Stories Business Deans Tell about Successful Journeys to AACSB Accreditation

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Abstract. Based on an organizational myth perspective, it was expected that the stories Business Deans tell about the journeys their Schools have taken to The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation, would follow the leaderist pattern of "hero quest myths". However, qualitative content analysis of 16 stories, written by Business Deans and submitted to the AACSB exchange blog (DATE), indicated these were presented as leaderless quests. Among the reasons proposed for this surprising finding were the bias within academe against narrow attribution of credit for leadership and the space the formal silence about the leader's role allows for the construction of a leader legacy from the informal stories told about this by others who worked with them.

Keywords: organizational myths, leaderism, leadership legacy, AACSB accreditation.

1. Introduction

Studies of organizational myths (see for example, Cassirer 1946, Christensen and Lagried 2007, Goldfinch and Malpass 2009, Goldfinch and Wallis 2010, Hirschman 1991, Hood 1998; Pollitt 2001, Yanow 1992) see them as non-fictional narratives created by particular groups that, while making sense to them, also perform a 'silencing function' (Yanow, 1992) by diverting attention away from politically troubling aspects of their reality. Both myth-making characteristics are evident in the stories Deans tell about the 'journeys' their business schools have taken to initial accreditation with The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

Following its inception in 1916 as an elite club of the 17 most prestigious business schools in the United States of America (USA), AACSB has undergone significant globalization, particularly since 2000 so that, as can be seen in Table

One, by 2023 it comprised 727 members in USA (of whom 978 were accredited) and 1207 members outside the USA (of whom 436 were accredited).

Table 1: Trends in AACSB membership 1916-2015 (Bisoux 2016, AACSB https://www.aacsb.edu/members?accreditations=business%7Cbusiness-accounting retrieved 27/3/2023)

	Number of US Schools	Number of Schools Outside US	Number of Accredited Schools	Number of Accredited Schools Outside US
1916	17	0	17	0
1929	40	0	40	0
1944	55	0	55	0
1951	70	0	70	0
1966	120	0	120	0
1967*	293	2	126	0
1970	411	23	147	2
1980	563	50	217	2
1990**	661	79	272	2
2000	656	169	390	19
2010	670	510 (73 countries)	593	120
2023	727	1207 (111 countries)	978	436

This globalization process has been the subject of an emerging literature (Casile and Davis-Blake 2002, Durand and McGuire 2005, Scherer *et al.* 2005, Romero 2008, Zammuto 2008, Popescu 2017, Alajoutsijärvi *et al.* 2018, Larcon 2018, Hatimi, I. 2018). A common theme is how the periodic revision of accreditation standards allowed the domestic and international expansion of AACSB accredited membership, and a common concern is how this process could lead to a dilution of the quality of the business education associated with the AACSB brand (See Durand and McGuire in particular).

In this paper we will explore how, to address this concern, AACSB has sought to shape the organizational transformation myths that surround the 'journeys' aspirant members can be expected to take toward successful initial accreditation. Such stories are shaped through two types of document:

- The first are the relatively long "self-evaluation reports" (SERs), Schools submit to AACSB's initial accreditation committee (IAC) that detail the School's progress in addressing the prevailing standards according to which a judgment will be made about the School's readiness for accreditation.

- The second are the far shorter (usually one page) submissions that the leaders (typically Deans) of recently accredited Business Schools have been invited to provide in AACSB's Exchange Blog "about their journey to accreditation and what the new achievement means to them".

Self-Evaluation Reports

With regard to the first type of self-evaluation document, a series of reports are typically submitted. Following the acceptance of its eligibility application, the IAC will assign the school a mentor (usually an experienced Dean of an accredited school). This mentor will present the school with a gap report identifying its status in relation to AACSB's accreditation standards. The School will then be given up to three years to prepare an initial self-evaluation report (ISER). The IAC can either reject or accept the ISER and communicates its decision through an official letter. Such letters typically specify concerns relating to specific standards which the school is expected to address through a progress report submitted to the IAC a year later. The accreditation process is thus marked by a series of progress reports through which the School, with the support of its assigned mentor, is able to develop a narrative sense of its own progress in aligning itself with AACSB standards. This is not an endless iterative process since AACSB will only entertain up to four progress reports before declaring the School to be ineligible for initial accreditation.

A key milestone in a successful journey will therefore be the receipt of a letter from the IAC accepting its most recent progress report and declaring the school ready for the final stage of the accreditation process. With this letter, the mentor steps aside and, in consultation with AACSB, a peer review team is appointed. A final self-evaluation report (FSER) is submitted to this team who will base their decision on whether to recommend the school for initial accreditation based on their assessment of this report and the observations and additional information they are able to gather in their initial accreditation visit. The IAC will assess the PRT's recommendation and, if they agree with it, will welcome the School into the AACSB club through an official letter of initial accreditation.

Through this self-evaluation and peer review process, AACSB can be seen as shaping the myth of a typical accreditation journey which has a number of uses. Firstly it assures existing members that no new member will be accredited before they have gone through a prolonged 4-7 year process of institutional and cultural transformation to bring their school into alignment all the quality standards agreed upon by AACSB's membership. This assurance will be strengthened to the degree that members hold to the Kotterian-type notion that the process of transforming an organization's culture can only be successful if it is required to "go through a series of phases that, in total, usually require a considerable length of time" (Kotter 1995).

Secondly, it remains usefully silent on the factors which according to Kotter (1995) explain why "organizational transformations fail", assuring aspirant members that they will be able to progress steadily toward the final destination of initial accreditation with the support of an assigned mentor and the peer review the IAC provides by way of official feedback on successive self-evaluation and progress reports.

Journey Narratives

This reassurance can be reinforced by the hopeful myths newly accredited members construct about their own journeys to accreditation. A second type of document through which AACSB explicitly seeks to shape this myth construction process can be found in the far shorter (usually one page) submissions that the leaders (typically Deans) of recently accredited Business Schools have been invited to provide in AACSB's Exchange Blog "about their journey to accreditation and what the new achievement means to them".

In this paper we explore the myth-endorsing function of this second type of document. We have selected a batch of such submissions made prior to the publication of AACSB's most recent 2020 Business standards (AACSB 2023) for business accreditation to provide raw data for qualitative analysis. AACSB effectively encourages a repetitive pattern of themes to be generated by these blogs by asking the "storytellers" to structure their stories in response to a standard set of questions. The broad outlines of the transformation myth, thus became apparent in the process of being constructed from this narrative database.

We expected these organization transformation stories to follow the "leaderist" pattern of a typical Kotterian organization transformation process in which a leader or leadership team plays a key role in advancing sequentially through eight successive stages in which the focus shifts from: (i) creating a sense of urgency; to (ii) building a guiding change coalition; to (iii) formulating a compelling vision of the desired future culture of the organization; to (iv) persistently and frequently taking advantage of every opportunity to communicate and signal a sustained focus on this vision; to (v) removing structural barriers to its implementation; to (vi) pursuing early 'easy wins' to build credibility and support; to (vii) capitalizing on these early wins by strengthening and broadening the momentum of the change process; and to (viii) anchoring the changes through a process of expanding follower commitment, institutionalization and leadership succession. To our surprise the Deans telling their stories downplayed their own role in mobilizing a change management team to overcome opposition and resistance to accreditation within their institutions. Understanding why the leaderist aspect of transformation myths has largely been silenced in this context thus presented us with an interesting research question.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section (section one) will explain why we initially expected the stories to follow the "leaderist" pattern of a "hero quest myth". Section two then describes the methodology we followed in conducting a content analysis of the accreditation journey stories. Section three will present and discuss our surprising finding, which is that Deans typically downplayed the role played by themselves and leadership teams in advancing accreditation processes to their successful conclusion. Section four, draws from the myth perspective in organization studies to provide a number of explanations for this surprising finding. Finally, section five concludes the paper by discussing its implications for future research.