



Blueprints for Success:

Preparing for the On-Site Evaluation – Best Practices

An ACCSC Member Services Series



Blueprints for Success

A Member Services Series

Introduction

The ACCSC **Blueprints for Success** highlight best practices and provide guidance on some of the more technical areas of ACCSC-accreditation in the hopes to help accredited member schools to comply fully and accurately with the **Standards of Accreditation**, achieve institutional success, and ensure that students are well prepared to enter the workforce.

Please note that the ACCSC **Blueprints for Success** do not supersede applicable accrediting standards, are not intended to be prescriptive about the way an accredited school operates, and do not address all compliance elements required by a school to maintain good standing with ACCSC. Rather, the ACCSC **Blueprints for Success** provides a framework that can help a school to gain a better understanding of the expectations and rigors of the accreditation process as well as sample documentation that a school might consider in order to demonstrate compliance with accrediting standards.

Modules

1. Preparing a Comprehensive Response for Commission Consideration
2. Organizing an Effective Electronic Submission
- 3. Preparing for the On-Site Evaluation – Best Practices**
4. ACCSC's Graduation & Employment Chart

Module 3

Preparing for the On-Site Evaluation - Initial and Renewal of Accreditation

The on-site evaluation is an essential component of an institution's responsibility to demonstrate compliance with accrediting standards and serves as the cornerstone of ACCSC's ability to continually ensure that a high-quality education is offered at its accredited institutions. This [Blueprint](#), "Preparing for the On-Site Evaluation" provides an overview of best practices to prepare for a successful on-site evaluation by an ACCSC team.

Purpose of the On-site Evaluation

The purpose of an ACCSC on-site evaluation is to:

- Verify data in the school's Application for Accreditation and Self-Evaluation Report prepared for Commission consideration;
- Seek additional information regarding the academic and ancillary activities and resources that support an institution's mission and educational objectives; and
- Develop an understanding and perform an assessment of how well the school meets its educational objectives and demonstrates compliance with the *Standards of Accreditation*.

During the on-site evaluation, a school will be evaluated according to all available information, including:

- Documentation provided by the school in order to demonstrate compliance with accrediting standards;
- Interviews and discussions with the administration, instructors, and other school officials;
- Surveys of and discussions with students, graduates, Program Advisory Committee members, and employers of graduates;
- Observations of classes, laboratories, admissions, student services, career services, as well as general management and administration of the school; and
- Documentation provided by the school to support reported student achievement data, including rates of student graduation, graduate employment, and licensure/certification pass rates.

Scheduling the On-Site Evaluation

ACCSC staff will contact the school to schedule the dates of the on-site evaluation keeping in mind the following:

- Normally, the on-site evaluation will be scheduled to take place within 2-3 months following the submission of the school's finalized Application for Accreditation and Self-Evaluation Report ;
- Generally, the on-site evaluation will take place over two days, unless the size of the school, number of programs, or number of satellite locations warrant scheduling additional days;
- The on-site evaluation should be planned for typical school days with students in attendance (i.e., not exam week, spring break, etc.);
- Key school personnel are expected to be available for interviews with on-site evaluation team members; and
- Once the date is established and agreed upon by school officials, changes to the on-site evaluation date may result in the school incurring additional costs.

Prior to the on-site evaluation, ACCSC provides written notification to the school of the names and affiliations of the team members to avoid any conflicts of interest.

Unusual Circumstances:

If there are any unusual events or circumstances falling on the day or week of the on-site evaluation (e.g., weather-related difficulties, scheduling conflicts, atypical class schedules, or other circumstances that may affect normal school operations), please notify the Commission Representative promptly.

Preparation is Key!

In order to ensure a successful accreditation experience, school administrators should be proactive in preparing for the on-site evaluation.

Prepare Your Team

- Meet with key faculty and staff to explain the purpose of ACCSC's on-site evaluation, identify the roles of team members, and provide an overview of the general expectations of the on-site evaluation.
- Familiarize your staff with the Application for Accreditation and Self-Evaluation Report that forms the basis of the on-site evaluation team's review.
- Faculty and staff should be aware of ACCSC's Standards of Accreditation, particularly as those standards pertain to their roles within the school.
- Have all school staff arrive at the institution in accordance with their normal schedule on the days of the on-site evaluation.

- Identify one or two key staff members that can serve as liaisons to the on-site evaluation team during the on-site evaluation.
- Set the school up for success by being prepared to provide “ready access” to information needed by the team as part of the review.

Prepare a Work Room

- Please prepare all items listed in [Appendix B of the SER \(Initial or Renewal\)](#).
- Identify a separate room that provides a comfortable workspace based on the number of team members that will be participating in the on-site evaluation.
- Given that the team works with electronic materials, ensure there are adequate power strips and wireless Internet access (provide required access codes if necessary).
- Take the time to organize the on-site evaluation materials such as student rosters, lists of resources materials, school staff schedules, lesson plans, curricula and syllabi, Program Advisory Committee meeting minutes and contact information, etc. so that the information provided is easily understood.

On-Site Evaluation Team Members

ACCSC's Community of Volunteers support and enhance the Commission's work in a variety of ways, including their active involvement in the accreditation and on-site evaluation process. ACCSC dedicates significant resources to ensure that only qualified individuals carry-out accreditation responsibilities associated with peer review on-site evaluations. Before participating in an on-site evaluation, all of the members must participate in comprehensive training that focuses on accreditation standards and on-site evaluation expectations, policies, and procedures. Additionally, all on-site evaluation team members must have completed ACCSC's training program and agreed to and adhere to ACCSC's Code of Conduct policy.

The **Team Leader** is responsible for leading and directing the work of the on-site evaluation team and for conducting a thorough evaluation of the managerial and administrative capacity of a school seeking accreditation from ACCSC.

To be eligible for this role, a Team Leader must:

- Own, direct, or be a senior manager involved in the administrative operations of an ACCSC-accredited school that is in good standing with the Commission; and
- Have significant experience in vocational education or post-secondary technical education;

The **Education Specialist** conducts a thorough evaluation of all areas related to the educational delivery of programs including curriculum, learning resource system, faculty qualifications, and faculty professional development. Education Specialists also work closely with the Occupation Specialist to assess whether programs offered reflect current occupational trends and practices. To be eligible for the role, an Education Specialist must:

- Possess a Doctoral degree with three year’s postsecondary teaching/administration experience; or
- Possess a Master’s degree, with five year’s postsecondary teaching/administration experience.

The **Occupation Specialist(s)** has five (5) years of experience working in a specific industry or trade (e.g., Plumbing, HVAC, Electrician, etc.). As a member of the on-site evaluation team, the Occupation Specialist(s) evaluates curricula, facilities, instructional resources, and equipment; provides feedback regarding current industry trends and workplace expectations; and helps to assess a training program’s overall effectiveness in preparing graduates for entry-level employment in the field of study. There may be multiple Occupation Specialists on an on-site evaluation team depending on the number and diversity of programs offered at a school. As part of the accreditation process, ACCSC requests that the school identify, in accordance with Appendix C of the SER (**Renewal and Initial**), three (3) to five (5) candidates per program (or group of related programs) who are independent of the school and free of any relationship with the institution beyond that which is typical of a networked professional in the community. ACCSC will screen the candidates and secure the participation of Occupation Specialists in a manner independent of the school.

The **Distance Education Specialist** – required only if the school offers a distance education program – evaluates the distance education program in order to make a determination that the school’s delivery methods, instructional staff, resources, and equipment are in compliance with ACCSC Distance Education Standards. To be eligible for the role, a Distance Education Specialist must:

- Meet all the qualifications required of an Education Specialists; and
- Possess three years of experience in distance education with an emphasis on instructional design, teaching, or instructional technology.

The **Commission Representative** is an ACCSC staff member whose primary duties and functions during the on-site evaluation process include providing logistical and technical support and guidance to the on-site evaluation team. The Commission representative serves as a liaison between the school and the Commission during the accreditation process and provides feedback with respect to the application of standards at the practical level in the institution.

A **State Oversight Agency Observer** is invited to all ACCSC on-site evaluations to observe the ACCSC’s process. ACCSC believes that participation by the state regulatory agency – as a member of the regulatory triad that oversees postsecondary education – helps to bolster confidence in accreditation and provides an opportunity for the state regulator to learn more about the rigor of the accreditation process while learning more about the performance of a licensed institution in their state.

What to Expect

Day One

- Normally, the Team Leader, Education Specialist/Distance Education Specialist, and Commission Representative will arrive at 9:00 a.m. to begin a two-day on-site evaluation at the school. The Occupation Specialists will typically arrive separately on the morning of the first day.
 - ✓ Ensure that front desk personnel are aware when the team is scheduled to arrive, or
 - ✓ Have a member of the school staff at the front door ready to greet the team; or
- Escort the team to a designated work room that has been set up prior to the team's arrival.
 - ✓ Typically, the team will need 15 minutes to settle-in and set up their materials before the initial tour begins.
 - ✓ This is the best time to make sure the team has enough power strips and access to internet.
- Provide a tour of the school.
 - ✓ Present an overview of the physical space so the team can get an understanding of the location of key staff, program areas, and student services.
 - ✓ Make the tour unobtrusive to the staff, faculty, and students. Avoid interrupting classes to introduce the team members.
- The Team Leader will conduct an entrance interview with the school director and selected staff members to discuss the agenda for the day.
- The team will select files for review from the lists of students prepared by the school in advance of the team's arrival (outlined in [Appendix B of the SER \(Initial or Renewal\)](#)).
- The evaluation begins!
 - Over the course of the day the team will survey students; review files; observe classes; meet with administrators, staff, and faculty; verify student achievement data; and review the curricula, equipment, and facilities.
 - Occupation Specialists typically depart after the completion of their reviews on the first day of the on-site evaluation.
 - Throughout the day, team members communicate with school officials regarding the team's progress and findings.

Evening Activities

- If the school offers evening programs, the team will be on-site to conduct student surveys and staff interviews. The team evaluates whether the students in evening programs have comparable access to student services, learning resource system, career services, etc.
- The Team Leader will meet with school officials throughout the day in order to provide a “debrief” of the day’s activities and to outline remaining areas to be completed.

Day Two

- The Team Leader, Education Specialist/Distance Education Specialist, and Commission representative will arrive at 9:00 a.m.
- Team members address outstanding issues and complete their notes and observations.
- The On-Site Evaluation Summary Review is typically scheduled for early afternoon on the second day of the on-site evaluation.

The On-Site Evaluation Summary Review

The On-Site Evaluation Summary Review is a courtesy and provides an initial draft summary of the on-site evaluation team’s findings. Findings are based on the information provided during the on-site evaluation and tied to a specific accrediting standard.

- Two things a school is prohibited from doing during the On-Site Evaluation Summary Review:
 - ✓ The school cannot have legal counsel present.
 - ✓ The school cannot record the proceedings.
- The On-Site Evaluation Summary Review is a time to take careful notes rather than to debate the merits of the team’s findings.
- The On-Site Evaluation Report (“OER”) serves as the official record of the on-site evaluation.
- The school is afforded an opportunity to respond to the team’s findings.
 - ✓ The OER is generally issued within 60 days of the on-site evaluation.
 - ✓ The school will generally have 30 days to file its response.

Tips and Practical Advice

Pre-On-Site Evaluation: Success Tips

The accuracy, reliability, and completeness of the Application and SER set the stage for a successful on-site evaluation process. Some important points to remember:

Application for Accreditation

- Ensure the application is complete
 - Address/answer all questions in the application. If an area does not apply, be sure to indicate “N/A.”

- Ensure the information is updated

The application is meant to be a snapshot of the institution at the point in time of submission. If the “picture” changes, such as a renewed insurance policy or state license, new faculty, catalog, or a recent Program Advisory Committee (PAC) minute, the school has an opportunity to upload the new information or provide it on-site to the team.

- Cross-reference the catalog and enrollment agreement to their respective checklists.

- ✓ Catalog Checklist

- ✓ Enrollment Agreement Checklist

What does “Cross-reference” mean? This means that in addition to indicating on the actual Checklist the page on which the requested information can be found, the Checklist Item # is also expected to be placed beside the information in the actual document. Cross-referencing facilitates a more efficient review of the documents by the team.

- If the school is in the initial accreditation process, or otherwise elects to utilize the ACCSC Faculty Personnel Report (FPR) and Staff Personnel Reports (SPR), please ensure that all areas of the forms are complete. In particular:

- ✓ Prior work experience must identify both the month and the year for each employer listed;

- ✓ The Instructor Training section is to be completed with teacher training related to the specific occupation the instructor is teaching.

- Review all current advertising for compliance – As part of the review of the school’s Application for Accreditation, the on-site evaluation team will review all current advertising utilized by the school, including the school’s website.

Review *Section IV (B), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation* and *Appendix IV - Guidelines for Advertising* for ACCSC’s standards regarding advertising.

[SER Supporting Documentation](#)

- Use [Appendix B of the SER \(Initial or Renewal\)](#) available on the ACCSC website under **Forms and Reports** as a guide for preparing the work room with required documentation.
- Ensure documentation is accessible and organized in an understandable manner.
- Keep in mind that documentation available in school files serves as the basis of the on-site evaluation team’s verification of the accuracy of the SER and the school’s compliance with accrediting standards.

[Graduation and Employment Charts](#)

The school’s records management system (whether hard copy or electronic) should be organized in a way that facilitates the retrieval of documentation to support the reported graduation and employment data. Keep in mind, the on-site evaluation team will need ready access to the

supporting documentation, including copies of student transcripts and records of initial employment, which correspond to the data recorded on each Graduation and Employment Chart.

Key points:

- For each program’s Graduation and Employment Chart, prepare a roster of the students reported on the chart, grouped by cohort start date.

Students: Have copies of transcripts for all students categorized as “graduated” as well as copies of documentation for any student categorized as “unavailable for graduation.”

Graduates: Have documentation for all graduates classified as “further education” “unavailable for employment” and “employed in field.”

[Independent Third-Party Employment Verification](#)

Accrediting standards require that schools report accurate data to the Commission and that schools meet the established student achievement standards and maintain “verifiable records of initial employment.” Review the [ACCSC Guidelines for Independent Third Party Employment Verification](https://www.accsc.org/forms-and-reports/) available on the ACCSC website at <https://www.accsc.org/forms-and-reports/>

As a means to confirm the accuracy of a school’s employment records, the initial and renewal accreditation processes require the school to engage a third party to perform an independent verification. The on-site evaluation team will review the verification results from the independent third-party verification in order to assess if the student achievement data reported to ACCSC are accurate and supported by verifiable records.

- The on-site evaluation team will review the **full report** from the independent third-party verifier, including a list of the students in the sample, the results for each student, and the reasons for those results.
- In cases where a graduate’s employment could not be verified by the independent third-party, a school can present additional documentation to the on-site evaluation team to demonstrate that the employment classification is valid.
- If an on-site evaluation team raises a question about whether a school has demonstrated compliance with accrediting standards due to the accuracy or validity of the data, the team will include a finding or a request for additional information in the On-Site Evaluation Report. The school will be required to respond to the Commission with supporting documentation to demonstrate that the student achievement data is accurate and verifiable.
- The Commission, not the on-site evaluation team, makes the final determination regarding a school’s compliance with accrediting standards.

During the On-Site Evaluation: Success Tips

After school officials take the on-site evaluation team on a brief initial tour of the campus, each member of the team will begin their evaluation. Day one will most likely consist of interviews with key staff and faculty; reviewing files of current students, graduates, and withdrawn/terminated students; reviewing backup documentation for the school’s most recent Annual Report data; and surveying students.

File Review

The on-site evaluation team will seek to determine that student records are secured as required by accrediting standards and will randomly select files to verify the consistent application of the school's policies and procedures by reviewing information such as:

- Documentation that each student met all established admissions requirements prior to the school official executing the enrollment agreement;
- Documentation that demonstrates the school furnished a copy of the enrollment agreement to the applicant at the time the applicant signed, and a final copy of the enrollment agreement signed by both parties to the student prior to the student starting class;
- Satisfactory progress evaluations, including records of grades and attendance;
- Documentation from advising sessions to show how the school's student services were applied;
- Copies of transcripts for graduates to show that each student met the conditions for graduation; and
- Copies of refund calculations for withdrawn/terminated students, to include evidence that the refund was processed in accordance with the school's established policies and as required by federal or state requirements.

Student Surveys

ACCSC considers student feedback a critical component of the accreditation process, which is garnered primarily through the student survey process. ACCSC uses an electronic, web-based [survey](#) that is distributed to currently enrolled students one to two weeks prior to the on-site evaluation. The intent is to receive feedback from at least 25% of the students in each program to create a meaningful sample. The on-site evaluation team will incorporate the survey results into its review. Positive student feedback may indicate that the school's processes are effective, while concerns expressed by students may raise questions about whether the school has remained attentive to student needs.

Key Compliance Areas

One of the goals of the on-site evaluation is to facilitate the team's ability to perform an assessment of how well the school meets its objectives and demonstrates compliance with the *Standards of Accreditation*. Because the Commission requires documented evidence of statements made by the institution, the team will spend considerable time reviewing written materials such as:

Curriculum and lesson plans; minutes from PAC meetings; copies of employee and student handbooks; faculty credentials and professional development in personnel files; entrance examinations taken by applicants; and copies of service contracts for the institution's equipment.

The following are examples of how to prepare for key areas of focus during the on-site evaluation:

Financial Budget

Financial soundness is important to ensuring the school has the resources to support operations and discharge obligations to students. As part of the on-site evaluation, the school should be prepared to provide a copy of the current school budget with supporting documentation to show how expenditures are sufficient to ensure:

- Proper operation of the school, such as the purchase of new equipment and training materials, as well as allocations made to support the learning resource system and
- Institutional improvement and staff/faculty development activities

Institutional Assessment, Improvement, and Planning

Institutional assessment and improvement activities are essential to the ongoing success of accredited schools. During the on-site evaluation, the school should be prepared to present the following:

- Results of institutional assessment undertaken in the areas of management; fiscal condition and budget; administrative policies and practices; emergency preparedness; student support services; faculty and staff development; educational program curricula; learning resources system, equipment, and supporting materials; facilities; and student achievement outcomes;
- Documentation showing how the school obtained information internally (e.g., staff and faculty development and planning, and student input and feedback) and externally (e.g., Program Advisory Committees, employers, community involvement, school graduates, etc.);
- Documentation of the improvement activities in which the school has engaged. For example, copies of purchase orders or invoices to show the school purchased new equipment or materials for the learning resource center. If the school's assessment resulted in a goal to improve; and,
- The Commission encourages planning that includes goal setting, establishing timelines, and benchmarking. If applicable, the school should provide a copy of this document.

Program Advisory Committee (PAC)

Program evaluation is critical to ensuring that curriculum is aligned with program objectives, and that the program is adequately resourced with equipment and other learning materials and demonstrating program viability. An important part of a comprehensive program evaluation process is the input of Program Advisory Committees. The school should be prepared to provide the on-site evaluation team with the documentation of the following:

- A roster of PAC membership showing the school has a committee for each program or group of related programs;
- Evidence that the school facilitated one meeting per year for each of the school's PACs;
- Detailed minutes for each meeting that show
 - At least three employers/practitioners were in attendance at each meeting;
 - PAC members discussed curriculum, student achievement, equipment and other key areas critical to a program's success; and

Faculty Improvement

Success of a school is directly related to the quality of its faculty. The school must provide documentation to demonstrate that faculty qualifications meet accrediting standards, that faculty are trained in instructional methods and teaching skills and engage in ongoing professional development activities include elements such as continuing education in the subject area(s) taught; teaching skill development; instructional methodology development; membership in trade and professional organizations .

- During the on-site evaluation, the school will need to provide faculty files that are organized to allow for easy access to evidence of academic credentials held by the faculty and proof that the school has verified the reported prior work experience required to demonstrate compliance with standards.
- The school may provide its own faculty training using in-house resources or utilize resources outside the school. The following will provide documentation of the training and professional development activities for your faculty:
 - ✓ **Outside Training** – The school should maintain copies of conference/workshop agendas, certificates presented to faculty upon completion of workshop/conference, and any CEUs earned by the faculty member.
 - ✓ **In-service training** – The school should maintain documentation to show the focus/subject matter of the in-service, who attended, and the dates on which the training took place. Documentation could include agendas and minutes; in-service training class outlines; and attendance rosters.

Student Services

Accrediting standards require schools to remain attentive to their students' educational and other needs and to offer advising and counseling, graduate employment assistance, and procedures for handling student complaints.

- During the on-site evaluation, the school should present the team with its manual of written policies and procedures for the delivery of its student services. Although many of the policies are captured in the school's catalog, the manual is the school's internal document for the delivery of student services, such as a staff handbook or standard operating procedures manual;
- During file review the team will review documentation to determine whether or not the school follows its establish policies on advising, grading, attendance monitoring, satisfactory academic progress, as well as career services, and tutoring;
- An important part of evaluating the effectiveness of the school's student services program is the ACCSC Student Survey. Student feedback will provide valuable information about how well the school remains attentive to student needs. If the school has a regular student survey process, have documentation of those survey results available during the on-site evaluation, along with analysis of the results and actions taken in response to student feedback.

Conclusion

In order to have a successful on-site evaluation, schools should actively engage in all facets of the accreditation process and take advantage of every opportunity to demonstrate the success of the school as a whole, the success of its students and graduates, as well as to provide documentation that provides evidence of the school's compliance with accrediting standards.

Keep in mind, through the accreditation process, each school must establish that it is meeting ACCSC's standards before accreditation is conferred. In addition to this Blueprint Series, ACCSC has a number of resources available to support institutions in the accreditation process. Institutions are strongly encouraged to take advantage of these resources, such as the ACCSC Monograph Series, regularly hosted workshops, conferences and webinars, as well a series of informative letters designed to help schools to connect with students and alumni.

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