Purpose: The purpose of an academic unit review is to assess the quality and effectiveness of that unit, to potentially modify the unit because of the review, and to provide benchmarks for additional planning and assessment. As such, unit reviews are a critical element in assessment and strategic planning. Academic unit/program review is an explicit core component of Higher Learning Commission accreditation.

Frequency and Cycle: Generally, a unit’s review will be undertaken no less than every five years. However, unit positioning within the university’s review cycle will reflect both external needs, such as the timing of accreditations and reaccreditations, and internal needs, such as equalizing across the cycle, to the degree possible, the number of evaluated units within each college and the number of unit reviews carried out within a given year. The actual review may take anywhere from several weeks to a full academic year depending on the size, complexity, and on-going initiatives of the unit. The Unit Review Schedule lists the academic year in which the self-study is to be conducted. The final report, including any external review, is to be submitted no later than the beginning of the fall term of the following academic year.

“Unit” refers to the body of the whole: a department, school center, or interdisciplinary studies program that stands as a whole. “Program” refers to areas of study within a unit, such as a major or minor, area of emphasis or concentration, interdisciplinary area of study that is a part of a larger unit, and/or degree level.

Units that are wholly accredited may use information in their accreditation self-studies and external reviewer findings for the academic unit review process as long as two criteria are met: that all of the topics listed below for the self-study are addressed by the accreditation and the accreditation takes place every five years or sooner. It is important to note that the focus of accreditation is meeting standards established by the discipline/profession, while the focus of unit reviews is unit operations. In cases where accreditations do not fully meet these requirements, academic units and their deans should work with the Provost’s Office to supplement the accreditation self-studies with additional required elements of academic unit review and they should establish a schedule that provides feedback about the unit at least every five years. Units that are partially accredited may choose to review the entire unit at the time of accreditation, or they may choose to submit the accreditation report as part of the larger unit review. For example, a unit in which only the undergraduate program is accredited may review the graduate program at the same time; a program that is reviewed every two years may submit a summary of those reviews at the time of the unit’s review.
Steps in the Academic Unit Review Process:

1. The department chair, school director or other unit head, the Dean, the Provost or his or her designee meet to discuss the timeline and logistics of the review. Issues of relationship of the review to accreditation, if applicable, are addressed as well as a decision is made concerning if an external review will be part of the Unit Self Study.

2. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness provides a package of information to the unit that addresses some of the elements of the self-study, including enrollments, retention and graduation rates, number of graduates, characteristics of faculty and staff members in the unit, and survey results disaggregated to the unit level. OIE may assist with providing information in additional areas as requested, including carrying out surveys of students, alumni, faculty and staff members, community members, etc.

3. Conduct unit self-study and draft report

4. Review of self-study report by Dean and Provost

5. Review of self-study report by external reviewer (if an external review is conducted).

6. External Reviewer visit (not required unless by external accrediting agency or at the request of the Provost and Dean)

7. External Reviewer report received (if applicable)

8. Action plan written and submitted to the Provost

9. Provost or his or her designee, Dean and unit head met to discuss findings and action plan

10. Annual progress reports to Provost and Dean (may be embedded within annual reports)

Process and Outcome for External Review: It is important that an external review take place at least once every ten years. The external review process begins with a unit self-study. The self-study is based upon a set of questions approved by the Dean and the Provost, and may include areas specific to a unit’s accreditation process. (See the Self-Study Guidelines document.) After the self-study is completed, it is sent to an approved external reviewer (see below). After the external review is completed and the report received, the unit will consider the reviewers’ comments and, in consultation with the college dean, propose an action plan to address any issues raised. When the Dean approves the plan, all materials will be sent to the Provost for final consideration (i.e., approval, revision, reconsideration, etc.). When the Provost approves the plan, it will be implemented and reviewed annually in the unit’s annual report to the college dean. All unit reports will become a part of the college’s annual report to the Provost.

Self-Study: The primary audiences for the self-study are the unit, the external reviewer(s), the college dean, and the Provost. The self-study will begin with a reflective assessment by the unit in response to a series of questions about the current state of its (1) curricula and pedagogies, as well as enrichment, co-curricular, immersion, and internship/placement activities, in the provision of excellent education and promotion of student success; (2) scholarly agendas and programs, grant and contract activity; and (3) university, professional, and public service. The self-study will then define and justify a direction for future activities in teaching, research, and service as related to the university’s strategic plan and/or accreditation guidelines. This may require reconsideration in whole or in part of the unit’s mission and goals. See the Self-Study Guidelines document for further details.
Logistics for Conducting External Reviews: If an external review is conducted, units will generally bring to campus one or two external reviewers depending upon the complexity of the unit. However, accrediting agencies will often send a team of reviewers. In either case, funds of up to $2,000 including expenses are available in the Office of the Provost for each unit review. Because accrediting agencies may require a higher fee from the university, colleges with accredited units will need to budget additional monies for this purpose. Funds will be transferred to the colleges upon receipt of documentation, including letters of agreement with reviewers or agencies and verification of expenses. Generally, reviewers’ fees will not be paid until receipt of the report.

Reviewers are chosen by the unit with the approval of the dean and the Provost. Names of reviewers and their credentials should be submitted to the dean and Provost for approval at the earliest possible date. Dates for the campus visits of all reviewers should be finalized as early in the academic year as possible and communicated to everyone on the interview schedule. For more information, refer to the External Reviewer Guidelines document.

Action Plan: Consistent with the university’s strategic plan, the unit action plan will identify as specifically as possible the unit’s goals in each area of teaching, research, and service to be achieved over the next five-year period. It will provide annual benchmarks against which the unit’s progress will be measured in its annual report to the college dean. If new resources (e.g., faculty, facilities, equipment, budgets, assistantships, scholarships, etc.) are required, they will be enumerated and justified. The unit will propose reasonable plans to fund or acquire the needed resources.

Annual Reports: During the five-year implementation period, units will annually report progress toward achieving benchmarked goals to their college deans. Annual reports will be based on valid and reliable assessments of teaching, research, and service. The annual report will provide also a structural mechanism for making mid-course corrections should the goals or the assumptions about resource availability, funding, etc., prove too unrealistic to be reasonably achieved.

Related Documents:

Unit Review Schedule
Self-Study Guidelines
External Unit Reviewer Guidelines