Preparing for Program Review

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During your term as department chair, you may be asked to complete a program review. Many chairs, upon hearing this news, run screaming in the opposite direction. This article is designed to provide some helpful tips on how to prepare and, perhaps, to even enjoy the review process. Because most schools require a regular department review every ten, seven, or even five years, chairs must be able to take on this task with some confidence. I was assigned the program review during my chair rotation six years ago, and I utilized the self-study process as a venue for my department to evaluate and rethink where we had been. The previous ten years and where we wanted to go in the next five to ten years. I also have been trained by my professional organization, the American Sociological Association, to complete departmental reviews and to serve as a consultant for departments going through the external review process. To date, I have evaluated several different sociology programs across the country, with plans to visit at least two more schools in the future. I have something from each school that I visit, and, in brief, the better reviews are done in climates of collegiality and administrative support. Here I provide eight tips for preparing for a program review.

Start Early
This may go without saying, but trying to collect data and conduct a self-study of your department in addition to your regular teaching and administrative duties is a lot of work. As soon as you know your department is going to be undertaking a program review, get started. Make a plan of action using a calendar to map out the long-term schedule. The basic self-study/external review involves several steps that occur over one or two academic years. You must first identify the goals for your areas of concern in your department. Next, collect data on your department and programs, analyze that data, and write your departmental report or self-study. This report is submitted to administrators and to the outside reviewers who are scheduled to visit your department and campus. Outside reviewers will take about a month to write their report after a site visit, and then the department usually will be asked to formally respond to that report and provide the administration with their follow-up strategies. Your school may vary in what it requires, but the main point holds true: start early so you can allow enough time for analysis, evaluation, and reflection on your program.

Determine the Purpose of the Review
Find out exactly what is the purpose of your program review. What is the agenda of the dean or other college administrators in department reviews? Is this review just a typical regularly scheduled program review? Or, are there particular concerns for your department in terms of curriculum, personnel, or number of majors? At some schools I have visited there have not been regular reviews, and administrators call for a program review to better assess what is going on. I also have been to schools where several senior faculty are transitioning to retirement and a review is needed to help junior faculty define the new program and decide the direction in which to make hires. At other schools the focus of the review is on assessment—that is, how well the program is achieving its learning goals for majors and non-majors. Very rarely is the sole purpose of a self-study/external review to be the justification for new positions. A program review may help identify a new line as a critical department need, but the primary focus are on the current personnel and curriculum.

Learn from Others
Some schools have a clear template that departments can follow while conducting their program review. This template will give chairs the deadlines for the various required documents as well as provide details about which data to analyze and which questions to address. If your college or university does not provide many written guidelines, you should ask other department chairs who have recently undertaken reviews what they have done. Ask for copies of their self-studies and for tips on how to manage the process. At Grinnell College there are some basic guidelines, but every department faces the program review in a unique fashion, usually because our chairs rotate every two years so a new chair is often given the task. After I completed our self-study in sociology, I was asked by the chairs of the English and political science departments for copies of our report to help guide them. In addition to asking other departments for their reports, also obtain copies of any earlier self-studies/external reviews that were done in your own department. These can serve as a baseline for the current self-study.

Make Self-Study an Opportunity
If you have considered the first three tips just described, you now have a basic sense of what the administration expects from the program review, how other departments at your college or university have approached the task, and a sense of the overall timeline involved. Now we'll focus on the department level. Try to see the program review as an opportunity to rethink and reevaluate your department. If you are going to take the time to conduct a thorough self-study of your academic program, why not use the data as a springboard to make your department a more collegial and productive space for both faculty and students? As chair, you will, in a sense, set the tone for the rest of the department in how to view and experience the self-study process. If you approach
the task with loathing and disdain, your colleagues will follow your lead. If you approach the task as time for the department to work together and create a shared vision and mission for your program, again, your colleagues will follow your leadership.

**Involve the Entire Department**

In tandem with the previous strategy, chairs should strive to involve the entire department in the self-study/external review process. In addition to using the review as an opportunity for reflection as just described, involving the entire department will allow the chair to know various points of view and areas of conflict before the external reviewers arrive on campus. Again, this tip originates from my observations of different schools as a consultant. At some sites only the department chair was involved in completing the self-study and writing the initial report. This fact was surprising to me, especially when I interviewed other faculty in the department who were not aware of the review. Chairs should invite all department members to participate during the self-study process, including adjunct faculty to some degree. Participation will help faculty to comprehend the process, understand their department better, and facilitate communication between members. Another reason to involve the entire department is that you can share the workload of data collection and analysis, which I will describe next.

**Delegate Tasks**

If all faculty members are involved, the chair can divide the workload and assign tasks. In my own department, I assigned one senior member to write the history of the department, another to do a comparative analysis of curriculum at similar schools, and still another to survey and analyze alumni data. I also involved an adjunct faculty member who was very skilled in web design and asked him to analyze our current department webpage and make suggestions for changes.

**Collect a Wide Range of Data**

Many schools house internal research departments that collect data on alumni and departments. Start there to find out which data have been collected on your department in terms of enrollments, number of majors, and surveys of alumni post-graduation. You also may want comparative data of faculty FTE between your department/major and other departments on your campus. Data should contain both quantitative and qualitative summaries of your program, including feedback on the curriculum, advising, number of majors and minors, and post-graduation careers. Some programs also may want to formally survey faculty within the department, or evaluate special department programs such as research opportunities and internships, or complete transcript analyses to see how majors create pathways through the program. Other schools require departments to provide summaries of learning assessment outcomes. Do students in your program work off campus, take classes at other schools during the summer, or participate in off-campus study? How do these opportunities impact your curriculum? It is helpful to have measures that show trends over time; for example, what has been the number of majors or graduating seniors over the past ten years? Again, many schools already keep data on these questions.

**Use Professional Resources**

Determine which resources are available from your professional organizations. For example, the American Sociological Association has a department resource group that trains consultants to be external reviewers. They also provide guidebooks and curricular examples for different types of programs. Relatedly, I would suggest hiring a trained consultant to be your external reviewer. I have been on site visits where the chair brings in his or her buddy from another school, with the colloquial notion of you scratch my back (give a positive review) and I will scratch yours (do a similar positive review at your school). Unfortunately, that “buddy” may have no idea about how to do an external review, and the evaluation may lack the depth you need to improve your program. Hiring a professional maintains the integrity of the review and allows the consultant to provide excellent insights into your program.

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This article is based on a presentation at the American Sociological Association Chairs Conference, August 16, 2012, Denver, Colorado.

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