

Dean's Corner: What We Learned from Initial Accreditation



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We are understandably pleased for the Davis College of Business to join other AACSB-accredited business schools. It was a long, challenging experience complicated by the current economy—and reaffirmation is already too near. It is an opportunity to reflect and share our observations with other schools considering initial accreditation and those approaching the five-year milestone.

First, understand why you are doing it. Yes, accreditation definitely helps position your school in a competitive market—it is the ticket to punch in the narrowest sense. But, if your motives are not right or widely shared by all stakeholders, it can be a painful process with limited impact. If it is only a major donor or president's expectation, then it may not be the right motive.

What are the right motives? Accreditation does provide a great rationale and basis for change—leverage with those who control resources or have blocked change in the past. It allows you to make tough choices early that would not be made otherwise. Most importantly, the right motive is deeply believing that accreditation will help your school become better in the long run. The clichés are real; accreditation is only a milestone in a continuous learning process that calls for the fundamental shift from managing structure to core processes, aligning your governance with those processes, and committing to measuring and acting on the variables that truly drive performance. Everything becomes variable. You'll truly benefit over time only if everyone embraces that idea. Accreditation also means cultivating organizational curiosity, inquisitiveness, and transparency. Not easy, for sure, but this is the attainable "holy grail."

On the other hand, we learned that it is easy to over-do it! The inherent ambiguity in the process tended to make our school over invest in technology, complex jargon, systems, and otherwise do things not good for us. For example, setting AQ standards and expectations that didn't fit our mission. We learned that schools must keep it simple, focus on quality and not quantity, and measure the items that really count since not everything does. Create a performance dashboard and information flow that makes sense and honestly impacts performance. And, don't create things that you can't afford or support long after the visitation team leaves town—be sure all of your plans fit the size of your school and its resources.

And, because you depend on others inside and outside of your school for support, particularly in smaller universities like ours, get used to the idea that you'll need to help improve their processes and how well they support you. Whether it is the registrar's office, academic advising, institutional research, or etc. These areas provide the information and support needed to make things happen internally. Most of them will actually appreciate the interest and will help if it is clear that your motives are honorable and your success rewards them too.

Finally, use AACSB resources and staff fully and communicate often. Choose your mentor and team carefully, not just to help you slide through, but to share their knowledge and expertise. These teams enjoy being used and challenged. At this point, we can honestly and proudly say that we are a better learning organization for it. The journey continues.