The Maze of Re-Certification and Accreditation

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Abstract: Education in America is currently receiving prominent attention in the public forum. Efforts to strengthen the quality of education have included more rigorous student and teacher standards, creating the necessity for reforms and revisions in teacher preparation programs. This paper describes the process involved in applying for New York State Re-Certification and NCATE Accreditation of a Masters Program in Educational Technology. The focus is on the challenges that a small college faces in complying with the requirements of various organizations. Problems, solutions and a sample curriculum are provided.

Introduction

One of the goals of the Goals 2000 legislation passed in 1994 was to provide teachers with opportunities for lifelong enhancement of professional skills. As a nation, we have fallen short of this goal (Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources 1998). The turn of the century has witnessed a renewed interest in the state of education in America, as evidenced by its prominence in the 2000 presidential election. Parents are concerned about the quality of education their children are receiving. Our nation’s leaders are calling for accountability as they seek to close the gap between our system of education and that of other industrial nations around the world. Concern appears to be focused on the lack of competent teachers, laying the problem directly at the feet of teacher preparation programs. One response has been the establishment of stricter standards. But the solution begins with the consideration of the students’ needs and growth. Once we establish what our students need to know and be able to do, we can develop programs to prepare teachers to meet student objectives. Teacher standards must flow from student standards. However, setting standards is only the first step; of far greater importance is developing assessments to meet the standards (Galluzzo 1999). Almost every state has released more rigorous learning standards for students. Since research has shown that teacher expertise is related to student achievement (Darling-Hammond 1997), we must now focus our attention on teachers and the programs that prepare them. States are rethinking their certification procedures as well as their policy of requiring accreditation of teacher preparation programs, thus putting organizations like the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in the foreground of the educational reform dialogue.

Iona College's MS Program in Educational Technology

Iona College has offered a graduate program in computer technology in education since 1983, when the College's MS program in Education Computing became the first of its kind to be approved by the New York State Department of Education. The program was offered at both the main campus in New Rochelle and the branch campus in Rockland County. It was designed for teachers, administrators and
other school personnel, whether they were computer novices or experienced computer users. The goals were to enable them to provide leadership in the field for schools and industry, to integrate educational computing into the school curriculum, to be teachers of computer literacy, to write educational software, and to conduct research and evaluation in the field. Because the program was placed within the Department of Computer Science rather than the Department of Education, there was a strong technical computing orientation that included programming. Students who completed the MS program were eligible for permanent certification in elementary education and the secondary subject areas, provided they met the other state requirements. The degree was considered by the state to be "functionally related" to all these certification areas.

As originally offered in 1983, the program had a common core of 9 credits, three areas of specialization (Elementary Education, Secondary Education, and Educational Software Design), each with 12 specialization core credits. The specializations required programming in an appropriate language: LOGO for elementary education, BASIC for secondary education, and a commercial language for software design. There were 9 credits in general electives, and 6 credits in a culminating experience (thesis or project). When the program was revised in 1991, the goals remained the same but the specializations were eliminated. The core was changed to 15 credits, with 15 credits in general electives and 6 credits in a culminating experience.

Because of changes in the undergraduate preparation of teacher candidates, the Department of Computer Science undertook a major revision of the program in 1998. As the College was educating the community about its mission statement, the department identified the mission of the program: To provide students with the knowledge, skills, and experiences to become successful practitioners and leaders in the field of Educational Technology. At that time we changed the name of the program to MS in Educational Technology. The student population was identified as teachers, administrators, corporate trainers, and others who wish to enhance their knowledge of emerging educational technologies. The program remained open to both computer novices and experienced computer users. Linked to the mission of the College and the department, the program goals were defined to enable graduates to: provide leadership in Educational Technology for schools and industry; participate in the integration of Educational Technology in the learning environment; conduct research and evaluation in the field of Educational Technology; develop a foundation for continuing education and growth in the field of Educational Technology.

The curriculum changes included adapting an existing course, Introduction to Software Packages for Education, as a transition course that would not count towards the degree. The core consisted of 12 credits, with 18 elective credits, and a 6 credit capstone in research methods and a research project. The department committee's proposal was approved by the department and the college committees and was sent to the State Education Department, where it was also approved and went into effect in September of 1999.

**New York State Certification Requirements**

In 1996, after New York State adopted new performance-based student learning standards, the Regents Task Force on Teaching was established to address the teaching crisis in the State. They found that too few teachers are prepared to incorporate the more rigorous student standards and assessments and that too few teachers are able to sustain a high level of standards throughout their career (Teaching to Higher Standards: New York’s Commitment 1998). The findings of this task force led to immediate action by the State. In September 1999, the Deputy Commissioner for Higher Education in the State of New York sent a letter to institutions offering teacher education programs stating that the Board of Regents had adopted new standards for teacher preparation programs. Among the objectives of these new standards are to ensure that: teachers would receive rigorous preparation in the content areas they would teach; these new teacher standards would coincide with the performance-based student learning standards that had been adopted in 1996; teachers would have experiences with diverse student populations; education faculty would collaborate with faculty in the arts and sciences, local schools, parent and community groups.

**Seeking New York State Certification**
The State also issued revised methods of obtaining both Initial and Professional Certification for teachers. When Iona received notification of these changes, the first decision we faced was whether to revise our program to offer Initial or Professional Certification. Since Initial Certification had traditionally been the province of baccalaureate programs, it seemed appropriate to offer our students the opportunity to attain Professional Certification. The State described numerous ways to achieve Professional Certification but those we considered were: 1) A Masters degree plus 12 graduate credits in a candidate’s undergraduate major and 2) A Masters degree that includes 12 graduate credits linking pedagogy and content in English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science and Technology, and Social Studies. We rejected the first option because the completion of at least 40 graduate credits appeared to place too great a burden on students. We decided on option two because we believed it would better meet the needs of our student body. While Iona already had courses that addressed the linking of pedagogy and content, none did so explicitly in each of the three areas. Therefore, this decision necessitated the development of three new courses to replace some of our current courses.

These courses were designed to enhance the teaching of these three content areas utilizing the most current and appropriate software. The new courses were entitled Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Curriculum, the Mathematics, Science and Technology Curriculum, and the Social Studies Curriculum. The courses emphasized the creation and delivery of a variety of lessons to afford the students practical experiences using software most appropriate to the specific content areas (e.g., desktop publishing, spreadsheets, database management systems). Faculty members from the Departments of English, Mathematics, Biology, and History at Iona provided guidance and suggestions to ensure the required linkage of content and pedagogy. These courses accounted for 9 of the 12 credits needed. The final 3 credits were accommodated through an existing course where students engaged in an independent research project involving the integration of technology in the classroom.

Once the curriculum had been revised, the next step was to complete the New York State application for certification, which placed a strong emphasis on the preparation of faculty teaching in the program. The State was most interested in their degrees held, their areas of expertise, their specific courses assignments, their knowledge of the problems of high-need schools and diverse student populations, and their recruitment from underrepresented groups. As a small college, we rely heavily on adjunct faculty with considerable experience in K-12 education to complement the technology expertise of our full-time faculty. We were concerned that this situation might weaken our application.

NCATE Accreditation Requirements

To further ensure the quality of teacher preparation programs, New York State also set a deadline of the end of 2004 for institutions to achieve accreditation. NCATE was then, and is now, the only organization ready to grant accreditation. Recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, NCATE sets standards of quality by which teacher preparation programs are judged. In the forefront of the recent national call for educational renewal, NCATE has revised its standards and recently released NCATE 2000 Unit Standards with its focus on performance-based standards and assessments. Research studies indicate that students of NCATE-accredited institutions have demonstrated superior classroom performance when compared to their peers at non-accredited institutions (Brown 2001, Nweke 2001, Wise 2001). Iona College made known its intention to apply for NCATE accreditation to comply with the New York State directive.

Among the initial steps in the NCATE accreditation process is the creation of a curriculum portfolio submitted to one of the NCATE Constituent Members, professional organizations that establish discipline-specific standards approved by NCATE. The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) is one of the technology organizations that establishes guidelines by which educational technology programs are evaluated. Procedures for ISTE accreditation can be found at http://www.iste.org/standards/ncate/advanced.html.

Seeking NCATE Accreditation
As mentioned earlier, the Masters Program in Educational Technology at Iona College differs from most programs of its kind in that it is offered through the Department of Computer Science rather than through the Department of Education. The Education faculty had the responsibility of completing the NCATE application; our first responsibility was the completion of the ISTE portfolio. The most significant part of the portfolio was the matrix of performance indicators and experiences to fulfill the guidelines along with a set of course syllabi with the mapped indicators.

A committee was formed to complete the matrix and syllabi. An ISTE consultant provided invaluable assistance in explaining the requirements. For each performance indicator in the matrix, we were required to indicate the specific objectives, topics and assignments in our courses that verified that students had met the indicator. To cross reference the matrix, we were required to map each indicator onto the objectives, topics, and assignments of our course syllabi. Since our program offers a masters degree, ISTE advised Iona to complete the matrix for Advanced Programs consisting of the Educational Computing and Technology Literacy Endorsement Matrix as well as two sections for Educational Computing and Technology Leadership.

It became obvious from the start that compliance with ISTE standards would entail drastic changes in our program. The first problem we encountered was how to meet the over one hundred indicators within our current courses. ISTE requires each graduate of the program to meet each of the performance indicators in the matrix, implying that all the indicators must be met in core courses that are taken by every student. As explained above, New York State requirements necessitated the development of three new courses in the core. On the other hand, there were certain courses that we strongly believed should be part of our program, such as the programming and research courses, and were reluctant to eliminate. In light of all these requirements, our committee had no choice but to expand the core from its existing 18 credits to 30 credits. This left only 6 credits of electives for our students. We were concerned about the lack of diversity in our students’ course of study but there were no other viable alternatives.

Each committee member took responsibility for a group of core courses and revised the syllabi and assignments to meet the appropriate indicators for the course. We met periodically to ensure consistency and completeness. The initial feedback from our consultant on the first three sections of the matrix revealed other problems in our procedures. Many indicators had several parts and we had not been sufficiently attentive to each and every one of them but rather addressed the general intention of the indicator. We learned the importance of using the language of the indicators in our syllabi. Another problem that surfaced was our misconception that merely addressing an indicator in class was sufficient evidence that it was met. Our consultant made us aware that performance indicators could only be properly satisfied through specific assessments such as examinations, assignments, and projects. This realization forced us to revisit each of our syllabi to provide compliance with the indicators though performance-based assessments. We also encountered difficulty in completing all of the indicators to our satisfaction. Some of the indicators required equipment that we do not have and that we might have trouble acquiring. Other indicators could only be properly met in an extensive field experience that we are unable to provide at the current time. By the end of this iterative process, we added another new course to the program (bringing the total of new courses to four) and significantly revised four others. Iona College submitted its ISTE portfolio to NCATE in August 2001. A complete description of the revised program can be found at http://www.iona.edu/cs/gradreqs.htm.

Implementing the Program

We have already achieved one of our goals: New York State has registered our newly revised Masters Program in Educational Technology. We were gratified that the State recognized the strength of our program and implicitly acknowledged that our use of adjuncts in the program did not detract from but rather enhanced the students’ experiences. After approval by the state, the next challenge was to implement the new program. A three-year projected schedule had to be revised to reflect the changes. The scheduling was complicated by several factors, including the stipulation that all core courses had to be offered on both campuses within a reasonable cycle. Students already in the program, who had matriculated under the old curriculum, were given the option of completing their existing program plans or switching to the new requirements. Most opted to complete their old plans, making substitutions where necessary. A summary of the changes was prepared and distributed prior to registration for fall of 2001 for all new and non-matriculated students. New requirements could also be found in the college catalog and the department website. The more structured program required scheduling additional advisement hours to
explain its effect on the students’ programs. The adjunct faculty teaching in the program had to be brought up to date on the changes, and made aware of the revisions to their course outlines, which they were no longer permitted to modify. In general, they were pleased with the specificity of the outlines, and they adjusted their teaching accordingly. Collection of assessment materials became more crucial, and the department is still experimenting with methods of collecting and storing those assessments. Electronic portfolios are being developed for each offering of the courses.

Conclusion

We discovered that the new courses the State required us to offer were well received by our students. Our K-12 teachers are constantly looking for effective ways to integrate technology into their classrooms and they found these courses most beneficial to them and their colleagues.

At the time of writing, we are still awaiting a response from ISTE on our curriculum portfolio. Although the first round of the ISTE accreditation process was long and arduous, it yielded some positive outcomes. Perhaps for the first time, the committee examined each course in minute detail to reduce duplication of course material, and to eliminate areas that were outdated and replace them with more meaningful, relevant and current topics and assignments. This purposeful “house-cleaning” can have a cathartic effect. Our program has been invigorated with the latest theories in educational technology and, as such, is a more challenging but rewarding program. With its emphasis on performance-based assessments, we are convinced that our revised Masters Program in Educational Technology will better prepare our students to meet the challenges they will face in their own classrooms.

References


