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Creating an Electronic Document Center for NCATE Accreditation

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Academic Leadership Journal

Accreditation visits are a stressful time. Those of us involved understand the amount of preparation and the years spent in getting ready for those few short days. It's a monumental task with a small core of heavily utilized individuals, a larger group involved with report writing and other tasks, and the combined effort of every single faculty and staff member in the unit.

In order to make information available to the review teams there has been a gradual move towards electronic documentation over the past decade. Increasingly, the amount of information that is only available in print form is becoming almost non-existent. The technology provides greater access to materials for the review teams even before they step foot on campus. However, this does not mean that the task is easier for the college or university involved.

This paper will discuss the development of the electronic document center (EDC) at the University of Central Missouri. It will highlight the initial assumptions and planning, discoveries made along the way, and thoughts and ideas as we reflect back on the process. It is hoped that sharing this insight will help those who will be preparing for their own site visits.

Background

The University of Central Missouri (UCM) is a moderately selective, comprehensive, public university located in Warrensburg, a west central Missouri community of 17,000, fifty miles southeast of Kansas City. UCM was founded in 1871 as a two-year institution, State Normal School #2, with three faculty members and 30 students. Over time it has grown, becoming a university in the 1970's, and now offering more than 150 programs of study to over 11,000 students.

With strong historical foundations as a teachers college, the College of Education is a cornerstone of the University. The college graduates the largest number of educators of all the colleges and universities in the state, offering the greatest number of degree programs and certification areas.

UCM completed its accreditation visit in April 2009. The visit consisted of two teams: a National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) team comprising six members and a state team from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) comprising nine members, the largest review teams in the state. A total of 62 major, minor, and certification programs were reviewed and a total of 34 reports were written.

Basic Organization of the EDC

There were six main components that we considered when designing the EDC. This is not to say that we created only six sections, but it did provide us with a framework of the pieces that needed to be considered.

The most important piece of the EDC is providing the institutional report (IR). This includes an overview

of the IR, the conceptual framework, and all six standards. The IR was provided in multiple ways. Initially it was submitted electronically to NCATE via AIMS (Accreditation Information Management System). However, the PDF (portable document format) that this gets converted into is sometimes not the easiest to read. Therefore, the IR was also made into a single Microsoft Word document and placed on the EDC. Additionally, all of the content of the IR was turned into html and placed directly into the EDC as a series of web pages. With the exact same content as in AIMS it was much easier to read, jump to different sections, link to documents, and search for words within the browser. This web version was what was primarily used.

The next important piece was a program webpage. This page was a jumping off point for information about from every program area that submitted either an NCATE SPA and/or a DESE report. This page consisted of a table acting as a matrix listing every program, links to SPA reports, reports back from the SPAs, DESE reports, the SPA or other organization overseeing each program area, current status of the national program review (i.e. recognized, recognized with conditions, etc.), and the name of the faculty member responsible linked to a faculty profile webpage. Additionally, each program area linked to an individual program page which also duplicated links to all of their reports. These program web pages also included vitae from program faculty, syllabi used in their programs, and any additional documents that programs wanted to share but simply did not fit or were not needed in any of the reports.

The EDC included a section on general information which had several subcategories underneath. This included a page linking to every single vita available from full-time and part-time faculty all in one place, every single syllabus from every program in one long alphabetical listing, catalogs and other comprehensive documents, and a page soliciting third party testimony.

Another section was created to house any other types of reports and documentation. This included documentation provided by the Professional Education Faculty (PEF), Teacher Education Council (TEC), a copy of the student teacher handbook, and reports and raw data that may have been referenced in program reports. This area also included newsletters, meeting minutes, and other forms of documentation that could be collected in one place.

A separate section was created for the conceptual framework. While there is another section of the IR that contained this information, this section was a shorter, more condensed, and more publically friendly version that was produced early on before the final IR was actually written.

Finally, the home page for the EDC provided a jump off point for everything just described. Additionally, the home page was used for ease of access to individual web pages such as the following: state supplemental information not found in program reports, items added on request during the site visit, Dean's welcome message, steering committee member list, and description of file formats, site map, and a schedule page. The schedule page included the site visit agenda, list of team members, travel/hotel information, campus map, restaurants, weather, and city information.

At the Time of the Site Visit

Preparing the EDC before the visiting teams arrived was not the end of the conversation. We needed to ensure that everything worked smoothly during the critical few days that the system would be put to use, and contingency plans needed to be in place.

So that the visitors would not be left in the dark in case of a server crash or any other unforeseen problem the entire contents of the EDC was placed onto flash drives. Additionally, laptops were provided to all the visitors to work with so that we could ensure connection to the campus network and similar setups in case help desk staff were needed.

On each laptop Firefox was installed and the home page was set to the EDC. Icons for Microsoft Office were also placed on the desktop and everything else was cleaned off so that the visitors had a streamlined experience and could get straight to work.

During the opening session in which the Dean and Associate Dean presented an overview to the review teams, spoke about the conceptual framework, and provided some historical background, time was also provided to go over the EDC. While most of the team should already have been working from their home institutions prior to arriving on campus, it provided an opportunity to highlight key points including the provided backup flash drives. We also created a page on the EDC in which requested items during the visit would be added. These were added in the order of the request by day. This ensured that the rest of the website was static and would not confuse the accreditation team with changing files while they worked with them, provided a way to give requested information to the visitors, and simultaneously allowed all of the visitors to see what was being requested.

Creating the EDC

The EDC was a tremendous feat. In the end it consisted of over 249 MB comprising 1,362 files. It was built with a standard web editor by a single individual. Copies of the entire website were backed up to the webmaster's laptop as a precaution against a worst case scenario of a hard drive failure for the server.

The process for creating the EDC began over two years prior to the visit, with initial conversations beginning even the year before that. Space on the faculty web server was utilized as the most secure and safest place especially because of automated back up.

In terms of design, the underlying concept was one of simplicity and ease of use. The EDC did not need to be flashy. It was meant to be used quickly and easily by those from outside our campus. Organization was most important. Additionally, it needed to be in a file structure that was easily copied to a flash drive as opposed to being locked into the system utilized by the official university website and the content management system in place.

Findings

What did we gain from the experience? What would we offer as suggestions for future steering committees? The most important item is that everything needs to be put on the EDC as soon as possible. It cannot wait until the night before the visitors arrive. While there may always be last minute additions, the bulk of the EDC and especially all of the program reports need to be up a month or two ahead of time. This gives the visitors time to review documents before stepping foot on campus. The time of the actual visit is so brief that it cannot all be done over those few days. In fact, we were able to edit documents the month prior to the visit because of pre-visit feedback from the state team. We would not have done as well otherwise.

Have everything channeled through the NCATE coordinator. While this may mean a great deal of work, without having one person as the point of contact it could quickly get out of hand.

Be sure to proofread and double check everything. We made heavy use of a couple administrative assistants and office professions for reviewing documents, formatting, making sure the submitted documents were actually what the file names said they were, removing personal information from syllabi, making sure links worked, and even spell checking. A lot of mistakes would not have been caught without these few extra set of eyes. Towards the end they put in many hours on the weekends and late into the night.

For that matter, program coordinators need to double check to ensure that everything is posted that needed to be. Since no single person is an expert on every area, program coordinators are needed to ensure that everything they want is posted and available.

For ease of transferring files, a shared drive is a must. While a lot of documents were simply emailed back and forth, having a repository for syllabi, vitae, and other documents is a must. As the webmaster I would file each email after I addressed what was in it, and then I would tackle folders one at a time placed on the shared drive.

In terms of standardization, documents need to be saved in the same format. This means opening each file and resaving it if need be. We decided to go with Microsoft Office 97-2003 (.doc, .xls, .ppt) for the bulk of our documents as they are so commonly used. The remaining documents were pdf's and images. An important aspect was ensuring that the same file naming format was used for types of documents that we had larger numbers of, such as syllabi and vitae, ie Engl 101 and vitae_smith. This eliminated a great deal of hunting for files as they were in alphabetical and numerical order.

Since the syllabi and vitae were linked to from several locations, this also provided a way to double check. If it were not for program specific pages it would have been difficult to see from one master list if everything was there that needed to be.

In terms of creating documents we encouraged faculty to create single files if possible instead of breaking them into multiple pieces. This not only saved time for uploading files, but made linking much easier. It would have been very messy ensuring that the live website worked the same way as the offline flash drive copy, especially when trying to link between web pages, external web pages, and from a document to another document or web page.

Finally, keep in mind that this is a project of massive scale. During the last two months before the visit several of us were working 60 hrs per week as we still had our regular tasks to attend to. At one point during the peak of the rush to get documents collected, reviewed, and added, we were working almost 80 hrs per week. In the end, we were successful and had smooth though stressful accreditation visit. It is hoped that others will be able to learn from our experiences.

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