

# Earning Excellence

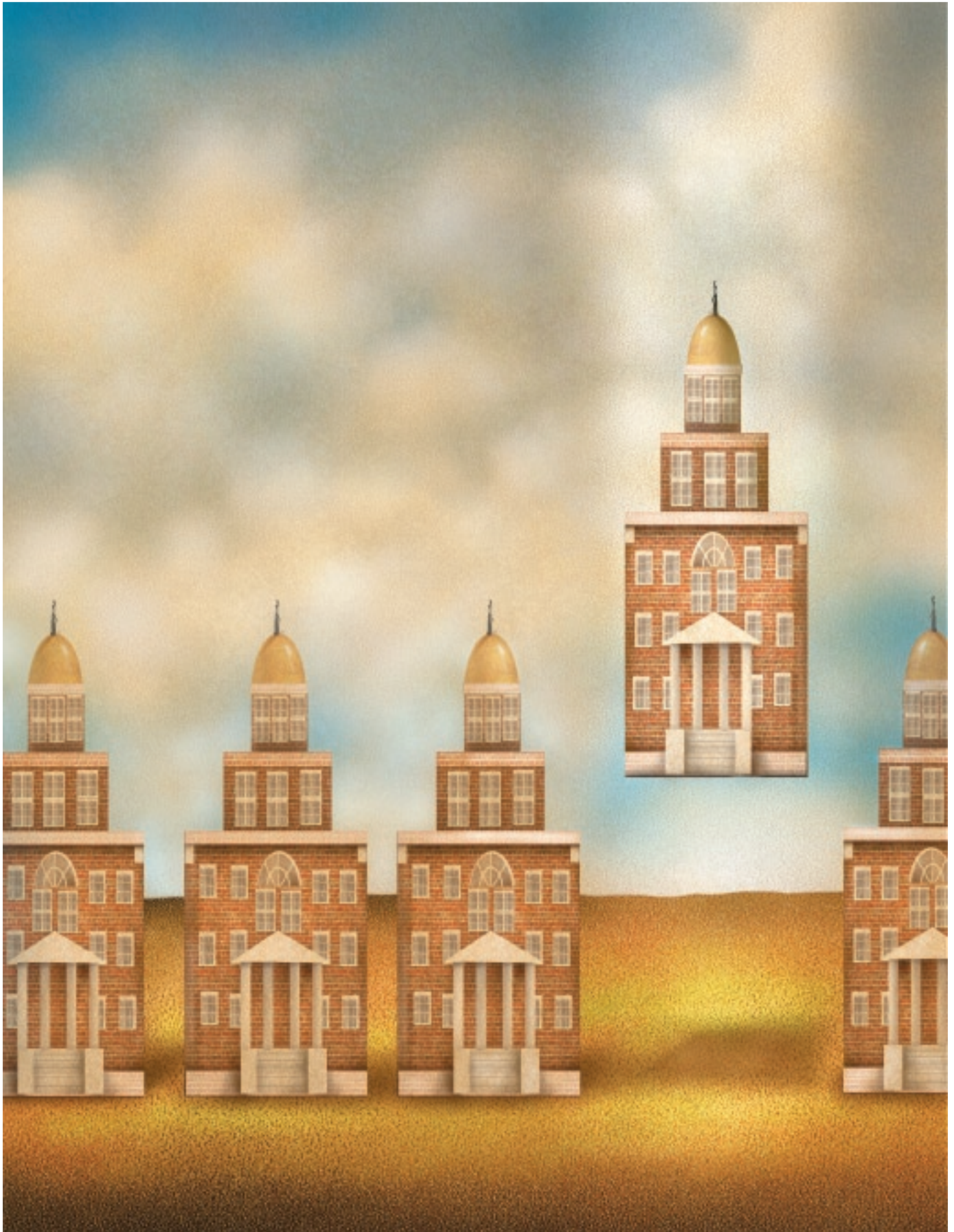
by Sharon Shinn

Each year, thousands of students enter business schools to pursue their MBAs, credentials that indicate they've developed the skills and mindsets to become highly successful business leaders. And each year, business schools around the world begin seeking their own external credentials as they undertake the process of pursuing accreditation. But if a school puts its staff and stakeholders through the grueling process of pursuing accreditation, what are the true rewards likely to be?

That question recently was answered by the deans of business schools at four very different stages of the process, from those still working toward the goal to those that have held the designation for more than half a century. No matter where they stand in the process, all agree that achieving accreditation offers powerful benefits. But that's not the only reason to pursue accreditation, they say. The journey itself provides just as many rewards.

Nakiye Boyacigiller of the Faculty of Management at Sabanci University in Istanbul, Turkey, is currently shepherding her school through initial accreditation with AACSB International. She is most impressed by how the accreditation process forces a school to examine its systems and meet its own goals. "It's very easy to write in our strategic plan that we will be at X level of internationalization by a certain time, and then be loose about measuring ourselves against the plan," she says. "Accreditation holds us accountable on the things we say we want to do, so we have to be careful about what we promise."

Achieving accreditation helps a school set itself apart, attain a high level of quality, and earn international recognition — while learning valuable lessons along the way.



Because accreditation requires a school to prove its own claims, administrators must develop a reflective mindset, says Sue Cox, professor and dean at the Lancaster University Management School in England. She also is a member of the International Awarding Body for the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS), the accrediting system of the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD). The school is accredited by multiple associations.

Says Cox, “One peer review team said to us, ‘You say you’re a research-led school. What does that really mean?’ We couldn’t just reply, ‘We’ve always been at the top of the field in the U.K.’ We had to think about the fact that we embed research into our teaching, our staff development, and our culture. Accreditation teams question assumptions you’ve always had, and you’ve actually got to use the elevator pitch to justify your claims! It makes you challenge who you are and the journey you’re on.”

Even established schools benefit from meeting such challenges, says Jan R. Williams, dean of the College of Business Administration and the Pilot Chair of Excellence in Leadership at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Receiving input from a visiting team helps those schools identify what they’re doing right and where they need to improve.

Williams, who also conducts peer reviews for AACSB, says he comes away with new information every time he visits another school. “Probably seven out of the ten things I ever learned on peer review teams were positive things to do,” he says. “Three of the other ten were things I learned not to do. All are pretty valuable.”

Here, these deans share their insights about the benefits of accreditation—at every stage of the process.

### The Accreditation Veteran

The College of Business Administration at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville was founded in 1913 and accredited in the same year dean Jan Williams was born—1941. For a school that has been established so long, is accreditation still as critical as it once might have been?

Williams believes the answer is yes, but not for the obvious reasons. While accreditation is a badge of quality, he believes many stakeholders simply assume such a well-known school is accredited; it’s what they expect. “I think that, when established schools are hiring faculty, *not* having accreditation might be a bigger negative than *having* accreditation is a positive,” he says. He thinks the same reasoning holds true for grad students deciding where to pursue a degree.

Still, even a school that has been accredited for more than 60 years must consistently meet a high level of quality to

maintain accreditation. Williams thinks schools most often run into trouble in two key areas: creating assurance of learning processes and maintaining the right ratio of academically qualified and professionally qualified faculty. UT Knoxville has tried to avoid problems in those areas by focusing on them throughout the school year.

As part of its annual evaluation of faculty, the College of Business Administration uses AACSB guidelines to calculate its academically qualified/professionally qualified faculty

ratio. The school also has made internal assignments so that someone is always monitoring faculty ratios or assurance of learning goals. “If we run the risk of falling out of compliance, we know it early,” says Williams.

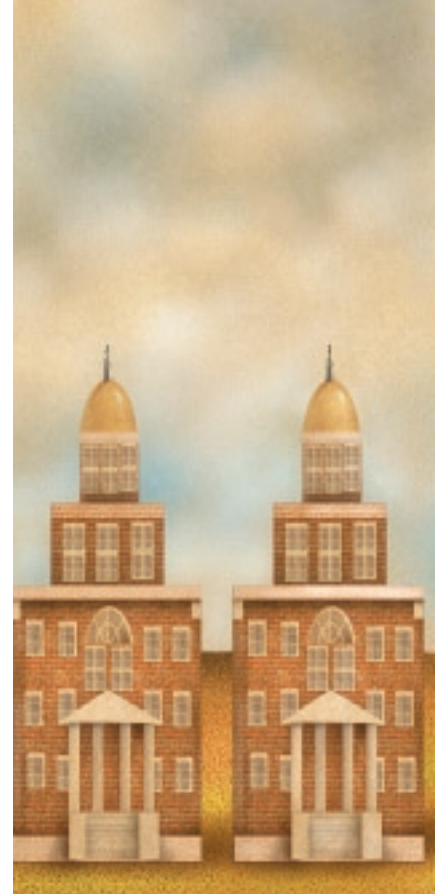
Williams thinks that the association’s crisply defined standards for AQ and PQ faculty has been a boon to schools. “When the standards formally recognized PQ faculty as part of the mix, it freed us up to hire more of them than we could before,” he says. UT Knoxville deliberately hired professionally qualified faculty to take on specific roles that would benefit from hands-on experience.

“For example, we decided to make a big push on international business, and we brought in recently retired business executives who had significant international experience,” Williams says.

Accreditation provides not only staffing guidelines, but also the helpful insights of like-minded professionals. “It makes sense to base your continuous improvement efforts on what your peers say about you. It’s particularly valuable since the people visiting you are either from institutions comparable to yours or aspirational institutions—schools you want to be like,” says Williams. It would be difficult for the school to get that kind of scrutiny, he adds, if it wasn’t taking part in the accreditation process.

### New School on the Block

The School of Business at Adelphi University in Garden City, New York, was midway through candidacy when AACSB changed its accreditation standards. “Without hesitation, we said that we wanted to be reviewed under the new standards when they went into effect,” says Anthony F. Libertella, dean





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of the school. By emphasizing continuous improvement and mission-based learning, the new standards would ensure “that we constantly looked ahead,” Libertella says. In 2007, Adelphi became the first North American school to attain accreditation under AACSB’s new standards.

Through achieving accreditation, the School of Business has fulfilled its part of a universitywide goal to attain top-level professional recognition for each professional school or program in the institution. But perhaps even more important, the School of Business has sent a signal that it has joined a select rank of

accredited schools—many of which already dot the region where Adelphi is located.

“Most of our peer competitors and aspirant business schools in the New York metropolitan area have attained AACSB accreditation,” says Libertella. “For us, accreditation has leveled the playing field so that we can compete based on other criteria, such as small class sizes, student access to faculty, and technology-enriched faculty.”

But moving any school from *wanting* accreditation to *achieving* accreditation requires an immense amount of work. “First, we had to educate stakeholders about the necessity for accreditation,” says Libertella. “Then we had to create a culture of scholarship and inquiry, recruiting and empowering faculty to participate in the process.

“Finally, we had to make sure we sustained the effort over the candidacy period,” he continues. “Pursuing accreditation requires an explicit and conscious effort to formalize key processes, which made all of us—the faculty and the administration—much more focused on our mission and goals. Specifically, during the candidacy period, we achieved dramatic changes in faculty research productivity, learning assurance processes, and the overall curriculum.”

The six-year candidacy period already has changed the school’s culture, says Libertella. Scholarship, teaching excellence, and outcome assessment have become institutionalized, and the continuous improvement model is now ingrained, he says. In addition, the business school is developing joint programs within the university and exploring global partnerships.

Since attaining accreditation last year, Adelphi has heavily promoted its achievement. “The AACSB logo is featured

prominently in all of our communications with potential students, parents, alumni, and the business community,” says Libertella. “This includes advertising, mailings, newsletters, our Web sites, and viewbooks.”

He believes all stakeholders are aware of the achievement—and influenced by it. For instance, he has noted an increase in collaborative research by and among the business school’s faculty. He is convinced that graduate students decide to attend Adelphi partly because of its accreditation status. And alumni are definitely impressed.

“There was a significant jump in alumni giving once we attained accreditation,” says Libertella. “We expect this to continue for the foreseeable future.”

### Pursuing Recognition

Sabanci University opened its doors in 1999 and already has earned a reputation for excellence in Turkey. “But as soon as I cross my border, as soon as I want international students or faculty to apply, I hear the question, ‘Who is Sabanci?’” says Nakiye Boyacigiller.

A desire for international recognition was one of the goals that spurred Sabanci to undertake its current quest to achieve AACSB accreditation. “There are many ways for a school to communicate that it is a high-quality institution,” says Boyacigiller. “It can publish good articles, it can turn out skilled graduates. But AACSB accreditation is an instant stamp of approval, and that is the No. 1 reason we want it.”

The accreditation seal also will carry weight with stakeholders, Boyacigiller believes. She expects it to help her attract international faculty who might be excited about the idea of coming to Istanbul, but have some questions about a startup university. At the same time, it will signal students that Sabanci runs a high-quality MBA program—and let alumni know that the school is getting better every year.

Boyacigiller doesn’t shy away from admitting that the whole effort has been more difficult and time-consuming than expected. For instance, all of her full-time faculty have PhD degrees, and they publish frequently. The school routinely documents processes and achieves quality goals. She had anticipated the school wouldn’t have far to go to meet standards. “But it’s been a great deal of work—more than we could have predicted,” she says.

Boyacigiller adds that developing assessment processes for assurance of learning has been particularly time-consuming—partly because the concept is very new in Turkey. “We’ll be leading the assessment effort at our university, which is exciting, but we’re learning it as we go along, which is a challenge,” she says.

Another challenge to overcome is the relative inexperience of her staff. “We’re young not only as a school, but as a faculty,” says Boyacigiller. “When I arrived in 2003, we had 13 faculty members, and now we have 29. Almost all of them are newly minted PhDs. They haven’t been through accreditation before. They can’t say, ‘This is how we did that at my previous institution.’”

Despite the hard work, she’s proud of her school’s effort and hopeful about the outcome. “I view it as a badge of honor to even start the accreditation process,” says Boyacigiller. “I think we’re on track. We’re getting positive signs. We’ll see.”

### Accreditation Multiplication

Faculty and administrators at Lancaster University Management School know firsthand how stressful the process of accreditation can be. LUMS set the standard for stress earlier this year by undergoing initial accreditation with AACSB, reaccreditation with EQUIS, and accreditation of its master’s program with

the Association of MBAs (AMBA)—all in the same term.

Despite the effort, pursuing multiple accreditations at the same time has its advantages, Sue Cox says. Everyone at LUMS remained in a certain “accreditation mindset,” and the school was able to conserve and combine efforts.

For instance, she says, “We have a fully international advisory board with members from around the globe. We can combine one full board meeting with one accreditation visit, but we can’t ask board members to come back again a month later for a second accreditation visit. In that sense, managing the logistics for multiple accreditations made a lot of sense.”

At the Rotterdam School of Management at Erasmus University in the Netherlands—which also has been accredited by the three organizations—similar efforts are under way to simplify the accreditation and re-accreditation process. “Until a couple of years ago, each reaccreditation was dealt with separately, and different sets of coordinators were responsible for different programs,” says dean George S. Yip.

## If You’re Thinking About Accreditation...

**1. Understand how much effort is involved.** Be realistic about the challenges and time-frames necessary for a successful effort, says Nakiye Boyacigiller of Sabanci University. To make sure all the tasks get done, she says, divide the work among many people and recruit champions who will “take the process very seriously.”

Because the effort can be so immense, let faculty know you appreciate their work, says Adelphi University’s Anthony Libertella. “Establish a reward system to motivate and maintain faculty momentum,” he

says, “and celebrate small victories along the way.”

**2. Ask for help when you need it.** Libertella advises that administrators consult an expert early in the accreditation process. Other deans recommend seeking advice from assigned mentors, staff members at accreditation bodies, and colleagues at other schools.

“Hearing personally from colleagues who have gone through the process is very helpful,” says Boyacigiller. “It’s like learning a recipe by watching a cooking show instead of reading a cookbook.”

**3. Learn about your own institution.** “Put together self-evaluation documents that reflect how the school envisions its future direction,” says Sue Cox of Lancaster University. “Ask responsible role-holders of the school to contribute to the self-evaluation. When you’ve gathered all the information, have someone go through it and look for internal inconsistencies. Don’t think this is a document that can be ghost-written.”

And start the work early, says Libertella. “In the year prior to submitting a formal self-evaluation report, do a mock accreditation review,” he advises.



**4. Make sure your data collection systems are compatible with those of the accrediting body.**

Consider the ways you collect data on faculty, including where they’ve published, when they were promoted, and how they’ve been developed. “When we underwent AACSB accreditation, we also had to look at assurance of learning and how we collected data on student

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Today, RSM systematically collects the data necessary for accreditation and compares the requirements of the awarding bodies. "Differences in subject, focus, and emphasis thus become apparent," says Yip. "At the same time, we can establish the overlap between the different accreditation requirements, and that's very useful as well. We have also been able to reach an agreement with our national accrediting organization, NVAO, so we can use reaccreditation information from AACSB to nationally accredit a number of our programs. Moreover, we recently appointed a special accreditation manager to oversee and coordinate activities for all the different accreditation processes. This doesn't just streamline activities—it also helps us make the most out of the data."

The immense effort of managing multiple accreditation requirements pays off with equally huge rewards, Cox believes. Not only does undergoing each process contribute greatly to the betterment of the school, but achieving the designations instantly confers legitimacy as a top school, she says. "Our

outcomes. We had to revise some of the ways in which our data were collected and stored," says Cox.

### 5. Put your best foot forward.

When the accreditation team visits the campus, work to make the visit a success, says Cox. Keep logistics smooth, make sure the team receives all the information it needs, and quickly fulfill requests for more data. In addition, make sure students and faculty understand the importance of the visit, but let them speak freely about their experiences with the school. "Otherwise, you're not going to learn

anything," she says. "This is an opportunity for other people to test out what you think is true."

### 6. Pay attention to what you learn.

"Listen carefully to the feedback," says Cox. "Make sure you take every opportunity to engage stakeholders in the development of objectives."

### 7. Realize that the process won't always be smooth.

"Be prepared to deal with Murphy's Law," says Libertella. But when the inevitable setbacks occur, solve the problems, maintain your calm, and move forward toward accreditation goals.

students, our advisory board, our corporate partners, and our academic partners are looking to join and have alliances with schools that have multiple accreditations," she says.

Cox notes that the three different accreditations offer a school three different lenses. AMBA is very program-specific, dealing only with the MBA. EQUIS focuses on a school's strategy, direction, and governance. AACSB connects the school's mission with its programs and achievements, while drilling deeper into program quality. "I see the three accreditations as being very complementary," she says.

### Maintaining Quality

No matter which brand of accreditation a school pursues, achieving and maintaining it can lead to "episodic stress," Cox notes. Administrators can mitigate this to some degree by applying continuous improvement tactics to program goals. "I know that when my AACSB peer review team returns to Lancaster, they'll be looking to see if we've consolidated our assurance of learning programs and if we can demonstrate some growth in our international research," she says. "These are objectives we need to be working on all the time. In that sense, accreditation becomes sort of a rallying call for the troops."

Williams agrees. He points out that AACSB's shortened reaccreditation cycle—from ten years to five years—has made continuous improvement even more imperative. "School administrators can't just get accredited, heave a sigh of relief, and then sit back and do nothing for nine years," Williams says. In the past, by the time schools had to seek reaccreditation, the whole faculty might have turned over and the school could have lapsed in key areas, he says, making reaccreditation almost as difficult as initial accreditation.

Once a school has achieved accreditation, it becomes part of a larger community of educational institutions where information is shared to the benefit of all. "One of the things the awarding bodies do is spread best practices throughout the management community," says Cox. "Spreading that information is a good goal for the awarding bodies, who are there to promote the excellence of schools generally."

Indeed, as business and business education become more international, the world's accrediting bodies increasingly are promoting excellence around the globe. Today, a school pursuing accreditation has the chance to benchmark itself against—and share best practices with—schools in Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the U.S. As each individual school focuses on its own continuous improvement, it also joins a greater community whose members are all striving to raise the bar. Thus, accreditation prompts a virtuous cycle that improves management education for everyone. 