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When the Accreditation Board Says –“NO”: A Chronicle of the Reaccreditation Process

By Dr. James L. Toppen, East Carolina University

In the Fall of 2001, East Carolina University received notice that their NAIT Accreditation for the Industrial Technology programs was in jeopardy. Of the sixty-two accreditation standards, we had received a combined total of seventeen partial and non-compliant ratings from the NAIT Board of Accreditation. Our Dean was very emphatic regarding his embarrassment and our disgrace as a department.

Faculty Apathy

The first instinct was to point fingers; however, it didn't take long in our first faculty meeting to reach several conclusions. The most important reason for failing the accreditation process was faculty apathy towards the process. As a faculty (self included), we made the serious mistake of not taking an active role in the accreditation process. We allowed a committee, of one senior faculty and 2 new non-tenure track faculty, to complete the accreditation self-study report and documentation. The rest of the faculty took a nonchalant attitude toward the process, thankful we hadn't been chosen for the job. This attitude allowed the committee to do the work, gather the facts, and complete the report. Several of us did not even show up for required meetings during the process and prepared our curriculum files in an unorganized, and in some cases an unprofessional manner. We felt the process was and should be automatic – wrong thinking on our part!

Separated the Self-Study Reports. One for Each Degree

During this first meeting, we made some very wise decisions. These

decisions should have been made the first time. At East Carolina University, we were originally awarded accreditation as one degree with five concentrations. Since that accreditation, each concentration was changed to a separate degree status. Our first mistake, was attempting to do documentation as one degree. The major difficulty in this was because as each separate degree evolved, several changes were made, away from the original degree. Before there was a common core, but now, several degrees have strayed away from that common core. The first decision we made was to have a separate report for each individual degree. We also assigned the coordinators of each degree as the planning/ implementation committee. This gave ownership of the reports to each individual degree.

Developing a Plan of Action

The first step was requesting funds for a two day workshop/retreat away from campus to begin the planning process with the planning/ implementation committee. This committee reviewed the NAIT Accreditation report of findings carefully. Each partial or non-compliance standard was addressed individually. As we examined the original self-study report it became clear to us that although we were meeting most of the standard, we had done a poor job of presenting the IT programs clearly enough for an outsider to observe that the standard was being met.

We began with brainstorming sessions. Each standard was addressed individu-

ally. Ideas were individually given as to what should be included in showing how that standard was met. These bulleted items were then discussed and prioritized forming a basic outline to address the standard. We originally reviewed every standard, even though we were only required to address the partial and non-compliant issues. This turned out to be an excellent method of beginning the process.

As the committee went through the process, we found that in reporting to the standards that there would be many common areas of information. We also found the areas where information for the individual degrees had changed enough, that those areas would have to be reported separately by each degree. The information for that degree was unique only to that degree and had to be addressed differently. After the information for each standard was addressed, the committee also discussed how to physically show evidence the standard was being met. These items became our appendices. This process took a day and a half.

One thing we wanted to achieve in the process was developing a reporting methodology that was consistent from degree to degree. This would allow outside examiners to be able to quickly and more thoroughly examine each degree report, as they would be set up exactly the same.

Significant time was spent setting up a time-line of activity completion dates and assigning a committee chair that would be responsible to coordinate and schedule all meetings. It was also decided that this committee would meet bi-weekly to keep the development of the self-study on target.

Two Target Dates Established

During our first accreditation committee meeting, two target dates were established. We employed a NAIT Consultant (Dr. John Sutton). We set up the first target date to have all reports completed one week before the consultant's visit, which was approximately 4 months away. The second

date was 45 days before the NAIT Accreditation revisit. At this time all reports and appendices were to be completed for mailing to the accreditation reviewer.

Advisory Boards Reestablished

A major area that needed changing in the IT programs was the use of advisory boards to aid in the curriculum and assessment process. The current ECU advisory board, although representative of all the degrees, was not set up to be used as a curriculum and assessment aid. The board was too broad in scope to be of direct value. We set up target dates for establishment of new advisory boards for each separate degree. Each board was to have a minimum of ten members, including one student member.

One day was set aside and we held one advisory board meeting with each separate degree board meeting. During the agenda, officers were elected to conduct the meetings and the boards were given their charge by the curriculum coordinators and the department chair. Close review of the current curriculum was conducted and the content of each course was examined. Many curriculum suggestions were made and numerous changes in courses were implemented because of the advisory board recommendations. Two further meetings were scheduled throughout the year. This was very significant for curriculum change.

Document Produced

The Industrial Distribution faculty took the lead and initiated a report document from the outline that was generated in our weekend retreat. Each accreditation standard's documentation was composed one at a time. After composition of the standard's documentation the appropriate evidence of that documentation was gathered and placed in an appendix folder. This made it easy to organize and number the appendix.

Once the Industrial Distribution faculty completed their documentation, copies were distributed to the Associate Dean, the Department Chair

and the degree program coordinators for review and change.

Upon completion of the review of the documentation, editing the document was completed and the appendix was organized using the edited document. Great care was taken to make sure that every item referred to in the document was evidenced in the appendix and the numbering system was correct. Both the completed Industrial Distribution accreditation self-study report and appendix were then bound for review. Electronic copies of the report were distributed to the coordinators of the other degrees for them to produce their own documents. They were then able to use the common areas while making the individual degree information unique to their degree. This was extremely productive because it kept each degree self-study consistent from report to report.

Degree Files (Crates) Designed

The committee wanted guaranteed consistency in developing evidence crates. The committee debated what information should be included in each crate. We decided that each degree crate would be color coded. Inside the crate there would be three file folders for each course, a syllabus folder, course materials folder (sample multimedia and teaching media) and a course student samples folder. The course sample folder would include a variety sample of course assignments and projects. Instructors for each of the courses were given the assignment for collecting materials for the courses and the degree coordinators were required to build their degree crates according to the format recommended by the NAIT consultant. Upon completion each crate was reviewed by the Accreditation Committee Chair and a graduate assistant for accuracy, consistency and completeness. Each degree submission was checked against the course check sheet to make sure each course in the degree was represented in the file (crate) in the order of the degree check sheet. If several degrees used duplicate courses, each degree had a copy of that course

folder in their degree crate. The accreditation committee chose to do this so that the reviewer would not have to go back and forth between crates to examine coursework.

Entire Staff Involvement

It is very important to keep the entire staff involved in the process. The more the teaching staff is involved in the process the more ownership they take in the assessment process. One of the original mistakes which led the initial poor accreditation recommendation by the Accreditation Team was lack of total faculty involvement in the process. To remedy this, reports were made at each faculty meeting regarding the progress; assignments and timelines were given to individuals at that time. The department chair was very diligent in maintaining due dates for materials. This kept the staff from alienation but maintained the timeline due dates.

Final Review of Documents

It was very important to the committee, that the reports were clear, concise and accurate to an outside reader. Each report was reviewed by the Associate Dean of Education. This person had directed several accreditation efforts for his school. He made editorial corrections for each degree report. The Associate Dean of the School of Industry and Technology also reviewed each document. The documents were then returned to each coordinator for correction, printing and binding.

A targeted mail date was established forty-five days before the two year accreditation re-visit. This decision

was concluded to show that we were prepared and to reduce the pressure of the faculty before the actual visit. This also gave the visiting assessor time to really review all documents and ask for anything needed.

Preparation for the Visit

The accreditation committee chair and one graduate assistant reviewed all curriculum crates to make sure they were complete, accurate and consistent from degree to degree.

Each coordinator was to review the report and appendices with their faculty. When the established schedule for the NAIT Accreditation Team member was determined it was given to each faculty and staff. All faculty were required to be either in their office or in the classroom during the accreditation re-visit.

Another item that is very important to a successful accreditation visit is to coordinate with the visiting team to make sure they have all documentation needed before the visit. Make sure that the team visit has been carefully coordinated, and that they will have all the things needed before and during the visit. It is very important that the visiting team have a comfortable private place to work, computer and phone accessibility and that transportation/parking are coordinated.

Make sure that the accreditation team members' schedules on campus are coordinated and the people they need to talk to are available. Lead time for scheduling is important and if someone

can not be on campus, an appropriate substitute should be arranged.

During the Visit

One of the most important things is to assign an escort to each visiting team member. This escort can aid the team member in their movement around campus and can act as a liaison for your department to make sure the team member's needs are met as they complete the review process. This escort can be a support staff, graduate assistant or faculty member. This will aid in maintaining the desired schedule, as the team members won't waste time searching.

Make sure you enjoy the time with the accreditation team. It is your school's opportunity to show how good you are. It is a very positive time!

Value of Accreditation

The most important thing that East Carolina University learned in our re-accreditation failure was that we have an excellent team of people including administration, faculty and support staff. We needed to focus our attention on the process and demonstrate how excellent the program and students really were. Rather than just "get through" the paperwork; use the accreditation process to improve your program and the instruction that takes place. When addressed correctly, the accreditation process, can aid in the growth of pride and recognition of your program and the improvements needed for a quality Industrial Technology program.

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