THE CHALLENGES FOR AACSB ACCREDITATION AT CEIPA BUSINESS SCHOOL: ADAPTING NEW STANDARDS FOR A CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

CEIPA business school in Medellin, Colombia, is a 40-year-old institution that developed its education model based on "problem nucleus," allowing students to start their learning process by analyzing a real problem or issue in a company, then developing the appropriate competencies and skills to solve it. The model encompasses not only classroom and online acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also hands-on experiences, and outdoor training for polishing of personal skills and managerial abilities.

This year, the institution has decided to initiate the AACSB accreditation process to enhance its reputation and position in the highly competitive higher education landscape in Colombia, as well as to become a recognized business school in the global marketplace.

This process will take several years and implies many structural and cultural changes toward a more evidence-based process at all levels, thus generating many interesting opportunities for improvements.

This paper analyzes the process of adaptation of the AACSB standards for CEIPA, and the challenges for change at all levels, including the student admission process, teaching methodology and the online component, student services, and the installation of assurance of learning and assessment processes in all programs, to name a few.

Since the AACSB accreditation of business schools in Latin American countries is still limited, this paper may also help other institutions to embrace this challenge to become a world-class business school.

Keywords: accreditation, cultural changes, AOL, assessment, education, Latin America, Business School.

INTRODUCTION

CEIPA Business School was founded in 1972 in Medellin, Colombia, with the purpose of providing integral education to students, by means of programs focused on the field of administration. During the first 20 years of operation, it offered technological programs[1] of about three and a half years: the majority of students had a job in order to pay for their tuition.

In 1992, after a very long and difficult process, the National Ministry of Education authorized CEIPA to turn from being a Technological Institution into a University. This change allowed CEIPA to offer five-year professional undergraduate programs and post graduate education, as well as consulting and university extension.

This authorization means a great strategic challenge for the institution since about 90% of higher education institutions in Colombia have a department of administrative sciences, and this represents about 30% of the students registered in higher education. In other words, this is the most competitive area with the highest educational offer in the country.

By using an approach towards the instruction of students for the corporate world within the country and the region, and since as most of them work in order to pay for their studies, it was then necessary to ponder if the classical model of university formation was appropriate for the education of the students at CEIPA.

Several consultations were conducted regarding the time it took for students to finish their studies, their expectations, and their employers'. These studies showed that a high number of them (150, at the time), graduated

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[1] In Colombia, higher education proposes three levels: technical professionals, technologists, and highly qualified professionals. Besides the degree of professional responsibility, it is understood that the length of their education differentiates the programs. Professional majors take longer.

within the five years in the institution plan; that there were subjects that both employers and students did not find any application for in their professional lives; and other perceptions that gave basis to work on a new proposal.

The need to differentiate ourselves from others, and to offer an instruction of the highest quality for our students, made us formulate the following hypothesis: Is it possible to educate a professional in business administration in less than 5 years? Is there a pedagogical model that allows the optimization of resources and teachers? How can we increase academic quality? These questions led us to undertake a national and international search for a new educational model.

By mid-1995, the proposal to adopt an educational model based on problem-solving and theme-based nuclei was consolidated. This model was implemented using a different timeline; that is, instead of studying two semesters in a year, each of 16 weeks, we moved into creating five periods per year, each of 8 weeks. Therefore, each nucleus had to entirely be redesigned, and the programs changed from 60 subjects to a maximum 24 nuclei.

By adopting the model, the programs could be structured into four-year programs, thus reducing the number of required teachers while allowing students to focus on just one nucleus per period and the making of applicability tasks connected to the industry.

CEIPA's educational model

Problem-Based and Theme-based Nuclei of Studies have been an extensively discussed proposal with application experiences (López N. and Puentes A. V. 2011; Silva, L. y Domínguez, F.2017), both positive and to be improved, of which we will share some fundamental aspects originating from different authors. Some of these compilations have been retrieved from the work of Edmee Córdoba, Master in Education from Javeriana University who states:

"It is a group of similar knowledge which allows the definition of lines of research concerning the object of transformation; methodological strategies, which guarantee the theory-practice relation and the communitarian participation activities." (ICFES, 1989).

"Convergence of knowledge: specific, popular, incorporated and pedagogical for the comprehension, integration, and application of a theoretical-practical solution to problems." (Munevar, R, and Aguirre, R, 1980).

"A basic work nucleus or 'work around a basic nucleus', exclusively involves a group of knowledge from different fields and incorporates them, merging them into a work unit. The interrelated disciplines maintain their identities, are grouped and thought in regards to a particular subject which serves as its nucleus." (Garcia, 1988).

"A thematic nucleus represents a theoretical-practical group of learning experiences where conceptualization, reflection, and application of knowledge takes place in relation to a specific topic or to a particular problem-based situation. (Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Education, University of Caldas, 1989; López N. and Puentes A. V. 2011; Silva, L. y Domínguez, F.2017).

"In the words of Madgenzo (1986) "An Integrated Curriculum in which all disciplines or contents are related or integrated, theory-practice. This means that theory cannot be worked separately from practice. Much less does it mean to assign a teacher for theory and another one for practice."

Problem-based Nuclei in the CEIPA Curriculum

We can define the problem-based nucleus in the CEIPA curriculum as the basic, dynamic unit for analysis, planning, organization, integration, and continuous and improved construction of knowledge, specifically in respect to the administrative and managerial fields, and related to solving problems specific to organizations.

In the model´s unique nature, each nucleus is designed and focused towards students and professionals' effective confrontation and intervention on the restrictions organizations face, as well as the use of their skills; centered on the knowledge and development of administrative and corporate theories and practices.

The articulated intent of the nucleus feeds off students and teachers' experiences, and administrative knowledge. It is structured so that, in practice, the executive's intervention within the organization, allows it to optimize its relationship with its settings (economic, social, political, legal, environmental), through the aligning of its strategies and internal processes with its systems, structures, culture and different public interests in order to fulfill its objectives.

It is, therefore, important to acknowledge that, as systems, both the corporate life as well as the educational process of executives and managers, are related to the development of specific competencies that empower them to contribute to the solving of problems (human, social, economic, technical, technological, etc.), which are ethically acceptable, socially valid and effective within the scope of the corporate world.

On the basis of the aforementioned, the problem-solving perspective in which the nucleus is based, favors a systemic and a systematic vision of the organization and its setting, and, in this way, students develop a peripheral inside-outside view of their organization, in order to understand and intervene it at different times and scenarios.

The above is then achieved through the work in and outside the classes, and on several instances (disciplines, knowledge, methodology, tools, practice). During the nucleus practice stage, this is achieved through different activities, readings, case studies, visits, online search, and basic research elements that go from one nucleus to the next. It is also obtained by means of the different projects that students deliver; through, the socialization, expansion, and discussion of experiences and from the expert collaboration of the teachers and, at times, from the occasional invitees of the corporate sector (Cardona, 2011).

The corporate practicum, which have as much of art as they have of discipline, and the knowledge itself, integrated to corporate theory (which effectively educates executives and managers, at least from a conceptual point of view), has inter, trans and multidisciplinary contributions due to the complexity of the problems that organizations face, and the need for integral contributions in order to solve them.
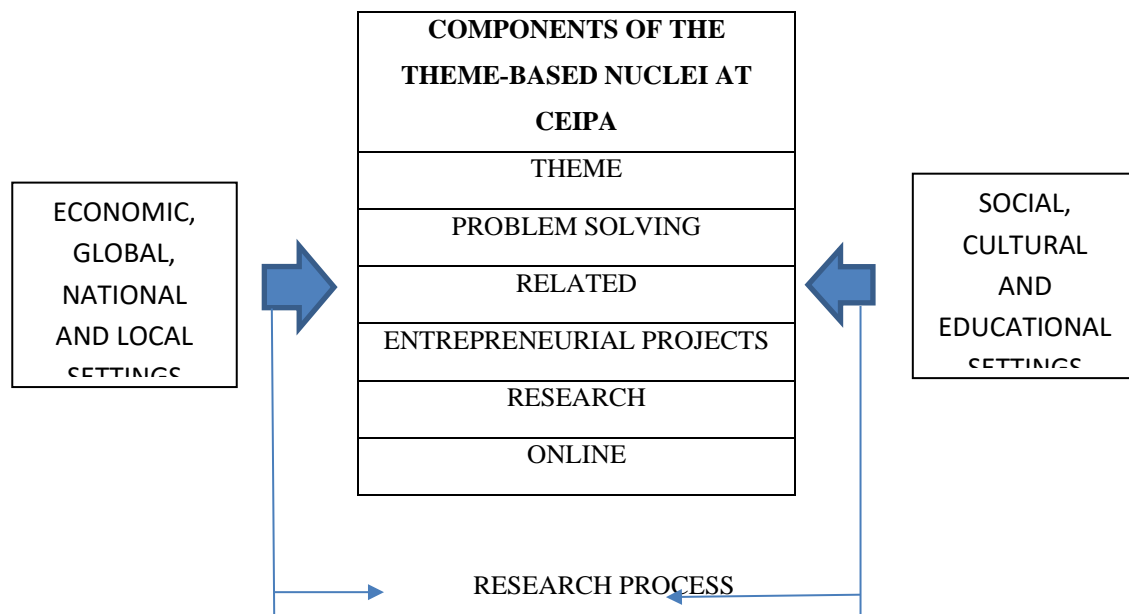

Figure 1. The CEIPA educational model showing the process for student learning and different elements involved in the process.

Given this unique background at CEIPA, this paper focuses on the process of the alignment of the AACBS accreditation standards to this educational approach, and the correlated activities and changes needed to take the university to the next level. In the Literature review section, this article first analyzes some of the existing known challenges to AACSB accreditation in recent years with similar universities in Europe and other countries, followed by a list of the various areas involved in the accreditation process, including the changes and the implementation of new elements such as Curriculum Maps, Assessment plans and signature assignments. On the conclusion section, the authors highlight some of the preliminary benefits of the process, as well as the potential for discoveries and improvements in the next few years for CEIPA.

LITERATURE REVIEW

AACSB International is the leading accrediting organization for business schools (Bunker, Cagle and Harris, 2014) and has over 100 years of history as a prestigious institution that most business schools seek to be connected

to achieve their accreditation, and participate as members. According to AACSB's website, its accreditation represents the highest standard of achievement for business schools worldwide, with less than 5% of the world's 13,000 business schools accredited (AACSB 2017). It is the longest serving global association dedicated to advancing management education worldwide, with 786 business schools accredited in 53 different countries, and it has 1,500 members from 90 countries around the world.

AACSB is not the only determinant of quality business education for business schools, but given the proliferation of business programs worldwide and of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), it has become indispensable to have a framework of reference for quality by following the operational and academic standards followed by the most prestigious and successful business schools in the 21st century. After several modifications and iterations throughout the years, AACSB provides a set of revised 15 standards for quality business education with the overarching pillars of engagement, innovation, and impact, and overseeing all areas of the business school including a) mission and vision, management and innovation, b) participants (students, faculty and professional staff), c) Learning and teaching, and d) Academic and professional engagement. In other words, it covers all relevant areas of a business school that impact what the student achieves in obtaining a degree.

Compliance with the AACSB standards does not guarantee a quality business education, but given the brand reputation it certainly increases visibility for the institution, global recognition, and attracts better students, increased funding as well as potential donors and partnerships. It is also used to assess the school's mission, vision, faculty teaching and scholarship, interaction with students, corporate partnerships, and impact to the business community. Possibly the most significant change involves developing an appropriate mission and its connection to faculty research consistent with that mission. Faculty often finds this very challenging in assessing their performance.

To embark in any accreditation process implies changes at many levels of the organization as well as associated costs, and thus institutions should be careful in considering this process to make sure it can produce the expected benefits, both tangible (like attracting more and better students) and intangible (reputation and positioning), to justify the additional investment.

There is also the gold standard for a business school to obtain the "triple accreditation", from not only AACSB, but also EQUIS and AMBA.

One of the examples in Latin America for the triple accreditation is IESA University in Venezuela, which thanks to the accreditation process they claimed to have obtained many benefits, including raising standards to a global scale, reviewing mission and vision, assessing strategy, systems and processes from different angles (Jaén, 2013). Furthermore, Jaén (2013) states: "Accreditation encourages and helps develop a school's own standards for managing faculty in accordance with its mission, vision, and strategy, so as to serve a given market". The process also promotes internationalization and strengthens a school's brand recognition, giving stockholders a guarantee for quality education.

However, some questions need to be addressed before engaging in this process, including whether or not accreditation fits the school's strategy, why does a school want to get accredited, and what for, how does accreditation will reinforce our strengths and diminish our weaknesses, to name a few. It is also recommended to hire an experienced mentor or consultant, to help with the process with an outside perspective (Jaén, 2013).

Business schools are one of the most success stories in higher education in the last 50 years, both form an academic (faculty, research, qualifications) and a business (customers, revenue, profitability) perspective (Osbaldestone, 2015). Given the incremental competition between business schools world-wide, it is hardly surprising that some leading schools have turned to accreditation to demonstrate their worth, and provide quality assurance to their board of trustees.

On the other hand, critics emphasize that rigid accreditation following specific rules discourages experimentation and innovation. Moreover, there are different types of university approaches for example teaching, research, entrepreneurship, that find adherence to standards very limiting, and prefer to be more open to new trends in the

market, especially now with the TEL (Technology Enhance Learning), the online formats and platforms, as well as recent learning models like Precision and Adaptive Learning as well as Competency-based education. These new methodologies have been growing significantly in the last ten years and present a challenge to all accreditation agencies.

To make matters more defiant, some business colleges have labored for 10 or more years to achieve AACSB accreditation (Al-Khalifa, 2016). Therefore, it is a long process that requires many changes in all areas, sizable investments, and a profound cultural transformation.

Assessment of student learning is one of the critical components of the AACSB accreditation process, in addition to the changes in the internal operations to comply with the standards. They include revising the mission statement that drives everything else in the process, admission process, student mentoring, community engagement, as well as faculty qualifications and relevant scholarship. Historically, the evidence of student learning was performed via direct assessment (exams, case analysis, presentations, papers, etc.), but the 2013 AACSB standards also allow schools more flexibility by incorporating indirect assessments using opinions of students, alumni and employers in surveys, focus groups and exit interviews (Al-Khalifa, 2016). The new standards also include a new classification of faculty research based on relevancy and engagement: Scholarly Academics (SA), Practice Academics (PA), Scholarly Practitioners (SP), and Instructional Practitioners (IP) (AACSB, 2017). This brings a whole new approach to make business schools more impactful to their students and business community.

The accreditation process consisting in developing and implementing outcomes assessment, or assurance of learning (AoL) to meet AACSB standards takes at least three to four years to develop learning goals and objectives and to create the metrics and rubrics needed to measure student's progress towards the goals and to address deficiencies (closing the loop). Moreover, "The school uses well-documented, systematic processes for determining and revising degree programs learning goals; designing, delivering, and improving degree program curricula to achieve learning goals; and demonstrating that degree programs learning goals have been met" (AACSB, 2013, p.5).

Marques and Garret (2012) presented an evaluation of the ongoing debate about the pros/cons of the AACSB AoL procedures to the university's constituents including students, faculty and administrators, given the possible transformation changes in the implementation, to comply with the 2013 standards. On the positive side, this created an increased faculty cooperation as well as transparency and consistency. However, there are some philosophical concerns about the reliance and emphasis on quantitative methods of assessment as a standardized approach for all institutions.

The AACSB Accreditation for CEIPA

While AACSB is the most sought after accreditation for business schools in Latin America, little has been written about the challenges and efforts required to achieve this accolade, especially in the context of the region and in particular in Colombia. There are a limited number of universities accredited by AACSB in South America, including two in Brazil, one in Argentina, three in Peru, one in Venezuela, three in Chile, one in Costa Rica, three in Mexico, and two in Colombia (AACSB, 2017); this is mostly due to the efforts and re sources required both in terms of faculty, processes and financial.

As a result, in late 2015 the administrators at CEIPA decided to embrace the challenge of pursuing the AACSB accreditation process, given the emerging opportunities from the new 2013 standards that expand alternatives for non-traditional, teaching-oriented, and non research-oriented universities. As previously noted in the introduction, CEIPA is a Business School with a problem-based educational approach and modular courses that has been proven successful for the last ten years in their specific context, and the format has been refined and successfully implemented. Therefore, the first challenge was to try to adapt and incorporate the AACSB standards to the existing model without changing its essence. Other challenges include the prevalent cultural approach to comply with norms and standards (as it is current practice for governmental accreditation in many Latin American countries). In that sense, the new 2013 AACSB standards also bring a fresh look by connecting all institutional activities to its mission, vision and values.

This paper intents to describe the initial efforts in disseminating the information about the AACSB standards, as well some of the first steps in implementing the AoL and Assessment process for all programs at CEIPA.

Dissemination process

In late 2015, CEIPA organized a series of workshops about the AACSB accreditation to various groups including full-time faculty, part-time faculty, and all other departments of the institution in Medellin (Communications and TV, Planning and Quality Control, Business School staff and administrators, Finance Laboratory, Community Development, Human Resources, Language School, Outreach and Business Development, Online Development, Finance Department, IT, Library, Research Department, Entrepreneurial Department, General Services), as well as in the campus in the city of Barranquilla.

The purpose of these sessions was to a) introduce the AACSB accreditation, b) to highlight the potential benefits for CEIPA, and c) to discuss possible implications to each department, both in the short and long term. The culture of mission-driven activities was especially emphasized and the continuation of the existing educational approach that has been successful for CEIPA for a long time. Many of the implications were addressed and clarified, to make sure all participants felt comfortable with the future changes.

CEIPA's decision to pursue AACSB accreditation was confirmed by its Rector in a public video communication to the university shareholders in December of 2015, emphasizing that the development and implementation may take a few years, as well as accentuating the potential benefits and strategic positioning for CEIPA in the region as a result of these efforts. Constant visit by consultants and periodic follow-up in 2016 and 2017, resulting in a series of initial actions described in the following section.
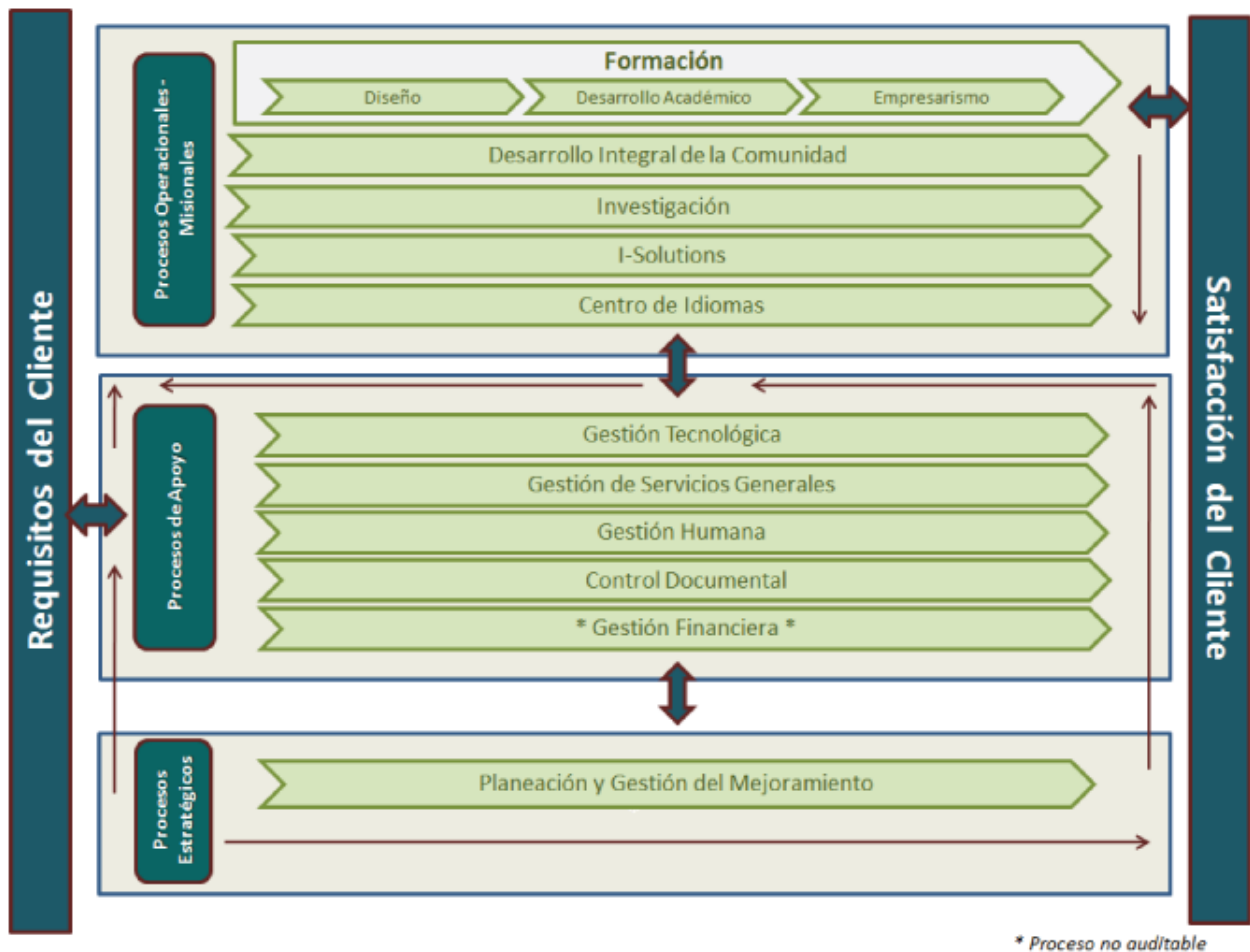
Fig 2. Matrix showing the various process and areas involved in CEIPA administration, starting with the mission and vision, formation, supporting activities and Quality improvement and customer satisfaction.

Implementation and actions

1. Mission and Vision. CEIPA's mission and vision was reviewed and analyzed to make sure it continues to be relevant for the students and the community they serve. Their original "driving principle" (principio rector) states "CEIPA Business School is a leading enterprise that manages business knowledge in online and face-to-face environments; is committed to the development of people and organizations, to foster the entrepreneurial spirit and integral formation". (CEIPA 2017). Its 'bridge' values include: Integrality, learn how to be; Respect, learn to live together; Flexibility, learn to learn; Responsibility, learn to do; "Fractalidad", learn how to meta-compete, or develop a wide variety of competencies and abilities, as professionals and human beings; and Innovation, learn to be entrepreneur and develop new businesses.

2. Review and development of Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs). Each program director developed a revised list of PLOs, linked to CEIPA's mission and ILOs. This process generated some questions about what the students should learn in each program and the connection to the ILOs. Adjustments were made accordingly.

3. Review of Institutional Outcomes. The existing institutional goals and CEIPA's "raison d'être" were reviewed and formally established as Institutional Outcomes: to Meta-compete, Problem Resolution, Leadership, Critical Thinking, and Social Responsibility. These will become integral part of all programs. This process helped disseminate and reinforce CEIPA's values and outcomes to experienced and new program directors, as well as adjuncts.

4. Curriculum maps for all undergraduate and graduate programs. Program directors also developed a curriculum map for each program, stating for each module/course if it was Introduction, Developed, or Master of each PLO. Curriculum maps show a clear connection of the entire program with the expected outcomes. This was probably the most beneficial action since it forced the program directors to revisit each of the modules to make sure they have a logical connection with the PLOs. Several modules had to change and others could be eliminated.

5. Student's end of course evaluation. The evaluation was reviewed to make sure it had the information needed, and implemented at the proper time and conditions for the students. It also should include the expected parameters to assess the class environment, as well as find future enhancements and feedback for the instructor.

6. Faculty qualifications. This is probably the most challenging standards to meet, given the existing group of full time and part time faculty at CEIPA, and the notorious scarcity of professors with a Ph.D. or terminal degree in the country. This is a big problem for all Colombian universities, and for CEIPA it means both an analysis of each of the professors and the specific actions to elevate the academic level, as well as the hiring of new faculty with the appropriate qualifications to meet AACSB standards, as described before in this paper.

7. Outdoor training. CEIPA currently has a great assignment/activity at the end of the core requirements for graduate programs, consisting on spending a weekend in a hotel outside the city (in the mountains) where students participate in numerous activities, games, and social interactions, to test their abilities, including leadership, team building, ability to negotiate, decision making, etc. It is also a great way to get students more involved with CEIPA staff and administrators, and have a fun weekend.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDTIONS

These activities and efforts are only the beginning of a long series of activities and changes for CEIPA to become eligible for AACSB accreditation, but the most important thing is that it is an on-going process that is starting to change the culture at CEIPA in all areas, and here are some examples: a) all fulltime and part time faculty participate in sessions and workshops about AACSB accreditation, but most importantly by not only changing and adapting existing programs to comply with the AoL, but also by incorporating AACSB criteria in the development of new programs. One example is the new Graduate program in Financial Markets, as well as the future MBA program, currently under approval by the Ministry of Education, where they presented the justification and rationale of the program based on PLOs and curriculum maps, generating very positive results

from the government accreditors. b) Supporting departments are looking for ways to modify or adapt what they currently do in supporting students, to adhere to AACSB. For instance, in the admissions area they are adapting the initial self-development assessment for students (to determine competencies), to develop a follow-up test later and measure changes and improvements in student's abilities. This assessment includes effective communication, persuasion, social intelligence, emotional performance, flexibility, self-confidence, openness to new experiences, strategic decision-making, innovation and creativity, management, persistency, planning, and teamwork.

The most important outcome of this initial process has been the cultural change and adaptation in embracing the AACSB standards and criteria for faculty and administrators, and the legitimate aspiration to become one the best business schools in the world in Latin America.

This paper describes the initial stages of the AACSB accreditation process and its benefits to this date, however additional research will be performed in the next few years to describe and discover new improvements and implications at CEIPA Business School.

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