

Accreditation is supposed to be about education

September 18, 2013

RICHARD REEB

As Victor Valley College strives to comply with the criticisms and recommendations of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges accreditation team, there is no little amount of public confusion about what the college's problems really are. Without attempting to clarify that issue, we can at least come to understand what accreditation is intended to achieve.

As a member for 34 years of the Barstow College faculty and a division chair, I participated in several accreditation processes and, indeed, edited two of the college's accreditation reports. Between that experience and my knowledge of what accreditation actually is, I believe that there is considerably more heat than light being generated by VVC's now years-long state of affairs.

Much high-sounding verbiage characterizes accreditation guidelines, reports and reviews, but there are also hidden agendas, by both accreditation commissions and the colleges they evaluate. As I read through the WASC report on VVC, I noticed the "same old, same old" outlook that seemed designed more to obscure issues than to illuminate them.

But what stands out in this case is the budgetary issue. On this matter, the citizens and the college are deeply divided between those who believe that massive amounts of money have been misspent, on salaries and benefits mostly, and those who do not believe that that has been the case. Except for the details and the extent of these problems, they are not materially different from practically every other public twoyear college in California, but which hardly mitigate their seriousness. The state funding formula that pays colleges "by the head" is the greatest corrupter of all efforts to maintain fiscal integrity. Unionization is a close second.

What is accreditation anyway? According to one definition, "Accreditation is a voluntary method of quality assurance developed more than 100 years ago by American universities and secondary schools, and designed primarily to distinguish schools adhering to a set of educational standards."

According to another more terse definition, "Accreditation is a process in which certification of competency, authority, or credibility is presented." In fact, both these sources go on to say that much more is considered now than a century ago, which I suspect is because education is more politicized, meaning the government dominates it, which was not the case in the past.

In fact, the idea of accreditation is considerably older, for no less a personage than Thomas Jefferson, in his plan for education in "Notes on the State of Virginia," recommended that "visitors" govern the schools and that they select the "geniuses" fit for a college education. Lest we be offended by this apparent "elitism," we should note Jefferson's tacit concern about the impartiality of the students' teachers and their willingness to acknowledge that there are better students elsewhere.

In plain words, outside bodies evaluating the educational efforts of our schools should concern themselves with education, not politics. Hence, it should not take an accrediting commission to point out that a school is living beyond its means.

Nor should an accrediting commission imagine that it has the right, much less the duty, to lecture citizen bodies on how they should manage their budget. If the citizens of the community cannot hold their elected representatives accountable, no one can.

What Victor Valley residents should know is that WASC has been doing its own form of politicization. It has pushed so-called "multicultural" education, which purports to broaden students' perspectives but actually narrows them by encouraging them to identify with their particular ethnic, racial or gender

grouping. It has also advocated equally questionable national standards which enforce the conclusions of the most powerful factions in educational disciplines over dissenters.

Indeed, WASC is a covert enemy of academic freedom, for college is not a place to enforce conclusions but to leave human beings free to reach any conclusions that the evidence supports. This includes the possibility that America's founding fathers acknowledged the authority of a Creator, not to mention that sensible conservation practices need not entail waging war on America's prosperous commerce.

The citizens are responsible for Victor Valley College's financing. Let the educators, on and off the VVC campus, put their house in order by aligning their objectives with the freedom of the human mind rather than politically driven dogmas.

Richard Reeb lives in Helendale.