

Section 6: Academic Program Review

Design of Academic Program Review

On March 3, 2006, Sonoma State University revised its policy on [program review](#). Although the policy applies to academic units on a five year schedule, the university expedited initial implementation because assessing the Curriculum and the roles of General Education and the Major is one of the two outcomes in its thematic institutional proposal. At the end of spring 2009, all academic units save Biology and ITDS will have completed their self-study and external review; both will complete their reviews during the academic year 2009-2010. Of those units who have completed their self-study and external review, appropriate administrative and faculty committees have reviewed 27 and will complete the reviews of the remaining units in the fall of 2009.

The aim of program review is to evaluate all facets of an academic unit (2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.8, 2.9). It centers on evidence-based assessment of student learning outcomes, but includes additional considerations, such as alignment of a program's mission and goals with those of the university; relation of curriculum to student learning; quality and diversity of faculty, staff, and curriculum; service and contributions to community; recruitment, retention and support for students and faculty; resource allocation; and administrative support.

The process of program review proceeds as follows. First, in consultation with faculty, staff, students, and alumni, academic units prepare a self-study document. Academic units review their past program review documents and their current assessment work, speak with the relevant constituencies, and reflect on their practices. The program review policy contains a template for the self-study, comprised of eight categories: 1)

introduction and history; 2) curriculum, such as student learning outcomes, their justification and dissemination, correlation of curriculum with student learning outcomes, effective teaching strategies, distance learning, cross-departmental offerings and General Education offerings; 3) diversity, focusing on the student body, advising and faculty recruitment; 4) student body; 5) faculty, focusing on pedagogy, professional accomplishments and university service; 6) institutional support; 7) assessment and findings; and 8) action plan.

Second, after completing the self-study, the academic unit invites an external reviewer to evaluate the program. The Office of the Provost, the School Dean, and the academic unit work together to identify a mutually acceptable external reviewer. The external reviewer receives and reviews the self-study document before visiting the campus. A typical visit will include meetings with faculty, staff, students and the administration, perhaps observing a class, assignment or a co-curricular event. Shortly after the visit, the external reviewer delivers his or her report to the academic unit and to the Office of the Provost.

Third, the academic unit submits its self-study document along with the external review report to its school curricular committee. The school committee writes a report and relays it to the Dean for his or her comments. From the Dean, the document goes to the Educational Policies Committee of the Academic Senate (EPC). EPC writes a report and sends it back to the academic unit. The academic unit meets with EPC to discuss its findings. Finally, EPC sends the academic unit's self-study, external review report and the additional committee and administrative comments to the Provost. The Provost

works with the academic unit to craft a common understanding of expectations (MOU). The process is then completed, and the five-year cycle begins again.

Planning at SSU is an ongoing, dynamic, and iterative process of revision, clarification and consensus building. Program review (Major and General Education) informs the planning process and vice versa, thereby helping the university align its resources with its educational mission (4.2, 4.3). From the bottom up, academic units assess their priorities, they communicate their needs through the School's curricular committee to their Dean. At the School level, program review helps to identify strengths and weaknesses so that faculty and the administration make appropriate decisions. From the top down, the university planning process reaches through the Dean and the School's Chair Councils to departments, guiding them in their efforts to assess, modify and align their priorities with those of the university overall. (See Appendix 9, [Academic Planning Process Schematic](#).)

Support for Academic Program Review

The Office of the Provost supports program review by providing \$1500 to fund each academic unit's external review, and Academic School Deans provide release time or stipends to a department faculty member or department chair to support the completion of the self-study document. Through the [Center for Teaching and Professional Development](#), Academic Affairs has provided assessment-based workshops and will continue to provide additional workshops on such topics as rubric development, course-embedded assessment, student learning outcomes, instructional technology, and syllabus development. These were all requested topics submitted as part of the Annual

Assessment Report process. In addition, Institutional Research assists academic units with statistical collection and analysis (4.5).

Implementation

Academic Affairs has developed an assessment rubric for evaluating an academic unit's educational effectiveness. Along the vertical axis, the rubric identifies seven categories: 1) outcomes; 2) alignment; 3) communication; 4) approach; 5) assessment; 6) feedback; and 7) engagement. The first category refers to formulating student learning outcomes, the second to aligning those outcomes with course expectations, the third to communicating those outcomes to students and others, the fourth to establishing a formal method for assessment, the fifth to assessing the outcomes, the sixth to establishing feedback mechanisms that link assessment with curricular improvement, and the seventh to engaging the faculty in the assessment process. The horizontal axis identifies three levels of achievement: beginning, developing, and competent. For example, at the beginning stage with regard to outcomes, an academic unit will have developed student learning outcomes; at the competent stage, the unit has formulated student learning outcomes, reviews them regularly and modifies them in light of their assessment efforts. At the beginning stage for assessment, an academic unit will have conducted class level assessment, but program level assessment has thus far been based on indirect assessment techniques, such as surveys and exit interviews; at the competent stage, the unit has assessed all learning outcomes, using indirect and direct assessment techniques, and evidence of findings is available for departmental review. To review the rubric itself, see Appendix 3.

In the academic year 2005-2006, 26 academic units were ranked at the beginning level, 14 were ranked at the developing level, 13 were ranked at the competent level, and 6 were not evaluated. In the academic year 2007-2008, 3 academic units were ranked at the beginning level, 18 were ranked at the developing level, and 38 were ranked at the competent level. These rankings are holistic in nature and reflect an overall view of the unit. Thus, an academic unit deemed “competent” overall, may have variation in areas of strength.

In sum, academic units are moving to include direct assessment techniques in their formal assessment protocols. Examples of direct assessment include various course-embedded assessment, capstone and senior seminar courses, lower and upper division portfolios, oral and written exercises, field experiences and internships. Academic units continue to use indirect assessment techniques such as student evaluation of faculty performance and exit surveys.

Sample of Assessment Practices

What follows is a brief description of the assessment practices of the following departments: [American Multicultural Studies \(AMCS\)](#); [Chicano and Latino Studies \(CAL\)](#); [Theater Arts and Dance](#); [Chemistry](#); [Computer Science](#); [Mathematics and Statistics](#); ; [Physics](#); [Anthropology](#); [Geography](#); and [Sociology](#). The first three departments are housed in the [School of Arts and Humanities](#), the next four in the [School of Science and Technology](#), and the last three in the [School of Social Sciences](#). These departments represent a range of assessment plans that use either direct, indirect, or both evidence-based assessment to guide curricular decision-making and also are a

representative sample of the university's overall direction and pace towards educational effectiveness.

- AMCS has three main assessment instruments: embedded course assessment, student survey, and a capstone course. Faculty discovered high general student satisfaction with the department, but varying degrees of dissatisfaction in certain areas, such as preparation for career, course content, and communication skills. The Department has used this information to develop an action plan to attract new students into the major.
- CALS assessment instruments include portfolios in the teacher preparation track, a senior thesis, student evaluations of faculty (SETE), and student surveys. The department learned that students would like greater variety of course offerings and more Spanish language courses. Based on this data, the department has identified the need to create a Center for Latino and Latin American Studies and an annual symposium on region-specific topics.
- Theatre Arts uses the following assessment instruments: direct assessment in dance, acting and technical theater at the junior and senior level; achievement in productions and auditions; and embedded course assessment. Senior evaluations occur twice a semester. In response to assessment findings, the department has decided to introduce a monthly contemporary play reading series with noted SSU faculty and their departments.
- Chemistry assesses student learning in three capstone courses. These courses are all project-based and highly structured. Students make formal presentations of their work in departmental seminars. The department has created a one-year

- Computer Science uses the following assessment instruments: senior focus group, senior survey, alumni survey, and the major field test (MFT). The department intends to move away from using the MFT instrument, and replace it with a capstone course requirement, which it offered for the first time in Spring 2009.
- Mathematics uses four assessment instruments: the SSU Student Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness (SETE); the Graduating Senior Questionnaire; a focus group; and an Alumni Questionnaire. Each graduating senior completes a questionnaire right before graduation that produces quantitative data. The focus group, conducted with 12 math majors obtained qualitative assessment data. The Math Department has created a new BS in Statistics and a BA in Applied Statistics in order to meet student interest and demand.
- Physics employs a range of assessment instruments: student exit interviews, alumni interviews, standardized competence tests. Based on these instruments, the department has made or is making the following revisions: create small-group and interactive activities in lecture courses, adopt on-line homework tutorials to supplement first-year physics sequence of courses, redesigning lower-division labs to include inquiry based assignments focused on doing science, require all students in capstone projects and special studies to meet at least once per month.
- Anthropology has adopted an assessment plan that includes formal and informal components. Formal assessment consists of pre and post-test assessments for

- Geography uses four assessment instruments: student surveys that address the correlation of specific classes with programmatic learning outcomes; SETE teaching evaluations; senior exit surveys; and a senior capstone thesis. Through assessment, the department has revamped its student learning outcomes and deemphasized courses that do not directly contribute to their various concentrations. The department has adopted new teaching strategies to improve students' written communication skills.
- Sociology uses direct and indirect assessment instruments: senior seminar research papers and graduating senior exit surveys. The department is moving towards relying more on direct assessment of student learning, as in their senior

Several of SSU's programs are externally accredited by professional organizations (see Appendix 4, Data Exhibit 8.1: SSU Inventory of Concurrent Accreditation and Key Performance Indicators). These programs include Education, Nursing, Chemistry, Art History and Studio, Business Administration, Music, and Counseling. They are reviewed periodically by the accrediting agency, including an external review, and must meet professional standards and learning outcomes as defined by the accrediting body. The university's program review policy allows for substitution of an accreditation report for the 5-year program review.

Reflection and Moving Forward

The Educational Policies Committee has completed a report on the implementation of the new program review policy. EPC divides the report into five headings: resources; "closing the loop"; the success of program review; diversity and cultural competence; recursiveness; and General Education. EPC notes that every department or program has made a case for increased resources. In particular, departments have requested an increase in permanent tenure-line faculty, assigned time to perform curricular and programmatic functions, and technology and equipment. EPC notes that some departments have concerns about the relation of program review to funding for their unit. In general, EPC believes that departments have taken program review seriously, which has led to significant consequences, such as curricular revision and reorganization. Departments have developed new concentrations, minors and major programs through the program review exercise.

EPC believes that it needs to amend its own procedures to address more adequately the diversity component of program review. It also is looking at refining its own response to program review so as to make the process more meaningful for academic units for their next review. And finally EPC is impressed with the scope of program review for General Education. It believes that such review will be the springboard for further reforms in General Education.

The Office of the Provost will develop a new schedule for academic units on the next five year cycle of review, as well as a new round of workshops on assessment and program review issues tailored to the level of development of academic units. Finally, EPC will refine the Program Review Policy based on what it has learned from the first cycle during the 2009-2010 Academic Year.