Conducting a Virtual Mentor Visit

These are uncertain times. The impact of COVID-19 has not only impacted peer-review visits, but it also has impacted how mentors engage with mentee schools. When the pandemic began, many visits planned by mentors were postponed until the world went back to “normal.” As days and months pass, and a “new normal” emerges, mentors and schools may no longer hold on to the hope that a physical visit will be possible soon. The initial accreditation process requires that mentors visit schools within the first year of assignment and prepare a visit report, but what does that mean when a physical visit is not possible? Just as with CIR visits, AACSB is now advising schools to liaise with their mentor and develop a virtual visit schedule.

AACSB has published a virtual visit protocol for virtual mentor visits, which serves as an easy reference guide for mentors and schools in the development of a virtual visits. In addition to the protocol, there is a sample virtual mentor visit schedule available. This sample schedule includes all the events that would take place during an on-site review but is spread out over three days to accommodate shorter meetings. This sample should serve as a starting point, but schools and mentors are encouraged to work together to modify the schedule to accomplish the visit objectives.

The objectives of a mentor visit, whether virtual or on site, are the same:

1. Become familiar with the school and institution.
2. Identify issues that may help or hinder potential accreditation.
3. Begin forming recommendations for quality enhancement and continuous improvement.
4. Help ensure consistency in assessing performance relative to the school’s particular mission and AACSB accreditation standards.
5. Review the business programs offered at the institution to determine what is to be included and excluded from scope.

With thoughtful preparation, these objectives can be achieved without a physical visit to the campus. Here are some insights on how to conduct a productive virtual mentor visit.

Orientation

The first interactions with the school are critical to developing trust, gaining understanding, and setting expectations. Maling Ebrahimpour, dean of the University of Rhode Island College of Business, has experience mentoring a school when a physical visit to the campus was not possible, and he advises having two introductory meetings to obtain a good sense of the culture and attitude of the school:

*First and foremost, the mentor needs to identify the key person (either Dean or person in charge of the accreditation process). Then set up a virtual meeting - not just a phone call. It is essential that there is a video so people can meet each other. It makes a major difference.*

*Then follow this meeting with another meeting soon [after] with key people from the host school. Ask the host school participants (dean, executive committee, the accreditation officer, etc.) about their role and what they do and how what their role is with regard to accreditation process.*
Peter Lindstrom, dean of external relations at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland, and Larry Rose, dean of the Jack H. Brown College of Business and Public Administration at California State University, San Bernardino, shared practical advice for preparing for an initial mentor visit during a session at ICAM earlier this year (Mentors on Mentoring, ICAM 2020). Like Ebrahimpour, Lindstrom and Rose advise having initial virtual meeting(s) with the dean and key faculty to get a feeling for the school’s motivation and level of commitment and resources. For Rose, he prefers to follow these discussions with a visit once the school has as rough draft of the iSER to review.

In summary, a couple of short orientation meetings, followed by a more intensive visit, is a good practice, and all of these may be conducted in a virtual manner if necessary.

Preparing for the (Virtual) Visit

Lindstrom advises that, in preparation for the initial visit, mentors should look through the school’s website, rankings, and news stories on the school or higher education in the region for context. He also advises connecting with the school’s AACSB staff liaison for insights on the school’s progress through the eligibility phase, and reviewing the eligibility application, strategic plan, and committee decision letter. This review is assisted by the mentor visit report template for developing questions to ask during the visit.

In addition, Ebrahimpour recommends asking for media files that the school may have available, such as videos of events and activities that the school has recorded and are available online. For example, if the school has conducted and recorded a career fair, or hosted an industry conference panel with alumni, links to these could be provided to the mentor in advance. Available brochures and course catalogs can be shared with the mentor via a link or online. These additional pieces of evidence can support the development of the mentor visit report, as well.

To assist with facilitating the discussions via a virtual platform, Ebrahimpour suggests asking schools to create and share an organization chart and/or document that lists all the faculty under the departments. Another tip is to ask for the resume of all the visit participants attending each session with their picture attached to improve the personal connections with the individuals involved.

Post-Visit Communication

Whether held as an intensive two-to-three-day visit or broken up into smaller meetings over a month, one essential outcome of these interactions with the school is the mentor visit report. This report is sent to AACSB after the visit concludes and provides an important communication between the mentor, AACSB staff liaison, and Initial Accreditation Committee. In the report, the mentor describes the school’s gaps and focus areas and makes a conclusion of whether the school is ready to move forward in pursuit of accreditation and has the necessary resources and support to be successful.

Another tip from Ebrahimpour for mentors who conduct their initial visit in a virtual manner is that frequent communication is more important in these situations. A monthly check to say hello and offer support will encourage the school to be on top of the process.
Working With Your Staff Liaison

AACSB is grateful for your service, and staff liaisons are here to support you. As an example of this support, a mentor recently expressed concern about the breadth of knowledge of the standards at the school and sought support from the staff liaison. In response, the liaison prepared a message to the school advising them of the various online resources available and specific threads on the AACSB Exchange related to these knowledge gaps. The mentor and staff liaison also made a plan to jointly conduct a brief overview and Q&A session with the school's faculty.

If you are unsure about expectations to conduct a visit virtually or in person, or just want to discuss doubts, please reach out to your staff liaison.