectations.



Student Outcomes

The overall goal of each and every ACCSC accredited institution is successful student graduation and graduate employment in the career field for which training was provided. During each PAC meeting, there should be a comprehensive evaluation and discussion on the quality of the program, the rates of student graduation, and the rates of graduate employment, including any licensure exam results, when applicable. Precursor outcomes to graduate employment include student graduation and state licensing exam outcomes; thus the institution should provide the applicable statistics to the PAC prior to each meeting so that the PAC can review and comment on the trends shown in the data and make recommendations for areas needing improvement. Further, with respect to the rates of graduate employment, the PAC should consider these three guiding questions:

- Do graduates demonstrate the foundational skills needed to perform at an exceptional level in their field of study?
- Do graduates demonstrate the workplace competencies needed to perform at an exceptional level in their field of study?
- Do graduates demonstrate the technical competencies needed to perform at an exceptional level in their field of study?

The critical nature of the PAC review and comment process places it at the top of the priority list for each and every PAC meeting and all members of the PAC should actively participate in this process.

Individual Roles and Responsibilities

A PAC team member is expected to attend the meetings, complete tasks as assigned, and serve the PAC and the institution according to the PAC's mission. However, an institution may choose to tailor the expectations for members of a program's PAC and further, may establish additional roles to help the PAC function more effectively. Below are some common committee positions and typical responsibilities:

Chairperson or Team Leader: schedule and arrange meetings; create agenda; manage meetings; follow up on assigned tasks;

Subcommittee Chair: assume a leadership role for a particular project or part of a project as assigned; report progress to the PAC;

Secretary: approve minutes of meetings and make sure that minutes, agendas, and other publications of the PAC are distributed to members in a timely fashion;

Faculty Representative: provide input and information to assist the PAC; make requests for assistance to the PAC from the program staff;

Administration Representative: give input and information to assist the PAC; apply influence in recruiting new members to the PAC; provide accessibility to the program, school, and personnel when needed; possibly monitor PAC functioning; and

Support Personnel: may assume actual word processing, mailing, and other support duties under the direction of the PAC.

The institution should take the time to define the roles and critical responsibilities for the positions as part of a PAC policies and procedures manual. However, one non-negotiable PAC requirement is to run at least two meetings annually, one of which to take place at the campus in order to provide an opportunity for the PAC to assess the facilities and equipment utilized by students in the program. Planning and running effective meetings takes skill and tact, which leads to our next section.

Planning and Running Committee Meetings

The success of your PAC depends, to a great extent, on the success of the meetings. Although pre-meeting and post-meeting communications can be critical to a PAC's sustained success, the bulk of the committee's meaningful work occurs during the meetings. Careful meeting planning and meeting management can make the difference between a committee which contributes significantly to the success of the institution and one which simply meets and reviews topics.

Planning the Meeting

Planning PAC meetings involves choosing a time, place, and atmosphere that suits the group and is within the established budget. Generally, meeting planning and the establishment of the agenda would be the responsibility of the PAC chairperson; however, the institution may want to serve as the guiding force in scheduling future meetings. Regardless of meeting location, the institution should make a concerted effort to confirm the meeting place and time with PAC members well in advance of the meeting date.

As previously discussed, ACCSC standards require that at least one PAC meeting be held at the institution, providing flexibility for the location of additional meetings. Given that ACCSC requires its accredited institutions to host at least two PAC meetings every year, a local restaurant might suffice as the location for the second meeting. These offsite meetings can serve as an additional incentive for PAC members, particularly when there is an opportunity for a good meal with colleagues. Furthermore, institutions may also elect to facilitate a second meeting via conference call, which can be easier for PAC members to participate in as they do not require travel; however, conference calls can be a challenge in terms of ensuring a thorough review and comment by all PAC members.

At a minimum, the minutes from any PAC meeting, whether face to face, or via telecommunications, must demonstrate a review and commentary of all required areas, and must show an exchange of ideas and perspectives. Providing a survey to PAC members, and considering the responses provided would not demonstrate compliance with accrediting standards. The institution should arrange for any handouts to be prepared and distributed in advance of the meeting to provide an opportunity for PAC members to reflect on the information which will lead to a more detailed and meaningful conversation as the meeting begins.

Creating the Agenda and Meeting Minutes

A comprehensive agenda is often a leader's most effective tool for accomplishing the business at hand in the most effective and efficient manner. For a PAC meeting, a typical agenda will be driven by the requirements in *Section II (A)(5), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation*, as well as by the PAC members and institutional leaders. A sample PAC meeting agenda might read as follows:

1. **Calling the meeting to order;**
2. **Introduction of guests and new committee members;**
3. **Approval of minutes from the previous meeting;**
4. **Special presentations, if any;**
5. **Review, comment and evaluation of:**
 - The established curriculum, including:**
 - a) Program objectives;
 - b) Program length;
 - c) Curriculum content;
 - d) Learning resources; and
 - e) Adequacy of facilities and equipment.
 - Student achievement, including:**
 - a) Student graduation rates;
 - b) Graduate employment rates; and
 - c) Where required, state licensing examination outcomes objectives.
6. **Old or unfinished business including subcommittee reports;**
7. **New business;**
8. **Information for the next meeting, including tentative meeting dates and locations; and finally**
9. **Adjournment.**

The agenda does not usually contain time constraints on discussions but the PAC chairperson should make notes as to how long each discussion should last to keep the total meeting time as established. Additionally, the institution should provide a tentative agenda to PAC members well in advance of the meeting and should provide an opportunity for PAC members to add agenda items for consideration by the group. By providing this opportunity, the institution will have a better opportunity for strong member participation as these agenda items were identified by PAC members, and not just the institution representatives, as important areas of discussion.

Meeting Management

As described in a previous section, meeting management requires skill in soliciting input from all members, managing conflicts that arise, and applying group decision-making processes. These actions take place in the framework of the agenda. The PAC Chairperson should make a determined effort to adhere to the established agenda and should prepare strategies, in advance, for bringing meetings back on course when members have strayed from the established agenda. The overarching goal for discussions during any meeting is to afford each participating member with an opportunity to contribute to the discussions and to ensure that all members are treated fairly and equally during the meeting.

Maintaining and Improving Program Advisory Committee Effectiveness

A significant amount of time and effort goes into establishing an advisory committee and in ensuring that a scheduled PAC meeting meets the needs of the institution. This next section describes how to maintain and improve PAC effectiveness through communications, new member orientation, retaining and replacing members, and evaluating the effectiveness of PAC meetings.

Communications

PAC operation will have several built-in forms of member communication, including: agendas, minutes, meetings, and new member orientation materials (discussed in the next section). If your PAC meets only two or three times per year, this creates a lag time in communications between the institution and the PAC. One way to overcome these communication gaps between meetings is to make a sustained effort to keep PAC members updated on school news and events. In order to do so, institutions should send copies of its regular newsletter or school updates to the members, or send copies of any official public documents, such as the institution's annual report, to PAC members, particularly if this report captures the progress on the new initiatives that may have been driven by PAC feedback. Institutions should consider inviting PAC members to participate in events such as graduation, or a career day, which will deepen the connection between the institution and the PAC member. PAC members should be included in the planning of community activities, such as food drives, clothing drives, or other local community service initiatives which furthers the connection between the institution and the local community served. The institution should regularly inform PAC members of staffing changes or organization changes that may impact how they interact with the institution. These types of regular communications will reinforce that PAC

members play an important role in the day-to-day operation of the institution, not just twice per year, which can lead to a deeper relationship and result in having PAC members who participate in a meaningful fashion.

New Member Orientation

New members bring fresh perspective to an institution's PAC. In order to maximize their input, create new member orientation materials which provide information not only about the institution and the programs offered, but also copies of PAC policies and procedures, a volunteer job description for PAC members, a document with brief member biographies and contact list, and a document highlighting the group's purpose, current goals, and summary of accomplishments. The institution should create a welcome letter from the program leader and PAC chairperson, and send the most recent meeting minutes, the logistical information for the next meeting, and an agenda if it is available. All of these communications will help a new PAC member to understand their role and responsibilities, as well as to help minimize the ramp-up time which should result in more meaningful participation from the start.

Prior to the new member's first meeting, the PAC chairperson should call the new member to again welcome the member to the committee and to ask if there are any questions on the materials. That initial connection should make the member feel more at ease and should provide an opportunity for the new member to ask questions about their role and responsibilities, as well as to address any logistical questions. This type of personal contact along with the packet of information helps to produce a new member who feels knowledgeable and comfortable to participate fully.

Recognizing and Rewarding the PAC

As part of the efforts to maximize the effectiveness of the PAC, one area that does not often get enough attention is how the institution recognizes and rewards the dedication of the PAC members. Given that one of the goals for any institution is to develop and maintain strong relationships with its PAC, an effort should be made to pay tribute to those individuals that have dedicated their time and effort to helping the institution succeed. Some ideas for recognizing PAC members include:

- Provide a Certificate of Appreciation / Certificate of Dedicated Service to PAC members upon the completion of their term;
- Consider implementing a PAC "Wall of Fame" at the institution that includes a photo of each participating member and identifies the organization they represent;
- Include the roster of all PAC members, with photos and organization information in the school catalog;
- Take an advertisement out in the local paper thanking the PAC member and the company they represent for their service;
- Invite the PAC members to guest lecture or to speak at special events, such as graduations or career days;
- Provide institutional gifts, such as sweatshirts, hats, or other memorabilia that carries the institution's name and brand;
- Provide an opportunity for PAC members to have complimentary access to the facilities for corporate meetings and events; and
- Provide an opportunity for PAC members to audit classes as part of their own professional development.

All of these activities should help reinforce the relationship that the institution has with its PAC and send a message that this relationship is one to be celebrated. Further, these initiatives provide additional incentives to serve as a member of the PAC.

Retaining and Replacing Members

Facilitating an efficient and effective PAC meeting is the best way to keep PAC members engaged. Members who believe they can accomplish goals and make a difference in the program are more motivated than those who feel as if they are just filling a seat. Positive group dynamics facilitated by the tone that the PAC chairperson sets, can also enhance the PAC member experience. The institution should make a concerted effort to involve the members in developing the vision for the institution and the programs offered, without overwhelming them with extra responsibilities that fall outside the scope of the PAC's role. The PAC chairperson and institution leaders should make PAC members feel as if they are a valuable, contributing part of the institution.

Inevitably, every PAC will experience the loss of a member. By being proactive, an institution can avoid losing PAC members who do not feel that they are an integral part of the group or feel that they are not providing meaningful contributions to the PAC. If the PAC chairperson suspects that a member is not satisfied with the level of their participation, a conversation should occur in order to flesh out the root of the problem and to determine what changes need to be made. Occasionally, the institution might recruit a PAC member who does not fit with the group. In these types of situations, the PAC chairperson might notice more conflict with the member than usual, a noticeable lack of participation, or a negative attitude toward the other members of the PAC. At this point, the PAC chairperson should discuss the perceived challenges with this person, and develop a strategy to work through the issues.

An institution's policies and procedures for the PAC should include a Code of Conduct which outlines the expectations for PAC members and includes provisions regarding conduct and conflicts of interest. Additionally, an institution should consider establishing a policy regarding term limits for PAC members, which can result in the generation of more energy and new ideas from new members with fresh perspectives.

Typical term limits for general members might be 2–3 years, while PAC officers might hold positions for up to two years. The institution can also consider adopting policies which permit a PAC member to rejoin the committee after a designated period of time away. In situations where the institution has enough faculty support, the institution should also consider rotating the responsibility of being the designated PAC liaison every 2–3 years.

When a PAC member's term expires, or if a PAC member resigns from the committee, the institution should replace PAC members using the recommendations in the Determining Member Qualifications section of this document. To keep the right mix of employer and non-employer representatives on the PAC, recruit a member from the same category. In certain situations, employers may want to replace PAC members with another employee in order to maintain a presence on the PAC; this would be acceptable as the institution's needs will continue to be met.

Evaluating Committee Success and Making Improvements

Is your PAC doing the job that helps your program improve? If the answer is, "no," then take the time to reexamine the established policies and procedures, and to re-evaluate the breadth and scope of the PAC's efforts. Begin this process by examining the committee results. Determine if the recommendations put forth by the PAC were sound, accurate, and useful. Ask the following questions:

Did the institution implement any new initiatives or make any program improvements based on PAC recommendations?

- What were the results?

Did the PAC and the program meet its established goals?

- If no, why not?

After you have answered these questions, look further into any ways in which the PAC fell short of expectations. Methods to evaluate committee success could include:

- Collecting and analyzing records and meeting minutes;
- Benchmarking processes and results against similar programs;
- Interviewing PAC members face-to-face about their perception and feelings;
- Reviewing policies and procedures; and
- Observing PAC meetings.

Through these activities, the institution's leaders should be able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the committee. These results will undoubtedly vary over time, so institutions should conduct this evaluation as part of their regularly planned self-evaluation process, and should work to improve the weaknesses and tout the successes resulting from the committee efforts to stakeholders.

Making Committee Improvements

Did the PAC evaluation results show the need for improvement? Now it is the program representative's turn to communicate this to the staff and develop a plan of action. Changes can be made to an established policy or procedure, or perhaps it is time to consider recruiting new members on the PAC in order to further diversify the membership.

The institution should also consider revisiting the mission or established purpose of the group. Overall, the institution should make a concerted effort towards developing goals and objectives for the PAC on an annual basis, and document the PAC's efforts in reaching these established goals and objectives. If the PAC falls short of meeting these goals and objectives, the institution should develop a corrective action plan in order to maximize the effectiveness of the PAC on a go-forward basis.

Creating and Implementing an Improvement Plan Using PAC Comments

Consider the input from any advisory committee, including the PAC, as part of the institutional assessment and improvement process. Just as you would gather and analyze information internally, analyze the comments of the PAC to identify the program's needs for improvement. The PAC's comments are just one component of the assessment of the effectiveness and appropriateness of any program. Developing and implementing an improvement plan based on the PAC input becomes the road to a better program. The most critical recipients of the PAC's findings are those who can effectuate change: program faculty and staff. Provide your staff with a detailed report and a summary highlighting program strengths and areas requiring change. Meet with staff and faculty on a regular basis to create awareness and to begin the improvement planning process. When all the information has been gathered and analyzed, improvement planning can begin. When the PAC provides negative feedback on several issues or on a complex issue, prioritize the list of needs by identifying those areas that have the greatest impact on the institution, as well as any quick fixes or high visibility areas, and place them at the top of the action list. Use this prioritized list to develop new goals and objectives, or, if the current goals are sound but the institution is falling short of meeting the goals, create objectives to remedy the problems blocking success.

Once the program team has goals and objectives in place, create a timeline for completion of each item and target date for accomplishing the final goal. Assign action items to appropriate program personnel and hold the program faculty and staff responsible for addressing each need and for following the established action plan. Make staff and faculty accountable for completing the action plan, implementing the action items, and evaluating the impact of the changes. Remember to keep in contact with the PAC for continuing information exchange on the issues. Report your progress on these initiatives to the PAC regularly and disseminate information to your other stakeholders as needed. Keep in mind that accrediting standards require the institution to provide evidence that it gives consideration to PAC feedback. Accordingly, record all of your plans and accomplishments in order to further demonstrate to the accrediting agency the role that the PAC is playing at the institution in shaping the program. The specific actions or changes to be implemented based on PAC findings should target continuous improvement in a manner similar to the accreditation processes, and overall, the endeavors of the PAC should be designed to improve an institution's programs as part of an institution's assessment and improvement efforts. An effective PAC will be an invaluable resource in this regard, and will help the institution to continue to meet the needs of students, graduates, and employers in a sustained fashion.

The Road to Continuous Performance Improvement

The goal of every organization, school, business, or non-profit organization is not only to survive and exist but to thrive and improve. Continuous improvement, and more specifically continuous performance improvement, is the philosophy and practice that will launch your institution beyond surviving and on to thriving and improving. As a philosophy, continuous improvement guides both long-term leadership and daily performance. Putting this philosophy into practice means an on-going cycle of planning for success, putting that plan into action, evaluating performance, and making improvements. Integrity, accountability, Continuous improvement, and community are the core values of ACCSC. As long as your organization has a valid mission and carries out its mission with integrity and accountability, aligning the continuous improvement cycle with this mission will facilitate the best opportunity for a quality educational institution.

Our ACCSC Monograph Series are targeted to provide performance tools to help you along in the cycle of continuous performance improvement. Each topic in the series contributes a unique aspect of continuous improvement processes. The topics currently published include:

- Self-Evaluation Processes and Practices;
- Institutional Assessment and Improvement Planning/Implementation;
- Faculty Improvement Planning/Implementation;
- Learning Resource Systems; and
- Maximizing Program Advisory Committees.

Full-color PDF versions of the ACCSC Monograph Series are available as a free on-line download at www.accsc.org.

Notes:

Endnotes

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About the Authors

Sage Performance

Jeff M. Allen, Ph.D.

Jeff Allen is a distinguished teacher and scholar in the field of performance improvement. His research includes over 30 publications in the area of performance improvement, including the edited book titled, *Leadership in Career and Technical Education: Beginning the 21st Century*. He consults and teaches in the areas of performance improvement, career and technical education, and research methods. At the national level, provides leadership in numerous professional organizations and serves as a reviewer for nationally and internationally referred publications. Jeff currently serves as the Interim Department Chair of Learning Technologies at the University of North Texas.

Denise C. Allen, M. Ed.

Denise Allen conducts the daily operations of Sage Performance. She is a business and education consultant in organization performance, training, instructional design and development, business and educational writing, and work-life balance programs with 20 years of experience in manufacturing, high-tech, service and marketing environments. Denise's experience spans large and small scale projects, working with individual contributors, management and executives in various occupations.

Edited by

Christopher D. Lambert, M.Ed., ACCSC

Michale S. McComis, Ed.D., ACCSC

Karen R. Marcinski, M.S., Ed.S., ACCSC



