



# **GUIDE FOR OBSERVERS ON ACCREDITATION VISITS**

## **ABET**

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## Introduction

ABET sends teams of evaluators to campuses around the world by institutional invitation for the purpose of determining whether programs satisfy the accreditation criteria of one or more of ABET's Commissions. Third party observers are often invited to observe how ABET teams conduct accreditation reviews. These observers usually come from the organizations that can be categorized into the following:

- A. ABET's Member Societies – The purpose of having observers in this instance is to provide training to individuals who have been selected by their Society to serve as Program Evaluators.
- B. US State Boards for Professional Registration – The purpose of having observers in this instance is to provide the State Boards with first-hand information about how ABET's accreditation process functions.
- C. Other accreditation agencies/organizations either within or outside of the United States that have established some form of relationship with ABET – The purpose of having observers in this instance is to share information about ABET's accreditation process.
- D. National education authorities or recognition/accreditation agencies outside of the United States that provide institutional legitimacy to confer degrees or quality assurance to offer degree programs – The purpose of having observers in this instance is to facilitate mutual learning of quality assurance in higher education between organizations.

This document is intended to provide observers/observer candidates and their representing organizations with information on ABET's observer approval process as well as expectations for observer participation during an ABET accreditation visit.

## Historical Background

There are several steps in ABET Program Evaluator training. Initially, Program Evaluator candidates who are selected by the ABET Member Societies (Category **A**) 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 an accreditation visit. This requirement is imposed by the Societies, not by ABET.

ABET, formerly the Engineers' Council for Professional Development, was founded in 1932. Then, as now, the US State Boards of Professional Registration (Category **B**) 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 observe accreditation visits.

Moreover, ABET is often asked by other accreditation agencies/organizations (Category **C**) to allow observers for the purpose of sharing information on ABET's accreditation process. In some instances, these observers represent accreditation agencies outside the US that are in the process of formation.

Lastly, ABET extends an observer invitation to agencies outside US (Category **D**) that support or do not object to ABET accreditation activities in their jurisdictions. Programs outside the US must submit an appropriate acknowledgement (Request for Acknowledgement; RFA) from *each* applicable national education authority/higher education quality assurance organization/recognition agency/accreditation agency to ABET along with a complete ABET Request for Evaluation (RFE) when initiating the formal review process. The requirement of such acknowledgement submission stems from the basis that ABET respects the autonomy of each nation's higher education quality assurance organization. Also, ABET must ascertain that programs are housed in a financially and educationally stable and legitimate institution. Having observers from accreditation agencies or education authorities outside the US offers a great opportunity for mutual learning in the sphere of quality assurance for higher education between ABET teams and the local organizations.

For more information on the aforementioned RFA form, please visit our website at <https://www.abet.org/accreditation/get-accredited/accreditation-outside-the-u-s/>

## How Arrangements Are Made for an Observer to be Included in an ABET Team

- **How an observer assignment is initiated**

Observers from Category **A**: Society Trainees – It is recommended that society trainees/new program evaluators be assigned to US visits only for the purposes of observation and training. If the Society is requesting to assign a trainee/new Program Evaluator to a visit outside the US, they must first get approval from ABET HQ by sending a request to [international-accreditation@abet.org](mailto:international-accreditation@abet.org).

Information for trainees assigned to visits **inside** the US should be sent to [accreditation@abet.org](mailto:accreditation@abet.org). The Team Chair will then contact the observer to complete the arrangements. Information for trainees assigned to visits **outside** the US should be sent to [international-accreditation@abet.org](mailto:international-accreditation@abet.org) for vetting and coordination. The Team Chair will be notified once ABET approves the trainee's potential participation.

Observers from Category **B**: US State Board Observers – ABET will advise the State Boards of upcoming US 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 other accreditation agencies/organizations – A request from a **US** accreditation agency should be made to ABET by e-mail ([accreditation@abet.org](mailto:accreditation@abet.org)) to secure initial approval. In the case of accreditation agencies **outside** the US, a request should be sent to [ir@abet.org](mailto:ir@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 that coordinated ABET reviews in their country/jurisdiction including those that have Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) or Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA) with ABET. The participant's name, biographical resume, and complete contact information must be provided to ABET HQ by e-mail ([international-accreditation@abet.org](mailto:international-accreditation@abet.org)) no later than **August 31st** following the submission of a RFA.

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

In the cases of observers from Category **A** and **B** who are assigned to visits inside the US, the Team Chair and the institution being visited must approve each observer before being included on the ABET team. For those who are assigned to visits **outside** the US, ABET Headquarters (HQ) in addition to the Team Chair and the institution must approve each observer.

In the cases of observers from Category **C** and **D**, ABET HQ in addition to the Team Chair and the institution being visited must approve each observer candidate before being included on the ABET team. Note that each request for an observer candidate from Category **C** and **D** must be brought to ABET HQ ([ir@abet.org](mailto:ir@abet.org) and [international-accreditation@abet.org](mailto:international-accreditation@abet.org) respectively) for initial consideration and coordination prior to being considered by the Team Chair and the institution.

Observers who decline or fail 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 any ABET teams.

While ABET will always do its best to accommodate observer activities as requested, please understand that ABET may not be able to guarantee acceptance of each observer request. ABET reserves the right not to include any observers on an ABET visit team if there are unusual circumstances or intricate/unexpected challenges presented for the ABET team and/or the review activities. In this situation, ABET may suggest an alternate visit opportunity for the observer.

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

ABET is not responsible for travel arrangements for any observers or reimbursement of observer expenses. Each observer should contact his/her sponsoring organization to determine policies for travel arrangements and 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 Department ([accreditation@abet.org](mailto: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 any specific accreditation issues or recommended actions to anyone other than members of the ABET team. Observers must sign the ABET Observer Confidentiality and COI Form prior to the visit. The signed copy should be sent to the Team Chair with a copy to ABET HQ ([accreditation@abet.org](mailto:accreditation@abet.org) or [ir@abet.org](mailto:ir@abet.org) or [international-accreditation@abet.org](mailto:international-accreditation@abet.org) as appropriate).

Observers will be provided with the same information as provided by the institution to the ABET team. These materials must be kept confidential. Upon completion of the ABET 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 representing agency should NOT contact the visit institution in order to ensure the observer approval process is clear and fair; all coordination for visits outside the US must be made through ABET HQ.

Observers from Category **D** must provide ABET HQ ([international-accreditation@abet.org](mailto:international-accreditation@abet.org)) with the requested information including a current biographical resume, name, and complete contact information **by August 31** prior to the scheduled on-site review. Observers who are unable to adhere to the approval process protocol will not be included in any ABET teams.

Observers are invited to observe all meetings and discussions of the ABET team during the on-site review. Observers must refrain from giving any interpretations of the accreditation criteria or any assumption pertaining to accreditation decisions to the institution. In addition, observers should not address any representatives of the institution without the specific permission of the Team Chair. Comments made to the institution should be pre-approved by the ABET team chair and be in conformity with the ABET team. The ABET team members are assigned to evaluate specific curricula and support areas. They have had discipline-specific background and appropriate training and they have received their appointment at the recommendation of their representing Society.

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

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

Observers are encouraged to arrange to stay for the entire period of the on-site visit. Considering the multilateral effort which goes into the scheduling, preparation and management of the visit, observers, once committed, are encouraged but are not required to observe the entire on-site visit.

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

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

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 observe any portion of the accreditation process that occurs after the visit. ABET's invitation to observe 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 confirm that no real or perceived conflicts of interest exist upon receiving the candidate's information prior to confirming an approval from the visit institution and before rendering a decision on inclusion of the individual on 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 pre-approve any observers' comments made to the institution to ensure conformity with the ABET team.

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 mentioning or for continuous improvement.

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

## 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 on the ABET 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.

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Signature

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Print Name

Date

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Position/Title and Organization