PREPARING FOR SPECIALIZED ACCREDITATION IN A MULTI-CAMPUS UNIVERSITY

Peter E. Maher and Janet L. Kourik

Department of Mathematics and Computer Science, Webster University
470 E. Lockwood Ave., St. Louis, MO 63119, United States, U.S.A.

Keywords: Accreditation, Assessment, Multi-campus, Knowledge management system.

Abstract: Specialized accreditation provides an external validation of a specific set of programs offered within an institution of higher learning. Such accreditations have become strongly outcomes-based, which in turn means that effective methods of assessing student learning must be developed. We describe the major requirements of a particular business accreditation for a multi-campus, multi-country university including the accreditation process. Further, we describe our observations resulting from this process, together with some recommendations for improvement based on our experiences.

1 INTRODUCTION

An increasing focus on strengthening accreditation requirements in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) provides ever increasing motivation to improve curriculum and assessment systems. The benefits of accreditation include formal external reviews of institutional improvements, encouraging the use of measurable learning outcomes, and providing students and employers with reassurance of program quality. The Association of Collegiate Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) is a US accrediting organization that evaluates business programs throughout the country and internationally (http://www.acbsp.org). Webster University applied for specialized business accreditation with the ACBSP in 2006.

In this paper we describe the requirements for ACBSP accreditation, and give an outline of the application process. Further, we describe the issues we faced during this process, and make some recommendations for improvements. It is our hope that other institutions embarking on a similar accreditation application will benefit from some of the pitfalls and positive actions that we have identified.

2 ACBSP ACCREDITATION

Specialized accreditation is designed to provide an external review of a specific aspect of a university curriculum. The ACBSP is one of two accrediting bodies for business schools recognized by the US Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). The second business school accreditation body is the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB). The AACSB considers research as a primary goal of institutions of higher learning. The ACBSP, on the other hand, places more emphasis on teaching effectiveness.

To be eligible for ACBSP accreditation, a US institution must already possess institutional accreditation by one of the six regional accreditation organizations. Webster University is located in St. Louis, Missouri, in the US. Hence it falls under the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), one of the regional accrediting bodies for the midwest portion of the US, which is in turn part of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (http://www.ncahlc.org). If an overseas institution is applying for ACBSP specialized accreditation, it must provide government documentation confirming their right to grant degrees.

The ACBSP accreditation, as with almost all such accreditations, determines the quality of a program by considering a variety of inputs into the educational process, the learning activities that take

place based on these inputs, and the outcomes produced by the process. 'Inputs' refers to anyone or anything that has a direct impact on the learning process such as instructors, students, support services, and organizational structure. Activities during the process include teaching, advising, and faculty study and consulting. 'Outcome' examples involve student project scores, employee evaluations, specialized test scores or other evidence of student learning. Accreditation is therefore 'outcomes-based.' This represents a change of direction for many specialized accrediting bodies who previously placed more emphasis on inputs into the educational process. See (Lubinescu, Ratcliff, and Gaffney, 2001) for a discussion of the shift in focus of accrediting organizations.

The process by which a business school may apply for ACBSP accreditation is outlined in Figure 1. Once the school completes and submits an application for accreditation it is immediately considered as a candidate.

The assigned mentor has the task of ensuring that a school is ready to begin the accreditation evaluation process. He or she will work with the school towards identifying any gaps in the school's documentation and/or processes that would make them ineligible for accreditation. The findings of the mentor are shared with the ACBSP's Director of Assessment. If deemed appropriate, the school will be given approval to complete the preliminary questionnaire, and hence begin the first major step in the accreditation process.

The preliminary questionnaire is a structured report regarding the school's readiness for accreditation that will serve as the foundation for evaluation. If the ACBSP's Director of Assessment is satisfied with the preliminary questionnaire, the school works with the ACBSP to develop a timetable for the development of a 'self-study.' A self-study, or self-assessment, is a comprehensive document examining the business school through guidelines provided by the ACBSP. Developing the self-study is major aspect of the accreditation process and requires a significant amount of time to complete. Some observations gained while developing Webster's self-study are provided later in the paper.

Once the self-study has been submitted, the ACBSP organizes an evaluation team and schedules a site visit with the school. This evaluation visit is typically requires a full week and the school is given precise guidelines as to how to prepare for the visit. This is a major aspect of the accreditation process.
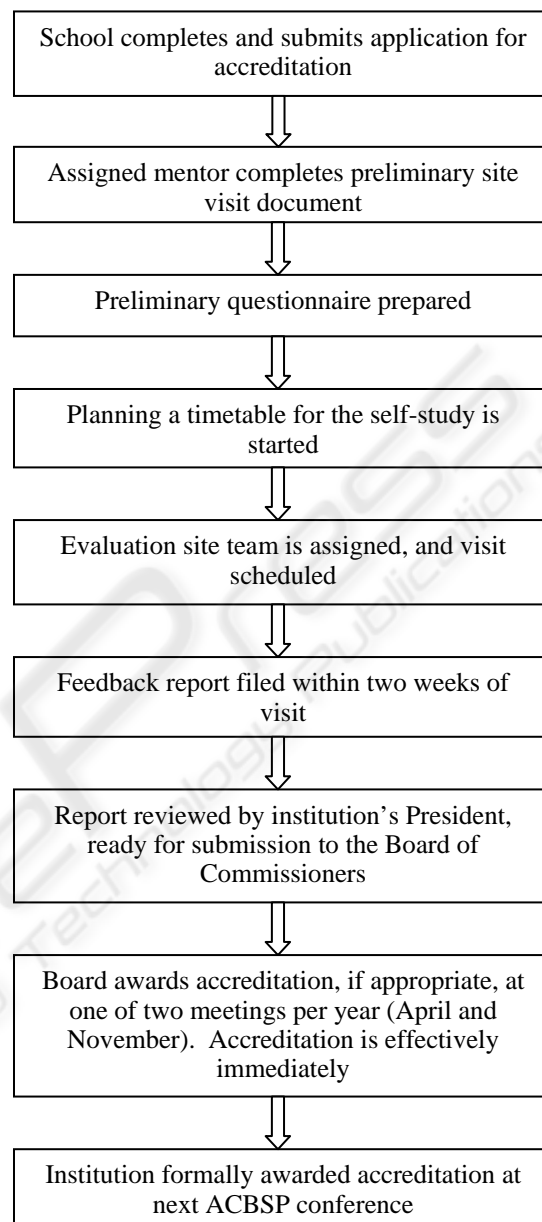

Figure 1: The ACBSP accreditation process.

The evaluation team completes a report based on their observations during the visit, which is filed within the following two weeks. It is important to note that while this report contains recommendations from the team, the ACBSP Board will make the final determination. Once the Board decides to accredit a school, this accreditation becomes effective immediately. The school may then advertise its programs as being ACBSP accredited. The formal award for accreditation is made at the next ACBSP annual conference, normally scheduled for June.

3 INSTITUTION BACKGROUND

The School of Business and Technology (SBT) at Webster University has over 15,000 enrollments across a network of over 100 physical campuses located in 21 US states, Europe and Asia. International sites include London, Geneva, Leiden, Vienna, Bangkok and Cha-am Thailand, and Shanghai, Shen Zhen, and Chengdu China. Some courses combine distance education and international travel. Students from around the world may also participate through distance education with approximately 4600 enrollments per semester in the school's online courses.

The school is composed of three departments: 1) Business, 2) Management and 3) Mathematics and Computer Science. The school strives to ensure that students receive fundamentally the same course regardless of where the course is taken or how it is delivered. Key concepts should not change from location to location or from the physical classroom to electronic classroom. In addition to the clear academic reasons for all offerings of a course having the same learning outcomes, we also want to afford our students the ability to take courses at any site at which they are offered, or online; the transition should be seamless.

Historically, the departments implemented curriculum processes independently with oversight by a school-wide curriculum committee. This effort to develop a consistent curriculum included a stipulation that all departments use the same core documents and information systems. This was a major step toward integrating and unifying the school's approach to curriculum.

Another view of the scale and distribution issues the school faces is apparent when faculty demographics are considered. The school has approximately 40 faculty members with full-time positions primarily on the home campus and over 1,500 practitioner faculty members with part-time positions distributed throughout the world. The school strives to establish effective channels of communication with all faculty, both full-time and practitioner. The input of all faculty members is vital to producing current, effective programs especially given that we have so many practitioner faculty members with current experience in industry. However, we also want all faculty members to feel part of a single, worldwide university. Such collaboration fosters effective teamwork, and goes a long way to boosting the morale of the institution.

4 OBSERVATIONS DURING THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS

If the mentor's visit is scheduled for the beginning of a fall semester, in August, then it can be anticipated that the preliminary questionnaire be completed by the end of the previous spring semester.

Typically the entire ACBSP accreditation process takes two years. It should be anticipated that the development of the self-study will take at least one year. Identifying and organizing sufficient historical documents and data is a potentially monumental task. Once collected, the data must be analyzed prior to writing the self-study. The accrediting agency specifies the order and topic coverage for chapters of the self-study. In some cases, specific formats must be used for tables and charts. Ample time should be allotted for collection, analysis, writing and formatting activities.

Writing the self-study report was a major undertaking. Significant thought regarding the delegation of tasks was considered vital. It was considered more appropriate to involve faculty in this process rather than members of the administration. Faculty members are more involved in the educational processes of the university and were therefore considered to be more appropriate. Each "standard" in the report was assigned to an individual faculty member.

Upon completion of each standard, the text was sent to several external reviewers. These reviewers were selected based on their experience with ACBSP evaluations or other established academic accreditation bodies, and would have experienced such an evaluation. Hence they would be in a good position to provide useful feedback, and enable us to include some vital details. The associate dean compiled the reviewers' comments into a single document before forwarding to each chapter author. This process also afforded the associate dean an overview of the emerging self-study report and opportunities to coordinate content across chapters.

Upon completion of the writing process for each standard, a member of the school administration was given the task of compiling the document into its final form. The important task at this stage was to ensure consistency of both fact and style across chapters and eliminate duplication of information. Publishing software was used to create a sophisticated professional document that was visually appealing and easy to read.

The work does not end with the publication of the self-study. Preparation for all constituencies is

very important and included explaining the value of accreditation, the accrediting standards, process, potential inquiries, schedule and responsibilities.

5 DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The **development of the self-study** is the most time-consuming aspect of the accreditation process. Having a central repository containing well-organized data for the preparation of such documentation is critical. In hindsight, we would have allotted significantly more time and human resources to the collection process. We also would have provided better cross-references from the self-study to the electronic repository.

The self-study consists of six 'standards.' Each standard represents a different aspect of the institution. The self-study is too large a document for one individual to write. Furthermore, **faculty members should be the major contributors** to this document; only members of the faculty have the institutional knowledge necessary to complete answers to the questions being posed. Administrators, in general, do not have the required background.

If each standard is developed by one faculty member, it is vital to ensure that eventually there is **consistency across standards**. This may entail figures being accurate; it may also involve simply ensuring a consistent format.

Getting **external reviewers** for each standard is important. Such reviewers should be from institutions that have already received ACBSP accreditation. They understood the issues involved in the process and provided valuable insights that were not explicitly documented in the literature.

Preparations for the evaluators visit should be done well in advance and the **evaluators' convenience** should be kept in mind. A complete schedule is preferred, with time allotted for the team to work by themselves.

The self-study is intended to represent an overview of the information needed by the evaluators. Detailed documents are provided as "exhibits." At Webster we organized the **exhibits in electronic form** – we deemed that given our multi-campus environment, having hard copies of all exhibits would be overwhelming. Great care and attention should be devoted to ensuring that they are **easily accessible**, and sufficiently detailed.

The school's **physical environment** says a lot about the educational environment and institution to the visiting accreditors. For example the ACBSP

report noted that "Student focus is clearly a priority for SBT. Evidence of pride in students is everywhere, for example large photos of past and present students in hallways, student artwork throughout campus, student work/study areas in multiple places in every building, 24-hour cybercafé, etc. SBT uses emails, open-houses, advising and many other methods to gain information from students and prospective students, as well as develop on-going relationships."

The ACBSP final report noted that the **knowledge management systems** developed at Webster constituted (Maher and Kourik, 2008) "…a well-deployed, best-in-class, systematic approach to ensuring that programs are delivered worldwide with consistency and quality." Further, the ACBSP noted that the overall "…Academic Assessment Project is also a well-deployed, best-in-class, systematic approach to ensuring that learning outcomes are achieved worldwide."

We have explained the process of obtaining specialized business accreditation in a multi-campus environment, as well as describing some observations and recommendations. Experience gained since embarking on this journey has uncovered many potential pitfalls. However, with careful planning, and having a solid infrastructure in place, the passage towards obtaining specialized business accreditation has been rewarding and has greatly contributed to the school's learning environment.

REFERENCES

Lubinescu, E.S., Ratcliff, J.L., Gaffney, M.A., 2001, Two continuums collide: Accreditation and assessment, How Accreditation Influences Assessment, *Ratcliff, Lubinescu & Gaffney, Eds., New Directions for Higher Education Number 113, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco. pp 5-21.*

Maher, P.E., Kourik, J.L., 2008, A Knowledge Management System for Disseminating Semi-Structured Information in a Worldwide University, In *PICMET'08, Cape Town, South Africa.*

U.S. Department of Education, 2006, A Test of Leadership: charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education, *Washington, D.C.*