Using the Internet for an Accreditation Self-Study Portfolio

By Dr. Timothy R. Obermier

Peer-Refereed Article

KEYWORD SEARCH

Administration
Accreditation
Higher Education
Internet
NAIT
Leadership

Using the Internet for an Accreditation Self-Study Portfolio

By Dr. Timothy R. Obermier

Dr. Tim Obermier is an Associate Professor of Telecommunications Management in the Industrial Technology Department at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. He developed an online accreditation self-study through which UNK sought and received National Association of Industrial Technology Accreditation, the first university to receive NAIT Technology Accreditation using an online self-study. Dr. Obermier teaches courses in telecommunications law and has applied the preceptorial concept to technical courses in telecommunications management. Dr. Obermier received the Ph.D. from Colorado State University in Vocational Education with an emphasis in management.

"The telecommunications marketplace is dramatically changing our world. Cable lines will carry phone calls, phone wires will deliver movies and the airwaves will carry both. This convergence of technology will transform how we live, work, play and shop" (Kennard, 2000, The New Digital Economy section, ¶ 1). Converging telecommunications technology and the Internet have left no aspect of our society untouched, including the process of accreditation. Accreditation agencies are eagerly anticipating increased productivity from moving some if not all of the accreditation process to an online format. As reported by Business Wire (1999), CBQ Inc. has launched a commercial effort to facilitate online accreditation and Peck (2001) reports that the National Committee for Quality Assurance plans to minimize onsite visits in favor of online accreditation reviews.

With eagerness to capitalize upon the Internet for the accreditation process, attention naturally turns to the self-study portfolio. An increasing number of educational institutions are utilizing the Internet to develop electronic self-studies for purposes of accreditation (Olsen, 2000). The Urban Universities Portfolio Project is a cooperative electronic portfolio development project of six metropolitan universities funded by the Pew Charitable Trust (The urban universities portfolio project, n.d.). One of the participating universities, Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis, has accomplished accreditation review in 2002 by the North Central Association via an online portfolio (Plater, 2001). Another participating university, Portland State University, is developing an electronic portfolio that will serve as an online self-study for

accreditation in 2005 (Portland State University, 2004).

Before online self-study portfolios can be required or even recommended by accrediting agencies, there must be a clear rationale for doing so. There must also be full recognition of the challenges to be overcome and advantages of the electronic self-study. As a final essential point, the National Association of Industrial Technology, Board of Accreditation will need to establish a common format for online portfolios and establish training for visiting team members and member institutions.

Rationale for an Online Self-Study

The rationale for an accrediting agency to require or recommend use of the Internet to prepare and present an electronic self-study is predicated upon monetary savings, accessibility to information by the visiting team, and increased collaboration among the individuals preparing the online portfolio.

Eaton (2001) notes that institutions want accreditation to "cost less, take less time, and be more useful" (Section 6). Institutional visits are expensive for accreditation agencies and ultimately to the institution through annual fees or one-time visitation fees. In addition, the cost of preparing a printed copy is not insignificant. Printing, shipping, and packaging expenses of these voluminous documents can be avoided through use of the Internet. Therefore, substantial cost savings are possible by using the Internet for an institutional self-study review.

Olsen (2000) reports that an online accreditation self-study is more accessible to stakeholders. Greater accessibility to the self-study portfolio by visiting

teams allows for better preparation for the onsite visit. This accessibility may increase productivity by reducing the amount of time the visiting team invests in confirming the accuracy of the self-study. Olsen further emphasizes that institutions can link statements in the self-study to online data and institutional research to confirm that an institution is meeting accrediting agencies' guidelines.

Accreditation agencies prefer broad institutional involvement in the preparation of the self-study. However, in practice, one individual is usually selected to assemble the entire self-study document. Whereas the accreditation process is designed to promote continuous improvement, this objective is defeated when only one individual is the primary writer of the self-study document. The Internet or local Intranet allows faculty to share and collaborate on complex projects. Authoring an accreditation self-study on the Internet makes the accreditation process a truly collaborative effort among faculty members. Collaboration among faculty, administration, advisory committee members, students, and all the other parties that should be involved in a quality self-study allows for a final report that truly reveals institutional strengths and, most importantly, revelation of the weaknesses that must be improved to become a quality program.

The rationale for an online self-study portfolio reveals several potential advantages; however, implementation and development of the online self-study portfolio can be a challenging endeavor. Each of the challenges noted in the following section portray a situation that can be resolved through proper planning and organization.

Challenges of an Online Accreditation Self-Study

While the challenges are few, they are significant enough to warrant review and analysis; they include: (a) difficulty of review and analysis of an online self-study by the visiting team, (b) the necessity of website development skills, (c) personnel must have a high

level of organizational skills, (d) problems with Internet access for visiting team members, and (e) confidentiality of information.

Difficulty of review and analysis of an online self-study by the visiting team

Visiting team members are most familiar with reviewing programs using a printed copy of the accreditation self-study. Adaptation to a program review using an online version requires a different mindset and a different review process. Visiting team members that have been reviewing programs for several years may be unwilling or at least reluctant to adapt to a different paradigm of program review. The solution to this problem is for accreditation agencies to establish educational programs to prepare visitation team members for the online program review. They must also coordinate efforts to develop a common template for the online self-study. A common format is essential to uniformity of program review by visiting team members. These two solutions will help accreditation agencies adapt to online self-studies.

The necessity of website development skills.

In an economy that already has hit institutions of higher education with dramatic budget cuts, an online self-study may be difficult to facilitate unless faculty expertise in web page development already exists. If a department does not have personnel with advanced web page development skills, training will be required or funds will be needed to outsource this component.

Personnel must have a high level of organizational skills.

Superior organizational skills are essential if an institution plans to attempt an online self-study portfolio. Not all faculty have the necessary abilities to conduct such a complex project, or more typically, the most organized faculty are already committed to other projects that require complex planning and organization. Creating an online self-study requires detailed planning. File naming conventions and folder structure must be established. Files must be uploaded

to a web server. And disaster recovery must also be considered.

Planning and organization includes the component of working with departmental faculty to draft the text of specific sections of the self-study and reviewing each section in a collaborative process. The only obvious solution to this problem is to ensure that the most organized faculty member or professional staff heads up the self-study development project.

Problems with Internet access for visiting team members.

Access to the self-study by visitation team members becomes another issue as they seek access to the online self-study in places other than their office. Traveling poses unique problems with gaining Internet access. Planners must prepare for the unlikely event that web servers may be down due to hardware or software problems or power outages. The most obvious solution to this dilemma is to develop a compact disc containing an offline version of the self-study containing the necessary files to access the portfolio. The compact disc serves as a back up source in the event of power grid or server failure and also as a historical record.

Confidentiality of information.

Student work that includes instructor comments and grading data cannot be placed online in a manner that could compromise student confidentiality laws. In addition, student placement data with salaries cannot be posted online. Important to a lesser degree than student confidentiality is the possibility that program data could become available to other institutions of higher education, compromising a program's strategic advantage in a specific degree program. One potential solution to confidentiality is to provide access to the visitation team via an Intranet that provides access only to the team. Or the files could be sent electronically by email to the visiting team, ensuring privacy.

All of these issues are significant challenges to an online self-study that can be resolved through proper planning

and organization. They should not prevent a program from implementation of an online self-study portfolio because the advantages are significant. Whereas accreditation agencies may be able to reduce the cost of the accreditation process, programs may have the most to gain through this new concept.

Advantages of an Online Accreditation Self-Study

The advantages of developing an online self-study include; (a) increased faculty collaboration, (b) the self-study becomes a working document and data archive, (c) online self-studies compliment current institutional efforts to place important program data online, (d) assurance of program quality to other schools, students, parents, and other stakeholders, (e) ease of dissemination to the accreditation visitation team, and (f) ability to work more directly with an accrediting agency consultant during the preparation of the self-study report.

Increased faculty collaboration.

The biggest disadvantage of a paper self-study is lack of faculty collaboration during development because of the mechanics involved in paper shuffling. However, due to the ease of posting a file on the Internet, faculty can immediately begin to review and provide insight to the development of the self-study. The ability of faculty to critique the self-study creates ownership in the final document and increased understanding of their department as a whole. The visiting team report for the North Central Association accreditation visit for Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis indicates the online portfolio maintained integrity and allowed for a broad range of public comment (Certain et al., 2003).

The self-study becomes a working document and data archive.

Once the initial web site is developed, the self-study becomes a working document. For example, the management of advisory committees is simplified when a web page is used to archive meeting minutes, meeting agendas, and special documents the committee needs to

complete their task of program advisement. One strategy is to include the URL for the committee website in all electronic communication with advisory committee members. Once they are accustomed to the site as a central depository for business documents, the site becomes an archive of the committee's business. This example also applies to the other data necessary for presentation to visitation team members.

Online self-studies compliment current institutional efforts to place important program data online.

Several colleges and universities are already placing institutional information online for purposes of presenting data to higher education coordination entities, assessment personnel, or faculty and staff. Much of the data required by accreditation agencies is already online. Rather than print this data in hard copy form and risk the data's being outdated or lost, it is easier to provide a web page link within the self-study, which leads to the most current information available.

Assurance of program quality to other schools, students, parents, and other stakeholders.

An online self-study portfolio made available to program stakeholders shows specifically how programs are meeting or exceeding standards set forth by accreditation agencies. The accreditation self-study can always be available from the main web site of the institution, allowing stakeholders to see how a program is rated by accreditation agencies. To go one step further, institutions could identify their goals and efforts in place for continuous program improvement in order to meet accreditation standards.

Ease of dissemination to the accreditation visitation team.

Rather than printing volumes of the paper self-study, dissemination of an online self-study takes place by sending a URL via email, and/or a compact disc to the visiting team. In addition, all materials, not just the main body of the self-study document, are available

to the members of the visiting team in advance of the visit. With online self-studies, printing becomes unnecessary and exorbitant postage or overnight-shipping charges become past history.

Ability to work more directly with an accrediting agency consultant during the preparation of the self-study report.

An online self-study allows a visiting team leader and/or consultant to be assigned very early in the accreditation process, providing guidance for the development of the institutional self-study. This capability would be especially helpful for institutions new to the accreditation process.

All these issues are advantages to preparing and presenting a self-study on the Internet. It is clear that significant advances in the accreditation process could be gained from adopting this novel approach. However, accreditation agencies must acknowledge that a change of this magnitude will most certainly alter the paradigm of the accreditation process.

Changing Paradigms for the National Association of Industrial Technology

The National Association of Industrial Technology, Board of Accreditation will be required to adapt to new organizational paradigms as member institutions develop electronic portfolios for accreditation. Specifically, three distinct changes will need to occur. First, a common format for the presentation of online portfolios will need to be accomplished. Second, training of accreditation review team members will need to be updated as the method to review a program changes to viewing an online portfolio. Third, member institutions will need training to adapt to both the concept and the required format.

First, before training can occur, a common format to the online portfolio will need to be developed. The need for a common format is evident in the comments made by North Central Association reviewers of Indiana University

– Purdue University Indianapolis in regards to their online accreditation portfolio. They indicated that while there are advantages to an online portfolio, one disadvantage was the lack of clear boundaries, which allowed the team to select links that led the team away from the actual self-study portfolio (Certain et al., 2003). While some may argue there is a need for institutional creativity with the electronic portfolio, the need for a common format is primarily for the benefit of the accrediting agency. It is possible for a template to be used by all member institutions, and creativity be implemented within the template. A common format to an online self-study will provide a web page design that allows reviewers to keep within the parameters of the self-study report and allows them to find information in the same web page location for each school. Links within the template can lead to institutional pages that exhibit creativity, but the reviewer should always be able to navigate back to a core that establishes the boundaries of the self-study and keeps the reviewer from becoming "lost" in the myriad of institutional web pages.

A common website format is no different than what is required currently as prescribed in the Industrial Technology Accreditation Handbook (2003). Section 8 of this document provides the outline that is to be followed when a member institution develops an accreditation self-study. Just as a self-study completed in the traditional printed format cannot deviate from the established sequence of required contents, the online self-study must also adhere to the same established sequence.

Second, accrediting agencies will need to develop new visiting team member training programs to demonstrate how to review an online portfolio. Visiting team members will also have to become familiar with the required web page format. In addition, due to the interactive possibilities on the Internet, changes to the accreditation process may occur that warrant new training programs. For example the current process of using National Association of Industrial Technology approved consultants to assist programs as they seek accreditation may need to be revised. Following a traditional onsite visit, a consultant could be involved with a self-study through the use of email and the Internet. They could review and comment upon a program's analysis of each standard after it has been posted online.

The method of reviewing a self-study will need to change, prompting the new training program. Online self-studies must be reviewed online rather than in a printed format. The very nature of an online self-study makes it impossible to apply traditional methods of review. Complex online self-studies contain multiple links to institutional data, which are very difficult to produce in a paper format.

Third, once a common format is established and review teams are properly trained, National Association of Industrial Technology member institutions will need training to develop online self-study portfolios. An essential component to the training will be upon the proper format of the online portfolio so reviewers don't get "lost" with improper website navigation. Additional emphasis will need to be upon developing a system that can better enhance the continuous quality improvement process.

Conclusion

Shaw (2000) provides an invaluable observation: "The economy is reconfiguring to reward those—individuals and firms—who learn to exploit and leverage information and communications technologies" (p.192). Online accreditation self-study portfolios leverage the technology of the Internet to improve the accreditation process. In order to capitalize upon the advantages of using the Internet for accreditation, the National Association of Industrial Technology Board of Accreditation will need to be proactive. They must set standards for a common format so visiting team members can more effectively conduct an online program review. They must educate visiting team members so they are prepared to conduct a quality program review using the Internet. Guidance must be provided for member institutions so they may more effectively plan and organize an electronic self-study portfolio to meet accreditation requirements. Finally, they must recognize that old paradigms of accreditation program review will need to evolve, as other industries have evolved while seeking the inherent benefits of the Internet.

References

Business Wire. (1999, September 28). CBQ announces Reliance Technology to develop online accreditation program for WatchMeGrow.com. Business Wire, 0420. Retrieved November 21, 2002, from InfoTrac One File.

Certain, P., Braskamp, L.A., Chu, R.G.W., Clasen, M.E., Conry, T.F., Driscoll, A., et al. (2003, January 28). Assurance section. Report: A comprehensive evaluation visit. (02C1195). The Higher Learning Commission: A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. Retrieved February 5, 2004, from http://www.imir.iupui.edu/iupuifolio/selfstudy/nca_report.pdf

Eaton, J. S. (2001, March). Regional reform who is served? Change, 33, 39. Retrieved November 21, 2002, from InfoTrac One File.

Kennard, W. E. (2000). The new digital economy. Washington, DC: Federal Communication Commission. Retrieved February 29, 2000, from http://www.fcc.gov/commissioners/kennard/

National Association of Industrial Technology. (2003). Industrial Technology Accreditation Handbook. Retrieved February 5, 2004, from http://www.nait.org/accred/accreditationhandbook2003.html

Olsen, F. (2000, October 13). The role of the web is expanding in accreditation reviews. The Chronicle of Higher Education, A27. Retrieved March 27, 2003, from LexisNexis.

Peck, R. L. (2001, July). Accreditation 2001. Behavioral Health Manage-

ment, 21, 20. Retrieved November 21, 2002 from InfoTrac One File.

Plater, W. M. (2001). Message from the chancellor. Retrieved February 5, 2004, from http://www.imir.iupui. edu/iupuifolio/selfstudy/

Portland State University. (2004). Portland state portfolio project. Retrieved February 5, 2004, from http://www.devoirp.pdx.edu/Info/ PSUPortfolio

Shaw, J. K. (2000). Strategic management in telecommunications. Norwood, MA: Artech House.

The Urban Universities Portfolio Project. (n.d.). Project summary. Retrieved February 5, 2004, from http://www.imir.iupui.edu/portfolio/ documents/ProjSummary.asp?about