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eBook

# Anticipating Accreditation

5 Steps for a Smooth Accreditation Visit

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Introduction

Administrators have the tremendous responsibility of providing guidance and resources to faculty and staff as they prepare for an accreditation review. The right tools combined with a sound action plan can minimize the stress of accreditation by streamlining the entire process.

When implemented effectively, accreditation procedures can become an integral part of the inner workings of a program. Thorough planning and thoughtful processes can help instructors and faculty members retain a clear understanding of accreditation standards at all times—regardless of whether it's an accreditation review year—while helping to continuously identify gaps in the curriculum and take action based on evidence. This focus and planning can make a significant impact on the self-study process and documentation.
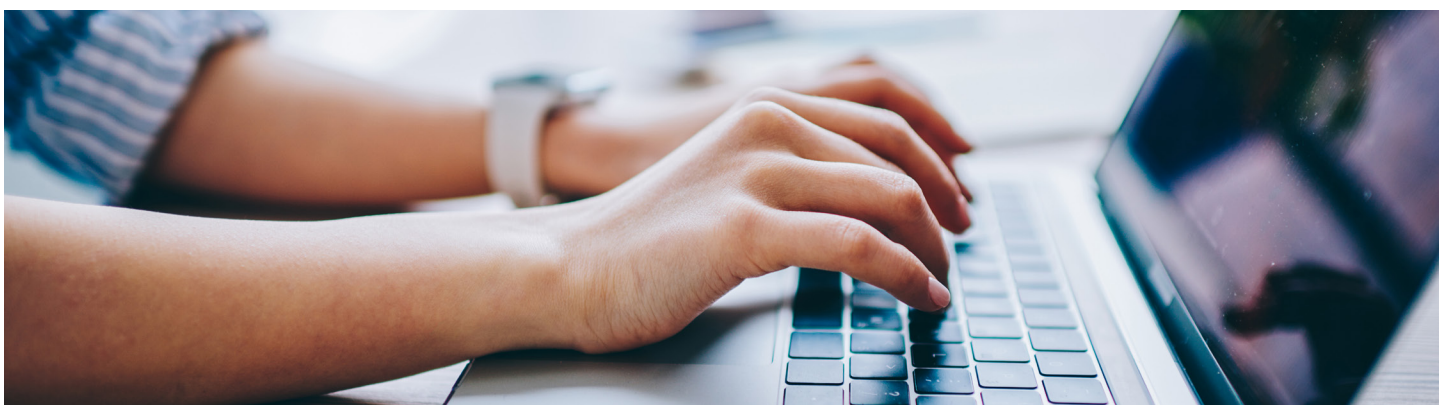
Following these five steps can help improve your nursing program's information-gathering process and contribute to the overall success of your next on-site evaluation.

1

Get Started Early

It's not uncommon for programs and institutions to only focus on an accreditation review 12-18 months in advance of the site visit. While it may be tempting to delay preparing for reaccreditation or a continuous improvement process report, this practice often puts faculty members under stricter time constraints which can lead to additional stress on top of a process that can already feel hectic and burdensome.

The authors of "Mastering the Journey to Continuous Compliance: Process Improvements for Excelling at CCNE Accreditation" examined their own nursing accreditation processes and how to improve while minimizing costs and faculty burden. They note that ongoing data collection and faculty involvement enhance the process.[1]

Because accrediting bodies are looking for continuous improvement, it makes sense to be continuously preparing. By making data collection standard procedure for every course, faculty and administrators don't have to devote as much time to it during the self-study and reporting process. The required information is readily available and accessible.

Suggestions for getting started early:

Map the Curriculum

Curriculum maps are helpful in organizing and auditing curricula more effectively, aligning curricular initiatives, ensuring student instruction consistently meets standards, and showing a program's strengths or gaps. Work with faculty at least two years before a site visit to produce a curriculum map that visually demonstrates your program's compliance with accreditation standards since the last evaluation. Consider investing in exam creation software that enables instructors to tag items by category, creating a quick and easy guide of accreditation-related questions and relevant student outcome data.

Increase Faculty Involvement

Consider holding routine, accreditation-focused faculty meetings monthly, by semester, or at another regular interval that makes sense for your program. These meetings can provide valuable opportunities to discuss what types of work will contribute to the accreditation documentation, how often data should be collected, what formats are easiest to use, and other basic decisions that will inform and equip the faculty to work more efficiently.

Hosting accreditation-focused meetings can also offer a forum for faculty to ask questions and share information before the program is in the thick of preparing for on-site evaluation. Also consider continuing these meetings even after passing a site visit, helping ensure accreditation is made part of the fabric of your program.

Delegate and Plan

It's common for many programs to form assessment and accreditation committees [2]. These committees can evaluate and explore in-depth the taxonomy of learning objectives, validate the mapping, and discuss a plan for addressing potential content gaps within the curriculum.

2 Engage All Accreditation Contributors

Preparing for a comprehensive accreditation review is too large a task for any one person (or even a small team). With responsibilities like gathering evidence, organizing data, and characterizing program fulfillment, the effort will be the most successful when everyone gets involved. However, gaining buy-in can be challenging. Therefore, anticipating and answering faculty questions will go a long way toward ensuring everyone is working together with the common goal of accreditation success.

A prepared and informed faculty is more effective in streamlining the accreditation process. With insights into both what your faculty want and need to know, you can proactively equip them for success. Below are questions faculty should be able to answer to fully participate in the accreditation process:

- How are their courses contributing to the accreditation standards?

- What student performance data needs to be collected (i.e. exams, quizzes, homework, group work, etc.) and for whom?

- In what format will the data be most compelling?

- How will the data be stored and accessed?

- Who is the direct contact for any questions?

- What is the timeline for accreditation and what are important deadlines?

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Present the Proof

Accrediting bodies require student performance data and program data that is robust and substantiated. A common accreditation misstep is to provide accreditors with evidence of what was *taught*—but stopping short of what was *learned*.

Be prepared to demonstrate to accreditors:

- How the program curriculum maps to specific learning outcomes or accreditation standards

- Course Learning Objectives (CLOs) that relate to the accreditation outcome

- The assessments used to evaluate student performance per CLOs

- How each assessment was properly graded and specific examples of student work per assessment

- Definitions for "competency"

- Summary statistics on student performance per outcome
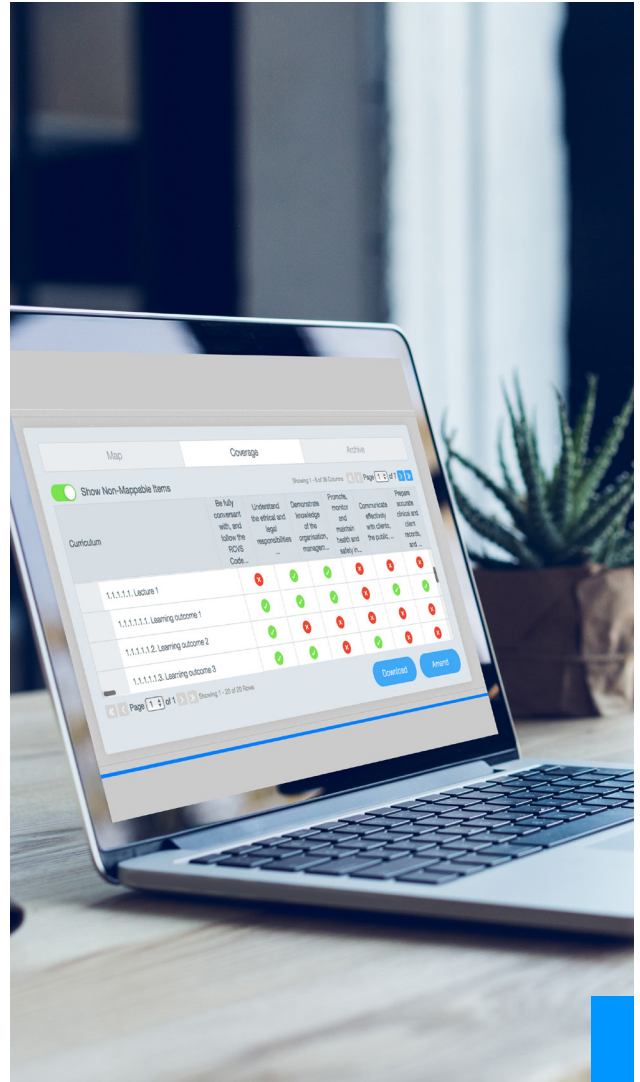
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Document Your Progress

Meaningful documentation showing your focus on data to guide and affect change and showcase continuous improvement can make for a smooth accreditation visit. As you're preparing to show evidence of your progress towards meeting accreditation standards, consider some of these questions:

- How are needs for improvements or modifications communicated?

- How are the changes documented?

- What is the program-approved process for implementing changes to the curriculum based on student performance data?

- What metrics are used to evaluate the impact of curricular changes?

- How does the program document the continual evaluation of needs, methods, and outcomes?
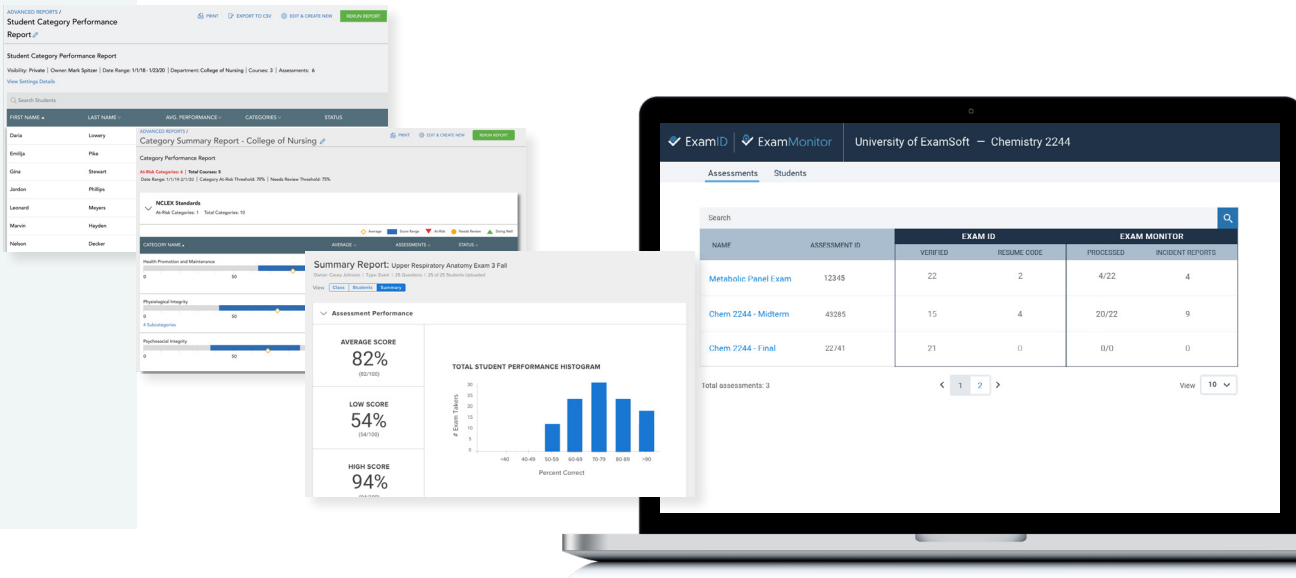
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Stay Informed and Employ the Right Resources

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Accreditation is ever-evolving, so it's important to stay current on emerging trends. For example, some recent additions include the assessment of skills like professionalism, communication, and ability to practice. Consider subscribing to resources that allow you to stay well-informed and follow important news from accreditation agencies. Accreditation-specific publications from organizations like the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), news sources such as *Inside Higher Ed*, and program-specific resources, are good places to start.

What's more, the right resources can make all the difference in easing faculty burden, eliminating surprises, and generating data that is truly actionable. These resources can include products and services like curriculum maps, communication tools, and even digital assessment platforms. Without them, programs could be missing out on tried-and-true methods for revolutionizing the accreditation process.

A Digital Assessment Platform as a Resource

Digital assessment platforms support educators across various programs and disciplines in their core mission of maximizing student outcomes, helping them become more efficient and effective at both testing and assessing students. By utilizing a digital assessment platform as the foundation for your accreditation process, you're employing a proven resource that captures and visualizes all the assessment information required to make the next site visit easier than the last.

The right digital assessment platform will act as the primary system that other internal processes can be built upon. It can perform multiple functions important to higher education institutions, including:

- Hosting all student assessments in one place, as well as securely storing and organizing all data associated with student performance

- Providing evidence-based support of accreditation-related learning outcomes with built-in data analytics and reporting tools

- Generating and organizing reports associated with student learning, teaching, and program performance

- Identifying potential issues with teaching methods, exam questions, or course performance quickly and easily

- Utilizing objective metrics (i.e. psychometrics) that quantify and report on various elements of a program's assessments including overall assessment reliability and individual item quality

Conclusion

Get the Knowledge and Data You Need Ahead of Time

There's a high cost associated with "surprises" during the period before an accreditation visit; surprises such as curriculum gaps, programs or students that are struggling, inadequate exam fairness or difficulty, and more. When there's not enough time to identify and resolve these and similar types of issues, it can lead to a program losing accreditation status completely—which also means letting down students, losing funding, and watching your enrollments plummet.

The right digital assessment platform provides you and your faculty with practical insights well in advance of accreditation visits. Furthermore, digital assessment platforms can generate these insights significantly faster than with traditional paper-based exams. Deans, provosts, and faculty alike can be continually informed on student performance, class performance, and program success without employing the full resources dedicated to an on-site visit.

How the use of a digital assessment platform can facilitate a smoother accreditation visit:

- Keep track of all assessment reports required to provide evidence for accreditation that are ready when you need them, at the click of a button.

- Know ahead of time which courses, learning outcomes, or students are underperforming in time to plan for possible solutions well before a site evaluation.

- Identify where there may be gaps in teaching, question, or course performance and take proper action to refine and redevelop teaching strategies.

- Take advantage of assessment data and objective metrics that can verify whether exams are properly fair, diverse, and difficult.

- Understand how performance gains are tracking over time through longitudinal analysis.

- Ensure students are learning the higher-value elements of Bloom's Taxonomy (i.e. Analyze, Evaluate, and Create) that are required for employers and licensure exams.

Summary

Accreditation is not a simple process, but it's easier with the support of a digital assessment platform that assembles assessment data into a digestible format for all administrators and faculty members. By continuously collecting valuable data that generates substantiated evidence for accreditors, digital assessment platforms can be an invaluable asset for any program or institution. This type of exam software can help the accreditation process itself become an informative and empowering part of the fabric of an institution.
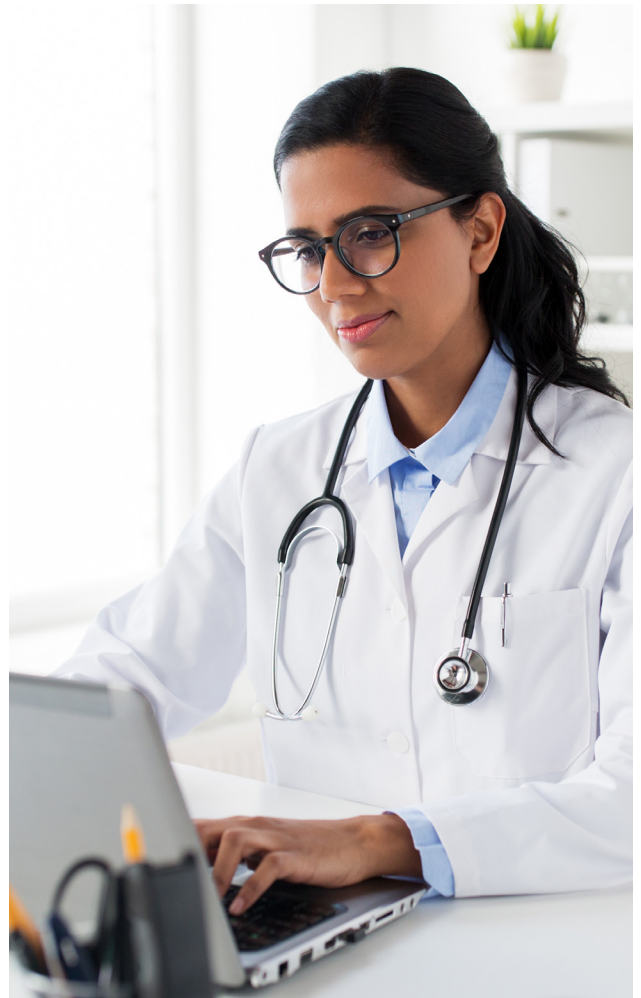
"With a few clicks, we were able to show accreditors very clearly that we were instructing students in a very strategic way and meeting the essentials for their nursing education."

– Northwestern Oklahoma State School of Nursing

References:

[1] Hanna, K., Duvall, J., Turpin, R. L., Pendleton-Romig, K., & Parker, S. (2016). "Mastering the Journey to Continuous Compliance: Process Improvements for Excelling at CCNE Accreditation". SAGE Open. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016656231
[2] "Excellence in Assessment (EIA) Designation." National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2020, www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/eia.
[3] Northwestern Oklahoma State School of Nursing Case Study, 2019. https://examsoft.com/resources/nwosu-school-of-nursing

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