Transcript
Pima Community College Perspectives
“Accreditation”

Guests: Rachelle Howell, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Marketing and Public Information
Bill Scurrah, Co-Chair of PCC’s Accreditation Steering Committee

(male announcer) Welcome to Pima Community College Perspectives, a look on how education enriches our community. And now, here’s your host, Nina Trasoff.

(Nina Trasoff) Hello, and welcome to Pima Community College Perspectives. I am Nina Trasoff, and I am joined today by Rachelle Howell, who is an Assistant Vice Chancellor of Pima Community College, and Bill Scurrah, who is the Co-Chair of PCC’s Accreditation Steering Committee. And today our topic is accreditation, which may sound cut-and-dry, but is the foundation for having the confidence to know that the degree you’re holding, or for an employer, that the certificate he or she is looking at, is worth what it says it is and really has value behind it. So, Rachelle, if we could start with you, what is, what is Pima’s ac—accreditation say in terms of its value to this community?

(Rachelle Howell) Well, accreditation for Pima and for—for any college, for any institution that has accreditation, is really about viability and accountability, in my mind. On the accountability front, it—it helps taxpayers, our—our local constituency, know that their investment in the—the higher education entity that they support locally is being well-spent, those dollars are being well-spent. It—it also ensures our, our current and prospective students and the public at large that, uh, we are holding ourselves to high educational standards. And that’s really important. Um, and for those that want to employ our, our graduates, our students at—at a later date, it’s also, it also provides them with some assurance that the employees that are coming their way are, are well-qualified. And accreditation, to a certain extent, boils down, boils down to that.

But all of that aside, Pima Community College is just not a viable institution without accreditation. Uh, student, student credits won’t transfer to other colleges and universities, the College can’t apply for federal grants and other aid, students cannot, uh, acquire student financial aid, federal financial aid. So, you know, we might as well deadbolt the doors if we, if we don’t have, uh, accreditation.

(Trasoff) And we have had that since the founding of Pima in 1969.

(Howell) That—that’s correct. Pima has had it and has maintained it, uh, throughout its tenure.

(Trasoff) And last week, we were talking about the job training and the role it plays in economic development. So, accreditation is not just something that sounds nice to have, and it’s a nice little thing to stick on the wall; it’s really a foundational element in the quality that Pima is offering to employers, to the students, to the community.

(Howell) That—that, that’s right. And to put it just briefly in perspective, Pima Community College is accredited by the, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools; that’s the same accrediting
body that accredits University of Arizona and all of the other higher education colleges and universities in the state of Arizona.

(Trasoff) Standards are standards are standards.

(Howell) Correct.

(Trasoff) That’s great. Um, Bill, Scurrah, you’re the Co-Chair of PCC’s Accreditation Steering Committee; that has to be a lot of work that you go through to prepare for these accreditation visits.

(Bill Scurrah) It has been a lot of work. I’ve been working on it since, uh, fall of 2007. And our steering committee’s been working on it since fall of 2008 with, um, various subcommittees taking care of various criteria and other working groups, uh, subcommittees, working on the technology aspects, the design of the cover, on all these things, plus the involvement of the faculty and staff, um, over that time period, and workshops and other kinds of, um, presentations, uh, during that time period.

(Trasoff) It—it must be fast. You have so many programs, so many campuses, so many students on, on so many different levels. My gosh, how do you get your hands around all of that and present that in a concise manner for somebody to evaluate it?

(Scurrah) Well, it—it’s really two things. Uh, the first is the self-study report itself, which, um, encapsulates, summarizes, our response to all of the criteria that we’re measured by by the Higher Learning Commission, which is the subsidiary for colleges of the North Central Association. The other aspect is gathering all the documentation to support what we say in the report. That is really the big job. And we’ve had, uh, the subcommittees were the ones that identified the documents that related to that particular criterion that they were working on; those had to be submitted and then had to be organized in such a way that the evaluators can make sense of them. So it’s a lot of documentation that goes into this process.

(Trasoff) It just sounds mind-boggling to me, forgive me, but, um, because there is so much, getting all of that together for a visit, which I understand is going on right now.

(Scurrah) Right now, today. Mmm-hmm.

(Trasoff) They—there’s mounds of, of paperwork, to get it together, and you work intensively for three years, all at once.

(Scurrah) Yes, yes. But it’s not so much paper this time around. We are giving them a digital evidence room this time. And every--

(Trasoff) Saving some tree. [chuckles]

(Scurrah) We are saving a whole forest of trees. It’s all online; it’s a Web-based, um, accreditation archive, and it’s meant to be a permanent repository so that we will always have those documents available.
(Trasoff) Now, we talked about the importance of the accreditation, but I would imagine the process also has to be introspective and self-learning for Pima, so that you, I think you guys are fabulous, but there are gonna be weaknesses. Does this process help you, um, find or discover any weaknesses you might have so that you can address them yourselves?

(Howell) I—I think that’s, it’s not stated necessarily, but that’s probably one of the key points of accreditation, uh, from our perspective, I think it is, because it really does give us an opportunity to look at the areas where we need to improve. And there, no matter how good we do things, are always areas that we need to improve. And this is a great way to go about doing it. And, and by starting the whole process with a self-study, I mean, it required us, has required us to look at ourselves inside and out and examine everything that we do well and everything that we need to improve on. And, uh, you know, we’re holding ourselves accountable for fixing those things.

(Scurrah) And if I can follow up on that, we have, in fact, identified areas where we could tighten up our processes, clarify our policies, and do other things. So during this time, we have actually worked on those weaknesses or areas where we thought we could refine the process a little bit better. So it really is very good self-reflective opportunity.

(Trasoff) That’s terrific. So, next step— you’ve done all of this background work, you have it all available online in an electronic report, what are they looking for now during this site visit?

(Scurrah) They’re going to be looking at a number of things. It basically breaks down to five criteria. Some of the important things within the criteria, are our students actually learning; are—is our teaching actually effective; um, is the online education experience the equivalent of, in terms of the quality of it, to the traditional brick-and-mortar classroom? Those are things that they’re going to be looking at. And, of course in these economic times, they’re going to be looking very closely at our finances, which, I’m happy to say, are very sound.

(Trasoff) That’s very nice to hear. And, uh, my understanding is that it’s not just College folks who are on the Steering Committee, that you’ve also brought in people from the community to participate in that.

(Scurrah) That’s correct. We have four community members on the Steering Committee. There’s Ron Shoopman from the Southern Arizona Leadership Conference; there’s Karen Francis-Begay from the University of Arizona; there’s Dan Eckstrom, whom everybody knows as a former Pima County Supervisor; and Mary Rowley, from the business community, Strongpoint Public Relations. And they’ve been very helpful in giving a community perspective to the whole process.

(Trasoff) That is great. And as a matter of fact, in the, um, second part of this program today, uh, Ron Shoopman, from Southern Arizona Leadership Council will be here to talk about this and also how it relates to the community as a whole. So, um, any final thoughts, Bill, that you’d like to share with us?

(Scurrah) Well, I think, basically, it’s important for the community to know that, um, our institution, as all institutions in Arizona, go through this process on a regular basis, and it’s meant to ensure the quality
of the education, the quality of the degrees, and that our students are ready for the work world and for
going on to higher levels of education.

(Trasoff) Terrific. Thank you very, very much for joining us. We’re going to take a brief break, and when
we come back, Rachelle and I will be talking with Ron Shoopman of SALC. Thank you.

[music]

(announcer) For more than 40 years, Pima Community College has helped prepare the citizens of
Tucson and Pima County for good jobs and better lives for themselves and their families. We don’t do it
alone. We appreciate your ongoing investment in education, especially during these extraordinarily
tough times. Your tax dollars, combined with student tuition, make it possible for thousands of
Southern Arizonans to get a jump-start before transferring to a university, to get the training they need
to stay competitive at work, and to prepare for the jobs of tomorrow. Many of our students are seeking
to restart their careers after losing their jobs, and some, their homes, during the recession. All of our
students know, as you do, that the more you learn, the more you earn. We know that today’s students
are often juggling work and family, as well as school. That’s why Pima offers classes at night and on
weekends at six campuses, more than 180 other locations, and over the Internet. Our programs deliver
education how you want it and give you the opportunity to achieve your goals at your pace. Today’s
Pima Community College students will be tomorrow’s firefighters, nurses, police, teachers, and small
business owners, the backbone of a safe, healthy, prosperous Tucson and Pima County. Thank you for
your support as we continue to help you and your family build a better tomorrow. For more
information, contact us at 206-4500 or visit us on the Web at pima.edu. Pima Community College,
Developing our Community Through Learning.

[music]

(Trasoff) Welcome back, I’m Nina Trasoff joined by Rachelle Howell. And, Rachelle, in the last segment,
we were talking about the accreditation, but there was one element of it that we really didn’t touch on,
and that is why it’s important for the community that this is going on. What is—what does the
accreditation add other than the credibility?

(Howell) Well, you know, it also provides an opportunity, really, for the public to weigh in on the College
and what we’re doing and, and—and, and let us know if we’re serving, if we’re serving their needs. It’s
an opportunity for transparency on our part. And the, the self-study report that, uh, Bill Scurrah spoke
about in the first segment and mentioned briefly, uh, is available online. Anyone can go look at it right
now. When the evaluation team completes the process that we’re in the middle of right now their
preliminary report will be published, uh, publicly available online, and their final report will be available
online. So, it—it provides the public with an opportunity to see what we’re doing and how we’re doing
it and make sure we really are walking the talk.

But beyond that, it—it also allows the, the public to, to—to speak to us, to provide public comment.
Part of the process is the, uh, the Higher Learning Commission solicits comments from the local com—
 uh, community, which was part of the process earlier, so we’ve, we’ve had those comments as well.
But, beyond that, we also, a—as Bill mentioned, he mentioned the—the list of members. In encouraging transparency in the process, it’s also very important to have community members involved. And in this instance, we have, uh, community members involved on our steering committee, and that’s a really key part, because they’re the ones who can tell us if we’re doing things the way we should be doing them.

(Trasoff) And that’s a wonderful segue to introduce our guest this segment, and that is General Ronald Shoopman who is U.S. Air Force, retired, and Ron is the President of Southern Arizona Leadership Council. And you sat on that steering committee. What did you think about the process?

(Ron Shoopman) I did, Nina, and I, uh, I’ve enjoyed my time, uh, with the Steering Committee, uh, especially because, uh, I learned so much about the inner workings of the College and just how diverse and complex their operation really is.

(Trasoff) And you used to run a division, um, a wing of, in the U.S. Air Force, here at DM. Are there any parallels you would draw?

(Shoopman) Well, the first thing that occurred to me as we were preparing for what looks in military terms like an inspection, um, was the similarities between the planning, the in-depth review of guidance documents, and just all of the different levels and complexities of the College needing to come together because they’re all going to be looked at. One of the real values of an inspection in the military is that it forces you to go back in and look, in our case, at regulations. Are we really complying with everything we’re supposed to be complying with? Are we combat-ready in a way that will really serve the needs of the entire Air Force?

And so you’re forced to open those books that sit on your shelves, and I saw that happening, uh, from day one at, uh, Pima, in the Steering Committee. They were back in, looking at all of the different aspects that would be evaluated, making sure that, um, that they put their best foot forward. So it’s, it’s a healthy process for any group of people, particularly a diverse and far-flung empire that, uh, Pima Community College is, that they get back to basics and make sure they’re really meeting the, um, the needs and the requirements that they’re supposed to meet. I’ve been impressed.

(Trasoff) A—an odd way of asking this question, perhaps, but, you’re the President of Southern Arizona Leadership Council; why do you care? Why is this important to SALC and its business membership?

(Shoopman) Well, that’s an easy answer, Nina, because, uh, SALC’s goal is to create a vibrant community. Uh, we, all of us, uh, the members and staff alike, are interested in making sure that this community has a, a solid, vibrant economic future, and you don’t have an economic future if you don’t have a well-trained and highly skilled workforce. And there’s no other organization any more important than that, to that, than Pima Community College. They fulfill so many of the workforce training requirements for this community; they prepare students at all ages, uh, and all interests, to fill the needs that—that we have as we work to build a, a healthy economy that, that we need for this community. As you know, unemployment is high here; um, we have to do everything we can to attract high-paying jobs to this community, and we need the workforce to fill those jobs. I mean it, the quality of life for all of us depends on our education system, to a large degree, and Pima is central to that.
(Trasoff) We talked last week with Joe Snell for Tucson Regional Economic Opportunities, and he was talking about the role Pima plays in being flexible to come in and train so that a new business, a—a new employer, can come in and know that they have the skilled workforce. But your membership is largely dominated by business owners now in Tucson. But they must have needs as well, if they want to expand, because that’s where most of our new jobs come from, existing businesses that expand. Where have you seen Pima playing with your members? What role?

(Shoopman) Well, many of—of the members of TREO, as well as SALC, are one and the same. We share a number of members and a number of concerns. Uh, you know, TREO’s out selling this community every day, and they’re doing a fine job of it. Um, SALC, we’re trying to, uh, improve the product. We’re trying to make sure that the picture of Tucson that’s in the mind of someone looking to move here, whether it’s somebody being recruited to expand a business or to bring a business here, that they see the kind of assets that this community has to offer. And having an excellent and outstanding education system, with our university, uh, with, uh, with Pima Community College, and also with K-12, is a really important factor, uh, for our members, for all of those reasons.

(Trasoff) But it still must be a challenge because you’re dealing with image, which is not necessarily reality.

(Shoopman) No, it, it may be, it may not be reality, but it’s reality if it, if it influences the decision. So changing that image, uh, is partly about making sure that we really believe ourselves, that we have the quality that’s here. One of the reasons I wanted to serve on the Steering Committee is I wanted to make sure that Pima Community College was every bit as good as I thought that it was. And through this process, I am, I am, uh, convinced, uh, more than ever, that we have an outstanding community college in Southern Arizona, one that is really prepared and flexible enough to meet our needs going forward, and that’s a, that’s a huge step. The, the business leaders of SALC, uh, I think when I report to them on this entire experience, will be very, very pleased and a little bit more proud about trying to sell Tucson. And, uh, you know, it’s a place that we all know and love, but, uh, we also have to put our best foot forward as we attract new business and new job opportunities for our, for our people.

(Trasoff) And in your experience, not just on the Steering Committee, but before, you said you had a good experience—uh, impression of Pima, and this has really confirmed that. What kinds of, um, experiences have you had with Pima, either through your members, or the role that Pima plays in this community is quite unique.

(Shoopman) Well, certainly I’m aware of, of many of the job training activities that, that Pima, uh, is constantly involved with. But I was involved on a little different level. One of the things in the Air Force that’s so important to the future of, of our military is we get those young airmen in the door, and from day one we start encouraging them, you know, “Get more education. Prepare yourself for the future.” And we give them the opportunity to step out and attend classes. And Pima offers the kind of hours and flexible, uh, schedules that many of our young airmen and young sergeants were able to take advantage of. So I saw it firsthand, and it really makes a difference in the lives of these young people.
(Trasoff) I think people forget, to some extent, or are maybe not aware of, that most of our law enforcement, firefighters, take courses at Pima. Um, I was surprised to learn how many credits a police officer, when he or she graduates from the Academy, gets from Pima, so they are really boosted on their way to a constant life of education.

(Howell) That—that’s really true, Nina. And I—I, I don’t think most people would be surprised to learn that the majority of "first responders" in Pima County, the individuals you interact with if you—if you have a, a fender-bender or you go to the emergency room, or your, you have an issue that requires the Fire Department to visit your home, that individual, those individuals who you interact with were likely trained by the College. We are the largest, the largest supplier of first responders in, in Pima County and are dedicated to continuing, to continuing that trend.

(Trasoff) Ron, you talked about the young airmen getting continuing education, but for SALC, this seamlessness, um, I mean, a full continuum, from kindergarten all the way through PhD, is really important. As a member of the business community who observes all of this, where are, what kind of a report card would you give our educational system in terms of the excellence throughout, where it needs to strengthen, and the ability to collaborate, um, all the way through the system?

(Shoopman) Well, there’s no question that one of the problems we have faced is that, uh, for reasons that maybe are not, um, actually true, we have a reputation that our K-12 system isn’t as solid as it needs to be. Uh, in fact, we have many outstanding programs in this region. People get confused between the funding level and the actual performance of the district, and the performance of our students is far better than the fact that we’re funded so low in K-12.

But I think what we can talk about, reference Pima, is the ability for them to, uh, play a significant role in that transition, that articulation from the K-12 system into the university system. And I’ve seen some efforts, uh, undertaken between the universities, particularly in Pima, where the dual-enrollment opportunities are there, so that now students can not face that, “Will this credit transfer, will that credit transfer?” That was a problem when I went to school in Arizona. Took a class at one of the community colleges in Phoenix, and it wouldn’t transfer when I went to the University.

(Trasoff) Wow.

(Shoopman) So I’m seeing now that, that the university system and Pima Community College are working to address that. And I think that’s a positive step forward. We have to address the fact that students are often not prepared to enter the University, and there’s an awful lot of remedial training going on at Pima Community College. And that’s a key role right now until we can get the entire system to work more seamlessly.

(Trasoff) A—and I think, going back, collaboration’s becoming one of my very favorite words, because it just speaks to how we build a stronger future, I think. And we’ll be talking in a few weeks with, um, Robert Shelton, Dr. Shelton, who’s the President of the U of A, will be here with Dr. Flores, Chancellor of Pima Community College. Because in the last few years, Pima and the University, and other state universities, have really worked to hone that seamlessness.
(Howell) We have, and—one of our, one of our main goals is to really create those pathways to bachelor’s degrees. We, we want to help individuals get trained and get in the workforce quickly. But not everybody wants to do that; many want to move on to, uh, a four-year university. And we want to make it as easy as we can. We have really seamless transfer opportunities to all of the in-state universities; um, that—that’s a statewide initiative. But we’ve gone out of our way to develop articulation agreements with, uh, 10, 12 other colleges, four-year, four-year universities, to allow students to move on and make those credits easy to transfer into the next step, the next level.

(Trasoff) Pima really does make it easy. I mean, financially, it’s easier on the student and/or his or her parents, um, to cover those costs, but also just all of these relationships are really important. And I just know, in my own family, that we’ve been touched by Pima with both of my sons having taken advantage of different programs at Pima and coursework to help either with transitions or, in the case of my younger son, um, at high school level, taking AP courses that were in—in essence, Pima courses, but he was able to take them through the high school and get the credit. And that really made the university process easier for him.

(Howell) Right, that—that’s good. You know, that—that’s the neat thing about what we do, and I think you’d be hard-pressed to find anyone who has not been touched by Pima or, at the very least, knows someone who has been touched by Pima.

(Trasoff) Where do you see the partnership needing to go from here, Ron? How, are—are there ways that it could be stronger, or are there things that the community needs to know are already going on, so they can take advantage of it?

(Shoopman) Absolutely. This community needs to understand one thing: education is key to the future for Tucson, for Arizona, and, really, for our nation. We’re competing in a global economy now, and it is not going to be, uh, possible for us to continue in our current position without a strong educational system. Pima is central in that. Um, we are dedicated as business leaders to doing all we can to support education at every level. Our Tucson Values Teachers program is aimed at K-12 teachers, but, but we believe that there’s a new model coming for financing all of education. We’ve got to find new and better ways to look at it, from K-12 all the way through the university, with Pima in the middle. We need a seamless and efficient way to prepare our, uh, our children for the future. And I think Pima has a central role.

(Trasoff) So earlier, you said that you were going to be reporting back to your members of SALC about your experience on the Steering Committee. Do you think the transparency of the process and what you learned will give them even greater confidence that the direction they’re taking is the right one in supporting education?

(Shoopman) Absolutely. This accreditation process will, uh, confirm to, not only the business leaders, but the broader community, that Pima is the institution we want it to be, it’s an institution we can be proud of, and the future of education depends on citizens getting involved to support it at all levels. And I really appreciate the fact that Pima is reaching out to the community in this process.
(Trasoff) Terrific. Well, General Ron Shoopman, I thank you so much for taking the time out of a very busy schedule to be with us. He’s the President of Southern Arizona Leadership Council. And Rachelle Howell, Assistant Vice Chancellor at the, uh, at Pima Community College. Thank you, also, for being with us. We’ve been talking about accreditation. And next week, our guests will be Dr. Robert Shelton and Dr. Roy Flores, and they will be talking about that unique and special relationship enjoyed by the University of Arizona and Pima Community College. Thank you so much for joining us.

[station identification]

(male speaker) K-J-L-L, South Tucson.