

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE THIRD CYCLE OF PROGRAM REVIEW

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Submitted by the
Program Review Third Cycle Planning Committee:

Susan V. Herbst, Chair, Program Review Council; WCAS Political Science
Marilyn McCoy, Vice Chair, Program Review Council; Administration and Planning
Charles H. Dowding, MEAS Civil Engineering
Leo I. Gordon, MED Medicine
Philip Greenland, MED Preventive Medicine
Kathleen M. Hagerty, KGSM Finance
Frederick L. Hemke, School of Music
Wallace J. Hopp, Chair, Administrative Reviews Subcommittee;
MEAS Industrial Engineering and Management Sciences
Lee M. Jameson, Dental School
Richard H. Kraut, WCAS Philosophy
Deborah J. Lucas, Chair, Academic Reviews Subcommittee; KGSM Finance
Kelly E. Mayo, WCAS Biochemistry, Molecular Biology, and Cell Biology
Sheldon I. Miller, MED Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
Neena B. Schwartz, WCAS Neurobiology and Physiology (*Emeritus*)
Andrew B. Wachtel, WCAS Slavic Languages and Literature
Bruce W. Wessels, MEAS Materials Sciences and Engineering

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Program review at Northwestern was initiated in the Fall 1985 in order to improve the quality of all units and departments within the University. Two cycles of reviews have been completed (1985-91; 1992-99). A Third Cycle Planning Committee was appointed last Fall and has conducted a thorough review of the program review process. Based on these efforts, the Committee offers this report on the overall status of program review and recommendations for changes for the third cycle.

GENERAL FINDINGS

An observation that came through clearly in both the written and oral surveys was that the concept of program review enjoys widespread support at Northwestern; approximately 80% of survey respondents were very or somewhat satisfied with most components of the process, and agreed that it is a very important activity for the University and should be continued.

Best Aspects of the Process

Elements of the program review process that were frequently singled out for praise by respondents were:

- Chance for the unit to take stock and plan strategically for the future
- Interaction within the unit
- Communication with the administration
- Creation of a culture of continual evaluation and improvement
- Utilization of outside experts as reviewers
- Inclusion of administrative units
- Fostering a broad knowledge of the University among its members

Worst Aspects of the Process

There were a number of criticisms of the process:

- Lack of transparent follow-up
- Inadequate measures and benchmarks upon which to base the review
- Communication with units after the review or about the larger impact of program review on the University
- Creation of false expectations
- Time consuming

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

1. Program review is appropriate for both academic and administrative units.
2. Basic elements of program review are still suited to a third cycle and to the review of academic and administrative units. Unit strategic planning is a cornerstone of a solid review process.
3. The use of quality external reviewers is essential.
4. Faculty/staff review of administrative units is appropriate.

The following recommendations address the perceived areas of weaknesses of program review and are offered in the spirit of fine tuning the process to meet the more stringent needs of a third cycle.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGES TO THE THIRD CYCLE PROGRAM REVIEW PROCESS

Overarching Recommendations for both Academic and Administrative Unit Reviews

Follow-Up

1. Following the review, each unit will receive an explicit implementation agreement that clearly describes the agreed-upon actions to be taken and specifies who is responsible for carrying out each of these actions (central administration, dean, and unit). The dean/vice president is encouraged to be explicit about the commitments he/she is willing or not willing to make. The dean/vice president and unit head are a clear party to the development of this agreement.
2. Once the implementation agreement has been finalized, the dean/vice president and unit head should meet with the faculty or professional staff in the unit to discuss the agreement and needed implementation steps. Administration and Planning will verify with the dean/vice president and unit head that these meetings have taken place.
3. In situations where the review indicates very serious problems in the unit, the unit will be added back into the schedule for re-review through the regular program review process (e.g., within three years) to ensure that these problems have been addressed.
4. Implementation agreements will be shared with the internal and external reviewers. The one-year follow-up report will also be shared with the members of the subcommittee.

Communication

5. The Office of Administration and Planning will distribute annually to the deans and vice presidents copies of the summary reports and implementation agreements for all units that have undergone review during that year.
6. The Office of Administration and Planning will develop a report to the Northwestern Community indicating the types of changes and impact that program review has had in each cycle. The report should be issued after the conclusion of each cycle and reviewed with the PRC, the deans and line administrators to ensure that no significant breaches of confidentiality occur.

Benchmarks and Data

7. Performance measures are essential to the process and should be developed by all units if they do not currently exist. Such information should be collected on a systematic basis and then be available for program review when it occurs. The University's administration must take a leading role in the development of these measures and data collection systems. Where available, external comparative data should be sought.

Enhancing the Self-Study/Strategic Planning Process

8. The letter of notification sent to the unit in the Spring informing them of their upcoming review during the coming year will be tailored to reflect the highlights and outcomes of the unit's previous review, including such aspects as the issues identified and recommendations made, changes that have taken place since the review, other important University context, etc.
9. In the Spring prior to the unit's review and once the unit has been notified of its forthcoming review, a member of the Program Review Council, along with staff from the Office of Administration and Planning, will meet with all members of the unit to introduce and review the process, explain what types of information and activities will be needed, and answer any questions that members of the unit may have. These sessions will take place at the units' offices.
10. Members of the PRC subcommittee, in addition to Administration and Planning staff, will review the unit's self-study when it is submitted to ensure that it is complete. Incomplete self-studies will be returned to the unit with explicit feedback on how the report is to be revised.

Program Review Process

11. The schedule of units to be reviewed is reassessed annually with deans and vice presidents to ensure that the timing of the review for the various units is not problematic. While the program review process generally follows the academic calendar, units should be made explicitly aware that they can request an alternative schedule (e.g., four months earlier) for their reviews.
12. The Office of Administration and Planning should continue, and possibly expand, its practice of grouping and/or clustering units for review.
13. Clearer guidelines and procedures for internal reviewers will be developed.
14. Once the report has been finalized by the PRC, but before it is forwarded to the administration, the report will be shared with the unit head to check for and correct any factual errors. It will be clearly communicated that the unit head should not discuss this report with the line administrator at this time, since they will not yet have had the opportunity to see it.
15. Units will be asked to identify external reviewers substantially in advance of the unit's review in order to try to schedule them earlier in the process.

Additional Recommendations for Academic Unit Reviews

16. For larger schools that are not considered a single unit for the purpose of program review, the Dean's Office for that school should be reviewed as part of the program review process.
17. In setting the review schedule, deans should be urged to consult with their chairs as to appropriate timing for the next cycle.
18. It will be reiterated to academic units that they can propose external reviewers in subgroups to ensure coverage of sub-fields within the department.

Additional Recommendations for Administrative Unit Reviews

19. For administrative units, the Office of Administration and Planning should try to include at least one administrator as a member of the review committee.

FULL REPORT

INTRODUCTION

Program review at Northwestern was initiated in the Fall 1985 in order to improve the quality of all units and departments within the University. Ideally, program review provides an opportunity for a unit or department to engage in rigorous and strategic self-reflection about its mission and challenges. With input from faculty committees and external reviewers, the administration is able to use the mechanism of program review to aid problematic units, and ensure that excellent units get the support they need to sustain optimal performance.

The first cycle of reviews was completed in 1991, and the second, in 1999. Following the completion of the first cycle of reviews, a hiatus was taken during 1991-92 to thoroughly evaluate the program review process for any changes deemed necessary. The second cycle of reviews thus began in the Fall of 1992, with slightly revised procedures and a new seven-year schedule of reviews; this cycle concluded last year.

A Third Cycle Planning Committee was appointed last Fall and has met regularly during the past year to discuss all aspects of program review and to consider specific areas where the process could be improved. To support their work, the Committee has conducted a survey of a wide range of members of the Northwestern community and interviewed deans and other administrators to improve their understanding of the perceived strengths and weaknesses in the process as a basis for improving the next cycle. Based on the information gathered through these steps, the Committee offers this report on the overall status of program review and recommendations for changes for the third cycle.

METHODOLOGY

Members of the Third Cycle Planning Committee include: the continuing members of the Program Review Council (PRC); members of the Council who had just completed their terms on the PRC but agreed to continue for this review; and, former chairs of the PRC during the second cycle. Susan Herbst is serving as chair of the Planning Committee and will also chair the Council during the first year of the third cycle reviews (2000-01). Given that program review encompasses both academic and administrative units and issues specific to these types of reviews had been raised during the second cycle, it was decided that two subcommittees would be formed—one focusing on each of these respective areas—so that the issues pertaining to these types of reviews could be considered independently. Deborah Lucas agreed to chair the Academic Review Subcommittee, and Wally Hopp, the Administrative Review Subcommittee.

The Planning Committee met as a whole in the Fall. At that meeting, a number of preliminary issues were identified based on comments that had arisen during the second cycle. In order to obtain input from the larger University community, the Committee agreed that a survey would be administered to solicit individuals' thoughts on various aspects of the process, and their involvement in and satisfaction with program review (Appendix A). An email was sent in early January inviting a select group of individuals to respond to the on-line survey. This group consisted of all individuals during the second cycle who: 1) prepared program review reports (e.g., current and former heads of units, selected deputy administrators);

2) served on the PRC or a subcommittee; and, 3) were significant users of program review reports (e.g., deans, line vice presidents, University administrators). Responses to this survey were anonymous and were shared with the Committee.

Each subcommittee met on several occasions during the Winter, first to identify broad issues and to decide how data would be collected, and then to discuss the findings and distill them into recommendations. As part of their proceedings, each subcommittee decided to conduct personal interviews to solicit more in-depth comments, and a list of interviewees was developed for each (see Appendices B1-2). For the Administrative Review Subcommittee, personal interviews of all heads of administrative units plus other key personnel in the units, all deans, and selected senior administrators were conducted, while the Academic Review Subcommittee interviewed deans and senior administrators. Due to the number of academic units, the Academic Review Subcommittee elected to carry out an on-line survey of all tenure-line faculty, rather than trying to interview random chairs, in order to allow for the broadest input possible. However, due to a very low response rate these results were not used.

After collecting responses to the on-line survey and completing the interviews, the subcommittees each met to review and discuss the findings. The remainder of this report highlights the key findings from the questionnaire results and personal interviews and presents the Committee's conclusions and recommendations for changes to the third cycle process for program review.

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS SUMMARY

An observation that came through clearly in both the written and oral surveys was that the concept of program review enjoys widespread support at Northwestern. Survey responses (see Appendix A) indicated that approximately 80% of respondents were very or somewhat satisfied with most components of the process. Even individuals who disagreed with the findings of the review of their unit or expressed some concerns with the process nevertheless agreed that it is a very important activity for the University and should be continued.

Best Aspects of the Process

Elements of the program review process that were frequently singled out for praise by respondents were:

Chance to take stock and plan for the future. Reviews are useful in requiring units to reflect on what they are doing, identifying important issues and crystallizing an agenda for change. The development of a strategic plan is a frequent outgrowth of program review.

Interaction within the unit. Program review creates a venue for members of the unit to interact together in confronting their most difficult issues. Program review makes it acceptable to say sensitive things and to bring issues out into the open.

Communication with the administration. Program review creates the opportunity for focused attention from and communication with the administration about the unit's current status and future directions. The fact that all units are reviewed insures that the attention of the administration will be comprehensive and not focused on a more limited set of departments or schools. It is very useful in keeping the administration informed.

The creation of a culture of continual evaluation and improvement. Since all units undergo program review, the institutional culture is one in which all units are encouraged to strive for improvement.

Program review plays an essential role in maintaining quality control, improving programs and providing for a more rational administrative process at the institution, enlivened by outside input. The thoroughness and regularity of the process underscores the seriousness of the undertaking.

Utilization of outside experts as reviewers. This offers units a unique opportunity to get fresh perspectives from individuals with distinguished backgrounds and to identify ways to improve and benchmark their units.

Inclusion of administrative units. The review of administrative units is valued by the faculty and is seen as adding credibility to the importance of such a process.

Develops individuals with broad knowledge of the University. A benefit of program review is that it provides an opportunity to work with and learn about other areas of the University and in the process makes the faculty and staff who participate on the PRC better citizens of the University. This is particularly the case for the review of administrative units, where, if not for program review, faculty would almost never have an opportunity to see how these units function. Because the reputation of administrative units is largely anecdotal, it is very easy for them to acquire negative reputations over time. By allowing faculty an opportunity to understand these organizations and the challenges they face, program review has the positive effect of making them more sympathetic and constructive consumers of the services provided by administrative units. The role of PRC in involving faculty in review and planning for the University should not be underestimated, given the paucity of other avenues for faculty governance at Northwestern.

Worst Aspects of the Process

There were a number of criticisms of the process:

Lack of transparent follow-up. The lack of systematic follow-up and differences among units in implementing the recommendations were also frequently cited as areas that need to be improved. Some units did not meet with their deans or units heads after the process and therefore were not aware of decisions that had been made as a result of program review. About half of all respondents on the survey indicated they were somewhat or very dissatisfied with the follow-up after their unit's review.

Communications issues. Insufficient communication to the University community on the outcomes of program review and how it informs the University's decision-making and strategic directions makes it difficult to assess whether it is worthwhile. A related challenge is the difficulty in involving everyone who should be involved in the review process. As a result, there is not widespread knowledge of what has been agreed to and who will do what for implementation. Again, just under half of the respondents noted that they were somewhat or very dissatisfied with the communication from administrators with their unit about the review.

Time consuming. Not surprisingly, the most frequent criticism of program review was the amount of time and effort required to do a thorough review for both the unit and reviewers, particularly in light of competing demands and expectations.

Inadequate measures and benchmarks upon which to base the review. The previous two cycles have shown that units often lack clear goals, measures or data against which their performance can be evaluated. This has been especially true of administrative units; many have none of these and therefore produce self-study reports that are anecdotal in nature and confusing to the review subcommittee. For academic units, where the measures are more consistent across units and are used by other areas within the University (for example, information on student applicants, accepts, admits, and placement, etc.), the data have been generally available, but the quality of the data has varied in a

number of cases. It is impossible to do an effective review of a unit that lacks fundamental planning data. As a result, the conclusions of too many reports boil down to “the unit needs to clarify its objectives and collect data to document performance.”

Creation of false expectations. Some recommendations can only be implemented if resources are available and units are unhappy in not receiving the support they feel is called for in the reviews. Related to this concern was a perception that the dean or unit head had not been explicit in indicating what resources may follow the review.

Beyond the above responses, the survey indicated some specific input on the various phases and steps in program review. These are noted below.

Differences between Academic and Administrative Unit Reviews

The primary differences between academic and administrative reviews noted by those surveyed and interviewed were the following: 1) administrative units tend not to have well-developed mission statements or performance measures, which makes it difficult to objectively evaluate their performance; 2) administrative units can be larger and more complex, which makes them more challenging for the reviewers to understand and review thoroughly in the relatively short amount of time that is available through program review; and 3) unlike academic units, administrative units are not tied to the academic calendar, thus, the optimal scheduling of these reviews may differ from the current cycle.

SPECIFIC TARGETS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN THE THIRD CYCLE

The Committee believes that the following are the most important areas for change in the program review process with respect to both academic and administrative units. Recommendations for academic units only or administrative units only follow these shared recommendations.

Confidentiality and the Communication of Program Review Results

Since its inception, program review has existed as a confidential process, with the results of the reviews not shared beyond the individual unit, the immediate line administrator, and the University’s leadership without the unit’s permission. This element of confidentiality was deliberately introduced into program review for the benefit of the unit, to keep the review focused on improvement, and, in that spirit, to encourage interviewees and reviewers to be candid and forthcoming in their assessment of the unit. Thus, individuals are often not aware of the impact program review has had outside their own units or schools.

Now that two cycles of reviews have been completed, during which many of the most grievous problems were identified, and it becomes increasingly apparent that future improvements will depend not only on buy-in by the unit itself, but also on cross-unit collaborations, it may be time to introduce a greater degree of openness into the process. There is also a need to put in place mechanisms that better inform the University community on the broader outcomes of program review.

Follow-up

Follow-up is an area where additional attention needs to be targeted. Units are unhappy with the communications between them and the administration regarding implementation, and there is a general lack of awareness as to the changes that have been brought about overall through program review.

At the conclusion of the review, the following steps are taken. The Office of Administration and Planning sends a letter to each member of the unit notifying them that the program review reports are available for reading in their chair's or department head's office. Members of the unit are invited to make any comments they wish on the report individually or collectively. There is then a meeting with the members of the administration, the dean or line vice president, and the unit chair or head to develop an implementation agreement. The statement takes each recommendation and represents the agreements that are made at the meeting. This document is shared with all meeting participants, with the expectation that they will then share this information with the members of the unit, as appropriate. The subsequent meeting that should take place between the dean or vice president and the members of the unit is intended to provide a venue for frank and open discussion about the review and the plan for implementing the recommendations. However, it appears that this meeting does not always take place, and as a result some members of the unit are unaware of the outcomes of the review.

In an attempt to provide a better sense of this, the Office of Administration switched mid-second cycle to a one-year follow-up process, rather than a two-year follow-up. Although this has proven to be more successful in identifying areas where additional support for and attention to implementation is needed, ultimate responsibility for the implementation of the review recommendations still lies with the unit and the administrative leadership. From the survey and interview results, it would appear that fewer people than one would like were aware of the follow up. It may be that the confidential nature of the program review process, coupled with the lack of discussion within the unit and with the dean or vice president about the review and recommendations, has limited the members' understanding and acceptance of the process and outcomes. This may have led to a lack of action—either real or perceived—or at least reluctance to credit program review with changes.

In addition, several respondents indicated that subcommittee members would like to continue to be kept informed on progress achieved by the unit they reviewed.

Identification of Issues and Development of the Self-Study

Judging from the responses, the approach taken to identify issues seemed to vary considerably across units. Some respondents view this as being done primarily by the chair, or by the dean or central administrators. Responses indicated that, in units where ongoing planning takes place, the development of the self-study was a natural extension of that process and useful to the unit. Some suggested that a narrower focus from administration or coupling it with other reviews that the unit undergoes might be helpful. A few indicated their unit did not do a critical enough self-assessment, and the time-consuming nature of developing the report is acknowledged, but overall, respondents indicate this step is valuable to the unit.

Program review was designed to be an inclusive process involving all members of the unit in the identification of issues and the development of the self study, in the identification of potential external reviewers and meeting with them while they are on campus, in interacting with the internal subcommittee, and working with the line administrator following the review to implement the recommendations. While such broad involvement has been strongly encouraged, individuals report that this has not always proven to be the model that is followed. The lack of participation of all members in the program review process may contribute to the lack of awareness and understanding about the review and its outcomes. It is the responsibility of the unit and the line administrator to ensure that all members of the unit have a voice and role in the process, and are kept informed of the process and its outcomes.

Lack of Performance Data

Performance measures are essential to the program review. The variation in the review process is also the result of variability in self-study reports, which is largely the consequence of insufficient data on the unit's performance. A few units have clear goals, measures, and data to document performance. But many have none of these and therefore produce self-study reports that are anecdotal in nature and confusing to the review subcommittee. It is impossible to do an effective review of a unit—academic or administrative—that lacks fundamental planning data. As a result, the conclusions of too many reports boil down to “the unit needs to clarify its objectives and collect data to document performance.” Because each unit has only been reviewed once per cycle (with the one year follow-up after the review to assess progress), units that have not provided adequate information experience a missed opportunity for real improvement, and represent an inefficient use of time and resources, both for the unit and the reviewers.

The Committee agrees that the impetus for developing performance measures should not come only from the unit for their program review, but rather must be an integrated component of the overall University management system (and therefore strongly supported by the University's leadership). Members agree that program review cannot and should not drive this process. For academic units, examples of standard performance measures could include: peer rankings; major awards and honors; external funding support; course and teacher evaluations; workload data; information on the number of graduate applicants, admissions, acceptances/enrollments, and students completing degrees; completion rates and time to degree; and PhD student placement. This information should be coordinated with the Graduate School and efforts should be placed on developing a performance database that captures these key indicators. For administrative units, performance measures will vary from unit to unit, depending on the services provided, but should reflect elements of the key services or operations of the unit, and should be collected in an orderly and systematic fashion. Client satisfaction measures should also be regularly collected for all administrative units, preferably by a central office that provides an “arm's length” perspective from the unit.

Coordination with Other Review Processes

Some units are also subject to a variety of other review processes (audits, accreditation, etc.). In some cases, these are much less stringent than program review (or just different in focus), while in others they are very stringent. In some units subject to rigorous review in another form, program review maybe regarded as less critical as a feedback mechanism. All units report that the time required to participate in the process is significant, and thus units with other rigorous reviews may see the time required for program review to be an added burden. However, those interviewed consistently cited the fact that administrative and academic units are subjected to the same review standards and expectations as being a critical strength of the process at Northwestern. Attempting to seek ways in which the various reviews (for example, the coordination of program review with the recently launched graduate program review) is important to reduce the burden each of these reviews places on departments.

Guidance to the Internal Review Committee

Subcommittees have had wide leeway in determining the process they would use in carrying out their work. However, it may be that review subcommittees could benefit from additional guidance at the start of the review. For example, determining whether to conduct a survey for administrative units or gaining an overall understanding the University's strategic context may require additional information not typically needed for academic unit reviews. For administrative unit reviews in particular, subcommittee chairs are unlikely to have much prior experience that help them make good choices. Committee

members have observed that, over the course of conducting program review, elements of “best practices” have been identified, and believe that there should be a more formal mechanism for capturing and communicating this information to subsequent committees.

Some respondents also noted that the subcommittee may tend to focus on the weaknesses of the unit more than its strengths and would like to see this change. Issues were also raised about the capacity of faculty to fully understand the workings of administrative units. It was suggested that subcommittees should meet with unit heads prior to submitting the report to senior administration to allow units an opportunity to correct any factual errors.

External Reviewers

From all accounts, the use of external reviewers is highly valued. However, it appears from the responses that not all respondents were involved in the identification of potential reviewers and there was confusion as to how they were identified and selected. Because this process is one in which the unit plays an active role, a lack of awareness of this process is cause for concern, and signals the need for better communication with and among the members of the units regarding this process.

With regard to selecting and scheduling external reviewers, the primary concern identified by respondents was the amount of time available for external reviewers to spend with the unit, and their congested schedule once they were on campus. However, while some suggested the length of the visit be extended, others acknowledged that such a move could limit Northwestern’s ability to secure the best people as reviewers. In addition, some respondents indicated they felt the reviewers’ time with their unit was too limited when external reviewers were assigned to review more than one unit.

The net effect of all these issues identified for improvement is that program review is not as widely or clearly understood by all members of the University as is desired, and in fact, may be misunderstood by some. To be optimally effective and productive, program review must be regarded by units and University leadership alike, as a collaborative effort, with the single-minded purpose of improving units. Active, sustained participation by the unit and the administrative leadership in the process—both during and following the review—is absolutely critical to achieve the kinds of improvements that are being sought in the third cycle of reviews.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

1. *Program review is appropriate for both academic and administrative units.* Periodic review of academic and administrative units, with the express purpose of identifying areas for improvement, is an essential activity that is not replaced by other review processes. It must be done in some form.
2. *Basic elements of program review are still suited to a third cycle and to the review of academic and administrative units.* A self-study report, an external review team, and an internal review team presenting a review to a faculty-led council on a seven year cycle is an effective way to review both academic and administrative units.
3. *The use of quality external reviewers is essential.* Very few units had complaints about the qualifications of the external reviewers. It was acknowledged that attempting to lengthen the visit could result in our not being able to secure the best people to serve as reviewers. Therefore, the

current process of selecting reviewers and bringing them in for two days (generally) should be maintained. It was suggested that, for larger and more complex administrative units, thought should be given as to whether these units should be subdivided for the purpose of the review to allow the reviewers adequate time to assess the areas' operations.

4. *Faculty/staff review of administrative units is appropriate.* The benefits of involving faculty in review and planning for administrative functions is a valuable form of faculty governance and forces the program review process to be sensitive to University culture and needs. This vital feature of program review must remain a part of the process.

The following recommendations address the perceived areas of weaknesses of program review and are offered in the spirit of fine tuning the process to meet the more stringent needs of a third cycle.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGES TO THE THIRD CYCLE REVIEW PROCESS

The following recommendations reflect the Committee's reading of survey results, the conversations with deans and administrators, and members' own experiences with various aspects of the program review process. Based on the survey results, it appears that most respondents feel that the process works well, and there is general agreement about those aspects of the process that need to be changed.

Overarching Recommendations for both Academic and Administrative Unit Reviews

Follow-Up

Recommendation 1:

Following the review, each unit will receive an explicit implementation agreement that clearly describes the agreed-upon actions to be taken and specifies who is responsible for carrying out each of these actions (central administration, dean, and unit). The dean/vice president is encouraged to be explicit about the commitments he/she is willing or not willing to make. The dean/vice president and unit head are a clear party to the development of this agreement.

Recommendation 2:

Once the implementation agreement has been finalized, the dean/vice president and unit head should meet with the faculty or professional staff in the unit to discuss the agreement and needed implementation steps. Administration and Planning will verify with the dean/vice president and unit head that these meetings have taken place.

Perhaps the biggest issue is follow-up and communication of what happened as a result of the review. There is not always a clear indication of what is to be done after the review and who is responsible for doing it, since faculty can sometimes see implementation agreements as vague. To address this, our first recommendation is to provide a document that more explicitly lays out actions and responsibilities.

Implementation agreements that spell out the next steps to be taken in implementing the review recommendations are drafted following the final meeting between university leadership, the administrative head and the unit head. Copies of the agreement are distributed to meeting attendees, with the expectation that the unit head will share this information with the members of the unit. As noted, this happens to varying degrees, and is sometimes contingent on whether the meeting between the members of the unit and the administrative head to discuss the review and implementation agreement is held. Lack of

access to this information may then result in the perception that program review is ineffective, or that nothing happens after the review.

A related issue is whether faculty members have adequate access to and awareness of the implementation agreement. Traditionally this document has been sent only to the meeting participants, with the expectation that the chair/unit head shares it with the members of the unit (and that it is discussed in the follow up meeting with the dean/line vice president). We believe that a concerted effort needs to be made to ensure that the dean/vice president meets with the unit following the review to discuss the reports and recommendations and to clarify the specific actions that will be taken as a result of the review.

A further issue was whether unit heads, in cases where there are problems with the dean or vice president, might request a private meeting with the president and/or provost. Unit heads should know that this option always exists.

Recommendation 3:

In those situations where the review indicates very serious problems in the unit, the unit will be added back into the schedule for re-review through the regular program review process (e.g., within three years) to ensure that these problems have been addressed.

The development of a poor quality self-study has often served as a first “red flag” indicator of a unit suffering more serious problems. The Committee suggests that units that are revealed to be very weak performers will be listed for a follow up review within three years. The specifics of the follow up review will be worked out with the administrative leadership and the unit.

Recommendation 4:

Implementation agreements will be shared with the internal and external reviewers. The one-year follow-up report will also be shared with the members of the subcommittee.

The response of the unit to the program review office in the form of an implementation agreement should be sent to the internal review subcommittee and the external reviewers. PRC members need to know the consequences of their recommendations if they are to become better reviewers over their term on the Council. If their recommendations are overruled or altered, then the reasons for this are an important form of feedback. Likewise, internal reviewers should be given copies of the unit’s one-year follow-up report, along with any comments from the administration regarding the unit’s progress in implementing the recommendations from the review.

Communication

Recommendation 5:

The Office of Administration and Planning will distribute annually to the deans and vice presidents copies of the summary reports and implementation agreements for all units that have undergone review during that year.

Deans have sometimes requested copies of the reports for reviews of units outside their area of responsibilities. Information has been shared, but only with the unit’s permission. Deans have indicated they would like to see reports for the administrative reviews in which they have provided input as well as from other school’s units on a more systematic basis. This allows them to better understand the steps the University is taking to ameliorate problematic areas. Such a practice would also provide useful information to deans as they identify and consider potential areas for cross-school collaboration. Each year, summary reports (3-4 pages) are developed for all units that underwent review during that year for

distribution to the Trustees. Providing deans with copies of these reports is one way in which this information could be communicated without burdening them with unnecessary paperwork. (Note: vice presidents usually get these reports as part of the materials that go to the Board). Deans could then request the full report materials if additional information is needed.

Unit heads always have the option of sharing their reports with related unit heads where cross-department or cross-school initiatives would be served. This will remain a unit-level prerogative.

Recommendation 6:

The Office of Administration and Planning will develop a report to the Northwestern Community indicating the types of changes and impact that program review has had in each cycle. The report should be issued after the conclusion of each cycle and reviewed with the PRC, the deans and line administrators to ensure that no significant breaches of confidentiality occur.

This recommendation should help clarify to the Community what impacts program review has had and help disseminate a wider understanding of changes that have occurred.

Benchmarks and Data

Recommendation 7:

Performance measures are essential to the process and should be developed by all units if they do not currently exist. Such information should be collected on a systematic basis and then be available for program review when it occurs. The University's administration must take a leading role in the development of these measures and data collection systems. Where available, external comparative data should be sought.

The University's leadership should take steps to develop, in consultation with units, an ongoing system of performance measures for both academic and administrative units that could be used by program review (as well as other University management functions) to assess unit performance and their success in meeting or exceeding their performance goals. For academic units, we suggest that the Office of Administration and Planning, working with PRC, the Graduate School and the deans develop a regular set of reports that can be used to inform program review. For administrative units, both client satisfaction and performance measures should be developed under the direction and support of the respective line vice president. These data should provide valuable information on each unit's performance over time. Having such data for multiple years versus only the year of review will enhance its utility and credibility.

Enhancing the Self-Study/Strategic Planning Process

Recommendation 8:

The letter of notification sent to the unit in the Spring informing them of their upcoming review during the coming year will be tailored to reflect the highlights and outcomes of the unit's previous review, including such aspects as the issues identified and recommendations made, changes that have taken place since the review, other important University context, etc.

It was widely agreed that the self-study, when done well, is one of the most useful aspects of program review. At the same time, an area where improvement is needed is in the identification of issues for the unit, and in the guidelines for the unit self-study. One possible way to do this would be to tailor the initial notification letter more to the unit (e.g., highlight the issues and recommendations from the previous review, summarize the changes that have taken place since that review as a response to the program

review recommendations, etc.). Customizing notification letters for individuals units would be an appropriate change, and would also address the concern that the process has become too bureaucratic.

Recommendation 9:

In the Spring prior to the unit's review and once the unit has been notified of its forthcoming review, a member of the Program Review Council, along with staff from the Office of Administration and Planning, will meet with all members of the unit to introduce and review the process, explain what types of information and activities will be needed, and answer any questions that members of the unit may have. These sessions will take place at the units' offices.

An area of general concern is the administrative burden placed on units, and the considerable paperwork involved. Because considerable effort has already gone into minimizing the administrative burden, the Committee was unable to come up with explicit recommendations for work-reducing changes. However, there was general agreement that the process is easier for units that better understand the purpose and value of program review, as well as those that have a clearer sense of purpose. One possible strategy to improve information flow would be to have a member of the PRC (but not the person who will be chairing the review) and a staff person from the Office of Administration and Planning meet in the spring with the entire unit membership. They would introduce the process, explain what will be needed, and answer any questions that may be asked. (The current model is to have an orientation session in the summer for the unit heads rather than all members of the unit)

During the meeting with a unit, the program review representative should deliver a written summary of what is expected in a good self-study report. It should be mandatory that the unit specify (1) its role, in enough detail to spell out what the unit should and should not do, and (2) measures and benchmarks, with which the unit tracks its performance. Other mandatory sections (e.g., faculty/staff vitae/resumes, summary of changes made in response to last review, etc.) should also be spelled out in these guidelines. Finally, the guidelines should detail the schedule (including what is and is not flexible) and inputs required of the unit (e.g., list of key issues the unit is facing, the names of potential external reviewers).

Recommendation 10:

Members of the PRC subcommittee, in addition to Administration and Planning staff, will review the unit's self-study when it is submitted to ensure that it is complete. Incomplete self-studies will be returned to the unit with explicit feedback on how the report is to be revised.

The Office of Administration and Planning currently reviews all self-studies prior to distributing them to the PRC and administrators to ensure that they are complete and responsive to the issues identified. In cases where it is found that the report is missing critical information or is poorly done, the self-study is returned to the unit with a letter that explicitly states what needs to be revised or added. For the third cycle, the Program Review Subcommittee will be more fully involved in this process.

Program Review Process

Recommendation 11:

The schedule of units to be reviewed is reassessed annually to ensure that the timing of the review for the various units is not problematic. While the review process generally follows the academic calendar, units should be made explicitly aware that they can request an alternative schedule (e.g., four months earlier) for their reviews.

Although the academic calendar tends to serve as the primary timeframe reference within the University, there are situations where the “typical” review schedule may not be optimal for a unit undergoing review. For example, it may be that administrative units, which operate year round, are less constrained by the academic calendar than are academic units, whose faculty is often absent during the summer months. Units have always had the option of requesting an alternative schedule, but few have utilized this option. As a consequence of this, the PRC believes this practice of flexibility should continue, and that efforts should be made to ensure that all units are aware of this option.

Recommendation 12:

The Office of Administration and Planning should continue, and possibly expand, its practice of grouping and/or clustering units for review.

In addition to having reviews of units, units that share an intellectual or functional component have been grouped during both the first and second cycles to create an increased synergy through the review (for example, basic life sciences units, language and literature units, have been grouped). These groupings have often shared a common review committee and/or team of external reviewers, usually expanded to accommodate the larger number of units. In addition, units have been clustered by year to create a similar consideration of common themes and potential tie-ins across units (for example, chemistry has been reviewed during the same year as the basic life sciences; area studies programs were reviewed at the same time as language and literature programs, etc.). The impact of these groupings and clusters has been substantial, and should be continued and possibly expanded for the third cycle.

Although there has been some suggestion to conduct reviews around even broader themes, such as undergraduate student life, graduate student life, information systems, etc., the PRC is of the opinion that it is at the unit level where fundamental change must ultimately take place, and therefore moving the process away from this established structure—even temporarily—could confuse the purpose and weaken the effectiveness of the process. Grouping and clustering units achieves a similar purpose, and this technique should be carefully considered in scheduling units for review for the third cycle. The advantage of having these types of reviews continue to be a part of the regular program review process is that they encourage the Council—and the University—to develop a more comprehensive and creative view of the University and thereby avoid becoming trapped in a narrow “silo” perspective of units.

To date the following groupings or clusters have been pursued and these should be reviewed and supplemented as appropriate:

Groups (same subcommittee):

- Basic life sciences on both campuses
- Art History and Art Theory and Practice
- Libraries
- Admissions, Financial Aid and Registrar

Clusters (same year, different subcommittees):

- Chemistry and Basic Life Sciences
- Economics and MEDS
- Theatre and Performance Studies
- Languages and Literature and Area Studies

Recommendation 13:

Clearer guidelines and procedures for internal reviewers will be developed.

Both academic and administrative reviewers could benefit from additional guidance, for example, information on “best practices” of reviews gleaned from previous reviewers, examples of well-done

reviews, etc. The Office of Administration and Planning should develop a set of general guidelines and perhaps an orientation session for internal review subcommittees. Recommendations should be offered on such issues as who should be interviewed, how much interaction to have with the unit while developing the report, what the final report should include, etc. Of course, it is generally easier to write uniform guidelines for academic units (e.g., all units with PhD programs should provide statistics on placement) than for administrative units. But over the fourteen years of program review, there are some practices that have been found to work well. Since PRC members are constantly changing, these best practices should be identified and written down to ensure their application.

Recommendation 14:

Once the report has been finalized by the PRC, but before it is forwarded to the administration, the report will be shared with the unit head to check for and correct any factual errors. It will be clearly communicated that the unit head should not discuss this report with the line administrator at this time, since they will not yet have had the opportunity to see it.

Because program review is built upon a foundation of perceptual data, and in the absence of other types of data to counterbalance these inputs, it is not unanticipated that a few factual errors based on misperceptions may crop up in the final reports despite the best efforts of the PRC to avoid these. These errors can create issues of credibility with the unit and weaken the unit's willingness to take seriously the recommendations of the review. As a strategy to address this, prior to presenting the report to the administration and others, the PRC should send a copy to the unit head and allow him or her to respond.

Recommendation 15:

Units will be asked to identify external reviewers substantially in advance of the unit's review in order to try to schedule them earlier in the process.

External reviewers should be brought in as soon as possible after completion of the self-study report. In some cases, it may be possible to have the external reviewers come during the Fall, although this will require coordination with internal reviewer schedules. It is essential that the internal reviewers continue to meet with the external reviewers, both at the beginning and end of their visit.

Additional Recommendations for Academic Unit Reviews

Recommendation 16:

For larger schools that are not considered a single unit for the purpose of program review, the Dean's Office for that school should be reviewed as part of the program review process.

During the first cycle, Dean's Offices were included in the schedule and were reviewed through the regular program review process. However, following the completion of the first cycle, a change was made in how Dean's Offices were reviewed, and the responsibility for formally reviewing them was moved to the Provost's Office. However, the Committee believes that a review of the Dean's Offices would again be beneficial, not only to the Office but also to the units within the School. Such reviews could provide clarity on the strategic plan of the School, could identify useful suggestions on ways communication between the Dean's Office and the units could be improved, processes refined, etc. For some schools that are reviewed as a unit (e.g., Law School, School of Education and Social Policy, etc.) a review of the Dean's Office generally happens as part of that review. Including a review of the larger schools' dean's offices would thus provide more balanced information on school operations across the University.

Recommendation 17:

In setting the review schedule, deans should be urged to consult with their chairs as to appropriate timing for the next cycle.

Departments do not feel that they have enough input into the timing of their review. The current process is that the Office of Administration and Planning contacts all deans and line vice presidents to solicit their input on preferred timing each cycle of reviews as they are about to be initiated. The schedule is then set for the full seven-year cycle. At the start of each year in that cycle, the Office of Administration and Planning again contacts the dean and line vice president to check whether there have been any circumstances such as the change in unit leadership that would warrant an adjustment in the original schedule. Deans/vice presidents should consult with the individual units as to their preferences, understanding that a university level schedule has to be developed that balances the number of units reviewed each year.

Recommendation 18:

It will be reiterated to academic units that they can propose external reviewers in subgroups to ensure coverage of subfields within the department.

Units have utilized this option extensively but it will be reemphasized for those who may not be aware of this option.

Additional Recommendations for Administrative Unit Reviews

Recommendation 19:

For administrative units, the Office of Administration and Planning should try to include at least one administrator as a member of the review committee.

In previous cycles, program review committees have included both faculty and administrators as members, and committee membership has been based on recommendations solicited from the University's leadership and members of the PRC. Based on interview and survey feedback, we believe the University should try to ensure that at least one member of the subcommittee for an administrative unit is either from an administrative unit or has a background relevant to the unit under review.