Preparing for and Hosting Virtual Regulatory and Accreditation Site Visits

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Lockdowns and travel restrictions during the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic made site visits by various regulatory and accrediting bodies difficult. This article shares lessons learned during 2 recent, highly successful virtual accreditation site visits. The first was a 2-day visit with 3 examiners, and the second was a 3-day visit with 5 examiners that included visits to other on-campus facilities and clinical partner facilities in the community. Planning for an accreditation visit begins 12 to 24 months before the anticipated visit. Process charts and timelines allow for project planning but are not intended to be prescriptive (Supplemental Digital Content, <http://links.lww.com/NE/A944>, Figure). They are useful to orient faculty and staff for the upcoming visit especially those not directly involved in coordinating visit-related activities.

Creating and Organizing a Virtual Resource Room

During a traditional site visit, a conference room is usually set aside as a resource room with binders that contain the possible files, records, and meeting minutes that the evaluators might request to see. The advantages of virtual visits are the virtual resources and ability to rapidly copy relevant data and documents. Thus, it is important to create and organize a virtual resource room in its stead. Many cloud-based systems are available to use for this purpose. Selection includes level of security, cost to the organization, and potential evaluators' familiarity with the system. Options that might be considered include Box, Dropbox, OneDrive, and Google Drive.

We recommend matching the file structure (outline) of the virtual resource room using the review criteria (requirements, standards, etc) as much as possible, even if duplicate copies of information are required to do so, such as including manuals or handbooks in more than 1 folder (Supplemental Digital

Content, <http://links.lww.com/NE/A945>, Table). We found it useful to create an index of all files and information saved in virtual resource room. This index was used extensively by program evaluators to find where documents were stored. It is best to limit access to virtual resources as much as possible to minimize errors and unaccounted-for changes. Once all materials are placed in the virtual resource room, *read-only* access should be provided to allow time to become familiar with the materials provided to the evaluators. Make certain that any files in resource room are copies; there should not be any risk of loss of the original data or records (Table).

Given the relatively new nature of virtual site visits, it may be preferable to allow evaluators early access to the virtual resource room for a period of time before the visit to allow them time to become familiar with the materials provided. The early access provides evaluators the opportunity to ask clarifying questions prior to the visit about missing documents or information and focus on in-depth questions during the visit itself. It is useful to document all data sources and location of raw data used for any statistics. This helps if questions about data arise during the site visit and minimizes work for future program reviews. It is also useful for any loss of knowledge should staff turnover occur in the future.

Creating Virtual Tour Videos

Often, site visits include tours of physical facilities to help evaluators put context around the thousands of documents that they are reviewing. Because this is not possible during a virtual site visit, it is good to provide video tours of your facilities demonstrating classrooms and laboratories, simulation spaces, faculty and staff workspaces, and student meeting and study spaces.

Traditionally, evaluators travel to clinical agencies to observe students in their clinical rotations. If possible, the school can provide a video or photographs of a representative clinical site, if allowed by the clinical partner. Additionally, evaluators like to visit classrooms to observe interaction between faculty and students. Although this may be possible to arrange virtually, the agenda and schedule of classes may not allow the evaluators to visit classes in each degree program that they are reviewing. They may find it acceptable to view a recorded class.

Selecting and Testing Videoconferencing System

If not provided by the regulatory or accreditation body, consider the following variables in selecting and testing a

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Table. Sample File Structure for Virtual Resource Room

Academic calendars and schedules
Certification and licensure score reports
Clinical contracts
Correspondence (with accreditation/regulatory bodies)
Course syllabi (by program)
Evaluation plan
Faculty curriculum vitae
Job descriptions
Manuals and handbooks
Meeting minutes
Organizational charts
Plans of study (by program)
Professional standards and guidelines
Responses to team questions ^a
Strategic planning documents
Surveys and evaluations (templates and results)

^aThis unique folder can be used to store responses or documents requested during the visit itself, reducing the length of time for evaluators to find such.

videoconferencing system: (1) What features do evaluators need access to (eg, screen share, the ability to mute participants, breakout rooms, etc)? (2) What is the level of confidentiality required, and does the system allow for encryption? This may affect the ability to have a host who allows people in/out of the meeting. (3) Will evaluators always be together in the same meeting at all times, or if there are multiple evaluators (we had 5 on one visit), will they break up and meet with different groups at different times? (4) If the system is licensed to your institution, is it easily accessible to those outside your institution? If so, do you need to create additional user names and logins? We chose to use our campus-licensed Zoom platform because the evaluators were accustomed to using this platform at their places of work, and it provided high-definition video, encryption, and both breakout and waiting rooms.

Arranging Access to Learning Management System and Developing Agenda

Providing access to the learning management system (LMS) allows evaluators to view course materials, announcements, discussion boards, and assignments and how they support student learning objectives. Access to a school's or university's LMS can be provided by staff members with LMS access sharing their screen and navigating the LMS as requested by an evaluator or by providing a university login for use during the virtual visit with read-only access. The latter is easier for school staff and the evaluators but may require the support of the university's or school's information technology office.

To develop the visit agenda, collaborate with the evaluators several weeks prior to the scheduled site visit. Make sure that the agenda addresses their needs such as meetings with the university administration and possibly representatives from financial aid, disability services, and the library. Developing the visit agenda early allows you to prepare faculty and staff. For those from outside of your program or school, it may be useful to develop 1-page talking points to prepare them for what the evaluators may discuss.

Testing Access

Prior to the virtual site visit, test access to the virtual resource room and its contents, LMS, and videoconferencing system. It is best to test access with a non-institutional login as the evaluators will be doing. Make certain that the access and display of all critical documents, images, and videos work properly across various digital platforms that the individual evaluators may use such as Windows, Mac operating system, tablets, and so on.

Provide Continuous Support

Designate a single point of contact who serves as the coordinator for the site visit. Assigning a host throughout the visit greatly reduces response time between the program and evaluators and streamlines communication. Evaluators have fewer contacts to sort through, and programs can ensure that all responses are coordinated and documented.

TEACHING TIP

Podcasts and Lifelong Learning

Helping students understand the value of lifelong learning can present challenges to nurse educators, especially when working to foster this value in senior students who have reached the end of their formal education. Podcasting may help students see the value of continuing education, without the constraints of traditional learning. Senior-level students were instructed to locate and listen to a podcast that corresponded with the week's lecture topic. Students recorded themselves discussing the podcast and how it related to the content covered in the lecture. After the students finished recording their reflection, they responded to a peer's audio post. This strategy is well known for text-based discussion forums. However, this updated format using podcasts encouraged students who are more auditory learners. At the start of the subsequent week's lecture, students were given the opportunity to share a synopsis of their podcast content. The design allowed students to be exposed to all ideas generated by the class. The initial student response to this project was mixed. However, by the conclusion of this project, student feedback was positive, indicating that the podcast not only emphasized course objectives but also showcased how lifelong learning can continue in many different formats.

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