

MIS Program Accreditation: Comparing AACSB and ABET

Thomas Hilton
MIS Department, University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire
Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 54701 USA
HiltonTS@UWEC.edu

Abstract

This paper explores the question of accreditation for MIS Departments located in schools of business. Specifically, it addresses specific requirements of AACSB accreditation and ABET/CAC accreditation that are synergistic, merely compatible, or contradictory. The tentative conclusion is advanced that an MIS department can meet both sets of requirements without unreasonable heroics and that doing so brings benefits to MIS departments.

Keywords: accreditation, business school, management information systems department, AACSB, Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, ABET, Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, CAC, Computing Accreditation Commission

Introduction

Accreditation is a time-honored method of assuring the quality of academic programs in higher education (Pare 1998). Every reputable higher education program in the USA is accredited by at least one agency officially sanctioned by the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education 2002). For instance, the standard of business school accreditation is the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International) (AACSB International 1998b). While higher education accreditation is generally conferred at the institution and college level, some individual schools/departments also have the opportunity to earn accreditation of specific programs. For instance, AACSB International offers special program accreditation to departments of accounting (AACSB International 1998a).

In consequence of this, several questions naturally arise. For instance, what is the relationship between general and special accreditation? Under what circumstances is it desirable to add special accreditation to general accreditation? My research will address these questions in the context of MIS programs in business schools.

1. MIS Content in AACSB Accreditation Standards

AACSB International accredits undergraduate and graduate programs in business. In Section C of the recently replaced AACSB *Standards for Business Accreditation* (AACSB International 2001) are listed the various content areas required in undergraduate and graduate business curricula: ethical and global issues; the influence of political, social, legal/regulatory, environmental, and technological issues; the impact of demographic diversity on organizations; accounting; behavioral science; economics (domestic and global); mathematics and statistics; written and oral communication; financial reporting, analysis, and markets; and creation and distribution of goods and services. Most AACSB-accredited business curricula include specific course work in these areas (cf University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire n.d.).

Management information systems as a content area was absent from this list. Aside from the oblique reference to "technological issues" noted in the prior paragraph and a "basic computer usage" prerequisite to the MBA curriculum, information technology is not mentioned at all.

Thankfully, that has changed. The following item appears in the content list of the current *Eligibility Procedures and Standards for Business Accreditation* (AACSB International 2003) approved by AACSB on April 25, 2003, to replace the former standards: "information technologies as they influence the structure and processes of organizations and economies and the roles and techniques of management." The explicit acknowledgment of information as a valuable business product in item 3 and the inclusion of information technology in item 5 as a fundamental business driver are both welcome additions.

2. Special Accreditation for MIS Programs

Unfortunately, references to MIS content were absent from many drafts of the new standards, notably the draft released for comment in September 2002. Because of this, the Executive Council of the Association for Information Systems (the largest and arguably most influential IS academic society) commissioned the publication and wide dissemination of "What every business student needs to know about information systems" (Ives, B., Valacich, J, Watson, R. T., Smud, R., et al. 2002); a copy was delivered to AACSB. One telling passage from that paper reads thus:

We fear that failure to recognize the essential importance of information technology and systems might eventually lead to the migration of information technology expertise and education out of the business school, leaving business graduates with inadequate education in a major change lever while failing to ensure that a large number of technology professionals are adequately educated in basic business concepts.

"The migration of information technology expertise and education out of the business school" was no empty threat. Long ambivalence of the AACSB toward IS content has motivated the creation of special IS accreditation standards by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), the body responsible for accrediting computer science and engineering programs (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology

2003). With this has arisen a movement to house IS with departments such as computer science and electronics engineering in a "College of Computing" or another similarly named entity (e.g., the School of Communications and Information Systems at Robert Morris University, the College of Computing at Georgia Institute of Technology, the College of Computing Sciences at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, etc.).

3. Value of Special MIS Accreditation

It seems clear to me that the most desirable location for MIS programs is in the business school to provide "business graduates with [adequate] education in a major change lever" and "to ensure that a large number of technology professionals are adequately educated in basic business concepts" per the quote above. Presumably, ABET accreditation of an MIS department housed within a college of business would only increase the credibility and quality of both the department and the college. However, the circumstances of the rise of this ABET accreditation presents interesting questions:

- A. What do business school and IS faculty and administrators know about the history and standards for ABET accreditation of IS programs?
- B. How do business school and IS faculty and administrators view the ABET accreditation guidelines for IS?
 - i. Are they viewed as an opportunity for MIS programs to improve?
 - ii. Are they viewed as unreasonable—too easy to be meaningful or too hard to meet?
 - iii. Are they viewed as a backlash against AACSB?
 - iv. Are they viewed as something else altogether?
- C. Would IS faculty and administrators regard ABET accreditation as a badge of quality for a business program or as a prelude to creating a College of Computing?
- D. Do the requirements of ABET accreditation complement those of AACSB, or do the two standards interfere with each other?

This paper presents responses to these and other, related questions.

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