

GUIDE FOR OBSERVERS ON ACCREDITATION VISITS

Last revision
as of
March 31, 2014

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Introduction

ABET, Inc. sends teams of evaluators to campuses around the world for the purpose of determining whether programs satisfy the accreditation criteria of one or more of ABET's Commissions. Observers are often included on these teams for the purpose of learning how the ABET accreditation process works. These observers generally fall into one of the following categories:

- A. Observers representing one of ABET's Member Societies The purpose of observers in this instance is to provide training to individuals who have been selected by their Society to serve as Program Evaluators.
- B. Observers representing one of the State Boards for Professional Registration within the United States The purpose of observers in this instance is to provide the State Boards with first-hand information about how ABET's accreditation process functions.
- C. Observers representing one of ABET's sister accreditation agencies either within or outside of the United States The purpose of observers in this instance is to share information about ABET's accreditation process.
- D. Observers representing a home-country's accreditation agency or national education authority outside of the United States The purpose of observers in this instance is to facilitate mutual learning in quality assurance for higher education between organizations.

This document is intended to provide information about how arrangements for observers are made and how observers should participate in the visit.

Historical Background

There are several steps in ABET Program Evaluator training. Initially, Program Evaluator candidates who are selected by the ABET Member Societies attend ABET Program Evaluator training. Candidates who successfully complete the training requirements may then be required to accompany an experienced program evaluator from their Society as an observer on a program visit. This requirement is imposed by the Societies and not by ABET.

ABET, formerly the Engineers' Council for Professional Development, was founded in 1932. Then, as now, the State Boards of Professional Registration sought means by which the educational credentials of applicants to the licensure process could be validated. Those programs in engineering which are accredited by the Engineering Accreditation Commission of ABET have met the basic requirements of preparing individuals to enter the engineering profession. The State Boards of Professional Registration rely on the accreditation process as a means of assuring the quality of engineering graduates. In order for the State Boards to be familiar with and to ascertain the quality of the accreditation process, ABET invites representatives of the State Boards to participate in accreditation visits as observers.

Moreover, ABET is often asked by its sister accreditation agencies to permit observers for the purpose of sharing information about its accreditation process. In many instances, these observers represent accreditation agencies outside the US that are in the process of formation.

Lastly, ABET extends an observer invitation to those accreditation agencies outside US which approved programs to seek ABET accreditation. Programs outside the US new to ABET must submit an appropriate approval (Request for Approval; RFA) from the home-country's highest national accreditation agency or educational authority. The requirement of such approval submission stems from the fact that ABET must ascertain that programs are housed in a financially and educationally stable institution. In addition, ABET respects the program's in-country quality assurance system and does not wish to interfere with existing accreditation activities. Having observers from accreditation agencies or education authorities outside the US offers a great opportunity for ABET teams and the local organizations to share in exchange and mutual learning in the sphere of quality assurance for higher education.

How are Arrangements made for an Observer to be included in a Visit Team?

- **How is an observer assignment initiated?**

Observers from Category A -- Society Trainees: The Society should include observer nominees along with their Program Evaluator assignments provided to ABET. The Team Chair will then contact the observer to complete the arrangements.

Observers from Category B -- State Board Observers: ABET will advise the State Boards of upcoming visits after visit dates have been confirmed and posted. Contact information for the Team Chair will be provided by ABET to the State Board. The State Board and the Team Chair should communicate directly concerning the inclusion of an observer on the visit.

Observers from Category C -- Observers from sister accreditation agencies: A request from a U.S. accreditation agency should be made to ABET by e-mail (accreditation@abet.org) to secure initial approval. In the case of accreditation agencies outside the US, a request should be made to ABET by e-mail (international@abet.org) to secure initial approval. This request should include a current, brief biographical resume of the observer and the reason for the request.

- Observers from Category D -- Observers from accreditation agencies or education authorities outside the US: The participant's name, biographical resume, and complete contact information must be provided to ABET HQ by e-mail (accreditation@abet.org or the designated contact) no later than August 31st following the submission of a Request for Approval (RFA).

- **How is final approval of the observer's participation obtained?**

In all cases, ABET Headquarters, the Team Chair, and the institution being visited must approve each observer included on the visit team. Any observer who fails to comply with the observer approval procedure, the policies pertaining to conflict of interest and confidentiality, or the guidelines provided below will not be included in the visit team.

- **Who pays the observer's expenses?**

ABET is **not** responsible for reimbursement of observer expenses. An observer should contact his/her sponsoring organization to determine policies for reimbursement of travel expenses.

Conflict of Interest

In no case will an observer be accepted if the individual has a real or perceived conflict of interest with respect to the institution being visited. Conflicts of interest include graduates, faculty members, or members of boards or committees of that or neighboring institutions. Conflict of interest questions should be broadly construed as applicable to any individual who, in some way or another, is related to the institution or may have any interest in the institution other than the accreditation visit.

In the case of State Board observers, it is understood that the issue of conflict of interest must be interpreted in a less restrictive way. Graduates of the institution may be acceptable as long as they are not active in alumni groups or other functions related to the institution in positions of leadership which might affect their objectivity or inhibit interaction with the institution. A common-sense rule should be applied.

Questions related to potential conflicts of interest should be directed to the Accreditation Director (accreditation@abet.org).

Confidentiality during the accreditation process

All aspects of the visit must be regarded as **STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL**. Observers may provide information related to the accreditation process to their own organization. However, they must not relate information about any specific accreditation issues or recommended actions to anyone other than members of the visiting team. Observers must sign the ABET Observer Confidentiality and COI Form prior to the visit.

Observers will be furnished the same information as provided by the institution to the visiting team. These materials must be considered to be confidential. Upon completion of the visit, these materials should be returned to the Team Chair or destroyed.

Guidelines for Observers

The accreditation visit is carried out by ABET at the invitation of the institution. All communications with the institution must be made through ABET's agent, the Team Chair.

During the observer approval process prior to acceptance, the observer and the represented agency should NOT contact the visit institution in order to ensure the observer approval process is clear and fair; all coordination must be made through ABET HQ and/or the ABET Team Chair.

Observers from Category D must provide ABET HQ with the requisite information including a current biographical resume, name and complete contact information by August 31st well before the scheduled accreditation visits. Any observer who fails to adhere to the approval process protocol will not be included in the visit team.

Observers must refrain from giving any interpretations of the accreditation criteria or any assumption pertaining to accreditation decisions. The ABET team members are assigned to evaluate specific curricula and support areas. They have received their appointment at the recommendation of the ABET Member Society whose discipline they represent and have been appropriately trained.

Observers do not have authority to act as official program evaluators. However, the Team Chair may, with the consent of the observer and the institution, assign an observer any duties which will enhance the quality of the visit without conflicting with the duties of the designated Program Evaluators.

Observers are invited to participate in all meetings and discussions, to ask questions, and to make comments when appropriate. However, care must be exercised that any comments to the institution must be in conformity with the applicable accreditation criteria.

Observers should become familiar with the applicable accreditation criteria. These criteria and related documents are available on the ABET website (www.abet.org).

Observers are encouraged to arrange to stay for the entire period of the visit. Considering the multilateral effort which goes into the scheduling, preparation and management of the visit, observers, once committed, are encouraged to participate in the entire visit.

Observers must not carry out any personal business, or any business on behalf of their organizations, while participating as observers on ABET visits.

Observers are encouraged to submit a report on their observations to the Team Chair following the visit. ABET Headquarters should also be provided with a copy of any report made to the Team Chair or to the observer's own organization.

Observers should not expect to participate in the portion of the accreditation process that occurs after the visit. ABET's invitation to participate in a visit does not extend to the portion of the accreditation process that occurs after the visit.

Guidelines for Team Chairs

The Team Chair will thoroughly check for any real or perceived conflict of interest upon receiving the candidate's information prior to confirming an approval from the visit institution, before rendering a decision on inclusion of the individual in the team. Observer approval or rejection by the team chair must be substantiated through strict adherence to the conflict-of-interest criteria.

In arranging the visit, the dean of the institution or the designated contact person should be advised of any observers, participants' role on the team, and the institution's right for declination. Approval should be obtained for all observers accompanying the team.

The Team Chair, not the institution, should handle all negotiations between the ABET Member Societies, State Boards, or other organizations and the institution.

All team members should be briefed on the duties and limitations of observers accompanying the visiting team. There should be no misunderstanding as to the assigned roles of the various team members. Observers should be reminded that they are not authorized to interpret accreditation criteria or to express opinions to the institution that might be construed as reflecting ABET policy or accreditation decisions.

The Team Chair should handle any complaint regarding the participating observer reported by the visit institution during the on-site visit or report to HQ for advice. All Team Chairs are encouraged to share their feedback with HQ if there is anything worth attention or improvement.

Observers should not carry out any official duties on behalf of their organization or conduct any personal business during the visit.

The observer from a ABET Member Society should work primarily under the direction of the Member Society's Program Evaluator.

The Team Chair may, with the consent of the observer and the institution, assign to an observer any duties which will enhance the quality of the visit without conflicting with the duties of the designated Program Evaluators. However, observers do not have authority to act as Program Evaluators.

Observers should be encouraged to report their observations to the Team Chair, either orally or in written form. They should be requested to provide ABET Headquarters with information copies of any reports submitted to the Team Chair or their organization.

Guidelines for Visit Institutions

The ABET Team Chair will advise the dean of the visit institution or the designated contact person as to any potential observers before being approved by the institution and officially included in the evaluation team. These candidates must be approved by ABET (HQ and the Team Chair) prior to inquiry of the visit institution's decision.

Institutions should not accept any observers who have not been approved by ABET HQ and the Team Chair. In the event that any observer candidate or accreditation agency contacts the visit institution without going through ABET, the institution should refer this individual/agency to contact ABET and refrain from accepting any observer until receiving a written notification from ABET HQ or its agent, the Team Chair.

Institutions should feel free to share their feedback or report any inappropriate behaviors and comments regarding the participating observers to ABET HQ or the Team Chair.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF INFORMATION

(Section Fourteen, ABET Rules of Procedure)

CONFIDENTIALITY

A. **Ethical Conduct:**

ABET requires ethical conduct by each volunteer and staff member engaged in fulfilling the mission of ABET. The organization requires that every volunteer and staff member exhibit the highest standards of professionalism, honesty, and integrity. The services provided by ABET require impartiality, fairness, and equity. All persons involved with ABET activities must perform their duties under the highest standards of ethical behavior. It is the policy of ABET that information provided by the institution is for the confidential use of ABET and its agents, and will not be disclosed without specific written authorization of the institution concerned.

B. **Privileged Information:**

The contents of all materials furnished for review purposes and discussion during the Commission meetings are considered privileged information. The contents of those documents and the accreditation actions taken may be disclosed only by staff, and only under appropriate circumstances. All communications between institutions and evaluators or Commissioners regarding final accreditation actions must be referred to ABET headquarters.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT

I have received and read the ABET Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Policies. I understand that the intent of these policies is to disclose real or perceived conflicts of interest, to recuse myself from decisions and discussions related to real or perceived conflicts of interest, to act impartially and avoid the appearance of impropriety, and to protect the confidential nature of the accreditation process. I will not participate in any decision-making capacity regarding the accreditation of a program if I have or have had a close, active association with an institution or program that is being considered for official action by ABET. I will not participate in any decision for which I, or the organization that I represent, may benefit materially.

In addition, I understand that materials furnished for the visit are considered privileged information and, consequently, are confidential. **I understand that no copies may be made of any materials or documents provided as part of the accreditation decision-making process.**

All elements of ABET's accreditation process are to be treated in a professional and confidential manner. Both ethical and legal considerations demand that the information acquired through the accreditation process not be used for purposes other than the accreditation process unless prior permission is obtained from the institution or program.

Signature

Print Name

Date

Position