

Roles Of Site Visitors: Developing A System That Works

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Overview

I have been asked to talk about my experiences and opinions regarding site visits to doctoral programs. I want to start by saying that it is my view that, *overall, the process works*. Programs become stronger through the self-study and evaluation process. I know Committee on Accreditation (CoA) members occasionally get some flack about weak programs receiving accreditation, or strong programs being given a hard time, but with so much at stake, and such a large system, this is not surprising. *In my view, the process is fair and reasonable overall*. So later, when I focus on my concerns about the process, please understand these in the spirit of CoA's own efforts at self-assessment and quality enhancement, much as CoA views most programs as strong, but always with room for improvement.

Roles: History

The main theme of what I will say is that *defining, clarifying, and communicating the roles of all parties involved in the accreditation process is essential*. These roles have evolved over time, and I worry that our expectations for the parties involved in accreditation may be approaching an unrealistic and undesirable state.

When I first started doing site visits, site visitors were expected to gather data, communicate a sense of the program and players, address the strengths and weaknesses in

each domain of evaluation (although these were slightly different back then), and come up with a recommendation for full, provisional, or no accreditation. Unfortunately, problems began to arise, particularly when the CoA, came to a conclusion that differed from the site visitors' recommendation. This often led to appeals and threats of lawsuits.

One solution would have been to get everybody on the same page through more clarity of criteria and better training and feedback for site visitors, but the more economic decision was made to cut the site visitor's overall judgment of a program, and have the site visit report contain no specific recommendation.

The next stage was to have site visitors gather data, communicate a sense of the program and players, address the strengths and weaknesses in each domain, and state whether the program was in compliance with each individual domain. No overall recommendation about accreditation was made. Well, this was only one step removed, and still carried the legal vulnerabilities of the earlier system. So further change was made.

The next stage was to have site visitors make no judgments specifically related to the Domains in the Guidelines and Principles (G & P). Instead, site visitors were to be the "eyes and ears of the CoA," the "sensors," not the "censors." We were asked to gather data and communicate a sense of the program and players, but not to draw conclusions about domain strengths, weaknesses or compliance and not to make an accreditation recommendation. The CoA decided whether program characteristics matched up with the criteria for accreditation. Some site visitors and programs did not like this system, noting that CoA had fewer data available to them than the site visit team, and thus might not actually have been in the best position to make an independent judgment.

Roles: Current

The latest stage in all of this, based on recent site visitor training workshops, is that site visitors are now being asked to address each point in the G & P briefly, and to even use the letters and numbers in the G & P outline in their write-up. The site visitor's role is only to poke around and gather data, checking whether the self-study seems to be accurate and truthful, and perhaps including facts that were omitted from the self-study. This results in a site visit report that looks very much like the self-study document, with no professional judgment at all on the part of site visitors. The role of the site visitor, in the extreme version of this system, becomes one of "police investigator."

Two questions arise: (1) Is it possible for site visitors to limit themselves to this role? and (2) Is it desirable or beneficial to do so?

First, is this limited role even possible? I would argue that it is not possible to be just eyes and ears without also being heart, soul, brains, and even the mouth of the CoA. To do the job of gathering data adequately, we must do many other things. For example:

- Good site visitors relate. Accreditation is an interpersonal process dependent on communication among all parties. Part of this involves being empathic with regard to the stress of the site visit. Doctoral programs, arguably more than internships and postdocs, really must be accredited to survive. There are also situational stressors to consider. This is why I always start my meetings with program directors asking them for a longitudinal, developmental overview. I want to know where the program is in its development, and where the students, faculty, and administrators are with regard to recent events, both expected or normative, and unexpected.

- Good site visitors also have more data than they can possibly convey to CoA. The idea that they can be eyes and ears directly “hooked up” to CoA is unrealistic.
- Good site visitors also give feedback. We do this indirectly through the questions we ask and issues we pursue. We also do this in a feedback session, which is pretty hard to conduct without giving, well... feedback!
- Good site visitors consult. We’re not supposed to do this, but in reality, we help programs present the data they have to facilitate an accurate evaluation vis á vis the criteria.

Stop for a minute now and think of a program that you consider to be of very high quality... but not your own. Now think about why you believe it is of high quality. Very few of you probably thought of reasons like “they offer a great 3 credit social psychology course that’s very broad and general, yet taught at the doctoral level.” Instead, you probably thought of unique characteristics, like a particular concentration area that is covered well, unique practicum or research opportunities, or prominent faculty members. This is what programs do, too, when they apply for accreditation. Programs try to demonstrate their strengths by telling us about the unique qualities that distinguish them from other programs. But in our consultant role, we need to communicate to programs that accreditation is about *conformity* or being the same as other programs, not about filling some unique niche. It is about *compliance* with standards, and programs may need to be told this to be able to present the type of data needed for the evaluation.

- Good site visitors are also advocates for programs. This is especially true when dealing with central administrators who are not familiar with doctoral education needs and standards in psychology.
- Finally, good site visitors don't treat all programs equally. This may sound heretical on the surface, but experienced site visitors can often avoid delays for information by anticipating issues that will receive particularly careful scrutiny by their colleagues on CoA, and by scrutinizing those issues closely during the site visit. Some examples are:
 - Religious schools and training on gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues
 - For profit schools and standards for admission
 - Medical school based programs and whether the psychology faculty maintains control over the program
 - And so on...

So we are not doing the best we can do for the accreditation process unless we expand our role from “eyes and ears” to something much more.

As site visitors, we go in “Columbo style,” with a combination of the authority of the trench coat and the disarming qualities of the lollipop, to create an atmosphere where it is safe for a program to “reveal” itself. We help the program provide relevant data so they are evaluated fairly and not penalized because they have misunderstood some aspect of the task. We go in as local clinical scientists, figuring out what questions remain unanswered, and we use our relationship, assessment, data analysis, logic, and other critical thinking skills, to fully understand the program. As ambassadors from the accreditation world, we may consult, advocate, and provide feedback in specific ways.

Very few site visitors could function successfully as “eyes and ears” without also doing these other things.

The second question about the current role of the site visitor is whether this is the best use of the site visit and site visitors. We seem to be heading to a place where site visitors are “truth checkers” or police investigators. The question is, is this where we want to be. Site visits take an enormous amount of time and expense. There is tremendous cost incurred from sending three or more professionals off to visit a school, so we want to make sure we can justify the expense by using the professionals’ experience, talents, and skills to the fullest. But are we heading in a direction where we are doing so? If our role is restricted to that of investigator, checking the facts, do we really need three professionals to conduct our site visits?

On the flip side of this is what the reduction of the site visitor role does to the burden placed on CoA members. Site visits are a huge amount of work. But this doesn’t compare this to the amount of work members of CoA do in the review process. So the question of the day is, *how can we best provide an accurate and fair program evaluation, define the role of the site visitors to reduce the burden on the CoA, and at the same time, avoid sending APA’s lawyers into a panic?* How can we *maximize* the usefulness of site visits to CoA? What are some options and alternative models and roles for site visitors vs. the roles of accreditation committee members?

Perhaps the expertise of the CoA is to evaluate, develop, and clarify policy, and to ensure a reasonable amount of consistency across programs. Perhaps CoA’s role should not “bleed” into areas better assessed by site visitors. Site visitors have expertise in understanding the data in context. Their perceptions must be trusted. To confine site

visitors to just reporting a limited set of raw data creates redundancy with the self-study and devalues the professionalism of the visitors.

Site visitors have much more program specific data than does CoA. Perhaps this is why some state boards of higher education and accrediting bodies have the visiting team make the recommendation, and a central group like CoA reviews the recommendation just as a check for consistency with general policy. The judgment of the site visit team about sufficiency of various aspects of a program or school is not second guessed by the central group. Some groups even send a board member along with the site visit team to make sure the group adheres to stated policies and procedures. These board members are sometimes full-time paid employees of the accrediting group. Perhaps one of these or some other model would actually decrease the work load of CoA, while increasing the responsibility of and respect for the site visit team.

Other Concerns About The Accreditation Process

Donald Rumsfeld (2002) once said, “As we know, there are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns. The ones we don’t know we don’t know.” My husband has astutely added that there also are things we don’t *want* to know that we don’t know. For example:

- We may not want to acknowledge that there is no empirical evidence to tell us which is the best course, curriculum, or program model for training professional psychologists. So when CoA decisions come out that imply that we know what we really don’t know, programs get upset.

- We may not want to acknowledge that levels and continuity of training are a mess in psychology, and they have been for years. Students enter doctoral programs with all levels of background in psychology. There are no standardized prerequisites across programs, so we can't really say what comprises appropriate content or level of material for a doctoral course, especially at the foundations level.
- We may not want to acknowledge that, in the absence of good evidence, our own biases are likely to surface. Paul Meehl's article entitled, "Why I do not attend case conferences," was written to describe fallacies in thinking about clinical cases, but fits the evaluation of psychology programs as well. He describes the "sick-sick" fallacy, where others who are unlike us are viewed as being "sick" or deficient in some way. Or the related but opposite fallacy, the "me too" fallacy where if we can understand or rationalize something, it must be ok. Or my favorite, the "Uncle George's pancakes fallacy." This fallacy occurs when someone else does the same thing as the program under review, so it must be ok. In Meehl's words, " Why, there is nothing so terrible about that—I remember good ole Uncle George from my childhood, *he* used to store uneaten pancakes in the attic." (p. 239). All parties involved with accreditation are subject to these biases and fallacies, and no one has a monopoly on the one correct "truth."
- In the absence of good evidence for what we should be doing, we also use consensual validation to decide what's best—but the CoA members reaching this consensus change every year, and are completely different every 6 years. One committee's ugly duckling may be another's beautiful swan! This can be

confusing to programs and site visitors alike. We have to find a system that can evolve while avoiding ephemeral idiosyncrasies.

Given the concerns I've raised about roles, and the unknowns and biases that surround doctoral education and the accreditation process, how do we get the site visit system to work for us? How do we get CoA to trust site visitors?

Clearly we need better training of site visitors, better communication about what we expect, and better feedback for site visitors following a visit, including specific ways in which their reports were and were not helpful. Some system for better feedback might improve site visitor performance and decrease the burden on CoA members. Providing feedback might appear labor intensive at first, but will pay off in the long run.

Perhaps even more important, as we transition from a committee to a commission, we must recognize that CoA simply cannot continue to usurp the role of the site visitors, adding impossible amounts of work to their already heavy load. There is a limit to how large the commission can get and still function, and there is a limit to the number of vitae and syllabi each commission member can read in detail. We need to be creative in thinking about how to manage this huge task. In the classic sense, the solution is the problem here, and ultimately, more of the same will not work. Instead, we need to examine roles and relationships, seeking second order change, to develop a system that will work for all parties.

Conclusion

So in conclusion, overall, the system seems to work. However, I continue to worry that our roles will become more and more problematic if we don't directly address their definition and clarification. The system can be improved by better communication

with programs, so programs know what to provide us, and with better communication and feedback to allow site visitors to develop their skills and prepare reports that best serve the accreditation process.

Sending site visitors the final CoA letter, and implementing a delay for information procedure, are 2 steps CoA has taken toward improved communication. But ultimately, creative thinking about ongoing communication throughout the entire process, and reconsidering the roles of CoA and site visitors so that they can be complementary and nonoverlapping, will further improve the process.

References

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