The principle of complementarity of relationship, structure and function, i.e. “something that completes, expands, makes up a whole, or brings to perfection,” is a transdisciplinary construct existing in many disciplines, including the social as well as in the applied sciences. For example, instructor Natalia Caporale provides the following insightful base pairing’s definition in her Biology 101 Complementary Base Pairing course on study.com:

Complementary base pairing describes the manner in which the nitrogenous bases of the DNA molecules align with each other. Complementary base pairings are also responsible for the double-helix structure of DNA. If you imagine yourself looking at a closet with 4 pairs of shoes that are all mixed up, complementary base pairing would be the set of rules that you would use to know which shoes go together. In a similar way to which only the correct two shoes will form a working pair (you don’t want two left shoes, or a black and a brown one!), only some of the nitrogenous bases of DNA can interact to form a stable DNA molecule. Complementary base pairing describes the manner in which the nitrogenous bases of the DNA molecules align with each other. Complementary base pairings are also responsible for the double-helix structure of DNA. If you imagine yourself looking at a closet with 4 pairs of shoes that are all mixed up, complementary base pairing would be the set of rules that you would use to know which shoes go together. In a similar way to which only the correct two shoes will form a working pair (you don’t want two left shoes, or a black and a brown one!), only some of the nitrogenous bases of DNA can interact to form a stable DNA molecule.

Accordingly, Chargruff’s Rule 1 of base pairs states that adenine always associates with thymine, so that the number of A’s and T’s in DNA must always be the same. Likewise, cytosine...
and guanine complement each other and must always be numerically the same, as illustrated below:


Complementarity also exists in quantum physics, where the “Copenhagen interpretation” holds that objects possess complementary properties which cannot be measured accurately at the same time. As well, complementarity is a common paradigm in math, international law, and economics, where complementary good is an economic good with a negative cross elasticity of demand, in contrast to a substitute good.
If all of this “complementarity” blather sounds as unintelligible as Stacheldraht DDoS or dark pool liquidity, please allow me to explain: as mentioned in prior columns, complementarity exists between some of the “Core Requirement” [CR] standards and some of the “Comprehensive Standards” [CS]. SACSCOC often notes that standard 1.0, The Principle of Integrity, is “essential to the purpose of higher education, [and] functions as the basic contract defining the relationship between the Commission and each of its member and candidate institutions.” (Principles, p. 13) As such, then, integrity overarchingly insinuates itself into all the approximately 100 SACSCOC standards, which it might be said to – at least philosophically, complement. More specifically and strategically, however, for some Core Requirements, there appears to be a complementary Comprehensive Standard.

In both its official SACSCOC Resource Manual as well as in its SACSCOC Handbook for Institutions Seeking Reaffirmation (but not in the SACSCOC Principles, per se), SACSCOC defines Core Requirement and Comprehensive Standard, respectively, as follows:

**Core Requirements:** Basic, broad-based, foundational requirements, the Core Requirements (2.1-2.12 in The Principles of Accreditation) establish a threshold of development required of all institutions seeking initial accreditation or reaffirmation.

**Comprehensive Standards:** More specific to the operations of an institution than the Core Requirements, the Comprehensive Standards (3.1-3.14 in The Principles of Accreditation) represent good practice in higher education and establish a level of accomplishment expected of all institutions seeking Initial Accreditation or Reaffirmation of Accreditation.

Among its many valuable insights, the SACSCOC Resource Manual (RM) also provides cross-referenced correlation between standards regardless of their designation as a “Core Requirement” [CR], a “Comprehensive Standard” [CS], or a Federal Requirement [FR]. Compiled di-
Complementarity differs from cross-referenced correlation: the former is commonly defined as “something that completes, expands, makes up a whole, or brings to perfection;” and, the latter is commonly defined as “a reference from one part of a book, index, catalog, or file to another part containing related information.” Based on these definitions, the red CS’s listed in the table above may be deemed complementary, and the balance may be deemed simply cross-referential. To augment what I mean by complementarity, an RM “NOTE:” specifically identifies unitwide-applicable [hence, unit = “comprehensive standard”] CS 3.3.1 as completing or expanding upon the institutionwide-applicable [hence, institution = “core requirement”] CR 2.5, viz.:

| “Cross References to other related Standards/Requirements, if applicable.” |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| 2.1  | None noted |
| 2.2  | CS 3.2.1, 3.2.2, 3.2.3, 3.2.4 |
| 2.3  | None noted |
| 2.4  | **CS 3.1.1, FR 4.2** |
| 2.5  | **CS 3.3.1, 3.5.1, FR 4.1** |
| 2.6  | None noted |
| 2.7.1 | FR 4.4, 4.9 |
| 2.7.2 | FR 4.2 |
| 2.7.3 | CS 3.5.1, 3.5.3, **FR 4.2** |
| 2.7.4 | CS 3.4.7 |
| 2.8  | **CS 3.7.1** |
| 2.9  | **CS 3.8.1, 3.3.1.3** |
| 2.10 | **CS 3.3.1.3, 3.9.1-3.9.3, 3.3.9** |
| 2.11.1 | CS 2.2, **3.10.1, 3.10.4** |
| 2.11.2 | **CS 3.11.1, 3.11.2, 3.11.3** |
| 2.12 | CS 2.5, **3.3.2** |

**Note:** Core Requirement 2.5 is distinguishable from CS 3.3.1 in that CR 2.5 focuses on institutional effectiveness at an institution-wide level. In CS 3.3.1, the effectiveness of the functioning units is addressed.
In its own official definition of CR and CS – noted above – SACSCOC provides definitions that underscore my theory of complementarity between these standards: it connotes the former as “basic, broad-based, foundational requirements...[which] establish a threshold of development required of all institutions seeking initial accreditation or reaffirmation”; and, connotes the latter as “more specific to the operations of an institution than the Core Requirements... [which] represent good practice in higher education and establish a level of accomplishment expected of all institutions seeking Initial Accreditation or Reaffirmation of Accreditation.”

You may be asking yourself: “why is this important; why does it matter?” These issues apparently matter to SACSCOC, so it follows must matter to us. More importantly, however: in their Evaluator Training Module: MODULE 4: FOUNDATIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS (http://www.sacscoc.org/trngmods/IEModules.pdf), SACSCOC lists three institutional effective Case Analysis Factors (CAF). CAF 1 – “Knowing and Understanding the Language of The Principles of Accreditation,” represents what SACSCOC wants its volunteer IE evaluators to know. Accordingly, it is paramount that we who generate documents to support the university’s compliance with SACSCOC standards be equally knowledgeable and understanding of the standards and their interrelationships to other SACSCOC requirements as well as to what we do on a daily basis to improve the quality of higher education at our institution. Therefore, if we are to “Think like a SACSCOC reviewer,” that is: know the standard’s IE requirements, then we must address all parts of the IE standard and follow – in accordance with our mission, all the explicit and implicit processes mandated in the Principles of Accreditation. Then, as Shakespeare notes in Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3:

This above all: to thine own self [or mission] be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man [or standard].

Countervainingly, the yin-yang complementarity premise I have outlined above seems to be in
contradistinction to the following well-premised comments from a senior SACSCOC VP with whom I have discussed it. For your edification, I quote his email in its entirety due to the many excellent perceptual and historical points he makes which are directly applicable to this particular discussion and supportive of the broader premise that “SACSCOC still matters."

While I think some CR and CS standards do have some complementarity, there is mainly just some overlap and some subject matter commonality. Different standards often cover different parts of related subjects, so to me, a complementary relationship is a bit too strong of a term. If the Resource Manual did not contain the section on cross-referenced standards, it would make little to no difference. The advantage of pointing out to an institution where standards overlap is probably in assigning personnel to write report narratives to ensure there are not inconsistencies in what is presented. It also reflects standards that are commonly assigned to the same reviewer on an off-site or on-site committee where that person serves as a primary reviewer. Using your definitions, I think these are all cross-referenced. Otherwise, I fear you may be reading more into them than is there, and reading more into the Resource Manual than was ever intended.

I would agree that the Core Requirements are generally more institution-wide in focus while the Comprehensive Standards are often more unit focused. Under the old Criteria, the analogous standards to the Core Requirements were called “Conditions of Eligibility,” meaning that an institution could not be reaffirmed without these basic, underlying standards being met. That remains true of the Core Requirements – they are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for being reaffirmed and staying in good accreditation status.

I think linkage between standards is better thought of in terms of the actual wording in the standards, not the numbering scheme. Hence, the distinction you make between 2.5’s institution-wide focus and CS 3.3.1’s unit or program focus is essential. Where is there is true complementarity in this case is in the word “integrated” within 2.5 – there is generally an expectation that the parts (unit or program reports) feed into and help determine success of the whole (institution-wide mission). Further, the institutional mission should flow into the types of expected outcomes thought most important by units.

Or take another case. CR 2.10 speaks of student services that “are intended to promote
student learning and enhance the development of students.” That wording was put into place fairly recently because reviewers tended to confuse the intent of the standard to ensure institutions offer an appropriate range of student services with the question of whether or not they are being as effective as they can be, which more logically belongs in CS 3.3.1.3 which deals with the institutional effectiveness process for student services. Are they complementary? Well, they conceptually should be in that I think CR 2.9 pretty much implies student service units should have some expected outcomes related to the co-curricular learning process.

In the case of finances, linkages tend to follow this logic:

1) 2.11.1 requires specific documents for compliance, but conceptually centers around adequacy of financial resources.

2) 2.2 deals with governance, but does specifically make it a Board responsibility to ensure adequate financial resources. So sometimes when there are severe financial issues, reviewers ask “Where was the Board?” Then they cite 2.2 as problematic.

3) CS 3.10.1 speaks in terms of recent financial stability, while 2.11.1 has a broader, overall stability focus. In this case, a finding in 3.10.1 is often seen as a “lesser problem” that still needs to be noted. So the relationship is one of viewing the standards as substitutes for each other.

4) CS 3.10.4 is, I think, an error in that the standards were renumbered a few years ago, and that probably refers to CS 3.10.3. But either way, one of the required documents in CR 2.11.1 is an auditor management letter, which in turn becomes a primary document in compliance with 3.10.3 and 3.10.4. The Core Requirement is that you have the document. The Comprehensive Standard is that the document shows there are no major issues of concern.

I hope this helps. I don’t think the Principles of Accreditation are quite as logical as your analysis implies, although it would be nice if they were!
So, what are the take-away’s from this column?

Number one: while assessment is a data-driven praxis, metacognitively reviewing assessment requirements aids not only the institution with compliance, but has the potential to elevate individual course and program quality across the higher educational board, because:

Number two: “student learning is a campus-wide responsibility, and assessment is a way of enacting that responsibility...assessment is not a task for small groups of experts but a collaborative activity; its aim is wider, better-informed attention to student learning by all parties with a stake in its improvement [Banta, TW, Lund JP, Black KE and Oblender, FW. (1996). Assessment in practice: putting principles to work on college campuses. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p 35.].

Number three: Therefore, I suggest examining the three key SACSCOC documents alluded to below for any and all interpretative information. All three documents are useful in this regard, especially the Resource Manual, which is organized to provide insights into each standard by means of the following:

**Rationale and Notes**
The rationale and notes provide a further explanation of the standard/requirement along with reasons for its inclusion in the Principles.

**Relevant Questions for Consideration**
For each standard or requirement, there is a series of questions designed to help an institution examine its current processes and practices.

**Documentation, if applicable**
Evidence that should be examined by the institution and provided as part of the documentation of its case of compliance with the requirement/standard. (Does not apply to all standards.)

**Reference to Commission Documents, if applicable** (p. 2)
Additionally, SACSCOC indicates that:

an institution’s primary resource, however, is its Commission staff member assigned to
provide advice and to consult with the institution regarding the accreditation process,
its expectations and applications. Such advice and information do not supplant the peer
review process, but rather provide additional insight in assisting institutions reaching
informed judgments about their self-assessment. (p. 2)

The word “assess” harkens etymologically back to the Latin word “assidere,” which means to
“sit next to a person in the position of an assistant judge.” I just attended the annual
SACSCOC conference last week, and 4000+ attendees from 800+ institutions across 11 states
were there with the single and signal purpose of understanding the standards relative to their
own self-assessment efforts. In so doing, they invariably solicited insights from SACSCOC con-
ference presenters as well as from the attending authoritative SACSCOC VP experts. These
accreditation judges, or rhadámanthuses (from the New Latin, from Ancient Greek
Ῥαδάμανθυς (Rhadámanthus, the “name of a son of Zeus and Europa, one of the three judges
of the dead.” Rhad·a·man·thine [radaˈmanTHənˌ,ˌTHīn/] is an adjective connoting an implaca-
ble judge, or a person with stern and inflexible judgment.) provided varying ex parte insights
into the standards. Then, it was incumbent upon those attendees to apply those insights to
their own unique institution. For, as the Preamble of the Resource Manual states: “The man-
ner in which an institution makes its case for compliance with the Principles of Accreditation
is an institutional decision, and the process employed by a review committee to reach its deci-
sion on compliance issues is likewise determined by the professional judgment of that com-
mittee within the context of the institution’s specific circumstances and mission.”

I hope these assessment thoughts have stimulated your own introspective analytical process-
es relative to classes and department. If you have questions, kindly advise: assesseo ergo
sum.