

The Importance of the Accreditation Site Visit to the Accreditation Agency and the Program

By Catherine V. Palmer

ACAE prides itself on having the most sophisticated, interactive, and up-to-date electronic system for accreditation not only for audiology, but the electronic platform rivals any other discipline for seamless data entry, retrieval, interaction between reviewers and programs, and ability to update with minimal effort.

So why hasn't all this wonderful technology done away with the (historically dreaded) site visit? The site visit remains critical to the accreditation agency and the program, and if done correctly, does not need to be dreaded by either party.

The purpose of accreditation is to protect the patients we serve. Accreditation accomplishes this

by setting standards that, if met, produce graduates who are ready to practice the full scope of hearing and balance care. The practice standards are driven by practice reviews completed by professional organizations at reasonable time intervals that inform the accreditation agency as to how practice in the profession is evolving. The purpose of the site visit is to verify that everything the program has described that supports its ability to educate students, and to assess that students have achieved competency is in place.

Accreditation acknowledges that a program has met a minimum set of criteria related to the accreditation standards. ACAE has a rigorous "minimum" criteria requiring

programs to demonstrate didactic and clinical education across the entire scope of practice, with specific mechanisms in place to assess outcomes indicating that students have mastered the skills and knowledge set out in the standards.

ACAE has a unique interactive component to the accreditation process that starts during the electronic data entry portion of the review. This allows the site visitors to read through all of the materials the program has submitted in support of the program's compliance with the standards, and ask questions related to these materials before the site visit. This is a unique feature of ACAE and allows the eventual on-site visit to be efficient. The site visitors arrive with a specific list of items that must be verified or further explored to assess compliance with various standards.

If the purpose of the site visit is to verify what has been submitted by the program in the accreditation report, what should we expect of the site visitors? The site visit team will have expertise in education and clinical practice in audiology. Site visitors go through rigorous training to make sure they stay focused on their overarching goal—to verify what has been reported in the accreditation document and to assess whether this constitutes compliance with each standard.




The site visit involves tours of space, equipment access, discussions with faculty, students, preceptors, and other stakeholders of the program. Site visitors leave behind their biases and favorite things about their own programs or clinics. Although it is tempting to engage site visitors in discussions about common areas of interest/expertise because we are a small field and tend to know each other, you'll find that site visitors are focused on the program, not any one individual. The site visit ends with a preliminary report to the program indicating compliance, strengths, and, if applicable, areas that need attention. The site visitors are the eyes and ears of accreditation and their job is to report their findings to the full accrediting body. The full accrediting board then votes on the status of the program.

From its inception, ACAE has approached accreditation as a

collaborative process between the accreditation agency (site visitors) and the academic program. This is a unique approach to accreditation and puts everyone on the same team—the team that is dedicated to improving audiology education by reviewing and supporting programs in their efforts to produce graduates who can independently practice across the entire scope of practice.

The site visit should not feel threatening, as if people are coming to try to catch you doing something wrong. Instead, the site visit should feel like a time when a program can show what they do and self-reflect on what is going well and what could be improved relative to the demands and opportunities in our field for which students will need to be prepared. Most programs feel good about what they do and put a tremendous amount of energy into continually improving their programs. But without the requirement

of accreditation, including the site visit, we often do not stop and reflect about how our program maps onto current standards and how we measure that our students demonstrate knowledge and competencies. If done correctly, accreditation, including the site visit, is an ideal time to self-reflect and plan. 

Catherine V. Palmer, PhD, is an associate professor and director of the AuD program at the University of Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania). Dr. Palmer serves as the director of audiology for the Integrated UPMC Health System.

The ACAE site visit team consisted of two audiologists, one from another AuD program and one clinical person who worked with AuD students. In addition to being thorough, it was very collegial, with the team providing feedback about all standards, whether in compliance, partial compliance (and steps suggested for full compliance) or program strengths. It truly felt like a partnership—with the team and the program faculty sharing the goal of excellence in AuD education.

Martha Mundy, AuD | University of North Carolina School of Medicine