# Enhancing and Sustaining Higher Education Quality in the Pacific:

## Challenges Facing Institutions Seeking to Acquire and Maintain WASC-Accreditation

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## Background

The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), accredits two-year degree-granting institutions of higher education in California, Hawai`i, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Palau, Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and American Samoa. The Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities accredits four-year and graduate degree-granting institutions in the region, including the University of Guam, the only senior institution in the WASC region beyond Hawai`i.

In summer of 2004, after taking accreditation actions on some of the institutions in this region, the ACCJC's Commissioners determined that the region's institutions were facing substantial challenges to their ability to remain in compliance with accreditation standards. The institutions are required to remain accredited if they wish to access U.S. Department of Education Title III, Title IV and other funds for higher education. In September 2004, a group of leaders in the WASC region came together to discuss the accreditation and higher education challenges facing the Pacific Region. These individuals included:

Dr. Harold Allen, President, University of Guam
Dr. Barbara Beno, President, ACCJC
Dr. Herominiano delos Santos, President, Guam Community College
Mr. Anthony Guerrero, President, Northern Marianas College
Mr. Spensin James, President, College of Micronesia, Federated States of Micronesia
Ms. Susan Moses, Commissioner and former President, College of Micronesia-FSM
Mr. Michael Rota, Commissioner, and Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs (Community Colleges), University of Hawai`i
Dr. Adele Satele-Galea'i, President, American Samoa Community College
Dr. Wayne Schmidt, President, College of the Marshall Islands
Mr. Floyd Takeuchi, Commissioner, and businessman from Honolulu
Dr. Patrick Tellei, President, Palau Community College

Dr. Wilson Hess, President of College of the Marshall Islands, joined the group in 2005 and has also contributed to this paper.

As the group discussed the challenges to quality higher education in the region, they drafted a planning-grant proposal entitled "Building Critical Regional Capacity to Enable Public Colleges to Maintain WASC Regional Accreditation" that was funded by the U.S. Department of Interior's Department Office of Insular Affairs. This grant provided support for these leaders to do further work in identifying challenges and threats to the quality of higher education in the region as well as to continuing accreditation, and to begin to develop strategies to address these challenges. This paper is one of the work-products of that planning grant.

**Demonstrating Institutional Quality Through Regional Accreditation**

American higher education uses a non-governmental, peer-based quality review system called **accreditation** for purposes of assuring the public of educational quality as well as stimulating continuous quality improvement. This system has been in place in parts of the United States for over a century. In the 1960's, as the U.S. government began providing substantial funding to support higher education, it decided to use the existing accreditation system to qualify institutions for access to federal funds for education as well as access to contracts and grants for training, institutional development, and research. Federal funds now comprise a significant portion of the revenues of postsecondary institutions, and acquiring and maintaining regional accreditation from associations such as the Western Association of Schools and Colleges is a necessary prerequisite.

Accreditation is a system of voluntary, non-governmental self regulation and peer review. Until recently, it was unique to American educational institutions. Presently, there are six geographically-based, discrete regional accrediting associations that operate under the authority of the U.S. Department of Education. First established as a membership organization of secondary and postsecondary institutions in the New England states in the late 1800s, this voluntary system of peer review was repeated in other geographic regions of the United States over the following decades.

The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) was formed by its member colleges in 1963. The Western region covers institutions in California and Hawai'i, the territories of Guam, American Samoa, Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of Palau, Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and areas of the Pacific Basin, and East Asia where American/International schools and colleges operate. The accrediting activities of WASC are conducted by the three Commissions: The Accrediting Commission for Schools, The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, and the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities.

WASC and other accrediting agencies are required to follow U.S. Department of Education regulations in order to be recognized, but the Department's regulations guide a relatively small portion of an accreditation agency's standards and policies. With the exception of Department of Education regulations, the accrediting commissions are independent of government or other political control or influence.

Accreditation is a system by which an institution is evaluated against objective Standards of Accreditation (see Appendix 1 for the current ACCJC Standards) regarding institutional goals and objectives; the appropriateness, sufficiency, and utilization of resources; the usefulness, integrity, and effectiveness of its processes; and the extent to which it is achieving its intended student outcomes. The standards of accreditation are developed by a commission composed of higher education professionals and members representing the public interest. All standards are subject to review and comment by member institutions before being adopted. Accreditation standards are peer-based, and reflect best practice in American higher education as well as the American public's expectations for institutional quality and accountability. Over time, the standards of quality evolve, generally requiring higher performance from institutions. This uniquely American process for assuring and improving quality has resulted in a higher education system that is viewed as one of the best in the world.

The evaluation of an institution is conducted by peer evaluators drawn from other accredited institutions of higher education, and the evaluators' recommendations for improvement are

reviewed and approved by an accrediting commission itself composed of other higher education peers and public representatives. The Commission makes the decision on the accreditation status of the institution. The range of accreditation decisions range from "reaffirm accreditation" to placement on special notice or sanction, to termination of accreditation. All institutions placed on any kind of special notice must make improvements sufficient to fully meet the standards within a specified time frame or risk losing accreditation.

**Barriers to Improving and Sustaining Quality at a Level Sufficient to Maintain Accreditation**

The Pacific institutions which are members of the Pacific Postsecondary Education Council choose to be accredited in order to be eligible for U.S. federal financial support, including financial aid for students, grants and contracts. Institutions in the Pacific Region face some special challenges in continuing to meet accreditation status. Currently, over 50% of these institutions are on some level of notice from ACCJC/WASC that they are not in full compliance with the standards, and most of those that are not currently on such notice have been so at some time in their institutional history. It is the view of this paper's authors that the entire region shares some conditions that have to be changed if the colleges in the region can reasonably expect to meet the established accreditation expectations for continued improvement of higher education practice and for adequate student outcomes. We believe a candid discussion of these issues on a regional basis is helpful to developing a best-wisdom approach to improving the quality of higher education and insuring that institutions continue to meet accreditation standards.

The challenges facing Pacific institutions can be organized into eight categories:

- Geography as a barrier;
- Evolving definitions of good practice that raise requirements for accreditation;
- Inappropriate local government control or influence;
- Institutional governance issues;
- Inadequate development for institutional leaders and potential leaders;
- Inadequate levels of public support;
- Under-prepared entering students;
- Insufficient scale to permit effective and efficient operations.

**Geography as a Barrier**:

Accreditation standards change or evolve as the direct results of the dialogue and exchange of ideas for practice that occurs in the higher education community. Pacific institutions, however, are geographically isolated from one another and from the mainstream of emerging American higher education practice, and have few opportunities for exchange of ideas and practice. These institutions are widely dispersed in a region that is larger than the continental U.S. As a result, Pacific island institutions have very limited opportunities for professional exchanges with the faculty, staff, and administrators from other accredited institutions, including the mainland, and learning from best practice across the landscape of American higher education.

Pacific institution administrative staff and faculty have received their initial bachelor's degrees from a variety of institutions. Many studied for their degrees in Hawai`i or the mainland United States, while others received degrees from institutions in the Pacific (University of Guam, University of the South Pacific). Opportunities for additional formal education and graduate training after employment are limited and expensive. Any graduate training or professional development provided specifically for Pacific institutions needs to address the region's need for

currency in American higher education practice. While a few accredited mainland institutions offer distance-learning based graduate degrees in higher education, the opportunities to participate are still quite limited.

*Challenges for Pacific Institutions:*

The Pacific institutions need to increase opportunities for workshops and conferences that provide professional development, leadership development and sharing of best practices from within the region as well as from the rest of the U.S. higher education community. Staff at mainland institutions can choose from professional meetings which are designed to share practices, provide specific professional development skills to categories of institutional staff, and allow for collective problem-solving of shared challenges in education. Higher education's best practices typically evolve from the dialogue *across* campuses that develop from professional associations. For Pacific institutions, the cost of regular participation in these events is prohibitive both in terms of expense and time needed to reach the mainland. For many of the Pacific institutions, a flight off island will require a week's absence or more, and the travel time required by airline schedules makes it very difficult for academic staff to attend many mainland conferences. The Pacific Region needs to develop the means of creating *regional conferences* and workshops (including an emphasis on developing teleconferencing capabilities) that bring in best practices from the mainland as well as permit sharing of best practice and problem solving within the region. This effort should be *supplemented by* more opportunities for Pacific college staff to participate in important professional development activities on the mainland and with other WASC-region institutions.

The Pacific institutions lack broadband internet access at a reasonable cost to share curricula, instruction, and the ability to communicate in real time. Many rural institutions in the mainland overcome their relative isolation with effective internet tools at reasonable costs. The Pacific institutions need accessibility to similar tools easily available to their counterparts in the mainland. Greater access to modern telecommunication technologies is an opportunity for the Colleges to partly overcome their geographic boundaries and supplement their abilities to communicate with regional counterparts and share best practices.

**Evolving Definitions of Good Practice**

As American institutions develop better practice in response to rising public expectations, they inevitably drive changes in the standards of accreditation. Similarly, as the American public's expectations for higher education increase or become more finely articulated, they are expressed through Congressional mandates to accreditors and accredited institutions. Professional associations at the state or national level; accreditors, government and other training opportunities; and exchanges of assistance between institutions in an accrediting region all help mainland institutions develop the capacity to meet accreditation standards. Community College administrators and to a lesser extent, faculty, are more likely to change jobs within a more local geographic region, and they thereby circulate skills and insights among the institutions. Pacific institutions, by virtue of their geographic isolation, have less access to, and make less use of these regular opportunities for professional development and learning.

In the past twenty years, American higher education has increasingly implemented learning-based strategies for organizing higher education. The practice of identifying specifically expected learning outcomes, pedagogical and learning strategies, and assessing learning began over twenty years ago in the Midwest. It has spread through much of American higher education by professional associations such as the American Association of Community Colleges, League for

Innovation in the Community College, American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) and American Council on Education (ACE), grants from foundations such as the Pew Charitable Trust, and early adopter accrediting commissions such as the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central region. This collective "body of work" of American higher education has seldom involved the Pacific island institutions. While many individual mainland institutions have not been directly involved in funded research or experimental practice projects, they have been able to learn about the new practices through professional associations and through the circulation of staff that have acquired the new knowledge. This is not the case for Pacific island institutions due to their geographic isolation.

Over this same twenty year period, accreditation standards have significantly increased their expectations that American higher education be able to assess its own quality and use the results of assessment to improve over time. Initial accreditation standards expected colleges to articulate the results of student participation in higher education by providing statistical data on student progress through the education system (initial enrollment in college, completion of a certificate or degree, graduation, job placement or transfer to another institution). More recently, accreditation standards have added a requirement that institutions assess whether students are actually learning what the courses and programs expect they will learn. This new requirement asks institutions to define expected learning outcomes at the course, program and degree level, to develop authentic and valid assessments of learning, and to use the results of assessment to change institutional educational practices to continuously improve learning.

The presumed presence of ongoing and effective institutional research has become a critical foundation for the central belief of accrediting bodies that *good institutions engage in continuous assessment and improvement.* In addition, American institutions have significantly "ramped up" their capacity to do institutional research on student satisfaction, on the relative success of different student cohorts, and on a number of other topics of interest to colleges seeking to produce or support better learning. Professional associations such as the Association of Institutional Researchers (a national group), California Association of Institutional Research, and the Research and Planning Group (regional associations) have helped member institutions increase their ability to conduct meaningful research. Pacific institutions have had limited access to the professional development provided through such organizations. There is no comparable association of Pacific institutional researchers.

*Challenges for Pacific Institutions:*

Pacific island institutions need to develop capacity to address evolving higher education institutional practices, particularly around teaching and learning, but also around administrative theory and organizational management, business practices, student development, etc. to keep pace with evolving practices reflected in the Standards of Accreditation. This capacity is often developed through post-baccalaureate, degree-oriented education; professional and staff development workshops and conferences; involvement in specially funded research and praxis projects with other institutions; and ongoing high quality institutional research. Pacific island institutions need to develop strategies for systematically engaging in and learning from the evolving practices of higher education if they are to remain able to meet accreditation standards.

**Inappropriate Local Governmental Influence or Control**

Accreditation standards call for each college to have an independent governing board that is responsible for:

- establishing policies to assure the quality, integrity, and effectiveness of the student learning programs and services;
- the financial stability of the institution;
- adhering to a clearly defined policy for selecting and evaluating the chief administrator for the college; and
- reflecting the public interest in its activities.

As an independent policy-making body, the board is expected to advocate for and defend the institution and protect it from undue political influence or pressure. In practice, these standards expect that governing boards make the educational quality and integrity, and fiscal integrity and stability of the institution their goal, eschewing pressures to do otherwise from the constituencies that elect them or the from government and private sector interests that may influence their selection for a role on the college governing board. This is not to say the local governments, which provide direct funding and charters to colleges, do not have an important say in the mission and purposes of the institution *to provide higher education* or an expectation that the institution be accountable for spending pubic funds in a manner that provides high quality education. But accreditation standards specifically state that the college governing board is to protect the institution from undue pressure, and this includes governmental pressures.

Over the years, the ACCJC has had to deal with a number of efforts by local governments or influential community members to exert undue influence on Pacific institutions. These examples include efforts to provide un-earned degrees or awards to students, requirements that associates and relatives of government officials be hired regardless of their qualifications for the job or performance in the job, efforts to subsume the institutional hiring process under the government's hiring process or to have it favor an ethnic group over others, efforts to have the government define the job duties and qualifications for college jobs, government withholding of funds due to colleges for purposes that are arbitrary or even unknown, government attempts to control college ending fund balances, government decisions about mission, curriculum or programs that colleges are required to offer, government interference in the hiring or evaluation of institutional staff and administrative leadership, government requirements that colleges engage in business deals that are not prompted by the college's decisions about what best serves institutional mission. In some cases, local laws needed to be changed to prevent or address the interference. Compared to the ACCJC's state-based institutions, the Pacific institutions appear to experience far more governmental interference in college operations, to the detriment of the colleges. .

College governing boards are typically either appointed by local government or elected. When appointed, individual board members may find the body or individual that appointed them wishing to exert influence on the board. When elected, individual board members may find the constituency that elected them wishing for special benefits from the institution or for other "results" from an elected official. The task of a governing board member is to honor her or his primary responsibility to serve the educational needs of the institution's students, not the interests or needs of other parties. It often falls to the governing board members to defend the college against other undue influences. Pacific governing board members are all appointed by their governments. This makes it difficult for some to reject efforts at governmental interference in the college; some resist at the cost of losing their appointments to the board.

The Pacific institutions have historically been subject to undue pressure from local governments. This stems in part from concerns by local governments that colleges be "accountable" for the public good. However, they lack of a set of measurable educational objectives by which to hold the colleges accountable and as a result exhibit a tendency toward interference in institutional processes and decisions. It also results from a tendency of some local government officials to operate governmental agencies in a manner that serves some partisan or community constituencies over others, and they may desire to have the local college[s] operate in a similar manner. In addition, in some Pacific territories and republics, traditional community leadership practices and expectations appear to conflict with the ACCJC's standards related to the established autonomous authority of the board and college administration.

Many institutions outside the Pacific islands are also subject to undue pressure from local governments and other agencies. However, most of those institutions have in place a number of checks and balances that can be used to help counter undue pressures. These include charters that establish their independence from governmental bodies, strong faculty professional associations (Senates) and a tradition of ceding almost exclusive control over curriculum and educational programs to faculty, institutional governance system that call for significant faculty role, tenure that protects faculty employment, collective bargaining units that provide a second control on work conditions, a public expectation that college resources (fiscal, human, physical) be used almost exclusively for education, and external audits and regulations and laws that prohibit the use of institutional resources for non-institutional purposes.

*Challenges for Pacific Institutions:*

It appears to the Accrediting Commission that with frequent changes in local government leadership, higher education leaders have to frequently defend their institutions from external attempts to redirect internal operations, staffing, and finances. Pacific island institutions need to develop and implement institutionalized policies and practices that serve as a barrier to inappropriate external intrusion.

The Pacific institutions would benefit from regionally developed and delivered workshops for local government officials that clarify the required independence of colleges as well as their mission and benefits to the communities they serve.

The laws in the respective island entities that established the authority of the boards of each Pacific institution clearly delineated the roles and responsibilities of the respective boards. However, these laws are frequently ignored by the government. The institutions would benefit from on-going training and development of governing board members. Accreditation standards require the governing board to ensure the integrity of the institution, yet many board members need training to help them develop the ability to maintain the institution's freedom from undue governmental interference.

**Institutional Governance Issues**

The Accrediting Commission also notes that Pacific institutions frequently demonstrate that the institutional governance structures are not operating in accordance with accreditation standards. Standard IV defines specifically the oversight role of the Board, and quite specifically the role of the college chief executive. Other sections of the standards describe the responsibilities of faculty and the responsibilities of the academic staff of the institution. Too frequently, accreditation teams find that the governing boards of Pacific institutions become inappropriately involved in administrative and management tasks. This appears to be most common where there is high

turnover in governing board membership and new board members are untrained in appropriate strategies that will allow them to fulfill their basic responsibility to ensure the fiduciary integrity of the institution as well as to ensure educational quality and effectiveness. It also appears to occur where there is instability in the presidency, with frequent turnover and long periods in which the individual in the presidency is "acting" or interim. Pacific College presidents are too frequently struggling with simultaneous government and board interference in administrative matters. We believe that these difficulties again stem from the governing board member's lack of access to regular board training and development opportunities, and to boards' needs to develop clear policies that establish institutional governance autonomy. Additionally, college presidents need regular training to help them be appropriately confident in helping the board to distinguish its role from that of the president.

*Challenges for Pacific Institutions:*

Pacific institutions need to provide regular training to new and continuing board members and to college presidents to enhance their ability to fulfill their respective responsibilities in accordance with accreditation standards. Board members would benefit from regular exchanges with board members from other institutions, as well as from training that illustrates the distinctive roles of board members versus presidents and administrative staff.

**Inadequate Development for Institutional Leaders and Potential Leaders**

All higher education institutions face a challenge of providing professional development and training to current institutional leaders to help them better lead the institution, as well as the challenge of developing potential leaders who may assume increasingly senior posts at the institution. Leaders and potential leaders at mainland institutions have a broad range of professional development opportunities available, from evening post-baccalaureate programs at local universities to summer two-week retreats and workshops; from regular meetings of position-related professional associations (e.g., the chief instructional officer's association) to attendance at conferences where workshops are presented. In the Western Region, the California public college leaders benefit from such professional development associations as the Association of California Community College Administrators, an organization whose goal is to train mid-level administrators, and the Community College Leadership Development Initiative, whose goal is to provide leadership training at all levels of leadership from board to faculty. Nationally, organizations of researchers (e.g., Association of Institutional Researchers) and department chairs (various national associations of discipline chairs) help support leadership development among researchers and faculty. All of the professional development opportunities help institutions prepare leaders and future leaders that are well versed in current and effective higher education practice.

*Challenges for Pacific Institutions:*

Leadership and staff development training are essential to the future vitality of the Pacific institutions. An on-going, region-wide program of leadership training, built around a common set of best practice principles, will provide a network of educational professionals from all segments of higher education. Regional chapters of selected professional associations should also be established. The Community College Leadership Development Initiative, founded by leaders of the ACCJC, should be engaged to develop leadership training programs that are specific to the needs of Pacific institutions but which also bring to the region some of the excellent practices and knowledge developed on the mainland.

**Inadequate levels of Public Support for Quality Education**

Five of the six Pacific island colleges accredited by the ACCJC are the only public institutions of higher education in their respective entities. All six operate in environments where the college faculty and administrators are likely to be among the most highly educated persons in the community, and where the general public's understanding of what is needed to support educational excellence is limited by their own lack of experience in an accredited higher education institution. In the absence of many alternatives for their students, the communities do not have a means of comparing the outcomes of the education programs offered by the Pacific institutions with those of other institutions. Most individuals within the local communities appear to be appreciative of the colleges and generally supportive, but it is not clear that they have set well-developed expectations for the student outcomes of the education system. Even more challenging, the public constituencies of some colleges do not always understand and value the contribution that the college makes to local society. The lack of involvement and support for institutional excellence contributes at times to the lack of local government support, monetary and political, necessary for educational excellence. In at least one case, College of the Marshall Islands, the public's response to the potential loss of accreditation has been important in the college's efforts to improve. But this response came far too late to prevent imposition of the most severe sanction, "show cause," one step short of removal of accreditation.

The Pacific island economies are a varied mix of subsistence agriculture; public sector employment (particularly in government services, education, and health care), and small though growing private sectors. Economic development in the American Affiliated Pacific Islands is best described as variable and highly dependent upon world and regional demand for selected commodities (such as fish, sugar, pineapple, copra, etc.); overseas visitors from Asian countries such as Japan and Korea; U.S. defense and selected military research projects; and governmental expenditures (U.S., local, and international) for infrastructure projects, operations, education, health, and welfare. While many current workers are imported contract employees (depending on the availability of particular skills in the specific entity), the long term sustainability of the respective local economies is dependent upon the ability of the local colleges to prepare local residents for the full range of employment opportunities.

In the U.S., there is a demonstrable connection between a person's level of educational achievement, the likelihood of employment, and level of annual and lifetime income. Unfortunately, except in a few selected areas, it is not clear that the majority of the public in the Pacific islands yet sees direct connections between the efforts of the colleges to educate and train students and the economic and social development of their respective entities or the Pacific islands region. Indeed, in the absence of a growing economy, *there may be little connection* between the advancement of individuals through attainment of higher education and the social and economic development of nations. Nevertheless, education may be critical for the individual's economic advancement and ability to move to other locations where more jobs are available.

Given general levels of funding for other public ventures within the respective entities, including utilities infrastructure, health care, and primary and secondary education, the colleges may appear to the public to be relatively well-supported with public funds. Yet the state of college facilities, the colleges' inabilities to purchase and sustain the technical equipment that tech-voc training requires, and their inabilities to provide salaries and other funds sufficient to employ, sustain, and to further develop some of the human expertise they sorely need (such as information systems specialists, learning disabilities specialists, trained administrators and academic leaders, faculty

with Master's degrees in academic subject matters included in the college curriculum, and institutional researchers) all contribute to institutional deficiencies and accreditation difficulties.

*Challenges for Pacific Institutions:*

Without greater public knowledge about how colleges contribute to individual and social welfare, and without a widely-held public expectation that quality higher education be available in their communities, the Pacific institutions will continue to be challenged by insufficient public support in the form of funds for operations, accountability for governing boards, and expectations of educational excellence. There appear to be a number of Pacific institutions that do not yet have sufficient government support to remain qualified as accredited institutions under American accreditation standards. Unless governments more fully understand accreditation standards and the requirements that their local institutions must meet to remain accredited, their continued accreditation will be at risk. The Pacific institutions need to provide more training and information to local governments and to the public about what is necessary to sustain an accredited higher education institution in the respective entities.

**Under-prepared Entering Students**

Most colleges accredited by the ACCJC provide "open access" to students and do not have entrance screens such as SAT score or a high secondary school grade point average. In that regard, they are "open access" institutions committed to serving all who do enter, and limiting their requirement to some sense of "who can benefit." Public community colleges tend to view their mission as including that of providing students with a "second chance" at higher education, and commit to offer remedial/developmental courses for those who are not yet ready for college. The provision of remedial/developmental courses and programs are the means by which institutions seek to ready students for *collegiate* educational experiences.

Like most accredited institutions, all of the Pacific institutions admit high school graduates of their own school systems who lack sufficient skills in English language, in reading, writing and computation to perform at the postsecondary level in college courses. To various degrees, the colleges have implemented remedial/developmental or pre-collegiate courses and student support programs. However, the degree of under-preparedness that Pacific institutions must address appears to be far greater than what one can expect to find in most mainland colleges. Pacific institutions must find a means to bring entering students with a wider range of educational preparation up to collegiate level in the amount of time that students will willingly spend in pre-collegiate courses and that student financial aid will fund. The lower the level of educational attainment of incoming college students, the more significant is this challenge. The skills of the exiting high school students, particularly those graduating from public high schools, are in some places quite low. In addition, data suggest that in some of the Pacific entities, a significant proportion of primary and secondary teachers lack associates or bachelors degrees themselves. Unless the local primary and secondary education systems improve the educational attainment of their high school graduates, the Pacific institutions will continue to place a high proportion of their effort and resources into remedial/developmental programs, and thus be unable to elevate the level of their collegiate curriculum to meet quality standards for higher education.

A major component of student under-preparedness is that indigenous languages other than English are widely practiced in each entity. In fact, in most Pacific island communities the formal medium of education up to grade four is in the local language or dialect. Since the colleges' medium of instruction is English, nearly all their students are English as Second Language students with a wide spectrum of competence.

*Challenges for Pacific Institutions:*

The Pacific island institutions must have adequate resources to offer a comprehensive set of remedial/developmental education instruction and related support services matched to the diverse needs of their entering students. These resources include staff expertise in assessment, research and pedagogy, assessment tools, research tools including adequate data systems and funding. Federal financial aid policy sets limits on the number of courses for which an individual is eligible to receive aid. Therefore, a significant number of students who need remedial/developmental instruction will exhaust their student aid prior to completing their degree requirements and are likely to drop-out. This is likely to create pressure for a quicker solution to meet students' lack of preparation for collegiate level work. The institutions must acquire additional local student financial aid support for those students whose academic preparation makes it unlikely that they can complete a degree or certificate in the time allowed by U.S. government financial aid policies.

The region would benefit if its faculty and staff were trained in and able to consistently use the best pedagogical strategies for remedial/developmental education. The Pacific island institutions need to assess the quality of their remedial/developmental and collegiate level programs in order to better articulate the pre-collegiate and collegiate level courses and programs. They also need to carefully assess skill levels of students entering collegiate courses as well as student progress through those programs. This assessment is essential to inform ongoing efforts to improve student learning and achievement – a key element in meeting accreditation standards.

English language training remains a challenge in the Pacific region. Many teachers of English lack certification as English language teachers, or lack training in the methodologies most effective for teaching English to non-native speakers (English as a foreign language instruction). Region-wide efforts are needed to identify and propagate English language instructional methods that are effective in non-English speaking primary and secondary school environments. College faculty need to be trained in language instruction and to help primary and secondary school teachers gain the required skills to raise the level of English language proficiency for high school graduates.

Finally, the institutions need to establish and maintain student performance standards for collegiate instruction that are consistent with the practices at other accredited U.S. colleges. Failing to establish and maintain appropriate collegiate standards will inevitably harm students' abilities to transfer to other colleges or pursue graduate education, to pass licensure examinations, or to perform adequately in their job and career.

**Insufficient Scale to Permit Effective and Efficient Operations**

The Pacific island institutions are modestly funded, and lack the economy of scale needed for efficient operations. In addition, their publics frequently expect that they operate at multiple sites due to their dispersed island geography. Colleges face severe challenges providing quality facilities and coordinated educational services with sites and students spread over hundreds or thousands of miles of ocean. Some of the colleges offer education at off-campus sites that are far below the institution's and the Accrediting Commission's standards for quality educational facilities and for safety. Some are, frankly, decrepit physical plants that lack basic classroom equipment. Colleges offering distance instruction via telecommunications find that the technology that connects islands is now insufficient to provide reliable service, and cannot offer the two-way live instruction that is needed for some classes and programs. Yet the colleges

attempt to meet the public's expectations by continuing the practice of multiple sites. Given current enrollments many college off-campus sites do not enroll sufficient students to be an efficient use of college resources. Costs of higher education in the Pacific are high relative to mainland college costs for comparable numbers of students.

These issues are highlighted with the following data

| College | Fall 2005 Enrollment | # Sites | Annual Budget[1] |
|---|---|---|---|
| American Samoa CC | 1,500 | 1 | $4.0 M |
| College of the Marshall Islands | 600 | 1 | $ 5.1M |
| College of Micronesia FSM | 2,500 | 6 | $10.5M |
| Guam CC | 1,800 | 1 | $13.5M |
| Northern Marianas College | 1,300 | 3 | $11.2M |
| Palau CC | 650 | 1 | $ 5.1M |

*Challenges Facing Pacific Institutions:*

The Pacific institutions are challenged to provide for the full range of institutional activities, including instruction, student support services, professional develop for all staff, adequate and state of the art facilities and equipment, that are necessary to continue to meet accreditation standards.

**Conclusions**

Pacific institutions receive a large amount of their current operating revenues from U.S. federal funds, including student financial aid, grants and contracts supplied through Title IV and Title III of the U.S. Higher Education Act. In order to be eligible for these funds, the institutions must retain accreditation by a Department of Education recognized accrediting agency by meeting accreditation standards. The institutions' collective ability to continue to fully meet accreditation standards is being challenged as the standards grow more demanding and as American higher education practices evolve. The Pacific region colleges all experience similar challenges but to different degrees. The challenges call for regional and collective solutions.

The Accrediting Commission must apply the same set of standards to all institutions it accredits. When it began accrediting Pacific institutions, the Commission took a developmental approach and granted initial accreditation expecting institutions to continue to improve and to meet and exceed standards. Nevertheless, for many reasons including those noted in this paper, Pacific institutions have historically been minimally meeting standards rather than exceeding them. As the standards and quality expectations of American higher education evolve, the Pacific Region's colleges need some assistance to improve in areas where they are falling behind accreditation standards and the practice of mainland institutions. The Pacific region also needs greater opportunity for working with mainland institutions – through ongoing professional development as well as pursuit of higher degrees. Collective effort is called for.

[1] Government appropriation and tuition & fees

If the Pacific institutions could create and sustain a higher education professional community for professional development and the exchange of ideas, and develop and share research on educational effectiveness and strategies for developing institutional practice, they will be more able to address the continuous quality improvement requirements of accreditation.

A Pacific higher education community would help all of the colleges defend their missions and their autonomy from governmental interference, help them educate their respective publics about the unique and important role a higher education system should play in society, and help link the higher education institutions to systems for economic development of the region. The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges and the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of WASC can help by providing education and training about accreditation standards, providing contacts with high-performing institutions in other parts of the Western Region, and by promoting the institutions' quality through accreditation processes. The Community College Leadership Development Initiative is willing to provide modeling and support for leadership development specific to the needs of Pacific institutions.

The Pacific Postsecondary Education Council (PPEC) has coordinated some of the professional development activities in the Pacific Region for over a decade. If strengthened and provided with appropriate resources and support from other agencies such as the CCLDI, the PPEC could serve as a vehicle for planning and implementing improvements quality assurance practices for post-secondary education quality throughout the Pacific region.