

Accreditation and the Academic Program Review (APR)

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ABSTRACT

The histories of both Accreditation and Academic Program Review (APR) were outlined. An ERIC database search compared the historical trends of the two concepts in publication. The focus was then turned to APR. This paper described and discussed the different purposes and different types of APR, the APR process as well as the benefits and possible negative outcomes of APR. Next, a case study of an academic program at a Midwestern university in the U.S. in connection with accreditation and APR was presented. Finally, the concepts of accreditation and APR were compared and contrasted.

Introduction

Academic programs in higher educational institutions are under constant pressure to maintain and improve quality. Concerns over quality of education have led to a number of quality assurance processes in higher education. Among these are accreditation, and academic program review (APR). The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) defined accreditation as a “procedure by which an authoritative body gives formal recognition that a *body* or person is competent to carry out specific tasks” (see Balci, 2001, p. 353). In the context of higher education, the word *body*, of course, refers to a program of study or a department, a specific college, or an entire university.

Craven (1980) defined APR as a “process of defining, collecting and analyzing information about an existing program or non-instructional unit to arrive at a judgment about the continuation, modification, enhancement, or termination of the program or unit” (p. 434). This paper focuses on academic program review or APR.

History of Accreditation and APR

Both the accreditation and the academic program review (APR) have a long history. The expression “accreditation” was associated with an educational institution and an academic program while APR is used in connection with an academic program only.

History of Accreditation

Accreditation began around the turn of the 19th Century when colleges started to establish minimum admission standards and course equivalencies to allow transfer of credits from one college to another (Colbeck et al., 2003). The Federal Department of Education maintained lists of recognized colleges as far back as 1867. There were also lists of high schools approved by colleges for admission purposes. The University of Michigan was the first to do so in 1871. Regional accrediting agencies maintained lists of accredited colleges as early as the 1920s. The increase in the number of accrediting agencies since the 1920s necessitated the formation of the National Commission on Accrediting (NCA) in 1950 to coordinate accreditation activities. NCA changed to the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) in 1975. By 1980, COPA had more than 70 professional agencies and six (Middle State, New England, North Central, Northwest,

Southern, and Western) regional accreditation associations. The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) was formed in 1993 after the dissolution of COPA (see Fagan & Wells, 2000). The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) was formed in 1996 (see Colbeck et al., 2003). There are several levels of accreditation: institutional or university (sometimes called college) level, college within university (sometimes called school within college) level, and program within college (or school) level. For example, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) accredits a university. The National Council for Accreditation in Teacher Education (NCATE) accredits a College of Education within a university. The American Psychological Association (APA) and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) accredit a School Psychology program within a College of Education.

History of Academic Program Review (APR)

Academic Program Review (APR) has its root in academic program evaluation. Actually, there is a distinction between “program evaluation” and “program review.” According to Conrad and Wilson (1985), program evaluation refers to the various assessment activities on new or existing programs while program review is a subset referring to assessment activities on existing programs only. The expression “academic program review (APR)” was not formally used until the mid 1970s when the first APR document appeared in the ERIC database.

Conrad and Wilson (1985) gave a very good account of the history of academic program review. The first academic program evaluation in the U.S. probably started in the 17th Century when Harvard College graduated their first nine students in 1642. On the commencement day, these nine students were given a public exam on classical languages, philology as well as philosophy, by the External Board of Overseers.

During the 17th–19th Century, control of academic programs was usually in the hands of institutional lay boards. Even textbook selection was usually done by those boards. Program evaluation was infrequent and defense of classical curriculum was common. One famous such defense was the 1828 Yale Report.

Pressure for curriculum change increased tremendously after the Civil War. Colleges and universities started to embrace the German ideal of “research” and American ideal of

“service” into their curricula. Graduate education emerged and electives became more available. Classical curriculum (Greek and Latin) gradually gave way to history, English, and economics. Math, sciences, and modern languages were introduced. With this change and growth of specialized academic programs and the resulting growth of the college teaching profession, the evaluation and decision of these programs then started to shift hands from governing board (external) to administrators and professors (internal). This shift spilled into the beginning of the 20th Century.

In 1909, President Lowell at Harvard and his faculty introduced “general education” to stem the tide of electives—giving a sense of unity among the diverse fields of the undergraduate curriculum. During the first half of the 20th Century, academic program evaluation shifted external again—this time in the form of accreditation by regional bodies and specialized professional organizations (e.g., medicine and law) and program evaluation by “statewide” boards of higher education. The accreditation by regional bodies and specialized professional organizations was “voluntary but recommended” with the goal focused on maintaining standards or improving quality. The program evaluation by statewide board of higher education, on the other hand, was more “mandatory” with the goal of program and budget approval or elimination in addition to maintaining or improving quality. For example, in 1930 (during the Great Depression) Georgia eliminated 10 institutions of higher education. During 1900–1950 there were 10 states with “statewide governing boards” and two states with “statewide coordinating agencies.” By 1969, there were 19 states with statewide governing boards and 27 with statewide coordinating agencies.

In the 1950s and 1960s academic program evaluation was largely carried out by statewide governing boards or coordinating agencies. It was not until about the mid 1970s that academic program review (APR) as opposed to academic program evaluation came into being. Unlike academic program evaluation (by statewide governing boards or agencies), APR was normally conducted within the college or university by administrators and faculty. Several forces brought this about, (a) interest in quality, (b) strategic program planning and budgeting—a popular administration concept, (c) shrinking budget and enrollment decline, (d) accountability to the public and tax payers, and (e) concern for efficiency under limited resources. The practice of APR caught on rapidly. In a 1993–94 survey of 452 public and private two-year and four-year colleges, Barak and

Sweeney (1995) found that about 83% used the APR process. Almost all colleges and universities now have implemented APR in their institutions.

Eric Search

In the past 40 years or so, the concept of “accreditation” has become increasingly popular in scholarly writing. By contrast, the concept of “academic program review (APR)” received attention about a decade later. One author of the present paper conducted an ERIC database search using both the term “accreditation,” and the term “academic program review.” The frequency count (in blocks of five years) of articles and documents written on those two topics is as shown in Figure 1.

ERIC Database

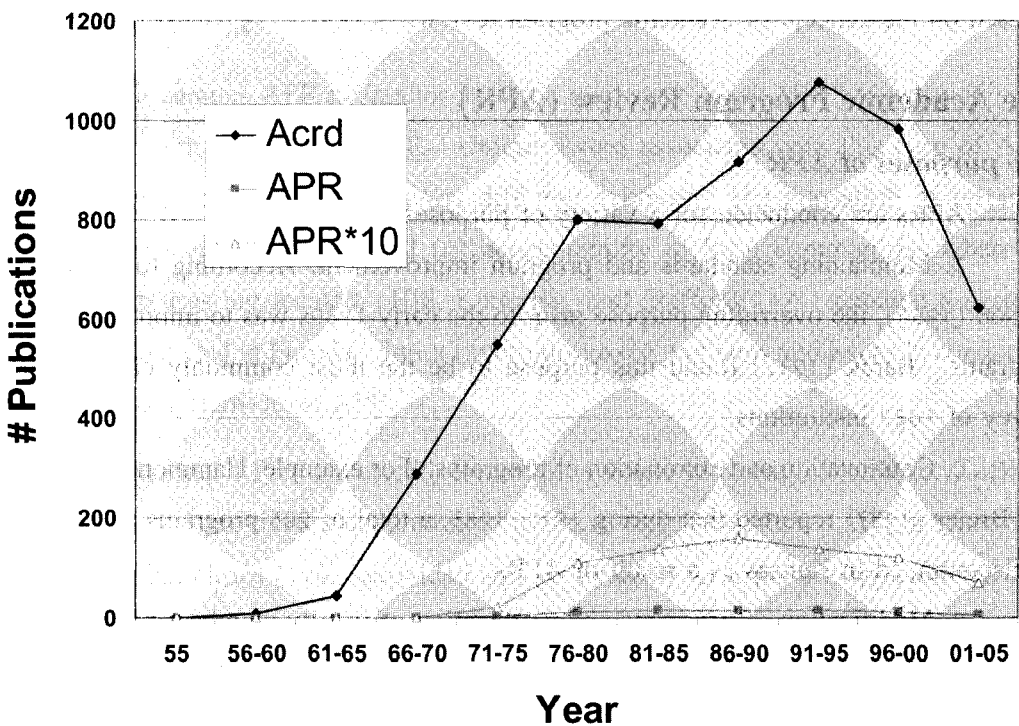


Figure 1 Frequency count (in blocks of five years) of articles and documents written on the topics: accreditation (Acrd), and academic program review (APR). The APR*10 is the 10 times magnification of APR due to the relatively rare publication on the topic compared with the accreditation topic.

It is evident from Figure 1 that scholarly writing on academic program review is not as extensive as its accreditation counterpart.

The Accreditation Process in Recent Times

The *accreditation* process in recent times has already been extensively discussed in an earlier paper (Archwamety & McFarland, 2005) in connection with the ISO international standard. To summarize, a typical accreditation process involves a sequence of events as follows. First the educational institution or program submits a set of documents (oftentimes quite extensive) that show compliance with the standards or guidelines set. This is usually followed by a site visit, conducted by an accreditation team. Finally, if the educational institution or program is found in compliance (with the standards or guidelines), accreditation is granted. Otherwise, the accreditation is denied. The present paper focused on the concept of academic program review.

The Academic Program Review (APR)

The purposes of APR

APRs are conducted for a variety of purposes

1. Maintaining standards and program improvement: According to Conrad and Wilson (1985), the overriding purpose prior to the early 1980s was to improve academic programs. Barak (1982) found this purpose to be the most commonly cited one in a survey of 1082 institutions.

2. Continuation and elimination of programs: For example, Hammond, Tompkins, and Breier (1987) reported that during 1972–1986, a total of 206 programs were merged or discontinued in Kansas as a result of APRs.

3. Modification of programs and reallocation of faculty members. For example, Sproles (2001) described the moving of composition out of the English department as a result of APR.

4. Planning and Budgeting: For example, Eaton and Miyares (1995) encouraged the integration of APR into institutional planning and budgeting activities. Hagood (1986) described APR and the five-year planning process at a major university. Benoist (1986) also urged that APR become an integral part of planning for the future in colleges.

5. **Accountability:** Another often cited reason for APR is “accountability” to the public and communities served (see, for example, Mims, 1978, p. 6).

Types of APRs

There are several ways to classify the different types of APR. One way is to look at the scope of the review. Conrad and Wilson (1985) identified three types of APR: statewide APR, multi-campus APR, and institutional APR.

State-level APRs are normally conducted by statewide governing boards or statewide coordinating agencies. The goals are usually those of program and budget approval or elimination in addition to maintaining or improving quality. Barak and Berdahl (1978) described this type of APRs as conducted in New York and Florida. Barak (1984) surveyed boards of education in many states on the criteria used for review and approval of academic programs.

Multi-campus APR is smaller in scope than state-level APR but wider in scope as compared with institutional APR. Unique issues associated with this type of APRs include (a) duplication of programs at different campuses, (b) allocation of resources across the different campuses, and (c) accountability to local communities where the different campuses are located. Hill, Lutterbie, and Stafford (1979) detailed a system-wide APR conducted in Florida. Smith (1980) discussed problems and issues in conducting multi-campus system-level APR.

Institutional APRs are usually limited to a single university or college. DiBiasio and Ecker (1982) provided a detailed description of single institution APR at Ohio State University. Humphries (1983) provided another detailed description of institutional APR conducted at Sam Houston State University to accommodate a long-range 20-year master plan.

Another way to classify different types of APRs is the approach used by DiBiasio and Ecker (1982) who contrasted “loosely coupled” APR with “tightly coupled” APR. They defined these two types of APR as:

Tightly coupled review processes are likely to stress efficiency. They can be characterized by their narrow purposes, uniform review procedures, and centrally prescribed review criteria. In contrast, loosely coupled review processes typically have comprehensive purposes, variable review procedures, and program specific review criteria. (p. 6)

In a tightly coupled APR, the purpose is rather limited (e.g., program elimination and accountability), the procedure rather uniform (e.g., standard questionnaire), and the criteria prescribed and centrally determined (e.g., productivity measures). In a loosely coupled APR, on the other hand, the purpose is comprehensive (e.g., program improvement), the procedure variable (e.g., no fixed format), and criteria program specific (e.g., multiple measures).

An example of loosely coupled APR is one conducted at Ohio State University (DiBiasio & Ecker, 1982). State-level APRs tend to be more tightly coupled while institution-level APRs tend to be more loosely coupled.

The APR Process

An APR process generally consists of three basic stages: (DiBiasio & Ecker, 1982.)

Stage 1—Self Study. The academic department sets up a “self study” committee. The committee usually consists of program faculty and occasionally a student. The self study committee collects materials relevant to (a) the “context” of the academic program such as the need of community, the mission of the university and department, (b) the “input” or resources of the program such as student admission and enrollment, faculty vitae, and facilities, (c) the “process” of the program such as course requirement, course offerings, and student advising, and (d) quality or effectiveness of the “products” such as student performance evaluation, graduation rate, placement, and evaluations from student supervisors or employers of graduates. These materials are then assembled and organized in a “portfolio” for review by an external review team. Note that the terms “context, input, process, and product” are used here to conform to the CIPP (Context, Input, Process, and Product) evaluation model proposed by Stufflebeam (1973).

Stage 2—External Review. This is done by an “external review committee” which is usually headed by a senior faculty from another institution or an accomplished practitioner from the profession. Other members of the team usually include senior faculty from different departments of the same institution, an alumnus, and a student representative. This external review team would perform “site visit”—reviewing the self study portfolio, meeting with faculty members in the program or department, meeting with the students in the program, and with the administration of the university. This site visit culminates in an “exit report.” The exit report is usually oral (i.e., not a formally typewritten version) made to the Provost, Dean of the college where the department or program is located, and the department chair or program director.

Stage 3—Final Report. The written formal report comes from the leader of the external review team after the site visit. This final report presents the results of the team’s evaluation of the self study and the meeting with faculty, students, and administrators. It usually notes the strengths and weaknesses of the program, and ends with recommendations for the future. The department chair or program director is normally required by the university to respond to this final report.

APR Cycle

An APR usually takes place in a five-year cycle (see Stanley & Patrick, 1998). However, some colleges had APRs on a six-year cycle (see El Camino College, 1999; Mets, 1995) and others even do APRs at a seven-year cycle (see, for example, Keene State College, 1998). Not all departments at a particular college or university do APR at the same time. Their APRs usually take place in an overlapping fashion throughout the entire cycle.

The APR cycle corresponds to the “Deming Wheel” concept. The Deming Wheel is a repeated sequence of (a) plan, (b) do, (c) check, and (d) act, which leads to continuous improvement (see, Archwamety & McFarland, 2005; Hansen, 1994, p. 163; Voehl, 1995). After an APR, the academic program faculty “plans” for the next cycle, implements (“do”) the plan, “checks” or evaluates if the plan works, and “acts” on the evaluation results. The academic program is then ready for the next APR.

Benefits and Possible Negative Outcomes of APR

One benefit of APR could be program improvement. Mets (1995) interviewed 36 academic department chairs at a Midwestern research university where their departments had been through the APR process. Nearly three fourths of the respondents agreed that their APRs had contributed to program improvement. These department chairs also mentioned that APRs helped the administration make better decision on allocation of resources and that APRs helped make their program quality known to places outside of the institution through the external reviewers. Conrad and Wilson (1986) reported that an APR could provide impetus for change and that the University of California and the University of Iowa benefited from APRs. They also mentioned possible negative impacts of APRs such as (a) unwarranted anxiety, (b) diversion of time from teaching and research, and (c) unfulfilled promises and expectations.

A Case Study of Accreditation and APR

The accreditation of a Specific Educational Program—School Psychology

The School Psychology Specialist Degree Program at the University of Nebraska–Kearney (UNK) is accredited by NASP (the National Association of School Psychologists) and NCATE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education). The program was first conditionally accredited in 1994 and achieved full accreditation in 1997 by NASP (see Fagan & Wells, 2000). NASP became a constituent member of NCATE in 1976. In 1987 formal NASP approval of programs was sanctioned by NCATE (see Fagan & Wells, 2000). As a result, a school psychology program approved by NASP automatically becomes approved by NCATE. It is worth emphasizing here that NCATE accredits at the college of education unit level while NASP accredits at the program (specifically school psychology program) within the unit level. The accreditation process of the School Psychology Specialist Degree Program at the University of Nebraska–Kearney was already described in a previous publication (see Archwamety & McFarland, 2005). In the following paragraphs, the APR process that the program went through will be described.

The Academic Program Review of a Specific Educational Program—School Psychology

The University of Nebraska at Kearney has a five-year cycle APR policy for all its academic departments (see University of Nebraska at Kearney, 2006). Different departments have their APRs carried out at different times. The latest APR for the Department of Counseling and School Psychology was scheduled for the Spring semester of the year 2006. Since an APR targets an academic department as a unit and this department has two programs (counseling program and school psychology program), these two programs went through the APR simultaneously. The three stages of this APR process are described below:

Stage 1—Preparation. A year before the APR date, the members of the review team were identified. Two external co-leaders (one for the school psychology program and the other for the counseling program) were chosen from outside. The other team members were internal to UNK. Team members included the Director of Assessment from the Office of the Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, the chair of a different academic department on campus, two alumni (one for the school psychology program and the other for the counseling program), and two graduate students (one for the school psychology program and the other for the counseling program). All team members were contacted by the department chair and agreed to serve on the review team.

Next, the department chair, with the help of faculty and graduate assistants within the department, collected various materials for self-study. These materials were organized, and assembled in a portfolio report during the Summer of 2005. The portfolio consisted of the following materials:

1. “Context” related materials. These included (a) department mission statement, (b) long and short range goals, (c) processes for re-evaluating the mission and goals, (d) need and demand for the program, and (e) assessment of mission statement.

2. “Input” or “Resources” related materials. These included (a) organizational structure, (b) department specific policies and practices, (c) faculty, (d) diversity and gender equity—both student and faculty, (e) evaluation of physical facilities, (f) academic resources and equipment, (g) library assessment, (h) handbooks and publications, and (i) department expenditures.

3. “Process” related materials. These included (a) programs offered within the department, (b) changes since last academic program review, (c) effective teaching, (d) professional development, service, and research, and (e) involvement of department constituencies in decision-making process.

4. “Product” related materials. These included (a) assessment of student academic achievement, (b) student success data, (c) most recent Coordinating Commission review, and (d) accreditations by regional and national associations.

At the end of the self study report portfolio, proposals were made for (a) program changes based on evaluation of assessment data, (b) strengthening of programs within expected continuation budget, and (c) additional financial resources required.

This self study report was then forwarded to the Dean of College of Education in the Fall semester of 2005. Copies were also sent to the Dean of Graduate Studies, and the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs.

Stage 2—The Review Team Site Visit. The site visit by the external review team was conducted on April 11–12, 2006. The team visited with faculty of the department, the department chair, the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research, the Dean of College of Education, department alumni and students. The review team asked questions related to the programs and took notes of the answers. These activities culminated in an oral “exit report” presented the following day to (a) the department, and (b) the Chancellor, the Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research, and the department chair. The oral exit report commented on the strengths and weaknesses of the programs and made recommendations for the future.

Stage 3—The Final Report. The formal APR written report which arrived on July 14, 2006, consisted of the following:

1. Abstract.
2. Evaluation of the self-study document.
3. Evaluation of the mission of the department.
4. Evaluation of department resources. This was broken down into (a) facility resources, (b) human resources, and (c) summer session resources.
5. Evaluation of department effectiveness.

6. Recommendation for the Future.

7. Appendixes. This was broken down into (a) notes from meeting with alumni, and (b) notes from meeting with current students.

Some of the strengths reported were (a) very energetic faculty, (b) counseling program accredited by CACREP and school psychology accredited by NASP, (c) various assessments used to improve programs, (d) students feeling both personal growth and professional skill development, and (e) alumni reporting adequately prepared. One important weakness pointed out as needing improvement was that the department had the largest graduate programs but did not have proportionate resources.

The department is currently in the process of writing a response to the APR report. Effort will be made to address recommendations suggested by the review team and the department will get ready for the next review cycle five years from now.

Conclusion

Both accreditation and APR involve evaluation of academic programs. However, they differ on evaluation purposes, target of evaluation, evaluation procedure, evaluation closure, and cycle of evaluation. These differences are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 The Differences between Accreditation and Academic Program Review (APR)

Aspect of evaluation	Accreditation	APR
Purpose(s)	Single (program approval)	Multiple (program improvement, planning, accountability etc.)
Targeted unit(s)	From program to entire institution	Academic program only
Procedure	External review team	Internal review team members headed by external leader(s)
Closure	Accredited or not (summative)	Strengths and weaknesses pointed out; recommendations made (formative)
Cycle	Generally larger (e.g., seven years for NCATE, 10 years for NCA)	Smaller (typically five years)

Although accreditation and APR are two different processes they are closely related. Most of the materials used for an academic program review (in the APR portfolio) are transferable to an accreditation portfolio either directly or with little modification. To facilitate this portability, the design and collection of these materials should be carefully planned by the self study committee with both the upcoming accreditation and APR in mind.

As a final remark, it is interesting to note that future accreditation and APR processes may change as a result of progress in information technology. Some accreditation agencies have already contemplated reviewing portfolios on line through the Internet rather than reviewing the actual printed version mailed to the external reviewers. Actually, the National Association of School Psychologists is currently experimenting with reviewing accreditation portfolios submitted online this year. How successful this new review process would be remains to be seen.

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