From Chaos to Sanity: Preparing for NCATE 2000 at a Comprehensive Public Institution Using an Electronic Review

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Late in Fall semester, 1999, someone in the College of Education at the University of Georgia remembered that the college faced its five-year NCATE reaccreditation visit in less than fourteen months. As with probably the great majority of NCATE institutions, the college had done little in its prior four years to prepare for the visit, beyond the perfunctory annual reports, although it had been criticized five years earlier for particular weaknesses. And like that same, probable, great majority, administrators and staff alike looked forward to the next twelve months with about the same enthusiasm as a corporation with a shaky accounting department anticipates a visit from the Internal Revenue Service. All the players secretly hoped for the personal, secular equivalent of the Hebrew miracle of the Passover.

To compound the apprehension, the college also faced a critical visit from the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (PSC), the state agency with authority over individual certification-granting programs. The state commission was dissatisfied with its 1995 visit and critical of what it took to be the college's lack of engagement with schools and school reform. To make matters worse, the college was in the midst of a transition to a new dean and an entirely new organization in the dean's office.

In short, by the waning weeks of 1999, the college expected to go into a heightened form of NCATE Quinquennial Frenzy. Department heads hunkered down for the barrage of memos. Faculty dreaded the diversion from research and teaching to write interminable reports and justifications. Staff flinched at the hours of work ahead, digging out memos, embellishing halls and tee shirts with a dusted-off "Conceptual Framework," and brow-beating faculty to turn in vitae, syllabi and annual reports from the last five years. Newly-minted administrators wondered what they were thinking when they made the move to administration. Virtually everyone faced the next twelve months with nearly equal parts of cynicism and fatalism: "This, too, shall pass;" we will dutifully produce what we are told to produce with no expectation of any change as a result of our effort; we shall return to life-as-usual, only to repeat the same process in five more years, like Sisyphus and his infernal stone.

The leadership team that was to guide the reaccreditation process knew the trepidation and heard the skepticism. Its members had seen it every five years, whether at the University of
Georgia or in the other institutions they had served. So they made what they hope will prove a momentous decision: they decided to create a new process, one that would break the cycle of frenzy, exhaustion, anxiety, relief, and four years of stasis, to be repeated by a new visitation of frenzy, exhaustion, anxiety, relief, and stasis. They committed themselves to put mechanisms in place that would result in genuine, continual unit renewal and improvement, and that would relieve the faculty, staff, and administration of the bulk of the uncertainty, duplication of effort, and work of preparing for reaccreditation.

To give away the end of the story, in January 2001, the College of Education completed state and national reaccreditation under NCATE’s challenging new standards. There is virtually unanimous agreement in the college that this was one of the most successful reaccreditation visits in memory and one that holds the greatest promise to actually improve the work of the faculty and the college. From the perspective of the faculty, it was, at the same time, one of the most painless reaccreditation visits.

Our task in this paper is to describe the means by which the College of Education met its obligations to the profession and to the state in ways that are transforming the college’s relationship to accreditation and to internal change. We begin by describing the complexity of the college within the university context so as to situate this accreditation story. We then describe a number of decisions that we made early in the process that were crucial to success. We will then turn to detailed descriptions of our major initiatives. We offer our processes and decisions as models of the ways other colleges and schools, of whatever size, can complete reaccreditation successfully. More crucially, we offer our experiences as means by which the reaccreditation process can transform the inner workings of the unit.

It may be worth noting at the outset that the three people who formed the core of the leadership team consisted of an associate dean with no experience in teacher education, and two faculty members who, though experienced full professors, were new to the University of Georgia—both were, in fact, in their first year in the college. Both, too, are social foundations of education professors. We note that not to indicate any particular merit on their parts, but to indicate that processes can be invented that allow even newcomers to a unit as large and complex as the College of Education at the University of Georgia to grasp its fundamentals and move it through a successful reaccreditation visit. We should hasten to add, however, that we do not believe that using novices was in any way key to the success of our processes, and do not...
advocate the wholesale drafting of new faculty members to take leadership in preparing for NCATE visits.

Context and Complexity of the College

As the first state university in the country, chartered in 1785, the University of Georgia has a long and distinguished history in the development and dissemination of the state and national intellectual and cultural heritage. The university created a School of Education in 1908, expanding it into the College of Education in 1932. Always nationally ranked among peer Research I colleges of education, the college continues to set the pace in research, teaching and service projects of local, national and international interest.

The College of Education today is comprised of four schools, each with a school director: Health and Human Performance with five departments, Leadership and Lifelong Learning with three departments, Professional Studies with five departments, and Teacher Education comprised of seven departments. Completing the administrative structure are the Dean and three Associate Deans (e.g., Academic Affairs, Research and Outreach, and Educator Partnerships).

With 18 undergraduate majors, 35 master's degrees, 21 specialist degrees, 21 doctor of education degrees, and 16 doctor of philosophy degrees, the College of Education is among the most comprehensive and complex in the nation. There are 226 faculty in the college; 212 are tenured or on a tenure track; fourteen are academic professionals or research and public service associates. Thirty-one faculty members are people of color, or 14% of the college faculty. In addition to the faculty, 340 graduate assistants and 118 staff serve a student body of over 2,900 undergraduates and over 2,000 graduate students. In spring, 2000, the college awarded 436 undergraduate and 215 graduate degrees. Faculty, students, and staff are housed predominately in three separate buildings on the Athens campus.

Within its many degree programs, students can earn teaching and administrative certification in 37 fields, and endorsements in another ten fields. University of Georgia students can also pursue teaching certification in five additional fields through cooperating programs in the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, the College of Arts and Sciences, the College of Family and Consumer Sciences, and the School of Social Work. There are, then, a total of 42 certification fields that fall under the umbrella of the College of Education. Since the
last PSC and NCATE visit, one certification field has been terminated, seventeen have been revised, and one has been added.

For the sixth year running, *US News & World Report* placed the college among the nation's leaders, ranking it 26th out of 187 programs. The secondary education programs are cited as second best in the nation and its elementary education program was fifth. Three graduate programs in the college were ranked among the top five in the nation (secondary teacher education, counseling, and vocational-technical education) and five programs were ranked among the top ten nationally (elementary teacher education and curriculum and instruction, in addition to the three above). Four other programs ranked between fifteenth and twenty-third (Educational Psychology, Special Education, Higher Education and Administration, and Administration and Supervision), bringing to nine the total number of College of Education programs ranked in the top twenty-five nationally by *US News & World Report*.

The college's undergraduate majors are drawn predominantly from within the state (nearly 86%) and, as throughout the university, rank among the best students in the state. The college's majors have a cumulative high school GPA of 3.62, only slightly below a university-wide high school GPA of 3.64, and total SAT scores of 1163 (university-wide, 1195); the college GPA of the senior class averages 3.03, and 3.81 for graduate students, across all college departments. The preponderance of the students are female (over 72%). Over 61% are between 18 and 24 years of age.

**Early Leadership Team Decisions**

The college began with an option that will be available to other institutions for only two more years. That is, it had the choice of seeking reaccreditation under existing NCATE standards, or of becoming a pilot study of the association's new, 2000 standards. The team began by deciding that little progress would be made in transforming the ways the college approached reaccreditation or unit improvement if the college chose to be evaluated on the old standards. In addition, an early decision to create a fully electronic, web-based review necessitated the use of the new standards unless we wanted to recreate the electronic site using the new standards at a later date, with its accompanying time and expense of the effort. The team believed the electronic review is would make the reaccreditation visit and the forthcoming annual reviews as manageable as possible for the state, NCATE, and the college. The University of Georgia is not
the first to take this tack, but we suspect we are one of the largest units to do so to date, and we are particularly pleased with the outcome of the experiment. We detail our web work later in this paper.

The team determined, too, that part of the institution's cycle of frenzy, exhaustion, anxiety, relief, and stupor traced its roots to the quinquennial nature of reaccreditation. Every institution faces constant challenges and pressures; institutional triage naturally gives day-to-day priority to the most pressing, and reaccreditation only becomes pressing when it looms on the near horizon, not when it is still three or four years away. The leadership team asked, therefore, that the state and NCATE review the institution annually hereafter. Institutional triage will not go away; the answer, then, is to maintain reaccreditation as an day-to-day priority.

In a more prosaic vein, the team decided to abandon many of the standard trappings of NCATE review processes that, to our mind, have become banal if not simply dishonest, particularly those surrounding units' conceptual frameworks. As we will detail below, the college hammered out a strong conceptual framework that both reflects how the college has operated heretofore and that will guide it more fully in the future. However, we resisted the practice of reducing the framework to a visual representation. In our experiences at other institutions, and in reading many NCATE Continuing Reports, we found such visual artifacts to be lifeless, often silly, and almost invariably unhelpful in understanding either the institutions' intent or how it actually mobilized its framework to achieve its purposes. Likewise, we did not go through the artificial routines of requiring faculty to embed the framework statement in syllabi or asking students to memorize the statement. We suspect those practices are cynical at all but the most naive institutions. We were confident that college documents reflected the college's commitments and orientations, and that its students imbibed them. We were not disappointed.

Those decisions, though important to the overall look and feel of the review process, were not the central core, however. At the center were three factors: a system through which the entire work of preparing for the visit (and simultaneously preparing for future annual reviews) could be streamlined and rationalized; a means to construct a new Conceptual Framework; and a process to articulate modes of assessment with the new NCATE Standards. Surrounding that tripartite foundation was the web infrastructure that served, and will continue actively to serve, as the core documentation for the work of the college.
Systematizing the Preparation Work

Everyone dreads reaccreditation work, no matter the profession. Consultants earn enviable livings by preying on that common dread, though they mostly burden the process with commonplaces. We realized that much of the dread arises from reaccreditation experiences in which too many people were responsible for too many pieces of the work with too little understanding of how it all fit together. We were convinced that a system could be devised that doled out the tasks in manageable, understandable units while removing the onus of responsibility from most of the faculty and administrators. Portions of the more tedious work of collecting, verifying and organizing the reams of documentation did not need to fall to faculty, but could be managed effectively by student assistants. We could impose order by identifying the primary tasks and rationalizing them as fully as possible. One individual rather than a committee could take responsibility for major portions of the Continuing Report; small portions could be assigned to people with special expertise, though final editorial oversight belonged to the primary author to assure a continuity of voice, style, and emphases.

Reaccreditation inevitably requires large amounts of input from many individual programs. Central to systematizing the preparation work was asking for that input in small, manageable doses, and in formats that were easily comprehended. This was not motivated by having to work with people who could not handle complexity; on the contrary, we were working with highly effective, deeply involved faculty whose days were sufficiently filled with complexity and ambiguity. Our task was to add as little as possible to their burden.

We did not ask them, therefore, to immediately provide a vast array of data, to invent elaborate text in answer to general questions, or to pore over unfamiliar standards and imagine the sorts of material that might satisfy skeptical examiners. Rather, under the guidance of a member of the leadership team with extensive experience with NCATE, the team compiled a prioritized outline of all the steps necessary to gather existing data, and to initiate processes to begin to generate new data. To the greatest extent possible, it avoided going to associate deans, department heads, or faculty for information, but sought the information through reports, catalogues, syllabi, web-sites, and other documents. When it did go to administrators or faculty, its requests were specific and focused, with assurances that infringements on time would be minimized.
Our discussion of the means of articulating assessment with standards, below, provides one illustration of this process. In that case, as well as during the process of constructing the Conceptual Framework, we entered into an iterative process through which the information that was passed to the team was translated into a standard language to make it comparable across programs; the new text was then returned to the originators to be sure that our processes had not sacrificed accuracy or meaning; they might revise or elaborate, and send back to the team; that process could go on until all were happy with the result.

While seeking to minimize the impact of the reaccreditation process on individuals and programs, we simultaneously sought to keep everyone informed. Department heads and administrators were kept fully informed, perhaps more informed than some would have preferred. From early in the process we scheduled monthly meetings with the college leadership where progress was tracked, requests explained, and questions fielded. [Refer audience to samples of material from monthly meetings]

Constructing the Conceptual Framework.

Within NCATE, the Conceptual Framework has long held sway. The NCATE 2000 standards increase the centrality of the Conceptual Framework by moving it from a single standard to make it, instead, the framework by which all of the six new standards are evaluated. The unit must demonstrate that the conceptual framework does, in fact, guide the entire work of the unit. In other words, in an effort to move beyond top-down dictation of institutional practice, and to encourage diversity of professional approaches, the association begins with the institution's own vision. It is convinced that without a principle that governs much of what an institution does, there is no means by which to judge its effectiveness. Every reaccreditation visit, then, pivots on the ability of an institution to demonstrate that its Conceptual Framework is in fact operative in all aspects of the institution's efforts. Hence the absurd lengths to which most schools go to convince the board of examiners that its Conceptual Framework is invariably on everyone's mind. Yet despite the usual cynicism, ultimately the Conceptual Framework has great potential to shape the institution and to facilitate the process of reaccreditation.

The Conceptual Framework posed a particular problem for UGA's College of Education, however. As an institution with a long tradition of strong departmental leadership, the college simply had no overarching conceptual framework. It passed reaccreditation five years
ago on the plea that its strong departments had their own frameworks, and, in all likelihood, on its status as a college within a flagship institution. In 1995, however, the lack of a Conceptual Framework was announced as one of three weaknesses that had to be addressed. In its business-as-usual mode, that weakness was immediately shelved, a detail to be faced during the next cycle of frenzy—in 2000, in short.

Thus, constructing a Conceptual Framework was one of the first tasks the team had to tackle. It is insufficient, however, to simply announce a Conceptual Framework. Wisely, NCATE asks for evidence that there is actual consensus within the college regarding the Conceptual Framework. Within an institution with a tradition of strong departments and consequently an ethic of departmental independence, consensus might well be elusive.

Relying on its early commitment to make all parts of the reaccreditation process as unobtrusive as possible within a context demanding consensus, the team devised a strategy that illustrates portions of its effort to systematize. Convinced that there was broad commonality of outlook and commitment within the college, despite the lack of an articulated Conceptual Framework, the team solicited from all programs all relatively recent documents that outlined or spoke to each program's mission, commitments, and goals. The team also scoured the college's annual reports, strategic planning documents, mission statements, and other reports that revealed college-wide thinking about purpose and directions.

Working with a small, ad hoc committee of interested faculty members representing the four schools within the college, the team looked for common language and visions across those documents. As the team expected, though to the surprise of some faculty, there was a fair degree of agreement on central aspects of the college's common educator preparation tasks. The team pulled out seven common themes, then realized that those themes spoke to two aspects of the college's work: its aspirations, and the means by which it sought to actualize those aspirations. From that realization emerged a draft framework.

The team circulated the draft to department heads with a request that it be discussed at department meetings, with responses and reactions sent back to the team. It simultaneously circulated the draft directly to the faculty via e-mail, soliciting debate and rebuttal through departments or directly back to the team. The framework benefited from the resulting dialogue, and within five to seven months, every program had responded to the team, indicating that its
faculty was in fundamental agreement with the Conceptual Framework. The final form of the conceptual framework is a broad, clear statement of the work of the college:

_The College of Education aspires to prepare exemplary reflective practitioners to serve a diverse global community; it seeks to achieve that end through teaching, scholarship, outreach, and partnerships at local, national, and international levels._

Articulating Assessment with NCATE’s Standards

The largest hurdle for the college, however, still lay ahead. The 2000 NCATE Standards dramatically shift the terms of reaccreditation. The association is seeking to move from a prescriptive, input system to an assessable output system. The new standards are less interested in what education profession candidates are taught and more interested in what they can do as a result of all the activities in which they have been involved, from classrooms through field placements to student teaching.

Output systems, in turn, spend little time worrying over where particular skills and dispositions are “covered.” They are curious to know how the institution knows that the skills and dispositions have been acquired and are routinely mobilized in educational settings. That distinction radically alters the focus of reaccreditation. Colleges need no longer demonstrate the content of classes and field experiences, a relatively simple check-off system. Instead, colleges must begin to demonstrate what their candidates know, what they can do, how they apply what they know, and the facility with which they accomplish all of those “outputs.” Thus, assessment is the new key to reaccreditation. Through how many modes, through what range of modes, and through modes at what points in time, are candidates’ actual abilities as educators assessed?

At least for the near term, NCATE is not expecting programs to be fully proficient at assessment. This is, after all, a new ballgame, though its inexorable logic makes one wonder why it took teacher education this long to grasp it. What NCATE does expect is that programs are putting plans into place to elaborate its modes of assessment, both traditional and performance, with a generous timeline for full implementation.

Given the centrality of assessment to reaccreditation under the new standards, assessment became the second focus, right after the Conceptual Framework. It also became the focus and occupied us for the longest time, and remains the focus that will guide our work
through every annual review for many years to come. We are convinced that our efforts to articulate assessment with the NCATE Standards, even more than our PSC/NCATE web-site, impressive though it is, was key to the success of the reaccreditation process. We are equally certain that articulation will remain central to the college's on-going reaccreditation reviews, and will prove to be the crucial element in the college's continual improvement and transformation.

The leadership team was convinced that one of its tasks was to begin to shift the thinking of the entire college toward assessment. To achieve end, while at the same time collecting and generating much of the information it needed for the reaccreditation process, the team launched a major assessment initiative as part of its work. NCATE's new standards include descriptive rubrics for each element of each standard, ranging from Unacceptable, Acceptable, and Target unit performance. The team took the Target rubrics as the only acceptable level of performance for the college, and elaborated them into a series of indicators. The standards are written in such a way that only minor editorial work was required in that process; most sentences within each rubric can stand alone as one of the indicators of the general element under which it falls. [Refer audience to sample assessment grid here]

The team then prepared five-column grids with the elements and associated target indicators arrayed in the two left-hand columns, with three corresponding boxes to the right of each indicator. The middle column of boxes to the right of the indicator was headed “Program's Student Objectives;” the next was headed “Traditional Assessments,” while the right hand column was headed “Performance Assessments.” Since the programs had already submitted student outcomes to the university for their undergraduate and graduate programs, a team of graduate assistants inserted the already existing student outcomes for each program next to the appropriate elements and indicators on the grids. The result was a beginning of the assessment plan for each undergraduate and graduate program.

These grids for Standards One through Four, those most concerned with candidate performance, were then sent to each program with the request that the faculty use current program documents and syllabi to identify all of its announced objectives. Further, the programs were asked to identify every current mode of assessment, from scores on quizzes through informal observations in classes, PRAXIS Exam scores, and course grades, to field supervisors' comments. They were then asked to refine and add to the current course or program objectives, linked with one or more of the elements, listing the objectives in the “Program’s Student
Objectives” box to the right of the indicator. Likewise, they were asked to link the currently employed modes of assessment with the objective that it assessed and, by extension, the standard that it demonstrated.

In practice, most programs found it fairly easy to identify their program and course objectives; they struggled somewhat more to identify how they assessed those objectives. Many found that they had objectives that they did not adequately assess, though they had announced those objectives for years. Some found that they engaged in assessment, but were unsure how the assessments related to objectives. For nearly every program, the grids brought home quite powerfully the lack of fit between objectives and assessment. More troubling, the grids also indicated graphically that many programs lacked objectives that measured most of the NCATE elements, and all programs relied far more on traditional pencil and paper assessments than on performance assessments.

The results of this exercise are dramatic and promising, if occasionally embarrassing, however. Members of the team met at least once with every program and went over the grids. Every blank box visually illustrates a rubric indicator that the program cannot currently demonstrate that it expects of its students, or indicates a elements of NCATE standards that the program cannot currently demonstrate that its assesses. The program grids essentially stand now as planning documents for the next two to four years, for the college's expectation is that every program will rework and elaborate its programmatic and course objectives until it has one or, preferably, multiple objectives statements corresponding to every one of the indicators and elements; most objectives in Standards One through Four will be posed as performance objectives, not input objectives. The program will then create both traditional and performance assessment modalities that will assess its candidates’ ability to demonstrate that they have achieved the objectives.

In short, within the next few years, every program is expected to have filled every box on the grid. At that point, the college will have fully demonstrated every aspect of the standards. In the process, however, its programs will have, ipso facto, transformed themselves from faculties concerned with inputs to faculties focused on candidate performance in educational settings with real children.

After analyzing their assessment grids, each program summarized the assessment data it had collected to date. In many cases, program faculty illustrated how the assessment data had
been used to improve specific aspects of the program. Finally, each program summarized the plan it had to create new objectives and corresponding assessment modalities that would respond to all of the NCATE indicators, and provided a concise list of assessment goals to be met in the next five years.

At the unit level, the leadership team constructed a unit-level means to create an assessment plan for the college as a whole. This plan addresses assessment procedures for standards Five and Six, concerned with unit faculty and governance issues. The process of creating indicators for all six standards proved valuable, providing a strong organizing principle for the final section of the Continuing Report and creating the space for more focused evaluations of the unit’s operation.

The PSC/NCATE Web-site: Documentation for the World to See

Our goal for the electronic review was to build a website that could be the framework for a continual accreditation process—one that could grow with the college. The decision to conduct the accreditation evaluation through a web-based format required a team of technology staff from the Office of Instructional Technology to be assigned nearly full-time to the project. The team included a designer, a programmer, and several assistants who were primarily responsible for translating all documents into xhtml format for the website. One of the members of the leadership team served as the primary liaison between the leadership team and the technology team to coordinate the integration of the technological aspects with the content of the upcoming review. We began the process late, far too late for such a huge endeavor. However, between February 2000 and January 2001 we were able to build a website that is easy to navigate and contains most of the information needed for the visit. By the time of the visit, the site contained nearly one thousand documents, ranging from single page sample advising sheets through reports running to hundreds of pages. All the documents could be accessed through a variety of approaches. In the next few paragraphs we will provide an overview of our process, not necessarily as a guide, but to share some of the critical moments we experienced through the building of the site.

We began in February 2000 with a very simple framework that served as a skeleton for our technology team. The framework evolved as the leadership team and the technology team talked together about the standards and the types of documents that would be necessary to
support those standards. This was an inductive process in that we generated a list of all the types of documents that would be necessary for the site (program descriptions, syllabi, vitae, assessment plans, diversity plans, previous NCATE and PSC reports, annual college reports, etc.) and grouped them into larger categories of items. Using three different colors of notecards to identify our larger categories (program documents, college documents, PSC/NCATE documents) we began to organize our site. It was essential to involve the technology team in this discussion so that we could begin to share the content of the accreditation process as they shared ways the technology could facilitate parts of the process. We ended up with a webpage design that allowed us to clearly show documents according to NCATE standards and college programs as well as special links for faculty vitae, College of Education documents, University of Georgia documents, NCATE/PSC documents, and College highlights. The program pages each contained the following links: program descriptions, syllabi, field experience, diversity, assessment, technology, faculty vitae, and program highlights. [Refer audience to copies of site map and sample pages from program pages]

Throughout the spring and summer, the technology team worked with us to design the site. The programmer began with a document management system in which vitae could be entered and updated as necessary. This system had limited access for faculty and graduate assistants trained to enter data in the site. We then built a document management system to house the rest of the documents [refer audience to diagram of document management system]. This system was detailed in that it tracked a document from the time it was uploaded, through the xhtml coding and quality check by the technology staff, until it was “tagged” by one of the leadership team according to content. For example, a syllabus might be tagged to appear for a particular program in its syllabus listings, but could also appear in the diversity or field experience links for that program as well. A syllabus that was used across programs could be tagged for all programs. The document management system allowed staff to add documents to the system, change titles of all documents, add comments to documents, search for documents by number, take an inventory as to how many documents were at different stages of the process, and add URLs to the system. When the document management system was ready for the faculty and administration to view, we designed a feedback procedure whereby an individual viewing a particular document on the website could add a comment for the program development team by using a pencil icon located at the top of every page; the resulting comment became an e-mail
message that was sent automatically to the technology team. This served as a means for faculty to provide direct, clear feedback for changes that needed to be made to the documents. This system, which was in place from the time the site went public within the college until just before the PSC/NCATE visit, centralized the feedback and decreased the “people” time it took to respond to change requests. The technology and leadership teams could then use the management system to read and assign the change requests to others, provide instruction for what needed to be done, or simply make the change and resolve the issue. We were able to monitor change requests, ensuring that all were accomplished prior to the visit. The entire management system proved to be extremely easy to use as the leadership and technology teams prepared the website for the visit.

One of the challenges we encountered in creating the website was in negotiating across different languages. We found that faculty and administrators were using academic language related to teacher education programs and also language related to the PSC/NCATE process that was not shared across all faculty and was a challenge for the technology team. On the other hand, we as faculty were required to learn and use technological terms to communicate accurately with the technology team. One interesting incident occurred in which a member of the leadership team, who is also a qualitative research methodologist, was talking about “coding” documents, referring to using highlighters suggesting that graduate assistants could code the documents for particular standards. A technology team member understood her to say that graduate assistants would need to be trained to do the xhtml coding on the documents. The technology person knew that we did not have enough time to train graduate assistants in the skill of such coding. Clear miscommunication. We learned quickly to check our understandings around the language issues.

Despite the challenges and short turn-around time for the construction of the PSC/NCATE website, the college now has a means to engage in continual refinement and improvement, and has a way to present itself to external agencies such as the PSC, NCATE, and the Georgia Board of Regents. We expect to assign responsibility for upkeep of the site to designated trained individuals within the programs. The website allows us to engage in an ongoing data collection process as we begin to implement our assessment plans. It moves the college a long way from the chaos of traditional reaccreditation frenzy to the sanity of continual attention to the important work of assuring excellence across the entire unit.
Lessons about Time

A lesson of primary importance that impacts the entire reaccreditation process is to allow adequate preparation time. We did not have a realistic time frame for the construction of the website. The enormous task of designing the website, obtaining documents from the programs, translating them into xhtml format, tagging them for content, uploading them to the site, allowing the faculty sufficient time to comment and critique, and to revise and edit the website required more time than we had, given the college’s late start toward reaccreditation. We simply ran out of time so that we were not able to include student work samples and portfolios as we had planned. We established an elegant, complex, useful website in one year, but only through the extraordinary commitment of a number of people, and at that the website was not as complete as we hope to make it in the future. For institutions of the size of the College of Education, we would now recommend no less than two years to create and launch a web-based reaccreditation process; smaller institutions should give themselves no less than a year and a half.

In retrospect, we realize that the college should have provided release time for the principal member of the leadership team to oversee the development and implementation of the website. In addition, advanced graduate assistants with expertise in teacher education who could work independently with the technology staff would facilitate this process. The time requirement of the designated administrator, usually the associate dean, is extensive, particularly during the final six months prior to the PSC/NCATE visit.

Electronic Visit: Lessons Learned

The leadership team did not anticipate that the quality of the documents submitted by the programs would vary extensively. Consequently, two months prior to the visit, when the site was made accessible to faculty for its input, we had many requests to substitute documents previously submitted and to add many additional documents. This was due in part to faculty not realizing what their documents would look like in electronic format; it was due as well to a healthy degree of embarrassment when some programs realized how their documents looked along side those of other programs. The time and cost of preparing documents for the website would have been decreased significantly if we had been more vigilant with the quality of the documents before they were submitted for coding. A final approval process would help to alleviate this problem.
On the other hand, it may have been salutary for programs to actually see for themselves how they looked “in public;” with sufficient time to construct the entire website and view it in its entirety before making it available to reaccreditation teams, there may be value in expecting programs to wield some quality control of their own.

Although the site was easy to navigate, we know in retrospect that if we had more time, we would have made the site more user-friendly. More refinements, including alphabetized lists of documents, properly labeled URLs, and a search function are required. As we continue to refine the site for on-going reaccreditation use, we will have the site reviewed by an instructional designer to make suggestions for usability, readability, and interpretability.

Although we requested a PSC/NCATE team that was prepared to conduct an electronic visit, we found that there was a range in the ways individuals on the team used the site. While some were able to navigate the site and gather needed data from the electronic format with great ease, others had difficulty using the materials without extensive printing of documents. We did not anticipate the amount of printing that the board of examiners would engage in. In retrospect, it is essential, given the complexity of our organization, to have a tutorial, navigational tools, and carefully summarized documents. Due to the vast number of documents the team had to examine, there needs to be more attention to summarizing this data by the college in preparation for an electronic visit. On the other hand, colleges of education can hope that NCATE and state boards will begin to train members of examining teams to work toward nearly paperless reviews.

In thinking about using our PSC/NCATE website for annual reviews as well as our next reaccreditation visit, we are interested in NCATE’s plan to monitor our progress in years 2002 to 2004. Given an electronic website, will it go in and look at what is there? Will it ask for reports in paper form? A little heads-up to prepare would be helpful.

Assessment Plan Lessons

As a result of the training offered to our college leadership team, we were prepared to have a plan for what we wanted to do in terms of assessing our outcomes. Yet the PSC/NCATE teams kept asking for more data. They seemed to be expecting more than we were led to believe we needed to have. This may just be an interpretation problem from training to wanting to see more (or used to seeing more). We did not anticipate the team’s need for additional information, embellishment, or clarification, beyond what was on the web. For example, data regarding
student evaluations of faculty teaching was difficult to read and comprehend on the web. As a result, we had to print this material and re-organize it on paper for the team during the visit. It also appeared that it was easier for the team (over the weekend before the planned interviews begin) for the team to ask questions of me or another team member than to look for answers on the website. Again, this may change over time as examiners become more comfortable with electronic reviews, and as sites such as ours build in search engines, provide document summaries, and in other ways make complex sites more navigable.

Given the amount of information asked for in the first two days of the visit—during the weekend—we should have had department heads or program coordinators of key units in the building and available for interviews. Many questions dealt with how teacher candidates were evaluated, enrollment data, student and faculty recruitment data, and the specialty area folio reviews.

We kept a list of questions asked of us by the team so as to be better prepared for our next visit. Much of this information, which is currently available in different forms at the program level, will need to be presented in summary form at the unit level. The PSC/NCATE team pushed us to think about the kinds of data that will be needed and the form in which this data must be presented.

Conclusion

Perhaps the major lesson we learned is the good news that the usual chaos and frenzy of preparing for a reaccreditation visit can be put behind any institution that is committed to finding more rational processes. Those result does not pivot on the web-based review; indeed, our decision to adopt a web-based reaccreditation review added significantly to the work that faced the leadership team. We do feel strongly, however, that the extra work was worth the effort, for we now have an infrastructure in place that will facilitate annual reviews and short-circuit the quinquennial frenzy to which all NCATE institutions are prone. A small oversight committee can now take over. Its work will be focused on addressing any programmatic and unit weaknesses noted by the reaccreditation board of examiners and encouraging progress toward implementing the plans put in place during the reaccreditation process. It will also monitor the collection of assessment data and its transparent use as feedback to modify and improve programs and the unit, and improving the web-site. In the end, we are optimistic that reaccreditation need no long
be seen as an onerous, exhausting hurdle, but can authentically become a powerful means to institutional growth and improvement.