


To: Dr. Jim Allen  
Director of Assessment

From: Dr. Kimberly Kempf-Leonard   
Chair, Graduate Council Program Review Committee

7 April 2011

cc: Graduate Council

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As per your recommendation, I invited all internal reviewers during AY11 to discuss their experiences, evaluate the current process, and recommend improvements. We met April 4, with many reviewers who were unable to attend sharing their views via email. Several topics were discussed, spurred on by these four initial questions:

1. Were there any difficulties that you definitely want to see addressed?
2. What features of the program reviews do you think are ideal or critical to the process?
3. Do you have suggestions for ways in which the process might be improved?
4. Do you have any ideas about elements we could add to the review that would assist the upper administration in making decisions about resource allocation?

Concerns raised about the process this year included problematic time constraints, lack of clarity about institutional objectives of the review and reviewers' roles, and specific criteria that should be routinely included in reports.

Clear communication about institutional objectives of the process, who does what, and elements that are expected in the final product are seen as essential. Experienced reviewers expressed gratitude to your office for progress in this area, but room for improvement remains. In our view, the goal is a thorough examination of the program during which strengths are identified so that they may be encouraged to continue, and weaknesses are identified so that they may be effectively addressed. Some teams felt obliged, and perhaps even encouraged, *not* to address some weaknesses because of concern IBHE would access reviews. There is consensus that this is the wrong view, and that your office must encourage all diligent reviews.

There was considerable discussion on standardized assessment criteria and whether review teams should be expected somehow to rank programs for resources. We are skeptical that uniform ranking criteria could be applied on a rotating seven year basis to rank programs. We are more supportive that reviewers should not be expected to make the difficult decisions about resources. Reviews might contribute to the final decision, but should only be one factor in such decisions. Moreover, if reviewers are held accountable for those difficult decisions, nobody will agree to participate. In addition to expecting departments to highlight their responses to previous reviews, we would like to see a comparable section in which the Dean and the Provost describe follow through on their previous recommendations.

Overall, our group recommends that there be a single review of programs done jointly by a team consisting of external and internal reviewers. The external reviewers, knowing norms of the discipline, can evaluate programs in ways internal reviewers cannot. Similarly, internal reviewers contribute unique understanding of the institution and college. This would allow for fewer internal reviewers each year, although we consider two the minimum and more for larger reviews. This strategy would allow for a synergy across reviewers' expertise that currently doesn't exist. This combined team would also solve the time constraints encountered this year. We further recommend foregoing printing self-studies, but instead make them available electronically, which would help in multiple ways.

We support linking first-time and experienced reviewers. We recommend internal reviewers be chosen from fields clearly distinct from the program. Too often related reviewers, typically nominees from the department, push a predetermined agenda that is counterproductive to the goal. The external reviewers should provide the disciplinary expertise. Special effort needs to be made to assure they come from comparable institutional settings. We favor a clear division of some tasks, perhaps including some activities which the internal reviewers could complete in advance of the site visit by external reviewers. We think the external reviewers, as paid consultants, should be expected to serve as primary authors of the initial draft of the report.

There is substantial concern that departments have too strong a role in selecting both some of the internal reviewers and all of the external reviewers. Not only does this existing practice have the possibility of distorting the final product, but it also may result in diminished value of reviews by upper administration. We recommend that your office consider new ways of selecting reviewers; in particular, we suggest learning methods at comparable universities that are successful.