

Information Professions Accreditation Meeting
September 9, 2008
Meeting Report
Information Professionals Task Force^{1,2}

An invitational meeting was held on September 9, 2008, to consider the question of the accreditation of information professional programs. Sponsored by the American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) and The Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), the meeting grew out of a presidential initiative announced by ASIS&T Nancy Roderer in October 2007 that proposed that ASIS&T act as a catalyst for shared activity in the promotion of the information professions and in the consideration of a new accreditation program across these professions. A report reviewing the current status of information professional programs and related accreditation activities was released in June 2008 and served as background for the meeting.

The September 9 meeting brought together leaders in information education, accreditation officers, representatives of information professional societies, employers and students to discuss their interests and concerns relative to the education of information professionals. James Neal, Vice President for Information Services and University Librarian, Columbia University set the stage for the day's discussion by approaching information education and accreditation issues from the perspective of the employer; types of individuals the employer needs to hire, where s/he can find them, and the extent to which the employer can rely on information education programs to prepare today and tomorrow's professionals. This was followed by a discussion of the findings of the Landscape study by co-author Samantha Becker, and an overview of accreditation by experts Alison Lutton, Steven Spanghel, and Katy Marre.

¹ Members of the ASIS&T Information Professionals Task Force include Nancy Roderer. Chair, Diane Barlow Marcia Bates, Prudence Dalrymple, Joseph Janes, Kate McCain, and Ann Prentice.

² Additional information related to this initiative can be found at <http://www.asis.org/news.html>

The second half of the day's meeting provided attendees with the opportunity to respond to these presentations and to present their views and suggestions. Prior to the meeting, attendees had been divided into five groups each including representatives of the various groups and interests invited to the meeting. Each group had a team leader who recorded the discussions and reported them to the group at the end of the discussion sessions. The following five questions were posed of each group and served to provide a general outline for the discussion. Additional issues were raised by each group.

- Who are the stakeholders?
- What are the commonalities of interest?
- What are the needs and payoffs?
- If you had a magic wand....
- What are the next steps?

A summary of responses follows.

Who Are the Stakeholders?

There are diverse stakeholders and tensions are often found between and among them; between academic programs and professional associations, between the university's desire for creativity and autonomy and ways to measure success, between the employer's need to hire graduates with a particular skill set and the institution providing educational programs. The question of return on investment arises among each of the stakeholders; what is the ROI in current accreditation practices, if a different processes, what is the ROI? In one way or another, each stakeholder asked "what's in it for us? how will a different process meet our needs?" There was general agreement that credible measures of quality add value.

-Students. There was agreement among all groups that students are major stakeholders in the issue. They want to learn about opportunities and to explore the ways in which they can achieve their goals. They are concerned that they select the program appropriate to their needs and interests. Program quality, program cost, program credibility and status are factors in their decision making as is the concern that the degree program they select is of the type and quality that will allow them to compete successfully in the job market. Currently, there is no source of

information that will provide the information needed for informed decision making.

-Employers. Whether they represent educational institutions, not for profits, business, or industry, employers want to hire employees who have the requisite skills and abilities to be productive members of the organization. As the world of information requires more and more new types of skills and abilities, employers want to know where they will find the kinds of employees they need to hire and they need to have some sense of the quality of the academic programs in which students are prepared. And here again, it is difficult to acquire the information needed for informed decision making.

Deans. Deans are looking for competitive advantage that comes from quality programs. Their long range planning to achieve this is a constant activity. Tracking graduates of their programs is one way to determine quality. In the current environment it is very difficult to do this. Deans are not interested in adding layers to their already heavy responsibilities.

Faculty. Faculty want to get the right students for the courses they are teaching.

Professional Associations. Concern here is with the success of their membership. One way of doing this is to focus on program quality and assure that there is a way to show the public that programs meet certain standards. Current professional associations are looking at the ways in which they approach accreditation and some are envisioning new approaches. The explosion of information programs, many of which have few if any requirements or oversight, is of concern. If accreditation or credentialing is the passport stamp which expands the job market for graduates, where can it be found/ Who does this? What is the role of the professional organization?

Additional stakeholders include public consumers, government agencies concerned with measuring quality of academic programs, and graduates of information programs wanting to maintain or upgrade their skill set.

What are the commonalities of interest?

Everyone wants quality; quality programs populated by quality students who go on to become quality employees. There continues to be a need to define the domain and to identify commonalities within it. "Doing information" is more than the technical aspects. It includes the organization of information and means for retrieval. Society needs to understand that information professionals are not necessarily tech professionals. There is a necessary if sometimes rocky

partnership between employers and academics. Academic programs share the following commonalities; competitiveness, the need for reflection through self study, outward communication, and benchmarking to a standard which provides a measure for quality. Employers want to be assured that programs are preparing graduates for the jobs that now exist and will exist. There is agreement that academic programs must be flexible, agile, and creative and that institutions retain the plurality and diversity of their programs. Concerns about loss of autonomy, fear of change, loss of students or a shifting of enrollment to different programs and the related loss of funding led to the wish to be cautious and to move carefully.

Other commonalities included the recognized need for branding of information programs, for quality indicators, and incentives for participation in a process that would achieve this. There were several levels of interest in the possibility of finding an accreditation home that would further these efforts.

Needs and Payoffs

Students. Students are interested in programs that lead to the types of jobs they want. They are looking for a common lexicon of courses that are responsive to the evolving nature of information. They want to know basic information about a program; transfer of credit, is it a conduit for exchange, a growth of competencies. If a forward thinking accreditation or other process protects the students' interests and provides them with the information they need, they see it as positive.

Employers. Their major interest is that a program prepares competent employees who can participate in today and tomorrow's work environment. Globally, there is an international mobility of professional positions and information programs should prepare students to take advantage of the opportunities.

Deans. Deans have an "it depends" attitude toward accreditation activities. Who will do the work? Who will pay for it? Who will sustain the effort? If a new process is undertaken, it should not require a lot of faculty/staff effort and should be non-invasive. One possibility is to look at a system of recognition which would prepare a listing of information programs and provide information on content and purpose. This process, updated regularly could provide a means of identifying information programs.

From the university level, accreditation efforts help the administration understand the content and quality of a program. Quality programs can benefit from the prestige factor.

Professional Associations. There is both interest and concern about the benefits of a different accreditation process. If professional organizations merge their accreditation activities, will there be a threat to individual goals? Will employers embrace an accreditation process as a means of assuring quality? Will turf wars over cultural differences occur? How can one be both a leader for a profession, provide legitimacy for the organization, and at the same time, merge interests?

There was general consensus that if there is a change in accreditation activities, one should look at a “post modern” accreditation model, one that is a new brand. This new model should take advantage of the latest and best information technology expertise to devise a model for the 21st century.

Continuing concern over the way in which the various information disciplines see themselves in relation to each other was expressed. How can one link the various disciplines? Can one define and articulate the common elements and develop an information continuum? Can the new accreditation venture be able to expand to deal with new specialties and new specialized degrees? What lessons can be learned from looking at the accreditation programs of NCATE and AQIP? There were numerous comments that one should “get away from standards” and move toward “recognition.” Look at a less prescriptive accreditation process, e.g. ALA, and move toward a new design. As students and graduates look at their careers, there is an increased emphasis on credentialing. Will a new accreditation activity accommodate this?

If I had a magic wand...

- Provide a means of informing the public about the range of information programs.
- Standardize the terminology and provide a basic agreement on curriculum content.
- Develop a different assessment process that doesn't increase the workload, one that harmonizes the many statistics that programs are forced to submit in different ways.
- Provide a basic educational program and then specialize both in content and ways of learning.
- Involve the information community as consultants in an accreditation type of process.

Next Steps

There were numerous comments about the need for collaboration among the professional associations as next steps were discussed. Communication among disparate stakeholders and continuing discussion of the issues raised here is an important ongoing process. While there was little interest in developing new standards, there was considerable interest in finding a way to identify information programs that stakeholders would find useful. One proposal which was met with considerable interest was to look toward developing a recognition programs described in Appendix 1. This type of program would have as its purpose the identification and branding of programs that offer information education, thus making it easier for prospective students, for employers, and for society at large to understand what is and what is not included in the information professions. Information program recognition vouches for the **content** of the program so recognized but makes no claims about program quality.

Action Items from the Meeting

Based on discussions at the meeting, the Information Professionals Task Force has identified specific actions to pursue:

1. Use the feedback to date to identify explicit goals of the proposed effort
2. Conduct a formal needs assessment and review of options of stakeholders
3. Continue the development of partnerships with professional organizations and accrediting agencies begun at the September 9 meeting
4. Select an initial approach, such as a recognition program, to pursue, and identify a core of professional programs with which to work initially
5. Plan for a parallel effort to promote the educational opportunities within the information professions
6. Seek funding for the above

Appendix 1: I-program Recognition

At the September 9, 2008 meeting on accreditation sponsored by ASIS&T and CLIR, there was both great interest and great concern expressed regarding the prospect of developing an accreditation program for schools producing “Information Professionals.” Interest because many present felt that the unique array of skills and knowledge that are acquired at information programs merits greater recognition in society and in information workplaces. Concern because universities, and the Deans of schools, are becoming more, rather than less, resistant to investing the substantial effort generally required by accrediting bodies to achieve accreditation. One idea that came out of this discussion was that of “information program recognition” rather than accreditation.

One of the discussion groups proposed a different approach, which, it is to be hoped, achieves the desired visibility and recognition for information-professional-producing programs, without imposing an onerous burden on the programs to be reviewed. The approach proposed was to provide “recognition” instead of accreditation.

The intended purposes of recognition and accreditation are different, and, consequently, the effort to achieve recognition is understood to be quite different in nature than that for accreditation. The purpose of accreditation is to validate to the world the judgment of a qualified accrediting body that a particular program or school is offering an acceptable program in the subject matter of the degrees concerned. Accreditation implies that graduates of the degree program will have the necessary expertise and professional perspective and ethical values associated with qualified professionals in that discipline.

The purpose of recognition is different. At a time when the information professions are little recognized or understood by the general public and members of related disciplines, it is desirable to clarify to the world what the study of the information professions is about. Numerous programs use the word “information” in equally numerous different ways. It is often difficult to impossible for a prospective student, or a counselor advising a prospective student, to recognize

which programs actually address the subject matter of what the “I-Caucus” schools would call an information program.

The purpose of recognition is to identify and brand programs offering information education, thus making it easier for prospective students and the society at large to understand what is and is not included in the information professions. Information program recognition vouches for the CONTENT of the program so recognized; recognition makes no claims one way or the other about the quality of the recognized program.

Currently, accreditation self-studies run into the hundreds of pages of documentation. Achieving Recognition would involve submitting a 2 to 5 page application verifying the subject content of the program in question.

→The applying program would receive permission to display a seal on its web page and other program documentation. The seal would include a web address that the seeker could consult for more information on the general content of information programs.

→Recognition could be renewed every two years, with an even briefer renewal form.

Specifics of the recognition program should be worked out by representatives of sponsoring professional organizations working in concert with accrediting organizations and information programs.