

Requirements for Preparing for Specialized or Professional Accreditation

In addition to The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley's (UTRGV) accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), many academic units hold accreditation from specialized or professional agencies. The University supports the many and varied accreditation processes that apply to its academic units seeking to gain or maintain recognition from specialized or professional agencies. This support is focused through the Office of Institutional Accreditation, Program Development, and Analysis (OIA) and is overseen by the Vice Provost for Institutional Accreditation, Program Development, and Analysis (VPIA).

Though external accreditation processes vary considerably in timelines and requirements, common elements required by most accreditation agencies include:

- The preparation of a self-study report
- A virtual or on-site review/visit
- Preparation of follow-up reports

These guidelines establish the institutional procedures for developing, approving, monitoring, and reviewing specialized or professional accreditation reports and related activity.

Organizing and Preparing the Self-Study Report:

Deans/associate deans/directors/chairs typically appoint a person to lead the self-study review process. The deans/associate deans/directors/chairs and self-study leaders thoroughly review the standards and requirements of the agency. It is expected that the self-study leader and the college's associate dean responsible for accreditation contact the VPIA at least one year in advance of the preparation of the self-review process. In consultation with the VPIA, the dean/associate dean and the self-study leader will identify the information needed to develop an effective response and will draft a reasonable timeline for preparing the self-study report. The timeline should account for the data/information gathering lag time since it may take more time than expected to gather information internal to the unit and information from other units at UTRGV including data and tables needed from the OIA.

Drafting the Self-Study Report:

The report should adhere to the guidelines and standards specified by the accrediting agency. The dean/associate dean and self-study leader should be aware of any changes in guidelines and standards that may have occurred since the last accreditation period.

The report typically provides an understandable, clear, and succinct summary of the standards or requirements addressed. Supporting data and details may be provided in attachments and all materials should be clearly organized and easily accessible for reviewers.

The self-study report should be completed in plenty of time for vetting by appropriate faculty and administrators in the unit and college. In addition, the self-study report must be submitted to the VPIA for institutional review since reviewer questions relating to the self-study often get asked at the administrative level. The self-study leader is encouraged to seek feedback from the VPIA as the draft of the self-study report develops. No later than one month in advance of the due date to the accreditation agency, the self-study leader should submit a completed final draft to the VPIA for feedback after it has been reviewed by the college dean/associate dean. As needed, the VPIA will return the self-study report to the dean/associate dean and self-study leader with edits and comments to be addressed. Once all edits and comments provided by the VPIA have been addressed, the VPIA will review the self-study report and discuss it with the executive vice president/provost who may provide additional comments and feedback. The self-study report may go through the cycle of unit, college, and institutional review as many times as necessary to ensure that all standards have been adequately addressed. Once all edits and comments have been addressed, the dean/associate dean will submit the self-study report to the VPIA for final review and approval to submit.

Routing and Timing of the Self-Study Report:

The accrediting agency may request submission of the report in hard copy and/or electronic format and may specify type font, electronic software, etc. The academic unit should consider the time needed to comply with the agency's requirements. In addition, several UTRGV requirements must be fulfilled when submitting the self-study report:

- ***UTRGV Profile.*** The University requires that the most recent copy of the UTRGV Profile be submitted with the report. Though this may not be required by all agencies, it must be submitted to ensure that UTRGV can demonstrate compliance with SACSCOC accreditation standards.
- ***Self-Study Retention Requirements.*** Regardless of the format of submission, a copy of the self-review report must be retained to address subsequent questions or recommendations from the accrediting agency, to provide a basis for any required action plan, and as evidence of submission. In addition to the unit/college retaining a final copy, a final copy of all materials submitted to the accreditor and evidence of submission such as acknowledgment of receipt of the report or similar documentation must be sent to the VPIA for the official university files.
- ***Signature Page.*** Time must be allocated to acquire the appropriate signatures needed for submission. If the President's or Provost's signature is required, a final copy of the full self-study report including the executive summary must be submitted to the VPIA at least two weeks in advance of the due date to ensure adequate time for the VPIA to secure the necessary signatures.

Scheduling the Site Visit:

The accrediting/certifying agency typically contacts the academic unit and provides optional dates for the site visit. It often provides a sample itinerary or a list of meetings that need to be scheduled. If a meeting with either the president or provost is required, the academic unit must immediately contact the VPIA to determine the feasibility of the various proposed dates and if possible, to schedule the meetings with the president, provost, and/or VPIA. Typically, this process occurs six or more months in advance of the actual visit. Requests with shorter lead times or no options on dates may not be able to be accommodated.

Preparing for the Site Visit:

Before the site team arrives on campus, the VPIA must receive a copy of the site visit itinerary. If the review team is scheduled to meet with the president and/or provost, a series of documents must be made available three weeks in advance of the visit allowing one week for editing. These documents are as follows.

- Executive summary of the self-study report. The executive summary should provide the president and/or provost with sufficient information to be adequately prepared for the site visit. In addition to relevant program information, the executive summary should include program strengths, weaknesses, and concerns that may be noted by evaluators.
- Biographies and, if available, photos of each of the site reviewers.
- Itinerary for the site visit.

During the Site Visit:

Once on campus the reviewers typically are in charge of the schedule. Within reason, it is important to attempt to adhere to the schedule. Should changes be made to the schedule during the visit, the VPIA must be informed so that scheduled parties may be made aware of delays or changes in the plan.

After the Site Visit:

Typically, the on-site visit ends with the review team providing a closing statement, including cited strengths and suggestions, along with an indication of their recommendation for accreditation/certification. Shortly after the team departs, the unit should collectively discuss the results and formulate actions to improve the program based on the suggestion(s).

Forwarding Letter of Accreditation and Request for Follow-Up Actions:

After an action has been taken by the accrediting/certifying agency, a letter indicating the length of accreditation/certification as well as the need for any follow-up actions is ordinarily sent to the academic unit and copied to the dean and provost, and/or president. A copy of the formal letter must

be sent to the VPIA. As with the preparation of the self-study report, the self-study leader, the dean/associate dean, and the VPIA will work together to identify the information needed to develop an effective response and will draft a reasonable timeline for preparing the draft report.

Submitting Follow-Up Reports:

Based on the review findings, follow-up reports may be required to address specific criteria or standards. The unit should pay specific attention to the details in the request when drafting the follow-up report. Preparation of follow-up reports will follow the same procedure of review as the preparation of the initial self-study documents. In addition, documents must be retained by the college/unit and copies must be submitted to the VPIA.

Submitting Ongoing Accreditation Maintenance Reports:

Accrediting agencies often require ongoing maintenance reports on an annual or biannual basis. Some require forms while other agencies may require more detailed discussion. The college/unit is responsible for ensuring that any required maintenance reports are scheduled and that someone is preparing the required reports. Annual or biannual progress reports must be submitted to the VPIA and the appropriate EVP for review before submission to the accreditor. In addition, documents must be retained by the college/unit and copies must be submitted to the VPIA.

Maintaining Accreditation/Certification:

The unit should continue monitoring any changes to accreditation/certification standards, guidelines, and timelines and make the necessary adjustments to meet new expectations.