Program Review
Identification of Key Issues Guidance for Academic Departments
May 2016

One of the department’s first steps for program review is to identify a list of key issues that it believes to be critical to the department both now and over the coming years. These are issues which must be addressed in order to improve the quality of the department and remain competitive. Departments may use a variety of mechanisms for generating the list of issues, including but not limited to:

- Analysis of department data
- Faculty feedback
- Review of previous cycle reports and implementation agreements
- Working knowledge of issues that have been discussed in recent planning sessions

Once a working list of issues has been established, it should be shared with the members of the department for feedback and prioritization. The goal is that it will represent the perspectives of the entire department. In areas where there are diverse perspectives, notes should be added as to the nature of the disagreement.

The final list should be 1-3 pages and contain 5-10 issues. The due date for the final list should be discussed with the Office of Administration and Planning (OAP) in accordance with the Program Review schedule. Once the list of issues has been provided to OAP, it will be distributed to the Dean or line Vice President and the University’s senior leadership (e.g., President, Provost, Senior Vice President for Business and Finance, Vice President for Research, Dean of the Graduate School, etc. as appropriate). These individuals will provide feedback on these issues and may add additional issues to this list. The department may be asked to modify the list based on feedback from this group.

It is important to bear in mind that the list of issues generated by the department should correspond with the department’s strategic plan or should be issues which will shape future strategic plans. It is assumed that most departments have a strategic plan in place, in which case program review provides an opportunity to review and update the plan. In cases where departments do not have a strategic plan, program review may serve as an appropriate time to develop one.

The issues may take the form of known challenges that the department currently faces or critical questions that it needs to think about and on which it would like feedback.

Below is a list of questions related to areas from which key issues may arise. While consideration should be given to new issues that have arisen since the previous review, it may be equally important to review recurring issues that the department still faces. The main criterion should be how critical the issue is to the department’s strategic direction rather than how long an issue has existed.
The questions presented below are only examples of the areas which departments may explore – fundamental to philosophy of Program Review is that the department itself is best-positioned to determine what challenges it confronts.

A. Strategic Position

- What are the department’s strengths and weaknesses? Have these changed in recent years? How do these areas correspond to where the department would like to be?
- Is the department pioneering, mainstream, or lagging behind? Is it clearly slanted towards certain sub-disciplines and is this aligned with the department focus?
- What are the current trends in the discipline/field? How has the department responded to these changes – are any of the changes significant enough to warrant a reexamination of strategic plans?
- Is the department’s relative quality and reputation compared to peers improving? For what specific areas is it known and how is it positioning itself?
- What factors contribute to this image and quality assessment? What is the department doing to improve its quality and visibility, both within and outside the University?

B. Faculty

- Have there been any significant faculty hires or losses since the previous review? Has the department been successful in recruiting and retaining top quality faculty members? Have faculty from related departments been involved in meetings for this recruitment? What are the prospects for the future with regard to the market for the best scholars?
- What efforts have been made to make the department more diverse with regard to ethnicity and gender? At what levels in the organization has such hiring occurred? What has been the pattern of retention by ethnicity and gender?
- What is the teaching load of the department’s faculty members? Are undergraduate and graduate courses distributed among the different levels of faculty? What percentage of undergraduate courses is taught by part-time faculty, lecturers, or graduate students? Is this too high? If so, what strategies may be employed to reduce this percentage?
- How are junior faculty mentored? Are they given guidance regarding expectations for promotion and tenure? Are they evaluated and counseled regularly?
- Is the intellectual life of the department active and stimulating for both faculty and students? What is being done in this area currently? If necessary, what could be done to improve the situation? Do faculty actively seek out partnerships with faculty in other related departments? Are these efforts encouraged and supported by the department?
C. Research Programs

- What are the research strengths of the department? Do these research strengths support the department’s strategic plan? Do they correspond to the current developments in the discipline/field? What new areas should the department develop and what areas may need to be phased out? Are there faculty in other areas within the University with whom the department could develop collaborative partnerships?
- Has research support of faculty in the department increased since the last review? What are the sources of funding? With cutbacks in government support, what other sources of funding is the department exploring?
- How has the department engaged undergraduate students in its research activities and the department’s intellectual life? How do the research strengths of the faculty support the curriculum? What exciting scholarly research undergirds the education of the students?
- Are there emerging areas of research on which the department believes it should be focusing? Is awareness of these trends reflected in hiring decisions? Are there areas that no longer appear as relevant and should be phased out? What are the implications of these changes for the department?
- What is the impact of the research being done by the department? How is impact being measured and monitored over time (e.g., number of publications and citations, etc.)?
- Are faculty receiving outside recognition for their research through honors and awards? How can these achievements be further promoted?

D. Teaching & Curriculum

- Are the undergraduate and graduate educational programs providing a high quality experience for the department’s students? What specific innovations has the department implemented with regard to the improvement of undergraduate teaching? Have there been changes, improvements, and enhancements in the programs of graduate students and/or post-doctoral scholars? What interdisciplinary options and avenues are open to the students?
- Have there been significant changes in the discipline since the last review? What modifications to the curriculum have been made to address these changes? What future changes are anticipated? When was the last major review of undergraduate and graduate curriculum?

E. Students

- Have trends in undergraduate and graduate student applications, admissions, and enrollments changed? Have there been changes in the quality of the student body? How adequate are the efforts of the department in the recruitment of graduate students? How might this be improved? How does the marketplace for top quality students (undergraduate and graduate) look? Is the size of the graduate program appropriate?
- What is the average time-to-degree for the department’s PhD students? Are students taking too long to complete their degrees? What factors affect this?
- What has been the placement record for PhDs in the past ten years (please list
all students receiving degrees and their placement)? What is the quality of these placements? What factors are affecting the market for these graduates? What can the department do to ensure timely completion and quality placements?

• How are graduate and undergraduate students involved in the department? Do a significant percentage participate in research? Do they influence curriculum changes or other academic programming?

For medical departments:

• How successful have Northwestern University medical students been in obtaining residencies in their desired specialties? At what institutions are they being placed?
• What has been the assessment of the department’s residency program by the specialty’s Residency Review Committee? How many applications have there been over the past 5-7 years (and for how many positions)? How successful have the residents been on the certifying exams?

F. Leadership and Governance

• How does the department ensure orderly and effective leadership transitions? Has there been a recent leadership change in the department? How has this change affected the governance, programs, intellectual community, culture, and collaborations of the department?
• What kind of tone does the leadership set? Is the department visionary, entrepreneurial, and collaborative? Is there a sense of ownership among all members of the department?
• How has the department organized its operations and functions: through an executive committee, through heads of the graduate, undergraduate, and research programs, etc.? How effectively has this structure functioned for the department? Are there changes that need to be made?
• Does the department have a board of external or internal advisors? How is this group selected? How active is this group in providing strategic guidance, and where appropriate, oversight? How can the board be used most effectively?
• Does the department make decisions in a coordinated and integrated fashion or is it siloed by sub-areas?

G. Departmental Support

• How has technology been integrated into the teaching, research, and administrative activities of the department? How successful have these efforts been? Has the department developed adequate training and support for the use of technology?
• How well does the department’s current space meet its research and teaching needs? What reallocation or renovation could be done to accomplish the department’s goals? What are the department’s long-term space needs?
• Have library collections kept pace with changes in the discipline? What steps have been taken to evaluate and discuss the needs of faculty and students with
regard to accessing scholarly materials?

For medical departments:

- What has been the level of support from affiliated hospitals for the department’s teaching, research, and clinical missions?

H. Collaborative Opportunities

- What strategic relationships/collaborations exist between the department and other entities, both internal and external to the University? Are there other relationships that should be pursued that would strengthen the department’s research efforts?
- Have any new efforts been made to interact with other University departments, centers or institutes? Are there external entities the department has collaborated with? In what areas are these interactions most fruitful? Are there other areas of strength that could be leveraged through external collaborations?