

# **Program Review Council Guide**

## **2021-2022**

## 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 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, Senior Vice President for Business and Finance, Vice President of Administration and Planning, Vice President for Research, Dean of The Graduate School, and Vice Provost for Administration), and with the Board of Trustees.

This guide outlines the roles and responsibilities of the Program Review Council.

## PROGRAM REVIEW COUNCIL

The Program Review Council presides over the Program Review process and ensures that a balanced and consistent process is followed for each unit's review. The Program Review Council functions as a key oversight role for the Program Review process. Key responsibilities of Program Review Council members are to:

1. Read all external reviewers' reports (~15 per year)
2. Discuss reports and findings with internal review teams (8-10 meetings per year)
3. Provide input to develop actionable Implementation Agreement recommendations
4. Identify cross-cutting issues that span multiple reviews

Members of the Program Review Council are expected to judiciously maintain confidentiality during the process; their guidance and discernment is foundational to the review process.

## APPOINTMENT

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 have served on at least one internal review team prior to participating on 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 number of 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 the Council, 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.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

In the course of conducting the Program Review process, members of the Program Review Council are privy to sensitive information in the form of data, survey results, reports, and discussions. The intention of Program Review is not to publicly criticize 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.**

Occasionally, Council members 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, the review should not be discussed 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.

## MEETINGS

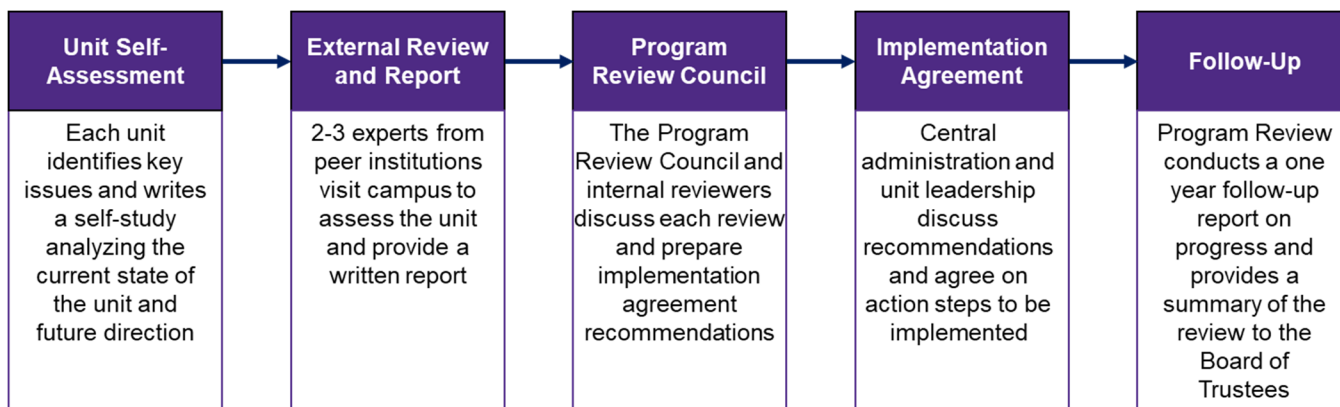
Program Review Council meetings are generally scheduled for three hours, and two units are discussed at each meeting. The Program Review Council members are expected to be familiar with the External Reviewer Reports prior to each meeting. During the discussion, the Program Review Council and internal 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.

The Program Review Office stewards the Program Review process and provides support to the Chair and the Program Review Council. For any questions on process or access to the materials, the Program Review Office provides guidance and additional information as appropriate. The Program Review Office welcomes feedback on the process or suggestions for improvement from the Chair and Program Review Council throughout the year, along with any notes or updates specific for that meeting.

## PROGRAM REVIEW PROCESS

All academic departments, major research centers, and administrative units at Northwestern University are reviewed approximately once every ten years through the Program Review process. For each review, a team of four to five reviewers, consisting of both external experts and Northwestern faculty or staff, meet with faculty/staff and key constituents of the unit before providing a written summary report of their recommendations. These recommendations form the basis of an implementation agreement with specific action items for the unit. The process is guided by the Office of Administration and Planning and overseen by the Program Review Council (PRC), a rotating committee of senior faculty and administrators who have been nominated from across the university.



### I. Unit Self-Assessment

Leading up to the review, the unit undergoes a period of self-assessment. Each unit undergoing review provides a list of key issues faced by the unit, which helps inform the unit's self-study. The self-study is an analysis of the current state of the unit that identifies specific issues critical to the further improvement of the unit and the fundamental questions that should drive strategic planning for the unit moving forward. The key issues list and self-study are informed by data collection and analysis. The Office of Administration and Planning works with the unit under review to define, collect, and analyze key performance indicators, such as student composition, student satisfaction, student performance, and faculty performance. The Office of Administration and Planning also administers and analyzes faculty/staff surveys (and customer feedback surveys, if applicable) that serve as input to the review.

## PROGRAM REVIEW PROCESS

### **II. Review Visit and External Reviewers' Report**

External and internal reviewers jointly meet with faculty, administrators, staff, and students (as appropriate) to gain further insight into the state of the unit and discuss key issues. The review team also meets with the Dean/line Vice President of the unit and members of central administration to share their initial impressions. Following the review, a report is written by the external reviewers and may include an addendum by the internal reviewers. This document is an analysis of the review materials as well as insight gained from the meetings with key individuals from the unit. It includes specific recommendations for the continuous improvement of the unit. The review team's report and recommendations are submitted to the unit under review for fact-checking. The internal reviewers present the report to the Program Review Council for questions and clarifications.

### **III. Program Review Council**

The Program Review Council is a group of senior faculty and administrators that oversees the Program Review process. The Program Review Council is nominated based upon recommendations from Deans and Vice Presidents. The role of the Program Review Council is to review all external reports and guide the development of actionable implementation agreements. Once external reports are received, the Program Review Council reviews the reports and meets with the internal reviewers for an in-depth discussion and presentation of the report. The Program Review Council is responsible for drafting the implementation agreement that follows the discussion.

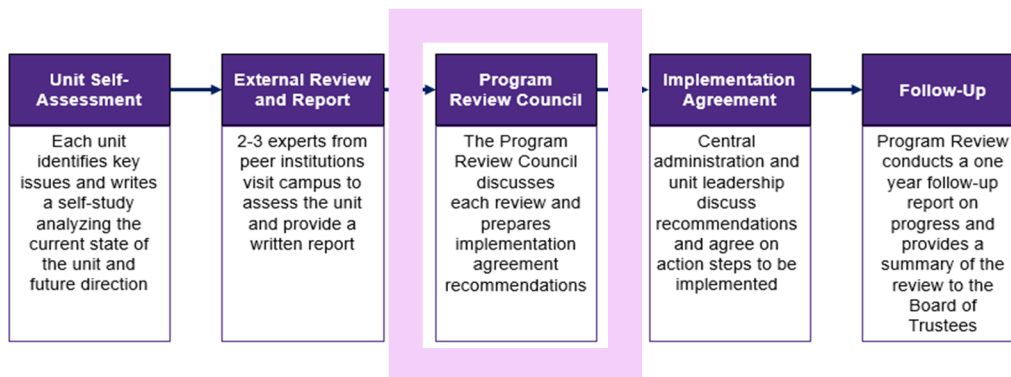
### **IV. Implementation Agreement**

In each review, unit leadership, the Dean/Line Vice President, and central administration discuss the recommendations from the external reviewer reports and agree on a set of specific actions to implement.

### **V. Follow-Up**

After the review, an executive summary of each external reviewer report and implementation agreement is prepared and provided to the Board of Trustees. One year following the review, the Office of Administration and Planning conducts a follow-up report on the progress of the implementation agreement for the President, Provost, and Board of Trustees. The Provost, Dean, or Line Vice President monitors progress on the implementation of the recommendations.

## PROGRAM REVIEW COUNCIL DISCUSSION



Following 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 review, 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 the External Reviewers' Report and a draft Implementation Agreement, based on the recommendations in the External Reviewers' 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

In preparation for the discussion, the Program Review Council should read the External Reviewers' Report and the draft Implementation Agreement. As it is expected that the Program Review Council has read the External Reviewers' 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 presentation should provide some context from the review visit to the external reviewers' report. 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.



## PROGRAM REVIEW COUNCIL DISCUSSION

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. While some recommendations for the unit may be reasonable for the field, they may not fit with University strategy or reality. The External Reviewers' 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.

During the discussion, it is the role of the Program Review Council to ask critical questions to better understand the issues facing the unit and to best shape the Implementation Agreement. All schools and units have different structures and functions. Members of the Program Review Council are from all over the University, and one of the benefits of serving on the Council is learning about other parts of the University. One of the advantages of having members from outside the unit discuss each review is that they bring a fresh perspective to the issues facing a unit.

Please below several questions for Council members to consider in crafting recommendations:

- Are the recommendations clear and concise?
- Will these recommendations help the unit improve?
- Are the recommendations listed in order of priority, with the most important/urgent recommendations listed first?
- Is it clear who is expected to lead the change process?
- Are there areas of the review findings that were not sufficiently covered in the implementation agreement that we need to address?
- If my unit received these recommendations, how would I react? What questions would I have?

### 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 leader, Dean/line Vice President, and central administration.

## PROGRAM REVIEW COUNCIL DISCUSSION

### D. Meeting Timing and Format

Program Review Council meetings are generally scheduled in the Spring-Summer 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.

### E. Evaluation of Process

The Program Review process itself strives for continuous improvement. Each year, a survey is sent to all members of the Program Review Council. This evaluation is intended to assess the quality of the process (i.e., if the structure of the process was sufficient in providing meaningful insight for assessment), as well as satisfaction with the logistics (i.e., timely receipt of materials and other information). The Program Review Office greatly appreciates candor in this feedback so that it may continue to refine its processes. These evaluation forms are kept confidential. Composite results and trends in the evaluations may be used during the review cycle planning process and to improve the process for the future.