

Program review at Southeast: Toward a meaningful framework for quality assurance

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Purpose

This paper draws on literature and best practices to propose a methodology for academic program review at Southeast Missouri State University.

Introduction

One of the most pressing issues facing higher education in the United States is the quality of academic programming (Bresciani, 2006; Bok, 2013). The quality of academic programs is central to the vitality of any university in terms of its ability to increase revenue, decrease expenses, enhance the quality of the student learning experience, and strengthen its reputation (Dickeson, 2010). Although program review processes have been in place in North American universities for more than 80 years (see Skolnik, 1989), it is only within the last 45 years that the quality assurance of academic programs has become more “prominent, organized, and influential” (p. 627). Commonly, universities dedicate much time and resource into reviewing and reporting the quality of their academic programs in order to satisfy the requirements of states, federal agencies, and accrediting bodies (Subramony, Wallace, and Zack, 2015). In an era of financial constraints, the program review process is perceived by many as a mechanism for justifying the existence of a program, or in other words, “survival of the fittest” and “punitive” (Patton et al., 2008, p. 3). Furthermore, when program review processes are carried out in isolation of other institutional effectiveness activities, such as strategic planning, budgeting, and assessment of learning, there is less potential for the program review process to be a catalyst for positive change. This paper draws on literature and best practices to propose a meaningful model of program review: one that focuses on strengths, continuous improvement, and that integrates program review within the wider context of institutional effectiveness.

Defining academic program review

Academic program review is a process of gathering and analyzing information about a specific academic program for the purposes of guiding the broader activities of the institution. Patton et al. (2009) described the process as being a “miniature accreditation self-study within a designated area of campus” that helps universities take stock, celebrate successes, and plan for the future (p. 8). A more specific definition is offered by Brown University (2012).

The purpose of academic program review is to improve the quality of academic units individually and the university as a whole. Academic review provides an opportunity for each academic unit to reflect, self-assess, and plan; they generate in-depth communication between the unit and the university administration, thus offering a vehicle to inform planning and decision-making... By stimulating program planning and encouraging strategic development, academic program reviews can be a central mechanism to advance the University mission. (p. 4)

While there is no universally-accepted definition for academic program review, there are three common features of program review seen across the sector. These include: 1) an internal, faculty-driven self-study; 2) an external evaluation carried out by a peer or committee from another institution; and 3) a comprehensive evaluation of the two studies, resulting in an action plan. Most program reviews are carried out over a six- to 12-month span, but some can take much longer (Hanover, 2012, pp. 2-3).

While the purposes of program review include meeting external quality assurance requirements and demonstrating a “systematic planning process”, they do not necessarily need to be the primary function of

the program review process (Patton et al., 2009, p. 9). The program review process can be designed with other, more motivating factors as its principal goals, such as celebrating excellence, improving the student learning experience, and contributing to the mission of the institution.

Program review at Southeast Missouri State University

The purpose and process for academic program review is outlined in the University's Faculty Handbook.

The overall purpose of program reviews is to assess each unit's program quality and effectiveness; to stimulate program planning and improvement; to continue to fulfill our mission to the students, communities, and people that we serve; and to encourage the unit's development in strategic directions that reflect the University's priorities. The fundamental principle in program review is the use of multiple measures to assess programs. (Faculty Handbook, 2017, p. 73)

The process for program review follows a series of steps, which can be summarized as follows.

1. Datasets are collected and verified between the Provost's Office, Institutional Research, and the department/college.
2. Datasets are reviewed by the department and a report is drafted in response.
3. Independent review of the data and the report is conducted by the chairperson and the dean.
4. Analysis of the report and responses is carried out by the University-level Faculty Advisory Committee for Academic Program Review, and recommendations are made to the provost;
5. Independent review of the report and all recommendations are carried out by the provost, and recommendations are made to the president;
6. Review of the report and all recommendations is carried out by the president, and an independent recommendation is made to the Board of Regents;
7. Action is taken by the Board of Regents on recommendations from the president.

The Faculty Handbook provides guidance for what should be included in the report (step 2 above).

- a. Size, scope, and productivity of the program;
- b. Revenue and other resources generated by the program;
- c. Costs and other expenses associated with the program;
- d. Contribution to University Studies (general education program) and courses serving other programs;
- e. External demand;
- f. Quality of program inputs;
- g. Quality of program outputs;
- h. Currency of curriculum;
- i. Impact, justification, and overall essentiality to the Southeast mission.

The Faculty Handbook also advises that "departments planning for the future" should consider the following topics in their report.

- a. The economic and programmatic impact of enhancing or eliminating majors;
- b. The impact of eliminating majors, but keeping the University Studies courses in a major;
- c. The impact of merging similar majors, such as the various education majors offered in various colleges;
- d. The impact of eliminating elective courses;
- e. The impact of partnering or collaborating with other institutions to offer programming;
- f. The impact of possible course redesign;
- g. The impact of the use of technology.

Seven principles toward enhancing program review at Southeast

Table 1 outlines a proposed set of guiding principles to enhance the program review process at Southeast Missouri State University. Figure 1 (overleaf) outlines a flowchart to describe what the proposed process at Southeast may look like, using the ‘seven principles’ methodology.

Table 1. Seven principles toward enhancing program review

Principle	Description	Link to literature or practice
<i>Principle 1:</i> Program Review is a mechanism for identifying and sharing successes.	Departments prepare a small number (two or three) short case studies describing excellent or impactful activities. These can be used by the University to showcase and share good practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patton et al. (2009) suggests the important of identifying successes.
<i>Principle 2:</i> Program Review is a supported process that provides important professional development for faculty and staff.	A program review handbook, templates for case studies (see Element 1), templates for the self-study and action plan, and other resources are available for departments to use. Kick-off meetings and workshops are offered as team-based opportunities for departments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examples of program review handbooks: Brown University, St. John’s University, UC Berkeley; The University of Northampton facilitates departmental workshops to support faculty during program review.
<i>Principle 3:</i> Program Review leads to focused action planning.	Rather than addressing a wide range of possible issues, each department will elect a small set of specific issues to explore that are important to the university and to the programs. These issues will form the basis of the action plan.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> See Brown University program review process (2012). Bash (2015) and Subramony, R., Wallace, S., and Zack, C. (2015) focus on planning.
<i>Principle 4:</i> Program Review relies on efficient and consistent use of data about the program.	A large set of data about the program will be available to the department, as well as pre-made charts and graphs for commonly used components (e.g. freshman retention over the last five year). Additional data can be made available on request. In addition to data about the program, data about the industry, related job market, and field of work, generally, is provided for reflection and comment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utah Valley University provides data sets, charts, and graphs to departments for review. Additionally, departments can commission Burning Glass reports for various job markets.
<i>Principle 5:</i> Program Review is carried out and communicated in a clear, succinct, and consistent manner.	The self-study is guided by a series of questions, and authors are encouraged to keep responses short and focused. A template is provided (see Element 2) to support authors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patton et al. (2009) and Dickeson (2010) provide sample questions.
<i>Principle 6:</i> Program Review requires external input to provide additional perspectives on the program.	External input is required as a key component to each review cycle. This includes an external review from a peer at another institution, and can also include input from students, graduates, employers, or peers working within the University. Reviews by the chairperson, dean, provost and president are carried out as normal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hanover (2012) provides an overview of best practices, which suggest external reviews are common features of program review.
<i>Principle 7:</i> Program review is integrated into the wider context of institutional effectiveness.	Program review enshrines data from student learning assessment. Action plans (see Element 3) are used to inform the university academic masterplan, and recommendations made throughout the program review cycle are used to prioritize budgetary considerations, faculty development needs, and support for students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subramony, R., Wallace, S., and Zack, C. (2015) Many sources cite examples of program review that includes student learning outcomes.

Stage 1: Preparation

- Data is collected and verified by the Provost's Office.
- The Associate Provost hosts a Kick-Off meeting with the Department.
- Key activities and milestones agreed and scheduled.
- External reviewer/s identified and contacted.



Stage 2: Case Studies

The Associate Provost facilitates a short, interactive workshop for the Department with the aim of identifying and celebrating good practice.



Stage 3: Self Study

The Associate Provost facilitates a short, interactive workshop for the Department that focusing on compiling and drafting the self study report.



Stage 4: Action Plan

The Associate Provost facilitates a short, interactive workshop for the Department that focuses on constructing an action plan for quality enhancement.



ACADEMIC PROGRAM REVIEW PROCESS [PILOT]

Stage 5: Submit

The Department draft and submits the following reports to its reviewers.

- ✓ Case Studies
- ✓ Self Study
- ✓ Action Plan

Stage 11: Integration

Recommendations are integrated into Institutional Effectiveness activities, e.g.

- Budget Review
- Academic Master Planning



Stage 6: External Reviews

The Department submits full report (all three sections) to the following reviewers for their comments and recommendations.

- ✓ External Reviewer/s
- ✓ Department Chair
- ✓ Dean

Stage 7: Committee Review

The full report is reviewed by the Faculty Advisory Committee for Program Review, who provide recommendations to the Provost.

Stage 8: Presentation to Provost

- The Program team presents its review, along with input from their external reviewers, to the Provost.
- The Provost reviews the report and Committee recommendations.
- The Provost provide recommendations to the President.

Stage 9: President's Review

- The full report is reviewed by the President, who provides recommendations to the Department and to the University.

Stage 10: Department Follow-up

The Associate Provost meets with the Department to discuss recommendations and to implement an action plan.

Version 1: September 2017

Figure 1. Proposed program review process at Southeast

Conclusion

This paper proposed a set of seven guiding principles for enhancing the academic program review process at Southeast Missouri State University. A flowchart was presented that reflects some of the proposed processes and integrated nature of program review into wider institutional effectiveness activities, such as budgeting and planning.

Next steps

It may be possible to pilot this proposed framework in the 2017/2018 academic year, with full implementation occurring in 2018/2019.

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