

IS/CS Accreditation: The Ethics Component

Ronald J. Kizior

ISOM – Loyola University Chicago
Chicago, IL 60611

Robert Zant

Illinois State University
Bloomington, IL 61790

Abstract

This paper presents the results of a survey on the ethical component of the accreditation process for IS programs conducted in 2001 and 2002. We contacted those institutions who had recently gone through the accreditation process in order to determine any trends in the evaluation of the ethics component of the accreditation criteria. We were interested in determining what, if any, common experiences were shared by the universities during their recent accreditation process, and, hopefully, pass on to the readers any suggestions to universities who may be going through this accreditation process in the future.

Keywords: accreditation, ethics

1. Introduction

In the fall of 2001 one University was visited, on a trial basis, by the Computing Accreditation Commission (CAC) of ABET for the purpose of reviewing its information systems (IS) program for accreditation under the newly adopted criteria for IS accreditation. Six more programs went through the accreditation process the following year. This is definitely a daunting task, and at times not fully appreciated. There are a number of different phases and components to the accreditation process. Typically, a university will do a preliminary analysis of their program to identify any obvious changes required to meet the accreditation criteria. Then a formal self-study is conducted over a fall and spring semester. The self-study is submitted to the CAC in the summer and the program is visited the next fall. A preliminary, oral, report is provided at the time of the visit, and a formal, written report is provided latter. The university has the opportunity to make changes to the program and respond to the report. A final decision on accreditation is then made in the summer

following the visit. The entire process is thus fully a two-year process.

2. Previous Lessons Learned

As part of ABET's efforts to continually improve the accreditation process, several pilot visits and more than ten phase-in visits were conducted in the fall of 1998 to evaluate newly modified criteria. The feedback from these events was reviewed by the (Engineering Criteria 2000) EC2000 committee in February of 1999. The review was conducted in order to determine what was learned from the visits. Major points of interest were identified during this meeting. These points were grouped under two major headings: Academic programs and Program evaluators. There were 24 items listed under the academic program title and 7 topics listed under the program evaluators title. None of the items listed in either category dealt with ethics. We therefore feel that our survey will provide interesting and needed feedback for continuous improvement in the accreditation process.

The authors did not attempt nor did they intend to review and evaluate the entire accreditation process. The focus of this review and inquiry dealt with only the ethics component. However, the study did look at the ethics component through several stages of the accreditation process. The study sought to identify the steps the university took to improve, if necessary, their program before the actual accreditation review process started; what actions, if any, occurred as a result of their self-study evaluation before the accreditation visit; and what actions were taken, if any, as a result of the visit. These, along with a few other areas of concern were the focus of a survey instrument sent to the seven currently accredited programs.

3. Survey Results

The survey instrument was comprised of the eleven questions shown in the appendix.

All seven currently accredited universities responded to our survey. They each either had an accreditation visit during the fall of 2001 or 2002. The program(s) that were being reviewed for accreditation from these seven schools were: 4 – IS program only, 1 for IS/CS program, and 2 for both IS and CS programs separately.

The accreditation criteria are general statements relative to the quality of the curriculum, faculty, administration, and facilities. Guidelines, called Standards, are also given but vary from the fairly specific to very general statements. The standards for the ethical component is more like the latter, so it can not be determined with certainty, in advance, whether or not a program will be judged to meet the criteria. However, the majority of the universities reported that, both before and after the self-study process, they were very positive and confident that their program would hold up to the scrutiny of the accreditation process. Five of the universities indicated that they were very confident that their ethical component would meet the criteria, while only two thought that their ethical component was weak, but passable.

The self-study part of the accreditation process can be ----- a very revealing and rewarding activity. This task ----- reveals

to the university what their current condition is and what changes it may or may not need to make. With respect to the respondents in this study, five felt that the self-study evaluation had no effect on how they viewed their ethics component, while two of the universities did. Therefore, five universities took no further steps as a result of their self-study. One of the universities that took some course of action as a result of the self study evaluation indicated the following:

“Provided better oversight of the courses that provided coverage under the program’s control and got additional information on courses delivering this content but not under the program’s control.”

The second university had this to say concerning the self-study review:

“(After) attending ABET sessions at (various) conferences (this) convinced us that out topical coverage spread throughout the curriculum would not be convincing because they wanted documented assignments within each course at least equivalent to 0.5 credits, and would not allow the same experience to count for multiple goals.”

4. Action Before Accreditation Visit

The strategy that can be used to satisfy this ethics component is varied. A course of action taken by one university was the use of a special required course as well as coverage of ethics in a series of courses. In order to cover global, social, and ethical implications of computing, one university required students to take courses in Philosophy, Psychology, Anthropology, and Organizational Behavior. Another university taking the multi-course approach had their students take courses in information systems, management, and business law which were also used to meet AACSB accreditation criteria relative to these topics. Still, another university was able to satisfy this ethics component by focusing on assignments in ethics through the following four required courses: Distributed Computing, Systems Implementation, Information Systems, and IS Design. The multi-course approach was also taken by two other universities. One university spread an equivalent of 3 semester hours of

ethics topics over 10 different courses, while the other created a completely brand new course entitled "Global, Economic, Social and Ethical Issues". We can see from these reports that the majority of the universities definitely take the multi-course approach, and are able to satisfy the requirement through a variety of courses.

5. After On-Site Visit

The majority of the respondents indicated that their program "fulfilled the Requirement", while in two cases the visitation team "expressed concern". In neither case was the concern ---- as bad as it might seem. The concern regarding one university on the part of the visitation team was that there was a "lack of formal evidence to support coverage although interviews with faculty and students indicated adequate coverage". This may seem to be a minor point, but properly put, it is a concern since the accreditation process requires that compliance be documented. However, it is something that could easily be remedied, possibly by documenting ethics topics within the syllabus.

The concern for the other university was removed from the final report, because they had created a new course as mentioned previously that satisfied the concerns of the visitation team, even though it hadn't been taught yet. All of the universities agreed with the conclusions of the visitation teams, including the "concern" aspects as described previously. Once the visit was completed, four of the universities required no further action, while one university had an outside consultant conduct a full day in-service program for the faculty on integrating ethics into the curriculum. Another university had their curriculum committee conduct a thorough review of the program requirements and formally set up procedures to document course work for the ethics component. And, all of the universities ultimately did fulfill the requirement of the ethics component. However, as noted, this satisfaction can be accomplished in a variety of ways.

6. Future Accreditation Visits

For those universities that may be considering having their program accredited, this

brief review of past experience, although small in number, will hopefully be very useful. In general it is always suggested that the university first go through a preliminary self-study process. This should reveal to the university any problem areas, and it will be the first step in documenting not only the ethical component, but all of the other parts as well. How universities have satisfied the requirement varies, with different approaches being found to be acceptable. What is important is that the approach to ethical topics that is taken provides adequate coverage and that this is demonstrated through proper documentation, i.e. syllabus and handouts. If a university feels that they need some improvement, whether it is with faculty expertise, or in documentation, or in the type of courses offered, the self-study evaluation will provide the opportunity for the university to realize the path they should take.

NOTE: Of the seven respondents, six completed the entire survey, while one university only answered the first eight questions. Therefore, toward the end of the survey some of the results were based on only the responses of six universities.

Source: www.abet.org/ec2000.html

Appendix: Survey

1. When was the actual site visit for accreditation done at your institution?
Date: _____

2. Was the accreditation process being conducted for?
 - _____ Your IS program only
 - _____ Your IS/CS program
 - _____ Your CS program only
 - _____ Other: Please explain _____.

3. Before you conducted a self-study and before the accreditation review commenced, how did you feel that you're ethical component would stand up to the review process?
 - Confident
 - Not sure
 - Thought it was weak, but passable
 - Knew it would not pass

4. Did your self-study change your feeling for the ethical component requirement in your program ?
 - Yes No Not sure
 - Felt we were weak and needed to improve.
 - Other, please explain _____

5. What steps did you take to improve your program before the actual accreditation visit? (Check as many as you did)
 - None required
 - Had an outside consultant also examine our program to confirm our findings.
 - Had an outside consultant conduct an full day in-service program for the faculty on integrating ethics into the curriculum.
 - Created new course(s) to be introduced into the curriculum.
 - Name Course: _____ Required Elective course
 - Name Course: _____ Required Elective course
 - Name Course: _____ Required Elective course
 - Other courses of actions were taken: Please enumerate and explain: _____

6. Before the accreditation visit, what strategy was used to satisfy the social-ethics requirement for accreditation? (check all that apply)
 - a required course (text used _____)
 - coverage over several courses (please indicate number of courses and level of coverage)
 - other _____

