Achieving AACSB International's Initial Accreditation: The Montana State University Billings Experience - The College of Business Coordinator of Accreditation and Assessment's Perspective

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The best guidance for achieving AACSB accreditation comes from experience. The school should help individuals fulfill three major roles. Essential to the process is communicating with AACSB staff early. A central theme is identifying processes that ensure quality of the business school. Good organization of the faculty can be achieved by centralizing and simplifying procedures. The assessment cycle provides a blueprint for an effective assessment process. The recommendation to document everything is a key to success. Finally, writing the self-evaluation report early will ensure that the final document will be prepared thoughtfully.

Achieving accreditation by Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International) is a daunting endeavor that consumes much time and resources. However, the rewards of achieving and maintaining accreditation more than compensate for the sacrifices of the dean, faculty, and staff of the business school. A reasonable question when a school begins this process is "How do we do this?" AACSB International provides some guidance. The standards are well organized and include the basis for judgment and guidance for documentation, which are helpful in identifying processes and data for the self-evaluation report. In addition, AACSB International assigns a mentor to the applicant school and a liaison between the applicant school and the AACSB staff. In addition, the school is encouraged to attend various meetings, conferences, and seminars sponsored by AACSB International and to hire consultants to learn more about what is required for success. Frequent contact with AACSB staff is not only encouraged but also necessary for the school to be successful.

An additional source of information on AACSB accreditation is a growing body of "Best Practices". The AACSB International website (http://www.aacsb.edu) provides access to databases covering a number of topics, ranging from effective practices in assessment to fund-raising and more. This paper attempts to add to this body of knowledge by outlining some tips for success in achieving accreditation from the perspective of the accreditation coordinator in a business school in a small state-supported university, Montana State University Billings (MSUB). Because every business school has unique characteristics and circumstances, some of the tips suggested in this paper may not be applicable to other schools, but might prompt ways of thinking about how to proceed through the accreditation process.

TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED

Assign Roles

When the school begins the pre-accreditation process, the first step is the assignment of roles. The primary roles are coordinating the overall accreditation process, coordinating assurance of learning, and writing the self-evaluation report. Depending on the situation at the school, three people or groups, or a single person might fill the roles.

The coordinator of accreditation understands the requirements for a successful self-evaluation, including the data and processes to report for each standard. Gathering institutional data on student characteristics is an example of a necessary task for completing the self-evaluation report. This person typically travels to meetings and conferences and works with consultants.

The first rule for assurance of learning is that someone has to be in charge. This role is crucial for developing and implementing the assessment plan, working with faculty, and compiling reports. Perhaps the most critical task for the coordinator of assurance of learning is "closing the loop" in which the faculty make decisions to create positive changes in the school based on assessment data.

The author of the self-evaluation report has to know the school and its processes. Like the coordinator of accreditation, this person has to know the standards thoroughly and work with consultants, the AACSB visiting team leader, the dean, faculty, and staff to create the document submitted to AACSB.

Schools usually find that someone besides the dean (an associate dean or department chair(s)) will perform one or more of these roles (although the dean has the ultimate responsibility for achieving accreditation). At MSUB, the College of Business has a dean, one department chair (no associate dean), and 20 full-time faculty members. The best model for the roles at MSUB was to assign the roles to individual faculty members. At first, three people held the roles, with a minimal stipend or release from teaching a course or two. During the last two years prior to the onsite visit (after writing the first draft of the self-evaluation report and developing the assessment plan), one person was released from half of the teaching load to perform all three roles. This arrangement allowed one person time to focus on the final steps prior to the visit by the AACSB team.

Read the Standards

Read the Standards, read the Standards, and read the Standards again! Many of the questions that coordinators ask about achieving accreditation are answered in the AACSB standards document, *Eligibility Procedures and Accreditation Standards for Business Accreditation*. The standards document includes 1) the basis for judgment, which provides evaluation criteria, 2) guidance for documentation, which provides a list of items the visiting team might examine, and 3) headings and sections for items addressed in the self-evaluation report. The visiting team may request the school to format the self-evaluation report to include each of the headings for each of the standards. The coordinator of accreditation and the writer of the self-evaluation report need to pay particular attention to the required tables for the report, especially the content and format of these tables.

In addition to the Standards, the coordinator should study the Self-Evaluation Report Guidelines (Guidelines), a document found on the AACSB website. The Guidelines describe the process for preparing for the visit, including a list of typical documents to prepare for the team to view when they are at the school. However, the coordinator should contact the team leader early in the process to find out what supporting documents to have on hand. In addition to the Guidelines, the coordinator should be on alert for annual updates to the Standards. The AACSB liaison for the MSUB College of Business recommended that the school be in compliance with the current updates in the year in which the self-evaluation report was submitted.

Understand the Focus of Accreditation

A guiding principle during the accreditation process is the focus on identifying and reporting on the processes that ensure the quality of the business school. The school is responsible for demonstrating that the school offers a program of quality. Quality at MSUB, which is primarily a learner-centered university,

is different from a school that emphasizes research productivity. The processes that ensure maintenance of quality are crucial for achieving accreditation.

By studying the AACSB standards, the coordinator for accreditation can identify the processes on which to report and maintain. The coordinator identifies the processes currently in place in the school and may have to assist in developing new processes or enhancing currently existing processes. The significant processes for the school include the development and review of the mission statement, the production of intellectual contributions, and the allocation of resources. An example of a process related to students is academic advising. The self-evaluation report should clearly describe the faculty evaluation process and procedures for tenure and promotion. Additional processes include the assignment of faculty responsibilities, curriculum development and review, the evaluation of teaching, and assurance of learning. The coordinator's primary role is documenting these activities and working with the writer of the self-evaluation report to describe the processes. In addition, the coordinator of accreditation works with the dean and other administrators and committees to define characteristics of participating and supporting faculty and the college's requirements for academic and professional qualifications.

Get Organized

Getting organized is typical of any project in which action items are identified, persons to assist are recruited, and timelines for completion are developed. Some of the action items come from the AACSB standards, guidelines, and updates. Some action items will be developed from consultants' comments. These comments are critical for success because a person with experience can identify the most important action items and can provide indications about how teams might view the processes at the school.

Because the standards require descriptions of the environment in which the school operates, some data gathering will be necessary. The typical types of data for the self-evaluation report include student characteristics, student satisfaction, and placement of graduates. The coordinator of accreditation is responsible for ensuring that these data are collected, analyzed, and shared with administrators and faculty. Plans for these processes should be part of "getting organized".

TIPS FOR ORGANIZING AND LEADING THE FACULTY

This section presents two recommendations for organizing and leading the faculty during the accreditation process. These are "centralize and simplify" and "polite persistence". Faculty members are reluctant to engage in labor-intensive activities that do not provide direct rewards or contribute towards promotion and tenure. Schools vary in the expectations of faculty. Some schools may not value service activities as much as others may. Alternatively, some schools might require participation in accreditation activities as part of the review process. Various other incentives can be developed to motivate faculty to participate in accreditation activities. In some cases, the pride in achieving accreditation and joining the ranks of the top business schools in the world may be sufficient. In the absence of concrete incentives, an effective approach is to minimize the burden on the faculty as much as possible while keeping accreditation a faculty-driven process.

Centralize and Simplify

The faculty should know what administrators expect from them as soon as possible after the school commits to working towards accreditation. Early in the accreditation process, the faculty should have a clear set of academic qualifications and professional qualifications. Definitions of participating and supporting faculty should also be developed in the early stages so that faculty members have sufficient time to meet expectations in these areas also. Furthermore, if additional resources are required for faculty support (to achieve academic qualifications, for example) the deans and administrators need time to mobilize these resources. At MSUB, a consultant recommended that a statement of academic and professional qualifications and a statement of participating and supporting faculty be created, disseminated to faculty, and provided as part of the supporting documentation for the team visit. Led by the coordinator for accreditation, the College of Business faculty met several times to develop the criteria

for faculty qualifications and participation and to ensure the criteria were compatible with the review, promotion and tenure processes at the college and university level.

Faculty will be asked to provide information, particularly regarding intellectual contributions. At MSUB, faculty members update their curriculum vitae annually for intellectual contributions, committee work, and other relevant activities for maintenance of faculty qualifications and participation. They submit the updates to a staff person who is responsible for a faculty database. Rather than have the faculty submit a vita in a specified format (to match the tables), the faculty simply provide new information to the staff person and she produces the documents for self-evaluation report. The staff person generates the vitae from the database in a format that matches the items on the tables for the for the self-evaluation report, making it easy for the visiting team to see at a glance the correspondence between the vitae and the tables. The database can also produce the tables.

At MSUB, the coordinator for accreditation developed forms for faculty to complete regarding courses, instruction, and other faculty activities. Faculty provided information on any new courses developed, student collaborations, student access to faculty and experts in their disciplines, activities for underrepresented student groups, grant support, teaching improvements and innovations, faculty development, experience-based learning activities, and academic integrity relating to various standards. Rather than try to gather this information in a piece-meal fashion, all of these requests for information were compiled in a single document for easy retrieval for the team visit.

The coordinator for accreditation also developed other forms for specific purposes, such as an intellectual contributions update form for faculty to list paper submissions, working papers, and research in progress. The visiting team requested this information just prior to the visit. By providing a form with instructions, faculty members were able to provide the information efficiently and the team members had a standardized set of documents to review.

In addition to centralizing the process for developing the formatted vitae, the coordinator for accreditation centralized the development of formatted course outlines. The visiting team requested only one course outline per course, with each outline having a similar format (i.e., having the same headings and elements). Rather than having faculty members re-arrange their course syllabi, the coordinator and the department chair developed a standardized format for course outlines. The coordinator then created an outline for each course from the course syllabus. The process was a labor-intensive procedure of cutting and pasting, but this approach ensured consistency. As part of the department procedures already in place, faculty members submitted their syllabi to a staff person for the department files so no additional work was required on their part.

Polite Persistence

One of the challenges of achieving accreditation is keeping faculty focused on the tasks asked of them. Faculty members are reluctant to put time into activities that are never reviewed or addressed by anyone, making them feel that all of their effort was not valued or necessary. Although the dean has ultimate responsibility for achieving accreditation, someone has to make sure that details of the process are completed. One of the ways to keep the accreditation processes going is to engage in "polite persistence"—reminding faculty members in a friendly way that the vita needs to be submitted, the survey needs to be completed, etc. Many faculty members simply forget to comply because of the numerous other emails received every day. However, caution should be employed in using emails too frequently because they will be ignored in that case. After a reasonable number of emails and time, other methods of communication should be used (phone calls, face to face conversations, etc.).

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING ASSURANCE OF LEARNING

Assurance of learning begins with knowledge about the process. A major challenge in achieving an effective assessment process is learning what it is and how it is different from grades and communicating that information to faculty members. AACSB International conducts very worthwhile seminars and conferences throughout the year. The process begins with developing learning goals and learning

objectives that derive from the mission of the business school. In some ways, this part of the process is the most difficult because the school has to deliberate and reflect on what it is the students should be able to demonstrate upon completing the program. AACSB International also recommends some specific wording for the goals and objectives.

Development

A key in developing a successful assurance of learning process is understanding the assessment cycle, consisting of assessment planning, implementation, and analysis (see Figure 1). Another key part of the process is identifying in which courses the students are taught or exposed to activities related to the learning objectives. At MSUB, an alignment matrix developed for this purpose revealed little coverage of two of the six learning goals across the common curriculum. The alignment matrix is also useful in identifying "assessment points", a course in the curriculum from which an assignment or activity might be used to assess a particular learning objective.

After the development of the learning goals and objectives and the alignment matrix, the coordinator of assessment and the faculty determine details of the assessment plan for each objective (see Table 1). Assessment planning involves identifying tasks to assess, often an assignment from a capstone course or a standardized exam, and the means for making the assessments, often with a rubric. In the case of standardized tests, the scores serve as the assessment measures. Rubrics can be developed in a number of ways. Examples from other schools were used as the basis for rubrics at MSUB.

Additional considerations in the development phase of assurance of learning include developing the data storage process. Assessment data should be stored in a place where someone in the department (faculty or staff) can access it easily and so that more than one person can access the data. In the event that the coordinator for assessment leaves the college, more than one person accessing the data ensures continuity of the process.

Finally, a reporting system for communicating results of assessment and "closing the loop" should be developed. Closing the loop refers to making recommendations for positive changes in student learning as a result of assessment data. The coordinator for assessment may write these reports, but anyone in the department should be able to access them. The visiting teams are likely to look for evidence that faculty members are familiar with the assessment process and results. At MSUB, a Sharepoint site has been created for posting assessment reports and other accreditation documents. Table 2 illustrates an assessment report format in use at MSUB.

Implementation

Perhaps the greatest challenge in conducting assessment is the implementation. While developing the assessment plan may require a great deal of time, the implementation of the plan may require a great deal of coordination. The first steps in implementing the assessment procedures is determining who is going to be involved and what are the tasks to perform.

At MSUB, assessment teams were created for each of the learning goals. Each team consisted of the coordinator of assessment and two faculty members. Except for one faculty member who volunteered to serve on two teams, no faculty member served on more than one team. The coordinator for assessment asked the faculty members to volunteer to serve on a team based on their interests. For example, faculty members that teach international business courses volunteered to serve on the international assessment team. The coordinator for assessment trained each of the teams in the use of a rubric. This process entailed choosing a student task to assess, having each of three team members assess it independently, and then comparing the results of the three assessments. After a discussion, each team understood the procedure of using the rubric for the particular learning objectives.

MSUB's College of Business primarily uses course-embedded tasks for assessment. These tasks are students' assignments or portions of assignments from a course (primarily the capstone course in the business school) that reflect the learning goals of the program. Existing assignments used for assessment purposes fulfill a dual role of providing evidence of student learning for course assessment and for program assessment. Therefore, the first place to look for an assessment task is to find out what students

are currently doing that reflect learning of each of the objectives. At MSUB, the capstone courses provide a written case assignment used to assess writing, critical thinking, ethics, and international business. When no assignment exists to demonstrate learning of a particular objective, current assignments may have to be modified or new assignments be created.

The coordinator for assessment arranges with the instructors to gather the course-embedded items to assess. The benefit of the assessment team approach for the instructors is not having to conduct the assessments themselves. They simply provide copies (usually electronic) of the assignment to the coordinator of assessment. The assessment team then conducts the assessment and provides the results to the coordinator, who then compiles the information and prepares it for reporting to the faculty. To the extent that the coordinator can centralize and simplify the process for the assessment teams, the team members can perform the assessments rather efficiently. At MSUB, the coordinator distributes the assignments (usually papers) among the team members (so each team member assesses one-third of the sample of papers) and provides rubrics labeled with the team member's name, the semester, the year, the course, the assignment, and a student identification (usually a number). Because assignments from a sample of the relevant student population are permissible for assessment purposes, each team member does not have a large number of papers to assess and the documents are prepared for them.

An advantage of using teams of faculty not involved in teaching the course is having evaluations conducted by more than one person and not having instructors provide evaluations of student work for both course grades and for assessment of the program. Larger schools with many sections of courses or many locations may not find this model of using assessment teams to be feasible. In many schools, instructors of the courses conduct course-embedded assessments. Furthermore, software vendors are creating packages in which assessment information can be submitted electronically, making the assessment process more efficient.

When using standardized tests or national exams for assessment purposes, the coordinator for assessment needs to plan early to schedule and administer standardized tests. This process involves working with instructors (usually capstone courses) to permit time for students to take the exams and to provide incentives to the students. At MSUB, seniors in the capstone courses take the ETS Major Field Test for Business online. The instructors award extra credit points to students for taking the exam, but at this time are not awarding points for performing well on the exam. Another key aspect of this process is budgeting sufficiently in advance of administering the test in order to ensure timely payment to the vendor.

Part of the assessment process also is developing the procedures for communicating the status of assessment activities to the dean and faculty on a continual basis. Whether through newsletters, reports, or presentations (or all three), the dean and faculty need to be informed of assessment activities and results. The AACSB visiting team may call on faculty members to explain the assessment process. More importantly, everyone is responsible for making changes to improve student learning and should be involved in those discussions.

OTHER TIPS

Documentation
One of the blocks to achieving AACSB accreditation is lack of documentation. Document everything, especially activities that fulfill the mission of the school and assurance of learning activities. At MSUB, the coordinator of accreditation kept a log of activities, which creates additional work for the coordinator but made it easier to write the self-evaluation report.

Another helpful exercise was creating additional documents that made things easier for the peer review team. For example, the MSUB coordinator for accreditation created a document containing a table that outlined the academic qualifications for each faculty member. While the tables required for the self-evaluation report are valuable, they are not explicit. Visiting team members must compare the faculty vitae with the tables and with the school's definition of academically qualified faculty. The visiting team found it helpful to have all of this information contained in one document.

Tips on Writing the Self-Evaluation Report

The primary recommendation on writing the self-evaluation report is to start early. After the standards, the Guidelines, and the updates are studied, the writer should begin writing the report starting with readily available information. Sections of the report which require more investigation or data can be deferred for a time. By beginning the report early, the writer begins to develop a list of things for completing the report, such as gathering institutional data on student characteristics. Having an early draft for consultants to read is essential for receiving good advice. At MSUB, two consultants read the first draft and provided invaluable insight about what information to add to the report.

The report should describe why the school is a quality school. The adage, "It's not only about what you say, it's how you say it" certainly applies when writing a self-evaluation report. At the same time, the school should acknowledge things the school is working on to improve the quality of the school.

SUMMARY

From the perspective of the coordinator for AACSB accreditation at a small business school, getting started on the process of achieving accreditation can seem to be the most difficult part. If the school recognizes the three major roles involved and helps the individuals to fulfill those roles with proper guidance, the process begins to unfold. An essential part of the process is understanding the AACSB standards, related documentation, and the communication with the liaison, consultants, and visiting team chair. A central theme during the process is identifying processes that ensure quality of business education in the school. Good organization of the faculty can be achieved by centralizing and simplifying processes as much as possible, along with polite persistence in keeping the faculty on track. Understanding the role of the mission in developing learning goals and objectives for assurance of learning is vital. The assessment cycle provides a blueprint for developing and implementing an effective assessment process. Lack of documentation can be the downfall of a business school in achieving accreditation. The recommendation to document everything should not be taken lightly. Finally, beginning the writing of the self-evaluation report early will ensure that the final document will be prepared thoughtfully and will reflect the quality of the business school.

REFERENCES

Eligibility Procedures and Accreditation Standards for Business Accreditation. (2010). Tampa, FL. Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.