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New Expectations, New Opportunities:

Faculty and Staff Share Enriching Experiences from
SACSCOC Annual Meeting



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Florida SouthWestern State College is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), which holds an annual meeting for its member institutions each December. The Provost's Office at FSW has, in recent years, supported attendance at the SACSCOC Annual Meeting for a faculty member from the Learning Assessment Committee (LAC). This year, as the college is beginning the process of identifying a topic for its next Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), the president and provost discussed expanding the knowledge base at the college to include attendance at the meeting to a member of the Faculty Senate Executive Committee and a faculty member of the General Education Assessment Committee, along with a faculty member of the LAC.

The 123rd SACSCOC Annual Meeting was held in New Orleans at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center from December 8-11. Representing FSW were Dr. Eileen DeLuca, Dr. Joseph van Gaalen, Barbara Miley, Dr. Rebecca Harris, Dr. Elijah Pritchett, and Dr. Martin Tawil.

From the SACSCOC site, "The annual meeting serves as a platform for member institutions to share ideas and strategies that have led to improved results and lessons



FSW's team at the SACSCOC Annual Meeting, December 2018.

Pictured, left to right: Dr. Martin Tawil, Dr. Joseph van Gaalen, Dr. Rebecca Harris, Dr. Eileen DeLuca, Dr. Elijah Pritchett, Barbara Miley

learned in the form of workshops, concurrent sessions, group discussions and poster sessions.” For members of the team from FSW, the SACSCOC Annual Meeting was an engaging experience from which each were able to understand the full picture of accreditation and the vital role that college-wide assessment has in it.

“As a member institution in SACSCOC, Florida SouthWestern embraces compliance with quality standards for higher education institutions,” said Dr. Eileen DeLuca, Interim Provost. “We support faculty and staff attendance at the annual meeting so that we continue to have widespread involvement in the accreditation processes.”

“At the annual meeting, we attended a variety of sessions to learn about updates to the SACSCOC standards and policies, and workshops on best practices,” Dr. DeLuca said. The group from FSW also had the opportunity to interact with SACSCOC Vice President, Dr. Mary Kirk, who serves as FSW's Commission Staff Liaison.

“These discussions and workshops help us shape our institutional processes,” Dr. DeLuca added.

The LAC representative at this year's meeting was Humanities Professor and LAC Coordinator Dr. Elijah Pritchett. “I went into the 2018 SACSCOC conference hoping for a better understanding of how SACS itself views assessment, what the organization's overall philosophy is, and how they think this should translate into institutional oversight,” he said.

“My general goal was to walk away with a clearer understanding of what is expected at the highest levels of the process: to have SACS demystified for me ... at least a little,” he emphasized.

Representing the Faculty Senate, SLS Professor Dr. Martin Tawil said that among his expectations in attending the SACSCOC meeting was to learn more about the accreditation and review process. “Since we are approaching the start of a new QEP, I

wanted to be well-versed in the accreditation language in my role,” he said.

“The conference was very informative and was an eye-opener in many ways. We are not alone in the process, and SACSCOC is constantly changing,” Dr. Tawil added.

The FSW Coordinator for Accountability and Effectiveness, Barbara Miley, commented on the overall expertise of those in attendance and “the vast amount of knowledge, experience, passion, and commitment from the attendees and the SACSCOC staff.” She added, “I have the same experience with every SACSCOC Annual Meeting I attend, and it is very energizing to interact with such a large and diverse group of people.”

Dr. Joseph van Gaalen, Assistant Vice President, Institutional Research, Assessment and Effectiveness, attended the meeting expecting “to hear about the latest updates to the SACSCOC guidelines and best practices and procedures on how to address those areas.”

“Having been to these before, I suppose the most eye-opening is listening to the accounts of others regarding those experiences. It helps me better understand the evolution of the collective comprehension of what SACSCOC is with respect to the academic community as a whole,” he added.

Dr. Pritchett explained, “a recurrent theme was SACSCOC’s flexibility and willingness to work with institutions not only on their processes of assessment in general, but even with issues such as teacher accreditation, provided institutions can provide a compelling and coherent rationale for their decisions on, and approaches to, these matters.”

“In keeping with this, I was impressed by how many of the sessions at this large and ranging conference emphasized process, innovation, and reflection as key to both education and assessment. Several explored principles of active learning, up to and including innovative classroom design; many outlined approaches for reimagining general education assessment through a variety of processes, including one focusing on collaborative design theory,” Dr. Pritchett continued.

The meeting attendees were also asked to comment on some ways in which they may have changed how they do things or see things at FSW since their experiences at SACSCOC.

“First and foremost, I am reminded of the wonderful things we are doing at the college for our students, faculty and staff. Secondly, I am reflecting on how I can become more efficient and effective in my role, and then transfer that into other areas. Finally, I am committed to increasing my knowledge about accreditation and

effectiveness, and discovering ways to keep them connected in a continuous cycle,” said Barbara Miley.

For Dr. van Gaalen coming back after the SACSCOC meeting is “a bit like coming home with a few new shiny tools to put in the toolbox to go to work the next day. I pick up something every time, but often I’m not sure what that something will be until I find it.”

For members of the team from FSW, the SACSCOC Annual Meeting was an engaging experience from which each were able to understand the full picture of accreditation and the vital role that college-wide assessment has in it.

Of his impressions from the meeting, Dr. Tawil commented “assessment and goal setting are concerns during the review process for many institutions. FSW is not alone in the process and how we continually look for ways to improve what we do.”

Dr. Tawil also noted that “SACSCOC is now embracing online education as a valid pedagogical method of instruction. As the economy continues to flourish, our students are busier and demand more online classes. From an assessment and goal setting perspective, it is vital that we ensure a fluid course, a valid common assessment, and positive online student engagement.”

Dr. Pritchett related his experience at the SACSCOC meeting to his ongoing work on the LAC. “Upon joining LAC, it was a revelation for me to realize how varied FSW’s approaches to assessment can be across the departments, and to realize how much constant change features in the process.”

“The SACSCOC conference convinced me that this is not unique to our institution, but is instead a fundamental aspect of assessment itself, since assessment must be responsive to changes in technology, pressures from within fields of study as they evolve, and shifts in student need, among other forces,” he said.

“Assessment is an ongoing process, and from what I can tell SACS understands and expects this,” said Dr. Pritchett.

“I came away from the conference feeling encouraged and empowered to embrace innovation and exploration in my department’s assessment through meaningful engagement with what we discover along the way: we should guide our assessment process by reflection upon what we know, not by a nebulous fear of the mysterious and unknown.”

Dr. DeLuca reiterated that “assessment is a key component of the accreditation process.”

“We engage in assessment in higher education for many reasons: determining the efficacy of courses and programs, measuring achievement of learning objectives, making educational decisions such as whether or not to continue the use of a teaching method or curricular materials, and reporting student success. All of these activities are a part of a data-informed process resulting in educational quality. Compliance with SACSCOC standards involves aligning an institution’s mission, objectives, activities, and assessment.”

“Compliance certification involves documenting this alignment and demonstrating that institutions ‘close the loop’ by disseminating assessment results with key stakeholders and taking action based on the data,” she said. “The work of the Learning Assessment Committee is integral in developing and administering assessments, providing support for scoring, providing and disseminating meaningful data reports, and making decision on related actions.”

