IFSAC Accreditation, It is Worth the Effort!

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There is a considerable amount of work to do in any accreditation visit. Most faculty have contributed to efforts dealing with regional accreditation. In the case of my university it is the North Central Association (NCA). Why then, should even more work be done to accredit the fire science program? Faculty members are busy enough without taking on the extra work and effort involved with specific accreditation. But after completing the work and successfully meeting the criteria, we have found that the extra effort benefited our program, our students, and our university. What follows is a discussion of how IFSAC accreditation tied into our university’s overall assessment effort. There were other benefits as well. Certainly, the observations made here are particular to Lake Superior State University, but there may be some issues and concerns which might apply or be of interest to other institutions.

The Setting

Lake Superior State University is the smallest of the 15 public schools of higher education in the state of Michigan. It is located in the far north on the border with Canada. It is one of two universities in Michigan which offer a bachelor’s degree in fire science. The other is Madonna University, an excellent private school in the Detroit area. There are also a number of community colleges in Michigan, which have two-year degree programs in fire science. Thus, Lake State has students who transfer into the bachelors program as well as students who spend their four years on the Sault Ste. Marie Campus. While the program offers only one four-year degree, students do have a choice of three tracks: engineering, hazardous materials, and the generalist. The engineering and hazardous materials tracks amount to a double major, while students in the generalist track will select a minor which is suited to their career goals. Most select a minor in business, accounting, public administration, or participate in the paramedic program which leads to their state license. Students who are aiming at a career in the public fire service also may receive their certification through the Michigan Fire Fighters Training Council. General education and other degree requirements are similar to other institutions. And, like other institutions, Lake Superior State University also has a requirement for both internal and external assessment.

Assessment

Lake Superior State is a small school. As a result, the budget is always critical. Both faculty and administration must ensure that we get the most from every dollar. Hence assessment is important. There is even a separate budget for assessment efforts and every academic and support unit goes through an internal assessment process. The goal is to have an internal assessment every three years. However, external assessment is also important. Programs like engineering and nursing have their own accrediting agencies which visit the campus, review the program, and render a judgment. In cases where there is no formal accrediting agency, assistance is requested from associations. For example, three visitors who were members of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences reviewed the Criminal Justice program.

The administration and the Board of Control also have discussed the purpose of assessment. Select members of the Board asked why some programs need to be assessed by external agencies. The concern was that external reviewers would arrive, make their observations, and turn in a report which would demand more money and expenditures for that particular program. There were even concerns that faculty in a specific program would bring in their “friends” from other institutions, who would then provide the “ammunition” needed to back up a huge budget request. This, of course, is not the purpose of external assessment. Indeed, the IFSAC team pointed out several ways in which money could be saved or a specific goal attained without additional expenditures. The purpose of assessment for the university as a whole and the fire science program in particular is to see if a program is achieving its goals. The best way to do this is through peer review.

The Invitation to IFSAC

The fire science program at Lake Superior State is only 11 years old. There had never been an external review. Thus, it certainly was time for such a review. Added to this need, was the fact that the university as a whole was preparing for the visit of the NCA site team. While the fire science faculty was certainly interested in acquiring IFSAC accreditation, the Chair, Dean, and Provost were concerned with accomplishing an assessment which would meet the needs of the overall university effort as related to the NCA. As a result, the assessment process itself was emphasized rather than any need to have the fire science program “accredited.”

The university has been sending a representative to the IFSAC Degree Assembly since its inception. With the need for an external assessment of the fire science program, it was to IFSAC that the university turned. The advantage was that IFSAC’s Degree Assembly had the criteria, instructions, and outline for the completion of a self-study. These documents provided fire science program faculty with a source outside of our own department. In this sense, there are “objective” criteria and documents to use. In completing the self-study, the assessment process required by the university was also well underway. In addition, at the end of the self-study, the faculty had an indication of what additional preparations were necessary for accreditation by IFSAC. IFSAC was then asked to send a site team to the campus to review the fire science four-year degree program. As a result of this visit, IFSAC recognized Lake Superior State University as an accredited institution.
Advantages of Accreditation

There are real advantages in completing the IFSAC accreditation process. First, the self-study itself is a worthy exercise. When completed, this document indicates just where the program stands. Issues involving support services, the library, the use of part-time instructors, and facilities are only some of the items covered in the self-study. More important, the self-study provides the means by which faculty can judge whether or not their objectives are being met. IFSAC recognizes that there are differences between institutions and programs. Therefore, there is no "prescription" as to what must be done to be accredited. The main concern is that the program is accomplishing what it sets out to do. This philosophy is reflected in the criteria involved for accreditation of a program. While there is considerable work involved in completing the self-study, the end result is a thorough review of the program against these internationally established criteria.

The very process of accreditation also ties into our preparations for the NCA visit already mentioned. Indeed, a copy of the self-study is now in the resource room which will be used by the NCA team when it visits next year. The self-study is also an "example" for other faculty to follow in their own assessment efforts (This has been a mixed blessing for the fire science faculty to be sure.). Hence, the fire science self-study and external review conducted by the IFSAC site team fits into the overall university assessment plan. This overall assessment plan is the subject of an NCA review.

Second, IFSAC is an international organization. Lake Superior State is located on the Canada-U.S. border and we have Canadian students in our degree program. The province of Ontario recently received accreditation through the IFSAC Certificate Assembly. Lake State also has just sent a faculty member on sabbatical to the UK’s Fire Service College in Moreton-in Marsh, England. The Fire Service College is also a member of both the Certificate and Degree Assemblies. Thus, the international aspect of IFSAC has a practical as well as symbolic meaning.

Third, the IFSAC review helped evaluate our procedures and our program. The final report identified our strengths and weaknesses. The excellent support and work done by our library was recognized in the report. On the other hand, there were some areas which could be improved. In one case, the final report recommended that we add a sentence about the fire program in an administrative form dealing with liability. The faculty had overlooked this, perhaps because we were so close we just didn’t "see" it. There were also important recommendations regarding the insurance requirements of our interns. One recommendation pointed out an alternative arrangement which would help us accomplish our goals at no additional cost or even less cost to the program. There were several other recommendations that were most helpful. This was because those who read the report and those who visited the university all had extensive and diverse experience. They understood what we were trying to accomplish, but did not measure our program by any arbitrary model or arrive with a preconceived notion of how the program should work. The report showed where we were on track with our program and where we could improve.

Fourth, the accreditation process had a positive effect on our students. The students were told that we wanted our program to undergo a review. Student input and interviews are a part of the IFSAC site team’s schedule. The students felt a part of the process and felt that their views counted. In fact, their concerns and views did count.

Fifth, the accreditation involved other academic departments and support services on our campus. The library was already mentioned, but student services, the assessment office, the physical plant, the budget staff, other academic departments and the administration were all involved in working toward accreditation. Our President welcomed the team and our Provost received the report before the team left the campus. The whole process of accreditation involved more than just the fire science faculty. The outcome was the result of a team effort across organizational lines. The program received heightened visibility on the campus. There were even some who admitted that the fire science faculty showed some courage in "calling artillery fire on their own position."

Conclusion

Assessment is an important part of any academic endeavor. In the case of one fire science program, the accreditation process as outlined by the IFSAC Degree Assembly fit into the overall assessment plan of our entire university. The IFSAC criteria provided an internationally approved set of criteria which formed the basis for a self-study document. This self-study became the basis for a complete review of our fire science four-year degree program. The self-study is still a reference document, which helps guide the progress and activity of the academic program. The accreditation process involved the entire campus rather than just the fire science program. One result was a more positive image on our campus. Certainly the students felt they had an impact on what is really their program. The peer review also helped us evaluate our efforts by providing us with a broader perspective. The work involved paid off handsomely in the benefits we received from going through the assessment process. Lastly, student, faculty, and administration are proud of the recognition which accreditation affords.