

Development of an Accreditation Matrix for Institutions of Higher Education

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Abstract

Accreditation is the process in which quality assurance reviews of higher education institutions—two-year and four-year colleges, universities, and graduate education programs—are performed to enable such institutions to implement improvement measures where and when necessary to effectively deliver quality educational service to their students. Universities and colleges rely on the accreditation process to ensure internal and external constituencies of the quality of educational programs offered and the caliber of their institutional capacity. This study examined the organizational effectiveness models currently used to meet accreditation guidelines and considered the experiences of one regionally accredited college as it prepared and participated in an accreditation review. Components of three organizational effectiveness models were used to assess how the institution applied these theoretical constructs in preparation for the accreditation visit. The research objective was “to explore the accreditation self-study process from the perspectives of Organizational Effectiveness.” The study developed and utilized a matrix composed of three organizational effectiveness models—the Goal, Competing Values Framework, and Baldrige—to measure the effectiveness of the college as it embarked upon its reaffirmation of accreditation. This study matched selected organizational effectiveness models used to meet each standard for accreditation and developed a four-dimensional accreditation matrix used to explore the accreditation self-study process from the perspectives of organizational effectiveness.

Introduction

In the United States, accreditation is critical for an institution of higher education to receive federal or state assistance (Abel & Fernandez, 2005; Eaton, 2009a, 2009c). Accreditation provides institutions with access to valuable operational resources that essentially enables it to operate. Most higher education institutions would perish financially if their access to federal lending programs were discontinued; it can be inferred that institutions place value on the accreditation process for operational stability.

Accreditation and its Importance

Accreditation is the process in which quality assurance reviews of higher education institutions—two-year and four-year colleges, universities, and graduate education programs—are performed to enable such institutions to implement improvement measures where and when necessary to deliver effectively quality educational service to their students. Universities and colleges rely on the accreditation process to ensure internal and external constituencies of the

quality of educational programs offered and the caliber of their institutional capacity.

The external quality reviews carried out in America are conducted by private, nonprofit accrediting organizations that stand independent of government programs. As Eaton (2009a) noted, the nation's accrediting structure reflects the nature of American higher education insofar as they are both "decentralized and complex" (p. 1) systems, covering both degree and non-degree programs. Eaton cited a 2008 report by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that stated that these institutions account for approximately \$375 billion per year in expenditures, employ around 3.37 million full- and part-time faculty and staff, and serve more than 17.7 million students. Given the wide array of higher education institutions, strikingly there are only about 80 "recognized institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations" (Eaton, 2009a, p. 2), employing about 740 paid and part-time staff, operating in the U.S. However, the staff numbers enhance by approximately 18,000 volunteers who work with the accrediting organizations.

According to Eaton (2009c) the tenets underpinning accreditation provide an excellent starting point for the merits of the accreditation process as a whole, as well as a framework for assessing specific accreditation strategies embarked on by institutions:

- Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for academic quality; colleges and universities are the leaders and the key sources of authority in academic matters.
- Institutional mission is central to judgments of academic quality.
- Institutional autonomy is essential to sustaining and enhancing academic quality.
- Academic freedom flourishes in an environment of academic leadership of institutions.
- The higher education enterprise and our society thrive on decentralization and diversity of institutional purpose and mission. (Eaton, 2009b, p. 3)

Accreditation provides internal and external constituencies with assurances of quality; yet in recent years, a surprisingly increasing number of these institutions receive citations—or sanctions. For instance, under the auspices of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Junior College (Hoffman & Wallach, 2008), the regional accrediting agency for colleges based in California, Hawaii, and the Pacific Islands, 22 sanctions were issued to institutions in 2009. Many of these sanctions fall into only a few operational or academic areas (Hoffman & Wallach, 2008). The most common reason for these is not conducting program reviews. Another major cause for sanctions is for not integrating organizational planning or using assessment results, and not repairing or correcting institutional deficiencies or problems with governing boards.

The sanctions such colleges receive for noncompliance of accreditation standards can significantly impact or limit the institutions from offering new degree programs, further expansion of campus locations, and a host of other operational restrictions. For instance, warnings or probation for higher education institutions can result in further sanctions until the accreditation matters have been resolved. Furthermore, these sanctions are public relations nightmares, as the scrutiny and panic from the general public as well as students, staff, and faculty undermining colleges' can be overwhelmingly negative experiences for the reputations of these institutions. Finally, if accreditation sanctions manifest without being corrected, they can

lead to revocation of accreditation, which is ultimately the end of an institution.

How can institutions develop organizational effectiveness processes to insure accreditors of the quality of programs and services? Knowing these processes can help institutions avoid such citations and meet accreditation eligibility requirements.

Study Design and Methodology

The study examined the organizational effectiveness models used to meet accreditation guidelines and considered the experiences of one regionally accredited college as it prepared and participated in an accreditation review. Using a case study design, components of three organizational effectiveness models were used to assess how the institution applied these theoretical constructs in preparation for the accreditation visit. The research objective was “to explore the accreditation self-study process from the perspectives of Organizational Effectiveness.”

The institution of focus was a two-year nonprofit institution located in California and offers programs primarily oriented to the marine technology and commercial diving sectors. The institution was under the tutelage of its current accreditors (WASC) since 1973; its enrollment was approximately 300 students across the six academic degree-certificate programs. The institution employed eight full-time faculty, 26 part-time adjunct faculty, five administrators, and 11 full-time staff members. The institution had a 40-year history in marine technology; it recently expanded its programs to include allied health and homeland security.

The research provided a detailed analysis of a review of the evidence gathered to meet the objectives of an accreditation self-study. Using the accreditation standards of a regionally accredited institution, this study utilized a matrix using three organizational effectiveness models (the Goal, Competing Values Framework, and Baldrige) to measure the college or university embarking upon its reaffirmation of accreditation. This study matched the selected organizational effectiveness models used to meet each standard for accreditation. This case study illustrated the results using such organizational effectiveness models to prepare for an accreditation visit.

The purpose of the study was to provide a case study of the organizational effectiveness models utilized to help prepare an institution for an accreditation visit. The research objective was to explore the organizational effectiveness factors that most influenced the self-study process. The study was conducted using case study methodology along with an assessment matrix to gauge the preparedness of the institution. The primary purpose of the study was to utilize the organizational effectiveness matrix as an assessment tool in alignment with the standards for accreditation. Next, samples of the college’s historical accreditation data were reviewed using the matrix. Last, the study concluded with a few interviews of leaders of institutions that recently embarked upon their own reaffirmation of accreditation visit. These interviews allowed the institutional leaders to assess the value of the matrix for future accreditation visits.

The case study was conducted using two major data sources. Primary data consisted of the assessment matrix that was developed around three organizational effectiveness models, which were then codified according to each of the WASC Standards for Accreditation. The matrix was

validated by incorporating the matrix with a previously submitted document to the accreditation agency along with the identification of the evidentiary materials that were provided. The secondary data source consisted of other institutional leaders of higher education institutions who were interviewed and asked to review and assess the matrix for possible applicability to their organizations. The processes provided qualitative assessments as evidence for validity in an accreditation visit.

Findings and Conclusions

The major outcome of this study was the development of an accreditation matrix in response to the intended objective: To explore the accreditation self-study process from the perspectives of organizational effectiveness. Following the use of the matrix, a few institutional leaders were interviewed as to their perceptions regarding the value of the matrix.

The Accreditation Matrix

The matrix was organized into four sections: institutional effectiveness and mission, student learning, resources, and leadership and governance. WASC standards and two organizational effectiveness models were used to guide the matrix development. The data revealed that the organizational effectiveness model correlates with the WASC Standards of Accreditation. Baldrige (50%) and the Goal model (43%) weighed heavily in the institutional effectiveness section, as the Standards for Accreditation states that institutions are expected to demonstrate clear operations that connects to the institutional mission. The questions from the institutional effectiveness section included questions aligned with the Goal model such as Section A.1: “The institution establishes student learning programs and services aligned with its purposes, its character, and its student population” (Anonymous, 2009, p. 39) and Section A.2: “The mission statement is approved by the governing board and published” (Anonymous, 2009, p. 84). These questions are associated with the Goal model, as they reference clear, concise directives for actions and assessments of the results. The majority of the additional items in the institutional effectiveness section were also straightforward, which may lead to them being with the Goal model.

Other questions from the institutional effectiveness section were associated with Baldrige because of the need for continuous review. The correlation with the Baldrige is because accrediting agencies expect that the mission inside higher education institutions is an inclusive process with consistent discussions and assessments conducted by each member of a higher education community. For example, using the institutional effectiveness section, Section A. 3 and Section A. 4 state, “Using the institution’s governance and decision-making processes, the institution reviews its mission statement on a regular basis and revises it as necessary” (Anonymous, 2009, p. 40) and “The institution’s mission is central to institutional planning and decision making” (Anonymous, 2009, p. 41). These questions are associated with the Baldrige model because the statements within the context of the accreditation guidelines refer to reviewing the mission statement on a “regular basis” (Anonymous, 2009, p. 14) which denotes a continuous review of the accreditation item. Additionally, the statement in guideline A4 references a need to review the institutional planning and decision so that it also continues to be in alignment with the mission. This statement denotes that all decision making and planning are central to the mission, which means that it must also be evaluated regularly. Both of these

statements that reference continuous reviews are associated with the Baldrige model in the matrix. Evidence gathered for these sections could include copies of meeting minutes and notes in which the institutional mission is regularly discussed, as well as board of trustees minutes in which the mission is also reviewed.

The student learning section was evaluated. The Goal model (48%) and Baldrige (40%) scored heavily. In reference to the Goal model, guidelines such as the one in Section A.1.B., which states, “The institution utilizes delivery systems and modes of instruction compatible with the objectives of the curriculum and appropriate to the current and future needs of its students” (Anonymous, 2009, p. 29). This statement alludes to clear, concise directives for reporting progress and outcomes which associates with the Goal model. In reference to the Baldrige model, guidelines such as the Section A.2.A, which states, “The institution uses established procedures to design, identify learning outcomes for, approve, administer, deliver, and evaluate courses and programs. The institution recognizes the central role of its faculty for establishing quality and improving instructional courses and programs” (Anonymous, 2009, p. 57). Once again, the statement that references established procedures and improving instructional courses and programs alludes to the need for continuous review in order to substantiate meeting the accreditation guidelines. Further accreditation guidelines within the student learning section clearly denote a balance between the goal and Baldrige models.

The resources section greatly utilized the Competing Values Framework (41%) and the Baldrige model (41%). The competing values framework, which requires maintaining a fair balance of resources throughout an institution, are used as reference points of the accreditation expectations. In the competing values framework, the allocation of resources throughout an institution that involves a balance among, academics, student services, and the administration of a higher education institution is the focus. To illustrate this point, Section 3.A.2 references (Anonymous, 2009):

The institution maintains a sufficient number of qualified faculty with full-time responsibility to the institution. The institution has a sufficient number of staff and administrators with appropriate preparation and experience to provide the administrative services necessary to support the institution’s mission and purposes. (p. 121)

This statement largely resonates with the term sufficient number of qualified faculty, which alludes to the need to maintain an adequate ratio of resources in this section. Obviously, these resources need to be balanced against other institutional resources, which is why the competing values framework was chosen. The references to the Baldrige model were made because of the continuous need to review resources. Accreditation guidelines such as Section A.1.B., which states (Anonymous, 2009):

The institution assures the effectiveness of its human resources by evaluating all personnel systematically and at stated intervals. The institution establishes written criteria for evaluating all personnel, including performance of assigned duties and participation in institutional responsibilities and other activities appropriate to their expertise. Evaluation processes seek to assess effectiveness of personnel and encourage improvement. Actions taken following evaluations are formal, timely, and documented. (p. 43)

The statements within the accreditation guideline, evaluating all personnel systematically and at stated intervals and actions taken for evaluation...timely denotes the need for continuous of review of personnel but also of the processes to determine effectiveness. Evidence gathered in this section could be copies of previously articulated personnel evaluations and a written statement about the processes and timelines for evaluation.

The leadership and governance section largely utilized the Goal model (53%) because of the straightforward mandate for specific deliverables. For example, the accreditation guidelines found in Section 4.A.2 (Anonymous, 2009) states:

The institution establishes and implements a written policy providing for faculty, staff, administrator, and student participation in decision-making processes. The policy specifies the manner in which individuals bring forward ideas from their constituencies and work together on appropriate policy, planning, and special-purpose bodies. (p. 129)

The mandates within this example are straightforward in nature, as they are clear guidelines for the deliverable of a written policy providing for faculty, staff, administrator, and student participation in decision making, which clearly means that the Goal model is used in meeting the objective. Evidence gathered for this straightforward item would be a copy of the written policy that has also been ratified by appropriate decision makers such as the faculty council and board of trustees.

Conclusions

The findings from the study revealed that there is a significant value in the creation of an organizational effectiveness matrix. The study substantiated that there is significant value in incorporating several organizational effectiveness models as opposed to a single model. The study determined an additional benefit of using the organizational effectiveness models fostered greater communication with the internal institutional stakeholders who are tasked to have oversight of meeting the accreditation objectives. Last, the matrix used in the study was determined to provide a readily accessible snapshot of the accreditation standards.

Conclusion 1: Value of several organizational effectiveness models.

The study revealed that institutions' answers in the Standards for Accreditation for the section titled Institutional Mission used the Baldrige and Goal models, the student learning section in the Standard for Accreditation manual used Baldrige, and the resources section in the Standard for Accreditation had most significance in the Competing Values Framework. These three models appeared also to assist each interviewee to understand the expectations from the Standards for Accreditation. Using the various organizational effectiveness models in a combined manner was most instrumental in preparing the case study institution and those interviewed also indicated that it has a major significance. The finding from this perspective also could add to the academic body of knowledge by demonstrating that the integration of several organizational effectiveness models in this manner greatly benefits an institution's performance in preparing for an accreditation visit and self-study.

Conclusion 2: Dialogue created from the matrix.

Findings revealed that significant benefits can be generated from dialogue among staff and faculty about the various standards for accreditation using the organizational effectiveness models. The presidents interviewed stated that the largest benefit of using a matrix is that it allows college personnel to communicate to form necessary dialogue about the accreditation process. The benefits of generating dialogue means that, as one president stated, “College staff and faculty understand the nature of the Standards for Accreditation as opposed to merely just generating dialogue that is not comprehended” (personal communication, December 7, 2010). The dialogue generated from the conversations about accreditation and the organizational effectiveness models was an unforeseen benefit to the accreditation study.

This dialogue that can be generated within an organization from the use of this study also supports Weiner (2009) by creating a “culture of assessment” (p. 28). The study could be beneficial in helping an institution, as Weiner states, to begin using common assessment language so that the institutional dialogue includes open discussions about how the institution plans to perform in key areas related to the assessment. The discussion from such dialogue provides an invaluable asset to higher education institutions. The study also revealed through the interviews with other college leaders that significant benefits can be realized from the increased dialogue. Using such a matrix and the elements of organizational effectiveness can, first, articulate the standards for accreditation and then, second, generate dialogue about the level of evidence required to maintain such institutions. The dialogue that can be generated from the matrix that incorporates the various organizational effectiveness models can greatly enhance an institution’s chance of a successful accreditation visit.

Conclusion 3: Overwhelming emphasis on Baldrige.

An additional conclusion relevant to this matrix and the accreditation expectations was that those who wish to apply the principles of organizational effectiveness by using this or any other matrix should be aware that the overarching expectation from accrediting organizational members was that many of the accreditation guidelines need to be continuously reviewed, which alludes to the Baldrige model. In this event, it should be generally understood by anyone using the matrix that continuous and regular review of the accreditation standards by all institutional stakeholders is expected and warranted in order to meet the guidelines—regardless of whether the organizational effectiveness model states Baldrige or any other model.

As Leist et al. (2004) states that the Baldrige model underscores important areas of assessment that include the learner, systems, faculty, staff, and partners in order to assess a higher education institution. Many of the standards in this section were written from the perspective of Baldrige. As Anderson (1997) and Faulkner (2002) noted in their studies of higher education institutions using the Baldrige model as a tool for gauging their institution’s performance, the Baldrige model provides benefits in that it underscores the importance of regular reviews of key milestones and the value of maintaining and assessing stakeholder relationships. These are all valuable traits to be used as important elements in this study. The information from the study, furthermore, provides an invaluable level of information to the academic community, as Baldrige is essential to the organizational effectiveness process, but there are significant advantages from

utilizing other models in conjunction with Baldrige, such as the Competing Values Framework and Goal model that were used in this study. Table 9 provides an overview of the accreditation matrix applied to the WASC Standards for Accreditation.

Implications and Recommendations

The study revealed that there was a clear connection to an institution's effectiveness when applied in this manner. The study also demonstrated that there was tremendous value in deciphering each written articulated standard for accreditation in a manner that provides clarity and comprehension of the standards of accreditation. As a college president interviewed stated after reviewing the matrix, "The dialogue generated from getting the faculty, administrators, staff, and community representatives to view each item from the perspective of the accreditor is an invaluable commodity to an institution's process in preparing for a visit." (personal communication, December 3, 2010)

The matrix and organizational effectiveness model also demonstrated that there is a need for more scholarly based organizational effectiveness tools applied within the sphere of higher education. The matrix, along with the application of the organizational effectiveness tools, seemed especially beneficial to the accreditation process. The presidents who reviewed the matrix thought that there was overwhelming support for such a model that used organizational effectiveness in helping to prepare an institution for a visit.

Another recommendation is to get more perspectives of the accreditation matrix by having other institutional leaders and those tasked to use the matrix in an accrediting visit to provide feedback on the viability of the tool. These views could be extremely helpful in implementing the matrix in additional higher education environments. Also, it would be recommended to utilize the matrix over a longer period of time in an organization.

A further implication involves external reviews and assessments. The accreditation expectations at times far surpass what is written in the standards. As such, it is highly recommended to retain an external consultant or advisor who has participated in a successful accreditation visit by such agencies within the last 24 months. Most notably, the consultant should have direct experience with the particular agency to provide the institutional leadership with the intricate and often unwritten expectations of such agencies. The information the consultant provides can help participants understand the requirements accrediting agencies are maintaining as well as any specific plans such as operational plans connected with budget allocations for areas such as student services and academics. This information, which is typically available by way of program reviews for most institutions familiar with other sectors of WASC or other accrediting agencies, has been a requirement for providing direct plans that connect with student classroom evaluation historical data, budgets for any operational or institutional changes, and resources that have been acquired as a result of the reviews of such information.

There was tremendous value added from the study, as it provides a rarely seen perspective of the accreditation process from the perspective of the president of a higher education institution. Largely because of the size of the case study institution, the president had a pronounced role in helping the organization to gather key documents and information to prepare for the

accreditation visit. The perspective from a person who served as the primary overseer of an institution and who led the endeavor of preparing the institution for the visit allowed for a unique observation as a participant observer. The combined roles of leading an institution while being a primary catalyst in preparing for the visit allowed insight into the rationale for organizing an institution to meet the compliance standards of the accrediting agency from the perspective of that office.

An additional element was added by the interviewed presidents who offered perspectives on the usefulness of an accreditation matrix. Many of those presidents responses to whether a matrix would be utilized spoke to complexity of implementing such as a tool, as it may offer minor consternation from the faculty or operating units and it could have some negative ramifications. This level of insight was beneficial if someone were to attempt to implement such a tool or matrix. These points can be avoided while implementing such a matrix inside a higher education institution.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from the study suggest some important options for future research into the relationship of organizational effectiveness and an accreditation visit. These recommendations for future research are based on the literature and observations. First, is the replication of this study with a substantially longer period for preparation. A significant detriment to this study was the limited amount of time to prepare the institution for the accreditation visit. Accreditation and, most especially, the reaffirmation of accreditation process is about the longevity of an institution's performance. This study should be replicated in an institution within a few years of the accreditation visit to gauge its performance over a longer period of time. Longitudinal implementation of the organizational effectiveness models will allow the institutional leadership to have in place the accreditation expectations necessary for the institutional leadership to demonstrate compliance.

A second recommendation for further research would be to replicate this study in multiple settings and higher education cultures. The college reviewed in the case study was a nontraditional institution within the marine technology industry, which largely caters to adult learners at the community college level. Although the study did not utilize or focus on the learner as a primary focus, there is a recommendation for utilizing future research studies on a more traditional higher education institution.

Last, the exploration of other organizational effectiveness methodologies in higher education settings could contribute to a better understanding of what theories and models best fit the environment. Although it was found that there is significant use of the models for organizational effectiveness as applied to this particular study, it is recommended that other organizational effectiveness models be utilized on similar studies to determine their validity as well. Additional organizational effectiveness can be used to gauge a higher education institution's preparedness, which can be either applied using a single organizational effectiveness model or a collection of models, as demonstrated by this study.

The interviewed presidents also revealed that there was tremendous value in using the Baldrige model in an accreditation review. This was largely a result of the Baldrige model that emphasizes

continuous review of organizational processes, which also correlates largely with the expectations from most accrediting agencies. However, another recommendation is to redesign the matrix so that the focus is not only on the various organizational effectiveness models used, but more specifically, what elements or factors of the various accreditation criteria identify most specifically. For example, it is not only useful to identify an accreditation item as being associated with the Baldrige model, but to delve deeper to ascertain what elements of the accreditation criteria make it Baldrige and why they would add great value in gaining consensus on the accreditation item and increase the learning or understanding by those who are participating in the accreditation process.

Concluding Remarks

This study evaluated the impact of organizational effectiveness in preparing an institution for an accreditation visit. The study confirmed that there is a direct correlation with utilization of the methodologies selected for review in the organizational effectiveness study to improve organizational performance. The findings from the study demonstrated a significant need for various accreditation models utilized, but also demonstrated a significant influence from the Baldrige model as a result of the accreditation expectations for continuous review of the standards for accreditation.

The findings from the study confirm that applying these organizational effectiveness models can have a positive impact on the institution's preparedness for the accreditation visit. It is hoped that this study provides other higher education professionals with a roadmap and guide for preparing for an accreditation visit. By using the tools and techniques outlined here, higher education institutions can improve the performance of their institutions, thereby, increasing the learning students experience and further improving the educational process.

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