

# ORGANIZING YOUR SCHOOL FOR ACCREDITATION

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Accreditation of baccalaureate nursing programs in Canada is a recent phenomenon. The Canadian Association of University Schools of Nursing (CAUSN) was designated as the accrediting body for university nursing programs in 1972, and the accreditation process was developed over a number of years by the CAUSN Committee on Accreditation (CAUSN, 1984, Curran, 1984). In 1987, the first program was reviewed (Curran & Bouchard, 1987) and by 1992, ten reviews had been completed.

Accreditation is a mechanism of external regulation that is used to promote the development of education programs that are responsive to societal needs and to ensure standards of nursing practice, encourage individuality and diversity, and stimulate innovation (CAUSN, 1984; French, 1978).

Undertaking accreditation to seek professional recognition for a university nursing program is an enormous task for faculty as it involves additional work and increased stress (Malarkey, 1981). As well, the impact of accreditation on academic programs and curricula is of concern to universities (Moore, 1992). This paper will provide an overview of the accreditation process and discuss some approaches that may be utilized or modified according to the educational philosophy and faculty experience in a school as it organizes for accreditation.

## **The Accreditation Process**

In order to initiate the accreditation process in Canada, a school must file a written application with the CAUSN Board of Accreditation. Once an appli-

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cation for accreditation has been accepted, the school will be notified of the year in which the review will take place. Site visits are usually carried out in January or February, followed by meetings of the Board of Accreditation in the spring.

CAUSN has prepared a 72-page monograph entitled *Accreditation Program* (1987) that outlines the philosophy, criteria and process. The data collection tools are included in the monograph as are the policies and procedures for accreditation. It also provides the framework for the accreditation of baccalaureate nursing programs in Canada. The data collection section guides the school in collecting the appropriate information.

Hawken and Reed (1978) suggest that the first and perhaps hardest step in the accreditation process is the self-evaluation. This is the process by which the school collects data about its program as outlined in the *Nursing Education Data Base* (CAUSN, 1987). The school also measures itself against the four criteria of relevance, accountability, relatedness and uniqueness (Table 1) and prepares responses, which include a rating score of 1 (low) to 4 (high), and an example of behaviour supporting the rating, to each of the 75 indicators in the evaluation questionnaire. The accreditation program is process oriented; as such, the report must summarize how the school meets the criteria and identify areas of strength and areas needing improvement.

Following submission of the self-evaluation report, the school is visited by three reviewers who have been chosen by the Board of Accreditation and approved by the school. The purpose of the site visit is to clarify and validate the information in the self-evaluation report and to provide a global assessment of the program. The reviewers meet with faculty, students, and administrators. As well, they observe student activities in various clinical and university settings. They also usually meet with health agency personnel who are involved in hiring and working with graduates of the program. The reviewers then prepare a report that addresses the indicators, areas of achievement, areas requiring further development and summaries of the program in relation to each of the four criteria. Both the reviewers' report and the school's self-evaluation report are submitted to the Board of Accreditation for use in the decision-making process. The dean or director of the school under review is invited to meet with the Board for clarification of factual details at the time of the deliberations. Decision options available

to the Board include granting accreditation for seven years, granting accreditation for three years or denying accreditation.

**Table 1**

***Four Criteria Used in CAUSN Accreditation***

Criteria	Components
Relevance	The extent to which the purposes, goals and objectives of a program reflect a response to the major trends in society that impact on the health needs, present and future, of the larger community.
Accountability	The extent to which the program teaches the student that the primary responsibility in nursing is to the client, that is, community, group, family, person.
Relatedness	The extent to which the parts of a program support and build on other parts, thereby promoting or negating the achievements of goals. The parts are curriculum, the teaching of nursing, faculty practice and study of nursing and administration. This quality is a measure of internal consistency.
Uniqueness	The extent to which a program capitalizes on unique characteristics of its resources (includes faculty, community values, financial support, etc.) within its particular setting.

## Getting Started

Getting an early start in the planning and preparation for the accreditation process is wise. Kauffmann & Burke (1989) suggest that four important and early decisions should be made by the school. These include when to begin collecting the data, what information is needed, method of presentation of the material and designation of the responsibility for preparation of the report. A time frame of 12 to 18 months before the expected date of the site visit is suggested (Hawken & Reed, 1978; Kauffmann & Burke, 1989). University schools of nursing vary in their stages of development from firmly established programs to relatively early stages of development (CAUSN, 1984). This along with other factors such as faculty availability and familiarity with the CAUSN accreditation process may influence the amount of preparation time required. The use of a flow chart (Hawken & Reed, 1978) is probably a good way to show faculty the magnitude and the scope of various aspects of the accreditation process.

The management strategies that are utilized in preparing for accreditation will have to be adapted to the individual school and administrative structure. Whether an individual or a steering committee is responsible for developing the accreditation report in a school, it is important that the faculty understand and support the process. If time and funds permit, it may be desirable to have a consultant meet with the faculty to review the goals of accreditation and to discuss the criteria and ways of approaching the data collection and report writing phases. Sufficient time must be allowed for the various components of accreditation, and some momentum needs to be maintained throughout the process. Some schools have been able to provide release time from regular teaching and academic duties for the individual or chair of the steering committee who is responsible for collecting data and putting the final report together. This has generally worked very well, and is recommended if resources permit. Having a skilled secretary who feels a commitment to the school and to the process is also helpful. The use of computer diskettes for the indicators saves time and allows for input from several sources. One can be prepared at the school or purchased from CAUSN. It is also helpful if one is made available to the review team for report writing during the site visit.

## **Data Collection and Report Writing**

The task of collecting data and writing the self-evaluation report is usually delegated to an individual or a committee with the authority to obtain information from whatever sources are considered necessary. According to the CAUSN Accreditation Program (1987), data must be collected for the Nursing Education Data Base, the ratings and responses to the Evaluation Questionnaire, a summary of the program in relation to the criteria and an outline of the strengths and priority needs for further development. A description of the data collection process that identifies the scope and length of time of the self-study, the number of faculty involved, sources of data and procedures and resources utilized is also required. Data can be gathered for the Nursing Education Data Base at the same time as responses to the criteria and indicators are being prepared. The Nursing Education Data Base refers to the historical development of the program, administrative structure and information on faculty, students, curriculum and related learning resources. As such, it may be desirable to have one person with administrative experience on the steering committee prepare it. We strongly recommend that all full- and part-time faculty be introduced to the accreditation process, perhaps through a workshop, and be involved in developing the report. This allows for input from the grass roots, so to speak, and helps everyone share in the ownership of the process. Probably the best way to involve the faculty is to have members evaluate the program from their own perspectives, according to the accreditation criteria and indicators. This can be done by individual faculty members or by a small team. They should give examples of student behaviour and teaching-learning activities that demonstrate the process by which the criteria and indicators are met.

The students should also be oriented to the process, made aware of the benefits of accreditation and encouraged to give their input. This can be done by meeting with individual classes or student representatives. Hawken and Reed (1978) suggest that students should be given information about their roles and, prior to the site visit, they should have examples of the general types of questions they may be asked. They also suggest that students should be encouraged to be open and honest. The process should be seen as a review of the program, not a gripe session about a particular concern.

Data collection is an activity that often leads to in-depth discussion of the program and learning experiences; as such, it is important to allow



opportunity for discussions to take place at various levels to address these issues. Responding to the 75 indicators is the most difficult part of the report preparation. Evaluation has identified some redundancy in the indicators (CAUSN, 1991) and faculty may have difficulty identifying different student behaviours for each one. Occasionally it may be necessary to note that one behaviour refers to more than one indicator. If the steering committee receives responses for each indicator from several levels of the program, it helps to ensure that most aspects of the program are addressed in the report.

Establishing the numerical rating for each indicator and average for the criterion presents another challenge. It is probably wise to have input on this aspect from several sources. One way would be to have the steering committee members rate each indicator independently. The committee could then meet to discuss and compare their rationales for those ratings in which there was diversity of opinion.

At the time the report is finalized, it may be helpful to have the report reviewed for clarity and readability by a faculty member with particular expertise in writing. Copies of the report must be sent to the CAUSN office for circulation to the review team members at least six weeks before the scheduled site visit. Faculty members should each have a copy of the report and copies should also be sent to the president, vice-president academic or other university officials who will be meeting with the review team, for background information prior to the site visit.

### **The Site Visit**

The site visit is a critical component of the accreditation process. It is the time when the school and the university presents its program and campus in a positive way to the external reviewers. In educational institutions, external appraisal is well accepted and valued as a method of evaluation (CAUSN, 1984). To prepare for the visit, several activities can be suggested. Hawken & Reed (1978) indicate that role-playing exercises, in which faculty are questioned about the various aspects of the curriculum, proved helpful in assisting faculty to think about the total program, increasing their familiarity with the self-study report and enabling them to speak more readily about the overall program. Colleagues in other disciplines who have had considerable experience with an external review process can be helpful resources to nursing faculty, and are usually willing to meet or offer useful suggestions. One

suggestion received in this manner was to have a room available for the review team during the day. This room could be the repository for important materials, provide access to a computer, and be available as a conference room between appointments. A good way to initiate the visit is for the dean or director to meet with review team members at the beginning of the site visit, to clarify or modify the schedule as necessary and to obtain general information on the program or school. The review team usually meets with the university president or academic vice-president. It is important that these appointments are scheduled early. Various members of the review team may meet with the librarian, computer centre staff or professors who provide service courses. It is wise to review the requirements of the nursing program in relation to each of these areas, so that the reviewers' questions can be addressed and the issues of particular concern to nursing can readily be discussed.

As the reviewers will want to observe students of different levels in various clinical settings as well as during clinical conferences, it is important to speak with the hospital personnel about the accreditation process and advise them of the planned schedule. Hospital and agency staff are usually very supportive and understanding of the stresses of accreditation.

The review team members will receive the self-evaluation report six weeks before the scheduled visit; the school may be requested to supply additional materials or information before the site visit. The schedule of the site visit should be circulated well in advance of the visit so that the review team can request changes if that is considered necessary. The schedule should be planned in detail to avoid delays and overloading and to be certain that the schedule is manageable. It is helpful if transportation can be arranged for review team members and considerable time can often be saved if an escort is available to take a reviewer to a particular location in the university or in a health care institution.

Accommodation for the review team should be located conveniently near the school and include a room to work in during the evening. It is generally considered desirable to have a computer, with diskettes that include the indicators and a printer available at this location for report writing after each day's visits. Evening activities should be avoided as this time is required for discussion of the data collected during the day and for planning the next day's visits. Compiling the data is an on-going process throughout the visit,

but the last evening following the visit and the final day should be reserved, by all the team members, for report writing. Review teams have also found it helpful to meet with the dean or director at the end of the visit for closure and, if necessary, to clarify certain aspects of the data. It may be helpful if the dean or director is available by telephone for verification of factual information.

The final draft of the report will be sent by the chair of the review team to the CAUSN Executive Director who will forward it to the dean or director for a final verification of factual data. The reports from the review teams have become more refined since they began in 1987. As on-going feedback is received from the Board, the review teams are able to make their reports more relevant to the needs of the Board. For example, the Board is encouraging more focus on the summary report of each criterion that reflects the overall quality of the program in the areas addressed. It is also recommending a sampling approach to the behaviours observed for each indicator.

When the Board of Accreditation meets to discuss the self-evaluation report and the review team report of the school, the dean or director is invited to meet with the Board to respond to any specific questions that the Board may have, and to discuss any comments about the accreditation process. Following the visit and receipt of the report of the Board of Accreditation, the school will be asked to complete an evaluation form addressing their experience with the Accreditation process. This is an essential component in the on-going evaluation of the Accreditation program.

Our experience to date indicates that a number of schools have successfully organized for the CAUSN accreditation process. Preparing the self-evaluation report is time consuming but also rewarding. It fosters self-development and frequently reinforced and validated issues already known to the school (CAUSN, 1991). Recommendations from the Board of Accreditation have become priorities for change. A complete and well-written self-evaluation report along with a well-organized site visit enable the reviewers and the Board to focus on the program under review and evaluate the extent to which it meets the criteria of relevance, accountability, relatedness and uniqueness.



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## RÉSUMÉ

### **La planification pour le processus d'agrément**

Le programme d'Agrément de l'Association canadienne des écoles universitaires de nursing a été finalisé en 1987 et à date, dix programmes d'étude ont été évalués. Le processus d'agrément exige une période de planification par tous les membres du corps professoral à partir de l'auto-évaluation selon les critères de pertinence, d'imputabilité, de cohérence et de spécificité jusqu'à la visite par l'équipe d'enquête. L'évaluation du programme d'Agrément indique que cette préparation, bien qu'elle peut être stressante, est enrichissante et favorise le développement du programme.

Le but de cet article est de présenter une séquence d'activités qui peuvent faciliter la planification des différentes étapes de la préparation de l'évaluation externe. Des suggestions pratiques sont faites afin de favoriser une collecte de données complète et d'assurer le déroulement efficace du processus aussi bien pour l'école que pour les membres de l'équipe d'enquête.