AMS/AGU Heads & Chairs Meeting
Accountability and Accreditation
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Related Experience

• Dean, College of Earth and Mineral Sciences at Penn State
  – Oversaw 7 ABET accredited engineering programs including their accreditation
• Dean, Jackson School of Geosciences at University of Texas at Austin
  – Completed SACS accreditation for the College and University
What are we trying to achieve?

• **Primary:**
  – Define standards for a discipline
  – Then, signal to the customer (student) that your program provides the appropriate training

• **Additional:**
  – Internal credibility
  – Internal visibility of needs
  – Quality stamp of approval that enables recruiting of faculty and resources
The Greatest Benefits of the Process

- Open Discussion of Standards - define the critical foundations related to a degree
- Self study – enforces an internal discipline of comparison of a program against a set of standards or criteria (always healthy)
- External review – process enforces a periodic, independent examination of the program
The Greatest Problems with the Process

• Setting standards that are too restrictive –
  – ABET frequently used to push back on curricular innovation (either from deans and provosts or even within departments)
  – If the credit hours and courses are overly prescriptive, then opportunities for innovation or student exploration can be highly limited
  – Should every program be the same?
The Greatest Problems with the Process

• “Process” dominates assessment of quality: Consider two example standards
  – Appropriate terminal degrees of faculty
    • SACS – do you have the *paperwork* that demonstrates that you assessed whether an individual with a non-ATM degree (e.g. with a mechanical engineering PhD) can teach in the atmospheric sciences? Assessing quality is more difficult.
  – Mechanisms in place to review / improve curriculum delivery
    • SACS and ABET – did you ask? Who did you ask? Do you have the *paperwork* that demonstrates that you asked and that you took action on what you learned? Assessing actual delivery is difficult.
The Greatest Problems with the Process

- The time and effort –
  - With time, formal review bodies tend to add more and more requirements – increasingly cumbersome
  - Enormous burden on a faculty and chairs
  - Frequently individuals are tapped, their teaching and other responsibilities limited, so they can devote a major part of a semester to write report and prepare for the review
  - For ABET cases, faculty role becomes a prominent part of a P&T package
  - The burden on faculty is growing in many other ways
The Greatest Problems with the Process

• Growing resistance from upper management –
  – External reviewers (process) demand audience with the Dean, President and Provost
  – In addition to providing a review:
    • they “always” ask for more resources for the program and wave the red flag of loss of accreditation (represent discipline). So, is the review really self-serving?
    • May be partners in pushing back on University level requirements or innovations. So, who is in charge?
Key Conclusions – If you do it!

• Focus on the Good
  – Discussion and recognition of basic standards
  – Self analysis
  – External Review

But… can you avoid having accreditation become a way of life?
Key Conclusions – if you do it!

• Avoid a growing set of standards that start to become restrictive for students and programs
  – we should not be after identical programs that lack room for innovation

• Recognize that assessing quality is difficult and has to focus on different metrics (hopefully they are strategic)
  – most accreditation groups are focused on process and that simply doesn’t assure a good program
Key Conclusions – If you do it!

- **Assess the cost-benefit of the process**
  - Are you assigning faculty full time to prepare just so that you can gain a stamp of approval?  (an insufficient benefit)
  - Be deliberate in identifying the benefits to your (our) program(s) that result from the process
  - My perspective is that faculty and heads/chairs time is increasingly scarce and accreditation efforts are taking more and more time without increasing tangible benefit

- **Understand the potential for backlash**
  - Imagine if every program does it; if all appear to be restrictive for leadership and all ask for resources
Thanks for your attention