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Accreditation in Education: One Institution's Examination of Faculty Perceptions

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Abstract

Accreditation serves many constituents and for a variety of reasons. It attempts to attest to the quality of a particular program that in most cases prepares people to enter a specific job or profession. The study examined faculty perceptions of the CAEP process in accrediting their teacher education programs and the impact on resources including human resources and morale. Through a researcher-constructed survey and then focused interviews, educators at this university indicated they believed the process of national accreditation was important for enhanced status and prestige, but questioned whether it helped with needed systemic changes. They also noted that faculty workload was a drawback unless faculty were recognized for their work. Conclusions to the study offered three recommendations: (1) faculty along with other key stakeholders should have a strong voice in the decision to pursue accreditation; (2) personnel need to be appreciated for their intensive work; and (3) institutions need to allocate adequate and realistic resources for the entire process. Additionally, universities need to use the lessons learned and outcomes of the process to strengthen and change programs and policies when necessary for continuous improvement.

Keywords: *Accreditation; CAEP; national accreditation; faculty perceptions; continuous improvement; quality assurance*

Introduction

Accreditation serves many constituents and for a variety of reasons. It attempts to attest to the quality of a university or particular program that in most cases prepares people to obtain a degree or enter a specific job or profession. The broadest level of accreditation begins with organizations like the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), which evaluates institutions of higher education. These reviews are rigorous, time-consuming, and labor intensive as universities as a whole self-examine and then present findings in a written report with supporting documentation.

National accreditation opportunities are available for various disciplines. For educators, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) has become one of the foremost leaders in advancing excellence in teacher preparation through evidence-based outcomes (CAEP, 2015), and is the focus of this study. This organization “assures quality and supports continuous improvement to strengthen P-12 learning” (CAEP, 2015, ¶2). Wise (2005) believes, for teacher

preparation, the standards for accreditation have become the voice of the “collective organization” (p. 321) representing teacher preparation providers. For most, an Educator Preparation Provider unit (EPP) can choose to be CAEP accredited, but it is not required.

Within the university, programs may also separately apply for and obtain national content-specific recognition. Some specialized (programmatic) content areas, such as the International Literacy Association (ILA) or National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), have overarching professional organizations that advocate for specialized standards to be met for national recognition through accreditation. Universities may choose to use these standards as a baseline to include in their program reviews.

Additionally, some national accreditation organizations will accept formal content reviews for accreditation, such as CAEP recognizes CACREP (for counseling programs), as the overarching benchmark. Programs may or may not elect to apply for these, often depending on the beliefs held by the university, administration, faculty, and even public. Typically, only a portion of the programs within a specific EPP unit apply for national Specialized Professional Association (SPA) accreditation. However, universities with teacher education programs are required to comply with their respective *state standards* for teacher certification and undergo rigorous accreditation reviews on a scheduled basis.

For some, national recognition acts as both the state and national level review to ensure quality, but in some it does not. The ultimate goal of every program is to pass an accreditation review at the state level to be able to offer state-sanctioned certification. While the focus for any accreditation application is to provide appropriate documentation for outside evaluation, a successful visit with accreditation awarded will only be achieved when faculty, staff, administrators, and students work collaboratively to support and collect the evidence needed (Head & Johnson, 2011). Accreditation can be the driving force behind a push to demonstrate institutional effectiveness (Head & Johnson, 2011).

Background

Accrediting organizations develop standards as a framework for quality expectations (Eaton, 2012). Periodic review of how an institution is meeting the standards forms the basis for achieving a much-desired excellence rating along with continued accreditation. This has become a touted rationale for preserving national recognition for quality programs. The trend for modern accrediting bodies seems to be systematic continuous improvement through data-driven evidence (CAEP, 2015; Head & Johnson, 2011).

Institutions are compelled to self-critique and self-regulate in their efforts to improve their programs, and then capture in a summative report and site visit their academic quality. The goal is to take a closer look at student outcomes and the best practices used to reach those outcomes. There are common threads of impact that must be woven throughout the programs and highlighted in the universities’ quest to *tell their story* in the accreditation report. Both technology and diversity evidence must be woven throughout the standards documentation presented by the institution applying for accreditation. According to Eaton (2012), accreditation involves “professionals reviewing professionals and academics reviewing academics” (p. 8). This peer review validates an institution’s “threshold quality and quality improvement” (p. 8).

Eaton (2012) posited that accreditation has been defined by two relationships since its beginnings in the early 19th century. The first being that the basic overarching authority belongs to the members of the accrediting bodies who, as members, determine the standards and the review

process. The second, more political relationship is an agreement between the federal government and accrediting organizations for oversight to remain under nongovernmental organizations. The accreditation organizations are recognized as “the ‘reliable authority’ on academic quality” (p. 9). However, within the last 50 years, the long arm of the federal government has sought to regulate accrediting organizations through requirements, laws, and guidance monitored by the U.S. Department of Education, bringing into question, the future of accreditation. Educator preparation institutions are being called to action through a “greater advocacy for accreditation; reaffirmation of the traditional role of institutions, not government, in providing academic leadership and judgments about quality; and robust institutional steps toward greater public accountability” (Eaton, 2012, p. 13).

Accreditation for an institution is a valued approach for public recognition. According to CAEP (2015), accreditation is important to P-12 learners and families, educators at all levels, state agencies, educational professionals, and the general public. Knowing the importance of accreditation and the willingness to do the work involved are two hurdles institutions must overcome in their efforts to reach a high rating.

The university investigated in this study, hereafter referred to by the pseudonym Midwest University, began as teachers’ college and strives to maintain a rigorous approach toward education and remaining mindful of the preparation of future teachers who attend the university. The university has participated in national accreditation since 1965 and values the public recognition. Since knowing the importance of accreditation and a willingness to do the work are key factors, it seemed important to ask the faculty involved in the Education Preparation Provider unit at this university about their perceptions of CAEP accreditation and their continuing accreditation plans.

The purpose of this study was to determine faculty perceptions of their university’s participation in the national accreditation process related to the following issues: benefits and drawbacks to national accreditation, how outcomes of the national accreditation process are used or not used by the institution, the investment required to move toward national accreditation and who is involved in the decision to pursue accreditation, and the barriers in proceeding with national accreditation.

Methods

At the time of this study, Midwest University was gearing up for an accreditation visit within the next three years. They were in the process of changing to a more systematic and purposeful way of collecting data from which to base their continuous improvement report. However, as in most cases of change, questions and concerns were raised by the faculty about the impact of national accreditation on their programs and faculty and the issues related to the accreditation process. For this study, faculty were invited to voluntarily complete a survey designed to identify their perceptions.

For the purpose of this study, faculty consisted of professors at all ranks (assistant, associate, full), lecturers (full time, non-tenure track faculty), and administrators (deans and department heads from every college/department on campus with a teacher education degree program). Faculty ($n = 111$) were sent an email in late May during finals week for the spring semester and asked to voluntarily answer a questionnaire via a SurveyMonkey.com link. The questionnaire was modified from Shim (2012) and was revised with the help of the Associate Dean for Accreditation, the Dean of the College of Education, and the Head of the EPP unit/Deputy Provost. The questionnaire remained open for three weeks to allow for the time between the end of one semester and the

beginning of the summer term. Data were analyzed for frequencies, percentages, and means.

Post hoc, the researchers used qualitative in-depth interviews to confirm and disconfirm findings obtained through the questionnaire. A purposive selection of four faculty members and two administrators from Midwest University were identified and invited to participate in the semi-structured interviews. The overarching questions used to lead the interviews were: What are your perceptions of a national accreditation process? What are the benefits and drawbacks to national accreditation? How are the outcomes of the national accreditation process used or not used by your institution? What investment is required to move forward toward national accreditation and who is involved in that decision? and What are the barriers your institution faces in proceeding with national accreditation?

Findings of the Study

A survey to determine faculty perceptions regarding accreditation was sent to 111 members of the Educator Preparation Provider unit. The return rate on the questionnaire was 54% ($n = 60$). This was lower than anticipated but this might be because faculty were asked to participate at the end of the spring semester and beginning of the summer session. Summer session teaching was not required, so faculty may not have been active on their campus email to receive the invitation. However, 60 respondents did represent more than half of the active faculty in the EPP unit. Table 1 provides demographic information.

Table 1. Demographics for the Study

Rank	Question Frequencies
Professor	22
Associate Professor	9
Assistant Professor	7
Clinical Faculty (all ranks)	3
Instructor (all ranks)	17
Administrator	2
Primary Program Level for Faculty Respondent	
Initial program with DESE certification	37
Initial program without DESE certification	4
Advanced program with DESE certification	21
Advanced program without DESE certification	9

It was interesting to note that 52% of the respondents were senior faculty members (full and associate professors holding tenure). Generally, most program coordinators at this institution are senior faculty who also have the major responsibilities for writing their respective professional organization accreditation folios. The main programs/majors in the EPP were accredited education programs (e.g. teacher education, administration, counselor) through the state department. However, a few programs (e.g. Bachelor's in Child and Family Development, Master's in Student Affairs) received accreditation through other national organizations but were housed in the College of Education and were considered in the EPP.

Faculty Perceptions of Participation in Accreditation

The purpose of this study was to determine faculty perceptions of their university's participation in the national accreditation process related to the following issues: benefits and drawbacks to national accreditation, how outcomes of the national accreditation process are used or not used by the institution, the investment required to move toward national accreditation and who is involved in the decision to pursue accreditation, and the barriers in proceeding with national accreditation.

Benefits

Table 2 illustrates the faculty's rudimentary beliefs about national accreditation. While the state requirements are an absolute for the institution to maintain for students to obtain state licensure, as an educational unit and university, they also desired to maintain their national accreditation through the newly organized Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). Consequently, faculty were instructed to answer the questionnaire based on their experiences or perceptions of the accreditation through CAEP. The scale used was SD = strongly disagree (1), D = Disagree (2), A = agree (3), and SA = strongly agree (4).

Table 2. Frequencies for Faculty Beliefs about National Accreditation

Question	SD	D	A	SA	M
National accreditation enhances University's status and prestige.	6	7	22	21	3.34
National accreditation enhances individual program's status and prestige.	7	7	22	20	2.98
National accreditation is important to attract quality faculty.	9	11	18	18	2.80
National accreditation is important to attract quality students.	9	14	20	13	2.66
National accreditation increases opportunities for federal funding or grants.	5	10	26	14	2.89
National accreditation assures program to be more rigorous in meeting their professional standards.	12	11	22	11	2.57
National accreditation supports an environment of collaboration across the unit.	8	18	24	6	2.50
The accrediting organization (e.g. CAEP) is a valid institution for evaluating teacher education.	5	15	27	7	2.67
DESE (state accreditation) alone is sufficient for ensuring quality programs.	8	25	10	12	2.47

In reviewing the responses for perceived benefits of national accreditation, the strongest responses were *enhanced status and prestige for the university* (77%) and *enhanced status and prestige for individual programs* (75%), followed by 73% who believe national accreditation

increases the opportunity to obtain funding. Well over half of the faculty believe it entices a higher quality of faculty (64%) and students (59%), assures rigor in programs through shared standards (59%), and that CAEP is a valid accreditor for evaluating education programs (63%). Also, 60% indicated that seeking only state (DESE) accreditation was not sufficient for ensuring quality programs, and faculty were fairly split in their opinions about how accreditation supports an environment of collaboration (54%).

Qualitative comments made in the open-ended comments at the end of the questionnaire revealed faculty supported accreditation; for example, two responses were “accreditation can be very useful” and “national accreditation is desirable.” However, they repeatedly noted that “national and state standards [are constantly] shifting arbitrarily” causing “program faculty, administrators and staff [to work] constantly in reactive mode to change components of the program to try to meet multiple (and often conflicting) requirements—especially when DESE and national standards are not aligned.”

Table 3 presents the faculty perceptions of the cost/benefit for faculty and administrative staff in applying for national accreditation. The scale used was SD = strongly disagree (1), D = Disagree (2), A = agree (3), and SA = strongly agree (4).

Table 3. Faculty Perceptions of Cost/Benefit from National Accreditation

Question	SD	D	A	SA	M
The benefits of national accreditation for faculty outweigh the costs of the accreditation process.	13	12	19	10	2.48
The benefits of national accreditation for administrative staff outweigh the costs of the accreditation process.	15	12	20	6	2.32

Faculty were fairly evenly split about whether the benefits of national accreditation outweigh the costs for faculty and administrative staff. Comments from faculty revealed more negative feedback: “Rather than attracting top faculty, the time and energy of the accreditation process has actually resulted in excellent faculty leaving” and “Workload has been added to with no compensation. Overall, I do not see that the benefits and results justify the costs.” Additionally, several respondents indicated “students don’t seem to be aware of what national accreditation means to them.”

Drawbacks

While faculty opinions were fairly evenly split concerning most national accreditation issues, a strong majority perceive a big drawback to national accreditation is the toll it takes on the faculty in terms of their time and stress levels. Table 4 presents the summary data related to faculty perceptions of the investment in national accreditation. The scale used was VL = very low (1), L = low (2), M = moderate (3), and H = high (4).

Table 4. Faculty Perceptions of Investment in National Accreditation

Question	VL	L	M	H	Mean
The monetary costs of national accreditation are	0	1	24	29	3.52
The time investment in national accreditation by faculty	1	1	13	41	3.68
The time investment in national accreditation by administrators	1	2	19	32	3.52
The resources (e.g. technology, staff) needed for national accreditation	0	0	21	34	3.62
The impact on faculty stress level	1	0	16	39	3.67
My level of responsibility in the national accreditation process	4	6	25	21	3.13
My level of involvement in the national accreditation process	4	8	27	16	3.00

According to the faculty responses, 98% of the faculty believe the monetary costs for national accreditation were moderate (44%) to high (55%). The highest costs seemed to be in terms of faculty time (73% reported high impact) and amount of stress (70% reported high impact), which would indicate that the institution needs to be cognizant of the efficiency of systems in place to support accreditation. This seemed to be echoed in the comment section of the survey. Written statements from faculty revealed the following: “Accreditation can be very useful if conducted properly. But, CAEP demands too much for what a unit will receive” and “The NCATE accreditation process has not been closely tied to the DESE accreditation process or the SPA [Specialty Professional Association] recognition process. This results in program faculty, administrators, and staff constantly working in reactive mode to change components of the program to try to meet multiple and often conflicting requirements.”

One faculty comment seemed to be a theme with others as well: “I understand the need to ensure that universities are accredited, but it also seems to be a series of unnecessary hoops that consume faculty time, which could be spent on other, more productive activities, like teaching and research.” This idea that accreditation work takes time away from what faculty were hired to do was illustrated by this comment:

The drawback is that people who are involved in the process are so overworked that little else can be accomplished. For example, sometimes the efforts distract from research agendas and faculty have trouble getting tenure or promotion, and the extensive writing for accreditation is not always valued in promotion criteria. Further, many of my colleagues are so burned out by the extensive commitment of time for meetings and writing teams that it makes faculty want to just quit (and some of the “best” faculty have disengaged because of the workload). I think that 80% of what gets discussed in committee meetings is involved in accreditation discussion. I cannot be as good of a teacher as I know how to be because my time is dominated by accreditation stuff (so I am not preparing future teachers as well because of a process that is intended to enhance the preparation of teachers.)

This theme is clear throughout the faculty survey and interviews. Faculty workload is a major drawback to national accreditation, yet that does not seem to be realized by the administration making the decision to apply for accreditation.

How Outcomes are Used or Not Used

Of the six faculty who were interviewed, only one seemed to have a positive response about how the outcomes are used by the university: “The outcomes are used to drive our instruction at the university, college, department, program, and classroom levels.” The others were not so positive. One person said, “I am not sure they are really used that much except to put the logo on the website and advertise national accreditation.” Another said, “Over the years I have been involved in accreditation, I have primarily seen all the hard work dropped and ignored after the accreditation is over. Then you must start all over again.” However, this person does believe “individual programs may use what they have learned more than unit wide changes.” This latter sentiment seems to be the same thinking as the faculty member who said “When weaknesses are identified, the institution does try to make adjustments. But many times, those adjustments are superficial (only having an appearance of addressing improvement), and many times the effort doesn’t really start until the next accrediting visit is just around the corner. Personally and collectively, my faculty colleagues focus on the issues that an accreditation process addresses (we would do it anyway), but now we are distracted with the *game* of documenting and verifying and that is very burdensome.”

Investment Required and who is Involved in the Decision

Faculty seemed to be aware of the investment that is required of the university. One faculty member stated in the interview that “time investment is huge on the part of the university as a whole and as individual faculty members.” Another said the investment includes “funding for the national organization, travel expenses, conference attendance, digital tool to manage data, personnel to collect and manage data (additional expense for students). Beyond cost is the time factor in serving on committees, writing reports, changing course requirements—stress—basically time that is not funded or compensated.”

While faculty members who were interviewed did not seem to be certain who made the decision whether to apply for national accreditation, they had an idea. One faculty member said, “I would assume that the national accreditation process decisions are made at the president and provost levels of the university” and another said, “At our institution, the Board of Governors has made this decision.” A third person said, “it seems to have been decided by upper administration (and ultimately by the board of governors).” What faculty did know for certain, as one member said, is that “Faculty are not involved in those decisions, to my knowledge.” Another said, “I don’t think the faculty have been asked if it is something we should consider doing. And I also don’t think that the upper administration or governors are aware of the workload or morale impacts: LOTS of time, intellectual energy, money, resources, workload, faculty discouragement, faculty efficiency is committed.”

Barriers in proceeding

One faculty member interviewed seemed to sum up the barriers for applying for national accreditation: “Support, knowledge, and money.” Another said, “With increasing budget cuts at the state level, at this time, the greatest barrier appears to be financial. However, because so much faculty time is consumed as well, another barrier is the amount of man power it takes to get through the accreditation process.” Another faculty member viewed the accreditation agencies’ requirements as a barrier: “the viewpoint of accrediting agencies that one size fits all and all universities must look alike seems to defeat their own stance on acceptance of diversity.” Another seemed to take this view as well:

It seems to have become so complicated with cumbersome (and expensive) data collection software, that it is difficult to keep up with what should even be happening with the process. I think people become frustrated because of the confusion involved in the process. I wish the process was more like the SPA that is used for our field (the requirements are pretty straightforward). I also wish that we could just use the state review process. It is extensive enough to accomplish the intent of accreditation. Further, I don’t think it really matters to students, personally or professionally, if there is CAEP accreditation associated with their university teacher education program. If I was making the decision, I would not seek it, so I suppose faculty buy-in is a barrier (but we are generally cooperative and work on it anyway when we are told we are going to do it).

Faculty support is definitely a barrier from these faculty members’ perspectives. One faculty member said, “the biggest barrier has been to create a culture of assessment and faculty and staff being supported in the process.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the faculty participants viewed national accreditation as a benefit in terms of enhanced status and prestige for both the university and individual programs and increased opportunities to entice a higher quality of students, faculty, and funding. However, the faculty raised more questions and concerns regarding accreditation. Among the most critical issues were the role national accreditation plays in sustaining rigor in programs and the degree accreditation supports an environment of collaboration. Finally, the greatest worry was costs—financial, time, and resources. Consistently, faculty voiced concern about the time and stress a national accreditation review costs faculty. Not only did they feel they had little voice in the decision to pursue national accreditation, but their participation was *grossly unvalued*.

Accreditation has become a culture of continuous improvement through standards-based, data-driven decisions (CAEP, 2015; Head & Johnson, 2011), which takes an enormous effort on the part of faculty. This translates into aligning curriculum and instruction with the shared standards, data collection, and analyses of programmatic as well as unit-wide data. It is also important to understand that, for some programs, the alignment of their professional organizations’ standards and accreditation demands and those of the national and/or state accrediting bodies do not closely match. This adds an intense amount of work to faculty loads, and many have to write two accreditation reports. This work is in addition to their required teaching, research, and other service loads.

Lessons learned through this study led the team to identify four recommendations to

Midwest University and others. These may seem obvious, but they are often overlooked or underestimated. Institutions must recognize the impact these recommendations can have on the overall accreditation success and plan for them in advance.

First, the decision to pursue a national accreditation should include faculty and other key stakeholders. National accreditation is typically an optional process; consequently, those involved must *buy in* to the commitment or resistance can occur. According to Bucalos (2014), faculty morale may also improve as they take a more vested interest or “ownership” in accreditation (p. 5). Faculty may fail to attend meetings, essential data may be entered slowly, or writing may be delayed are examples of actions that can be problematic for the accreditation process. Conversely, support can be stronger if faculty know the facts and have answers to their questions before beginning the journey. Bucalos contends faculty support can ultimately make or break the process.

Secondly, personnel need to be appreciated for their intensive work. For example, we found at Midwest University, faculty stated that some departments did not consider accreditation work as *scholarly*. The reality is that developing high quality assessment tools, collecting valid data, analyzing outcomes and using it to make systemic program changes is research work at its core. Dismissing or under valuing the work required for accreditation undermines faculty willingness to participate. Faculty confided that institutions can demonstrate appreciation by allowing faculty to do the following: 1) include accreditation work as part of their scholarship or tenure/promotion materials with appropriate credit, 2) receive varying teaching loads commensurate with their assigned accreditation work, or 3) receive incentive pay for work beyond the scope of their regular work loads.

Third, institutions need to allocate adequate resources for the accreditation process. While this seems common sense, the allocated monetary, time, and human resources can be underestimated. Financial support extends beyond the systems, annual dues, and accreditation team visits (e.g. Midwest University estimated annual dues are \$5000, according to the CAEP website). If faculty are expected to complete extra assignments while maintaining high quality work in their regular workload, remuneration is recommended, or additional computers/software/supplies may be required to complete the work. Time is a resource repeatedly referenced in our study. CAEP (2015) states accreditation reviews are conducted every 7-10 years, and culminating in 3 cycles of data required in the formal review process. A university team can spend more than 3 years preparing, collecting, and reporting the required data and analyses for its individual self-review report. Given the extensive length of time involved for the process, “the time that accreditation review takes [is] less and less acceptable” (Eaton, 2012, p. 11). At the individual level, program faculty spend hours preparing for accreditation—time beyond normal expectations. Another critical resource is personnel. Institutions may need to hire additional faculty to offset the additional load of key professors with accreditation responsibilities. New staff positions may be needed as well. For example, at Midwest University, computer technicians were hired to help with the data storage and retrieval. Providing adequate resources for an accreditation review can help relieve the added stress and work, so it is essential for success.

Lastly and ultimately, accreditation is designed as a form of self-review with peer judgment leading to *continuous* improvement of programs (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). Ideally, as faculty evaluate the *how* and *why* in their educator preparation, they make changes and improvements that should lead to better-prepared teachers. The review process assists faculty in collaborating with their colleagues in making these systemic changes resulting in stronger outcomes. Theoretically, the process is cyclical and on-going. In reality, institutions often work in over-drive for two-three years getting the report completed, and then are so exhausted, they are satisfied with resting on

those unique changes until the next review process. Recommendations for institutional changes or transformations often fall by the wayside after accreditation is awarded. This approach to accreditation can result in negative attitudes. Faculty can become disenfranchised with a lengthy process. It is incumbent for the University to value the lessons learned through the review process and use those as a foundation for continued planning and lasting results.

Deciding to pursue a national accreditation is an important decision for a university to make. Understanding faculty perceptions of the accreditation process and the impact on their institution and programs is essential in moving to a successful review. The findings of this study suggest Midwest University is on the right path pursuing CAEP accreditation, but it would benefit them to consider the recommendations discussed. Clarification of faculty support in the decision, the addition of last minute resources to relieve stress, a commitment to moving forward with changes identified in the review process, and a healthy respect for the work accomplished can lead to a positive outcome for this University.

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William Cooper completed the MSED in Education from Missouri State University as used part of the data from the study as his final thesis. He continues to be involved in educational issues in the community.