

# AMS/AGU Heads & Chairs Meeting

## Accountability and Accreditation

October 16, 2008

Eric J. Barron  
Director, NCAR



**NCAR**

# 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



**NCAR**