

WOOD AND FIBER SCIENCE

JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY OF WOOD SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

VOLUME 40

OCTOBER 2008

NUMBER 4

ACCREDITATION: ELEVATING PROGRAMS, THE PROFESSION, AND SWST

In 1978, SWST began formally investigating the pros and cons of establishing a formal accreditation process for wood science and technology programs. After adoption of accreditation standards by the membership, the first formal accreditation of programs began in 1984. The process was slow and did not meet with universal and immediate acceptance and adoption by our (SWST) members or by program administrators and faculty. Some believed that academic accreditation would help programs by creating a formal mechanism for both internal and peer review. Also it was believed that third-party accreditation would provide program administrators with a tool for defending existing and securing new faculty positions and resources.

Some, however, questioned the value of accreditation and suggested that it would neither help graduates secure employment nor help garner institutional support. Thirty years after the exploratory accreditation committee was formed, some level of disagreement over the value of accreditation persists within the Society, and the arguments on both sides have changed little.

It is difficult to overtly conclude that thriving programs owe a large portion of their success to SWST accreditation. Conversely, it is imprudent to conclude that waning programs would have or could have been saved by SWST accreditation. Most of the forest products/wood science and technology programs, however, are somewhere between these extremes. As SWST members who have served on the accreditation committee both as chairs and as committee members and as representatives of the academic community who

have served as faculty members and program administrators, we believe that the benefits of accreditation are very often underestimated and significantly outweigh its costs.

First and foremost, accreditation requires programs to prepare a detailed self-study that documents the program's compliance with the Accreditation Standards. Critics rightfully cite the amount of time and effort that must go into preparation of the self-study. This time could always be otherwise committed elsewhere. There is also a justified concern that university-level programs are already burdened with extensive institutional review processes that continually require programs to justify their own existence. However, the preparation of the self-study is an opportunity for programs to review their curricula, their assessment processes (more on this later), and their strengths and weaknesses. Academic accreditation by virtually any third-party agency requires that the process be structured, comprehensive, and accountable. In contrast to university-level accreditation which generally focuses on number of students, number of degrees conferred, number of faculty, number of research dollars generated, etc., discipline-level self-review opens the closets and lifts up the couch cushions with respect to what is actually taught in the classrooms. Self-review is healthy, and accreditation ensures that it gets done.

The institutional self-study is followed by a site visit most often, but not always, conducted in collaboration with SAF. At least two SWST members participate in the on-site review. The costs of the site visit are paid by the institution

that is seeking accreditation. These costs are commonly cited as a criticism of the process. The visit typically takes the better part of three or four days, during which the host institution must concentrate on presenting its program in a most favorable and candid light. Again this requires a non-trivial investment in time and effort. Very often, the site visits include some time devoted to an interview with the university provost and/or president. Without question, there is value in hosting peers to review the program, exchange ideas, and very often advocate the program among its own administrators. An unsung benefit is that visiting team members are able to bring back ideas and new concepts for the betterment of their own programs. At its best, accreditation serves as a vehicle for exchanging ideas on undergraduate education that might not otherwise take place in our research-driven programs and professional organizations. Peer review of a program is healthy, and accreditation ensures that it gets done.

Regional accreditation boards that review our parent institutions have placed a great deal of emphasis upon assessment of learning outcomes. In our experience on the Accreditation Committee as well as in our own institutions, the screws are tightening as programs struggle with a concept that very often appears vague and directionless. SWST Accreditation Standards have kept pace and even been ahead of the curve regarding outcomes-based assessment. There was a significant revision of the entire process led by Tom McLain (Oregon State University) that resulted in updated guidelines that were ultimately adopted in 2003/2004. This process included representatives from institutions throughout the U.S. The revision changed the curriculum requirements from a prescriptive-based system that required specific numbers of semester hours in basic science and math, basic wood sciences, manufacturing processes, and an area of professional emphasis, to an outcomes-based system that is more congruent with changes in the institutional accreditation process. As some of our non-accredited sibling programs such as wildlife and fisheries struggle with formulating expected

learning outcomes for their programs, the SWST Accreditation Standards provide us with a ready-made and easily referenced set of objectives.

Additionally, compliance with SWST Standards requires development and implementation of an assessment plan for evaluating student achievement of learning outcomes. As such, the accreditation process can be useful in assisting programs in development and implementation of those plans. These assessment plans are then also available for inclusion in the institutional regional accreditation. That said, the authors fully acknowledge that we as a society are still in the learning process in terms of assessment.

There is some difference of opinion with respect to the value of holding "accredited" status. Some argument has been made for the fact that within a given university, accredited programs command a higher level of respect, and as such accreditation can be used as a tool for preserving or requesting funds or faculty positions. While we don't presume to speak for other programs, we assert that we have found this to be the case at West Virginia University and Mississippi State University. Also, in an impromptu and admittedly biased poll of SWST Board Members with representatives from several of our accredited programs, there was the perception that being an accredited program carried weight with deans and provosts. This factor is not always apparent to faculty; however, administrators do notice these things. One of our deans clearly articulated his thoughts on this issue during the accreditation process: "Our institution is home to 27 nationally accredited academic programs and our provost does not want this number to drop to 26. This is especially important to our college which currently has 3 . . ." Another one of our administrators claims that accreditation was a critical factor in either keeping or adding three faculty positions across three accredited programs, including wood science. When questioned about the cost of accreditation, he replied, "was it worth (the cost) to keep or add three faculty positions? Yeah. I think it was." Perhaps enhanced communication between program administration, i.e. a group which very dearly val-

ues accreditation and faculty members, i.e., the group which deals directly with SWST and is responsible for the time-consuming work that is required for seeking and achieving accreditation, would better highlight the tangible benefits.

Accreditation also is a vehicle for gaining international recognition for the Society and taking a step closer to realizing SWST's Vision "to be the world leader in advancing the profession of wood science." The University of Bio Bio in Concepción, Chile, is the first non-U.S. university to apply for SWST accreditation. A site visit will be held following the Annual Meeting in November. Programs in Canada and Europe have also expressed interest in SWST accreditation in one way, shape, or form. Accreditation is a component of the Society's international outreach.

By nature of our society, accreditation is a changing process. The process of creating and maintaining standards as well as conducting re-

views is sometimes akin to making sausage, that is, "if you saw what went into it, you would lose your appetite, but most agree that the end product is pretty good." In its current iteration, the process continues to improve and remain contemporary with the profession. The Committee on Accreditation and Board of Directors remain committed to continually review and tweak the process in an effort to improve communication, bolster our relevance, and further the mission of SWST wherever possible.

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