

**MOVING OUTSIDE THE BUBBLE: SUCCESSFULLY INTEGRATING
ASSESSMENT AND ACCREDITATION INTO TECHNOLOGY
PROGRAMS**

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Traditional methods for validating a program's success have come under heightened scrutiny over the past several years from students, parents, board members, faculty, industry and local communities. These university stakeholders are demanding more visible evidence of quality and success. The challenge for the School of Technology at Kent State University (KSU) has been to answer the question: "How do we align external accreditation and internal assessment initiatives with existing program success strategies in order to achieve targeted student learning outcomes?"

Historically, the School of Technology (SOT) is no stranger to change. It began in 1913 as a department, moving to a School within the College of Fine and Performing Arts in the 1970s to its current status as an Independent School of Technology with programs on all eight campuses of KSU ("Brief History"). During this time, the SOT has been engaged in a continuous improvement and growth cycle.

Recently, the university initiated a system-wide approach to assessment through its participation in the Higher Learning Commission's (North Central Association) Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP). The SOT was required to implement a formal assessment plan for its programs and curricula ("AQIP Academic Quality"). The SOT decided to maximize its efforts and results by responding to AQIP with the introduction of professional program accreditations. This permitted compliance with AQIP as well as elevated the professional standings of the degree programs.

The introduction of multiple accreditation agencies such as NAIT (National Association of Industrial Technology), ABET/TAC (American Board of Engineering and Technology/Technology Accreditation Commission), CAA (Council on Aviation Accreditation), and ACBSP (Associate for Collegiate Business Schools and Programs) for the multiple degree programs within the School of Technology created a complex environment. In addition, the accreditation criteria had to be applied across a multiple campus system.

In order to deal with this complex environment, the KSU School of Technology implemented a systematic approach that methodically addressed the needs of each accreditation agency, curriculum program, and overall University assessment project.

One might erroneously conclude that assessment prior to accreditation had been neglected. Quite the opposite was true. As Sell argues, most universities and schools have already engaged in extensive work in the areas of student and faculty assessment (Sell, 1989). Rather, this paper presents a model that depicts the evolution from an autonomous programmatic state before accreditation to one in which quality is seamlessly integrated across campuses and programs without compromising the original mission and goals.

1. EXTERNAL ACCREDITATION

This process begins with the growing need across higher education to increase the visibility of quality of the academic programs. External program accreditation is one method by which quality can be verified to internal and external stakeholders. (Lubinescu *et al.*, 2001) The diverse disciplines represented within the SOT required the pursuit of more than one type of degree program accreditation. Fortunately, each of the external accrediting organizations have in common as their central mission to promote, maintain, or enhance the quality of the education being delivered with respect to their specific discipline area.

The program accrediting bodies provide structure to the process but are not prescriptive in nature. For example, the National Association of Industrial Technology (NAIT) assumes that each program will have its own unique goals and objectives which in turn drive the overall Industrial Technology program at the institution (“Industrial Technology”). NAIT does not dictate what those goals and objectives should be, but only requires that they be compatible with the criteria and standards specific to that particular program and accreditation.

1.1 The Process of Alignment

As part of the model, external program accreditation was an important first step toward the formalization of the quality assurance process. By providing the structure but not the prescription, the program accreditation organizations acted as a catalyst for the process of alignment. Alignment first begins within the individual degree programs as they are applied over a multi campus system. Goals, objectives, and other accreditation criteria such as outcomes assessment for each program provided a mechanism that linked the campuses together.

Before the introduction of the accreditation process, each program on each campus evaluated themselves independently and without collaboration. By working through the process that is required for the accreditation self study, programs found themselves communicating and collaborating in order to be successful. As a result, the programs which were previously separated geographically, found themselves joined in common goals and objects, thus operating as one cohesive unit. Figure 1 illustrates an example of this cohesion that forms as links across a multi-campus system are developed.

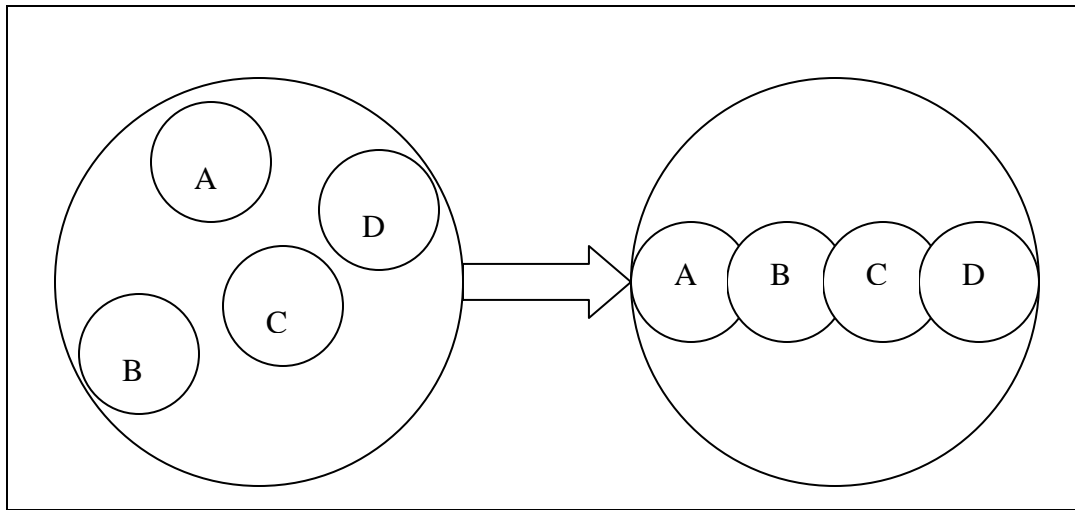


Figure 1: Individual programs across multiple campuses moving towards alignment.

Next, the goals and objectives for each program were examined in a broader context in order to answer the question, “Are the goals and objectives of each curricular program compatible with the mission and goal of the School of Technology?” This question had to be answered by each of the programs within the context of their accreditation. By taking this methodical approach it was discovered that the presence of numerous accrediting organizations unintentionally provided a framework to align each program with the SOT’s mission.

2. SYSTEM WIDE ASSESSMENT

Two forces were coming together simultaneously – AQIP and program accreditation- to ensure the continuing evaluation and improvement within the SOT. It was important to the success of the model that the efforts of these two major initiatives converged with minimal redundancy and maximum use of the limited time resources. As it was discovered, these two initiatives resulted in an improved process. Accreditation formalized the links and alignment in the model while AQIP provided the mechanism to internalize quality assurance and continuous improvement.

AQIP forced SOT to move outside the bubble and begin looking at quality and assessment from a university wide perspective. AQIP standardized the methodology for all of the colleges and their degree programs to assess individual curriculum programs regardless of the discipline. For some programs AQIP provided the only assessment tool. AQIP was also not prescriptive, but provided a systematic method for completing the process through self-reflection, measurement, evaluation, and result sharing. This provides a common metric for all colleges within a university to evaluate the quality of the degree programs. (“Six Steps”).

3. THE NEXT STEP

As Figure 2 depicts, the bubble that each academic unit, like the School of Technology, operated within was formed by its own discipline specific external accreditation. The AQIP process burst this bubble by requiring each academic unit to also assess within a university-wide context. The future progression of this model is one where internalization and more importantly ownership of the quality assurance process will take place. Quality efforts will then become systemic within each program.

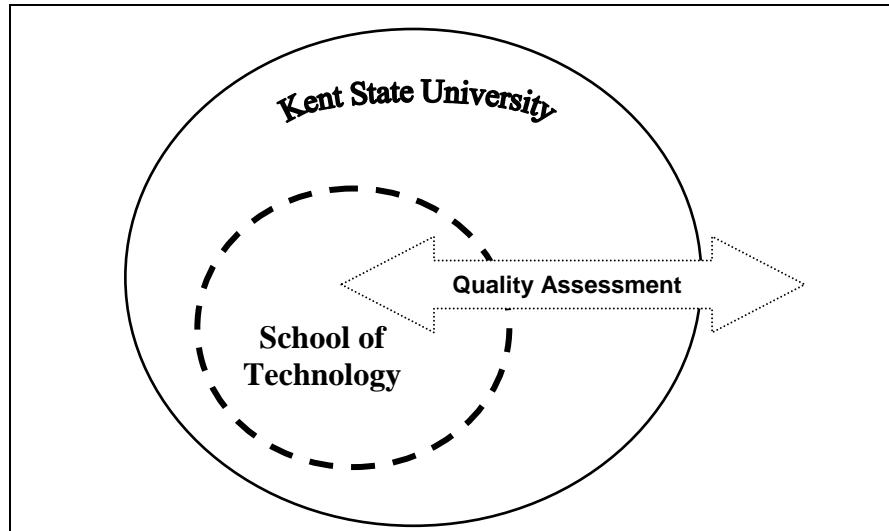


Figure 2: Bursting the bubble.

The suggestion that assessment and accreditation are no longer two parallel continuums, but rather converging, is validated based upon the model depicted (Lubinescu *et al.*, 2001). The recognition of this convergence represents a pivotal point in the model. It is not our opinion that organizations such as AQIP and the various professional accreditation agencies will actually merge into one, but rather that the requirements for compliance will eventually harmonize, rendering the distinction between what was an assessment effort versus an accreditation effort meaningless.

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