

The AACSB Accreditation Visit

One of the most critical aspects of the accreditation process in higher education, initial and maintenance alike, is the on-site peer review visit. As the words “peer” and “review” indicate, an accreditation visit is an evaluation performed by deans from similar schools to determine if the institution is in alignment with the applicable accreditation standards. The objective is to find evidence of overall high-quality and continuous improvement. During a visit, “the rubber meets the road,” and a school learns if all of its hard work, the advice from its helpful volunteers, and the changes it has implemented have paid off. If, after thorough review, investigation, and consideration, evidence is found that supports a school’s Self-Evaluation Report, the peer review team will provide a recommendation to initially accredit or maintain the designation to the appropriate accreditation committee and ultimately to the AACSB Board of Directors.

Elements of the Peer Review Team Visit

On average, two and a half years prior to the maintenance review visit, and one and a half years prior to the initial accreditation review visit, institutions are asked to submit a list of peer and aspirant schools. This list is one of the items used to assemble the final peer review team. Generally, the chair of the team is the first member to be assigned. The chair becomes the main contact person for the school. He/she reviews (if needed) the documents from the school and offers advice concerning the information provided. The chair also is the person who, if time and schedules allow, visits the school prior to the actual on-site review to get to know the school and discuss the particulars of the visit. Together, the dean of the school and the chair of the team draft a visit schedule. Before the schedule is finalized, the chair shares the schedule with the team members. The objective of the schedule is to ensure that time is used efficiently and effectively, and that all stakeholders know well in advance when they are scheduled to meet with the team.

Team members are generally assigned an area of responsibility and will lead and provide reporting concerning this area of responsibility. The team accomplishes a large amount of work in a very short period of time. This is why it is so important that the schedule is well balanced between data gathering, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting. Most teams will provide a draft report with the school before leaving the school or will be very close to finalizing a draft report. Each visit ends with an exit interview during which the school learns the outcome of the visit.

The on-site meetings and areas of concern or commendation vary from visit to visit. They are specific to the areas identified by the team based on the written material received. Overall, the majority of review visits include:

- A meeting with the institution’s president and provost
- Conversations with all levels of faculty and support staff
- Discussions with students, alumni, local employers, and committee representatives, as well as a thorough review of the materials gathered by the school to further support the existence of high quality and desire for continuous improvement

Tips for Preparing for an Initial AACSB Business Accreditation Visit

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Developing a Strategic Approach to the Accreditation Visit

Thoughtful preparation for the initial AACSB Business Accreditation visit can enhance the on-site review process and significantly improve the likelihood of a favorable accreditation decision for the school. The general strategy of the accreditation process is to develop a quality educational program that is strategically focused, well led, and financially well supported. The Self-Evaluation Report (SER) outlines this and should thoroughly document the school's programs and activities by fully responding to all of the requested information. The SER also should tell the school's story such as, what it is, why it is like this, and why this is good for constituents. This will encourage the peer review team members and the appropriate accreditation committee to focus on the uniqueness of the school and its programs. This also will ensure that the school will have a better opportunity to have some control over the accreditation-review process.

Prior to the visit, the peer review team will provide the school with an analysis of the SER, identifying issues and concerns. This analysis will likely require additional information that the school will need to provide to the review team, either prior to or during the visit. Even though additional information may not be required by the team, it is best to respond to as many of these issues as possible prior to the visit. By providing this material prior to the visit, the school may be able to satisfy the review team to the extent that any issues will no longer be concerns. This also will allow the actual visit to focus only on a limited number of the most important issues, and also allow the team to efficiently confirm alignment with the AACSB Standards. By having a more limited number of issues, the school can then focus the visit schedule on these issues and more effectively respond to these concerns during the visit.

If the school has been effective in this strategic approach to the visit, there may only be a limited number of issues that will need to be addressed during the visit. In this way, the visit can then be more advisory and collegiate, rather than evaluative. Such an experience will be more pleasant for everyone, and the results of the visit will be more valuable for the school. The more effective peer review team chairs will use such an approach in preparing for their visit. But, in any case, the school that is under review can very successfully influence the process by taking this strategic approach to the visit.