

NAST Accreditation Information for Faculty

INTRODUCTION

Over the next few months, your theatre unit will participate in a review to renew or attain accredited institutional membership in the National Association of Schools of Theatre.

This brief document is intended to provide you with an overview. It explains the basic elements of an accreditation review in terms of process. But it also introduces the philosophy and spirit of NAST accreditation, which may be quite different from those of other review bodies.

While the most fundamental purpose is to assure that accredited institutions meet a set of threshold standards, the far larger purpose is to apply the accreditation process in a way that supports continuous improvement and advancement of each theatre program. However, there is no single approach to improvement. Rather, the framework of commonality provided by NAST standards is used to encourage and develop diverse approaches to improvement in each institution.

A national accrediting organization can develop consensus-based threshold standards, but it cannot substitute for local efforts to produce artistic, intellectual, and educational excellence. Therefore, it is the combination of national and local, with emphasis on local, that makes an accreditation process potentially powerful and of long-term effect. This connection is the basis for the partnership between the theatre unit and NAST that should engage the interest and participation of faculty. Indeed, the connections among disciplinary content, process, faculty, and students are the core of the educational process.

ELEMENTS OF THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS

Application. All member institutions are reviewed on a cyclical basis (most institutions, 10 years; new member institutions, 5 years). At the appropriate time, the theatre unit forwards an application notice to the National Office indicating proposed visit times, curricula offered, and other pertinent information. This notice begins the process of nominating and selecting visitors. It establishes a schedule both for the theatre unit and for NAST.

Self-Study. The theatre unit undertakes a self-study, which includes involvement in a self-evaluation procedure and development of a self-study document. NAST provides guidelines for self-study documents. Beyond a few absolute requirements, institutions are encouraged to be creative in developing a self-study process and document that demonstrate compliance with NAST standards and fulfill specific institutional needs. Self-study documents may contain texts created for other purposes. The NAST self-study may be conducted concurrently or jointly with other review procedures. To put it simply, institutions have a great deal of flexibility with respect to self-study. Beyond the basic framework provided by NAST, the theatre unit and the institution have complete control of the process, content, and weight given to various issues. For example, some institutions will focus the self-study on futures issues, while others will use it to get the best possible analysis of current conditions, intending to use such a body of information in later planning efforts. The self-study document should be useful to the theatre unit and the institution well beyond the NAST accreditation process.

The Visit. Following completion of the self-study document, a visiting team of two or more persons will come to the institution for at least two full days. Beyond these minimums, the number of visitors and the

length of the visit are the prerogative of the institution. In certain cases, depending on size of the program and purposes of the review, NAST procedures require additional visitors. The visitors are chosen through a nominations process that involves the proposal of a slate by the NAST Executive Director, an opportunity for the institution to provide an order of preference and to delete proposed visitors due to conflict of interest. All visitors nominated have been trained by NAST. They work under strict guidelines to ensure the fairness and consistency of NAST reviews. The visitors will arrive at the institution having given careful attention to the self-study document. They will gain most of their information about the theatre unit from the self-study. Their on-site work will be devoted primarily to confirming the self-study and evaluating in areas where personal interaction is necessary. They cannot and will not repeat the self-study process.

All NAST visits are required to contain opportunities for visitors to meet with faculty. Visitors will also attend classes, rehearsals, and other functions. In interactions with faculty, visitors are seeking information, analysis, and verification regarding the work of the unit as related to NAST standards and to the mission, goals, and objectives of the theatre unit and the institution. For this reason, the visitors will often spend brief periods in classes and rehearsals. They will ask questions that address overall issues, conditions, and results in the theatre unit. They will not deal with or attempt to adjudicate local disputes or otherwise engage in personnel matters that are the prerogative of the institution. The visitors will meet with faculty and hear comments on the work of the theatre unit. At all times, the visitors are focusing on the extent to which students are gaining competencies expected for the educational credentials they are projected to receive. All other issues are subordinate to this particular concern. All operations and resources used are considered in light of this central competency-development purpose.

The Visitors' Report. Following the visit, the visitors prepare a report, which should reach the campus approximately seven to eight weeks following the visit. The Visitors' Report is not the accreditation decision. Rather, it is a report of the visitors' impressions and analyses, along with background information that provides the foundation for the next step in the process—an Optional Response to the Visitors' Report by the institution. The Visitors' Report needs careful attention because of the weight it carries in the Commission's deliberations. However, the Commission does not rely exclusively on the Visitors' Report, nor does the Commission simply endorse the Visitors' Report without careful study of other materials submitted by the institution.

The Visitors' Report makes an analysis regarding compliance with NAST standards. It also makes recommendations for improvements that are not tied to accreditation. Visitors' Reports make clear distinctions between the two.

Optional Response. Upon receipt of the Visitors' Report, the institution has the opportunity to respond regarding errors of fact, conclusions based upon such errors, and documented changes made in the program since the visit. The Optional Response does not change the Visitors' Report, but supplements it.

Commission Action. The NAST Commission on Accreditation reviews the Self-Study, the Visitors' Report, and any Optional Response to the Visitors' Report provided by the institution. Based on these documents and the standards of the Association as published in the *Handbook*, including any current addenda to the *Handbook*, the Commission makes an accreditation decision. The decision is forwarded to the theatre executive and to the president of the institution.

The Commission Action Report is the official accreditation action. This document alone outlines the accreditation results of the review. Of course, the institution is free to follow through on any issues raised in its Self-Study, the Visitors' Report, or its Optional Response to the Visitors' Report. However, any responses or reports due to NAST will be stipulated in the Commission Action Report. The

Commission's communication may also contain recommendations for improvement or future study that are not connected to accreditation status. A clear distinction between accreditation and other issues is made in the text of the Commission Action Report.

Institutional Action. The theatre unit and the institution respond to NAST if requested to do so. The analytical documents of the process produced by the institution in its Self-Study and by NAST in the Visitors' Report and the Commission Action Report constitute the basis for continued effort to improve the quality of teaching and learning in theatre.

BASIC FACTS

Peer Governance and Review. NAST operates on principles of peer governance and review. This means that member institutions through their representatives create an organizational framework, the accreditation standards, and the program of the Association. It means that these representatives govern the Association and conduct evaluations as site visitors and Commission members.

Standards. Consistent with peer principles, the standards of the Association have been produced by consensus among member institutions. Although there is broad consultation with others in the formulation and amendment of standards, every standard has been approved by vote of the membership.

Focus on Function Rather Than Method and Personalities. NAST focuses its reviews on *what* and *why* rather than *how* and *who*. It imposes strict rules on itself concerning institutional autonomy. It does not attempt to regulate particular methodologies, make personnel decisions, or otherwise intrude in the development of means for accomplishing work. NAST's focus on competency development consistent with institutional and programmatic missions maintains a concentration on educational results.

Conflict of Interest. NAST has extensive procedures to avoid conflict of interest in all phases of the accreditation process. Specific policies and organizational principles provide numerous checkpoints in each accreditation review.

Confidentiality. Members of the Commission, visitors, and staff treat as confidential all information about programs reviewed and all discussions and decisions made in connection with the review. NAST considers all material generated for the accreditation review by the program and by NAST as confidential. However, NAST encourages appropriate dissemination within the institution. The Self-Study document is considered the property of the institution. For further information, see NAST *Handbook*, Rules of Practice and Procedure.

Checks and Balances. Like our federal system, NAST relies on a separation of powers to provide checks and balances for the whole range of issues in accreditation reviews. No one person is ever completely in charge of anything, and the institution always has an opportunity to provide its perspective on conclusions reached by visitors or the Commission, and to evaluate the process formally, once in the middle and once at the end.

Visitors. During the accreditation review, visitors are serving NAST and the visited institution. They are not representatives of their own institution or of other organizations or review processes unless specifically stipulated in a joint or concurrent visit agreement. Visitors are expressly prohibited from making comparisons between the visited institution and their own institution. They must evaluate only against NAST standards and the stated purposes—mission, goals, and objectives—of the visited institution. Although each visitor will have a background in some theatre specialization, visitors are not permitted to

advance the cause of their specialty over others, or otherwise insert parochial agendas into the comprehensive review of the theatre unit as a whole.

The Commission on Accreditation. Members of the Commission are elected by the institutional representatives to NAST to carry out the accreditation and membership functions of the Association. However, the Commission can only make judgments based on the standards of the Association, and can only operate through the established and published procedures of the Association. It is charged with ensuring institutional compliance with accreditation standards while avoiding standardization, with acting consistently without producing a regulatory sameness, with focusing on *what* and *why* rather than *how* and *who*.

Staff. The staff manages the accreditation process and ensures that all procedures, policies, and operations established by the membership, the Board of Directors, and the Commission on Accreditation are carried out fairly and in accordance with NAST practice. The staff does not engage in accreditation evaluations of institutions or programs, nor does it take overt responsibility for operating the accreditation process at specific institutions. The staff does provide consultative services when requested to do so, and is involved in the development of literature, workshops, and other services to assist institutions.

QUESTIONS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

This informational document provides a brief overview. Below is an annotation of the major documents that give a complete picture of the NAST accreditation process. The institutional representative or library of each accredited member institution should have a copy of these documents, and all are available through the NAST website.

Since NAST regards accreditation as a partnership between itself and institutions being reviewed, it is important to the Association that questions, concerns, and anxieties be addressed as quickly as possible. First, seek clarification from your institutional representative to NAST or the coordinator of your accreditation review. If necessary, the NAST National Office staff will provide or find the answers you or your colleagues need. We ask you contact us as indicated below.

[NAST Handbook](#). Published annually, the *NAST Handbook* contains the Association's accreditation standards, as well as its constitution, bylaws, code of ethics, rules of practice and procedure, and other policies. The *Handbook*, along with any current addenda to the *Handbook*, is the reference point for all procedures, evaluations, and decisions in the accreditation process.

[NAST Membership Procedures](#). This set of procedures is in four basic parts:

Procedures for Institutions provides an overview of the accreditation process, primarily from the institution's perspective.

Procedures for the Self-Study Document describes procedures and content areas for the institution's Self-Study. ***Format A*** describes the traditional sequential format. ***Format B*** and ***Format C*** describe alternative formats.

Instructions for Preparing Curricular Tables in the NAST Format provides instructions and sample tables for preparing curricular tables as required for institutional Self-Studies (all formats), and applications for Plan Approval or Consultative Review (current members only)

Procedures for Visiting Evaluators provides an overview of the visit, the Visitors' Report, and the Visitors' Report format, primarily from the visitors' perspective.

Together, these documents give a complete picture of the approach to accreditation used by NAST.

The *Membership Procedures* are revised every five years. The latest edition is September 2008.

[A Philosophy for Accreditation in the Arts Disciplines](#). This publication is available on the NAST website. The theatre executive should make a copy available to each theatre faculty member. It reviews the conceptual basis for NAST accreditation and connects the process to larger artistic, intellectual, and educational goals.

[Optional Supplemental Questions for Self-Study](#) provides an optional supplement to the required 2008 NAST Membership Procedures. This document contains several optional sets of questions that may be used to explore one or more issues in greater depth during the course of the Self-Study.

[Creating Your Self-Study](#) (NAST *Sourcebook for Futures Planning, Supplement IV*). This optional document explores the many variations of self-study, and helps theatre units formulate how they can best develop a self-study that will fulfill their own immediate and long-term needs.

[Tough Questions and Straight Answers About Arts Accreditation](#). This document responds to standard questions about accreditation often posed by skeptics in the higher education community. The text explores these issues from the philosophical and operational perspective of NAST.

The NAST website — <http://nast.arts-accredit.org>. The website contains comprehensive information concerning the accreditation process, including a set of frequently asked questions. It also contains a list of members, and other information about the work of NAST beyond accreditation.

It may be useful to check the website periodically for updated information and new publications.

How to contact NAST:

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