STANDING COMMITTEES

Academic and Student Affairs Committee

Trends in Academic Reviews at the University of Washington

INFORMATION

This item is for information only.

BACKGROUND

The Graduate School’s Office of Academic Affairs & Planning oversees program reviews for all academic programs approved by the Board of Regents. As new programs have been approved, the Board has expressed interest in understanding more about the program review process and the outcomes of previously approved programs.

This report provides a summary of the academic review process and outcomes of programs reviewed between 2009 and 2015. The report, initially commissioned by the Provost, is meant to inform the board on the program review process and key trends that impact a program's success.

Attachments

1. Academic Reviews 2016 Report
2. UW Graduate School 10-Year Academic Review Process
ACADEMIC REVIEWS
2016 REPORT
Every 10 years, each of the University of Washington’s 369 undergraduate and graduate degree programs undergoes a thorough academic program review. This independent, future-oriented and systematic assessment helps the University measure the quality of its programs and, ultimately, the value of individual degrees. Taken together, these reviews provide University leadership with the information and perspective needed for comprehensive decision-making and planning.

For the individual units, reviews are an occasion to learn what other nationally renowned experts think of their programs and to seek a greater and more nuanced understanding of their strengths and opportunities for growth. Yes, reviews are a requirement. And the process demands a great deal of time. But, reviews can be a valuable opportunity for evaluation and long-term planning.

More specifically, reviews generate a clearer understanding of the unit’s quality of instruction, research and public service, as well as illuminate its contributions to students’ general education and their preparation for society. Reviews highlight the unit’s resource requirements, future objectives and how they can be attained, and how effectively it is fulfilling its role within the UW.

THE ACADEMIC REVIEW PROCESS

This report presents an overview of the academic review process and addresses broad trends in review process, as determined through analysis of all 65 academic program reviews conducted between September 2009 and June 2015. The report’s sections follow the order in which they are addressed during the academic program review:

1. Common unit-defined questions from the self-study
2. Key strengths
3. Chief challenges
4. Review committee recommendations

Stipulated by Executive Order No. 20.4 of the UW Policy Directory and overseen by the Graduate School, the review process typically spans 18 months. The process begins with a self-study in which a unit provides information required for all reviews, such as a list of all degrees offered, details on staffing and a description of how shared governance works within the unit. The unit also explains whether it has a diversity plan and a diversity committee, and describes its outreach strategies and efforts to underrepresented minority students, women, students with disabilities and LGBTQ students. Units address their teaching and learning goals, and related efforts and outcomes, as well as the impact of faculty research and creative work.

Then, the unit addresses its own unit-defined questions, and provides data such as organization charts, budget summaries and information about its faculty. The unit-defined questions, which are described in more detail below, pertain to each unit’s unique focus and work, and are shaped by conversations with deans, directors and chancellors.
The review itself is typically conducted by two UW faculty members, one of whom chairs the committee, as well as two faculty members from peer institutions. This committee is charged with assessing the quality of the unit’s undergraduate and graduate programs and providing faculty with constructive suggestions for strengthening those programs.

Through a site visit, the review committee meets with students, faculty of all ranks, postdoctoral researchers, staff and academic unit leadership, and even alumni and advisory boards. The site visit concludes with a meeting at which the committee shares its initial findings and recommendations with unit members who have been involved with the process and a representative from the Office of the Provost. The second half of the meeting is held in executive session for central administrators and review committee members without the academic unit members present.

Within four weeks of the site visit, the review committee submits its report to the Graduate School. The report is distributed to all participants, including the unit’s dean, chancellor or vice chancellor, the Graduate School Council and the Office of the Provost. (The Graduate School Council is an elected body of faculty from all three campuses that makes recommendations on reviews of existing degree programs, as well as new ones.) The unit responds within one month; and within one quarter, the Graduate School Council reviews all documents generated during the review process, and makes recommendations to the Graduate School dean, who then forwards the report and recommendations to the unit’s leadership.

If the review has gone well, the Graduate School Council will recommend another review in the standard 10 years. Occasionally, the review reveals important shifts either in the academic field at large in which the academic unit is located, or within the academic unit more narrowly. In these cases, the council may recommend another review within a shorter timeframe.

COMMON UNIT-DEFINED QUESTIONS

Unit-defined questions provide an opportunity for academic programs to highlight issues they deem pressing or critical. In other words, what do units hope to learn from the review? After all, as a panel of experts and peers, the review committee is familiar with the discipline at large, best practices and how to best plan for the future. Between 2009 and 2015, the majority of unit-defined questions addressed six broad areas related to:

- Defining program identity and success
  » Some units sought feedback on how to “forge one identity,” while others wanted “a review of the conceptual framework and statement of goals” and assistance with “communicating (its) brand.”
- Maintaining a cutting-edge research profile
  » Departments sought advice on how to define and pursue strategic research areas, maintain excellence in existing programs and increase student exposure and participation in research.
- Maximizing curricular impact
  » For some units, these questions were very specific: “Are courses and mentoring sufficiently rigorous, skill-based and experiential?”
- Responding to resource availability
  » A number of units sought advice on how to buffer the impact of decreased funding on maintaining programmatic and research excellence, the continued ability to recruit and fund leading faculty and top students, and improving facilities
• Improving partnerships and collaborations
  » One department asked how its program might interact with units across the University, and another inquired how it might “embrace responsibility for practice” within its college and more broadly at the UW.

• Planning for the future
  » While some planning and vision questions tended to broad — “How do we grow and improve in the most effective way in the future?” — others specifically referenced planning for the next decade.

The forward-looking nature of these questions demonstrates how unit-defined questions — and the program review process more broadly — can shape strategic planning and departments’ vision for the future. In general, units wanted review committees to speak to how their fields would evolve, how these changes would impact current and new faculty, the ideal structure of their departments and how the departments’ vision aligns with college-wide strategic plans and visions.

KEY STRENGTHS

In their assessment of academic units, review committees identify and document key strengths, which helps the unit’s leadership recognize and build upon them. At the institutional level, a broad understanding of the common strengths of UW academic units informs decision-making and highlights areas for interdepartmental learning and information-sharing. Between 2009 and 2015, six key strengths emerged:

• Outstanding faculty research
  » Faculty across the UW are doing sophisticated, nationally and internationally recognized research, deemed to be outstanding in quality and quantity.

• Competitive students and educational programs
  » UW academic units recruit top graduate students and provide excellent mentoring, academic and research opportunities for them. Students were described as hard-working, intellectually rigorous, and as productive and innovative researchers.
  » The units are committed to exemplary and innovative teaching of undergraduate- and graduate-level curricula, and student assessments affirm the excellence of the programs.

• High-quality leadership and governance
  » Academic leaders were commonly described as dedicated and hard-working, and were praised for their academic vision and commitment to collaboration and transparency.

• Dedicated staff
  » Motivated and effective staff provide needed advising for students, as well as administrative assistance to faculty — freeing more faculty time for research and teaching.

• Collegial environments
  » Some programs were described as having a strong “culture of collaboration” and collegial learning climates.

• Strong collaborative initiatives
  » Many academic units maintain collaborative partnerships with other faculty and units on campus, with off-campus labs, training sites and other universities.
CHIEF CHALLENGES

The academic program reviews identified six challenges facing UW units:

- **Budget and resources**
  - Resource challenges have the greatest impact on people — faculty, staff and students. Decreased budgets mean fewer or smaller raises, lower salaries for faculty and staff, and greater difficulty in funding the start-up costs of labs for new faculty.

- **Succession management**
  - Without succession planning, retirements “have enormous implications” for a program as “unfilled gaps in both the core and instructional research programs” could translate into reduced grants and research opportunities, and, ultimately, the diminished ability to recruit top students.

- **Workload pressures**
  - Programs today simply try to do more and more — which can lead to burnout, loss of good faculty, and challenges in recruiting new faculty.

- **Diversity**
  - Common critiques were the lack of women and underrepresented minorities in both faculty and leadership positions, and the struggle to attract a diverse pool of students.
  - Review committees pointed to behaviors ranging from a systematic lack of planning to address diversity to general avoidance of diversity issues.

- **Space and facilities**
  - An absence of shared common space can be a barrier to unit cohesion, collegiality and focus, especially in interdisciplinary programs.
  - Aging facilities and crowded classrooms and outdated labs not only impact teaching quality and research opportunities, but also constrain growth.

- **Unit cohesion**
  - A small, yet significant, number of review committees cited a general lack of agreement, cohesion, collective mission and focus.
  - These units also faced at least two other challenges from the categories above, such as space issues, key faculty retirements, budgetary constraints or poor communication within the unit.

REVIEW COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The UW asks the review committees to make recommendations that will lead to continuous improvement and sustained or increased academic excellence. Some suggestions are relatively distinct, such as updating a unit’s website, while others are large-scale, such as rethinking the curriculum for an entire degree program. Although some recommendations were highly program-specific, reviews frequently included recommendations in three areas:

- **Vision and strategic planning**
  - The most common recommendation was for units to create a strategic plan to articulate key goals, guide decision-making and set priorities.
  - Through their strategic plans, units should address:
    - Program strengths and identity
    - Faculty and governance
• Curriculum
• Students
• Opportunities to collaborate and think creatively

• Communication within the unit and beyond
  » Improved communication within units would enhance transparency, collaboration and the flow of critical information to faculty, students and staff.

• Diversity
  » The University should reflect the rich diversity of Washington state within all academic units.
  » Some committees addressed the need to improve diversity in the curriculum, especially how “ethnic/racial diversity and issues of diversity seem largely absent from the curriculum and pedagogy.”
  » One review noted that a unit “must enhance the curriculum so it better prepares students both for nuanced and sophisticated conversations in the classroom and for effective careers in multicultural and complex environments.”

Above and beyond these constructive suggestions to the academic units, review committees are mandated to make formal recommendations to the UW regarding the continuance of degree programs under assessment. These recommendations may range from suspension of study entry into degree programs to continuing status with a subsequent review in 10 years (the default period). Some committees may recommend that programs be reviewed again before the 10-year period. Only a small proportion of reviews conducted between 2009 and 2015 resulted in recommendations that the next review be conducted sooner. Committees recommended review for one program three years later, seven programs five years later and one program eight years later. Eighteen of the 65 reviews required interim reports to be submitted before the next review.

It is important to note that a shorter review timeframe, or an interim-report requirement, signals significant transitions within the academic unit, such as leadership or curriculum change. A shorter timeframe is not intended to punitive; rather, its purpose is to provide timely guidance to enable the academic unit to remain on track with its goals.

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UW GRADUATE SCHOOL
10-YEAR ACADEMIC REVIEW PROCESS

Graduate School notifies Dean/Vice Chancellor and academic unit chair to:
• Initiate review
• Confirm timeline

Works with academic unit to:
• Explain process
• Establish reviewer list
• Identify site visit dates

Office of Academic Affairs & Planning (OAAP) works with academic unit to:
• Finalize review committee and site visit dates
• Develop unit-specific questions

Charge meeting:
• OAAP establishes review charge with academic unit representatives, Dean/Vice Chancellor, review committee
• Review dates and process and unit specific questions

Self-study:
• Academic unit writes self-study
• Academic unit establishes site visit agenda

Site visit consists of:
• Committee working dinner
• 1.5 days of meetings with constituents

Exit meeting: part 1
• Preliminary conclusions from review committee
• Opportunity for clarifications and discussion

Exit meeting: part 2
• Executive session
• Recommendation for next review (10 year default)

Final letter:
• Graduate School Council discusses report and response, makes recommendation to Graduate School Dean
• Letter on final recommendation from Graduate School Dean to academic unit chair/director, Dean/Chancellor and Provost.

Reporting:
• Review committee submits report
• Academic unit prepares written response

ATTACHMENT 2