Assessment for Accreditation: A View from the Trenches

David Edwards, *University of Tennessee at Chattanooga*

I am fortunate to be the coordinator of the Master of Public Administration (MPA) program at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. We have an excellent faculty, all of whom take teaching seriously. Our curriculum is ambitious and relevant to the needs of our students, offering specializations in nonprofit management and local-government management. We are part of an outstanding department in an aspirational institution located in an exemplary city. Our students are intelligent, idealistic, engaged, and committed to delivering high-quality, effective public services. Our alumni almost always find careers doing what they love and doing it well. I know this because I am part of the program. My challenge is: How can I demonstrate to others that the program that I am so proud to be associated with is effectively providing a valuable educational experience for our students?

Although it may not provide a suitable platform for informing the wider community about our program, accreditation does offer the opportunity to demonstrate to our peers that we do meet a set of rigorous standards developed to measure the quality of academic programs in our field. This opportunity occurs about every seven years and is supplemented by annual reports that advise the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), our accrediting agency, that we continue to meet the standards and deserve recognition as an accredited program.

There are many obvious benefits associated with academic-program accreditation. However, it is neither cost-free nor easy to achieve. However, the benefits of accreditation must outweigh the costs because it is a common requirement in educational institutions from K-12 systems to the most prestigious colleges and universities. Interesting questions arise regarding the origin, ubiquity, and value of program reviews, accreditation requirements, and other forms of evaluation in American education. Although all of these issues deserve attention, the goal of this article is more modest in scope. Its purpose is to discuss the accreditation experience from the program point of view.

I note a few caveats before I begin. First, I represent a small program. We have had as many as seven core faculty members, but our number is currently five—the minimum required for accreditation. We typically register approximately 40 students during the regular academic year and award perhaps 10 degrees annually. Because we are a small program, our experiences are likely to be different than those of larger programs that have more resources available to support accreditation. Nevertheless, I suspect that even in larger programs, there are one or two individuals who have primary responsibility for managing program accreditation, and they will identify with the observations offered here.

Second, our program does not have dedicated administrative support, but our department's administrative assistant is available to help with accreditation-related tasks as time allows. This means that program faculty, particularly the coordinator, must balance administrative responsibilities—including those associated with accreditation—with other demands. Again, this means that our experience is likely to be different from larger programs that have more resources.

Third, our accrediting agency is NASPAA, which focuses specifically on accreditation of public administration and related programs. I am unfamiliar with the standards established and procedures followed by other discipline-specific accrediting agencies, but I am confident that they are as rigorous and as demanding as those followed by NASPAA. However, there most likely are differences in how accreditation is accomplished and in what constitutes evidence of program quality among academic fields if for no other reason than the differences in disciplinary content.

Given these caveats, this article is based on experiences with three successful accreditation rounds. The intent is not to propose a list of "best practices" for those charged with securing and maintaining program accreditation but rather to offer observations and lessons learned that might be helpful to those considering accreditation for the first time.

THE VALUE OF ACCREDITATION

Accreditation requires that you open your program and your work to scrutiny by representatives of an outside agency, a potentially threatening prospect. The representatives judge your program by applying standards developed for a broad range of institutional situations—standards that, by definition, impose conformity and therefore may not sufficiently recognize the unique circumstances of individual programs. Moreover, the time, expense, and effort required for accreditation are substantial, consuming resources that could be used for other purposes.

Therefore, an important step in the accreditation process is to recognize the value that it offers. The goal of our program is to provide a rigorous, relevant academic experience for our students that will help them become successful, effective, and ethical public servants. Accreditation not only demonstrates to others that we are achieving conformity to rigorous standards. It also allows us to examine our program, to reflect on how well we are accomplishing our goals, and to consider

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ways to improve what we are doing. So, although the purpose of accreditation is to compare a program's content, policies, and practices to a set of established standards, it also provides an opportunity to engage in an extensive self-examination of what you do, why you do it, and how you can do it better. From the program perspective, this may be the greatest value of the accreditation process.

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A complete evaluation of accreditation also requires that we understand the costs. Accreditation is a resource-intensive undertaking, involving direct costs that range from accrediting-agency fees to travel expenses for site visitors to copying and printing expenses. However, there are substantial indirect costs as well. Pursuing accreditation consumes significant faculty and staff resources, and it demands a major commitment from the institution. These costs and commitments should be acknowledged and considered in the decision about whether to pursue accreditation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCREDITATION STANDARDS

Successfully negotiating the accreditation process requires that you know and understand the standards by which your program will be judged and how those standards are applied. In this regard, NASPAA offers considerable assistance to programs seeking accreditation by providing extensive information about its standards and the accreditation process on its website (NASPAA 2015a). In addition to an extensive exposition of the standards, the website provides comprehensive instructions on how to conduct a self-study, a manual on how to plan and implement the accreditation site visit, and a discussion of all policies and procedures related to accreditation. Detailed guidance is available that provides an overview of each standard and the associated policies. The website includes especially useful examples, using scenarios to illustrate how a program can demonstrate conformity to the standards.

In addition to the extensive information provided on its website, NASPAA offers workshops at its annual conference for programs seeking accreditation. Recognizing the special challenges that smaller programs face, some workshops are designed specifically for them. The Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA)—the body within NASPAA that is responsible for overseeing program accreditation—assigns a liaison to each program seeking accreditation to answer any questions and to assist program staff through the process as needed. COPRA also encourages its members to volunteer to serve on accreditation site-visit teams and it provides special training for those interested in doing so.

Despite these efforts, however, it is important to note that NASPAA's standards evolve over time, leading to changes in the information required to demonstrate program quality and, to some extent, uncertainty about exactly what the standards mean. The standards guiding our first two accreditation rounds were mission-based, requiring us to demonstrate integration of our curriculum and practices with the program mission. The mission itself—its content and the process by which it was developed—became the touchstone for the review and report. In contrast, the most recent revision of the standards shifted from a focus on program mission to an outcomes-based model. Under this new approach, a program no longer simply provides a mission-based justification for its practices. It must show how it assesses its curriculum, policies, and practices; how the results of those assessments are used to change the program; and the results of its efforts. This places a premium on developing and maintaining assessment strategies that produce program data to support decisions in alignment with the standards. Faculty discussion and observation are no longer sufficient to justify programmatic changes—they now must be supported by data-based analysis.

These new standards have changed what is required to achieve accreditation. Moreover, the standards are under constant review. As the interpretations evolve, the evidence needed to demonstrate compliance may change as well. This underscores the importance for a program to become familiar with the standards before the accreditation process begins.

THE SELF-STUDY

Assuming that a program has kept good records, maintained consistency in program assessment, and documented how those assessments are reflected in programmatic changes and how the changes align with the standards, writing the accreditation report should be easy. The report required for accreditation is formulaic—NASPAA asks specific questions, explains what type of data should be referenced in the responses, and describes how the narrative should be structured. The program must only follow the directions.

This is an oversimplification, of course. Writing an effective accreditation report is preceded by months of preparation as the necessary materials are compiled, essential data are identified and assembled, and the information is analyzed—all of which is why the agency prescribes a multiyear accreditation process. According to NASPAA's published timeline, accreditation can be accomplished in a minimum of 23 months (NASPAA 2015b); however, the graphic that accompanies the timeline shows a three-year process. Programs are advised to spend at least a year preparing for the self-study and then another year conducting it and writing the self-study report. NASPAA requires reports to be submitted in August. Once a

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program submits its report, it joins a cohort of others seeking accreditation. Self-study reports are reviewed by COPRA, which then issues an interim report to which the program must respond. Assuming that these steps are completed successfully, a site visit is scheduled for the following spring.

Because the self-study report is the prerequisite to being admitted into an accreditation cohort, it behooves a program to be meticulous in ensuring that the information provided is accurate and responsive to the questions asked. The challenge is to demonstrate to reviewers how the program meets the standards. Writing the report is not necessarily a one-person task. Some faculty members may have more information relevant to a component of the standards than others and therefore are more appropriate for writing that portion of the study. Recruiting others to assist in preparing the report can dramatically improve the final product.

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THE SITE VISIT

From the program point of view, the site visit is likely the most important part of the accreditation process. It is the opportunity for the program to present its case for accreditation in person with NASPAA's representatives. The accreditation site-visit team is responsible for examining the program in situ and reporting its findings to COPRA. Its report carries substantial weight in the final decision. It is obvious that significant time and attention must be given to this critical component of the process.

In preparing for the site visit, the first and perhaps most important consideration is the composition of the three-member site-visit team. NASPAA nominates team members from a roster of volunteers who undergo extensive training before their first visit. The volunteers are faculty members from NASPAA member institutions; because public administration is an applied discipline, public-service practitioners also are included. NASPAA provides the credentials of the proposed site-visit team members to the program, which then may approve the team or request substitutions. Careful review of the proposed team members' vitae informs the decision of whether to seek substitutions. Ideally, because it will better understand the constraints and opportunities it faces, the site-visit team should include members from programs similar to the one being reviewed. The academic training and background of the team also are important and should reflect the nature of the program being reviewed.

Institutional preparation also is essential. During the site visit, team members will meet with program faculty, the department head, deans, the institution's chief academic officer, and other campus administrators. They also will consult with students, alumni, and community stakeholders. It is beneficial to inform those who will meet with the team about the program and the site-visit process. A self-study report is necessarily a voluminous document that few beyond those directly involved will read completely. An executive summary renders the information it contains more accessible. A pre-site-visit discussion with individuals and groups that will be meeting with the team is another effective way to share essential information.

It is important to remember that you will need to coordinate the schedules of everyone involved so that they will be available to meet with the site-visit team during its brief campus visit—and this is no easy feat when you are dealing with several busy people. Starting early and relying on administrative support can make this task easier.

NASPAA generally allows two and a half days for accreditation site visits, and it offers a sample agenda for programs to consider in scheduling the visit. In addition to arranging meetings with campus and community stakeholders, time must be set aside to review program documentation that supports the information presented in the accreditation report. Ideally, documentation is preassembled and available in a comfortable workspace for the team's use during the site visit. Time also must be allowed for the team members to discuss their findings and progress and to prepare their preliminary report. The program must arrange accommodations, transportation, and meals. Both the program and the site-visit team have much to accomplish in a short period of time. The team's goal is to verify the information provided in the accreditation report and to determine whether the program is in conformity with NASPAA standards. The program's responsibility is to ensure that the site-visit team has the information it needs to make an accurate assessment of its operations and outcomes.

The site visit culminates with an exit meeting between the site-visit team members and the program representatives—in our case, the department head and the MPA program coordinator. This meeting, the final item on the itinerary, is the last official component of the visit. The team already will have begun to write its preliminary report and the meeting gives it the opportunity to share its findings with the program representatives. Despite potential for disagreement about findings and conclusions, our experience during three accreditation rounds has been that the exit meeting is pleasant and even motivating. Whether by nature or by training, our site visitors were invariably gracious in highlighting what we do well while also noting what we could do better. They recognized the quality and commitment of our faculty. They noted the strong relationships we develop with our students and the achievements of our alumni. They acknowledged our effort in developing a strong curriculum that provides our students with the tools they need to effectively manage public services. Points of possible variance from NASPAA's standards were highlighted by the site-visit team but so were our strengths—the definition of a fair assessment.

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AFTERMATH

Although the site visit appears to be the culmination of a long, arduous process encompassing two or more years, it is not the end. After the site visit, the team prepares its report for submission to and review by COPRA, which then prepares a preliminary report for the program. This report may request additional information or clarification on specific points. The program then writes a response to the preliminary report, which is incorporated into COPRA's final report for review and action. The full commission makes the final decision regarding program accreditation, after which the program is formally notified of the result. COPRA may (1) approve accreditation, (2) approve accreditation subject to monitoring the program on specific standards, or (3) deny accreditation. In its decision letter, COPRA provides useful feedback to the program with justification for its decision.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article is to discuss accreditation from the program point of view. I would like to distill a list of best practices from the discussion that would help programs to more easily negotiate the accreditation process. However, I must be more circumspect about the generalizability of what is presented here. I believe that each MPA program is unique to some degree, and I suspect that the same is true for most academic programs in higher education. Specific academic disciplines are, by definition, identical across institutions. Political scientists, for example, share a common body of knowledge and assumptions regardless of their institutional affiliation. However, a student of political science in a regional public university is likely to have a significantly different experience than a student attending a well-endowed private university with an international presence. Programs are defined not only by disciplinary content but also by their faculty, mission, institutional environment, and available resources. Accreditation standards must define clearly the essential characteristics of a viable program yet be flexible enough to accommodate the wide range of situations in which they will be applied. Because of the inevitable variability among programs, it is difficult to develop a list of best practices for those seeking accreditation. Instead, I offer a summary of lessons learned with the hope that they may be helpful.

First, recognize accreditation for what it is—an opportunity for extensive review of your program and reflection on ways that it might be improved. Scrutiny by an outside agency is potentially uncomfortable, but it also gives you the chance to demonstrate the value of what you are doing.

Second, be prepared to commit the resources necessary to execute the project. Accreditation is time-consuming and expensive. The time spent holding meetings, reviewing program data, and writing reports is significant, and the effort extends over a period of years. Staff and faculty time that could be spent on teaching, research, and public service must be devoted instead to accreditation activities. These costs must be recognized at the outset, not only by those directly involved in the program but also by institutional administrators.

Third and perhaps most important, know the standards. Expend the necessary time and effort to understand them. Take advantage of accrediting-agency resources that explain the standards as well as any training that may be available.

Accreditation standards must define clearly the essential characteristics of a viable program yet be flexible enough to accommodate the wide range of situations in which they will be applied.

The most eloquent response to a question other than the one being asked is still wrong. It is essential to understand clearly the standards by which your program will be measured.

Fourth, adequate preparation for the site visit is vital. Writing the report and responding to requests for clarification or additional information is significantly different than hosting a site-visit team during its campus visit. The team will have conversations with various program stakeholders; briefing those stakeholders in advance will assist you in making the case for accreditation. It is important to remember that much needs to be accomplished during a brief site visit. Time spent in preparation will ensure that the visit runs smoothly when the team is on campus.

Fifth, if it is not already established, those responsible for conducting the accreditation review should resolve to create and maintain a strong recordkeeping system for their program. Effective self-assessment requires the review of program data over a period of years. Good records make it much easier to retrieve the necessary information. ■

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