

Accreditation and the Boundaries of Computer Science, 1984-1999

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Abstract

Business historians have studied the economic and technological aspects of standardization in great detail, but we have not devoted the same level of attention to the social and cultural consequences of standardization. Educational standards specifically, the accreditation of university curricula and degree programs provide fresh opportunities to consider the tradeoffs that standardization entails: who benefits, and at what cost? In this paper I consider a case study, the movement to evaluate and establish model curricula and quality standards for computing degree programs in the United States. Beginning in the 1960s, computer experts in leading professional societies supported academic standards in the hope they would align the variety of computer-oriented academic programs with the demand for programming labor in the commercial and industrial sectors. My focus in this paper is the Computer Sciences Accreditation Board (CSAB), created in 1984, which established its legitimacy by persuading academic institutions that accreditation was a meaningful and valuable process. This paper considers the CSAB's strategy, structure, and process for accreditation; the ways that it managed the tension between standardization and diversity; and the institutions that resisted or ignored CSAB's accreditation programs.