

Accreditation NOTES

Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges
Western Association of Schools and Colleges

What Accreditors Expect from College Program Review

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This Essay is intended to provide a *framework for thought* that institutions can use in designing and implementing program reviews. The term “program review” has been used in higher education to define a wide range of efforts to define and evaluate educational programs. Many colleges in the Western Region have asked the Accrediting Commission to clarify how it uses the idea of program review in the Accreditation Standards.

What is required?

The recently adopted Accreditation Standards that were provide much information that clarifies what the Commission means by program review, but the requirement that institutions engage in program review is a long standing one. The 1996 standards stated that institutions must have “clearly defined processes for establishing and evaluating all educational programs” and to insure “program evaluations are integrated into overall institutional evaluations and planning and are conducted on a regular basis.” (Std. 4.D.1) Institutions are specifically required by Accreditation Standards to “assure the quality and improvement of all instructional courses and programs offered in the name of the institution” (Std. II.A.2) and evaluate all courses and programs through an “ongoing systematic review of their relevance, appropriateness, achievement of student learning outcomes, currency, and future needs and plans.” (Std. II.A.2.e) While there are many other references to program review activities in the standards, these three statements give us a starting point for discussing the purpose and components of a good program review process.

What is program review?

Program review ought to be a “360-degree” review, or a review from all angles and over time, of the effectiveness of an “educational program”. Fundamentally, program review requires an institution to ask important questions about itself and to do some good thinking about its own performance. The quality of questions asked, and the care with which answers to those questions are sought and then analyzed, determine whether a program review will lead to meaningful information that can be used to improve institutional effectiveness and student learning. (While this essay discusses the program review of educational programs, the principles used in program review can be used as well to assess the effectiveness of other institutional efforts that are not directly related to student learning.)

By “program” accreditors mean a certificate or degree program, a coherent educational experience such as a tutoring or orientation program, a co-curricular learning program, or even an academic discipline (e.g., the social science “program.”). Institutions may differ in what they choose to define as a “program”, but the program ought to be coherent enough that its goals and purposes can be defined, and its effectiveness evaluated.

A complete program review *cycle* involves several distinct conceptual steps: a precise and accurate *description* of things as they exist, *evaluation* of whether those things are sufficient or appropriate or “good enough” to satisfy the institution’s pursuit of excellence, *planning* for needed improvement; *implementation* of those plans, and *evaluation of the*

effectiveness of the actions taken in achieving the desired results. Plans for improvement that result from program review should be integrated with or connected to overall institutional plans so that the regular institutional processes for setting directions and timelines, and providing resources for action, support the implementation of those plans that result from those plans. Ultimately, the actions taken to improve programs must themselves be evaluated for effectiveness, perhaps as part of the subsequent program review cycle. Through recurring cycles of program review, an institution can assess its progress in improving effectiveness over time. It can also identify the way in which student enrollment, student progress and student learning are changing over time, providing information important for planning future programmatic changes.

How should program review be conducted?

An institution can start by examining the stated mission, purpose, or goals of a program, and what a program is doing to achieve that mission. Some questions one might ask about the stated mission or purpose of a program are:

- Is the mission or purpose of this program clear as we have defined it?
- Is the mission or purpose appropriate to our students' needs and our communities' needs?
- Is the mission or purpose "current" and relevant to present-day society, the current labor market, or other contemporary conditions of the society?
- Is the mission or purpose consistent with the overall mission and goals of our institution?
- What have we defined as "student success" in this program? Is it relevant to the students' future needs when they leave this institution? Is it a definition that our community shares or could agree with?
- What are the specific goals and learning outcomes of this program? Have we designed them carefully? Are we certain the array of learning experiences we have designed for this program allows participants to achieve the goals and outcomes we have said we want to achieve?
- What is the array of educational services used to meet the stated mission of the program? How are those services offered? What are the class schedule, the kind of learning environment and pedagogy, the array of support services, and the marketing or promotion used to offer this program? Are these appropriate to the program's mission and purpose?

After defining and examining program purpose or mission and the array of educational services used to achieve that mission, the next step is to examine results, or program effectiveness. As Peter Ewell¹ has pointed out, effectiveness has two components. An effective program is one that achieves its goals, but the notion of efficiency is also inherent in the idea of effectiveness. Hence, an effective program also uses its resources as efficiently as possible – it doesn't waste them. Some questions one might ask about program effectiveness include:

- Who are the students enrolling in this program? What are their goals – what do they want to do with the knowledge gained from this program? What are their needs, including any special needs (scheduling, support services, etc.) that this program or the college should address in order to assure student success? Are we adequately addressing those needs?
- How well are students progressing through the program? What information do we have on their retention, course completion, persistence, and movement and success beyond college (e.g., graduation, transfer, job placement, etc.)? Is that student progress "good enough" in the institution's judgment? In the students' judgment? In the public's judgment? What can we do to improve student progress?
- Are students learning all the learning outcomes we've set for this program? In which areas are they learning more or less? Is this amount of learning "good enough" in the institution's judgment? In the students' judgment? In the public's judgment? What can we do to improve learning?
- Does this program have sufficient resources (human, physical, technological, time) to promote student progress and student learning? Does this program need additional or different resources to better accomplish its mission?
- Is this program using its resources efficiently? Are classes sufficiently full? Does the program have sufficient enrollments or student interest to keep running?

Here's where an institution should consider advice given by external groups. Ask such questions as:

- Did we consider changes made by the last accreditation team? By external program reviews conducted on our behalf? By program or institutional advisory committees?
- Did we consider recommendations we made to ourselves in our last self study?(planning agenda)

After evaluating program effectiveness, the next step is to develop and implement good plans to make needed improvements in a program. The institution should consider the following questions:

- What changes do we need to make the improvements we've identified for this program? What resources are needed to make improvements? Is there any required sequence of change? Do we need to do certain things before others? What are the timelines we need to set for making these programmatic changes?
- What short and long term plans does the institution need to make to implement changes? Do these plans require the involvement or assistance of other college programs or operations? How do we record these plans and keep them in our view so that we act on them? What individual or group should be responsible for follow-up?
- How can the plans necessary to improve program be incorporated into the institution's regular planning and resource allocation process so that the plans can be funded and implemented?

A last conceptual stage of any program review involves evaluating the impact of the changes that have been made to the program. At some point, whether it is after implementation of any stage of program change, or at the time of a next regularly scheduled review, the institution needs to specifically and carefully evaluate whether the changes made have resulted in improvements desired. The questions an institution might ask include the following:

- Did we make all of the changes we planned? If we did not, what were the impediments to making those changes? Do we still believe those changes would lead to improvements?
- How effective were the changes in improving program effectiveness? Have we improved student progress through the program, student learning, or other aspects of program quality such as efficiency?
- What have we learned by looking at the results of these change efforts that would inform future attempts to change and improve this program?

Conclusion

This article has tried to provide a framework for conceptualizing program review. The quality of questions asked, and the care with which answers to those questions are sought and then analyzed, determine whether a program review will lead to meaningful information that can be used to improve institutional effectiveness and student learning. Institutions seeking excellence benefit from program reviews that are shaped around well- framed questions that are of importance to the college and its staff. Ultimately, the shared interest of college staff and accreditors is in student success.

Thoughtful questions can only be answered with relevant and good information or data. The next edition of Accreditation Notes will include an article on good data.

¹ *Accreditation and Student Learning Outcomes: A Proposed Point of Departure* by Peter T. Ewell; A CHEA Occasional Paper, September, 2001.