

International Fire Service Accreditation Congress

Certificate Assembly

Entity Self-Study

**For Organizations Seeking
Certificate Accreditation or Re-accreditation**

**Prepared
by the
IFSAC Certificate Assembly
Committee on Site Teams**

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INTRODUCTION

A completed self-study is required prior to a site visit being scheduled. The purpose of the self-study for an entity seeking accreditation/reaccreditation is to provide for the opportunity to reveal and correct as many deficiencies in advance of the site visit. The governing body of the entity seeking accreditation/reaccreditation should rely heavily on an honest self-evaluation to provide a clear course for preparing for the site visit and to measure the overall quality of the program itself. The self-study may prevent the necessity of multiple visits by the site team prior to accreditation/reaccreditation by ensuring that all necessary paperwork and policies are in place.

THE SELF-STUDY TEAM

A team should be assembled to reflect representation from the various levels of involvement in certification within the organization itself. This should involve management, administration, program development, and instructional/evaluation personnel. Additional consideration for representation of any support personnel, such as area or regional coordinators, data entry operators, site facilitators, etc., should be given. Third party reviewers from outside the program are recommended as well. These third party reviewers should have educational backgrounds and be familiar with testing practices. Deans of continuing education are excellent in this position, since they are familiar both with off-campus delivery and testing, as well as educational and testing practices. The program director, as submitted on the IFSAC application, should not serve on the self-study team.

Since the team must make an honest and fair evaluation, it is recommended that an equal proportion of the team members come from areas both involved and uninvolved with the development of testing practices. This is critical since those not involved in development would be less likely to have prejudged the completeness of the program. In addition, many areas of concern are found within the learning process of an individual. You may find in explaining to someone that an area lacks sufficient detail for an individual not familiar with it to grasp with a cursory review, similar to what a site team would receive.

Self-study team members should be given access to IFSAC policies and procedures contained in the *IFSAC Certificate Assembly Handbook*, especially the *Accreditation Procedures* and the *Criteria for Certificate Accreditation*. The team should also be provided with the *Site Visit Worksheets for the Criteria for Certificate Accreditation* (Located in the Accreditation Site Visit & Self-Study Information section of the *IFSAC Handbook*).

The self-study team should have a thorough understanding of the fire service, NFPA standards, and what constitutes successful completion of objectives within the standards. Most importantly, self-study team members should be given the freedom to review the details within the program, and the impression that their comments, either positive or unfavorable, will be well received by individuals involved in the development or administration of the program. Such acceptance of a constructive critique will assist in the evolution of a prepared program.

APPOINTMENT OF A SELF-STUDY TEAM LEADER

To provide for a coordinated effort between the program director and the self-study team, one individual should be selected to serve as team leader. This appointment should be made by the program director at the same time the team is appointed. This appointment should be confirmed in writing. At this point, the team leader should take over direction of the self-study.

PREPARATION FOR THE STUDY

The self-study should be scheduled far in advance of any site visit. This will allow ample time to correct any deficiencies found by the study prior to the visit. An entity should not hesitate to postpone a site visit, should a self-study reveal any issues that require modification, since the site team is expecting to look at *completed* policies, procedures, correlation sheets, and test banks. It is the responsibility of the entity requesting accreditation to initiate and implement the self-study. IFSAC Administration is available to assist the entity in conducting the self study. Contacts in other entities who may have gone through a self-study recently can also be provided.

Each self-study team member should carefully review the *IFSAC Accreditation Procedures* and the *Criteria for Certificate Accreditation* prior to participating. In addition, the *IFSAC Certificate Assembly Site Visit Team Information* section of the *IFSAC Handbook* should be made available to them to ensure they understand what will be reviewed by the site visit team. Finally, a copy of the entity's application for accreditation should be provided. To ensure security for the official examination process, it may be appropriate to give sample tests to the self-study team members instead of actual examinations. The study team should review each of the NFPA standards to which the organization is seeking accreditation, and have a clear understanding as to the level of accreditation, and the version of the standard being used.

REVIEW OF THE TESTING MECHANISM

During the self-study process, it is imperative that team members separate curriculum from testing. While a high quality curriculum is necessary to prepare candidates for certification, as well as build capabilities for job performance, accreditation involves the testing mechanism itself. During the oral review, the team should ensure that the credentials presented for evaluation involve testing criteria, and not give credit for objectives accomplished during training, class work, or other means outside the testing mode. This is not to say that testing cannot be accomplished during the same time period as long as there is a distinct line between the training mode and the testing mode of that time period. The IFSAC criteria for testing is included in the *Criteria for Certificate Accreditation* and should be used in the self-study process.

PETITION FOR WRITTEN COMMENTS

After review of the submitted material, the self-study team members should be petitioned for written comments by the team leader. These comments could range from actual suggestions for improvement, to requests for further detail of submitted information. This should take place well in advance of getting together for the oral review. This step will allow both the team members and the program administrator to correct any shortcomings or clarify any details prior to a formal meeting or review. Comments should be submitted in writing, with copies going to each team member.

ORAL REVIEW BY THE SELF-STUDY TEAM

The team leader and director should establish a date and agenda for the formal oral review. The director should identify key personnel and confirm their availability for interviews during the oral review. The personnel interviewed should be representative of the total scope of the organization.

The oral review should be established formally and set apart from a normal work environment. This will allow total concentration by the program administrators and the team members themselves. An agenda should be established prior to the review. This agenda should be worked out between the self-study team leader and the program director. Copies of the agenda should be sent to each team member in advance, along with a request for additional agenda items.

SELF-STUDY REVIEW CONFERENCE

At the conclusion of the oral review conference, the self-study team leader should assemble all team members for a meeting. At this time, the team should formulate a list of recommendations based upon a consensus of comments each had from the written and oral review. This team meeting should occur immediately after the oral review while issues are still fresh in the minds of the team members. A final report should be formulated for presentation to the program director. The report does not have to be formal, but formality is strongly recommended, and should be given in written format for documentation.

Once the team has formulated comments and constructed the final report of findings, a review conference should be scheduled with the program director and other appropriate personnel. At this conference, the team leader should lead a discussion on the report, with team members, giving specific input both on areas needing improvement and those that are "site visit" ready. The conference attendees should avoid debating the issues of right or wrong, and should concentrate on clarifying which areas need additional work or clarification. More than likely, if an issue is unclear to a self-study team member, it will be unclear to a site visit team. The self-study team leader should open this conference describing the intent of the self-study, which was to assist in the preparation for a site visit, not to criticize.

Upon completion of the review conference, the program director should request assistance of the self-study team to put together a list of items needing clarification or improvement, specifying recommendations for correcting each deficiency. Discussions at this phase could evaluate the readiness for a site visit, and the scheduling of same dependent upon resolving each of the issues brought out by the review conference. Involvement of the total management team in this effort is suggested, even to the extent of having a supplementary meeting following the review conference to establish a course of action to correct any issues previously defined.

SUBMISSION OF REVIEW

The Worksheets for the Criteria for Accreditation list specific information required for submittal prior to accreditation. These items are *essential* in the process and must be received prior to a site visit. It should be noted that in submitting an application, and providing support information during a site visit, the entity seeking accreditation should not merely attach documents, but should present information sufficient to demonstrate compliance with each provision of the criteria. In order for the Board of Governors to grant accreditation, recommendations and facts presented by the site team leader must clearly define the entity's program. The more information presented to the site team, the more capable they are in recommending accreditation to the Board of Governors.

It may be beneficial to the entity to present a narrative of its findings, conclusions, and corrective steps taken as a result of the self-study. This may assist the team as well as the Board of Governors to recognize the sincerity of the entity, the openness and willingness to receive input, and the commitment to program quality. It may also serve to provide additional clarity on issues to the Site Team, Board of Governors, and the Assembly. This self-study report could serve as third party testimony to the readiness of the entity. At the very least, it would demonstrate that the entity had nothing to hide.