How to Write a Rejoinder That Will Make a Difference

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I do not recall ever attending a training session or reading an article about how to write effective rejoinder. I have not kept track of the number of rejoinders I have read over the six years I have served on the Unit Accreditation Board (UAB), but now that I have finished my second and final term on the UAB, it seems appropriate to correct this gaping hole in the accreditation literature.

The rejoinder can be important to the accreditation of your institution. Some rejoinders have changed a decision on a standard from “not met,” “to met,” and at times allowed an institution to be accredited rather than denied, placed on probation, or accredited with conditions or provisions. At other times the rejoinder was of no value in the decision. There have been occasions when the UAB audit team struggled over the lack of a rejoinder. In these cases, the BOE report failed to make a strong case for a stated area for improvement or standard not met, but there was no rejoinder to support changing the BOE team’s decision. So what is the difference between an effective rejoinder and one that is of no value?

Purpose

The purpose of the rejoinder is to provide additional or clarifying information to help the UAB make decisions about the institution’s accreditation status. It is to refute the information and/or conclusions found in the Board of Examiners report. It is important to remember that the accreditation decision must be based on the program as it existed at the time of the BOE visit. Changes made after the visit cannot be part of the decision and should not to be included in the rejoinder.

Know Your Audience

Whether making a speech, planning a lesson or writing a rejoinder, you must know your audience if you are to be effective. Your audience is the three or four members of a UAB audit team. They will be considering your institution along with six to nine other cases. The audit team reads the BOE report and the rejoinder before coming to the board meeting. Members include individuals from higher education, K-12 teachers and perhaps a policy maker or member of the public. Your case will be considered with care, but their time is limited. Their duty is to review, not to repeat the BOE visit. The BOE chair for your visit will not be at the UAB meeting, but the chair has the opportunity to give written response to your rejoinder. All audit team members are trained in the application of NCATE standards and many are former BOE members, but remember that not all are educators. After the audit team has determined what impact the rejoinder should have on the accreditation decision and the composition of the areas for improvement, they present the case to another audit team (joint audit team meeting). They must convince the other
audit team that their interpretation of the BOE report and the rejoinder is appropriate, or they must make adjustments that both teams can support. The information in your rejoinder is critical to this joint audit team decision. The audit team then must take your case to the entire UAB for a final vote. If the board does not agree with the recommendation of the audit team, your case is remanded to another audit team and the process starts over.

**Less is More**

I have seen rejoinders where it appears that the institution simply boxed up the exhibit room and sent it to NCATE. In other cases, institutions seem to have reprinted the self study document as the rejoinder. Neither of these approaches is helpful. To be honest, they just irritate the audit team. What you do not want is an irritable audit team. Write concisely, and write to areas for improvement or other negative statements in the BOE report. Provide only the documentation that relates directly to the point you are trying to make. If the BOE cites an area of improvement that can be refuted by a passage in the department’s minutes, do not send minutes from the past three years and hope the audit team will have the tenacity to dig out what is needed. The rejoinder should explain why the BOE’s statement is not correct and reference the one or more sets of minutes that address the issue. The minutes should be in the appendix with the statements that provide the documentation highlighted. The audit team has hundreds of pages of material to review, so make it easy for them. Be sure to include only things that were available to the BOE team at the time of the visit.

**If the Statement is Negative, Address it**

The last section states, “Less is more.” That is true, but do not overlook negative statements in the BOE report, even if they did not generate an area for improvement. The UAB is responsible to apply the standards as evenly as possible. While they do not compare one institution to another, if they see similar negative statements on BOE reports that generate areas for improvement for some institutions and not in others, they may determine that an area for improvement should be added to your report unless you provide reason to believe your situation is different. Let no negative statement go unchallenged if it is not true. However, if the statement is correct without mitigating circumstances, it is appropriate to indicate that you accept it as stated. Maintaining your credibility with the audit team is important.

**Assertions are Not Helpful**

The audit team is looking for documentation. You may say something is not true, but if you do not follow up with a reference to the appendix that provides documentation or substantiating data, the audit team is left with a “he said, she said” situation where the decision of the BOE should stand. Again, make the evidence strong and easily found. All responses should be referenced with the page and paragraph number of the BOE report, the standard and the area for improvement to which it refers.
Whining and Sarcasm are Not Helpful
It is very likely that some of the statements in the BOE report do not please you. You may feel that you have been wronged by the system or by individuals on the team. Your rejoinder is your opportunity to set the record straight. However, when it becomes personal or emotional, credibility is lost. Attacking the integrity or the lineage of team members is not appropriate. State your case in a factual manner, omitting the emotional and personal references. It is a good idea to have someone not involved at the institution read the rejoinder looking for bits of whining and sarcasm. Eliminating these “bits” will make the document more professional and thus more convincing.

What is the NRACB?
This is an obvious problem, but is often overlooked by those who write rejoinders. Educators love acronyms. Sometimes on campus, we use the initials so frequently we have to stop and think of that for which they stand. The members of the UAB audit committee will not have any idea what the NRACB is or what it does. They cannot ask anyone what it means. Acronyms of even nationally known exams or organizations can even be a problem. Remember, the UAB, like all NCATE boards, is made up of representatives from all of the NCATE quadrants (P-12 educators, policy makers, professional organizations, higher education) and members of the general public. Always state the full name of the organization, committee, or exam the first time it appears in the document.

Summary
The desire and purpose of the UAB is to make consistent accreditation decisions that accurately interpret the NCATE standards. A well written rejoinder is something that can help the board accomplish its purpose.