

THE PROS AND CONS OF ACCREDITATION: FACULTY AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

Susan B. Shurden, M.P.A.
College of Business and Public Affairs
Lander University
321 Stanley Avenue
Greenwood, SC 29649
Phone: 864 388-8224 or 8232
sshurden@lander.edu

Deborah Natvig, Ph.D.
College of Business and Public Affairs
Lander University
321 Stanley Avenue
Greenwood, SC 29649
Phone: 864 388-8232
dnatvig@lander.edu

Michael C. Shurden, DBA
College of Business and Public Affairs
Lander University
321 Stanley Avenue
Greenwood, SC 29649
Phone: 864 388-8703 or 8232
mshurden@lander.edu

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ABSTRACT

The process of accreditation is designed to be “a statement to students, parents, and faculty and staff that a school has met important standards and is fully qualified to be an institution of higher learning” (www.ncarts.edu). Various accrediting organizations exist, and they set requirements and standards that have to be met and maintained in order for the program, department, or college to continue to operate under the “umbrella” of prestige that they provide. However, the entire process is lengthy and costly, not only to the schools that are being accredited, but also to the faculty involved. In addition, the question arises as to whether or not students are even aware of the benefits that accreditation provides them, both now and in the future. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the “pros and cons” of the accreditation process and to obtain feedback from both faculty and students as to the relevance provided by accreditation. Approximately four hundred students at a public, southeastern university were surveyed as to their knowledge of accreditation and its relevance to their future. In addition, various faculty members were interviewed as to their opinion of the accreditation process and benefits that it provides. In this paper, the authors will analyze the material gathered through these interviews and surveys and present an analysis of the accreditation process that is both informative and relevant.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

McKenna, Cotton, and Auken (1997) presented a brief history of accreditation indicating that the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) played a significant role in the formulation of standards for business schools for approximately twenty five years. The catalyst whereby this influence was felt in the USA was in the publication of the Ford and Carnegie Foundation reports which gave AACSB a certain amount of credibility (Gordon and Howell, 1959; Pierson, 1959). Prior to the publication of these reports, four year business programs were considered to be “vocational” in nature and not regarded in very high esteem within higher education. The AACSB established a minimum level of performance for business schools that set standards then, continuing into the present, for faculty in areas of qualifications for teaching, research and publication, curriculum development, and continuing assessment of students. As of 1997, approximately 250 schools had achieved AACSB accreditation; however at that time, there were several hundred that distanced themselves and chose not to become a part of the “prestigious” body, which has been referred to as the “member’s only” club (McKenna, Cotton, Auken, 1997).

The debate over accreditation and its relevance to a genuinely “good” education for students has been continued by Julian and Ofori-Dankwa (2006:225) in their critique of the accreditation process. In an analysis of these authors’ work, Ashkansasy (2008:244) gives them credit for saying that “accreditation is an intrinsically flawed process because, by asking accreditation applicants to meet a set of prescribed standards, accreditation necessarily reduces options for flexible change, and this is incongruent with today’s turbulent economic environment” (Ashkanasy, 2008) Therefore, the question of whether or not accreditation is beneficial to business schools has become a concern for the authors. In an attempt to gain some insight, the

faculty and students of a small southeastern public university have been interviewed and surveyed, respectively.

METHODOLOGY

The study was both quantitative and qualitative in nature. The quantitative portion consisted of a brief seven question survey which was distributed by members of the business faculty in an AACSB accredited program to their respective classes at the mid-point of the semester. Enrollment for the fall 2008 semester was 459 students, and of that number, 396 surveys were compiled and analyzed. This is an 86% response rate. Students who were taking more than one course in the business program were asked to respond to the survey only once.

Demographic information regarding gender, class, major/minor, emphasis, status, graduation plans, and number of semesters attending the university were also asked. Table 1 is a compilation of this demographic information. The majority of the students were full-time, female students, who were juniors majoring in business. The response rate by emphasis was consistent with the distribution of business majors enrolled in each emphasis area of the program. Sixty-Five percent of the students surveyed plan to work after graduation. Thirty-three percent plan to attend graduate school, while two percent were undecided.

Table 1

Demographic Information on Student Information Survey—Accreditation—Fall 2008

Gender		Class		Business	
Males	47%	Freshman	17%	Major	92%
Female	53%	Sophomore	24%	Minor	8%
		Junior	33%		
		Senior	26%		
Emphasis		Status		Plans	
Accounting	20%	Full-time	96%	Work	65%
Econ/Fin.	8%	Part-time	4%	Graduate School	33%
Health Care	24%			Other	2%
Mgmt/Mkt.	45%				

Table 2 consists of analysis of the quantitative data of six simple questions regarding student's knowledge of accreditation. The purpose of the survey was to determine to what extent the students were aware of accreditation.

Table 2

Student Information Survey—Accreditation (n=396)

Questions	Yes	No
1. Prior to this semester, did you know what it meant for a business school to be accredited?	56%	44%
2. Do you currently know what it means for a business school to be Accredited?	82%	18%
3. Do you know what The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) is?	57%	43%
4. Prior to this semester did you know that the XXXX School of Business was AACSB accredited?	47%	53%
5. Was your decision to attend XXXX influenced by the XXXX School of Business being AACSB accredited?	17%	83%
6. Do you believe that it will be beneficial to you to have graduated from an AACSB accredited business school?	96%	4%

Question 1 and 2 pertained to the student's knowledge of accreditation both prior to fall semester and at the time of survey. Fifty six percent of the students indicated they were aware of accreditation prior to this semester, and 82% indicated they were currently aware of what accreditation meant. Questions 3 through 6 relate to AACSB accreditation, which is the accrediting body for this business department, although the university as a whole falls under the "umbrella" of SACS accreditation. Fifty seven percent indicated they currently knew what AACSB accreditation was, while only 47% indicated they knew that this university was accredited by AACSB. What is of interest is that only 17% of the students were influenced to attend this university because of its being AACSB accredited, yet 96% believe this form of accreditation will be beneficial to them. It is assumed that some of these students who responded positively to the benefits of accreditation will be attending graduate school. In fact, the

demographics indicate 33% of the 396 students plan on attending graduate school. An additional question was added in Table 3 which was a “tie in” to question five. Of the 4% who did not believe that accreditation would be beneficial to them, their reasons for attending this small university varied.

Table 3

Reasons for attending XXXX University (n=274)

Question	Near Family	Lower Cost	Parental Influence	Friends Attend	Other
If answer to number five was No, why did you attend Lander?	26%	16%	7%	9%	42%

The qualitative aspect of the study consisted of interviews with the university provost, dean, and department chair, as well as interviews with three faculty members. The following interview questions were asked.

- 1) What has been your experience with the accreditation process either with AACSB or SACs?
- 2) Do you believe that the benefits of accreditation outweigh the costs involved?
- 3) How essential do you think it is for a business school to be accredited?
- 4) What benefits are there to being an accredited department of business?
- 5) What benefits do you believe there are for the students to be a part of an accredited department of business?
- 6) What benefits do you believe there are for the faculty to be part of an accredited department of business?
- 7) Do you believe in any way that accreditation is a detriment either to faculty or the department as a whole?

An additional interview was conducted with a previous faculty member who has since left the university to be employed at a small, private, college which is only SACs accredited.

In compiling information for the completion of this paper, one of the authors attended two sessions at an AACSB conference in fall, 2008. One session was a “roundtable” discussion of teachers from various accredited and unaccredited universities. The focus was on questions by faculty members from unaccredited universities who were seeking information and guidance from peers who had been through the process of obtaining accreditation. The other session focused on the assessment process and “closing the loop” meaning that the goals, objectives, and

strategies developed to meet the school's mission are adequately assessed, and modified as needed, to assure program effectiveness.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the quantitative data indicate the majority of the students were aware of what accreditation was both prior to the semester of the surveys (56%) and at the time of the surveys being administered (82%). However, only 17% of the students indicated they were influenced to attend this university because of it being an accredited institution. Obviously, the institution would prefer that accreditation would make a difference in recruiting students, yet this was not the case at this particular university. Students were influenced to attend this institution for various reasons as indicated in Table 3. The majority of those reasons (42%) were in the "other" category, which may include scholarships, both academic and sports related and/or the sports programs offered in general. The second reason that most students attended this institution was to be near family.

A definite "pro" for the students is indicated in question six, 96% indicate that they believe accreditation will be beneficial to them in the future. Question five in the interview questions also asked "What benefits do you believe there are for the students to be a part of an accredited department of business?" Answers to this question were as follows:

1. The accreditation process gives students more of a role in the formation of programs within the university.
2. Graduates should make more monetarily and be more successful in their careers
3. Graduation from an AACSB accredited school should provide them with a better advantage when they apply to graduate school.
4. Students benefit from the improvements made in the content of their courses and in the way that the courses are taught.
5. AACSB accreditation provides students with more recognition from other universities, as well as employers.
6. Changes in the curriculum and program activities occur based on the data collected from assessments, and not from the "whims" of faculty members.
7. Students receive the benefits of programs that have recognized standards.
8. AACSB accredited universities have to prove evidence of learning through assessments.
9. Curriculums are improved because of the accreditation process.

Question six asks "What benefits do you believe there are for the faculty to be part of an accredited department of business?" Various responses to this question are as follows:

1. It provides standards for faculty in the areas of teaching, research, and the assessment of program outcomes.
2. There is a benefit in using AACSB standards to determine whether or not faculty applicants meet academic and/or professional qualifications during the hiring process.

3. Faculty is involved in making program changes because the accreditation process is “faculty-driven”.
4. Faculty receives recognition from other universities once it is discovered that they teach at an AACSB accredited school.
5. Faculty learns how to work effectively as a team through the accreditation process.
6. Faculty should receive higher salaries when teaching at accredited schools.
7. Having teaching experience in an AACSB accredited program should make it easier for a faculty member to move from one accredited university to another.
8. Faculty development is allowed to flourish through enhanced resources, technology and opportunities.
9. Faculty is empowered with more responsibility over the educational process.

From the authors’ perspective regarding faculty, they recognize that accreditation standards impose more stringent requirements in terms of furthering intellectual contributions to their profession and maintaining academically or professionally qualified status; however, faculty is more empowered in the responsibility for delivering a high quality educational program. Additionally, after having been employed by an accredited university, job recognition is enhanced increasing mobility from one university to another.

Other benefits or “pros” do exist for universities in becoming accredited. A faculty member referred to benefits as being “political” in nature, which could be indicative of the competition for students in the area where this university is located. One professor indicated that accreditation actually allows smaller universities to “run with the big dogs.” Therefore, accreditation may be beneficial in recruiting high potential students into the university’s business program.

So, are there any detriments or “cons” to either the faculty or the department regarding accreditation? One of the biggest shortfalls of accreditation identified by respondents is the high cost, both monetarily and in terms of opportunity cost. An analysis of the budget of the university surveyed revealed that the financial aspects of accreditation include annual fees of approximately \$11,000, with travel expenses for three to four faculty members to attend AACSB meetings contributing another \$9,000 per year. The breakdown for the fees consisted of the six year review fee of \$3,800, and annual accreditation fee of \$4,500, and membership dues of \$2,550. The annual fees are confirmed on the AACSB International current accreditation fee page with the Initial Business Application fee of \$11,000, and the annual accreditation fee showing as \$3,800 per year (www.aacsb.edu). A combined total of the fees and travel expenses for faculty can put a substantial burden on small universities, especially in dire economic times when state budget cuts threaten the ability of business schools to continue to provide the “quality” standards that are promoted by AACSB. Additionally, accreditation standards require that universities hire AQ (Academically Qualified) faculty who command higher salaries than

faculty members who do not meet the educational and publication requirements for AQ status, thus driving up the salaries for business faculty. Particularly during the current economic downturn, these hiring strategies impose tremendous “stress” for the administration and on interdepartmental relationships especially if faculty positions in other departments are not filled or if employees are being terminated in other areas in order to meet budget.

Another “con” of accreditation is the time involved in becoming and maintaining accreditation. In relation to time, one faculty member indicated that not only does one have to consider the initial time involved in obtaining accreditation, but the “opportunity costs” of lost time that could be used in improving class preparation, working with students outside of class, and interacting with internal and external stakeholders. Faculty spend a substantial amount of time developing strategies, creating assessment tools, collecting and analyzing data, developing new interventions, writing reports, and attending meetings to ensure the accreditation process is progressing well.

In conclusion, the major pros of accreditation are the benefits it provides to students in terms of improved curriculum and classroom experiences, entering a good graduate program, and possibly obtaining employment that pays significantly better. A second benefit to the university is that accreditation allows them to compete more effectively with other universities to maintain and increase enrollment of high quality students. A third benefit to faculty is that they become involved in the process of providing a quality education and being an active participant in the curriculum process, as well as enhancing their intellectual contributions to their profession. The overall detriment to the accreditation process is the cost, both monetarily and in terms of opportunity costs. Smaller schools, which are limited financially, may find the costs to be prohibitive in their seeking accreditation. One individual mentioned the law of diminishing returns where the time and effort needed to maintain the process becomes difficult, especially in terms of hours needed to prepare for teaching multiple classes with several preparations. However, faculty members indicated that withdrawing from the process once accreditation has been attained could have a detrimental impact on the students, the faculty, and the reputation of an institution. Consequently, the scales of judgment must be used to weigh the pros and cons of accreditation, and while benefits do exist, each school must determine if they outweigh the costs of the accreditation process.

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