PURPOSE OF PROGRAM REVIEW

As an institution, Northwestern University has had a longstanding commitment to continuous improvement, and Program Review is an important mechanism towards that goal. The purpose of Program Review is to assess each unit’s quality and effectiveness, to stimulate planning and improvement, and to encourage strategic development in ways that further the unit’s priorities as well as those of the schools and the University in general. Program Review provides valuable insight to University leadership on unit performance and the outcomes serve as key inputs to University-wide strategic planning and decision-making.

The reviews are an important source of external feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of units and serve as a constructive base for future improvement; they are intended to be a catalyst for the unit to chart and seek change. The reviews cumulatively provide input to University-wide priority setting and also serve as an important tool for the Deans and faculty for school-level planning. They are also a pivotal means of communication and accountability within the unit, with the Dean/line Vice President, with central administration involved in Program Review (President, Provost, Vice Provost for Academics, Vice Provost for Administration, Executive Vice President, Vice President of Administration and Planning, Vice President for Research, Vice President and General Counsel, and Dean of The Graduate School), and with the Board of Trustees.

This guide outlines the roles and responsibilities of the Program Review Council and the internal reviewers, as well as the Program Review process from their perspectives.
The Program Review Council is responsible for ensuring that a balanced and consistent process is followed for each unit’s review. The Program Review Council reviews all reports, meets with the internal reviewers after the site visit, and develops an actionable Implementation Agreement for each unit reviewed. Program Review Council meetings are generally scheduled for three hours, and two units are discussed at each meeting.

Program Review Council members are appointed by the Vice President for Administration and Planning based on the recommendations of Deans, Vice Presidents and central administration. Generally, Council members must have served on at least one internal review team to participate in the Council. At least two-thirds of the Council is faculty, and members serve staggered three-year terms, so that approximately one-third of the Council is replaced each year. The size and composition of the Council varies from year to year based on the units undergoing review and is representative of the various disciplinary and administrative interests within the University. This practice ensures a sense of continuity, while also bringing fresh perspectives to the Council each year. The Program Review Council Chair is appointed every two years from among the senior members of this group, while the Associate Vice President for Program Review serves as the Vice Chair on an ongoing basis. Program Review Council members must recuse themselves from discussions of their home department or if they have a joint appointment in the unit being discussed.

The Program Review Council members are expected to be familiar with the External Reviewer Reports prior to the meeting. During the discussion, the Program Review Council and internal reviewers discuss the review, with the goal of translating the report into actionable items for the unit under review. Based on input from the internal reviewers and the Program Review Council during the meeting, the Implementation Agreement will be updated to reflect the actionable items emerging from the review to which the unit will respond. Following the discussion of the reports, the Program Review Office keeps the Program Review Council updated on the status of the subsequent Implementation Agreement discussions between the unit head, Dean/line Vice President, and central administration by periodically discussing progress updates on previous reviews.

The reviews of related units are scheduled in the same year (i.e., basic life sciences, business and finance units, humanities, etc.). During the Council meetings, it may become apparent that certain issues arise repeatedly across these different but related units. The Program Review Council may wish to formally identify these cross-cutting issues and prepare a list of these issues with recommendations to be presented to central administration by the Chair of the Program Review Council.
INTERNAL REVIEWERS

Internal reviewers are integral to a successful and credible Program Review process. Faculty members and administrators (for administrative unit reviews) are invited to participate in the process based on nominations from Deans and senior level administrators, with the opportunity for the unit head to provide input. The role of the internal reviewers is to serve as resource for the external reviewers and also to provide a lens on the unique context of Northwestern during the external reviewers’ visit. Members of the internal review team cannot be members of the unit under review (including joint and courtesy appointments) and must also be free of any other potential conflicts of interest. Deans/line Vice Presidents and unit heads review all potential candidates and provide input as to preferred reviewers and/or individuals with conflicts of interest. For administrative unit reviews, internal review teams include at least one administrator.

The internal and external reviewers form the review team and participate in the review in tandem. While the external reviewers are responsible for writing the report, the internal reviewers are responsible for presenting on the review visit and recommendations to the Program Review Council following the visit. After the presentation, the internal reviewers help to ensure that the input from the Program Review Council is incorporated into actionable recommendation language for the unit’s Implementation Agreement.
PROGRAM REVIEW PROCESS

The Program Review Office is available to consult with the review team on any and all issues that might arise during the course of the review and to provide assistance or additional information wherever possible. The following is a summary of the major responsibilities for the internal reviewers throughout the review process in chronological order. For a detailed overview on the overall review process, please refer to the Program Review Procedures and Rationale document.

I. Prior to the Review Visit
   A. Background Materials
      Approximately one month before the review visit, the internal and external reviewers will receive a packet of review materials. The background materials typically include the following: Key Issues, Self-Study, Faculty/Staff Survey Results, Data Profile, and any supplementary materials prepared by the unit. If the review team feels critical data is missing, they can request assistance in obtaining data from the Program Review Office. The review team should be familiar with the background materials and note any areas to explore further during the visit. The review team may also want to review materials from the unit’s prior review, which are provided if available.

   B. Visit Schedule
      The review team receives the draft review visit schedule (prepared by the unit and the Program Review Office) and provides suggestions on others that should be included, if necessary. While recognizing that the staffing of each unit is somewhat unique, the following table summarizes the individuals the review team should plan to meet with during the course of the review.

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II. During the Review Visit

The role of the internal reviewers is to provide context on Northwestern, while the external reviewers provide field specific expertise. While some recommendations for the unit may be reasonable for the field, they may not fit with University strategy or reality. To make maximum use of highly qualified external reviewers, internal reviewers should pose questions during the review meetings around the field expertise of the external reviewers (e.g., How does a unit rank in a particular research field? Are the areas into which the unit is expanding on the cutting edge of the discipline? Is the unit making noticeable progress in improving the quality of its program, faculty, and students?)

The review team will have time to meet privately at the start of the visit, after the first day of meetings, and at the conclusion of the visit. These meetings are the internal reviewers’ opportunity to provide insights on Northwestern’s culture, structure, and strategy to help inform the external reviewers in writing the report and developing useful recommendations. The external reviewers are responsible for writing the report, while the internal reviewers are available to advise and provide guidance. The Program Review Office does not appoint any external reviewer to chair the review team or lead the writing of the report. For additional detail on the review visit format, please see the External Reviewers Guide.

The internal reviewers should be available to the external reviewers via email for any additional follow up questions after the review as the report is being constructed. As soon as the report is received, the internal reviewers review the report and determine if they would like to add an addendum (in general, reports do not require an addendum; however, in some cases it may be appropriate and the internal reviewers can consider adding one). For example, it may be appropriate to add an addendum if there is a differing perspective of the internal reviewers on the recommendations, if additional information is made available after the review visit, or to provide context on the scope or practicality of the external reviewer’s recommendations in the context of Northwestern. Should there be particularly sensitive topic or item related to a specific individual, the reviewers have the option to add a confidential addendum that limits who may see it (e.g., only the Department Chair, the Dean/Vice President, and/or central administration).
PROGRAM REVIEW PROCESS

III. After the Review Visit
The internal reviewers will present review findings and observations to the Program Review Council. The internal reviewers’ presentation to the Council consists of a five to ten minute discussion of the highlights of the report, with the remainder of the time used for discussion between the internal reviewers and Program Review Council members. In advance of the meeting, the Program Review Office will circulate a draft Implementation Agreement, based on the recommendations in the external reviewer report. Based on input from the internal reviewers and the Program Review Council during the meeting, the Implementation Agreement will be updated to reflect the actionable items emerging from the review to which the unit will respond.

A. Preparing for the Discussion
As it is expected that the Program Review Council has read the external reviewer report, the internal reviewers should provide a brief overview of the general state of the unit and major issues, as well as highlight any differences in findings between the external and internal reviewers. The Program Review Council is also provided with the set of background materials prepared by the unit, but is not expected to be as familiar with the materials as the review team.

B. During the Discussion
The internal reviewers should prepare brief talking points on their overall findings and recommendations on the review visit, as well as allow time for general questions. Before addressing the specifics of the Implementation Agreement, Program Review Council members may have general questions about the unit or the review. The Program Review Council and internal reviewers will discuss each of the recommendations carefully to make sure that they are clear and consistent with the needs of the unit. The External Reviewer’s Report will not be modified, but the recommendation language used in the Implementation Agreement may reflect any changes recommended by the Program Review Council. All changes to be made should be discussed and agreed upon by the Program Review Council in this meeting. Confidentiality throughout the process is extremely important. As these discussions are very candid, all information remains confidential outside of the meetings.

C. Following the Discussion
Based on the discussion, the Program Review Office will circulate a revised Implementation Agreement to ensure it captures the suggestions for the recommendations. The wording of the Implementation Agreement is important as it is used as the map for implementation and follow-up action between the unit head, Dean/line Vice President, and central administration.
D. Meeting Timing and Format

Program Review Council meetings are generally scheduled in the month following the review visit, but the schedule varies based on the distribution of review visits. Each presentation is scheduled for one and a half hours, with two presentations scheduled for each Council meeting. Program Review Council members who are members of the unit under discussion do not attend that meeting or provide input to the Implementation Agreement.

CONFIDENTIALITY

In the course of conducting the Program Review process, members of the Program Review Council and internal reviewers are privy to sensitive information in the form of data, survey results, reports, and discussions. The intention of Program Review is not to publicly embarrass a unit if problems are discovered but rather to resolve issues and build a mindset of continuous improvement. Thus, judiciously maintaining confidentiality—both regarding individual perspectives that are shared with the review team, as well as findings and recommendations—is an integral aspect and expectation of the Program Review process. Therefore, anything the review team and the Program Review Council hear or discuss throughout the course of the review (prior, during, and after) should be considered confidential and not shared with others outside the scope of the review process. Confidentiality is of particular importance during group meetings, and it should be re-emphasized to the participants that they should not share remarks or information with anyone else.

Occasionally, reviewers may have friends or colleagues who are curious about the review team’s findings and may try to engage the review team in conversation. On rare occasions, newspaper reporters have tried to contact reviewers trying to get information about particular units. Thus, as stated above, reviewers should not discuss the review with others outside the unit, the review team, the Program Review Council, or the Program Review Office.

This expectation of confidentiality exists not only while the review is being conducted but also once the review has been completed.