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Writing Assignment #3

I work for a midsized university in a small city, in a region with few other economic or professional opportunities. We are currently under the threat of losing our accreditation which came as a shock and surprise to the faculty, staff and senior administrators. During the last comprehensive visit, the school had received 10-year accreditation, the highest accreditation term available. It was incomprehensible how a school could move from such good standing to being in jeopardy of losing accreditation.

My emotions over the first few weeks after the news moved from confusion, to fear and then to hopelessness. The campus community questioned how this could have happened. The spirit across campus was glum as everyone began to understand the severity of the sanction. During this time, I witnessed many feelings among the faculty:

***Fear*** – In today’s economy, individuals were fearful they may lose their jobs. The university is located in a small city with a population of approximately 20,000, and it is one of the top five employers in the area. Opportunities in higher education are therefore limited. It would be difficult for many to find a position with a comparable salary without relocating to another area.

***Concern –*** A small student/faculty ratio allows faculty to get to know students. Programs are small and students complete many courses with the same students and faculty. Faculty and staff felt concerned for the currently enrolled students. Assuming the worst case scenario, students who were not able to graduate before the university lost accreditation would be placed in a position where they would not have a degree and their credits would not easily transfer. The personal sacrifices and investments of time and money without a return would be devastating.

***Anger* –** Feelings of anger toward senior administrators consumed the thoughts of many. As faculty asked questions and information became available, it was apparent bad decisions had been made and issues had not been addressed. The school operated under a business model with a push to sell credit hours. The school grew too large too fast sacrificing quality for opportunities to increase enrollment.

***Failure* –** Members of the campus community felt a sense of failure. Yes, there were issues regarding shared governance, assessment, and communication. There were many areas within the university that required attention. However, how could the state of the university be so severe to warrant such a severe sanction? With a campus full of educated, experienced and competent people, how did this happen?

***Hopelessness* –** As the news of the university’s accreditation status spread, bad press seemed to overtake the media. The university was required to post the statement of Show-Cause on the website, notify students, and other specialized accreditations required for the allied health programs, culinary arts and social work. The notice prompted many of the specialized accrediting bodies to schedule site visits. The future did not look bright and many felt a feeling of hopelessness.

Four to six weeks after the university received the notice, the shock had passed and the campus accepted the news. It was time to take action. In the spirit of shared governance, the university created committees comprising senior administrators, faculty, and staff to address issues and create policies. The university came together and worked to ameliorate the concerns addressed by the Higher Learning Commission. The university implemented a strategic plan with short- and long-term goals that addressed resource allocation, shared governance, faculty contracts and other areas identified by the HLC as needing improvement. The university’s Board of Directors fired the President and found an Interim President from the Registry of College and University Presidents. The change in leadership made a dramatic difference on the campus.

As I read about other schools facing accreditation issues, I think back over the past year. I am sure the faculty, staff, and students have questions and similar feelings of confusion, fear, and hopelessness. If I could speak directly to these individuals, I would share the following words of advice:

***Work together*** – For us, writing a response to the show-cause order and preparing for a site visit required the participation of every individual on the campus. Whether you are directly involved with writing the response, meeting with members of the accreditation team, or continuing daily activities to support the university, everyone plays a part.

***Show Support –*** Regardless of actions in the past, it is important to support fellow faculty, staff and students. As a stakeholder, the community and our city had substantial interest in the success or failure of the institution. The city displayed support signs in business windows and yard signs during the week of the on-site visit. Community leaders met with the accreditation team to convey the importance of the institution to the community. Faculty and staff supported the university as members of the community spoke negatively about the institution.

***Be Confident –***Faculty and staff should understand the issues addressed in the show-cause order and be familiar with the response in order to speak confidently to members of the community and the accreditation team.

***Communicate*** – The students and community respected the university when the lines of communication were open. Communicating information in a timely manner allowed the university to earn respect and support. In our case, faculty provided regular updates to their students and addressed questions during class. The university’s public relations department kept the media informed. The Interim President held regular forums and sent emails to faculty and staff concerning the status of the process.

As the Department of Education increases pressure on accrediting bodies, the number of schools placed on warning, probation and show-cause will rise. This experience has strengthened the university and I am confident the new policies and programs better support the mission of the university. The outcome of the show-cause order is unknown at this time. A feeling of uncertainty remains on campus. However, because we know we pulled together and worked our hardest to repair problems at the university, we await the decision of the HLC with a feeling of peace.