Addressing the Need for Management Processes for Higher Education Accreditation

Linda L. Brennan and Walter W. Austin

ABSTRACT: The accreditation standards of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International) ask business schools to describe consistent processes that provide for operational consistency and continuous improvement in support of the schools' stated missions. Such practices are beneficial to all institutions of higher education seeking accreditation or reaffirmation. This article addresses the identification of requisite processes, describes an approach for defining them, and suggests a format for documenting their essential elements. We discuss the value of quality management practices to higher education and present caveats and considerations for successfully implementing this methodology.

KEY WORDS: accreditation; processes; quality management; higher education.

Floss your teeth. Exercise. Eat lots of fiber. Drink eight glasses of water each day. We know that each of these practices is a good thing to do—yet how many of us are doing these things consistently?

Such is likely the case in the practice of quality management. Most higher education administrators have at least a passing knowledge of the tenets of Total Quality Management (TQM) and the principles of customer focus, teamwork, and continuous improvement. Yet how many of us are doing these things, consistently or well?

With the following case study, we describe one business school's efforts to institute consistent processes that have provided the administrative infrastructure to promote customer focus, teamwork, and continuous improvement. We also highlight successful approaches to overcoming the obstacles encountered.

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Motivation

Business school accreditation standards provide powerful extrinsic motivation for formal process management. The standards of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International) emphasize the importance of processes in all aspects of a business school’s operations, as stated in *Achieving Quality and Continuous Improvement through Self-Evaluation and Peer Review: Standards for Accreditation* (AACSB, 2000): “… programs in management education, and the accreditation process, must focus not only on the present, but also on preparation for the future. The processes used to strengthen curriculum, develop faculty, improve instruction, and enhance intellectual activity determine the direction and rate of improvement. Thus, these processes play an important role in accreditation [emphasis added]” (p. 1).

Regional accrediting bodies, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), expect that “each member institution is engaged in an ongoing program of improvement” (SACS, 2001, p. 3). Themes of continuous improvement and processes for evaluation underlay the philosophy of accreditation.

Beyond accreditation issues, documenting operational processes helps institutions to operate more efficiently and effectively. Process definition is simply planning to reduce errors and avoid wasted effort (Quinn, Anderson, & Finkelstein, 1996). It is a conscious attempt to influence how certain repetitive functions (e.g., admissions decisions, advisement choices, performance evaluations) will be conducted, rather than handling them on an ad hoc basis. Often, when repetitive actions are necessary, perfectly adequate processes may informally develop and evolve; however, over time processes may drift, and desirable or important benefits may be lost. Documentation is not intended to stop evolution, rather to enhance it by promoting understanding.

This view is consistent with TQM philosophy and techniques. W. Edward Deming’s Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle of continuous improvement calls for action based on actual data. Statistical process control is used to draw attention to assignable causes of variation so effort is not spent adjusting processes that do not need adjustment. Pareto analysis1 focuses “on the few rather than the many”. Again, the intent

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1Also known as the “80-20 rule,” Pareto analysis is based on the assumption that 80% of process problem are caused by 20% of the causes. This informs efforts to improve processes.