FOLLOW-UP VISIT REPORT

Sierra Joint Community College District
Rocklin, California

A confidential report prepared for
The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges
Western Association of Schools and Colleges

This report represents the findings of the evaluation team that visited Sierra College on October 23, 2009

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Introduction:
The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges issued a Warning to Sierra College on January 31, 2008. The college was required to submit a progress report by October 15, 2008. A follow up visit was conducted on November 17, 2008. The Commission continued the college on Warning and requested a follow up report be provided no later than October 15, 2009. An evaluation team consisting of two members visited the college on October 23, 2009. This report includes the findings of the team and the conclusions reached as a result of the team’s review of evidence.

In conducting the visit, the team reviewed all correspondence between the Commission and the college including the Team Evaluation Report issued at the conclusion of the comprehensive site visit that occurred from October 15 through October 18, 2007, the Team Evaluation Report for the Accreditation Follow-Up Report dated October 15, 2008, and Sierra College’s Follow Up Report dated October 15, 2009. The team interviewed the Superintendent/President, the Accreditation Liaison Officer, members of the governing board, members of the Academic Senate, the Strategic Council, the Planning and Resource Allocation Committee (PARAC) and several administrators, faculty and staff involved in various committees that were involved in planning, resource allocation and program review activities. During the visit, the team met with over 40 faculty, staff, administrators, members of the Board of Trustees, and students. The team also attended one open forum to allow for comment from any member of the campus. Approximately twenty people attended the open forum.

College staff members were very accommodating to team members and available for interviews and follow-up conversations. The college was well prepared and ready for the team's visit. After review of evidence, interviews with a wide range of constituency representatives and conversations with governing board members, the visiting team concluded that the college implemented Recommendations #2b, #2d and Commission Recommendation #1.

Upon review of the characteristics on the Rubric for Evaluating Institutional Effectiveness for planning and for the college’s program review process it is the team’s assessment that the college has on-going, systematic evaluation and planning in place. Additionally, a wide range of college personnel are involved in the dialogue that culminates in resource allocation recommendations to the Superintendent/President and the Board of Trustees. In the area of program review the team also concluded that processes are on-going, systematic and are evaluated on a regular basis. The team members have witnessed the college make changes to its processes over a period of time adding further support to our conclusions that the college has reached the Sustainable Continuous Quality Improvement level of implementation for program review and planning.
Team Recommendations

Recommendation 2b. Modify the budget development process in a manner that will place the college’s strategic plan priorities at the center of its resource allocation decisions (III.D.1, 1.c)

AND

Recommendation 2d. Develop mechanisms to regularly evaluate all of the college’s planning and resource allocation processes as the basis for improvement (I.B.6, II.A.2.f, II.B.4, III.D.3, IV.A.5)

General Comments Related to Recommendations 2.b and 2.d.
Sierra College has made significant improvement in the resource allocation process by modifying it in a manner that connects each funding request to strategies identified in the college’s Strategic Plan. A software program called TracDat is used to monitor reporting and tracking of resource requests. The budget development and planning process is a six stage process:

Stage 1: Establish Priorities. At the beginning of the year the Board of Trustees and Strategic Council review prior year accomplishments, assess the current state of the college, review the continued appropriateness of goals and objectives of the Strategic Plan and establish new planning principles and budget priorities for the upcoming fiscal year. Sierra College continues to use the “Sierra College Compensation Agreement” which established an arrangement between employee groups and the college that 78% of new revenues would be used for personnel costs. The remaining 22% is available for other costs. The Board also established a policy that the budget would be balanced and ending fund reserves would be at least 8%.

Stage 2: Identify Resource Needs. Departments identify their needs in an electronic Planning and Resource Request (ePAR) now referred to as ePAR. Prior to this change the college used the Planning and Resource Request or PAR for departments to request resources needed to implement department initiatives. A timeline for submitting ePARs and the process used to review and prioritize requests has been established as part of the process used to identify resource needs and to submit ePARs.

Stage 3: Prioritize Requests. Departments send their ePARs to the area manager who works with the department to prioritize the requests as being in Tier 1, 2 or 3 with Tier 1 being the highest priority. The tiered and ranked requests are forwarded to the responsible department’s executive administration who then works with area managers to establish the priority ranking of requests within the division or branch. This process is similar to the process that had been in effect since the development of the PAR process that resulted from the 2001 accreditation team recommendations.

The college has improved its PAR process by creating a Planning and Resource Allocation Committee (PARAC). A significant improvement has been made by the college’s use of PARAC to establish an open and inclusive process that provides faculty, staff, managers, students and administrators a voice in determining the prioritization of
the funding requests submitted by the departments. Previously the executive administration determined which items would be funded. The PARAC provides the opportunity for the campus community to participate in setting the priorities of the funding requests.

Stage 4: Review Alignment. PARAC’s recommended prioritized list of funding requests is forwarded to the Strategic Council for it to assess whether the Tier 1 requests are in alignment with Strategic Plan priorities, program review results and other planning documents that influence resource allocation choices.

Stage 5: Allocate Resources. Using the tentative budget for the upcoming budget year the prioritized list of funding requests recommended by the Strategic Council is forwarded to the Superintendent/President and then the Board of Trustees. The Board considers the recommended list of priorities and decides which items are to be funded using in large part the recommendations of the PARAC and/or Strategic Council and the Superintendent/President. Departments are notified of the status of their funding requests. A weakness noted by past evaluation teams is that the departments were not notified which items within their list of requests had been funded by the governing board. That concern has now been corrected as departments are now notified when their funding requests have been funded. The process has provided the college constituency groups the opportunity to actively participate in the deliberations of how resources were to be allocated. The changes in the process address concerns identified in previous accrediting team reports about the lack of campus wide participation in funding decisions.

Stage 6: Evaluate Results and Process. In this stage the college measures progress towards accomplishing its goals and evaluates the resource allocation process. Results of the evaluation were provided to the team and are described in more detail below.

The team members realize that the college has made significant improvements since the evaluation team visit in October 2007. Currently the college relies on the Strategic plan to influence resource allocation decisions. Additionally, the team noted that the dialogue among college constituencies related to resources allocation decisions has increased substantially. More specifically, the college uses PARAC to facilitate resource allocation decisions. Interviews with campus personnel confirmed that the on-campus dialogue has improved with college personnel stating that they are now involved in meaningful discussions leading to decisions as to how resources should be allocated at the college.

Recommendation 2b.
Findings and Evidence:
Sierra College modified its Program Assessment and Review (PAR) to include a requirement that proposed actions to address the goals and strategies of the college. The modified PAR is now called an electronic Planning Assessment and Review or “ePAR.” The ePAR process is fully implemented. Unit and area managers use the ePAR to separate resource requests into three categories: Tier 1, Tier 2 or Tier 3 with Tier 1 being the highest priority. The units and area managers work with their responsible executive administrator to develop a division level priority list of all Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 allocation requests from within the division. Finally, the Planning and Resource Allocation Committee (PARAC) comprised of nine members representing faculty, staff, and administrators evaluate resource requests in consideration of the college’s mission,
vision, core values and strategic plan. The prioritized list is then forwarded to the Strategic Council for consideration. The Strategic Council submits its recommended list of priorities resource allocation requests to the Superintendent/President who then submits recommendations for funding requests to the Board of Trustees for decision.

**Recommendation 2.d.**

**Findings and Evidence:**
Sierra College completed evaluations of the ePAR, Program Review, and PARAC development processes. Progress made on Strategic Plan strategies and goals was documented and reported to the Board of Trustees and the campus community. Updates to the goals are recorded in an automated program called “TracDat.” During the evaluation of existing processes college personnel identified several improvements that could be made to improve the overall reporting of accomplishments achieved over the course of the year. Measuring progress in achieving Strategic Plan goals is considered to be one method used to evaluate the planning process. More formal and structured evaluations were completed by the Research and Planning Office and included several evaluation techniques including surveys, interviews, focus groups and large group discussions. A separate evaluation report was prepared for ePAR, Program Review and PARAC. The college stated that it intends to review the Strategic Plan and reduce the number of strategies by the end of the fall semester, in preparation for the 2010-2011 planning cycle.

The review of the processes used by the college resulted in a number of changes to the processes. The following list is a representative sample of the improvements recommended as a result of the process reviews:

- Incorporate Program Outcomes assessment and planned program improvements into the resource allocation process.
- Improve the effectiveness of ePAR and Program Review by refining the institutional definition of “program” and “department”.
- Improve the longitudinal data used in Program Review, particularly for operational and service areas.
- Conduct college and community forums for input into the next Educational Master Plan and Strategic Plan.

The use of incremental improvements to existing processes is a positive step forward for Sierra College. The college continues to use processes that were developed as a result of its accreditation review in 2002 and is now modifying those processes to continually improve the processes to provide better processes for decision making purposes.

**Conclusions:**
Based on evidence prepared by the college and review by the evaluation team it is the team’s opinion that the college has implemented Recommendations 2.b. and 2.d. Additionally, the team reviewed the characteristics of the *Rubric for Evaluating Institutional Effectiveness – Part II: Planning* published by the Commission and using the characteristics of institutional effectiveness described in the Rubric the team has concluded that Sierra College has achieved the Sustainable Continuous Quality Improvement level of implementation.
Commission Recommendation 1.

The Commission requires the college to improve its program review process to include the analysis of the currency and relevancy of the programmatic curriculum.

General Comments:
In response to the Commission’s recommendation and realizing deficiencies in the original Program Assessment and Review (PAR) process, Sierra College created a number of changes to the process, reorganizing the activities under the Program Review Committee (PRC). The committee is composed of representatives from faculty, administration, and classified staff and is a standing committee of the Academic Senate and charged with “broadening and enhancing” the program review process. The new protocol developed by the committee is designed to be used by instructional programs, student services, operations and support offices and services.

One of the first activities of the committee was to define “program” as it was to be used for program review. The original PAR process had been adapted to an electronic process (ePAR) that each identified program is required to complete annually in order to establish resource requests and develop short term planning. The decision was then confirmed that these program definitions would be used for the completion of the initial program review under the new framework. The definition of “program” has been further refined after the first cycle has been accomplished as follows:

An instructional program is defined as an established entity that meets one or more of the following criteria:
• A group of courses that results in degree(s), license(s), or certificates
• A set or sequence of related courses focused on a specific discipline
• A special activity or function as decided by consensus between the Vice President of Instruction, the Vice President of Student Services, as appropriate, and the Academic Senate

A Student Services program is defined as an established entity that meets one or more of the following criteria:
• A defined service with assigned space, staff, and budget
• Entities mandated by regulation
• A special activity or function as decided by consensus between the Vice President of Student Services, the Vice President of Instruction, as appropriate, and the Academic Senate

Findings and Evidence:
All units or programs that completed an ePar were required to complete a program review in the spring of 2009. Three templates were created to address Instructional Programs, Student Services, and Support Offices and Services. A number of data elements were supplied by the college’s Research and Planning Office and pre-populated on an electronic program review form. The form allows spaces for narrative responses to questions.
For the program review, relevancy is defined in terms of a program’s alignment with the department and district mission statements, the college’s Strategic Goals, and student and community needs. In addition, an area is provided for additional information on program relevancy as determined by those writing the report. Currency is tied into the process of curriculum review and the inclusion of learning outcomes and outcomes assessment. At this point, the data used reflects the number of courses that include student learning outcomes. The determination of assessment methods and the results of the assessment of the outcomes is an ongoing process that will be further incorporated into the program review process as the cycle progresses.

Rubrics were designed for evaluating the reviews on the critical elements of program effectiveness, program relevancy, and program currency using both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Based on these rubrics, the PRC made one of three recommendations for each program being reviewed: Critical Attention Needed (C), Opportunity Identified (O) or Stable (S). The rating of a “C” evaluation could be for either the need for resource allocations or further planning. If “critical for planning,” the review is forwarded to the Academic Senate, the appropriate Educational Administrator and/or PARAC. In addition to immediate attention, these areas are required to do another review in a year or two, depending on the individual circumstances. Reviews deemed “Opportunity Identified” offered an opportunity to enrich or benefit student learning, but were not evaluated to be critical at the time they were completed. A rating of “Stable” indicates that a program is functioning well with current resources and is able to sustain currency, relevancy and effectiveness. Understanding that “stable” programs could become “critical” given the changing conditions of the environment, recommendations could be made anticipating potential effects of these types of changes. Programs rated as “stable” are scheduled for the next program review in three years unless recommendations were made that would require earlier attention.

Completed program reviews were received from 130 instructional and student services and support programs. An Executive Summary was prepared by the PRC providing summaries and recommendations that were given to the reports’ authors and also to the campus planning committees: the Planning and Resource Allocation Committee (PARAC), Strategic Council, and Dean’s Council in the Program Review Committee.

Based on the information compiled in the Program Review Executive Report, the strengths and weaknesses of the process were analyzed. In addition, a survey was sent to the authors of the program reviews, PARAC and Strategic Council members and all staff to determine their opinions of the process. From these two sources, the PRC has determined areas needing improvement and the direction for future refinement of the process. A Program Review Handbook is being created, further training is being planned, and additional work is being done with the Deans’ Council, PARAC, and Strategic Council members to continue to refine the process and align the content with the district’s resource and allocation process.
Conclusions:
Annual or bi-annual ePAR requests for resource and budget allocations have been tied in to the overall Program Review process focusing on the direction articulated in the college Mission Statement, the Educational Master Plan, and the Strategic Plan. As the assessment of Student Learning Outcomes progresses, these results will automatically be incorporated in the program review process. In meeting with campus constituencies, the enthusiasm and appreciation of the collaborative effort devoted to the refinement of the program review process was demonstrated.

Commission Recommendation #1 required the college to incorporate relevancy and currency as criteria in the program review process. It is the team’s assessment that the college has fully implemented this recommendation. Furthermore, the team reviewed the program review process and noted that the process is ongoing, systematic and is used to assess and improve student learning. The team’s conclusion is that Sierra College has a fully implemented program review process that meets the characteristics of the Sustainable Continuous Quality Improvement level of implementation of the Commission’s Rubric for Evaluating Institutional Effectiveness for Program Review.