

The Academic Program Review Process

Developed for the Armenian State Agrarian University (ASAU)

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Introduction and Purpose of the Academic Review Process

The program review process developed for the Armenian State Agrarian University (ASAU) was designed to identify the core competencies, including strengths and weaknesses of the educational program from the viewpoint of the director of the program and the faculty and staff as well as the opinions of the numerous stakeholders of the program. This stakeholder analysis would be accomplished through interviews between the review team and all of the stakeholders of the program including: faculty and staff, current students (both undergraduate and graduate) and former students and agribusiness professionals who employ the graduates and the interns. This program review process clearly identifies the positive aspects of the program and should be the first step in the accreditation process.

The review process must be sufficiently funded to allow the solicitation of a highly qualified external program review team of 3-4 individuals lead by a highly experienced senior academic. Selecting experts in the subject area and in program review principles are an essential component of a successful program review.

Overview of the Review Process

There are several steps in the review process, some of which are internal and others are external to the unit being reviewed. The **internal** process is primarily segmented into two areas: Departmental and Administration of the program. The administration of the program being reviewed must make a commitment to the process, both in terms of providing resources to adequately fund the review process and in support of the process itself. ***Without complete administrative support of the review, little value will be realized from the process.*** It should be made clear that the administration is not guaranteeing that

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the resources will be available to make changes suggested by the review, but rather that the review process itself is a valuable outcome. Departmental commitment must also be made to the review process. Significant time must be dedicated to the development of the **self-study review document** that outlines the educational program, identifies faculty and staff including their education and experiences and provides detailed information about the program. The review document allows the review team to quickly understand both the goals and objectives of the program being reviewed while preparing the staff and faculty for the review activity. The faculty must clearly identify in this document what they believed to be the goals and objectives of the program, by considering the strengths and weaknesses of the current educational program and as well as the opportunities and threats facing the program from exterior forces and situations. Specifically the self-study should contain the following sections:

- a. Background and History of the Program.
- b. Strategic Plan of the unit being reviewed. (Should include goals, objectives, strategies and measures of success).
- c. Identification of stakeholders of the program including graduate programs and employers of graduates.
- d. Faculty and Staff of the unit being reviewed (faculty vitas may be included as an appendix).
- e. Description of the undergraduate program (description of courses may be included as an appendix) and documentation of academic performance and student outcome measures (benchmarks) in place.
- f. Description of the graduate program (description of courses may be included as an appendix) and documentation of academic performance and student outcome measures (benchmarks) in place.
- g. Description of other educational programs such as internships.
- h. Student enrollment profile, admissions criteria and procedures.
- i. Student placement information including contact information for employers of graduates and measures of alumni satisfaction.
- j. Financial Resources of the Program.
- k. Evaluation of effectiveness of current program and actions identified to improve the program.
- l. Questions or Issues to be addressed by the Review Team.

This review document should be initiated approximately 4-6 months before the review team visit is scheduled. A draft of the self-study should be distributed to the faculty and comments and edits encouraged. The final review document should be delivered to the review team at least one month before the review team is scheduled on-site so they have adequate opportunity to study the document and present questions should they have any.

Identification of program stakeholders is imperative to a successful program review. University administration, departmental faculty, current students, former students and industry representatives that employ graduates should be identified and contacted to solicit their participation in the study. It is natural for some of the stakeholder groups to view the review as a summative action, so it must be made clear to the stakeholders that considerable formative actions can come from the program review. The stakeholders must be informed that the purpose of the review is to create an assessment of the strengths of the program and identify major contributions made through the educational program. Thus it is imperative to carefully set expectations for the review process with stakeholders and with staff and faculty. It is natural for faculty (and departmental administration) to be somewhat apprehensive of the process. Everyone (both internal and external) will be taking an intense in-depth view of the department's activities and it is natural to be somewhat apprehensive. The process will identify strengths and weaknesses, but this process is critical to growth and development of high quality programs.

Components of the External Review Process

The **external** component of the review process is completed by the review team. The review process begins for the review team by careful reading of the self-study to familiarize them with the goals of the departmental program. There are several components that are necessary to the successful completion of the review process:

- 1) **Selection of the review team** is an essential component of a successful educational program review. The review team must be consist of outside experts familiar with the review process, the discipline of the program being reviewed and must have extensive experience in teaching and educational program administration. Review team members should be carefully selected. A team leader is essential to the success of the review. The team leader must meet the requirements of the review team and also possess leadership skills both with educational administration and with industry stakeholders.

Review team members should be solicited from a broad base of competent experts and evaluated using a pre-determined evaluation method. For a typical review project three criteria

(plus a general “other factors” category) should be identified and weightings developed. For example, criteria could be: Experience in Program Teaching and Administration (50% weight), Experience in Academic Program Reviews (20%), Overall Quality of Academic Credentials (20%), Other Factors deemed important to the review team(10%).

An announcement of the call for reviewers should be broadly distributed in appropriate subject matter and higher education publications such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and advertised through the list serve of subject matter specialists. A period of time suggested to be at least 2 months should be allocated to soliciting these applications for evaluation with 2 weeks for evaluation of the applications. The review team members selected must bring considerable program review experience and technical subject matter expertise to the review process. Selection of the team leader should follow these criteria with the additional requirement of demonstrated leadership in teaching administration. This experience base allowed the review team to quickly and thoroughly understand the positions of the stakeholders. Review team members must be able to get the important information from the stakeholders in an efficient manner during the actual review process that identifies the strengths of the program and opportunities for improvement. The importance of being able to work with all stakeholders and quickly identifying the core competencies of the program cannot be emphasized enough.

- 2) The **pre-review on-site visit** the review team leader is very valuable and should be scheduled approximately 2-4 weeks before the actual review takes place. Each of the stakeholder groups should be visited and the review process explained. This is an opportunity for the team leader to give the stakeholders an idea of the types of questions the group will be asking. The review team should develop a profile of potential questions that would likely be asked during the review interview sessions. The stakeholders are then able to prepare for the review team. The team leader should also meet with the current and former students to explain the review process and provide them with typical questions that they would be asked during the review interviews. The review team leader should also meet with the rector during the pre-review on-site visit to be sure the administration has clearly provided the objective for the review process.
- 3) The **Review Report Document** generated by the review team is designed to synthesize the inputs received from all sources and outlines the strengths and weaknesses while identifying the core competencies of the academic program. The general outline for the review document is:

1. Executive Summary
2. Objectives of the Program Review
3. Overview of the Review Process
4. Summary of the information obtained from individual stakeholders
5. Review Team's Overall Assessment of the Academic Program
6. Recommendations for Sustaining and Enhancing the competitive advantage of the academic program

The executive summary of the review highlights the most important findings of the educational program review. This executive summary should be no longer than two pages and identify the most important elements from the program review. The program review report should then specifically identify the objectives of the program review. The overview of the review process helps the readers of the report to know the how the review was conducted, who was interviewed from the academic program, and the group of stakeholders who were interviewed for the review. The information, presented in summary form, from each stakeholder group allows the reader of the review report to understand the varying opinions and attitudes of the various groups.

The review team's overall assessment summarizes their impressions both in terms of strengths and in providing areas where opportunities exist or improvement should be initiated based on the information from all stakeholders. The review document may include only summative comments synthesized from all interviews and the self-review document, depending on whether the document is going to be used only as a summative effort or if it is designed to include formative elements. If the review document is designed to include formative analysis, then the recommendations section should be based on what the review team observed, plus the integration of the suggestions for improvement.

Finally, the appendix of the review report should include an agenda of the review process and the curriculum vitae for each of the reviewers.

Recommendations for Reviewers

The most important (and most difficult) job of the review team is to synthesize the various streams of data from all the different stakeholder groups. There exists a tendency to overvalue the comments of a few more forthright stakeholders rather than to consider the overall synthesis of the responses. It is suggested that the review team schedule time *each day* during the review, to work on

this synthesis, as a group. It is imperative that the final overview and recommendations consider all aspects of the review process.

A second recommendation is for the reviews to be sure there is enough time at the end of the review that a draft report can be formulated by the group. While Google docs and other electronic authoring and conferencing software allow review team members to communicate after the review, the best time to product the summary of the review and is immediately after the review process is completed.

Thirdly, review team members should ask about the selection criteria for stakeholders that were interviewed. For example, if ten students are presented for the reviewers to interview as student stakeholders, the review team should ask how many students were invited to participate or how they were selected to be interviewed. There is a natural tendency for academic administrators to identify stakeholders who are pleased with the program output and the skills demonstrated by students. If possible, stakeholders who are not on the list for interviewers should be identified and their responses added to the review process.

Finally, the most difficult part of the review process is to formulate the recommendations. Reviewers are encouraged to think broadly and not to be confined by the “what is” of the program review and to try to develop recommendations for future initiatives that help the academic unit create new competitive advantage built on the existing and easily extended core competencies.

Measures /Indicators used in the Review Process

Although the final review document should synthesize responses from the entire program review, the most helpful recommendations should also refer to indicators (data) collected by the review process. While the review process may often solicit “soft” data that show stakeholders’ attitudes and beliefs, the reviewers should be careful to observe, collect and report data that supports these beliefs. For example, if a business representative reports that their business is highly impressed with graduates of an academic program, the review team members should press for data. Following are some example questions that could be used to collect data from business stakeholders who have hired graduates of the academic program:

- How many of these graduates were hired by your firm?
- Could you give some examples of how graduates that were hired progressed in your firm and how specifically did they demonstrate success?

- Which of the skills identified as important in the selection of these graduates did they use on the job?
- How did the employed graduates use the skills taught in the educational program in your business setting could you please give some examples?

By carefully developing questions that provide data, the review team can support recommendations made in their assessment. While not every situation will provide data, the review team members are encouraged to pay special attention to achieving supportive data.

Challenges and Mistakes to Avoid

Although well qualified (through the selection process) reviewers will have the experience and expertise to analyze the academic program, there are several challenges and mistakes to avoid. The experiences of the authors suggest the following to avoid.

Deciding too fast. It is easy to decide early in the review process (even before the first day) that there is a strength (or weakness) evident in the academic program. Identifying these too early in the process does not allow the review process to work effectively, as opinions of the reviewers are based on few or even single data points. Reviewers are encouraged to keep an open mind until the synthesis of all the information can be completed.

A second challenge or pitfall is that there is a propensity to report strengths that are identified in the self-study as existing without evidence found during the review process. Adherence to the importance of noting the metrics as described earlier will help the review team to be sure that strengths are supported by observed information from stakeholders.

Review teams are often biased to support the strategic initiatives identified by the self-study. This pitfall should be carefully avoided unless substantial evidence exists that shows that the strategic initiatives are in fact, the optimal direction for the academic program. Far too many reviews are submitted that say the strategic plan of the academic unit is “right on track”. It is important to note that the well-done strategic plan considers the core competencies of the academic unit and these initiatives are often formulated only after diligent study by the self-study authors. So, it may be correct to support the strategic initiatives, but reviewers are cautioned to do this only with agreement of the review team members and after careful consideration of the responses of the stakeholders interviewed.

Academic program administration often identifies stakeholders who are quite pleased with the program and positively biased towards supporting the program. Review team members should be

encouraged to ask how the stakeholders were selected for the review interviews. Review team members should ask about the selection criteria and if possible interview other stakeholders in addition to those identified by the self-study.

Departmental Response to the Review Process

The review document will be delivered to the department and to university administration. This document will provide future administrative direction to the project as well as overall assessment of the success of the program reviewed. Educational program planning follows after the review document has been delivered to the department. Hopefully, improvements and opportunities for strategic development of the educational program will follow.

Summary

The educational program review process provides significant opportunity for external reviewers to summarize program elements and provide direction for improvement and sustaining important initiatives. The process requires commitment of resources by internal and external stakeholders, but the payoff can be significant. Careful selection of the review team members, breadth of stakeholders identified, collection of metrics to support the assessment and recommendation and avoidance of pitfalls contribute to a positive program review.

Appendix A. Evaluation of Program Reviewer Applicants

Evaluation of

(Academic affiliation)

Evaluation:

Experience in Academic Program Teaching and Administration **50** _____

Reviewer Comment:

Experience in Academic Program Reviews **20** _____

Reviewer Comment:

Overall Quality of Academic Credentials **20** _____

Reviewer Comment:

Other Factors **10** _____

Reviewer Comment:

Total **100** _____

Appendix B. Suggested questions to be asked of stakeholder groups.

(Would change slightly if business or academic stakeholders)

1. Please explain the nature of the interaction you have had with this program entity being reviewed.
2. Identify and describe the strengths of this academic program as you have experienced it.
3. What are the most outstanding attributes of graduates that you have hired from this program?
4. Have you had any internships or other experiences with current students in this program. Have you had experiences with part time (or full time) workers that are part of this academic program
5. What shortcomings or areas for improvements did you experience with graduates of this program?
6. What improvements could be made to this academic program to better align the graduates with your needs.
7. Please describe the experiences you have had with faculty members from this academic unit.
8. What are the strengths of faculty in this academic program?
9. Are there areas or programs where your company needs skills that are not currently being taught in this academic program.