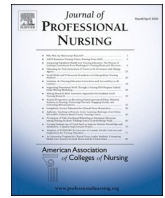




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Completing accreditation during the COVID-19 pandemic: A step-by-step process for success

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ABSTRACT

Many higher-education administrative processes have transitioned to the online environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nursing program accreditation site visits were not spared from this shift. This article describes the step-by-step online, interactive, and collaborative process one nursing department used for program re-accreditation. Kotter's 8-step process for accelerating change informed this work. Positive outcomes included increased faculty engagement and knowledge in the accreditation process and an ongoing accreditation readiness team. Recommendations include forming an accreditation committee, appointing program champions, utilizing a learning management system and a cloud-based storage system, and celebrating successes. This process could be replicated by other nursing programs undergoing accreditation.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the entire nursing profession, including nursing education and program accreditation. With our nation facing an ongoing nursing shortage, it is more important than ever for nursing programs to sustain high-quality, rigorous, accessible, and flexible education programs. Accreditation evaluates programmatic rigor and educational quality through peer review to support the nursing profession and those they serve ([American Association of the Colleges of Nursing, n.d.](https://www.aacnursing.org/)). Traditionally, nursing program accreditation and re-accreditation relied on in-person high-contact preparation and site visits. The pandemic compelled nursing programs to be innovative and utilize technology to meet the rigorous expectations of accreditation bodies in an online setting to maintain program standards and continue educating and graduating workforce-ready nurses. This article outlines how our department revised and strengthened its master plan for evaluation and accreditation in response to the pandemic.

Background

Accreditation site visits quickly transitioned online in the early months of 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, our site visit was only six months away, and a quick pivot was needed to complete our accreditation preparation and planning. There is little precedent or evidence for accomplishing accreditation planning and

preparation online, or for hosting an online site visit. However, [Vergara and Clochesy \(2021\)](#) recommend hosting online accreditation site visits using cloud-based data and document storage, providing site surveyors early access to the learning management system (LMS), and preparing video-conferencing technology for the visit. Our process builds on this limited evidence and provides a detailed step-by-step process for not only accreditation preparation and execution but also building lasting change around the work of nursing program accreditation.

Theoretical framework

[Kotter's \(2020\) 8-Step Process to Accelerate Change](#) was used as a guiding framework for our accreditation process ([Fig. 1](#)). Previously at our institution, a small group of faculty and administrators completed the accreditation work. This process lacked participation from many stakeholders. Our long-term goal was to transform the accreditation process into an expected part of the faculty role. The short-term goals were to increase faculty engagement and knowledge to complete accreditation work. The results of the quality improvement project demonstrated increased faculty engagement and increased faculty knowledge of the accreditation process ([Ziefle et al., 2021](#)). [Kotter's \(2020\)](#) change process provided a framework to build excitement, remain focused on the goal, and create a lasting product. This framework was selected prior to the pandemic but proved helpful in supporting the pandemic-related changes.

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Fig. 1. Kotter's 8-Step Process for Leading Change. Note: Kotter (2020). 8-Steps to accelerate change. [eBook edition]. Publisher. www.kotterinc.com. Permission to reprint granted 8.27.2021.

Step 1: create a sense of urgency

According to Kotter (2020), a sense of urgency requires an organization to identify an opportunity and motivate a team to work on a high-priority project. The sense of urgency at the institution began with a shared goal of accreditation of multiple programs during one accreditation visit. The rationale was to streamline resources into the accreditation process instead of constantly working on accreditation for each program every two to three years. The idea of efficient accreditation efforts was motivating for the nursing department.

The first task for our accreditation process was to create a sense of urgency. The dean and the accreditation committee created urgency 16 months before the site visit by presenting the accreditation plan at the Nursing Faculty Organization meeting (Fig. 2). The presentation included a vision, goals, and our school mascot dancing to a song. The committee described the importance of the nursing program to the university, and the work felt valuable. Incentives were discussed, such as professional development opportunities, continuing education credits,

and treats.

The phase of creating a sense of urgency includes designing a realistic timeline. The Nursing Faculty Organization presentation began with a song, *You Make Me Feel Like Dancing* (Sayer, 1976). The committee changed the words to “*You Make Me Feel Like Gantting*” and presented a Gantt chart of the overall timeline for accreditation. The chart included monthly goals and an accreditation countdown. The accreditation work followed Kotter's (2020) recommendation to think broadly about the tasks and include more participants in a focused system of change.

Step 2: build a guiding coalition

Creating a sense of urgency was followed by building a guiding coalition. This coalition “must consist of members from all layers of the hierarchy, represent all functions, receive information about the organization at all levels and ranks, and synthesize that information into new ways of working” (Kotter, 2020, slide 14). To prepare for the accreditation renewal and involve as many faculty members in the accreditation process, the accreditation committee included nursing administration (the dean and associate dean) and faculty from each degree level (one from undergraduate programs and one from graduate programs). This committee also included two senior faculty with extensive accreditation experience and a deep understanding of our department and history. The committee was committed to building an innovative accreditation process to encourage broad participation. The four faculty members on the accreditation leadership committee were given course release to prepare for the accreditation renewal and site visit. This small team of four members oversaw the writing of the self-study. One of the team members was responsible for editing the self-study and checking for omissions and redundancies. An example of the role of this guiding coalition was when one senior faculty member worked closely with the nurse practitioner program director to document the National Task Force Criteria for Evaluation of Nurse Practitioner Programs (2016). Another example was the collaboration between our department dean and the site visit lead. The dean was in communication with the site visit lead and the planning of the virtual visit and agenda was shared with the accreditation committee.

Step 3: form a strategic vision

Kotter (2020) describes the third step of creating change, forming a

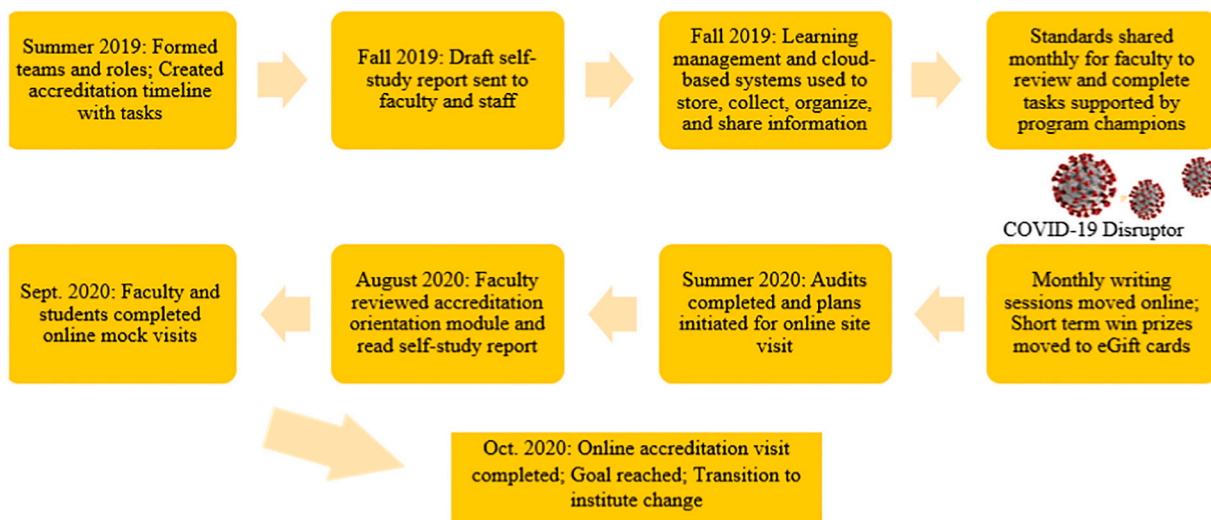


Fig. 2. Accreditation timeline. Note: This figure shows the timeline of the accreditation process with the COVID-19 pandemic as the disruptor and impetus for transition to an online accreditation process and site visit.

strategic vision, as “targeted and coordinated activities that, if designed and implemented fast enough and well enough, will make your vision a reality” (slide 18). The accreditation committee spearheaded our department’s accreditation preparation with a well-outlined accreditation “standard of the month” plan. The entire strategic vision was shared at the outset and was launched each month by the dean through email messaging to all nursing faculty. The work and expected outcomes were delineated for each standard. The ultimate goal was to complete the self-study report for nursing faculty review by the end of the academic year since our accreditation visit was scheduled for September 2020. The accreditation committee developed a guiding acronym as part of the strategic vision. The accreditation work was HOLISTIC - “keep it light with Humor, seize the Opportunity to participate, Lead the charge, Integrate evidence, author our Story, work Together as teams, make an Impact, and collaborate as a Community” (XXXX Department of Nursing, 2019).

One of the key targeted and coordinated activities to bring the accreditation vision to reality was the strategic use of a learning management system (LMS) and a cloud-based storage system. The LMS was used to share information about accreditation standards with faculty and staff using short informational videos. Checklists for each task were developed and used within the LMS. Assignment dropboxes served as a way to upload and track faculty task completion. The cloud-based storage system provided a centralized place to house the self-study report. These technologies made the compiling, storing, and sharing of accreditation documents easier in an online environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Step 4: enlist a volunteer army

A volunteer army is a group of people who choose to participate and are motivated by a shared cause and direction (Kotter, 2020). The nursing department has seven tracks within three degree programs (Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral). Each track had a volunteer “program track champion” who functioned as a liaison between the accreditation committee and the faculty in their respective track. Kotter (2020) describes the importance of these individuals stepping up and being from within the group. Program track champions met monthly with the accreditation committee and were accountable for communicating tasks and updates to the faculty and supporting faculty in the accreditation process.

In addition to assigned accreditation tasks, faculty had the opportunity to volunteer to help write the self-study report and participate in mock virtual site visits. Faculty were invited to attend monthly “First-Friday” self-study writing sessions and overall, 17 faculty participated. One chapter or accreditation standard was the focus of each monthly writing session. Initially, interested and available faculty volunteered to attend these writing sessions in person. With the shift to online during the pandemic, these were moved online with the help of video-conferencing technology. Once drafted, all faculty members were invited to review and suggest additions and revisions to the self-study. One member of the accreditation committee took on the role of final editor to ensure a consistent voice and avoid redundancies. Leading up to the virtual site visit, faculty also participated in mock online site visits. The mock site visits included prepping for possible questions that could be asked by peer evaluators and provided faculty and staff with the opportunity to become familiar with the online platform that was used for the online accreditation visit.

Step 5: enable action by removing barriers

Kotter (2020) also recognizes the importance of removing barriers such as inefficient processes, breaking down “silos,” and lack of collaboration. One of the first steps in breaking down barriers involves identifying potential barriers. One barrier was the faculty workload of adding accreditation tasks to already full teaching, service, and

scholarship loads. This barrier was partially overcome by streamlining and simplifying the tasks as much as possible using clear checklists embedded in the LMS for completing each step of accreditation preparation. Using the LMS was also key as all of our important program information and data was in one place. Faculty were already familiar with the LMS technology from their teaching, and they knew where to go to complete tasks.

Program track champions were another way of ensuring collaboration and overcoming barriers. These champions provided additional support to faculty. Tasks were described by program track champions during track faculty meetings so that faculty could collaborate and use time effectively. Having program track champions meant that the accreditation requirements were implemented consistently across the department. This also allowed for consideration of the different needs of each track and a closer look at requirements such as course syllabi, student handbooks, and policies.

Another barrier is the lack of student voice in the department and accreditation process. To overcome this barrier, our nursing program included student representation on track committees and student participation in mock accreditation interviews. The final barrier to overcome with the online accreditation visit was to set-up and ensure access to resources via a resource room. One faculty member on the accreditation team created the virtual resource room utilizing the resources created by the accreditation team. The virtual resource room included access to the LMS system for course review and documentation in the cloud-based Box folders. The Box folders were organized by each accreditation standard and their supporting documents. In addition to providing access to the LMS and Box, a one-page document was created that was color coded with links for each standard and supporting documents where the site visitors could access any item they wanted to review. This document provided a streamlined way for the site visitors to access key materials.

Step 6: generate short-term wins

Short-term wins are small results accomplished along the way towards the main objective or outcome (Kotter, 2020). In the accreditation process, the accreditation committee planned monthly updates and rewards for completing assigned tasks. Continuing education credits and small food incentives were awarded when faculty members completed each task. The accreditation committee facilitated a drawing for a prize basket for any faculty who reviewed each chapter of the self-study report. Short-term wins motivated busy faculty to continue the change process and complete required items on time.

One change as a result of campus pandemic policies was that the accreditation committee and program track champions could not meet in person to deliver food incentives. This was a loss because an additional purpose of short-term wins was to add fun and rewards to the process. A future consideration might be for the accreditation team to consider mailing non-perishable items or organizing another method of rewards redeemable online.

Additional personal short-term wins included increased faculty comfort with the LMS system and cloud-based storage system. While most faculty were comfortable with the LMS, cloud-based storage systems were new to many faculty, and completing the monthly tasks required the use of both the LMS and cloud-based storage. Completing the monthly activities had an unanticipated win in that faculty learned more about other program tracks in the department and connected with other faculty. Collaboration occurred naturally through the process of policy review and identification of missing elements. Using cloud-based storage required faculty to organize electronic files, find documentation of coursework, and complete faculty profiles as required by the accreditation process.

Step 7: sustain acceleration

At this step of [Kotter's \(2020\)](#) process, the team should identify organizational, structural, or cultural issues that may prospectively impede the momentum to move forward. Policies, procedures, and systems should align with the overall change vision. Sustaining acceleration is paramount to preserving invested resources to reinforce and maintain the practices, policies, systems, and environment needed to make the change vision permanent ([Kotter, 2020](#)).

To sustain acceleration and reach our goal of successful re-accreditation and achieve our overall vision of creating a culture where the accreditation process is a normal part of faculty work, the accreditation committee cycled back through Kotter's steps one through six. These included:

- 1) Revising new objectives or outcomes with a timeline. Our timeline shifted several times because additional items that needed to be addressed were identified through the process.
- 2) Setting aside time for teams to form shared interests and build an alliance. Monthly Friday Fun writing sessions allowed volunteers to provide feedback and assist in drafting our self-study.
- 3) Strategizing ways to share the change vision. The accreditation committee worked diligently (monthly meetings, reviewing, and editing accreditation documents) to sustain the momentum created for change, anticipating that the changes would continue in the work culture.
- 4) Enlisting additional volunteers for assigned coalition team roles. Program track champions recruited student volunteers to participate in online mock and site visit meetings.
- 5) Identifying new barriers and ways to overcome those barriers. Many of our faculty were either new to our university or had never participated in an accreditation process. Program champions facilitated mock online visits to simulate the site visit to overcome this barrier.
- 6) Providing incentives for continued motivation. Treats and CEUs were given for individual task completion.

Moving forward to accelerate and enable ongoing change, [Kotter \(2020\)](#) recommends that leaders continue developing competencies within the nursing profession, increasing credibility. Credibility during change is critical to success. Potential barriers and pitfalls (e.g., resistance to change) can be avoided by being authentic, truthful, and clear in direction ([Kotter, 2020](#)). Currently, the nursing department is setting new objectives and outcomes as part of our long-term vision. Every win and failure are being analyzed to identify what went right and areas for improvement.

Step 8: institute change

Successful accreditation was only the first part of instituting lasting change for our department. Long-term change ensures the integration of new behaviors and structures so that the revised master evaluation plan is streamlined and efficient. Converting the accreditation processes into standing committees and structures contributed to this success. By transitioning the accreditation committee into a standing Accreditation Readiness Committee (ARC) with membership from each program track, faculty who developed skills for accreditation can continue to support programs and faculty and reduce duplication of work. Small amounts of course release was initially provided to the accreditation committee and ARC co-chairs. Currently, plans are underway to secure funding for an administrative assistant to assist with documenting, collecting materials, and organizing for accreditation preparedness.

Through the accreditation process, the accreditation team reflected on ways to improve our school. Lack of standardization and increased variability in the new faculty orientation and mentoring were highlighted as areas for improvement. Additionally, other areas for

development included consistent application and adherence to processes and policies. Faculty compliance processes have been integrated to increase the ease of ensuring compliance on an ongoing basis. New policies have been implemented to address gaps identified during accreditation, including a more straightforward policy that outlines the steps needed to revise or change policies. Other policies were clarified or updated. One example was a teaching qualifications policy that was modified to be in better alignment with human resources and faculty contracts processes. The organization and maintenance of key documents linked to accreditation criteria are built into an online master calendar with scheduled automatic notifications to trigger ongoing quality improvement. This includes work on student handbooks and policies that have become more streamlined between nursing programs. These improvements decrease faculty and administrative workload and support accreditation work in an online environment.

Recommendations

Following successful preparation for accreditation and completion of an online site visit, we recommend the above process for other programs undergoing initial accreditation or renewal. Creating an accreditation leadership team and identifying program track champions to plan, organize, and support the accreditation process was essential in preparing for the accreditation visit as well as supporting the ongoing faculty and staff education and accreditation tasks. These key people were able to support faculty and staff in the transition to an online accreditation process.

An important consideration is the amount and depth of information communicated to faculty. Accreditation information and tasks were sent via email from multiple sources. This duplication led to increased workload and faculty confusion at times. Clear delineation of communication roles and responsibilities is a recommendation to support faculty knowledge of accreditation information and completion of accreditation tasks.

Scheduling self-study writing sessions was difficult due to the pandemic restrictions and faculty workload. Encouraging writing sessions during faculty meetings and sending out an email to ascertain interest and then querying schedules can help ensure the monthly writing sessions are well attended. Additionally, providing a standard overview in advance of monthly writing sessions can help faculty come to the writing session prepared to engage.

Celebrating success in an online environment can be difficult but is vital for continued engagement. Participation in tasks and writing sessions can be encouraged by offering gift cards or prizes that can be purchased online and either emailed or shipped directly to the winner. Online tools can be used to randomly select winners for gift cards or prizes. Finally, reframing the accreditation work as an ongoing part of faculty workload is essential to sustain the process during and after the site visit. This can be done by having accreditation standards and tasks on monthly program meeting agendas.

Conclusion

This online accreditation process and recommendations can be used by other institutions, whether completing accreditation or re-accreditation in-person or online. The LMS, cloud-based storage system, accreditation committee, and program track champions were all in place before the pandemic, which minimized the disruptions brought on by COVID-19 and were integral to the successful transition online. Utilizing [Kotter's \(2020\) 8-Step Process to Accelerate Change](#) provided a clear framework to guide the process.

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