

From the May 2003 AAHE Bulletin.com

Is program review a waste of time? Many faculty members may secretly (or not so secretly) believe so, but if institutions structure the review process properly, the exercise can result in wins for all involved.

System offices, trustees, and presidents at many institutions have responded to demands for accountability by mandating program reviews. These reviews, analogous to professional accreditations, are often met with skepticism by the faculty. "Why do we need to be reviewed? What is the problem? Why should outsiders review us when we know this place? Is anything actually going to happen as a result of this review?"

Nancy
Kleniewski

These questions reveal a set of predictable fears, including a fear of outside interference in departmental activities, fear of discussing problems in public, fear of looking bad in comparison to other departments, fear of departmental cuts or reorganization, and fear of wasting a time on a useless exercise. What faculty members need to know is that the program review process can be a positive experience and it can help them meet departmental goals.

What are the key characteristics of good program reviews and how can those reviews result in mutual gains for administrations and faculty? I offer the following recommendations.

A good program review process is systematic.

A wise institution avoids program reviews triggered by crises. Instead, every department takes its turn in the cycle (perhaps every five years), with a calendar published in advance so all department chairs or program directors know which programs will be reviewed and when. The criteria to be examined are expressed clearly in writing and focus on the big picture. The same data are analyzed for each program, although additional information supplied by the departments is welcomed. Department chairs are given a checklist of steps and a schedule of the review process, accompanied by models or outlines that they can use as starting points.

Faculty members can more readily accept a review process if they perceive it as fair; that is systematic, transparent, and consistent. Advanced discussion of the review criteria and data collection process can help different kinds of academic units ensure that their strengths will be appropriately documented. If faculty members are encouraged to collaborate in data collection with the institutional research staff, they feel more in control of the process and can actively seek ways to measure their effectiveness. Administrators can eliminate some of the drudgery of the process by providing standardized schedules, checklists of steps to complete, and models from past reviews.

Administration Win: The review process gains greater acceptance.

Faculty Win: Faculty members can present their unit in the best possible light.

All Win: Departments become partners with the process rather than adversaries or unwilling subjects of investigation.

A good program review begins with a serious self-study.

The most valuable result of a program review is the conversation among department members about their collective work. This may be a new conversation for many faculty members, particularly in the arts and sciences disciplines, which may not have professional accrediting bodies. A good program review process invites the department to set goals for itself - particularly dealing with student learning outcomes - and to measure progress toward those goals. It challenges the faculty to examine core issues such as curriculum, alignment with the institutional mission, faculty productivity, and the teaching/learning environment, while allowing some flexibility about how the self-study will be conducted and the results presented.

The gains from a department self-study can be enormous. Perhaps the most significant is that an honest evaluation of the department's strengths and weaknesses often reveals previously undocumented strengths. The self-study process can also lead to improvements in departmental functioning. Focused discussions encourage faculty members to take a global view of the department (in the words of the work of AAHE's Forum on Faculty Roles & Rewards, turning "my work" into "our work"). The self-study's focus on students and learning outcomes can lead to a collaborative spirit and shared ownership of such issues as teaching methods and assessment tools. Examining the curriculum in the context of student needs helps departments update curricula with a minimum of departmental politics. In addition, the teamwork required to produce a self-study can build new leadership among the faculty and help chairs to delegate tasks.

Administration Win: Academic units are challenged to align with the institutional mission.

Faculty Win: The faculty recognizes and documents its strengths.

Faculty Win: Members understand their own unit better as the result of describing it to outsiders.

All Win: The development of teamwork and a shared vision in the department.

A good review process makes wise use of external visitors.

The review process usually includes inviting one or more experts in the field to review the self-study and visit the department. The site visit, exit interview, and subsequent written report are the major source of information that reaches the upper administration. Administrations may choose visitors in collaboration with the department under review, have them nominated by a disciplinary association, or invite them from a peer institution. The ideal visitors are relatively senior, established academics from similar departments but without close connections to the faculty in the departments under review.

The role of the visiting team is both to affirm the strengths of the department and to offer suggestions for change. Because the visitors are from the same discipline, they can create a context for the unit, helping faculty members focus on where the discipline is going and how their unit conforms to national practice. Faculty members usually enjoy these visits; they get to display their accomplishments to their peers and talk shop with colleagues in informal settings. The departments benefit from having the visitors present their cases to the administration, given the additional legitimacy of an outsider's view. The visitors also provide legitimacy to support changes in program operation, because the source of the recommendations for change is other faculty members rather than administrators.

Administration Win: The visitors take an objective view of the program and can give suggestions from their own experience.

Administration Win: Faculty members may receive suggestions for changes in the department more favorably because the suggestions come from peers.

Faculty Win: Faculty members can get advice about troublesome issues from supportive colleagues in a constructive setting.

Faculty Win: The campus administration can hear the department's story from knowledgeable and disinterested outsiders.

All Win: Everyone is assured that the department is keeping up with changes in the discipline.

A good program review process provides a link to resource allocation.

In fairness, there should be a tangible result of a program review, yet institutions rightly fear making significant resource commitments based on either positive or negative reviews. Significant increases of resources could initiate a feeding frenzy, as every unit thinks that it has the potential to be world class *if only* it had the resources. Significant decreases in resources or the threat of program closure could discourage honesty in the self-study process.

Two areas where institutions might consider increasing resources (either as rewards or as responses to problems) are in faculty positions and equipment. The year following a program review is the ideal time for the dean or provost to allocate an additional faculty position to a department. Because they have just completed a significant conversation about the direction of the department, the faculty can craft a new position to help them move in that direction. Even in institutions whose full-time faculty size is stable (or declining), positions of retired faculty can be held vacant and reallocated in concert with program reviews or budget planning processes. If equipment replacement is not already on a defined campus cycle, the program review can provide an opportunity to survey the department's equipment needs and recommend upgrades as necessary.

Administration Win: A systematic look at resource needs helps avoid crisis management and the "squeaky wheel" syndrome.

Faculty Win: Relatively resource-poor departments can have their needs publicly assessed on a regular basis.

All Win: A system of program review can assist decision making about resource allocation.

A program review will not always result in predominantly positive changes for an individual unit. Some programs will inevitably be downsized or eliminated. Some programs will be selected to grow at the perceived expense of other programs. It is, however, possible to make these decisions in a less politicized and contentious way when they are the result of a consensus forged with departmental faculty through the program review process. Engaging the faculty in planning its own future is perhaps the biggest win of a program review.

This article is based on a paper the author presented at the AAHE's 2002 Assessment Conference in Boston.

Nancy Kleniewski is provost and vice president for academic affairs at Bridgewater State College. Contact her at nkleniewski@bridgew.edu.