Accurate and Efficient Accreditation Documentation Preparation

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This paper provides some thoughts on how to produce accurate accreditation documentation efficiently for an ABET accreditation self-study (Questionnaire for Review). We focus on the computer science discipline but the ideas are applicable to other fields. The goal is to give those planning to write or to assist in writing a self-study a number of useful guidelines. This paper complements the material presented at the Best Assessment Processes V Symposium at the Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology. The PowerPoint presentation given at the symposium may be obtained at www.cs.armstrong.edu/greenlaw/presentations/presentations.html

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1. Is Accreditation Documentation Preparation Worth Discussing?

ABET accreditation self-studies are usually written by faculty members, who are guided by an accreditation committee team chair. Support staff, if available, may be able to assist in document preparation but do not normally write sections of self-studies. An average length self-study consists of about 500 pages. So, the length of this project, much larger than a typical dissertation, is likely to be the longest one that most faculty members will ever be involved in writing. A self-study has many facets and it is rarely be feasible for one person to write the entire document. Nearly all faculty have too many other constraints on their time to write a 500-page document, even if given class release time; and furthermore, few would be knowledgeable enough to write about all aspects of their program. Only a small percentage of faculty are experienced at coordinating the assembly of a 500-page document even if given the components. As a result, many self-studies suffer from poor integration and non-uniformity. If a program evaluator cannot easily obtain the documentation they are looking, the tendency is to “dig deeper.” This puts an added burden on the evaluator and quite frankly can lead them to uncovering new issues of concern.

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2In this paper we use the pronouns “their,” “them,” and “they” even where the correct usage is singular.
Most faculty have little experience in preparing accreditation documentation. Those in departments working towards accreditation for the first time may not have a single faculty member with self-study development expertise. Even smart and resourceful people can struggle when presented with the immense accreditation process especially if they and their colleagues lack experience in performing such a task. We believe it makes sense to provide guidelines for producing the self-study documentation.

2. Planning Stage

Several preliminary steps are recommended to write a self-study. We believe an accreditation committee should be formed and a chair selected for that committee. The chair needs to be someone who is motivated to complete the self-study, is a good writer, sets and meets deadlines, has adequate time, and has the respect of other faculty. It helps if they are familiar with other personnel in the institution, for example, faculty in supporting departments, the head librarian, business office staff, and so on. The accreditation committee should be an ongoing one with continuity from year-to-year.

A. Chair’s Responsibilities

Key steps for the chair to take are as follows:

- **Read all relevant ABET documentation.** This is necessary to gain a thorough understanding of the accreditation process. A folder of the most important documents should be maintained in a central location. It is a good idea to assign faculty specific readings and give them deadlines for completion. We strongly recommend that someone in the department go through the program evaluator training and serve as a program evaluator. Such experience will prove invaluable during self-study preparation.

- **Collect and regularly organize all relevant documents.** We assume the degree under consideration for accreditation has all the standard processes in place to support it, evolve it, and improve it. However, this is not sufficient. Such activities must be documented on an ongoing basis. For example, a list of student outcomes should be maintained. Curriculum committee minutes should be kept and changes should be tied in to desired student outcomes when the minutes are produced. The minutes need to be kept accurately and thoroughly so that later they can either be included in the accreditation documentation or easily edited for inclusion. Too often stacks of faculty meeting minutes, which largely have nothing to do with accreditation, are provided to accreditation teams. Forms should be developed, for example, for senior exit interviews. These should be prepared and filled out at the time of the student interviews. Such data should be compiled regularly. Student surveys and the results of those surveys should periodically be tabulated and evaluated. Improvements to the program based on these results should be documented. Advisory board meetings should have accreditation related issues on the agendas and the minutes should be composed so that they can later be used as appendices in the self-studies or as supporting documentation. Student work should be collected starting two years prior to the visit, or even sooner if there are courses that are offered infrequently. The accreditation committee chair should verify that faculty are building student portfolios; it is a good idea to maintain this material in a central location rather than a faculty office. The chair is responsible for making sure that all such instruments are being collected, are well-written, are being analyzed, are comprehensive, and that the analysis can easily be folded into the self-study. They should also be reporting to the faculty and department chair so program improvements can be implemented. Many departments are scrambling to collect information when they should be focused on writing. Information gathering and analysis is a continuous process that is needed to make positive program adjustments. In this context it is also needed to assist in document preparation.
• **Test out manuscript preparation software.** It is critical to agree on and then test out the software for producing the self-study. ABET provides word documents that can be used as a starting point. It is a good idea to convert these generic documents to institution specific documents immediately. This process can sometimes be handled by an assistant. This task ensures that as sections of the self-study become ready, there will be no delay in loading them into the overall document. Software backups and hard copies should be kept as well.

• **Develop a timeline for the document preparation process.** The chair must know their own abilities and those of their faculty. Nearly all self-studies are rushed in their preparation. How can this be when many institutions have a six-year lead time for preparing documents? Naturally, faculty departures can create issues as can overzealous administrators. Some fault also lies with accreditation committee team chairs. They must make assignments early, motivate faculty to complete the assignments, and then follow through.

• **Communicate with all parties.** We recommend making a list of all individuals that will need to be involved with the accreditation process. Keep them informed of deadlines and communicate with them on a regular basis. It is important to keep faculty motivated throughout the duration of the accreditation process. The chair needs to lead the effort and possess a high energy level.

**B. Key Assignments**

Key assignments for the chair to make are as follows:

• **Acquire the physical items in which accreditation materials will be displayed.** This might include a binder for each class, dividers for the binders, plastic three ring insert sheets, tabs, and so on. We recommend purchasing about 20% more than you feel are necessary. This cushion ensures there will be enough so that all binders can be of the same style even if new courses need to be documented, a couple are misplaced, and so forth. Support staff can be given the task of labeling the binders consistently—same color paper, same font type and face, same numbering scheme, and so on.

• **Standardize the format for classroom materials.** It is a good idea to agree on a consistent table of contents for each course to be described in the self-study. This table of contents should appear in the beginning of each binder. Not all items listed in the table of contents may be relevant for every course. In which case a note can be included in the binder to this effect. A consistent format for these materials will greatly facilitate the job of the program evaluators. Furthermore, it can alert faculty to items they should have been collecting but were not.

• **Make assignments for course materials.** We recommend dividing up the work for preparing course materials. Usually, one or two people should be assigned to each course. The most common assignment is to have the person who most recently taught the course prepare the materials. This only works if the person is willingly supporting the accreditation effort. If they are not, another faculty member will need to assist. All course descriptions should be prepared uniformly. This will facilitate the jobs of the program evaluators and give a better impression. In many cases, supporting class materials from other units are also needed. It is a good idea to communicate with the chairs of these departments and provide them with forms to finish completing for their courses. Give them plenty of notice, and define exactly what is needed and when. It is important to follow-up on both the internal and external data gathering processes. In assigning faculty to these tasks make sure to take into account
possible retirements, departures, and dissension. It is a bad idea to assign faculty additional courses after the initial assignments have been made. It is better to assign faculty extra courses initially and then release them from preparing a course.

3. Reaccreditation: Working from Old Documentation

A prior self-study can be a curse or a blessing. The quality of the old self-study as well as its relevance to new criteria should first be ascertained. If the self-study is poorly written and outdated, it is best to start over. This is not to say that some material cannot be salvaged. However, having an old self-study to work from should not give one a sense of complacency. If you are able to utilize a portion of an old self-study be careful not to let outdated information remain in the document. It may be appropriate for the chair to process the entire document and remove all outdated material at the outset. If information is simply added as acquired, it will be difficult to ensure that incorrect information is not carried forward.

4. Communicating with Other Institutional Units

The chair should prepare and send out all requests for information to supporting units as early as feasible. The ABET accreditation process is extremely thorough and nearly all aspects of a program are investigated. It is important to realize early on to whom requests for information should be sent. For example, the self-study may need to contain information about faculty benefits. It would be a good idea to ask human resources for this information and then include it in the appropriate format. A list of periodicals from the library may be easy for the librarian to generate—if they are given enough lead time. Many self-studies do a poor job on reporting budget information. Early on direct a request to the appropriate person in the business office. In all cases leave enough time so that if a request gets misdirected, completely lost, or misunderstood, one still has enough time to send a second request, and go back and forth several iterations until everything is acquired. If at all possible, introduce yourself to the various people who will be collecting information for you and who will be meeting with the visiting team of program evaluators. Better results are likely if the other institutional personnel feel part of the team and realize the importance of the task at hand to you, the department, and the institution as a whole.

5. Writing the Self-Study

A. Introduction

The majority of this paper has been devoted to the preparation that needs to take place before really beginning to write the self-study. The better grasp one has on the material to write about, the more efficiently one can produce documentation. With much of the basic items and supporting documentation already prepared, the physical materials (binders, labels, tabs, and so on) for class material on hand, and standard formats for course descriptions in place, everyone involved with the project will have a sense of the framework and scope of the accreditation. Now it is time to consider the actual writing in further detail.

There are many different facets to the ABET documentation, for example, sections on objectives and assessment, student support, faculty, curriculum, laboratories, institutional support and financial resources, and institutional facilities. For computer science there are also sections on information relative to the entire institution, general information on the computer science unit, finances, computer science program personnel, enrollment and degree data, and admissions. Early on the accreditation committee team chair will need to make writing assignments. They should clearly indicate the scope of each assignment and the due dates. For example, for each task they might have a list similar to the following one about laboratories:
• The laboratories section is expected to be roughly fifteen pages long.

• It requires six sections: Computing Facilities Available for Use in the Computer Science Program, Student Access, Documentation, Faculty Access, Support Personnel, and Instructional Support.

• Much of the information has never been documented due to the recent acquisition of new equipment.

• The department’s only lab technician is a recent hire and will be of little assistance.

• The first full-draft in Word needs to be completed by March 15.

• It will go out to faculty for comment and will need to be edited by April 25. The administrative assistant will not be able to provide any assistance with this editing.

• The final version needs to be completed on May 5.

The overall writing tasks are outlined in the Questionnaire for Review; for computer science the Questionnaire is currently 42 pages long. Although it provides a very good framework in which to report information, since each program is unique, the presentation of certain items is not simply a matter of filling in a straightforward answer to a question. Some information may be best presented by adding a table, a figure, or an appendix. It is important to allocate enough time to develop material that can easily be understood by the program evaluators, and to justify any non-standard items. Furthermore, because many sections of the Questionnaire overlap, it is important to maintain consistency throughout the document. For example, the number of faculty working on the degree should be reported consistently, and if there is a discrepancy for some reason, an explanation should be included. We now turn to some specific writing issues.

B. Editing the Document

One person should be responsible for the overall document. A revision control system is recommended so that faculty can check-out and check-in their sections. It may be necessary to maintain edit logs. The files should be backed up regularly, the backup system should be tested, and hard copies should be maintained. Communication about editing assignments and completion dates should be provided by the chair to other committee members.

C. Proofreading

The document should be proofread by a couple of faculty—hopefully by at least one who is a program evaluator. The documentation should be read for correctness, completeness, and consistency. It is important for someone to verify that all intended edits are actually implemented. A good program that is poorly documented will raise concerns from evaluators.

D. Ethics and Reporting

All information must be reported accurately. If the integrity of those preparing the documentation comes into question, the entire accreditation effort is doomed to fail.

E. Common Pitfalls

Three areas where self-studies are often poorly done or inconsistent are as follows:

• In reporting faculty information. A consistent format should be used for faculty “vitas.” If these vitas are produced by faculty, someone needs to format them consistently and the chair
needs to make sure the information is accurately reported. Unusual circumstances need to be justified, for example, a faculty member teaching 500 students over three separate courses who also reports 30% of their time devoted to scholarship is not standard. The number of faculty should be reported consistently. If faculty have left, clearly document this.

- **In documenting the path through the program.** To become accredited, every student completing the program of study must meet the accreditation standards regardless of the path they take in finishing their degree. Many programs have multiple tracks students can follow. Clearly document that all tracks meet the program standards. This may require additional tables or extensive figures.

- **In presenting budget information.** These sections need to be complete or explanations need to be given as to why they are not complete. Budget numbers need to be reported consistently throughout the self-study especially when presented from different angles in several sections. Budget information needs to be specific. For example, when reporting equipment expenditures, it is not sufficient to say “We spent tens of thousands of dollars.” It is better to say “We spent $84,233 on . . .” The ellipsis is a placeholder where the items purchased should be described.

6. Miscellaneous Issues

We touch on three areas that are sometimes overlooked.

**A. Transcript Collection**

ABET standardly requires the submission of ten student transcripts. The process via which these transcripts are chosen should be documented, for example, “In an alphabetical list of our students from the last ten years, we began with the first student on the list and included every fifth student in order.” Unusual transcripts may require an attached note for the program evaluators, for example, “This student transferred in from MIT as a junior and we accepted the following of their classes . . .”

**B. Confidentiality and Security Issues**

Numerous parts of the self-study contain confidential information, for example, faculty salaries, student work, budget information, and so on. Care must be taken in storing both electronic and hard copies of information. Students should sign waivers, provided by instructors, indicating that they are willing to have their work displayed as part of the accreditation process. Course binders and other materials need to be secured. It is difficult to recover quickly from misplaced or stolen materials.

**C. Opening Presentation**

The chair of the host institution’s accreditation committee or the equivalent person should provide an initial presentation to the program evaluators. At that meeting a road map to and through the documentation should be provided, and any anomalies should be indicated, for example, “The reason there is no textbook displayed for the Embedded Systems course is because . . .”

7. Summary

This paper collects thoughts on accurate and efficient accreditation document preparation. It oversimplifies some issues. Nevertheless, we hope it raises a number of points that will help others in producing self-studies. Clearly, there are many different approaches that can lead to successful document preparation; we for the most part explored a single perspective. The hints provided here are to help one with limited experience stay on track during this challenging endeavor.