PROGRAM REVIEW

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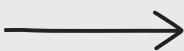
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A Problem to Solve
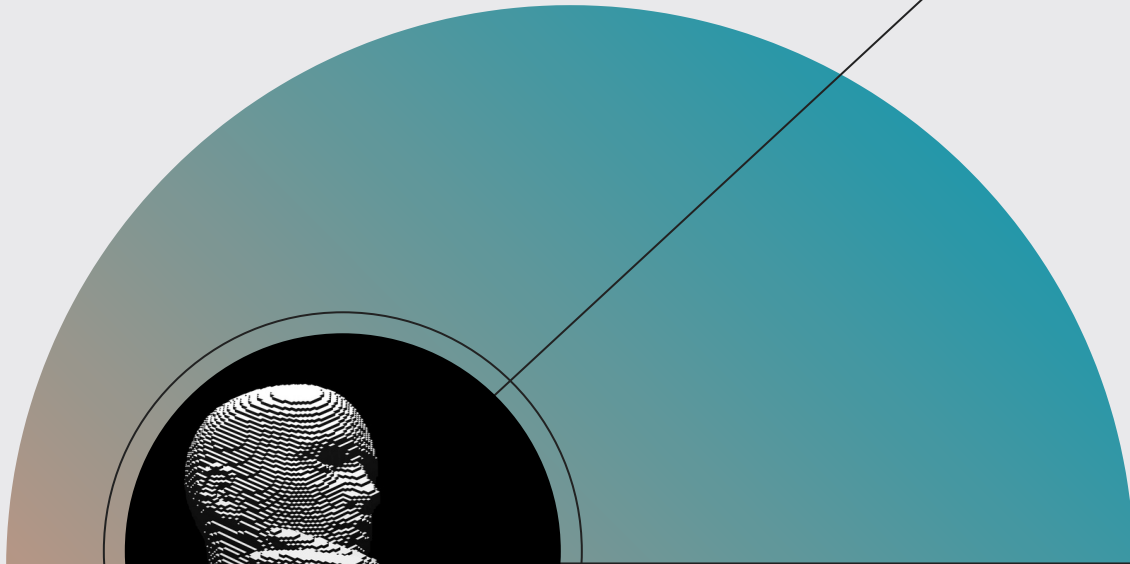
Academic departments and centers do program reviews every five to seven years; the problem is, they never result in any major changes! Such reviews are typically seen as a bureaucratic process required by the university or an accrediting agency. They are not viewed as an opportunity to take stock, measure one's strengths and weaknesses, and identify paths toward even higher levels of academic quality. Once completed they are typically placed on the shelf, and nothing much changes as a result. Why is that so?

The main reason is that regardless of the quality of the department or center, basically all program reviews start with the same proposition AND arrive at the same conclusion. The department starts with an assumption that they are pretty good, they prepare a "self-study,' and then look for all the evidence they can find to prove that point. Sometimes an external evaluator comes in from a similar academic discipline and sees exactly what they expect to see … just what goes on in their home department. Thus, the conclusions are almost always the same: 1. The department is pretty good and has a few regionally or nationally known scholars; 2. There is a need for more resources in the form of additional faculty or better facilities; and 3. That in the absence of additional resources there is nothing different that the department can so.

A Better Approach to Program Review

Triangle Associates assists institutions in using a quality improvement approach for their program reviews. Using a proven framework, we assist the institution to conduct an "academic audit" of its programs in lieu of the traditional "program review." An academic audit builds upon the traditional program review model. The audit process focuses how faculty approach decision-making and the "processes and data" that are used to assess quality.

Put succinctly, academic audits address the actions faculty members can take to improve quality in their departments. These audits stimulate deep reflection and invite peer-to-peer commentary to help departmental faculty members and center staff do a better job. The cycle begins with focused reflection that, hopefully, produces a spurt of innovation. Faculty members view such episodes as opportunities to challenge the status quo and think outside of the proverbial box.

Departments always should always be looking for improvement opportunities and be prepared to implement good ideas right away. In other words, continuous pursuit of incremental improvement creates a design thinking approach with rapid prototyping which should fill the space between spurts of innovation.

Why Program Review Matters

Higher education is changing dramatically today. Some, including political and business leaders, are questioning the value of a college degree, public institutions face increasing oversight and intrusion from state legislatures, political tensions from both the left and right roil campuses, and dramatically shifting conditions for teaching and learning are already in play as generative artificial intelligence becomes ubiquitous. Just figuring out what good teaching looks like in an era of widespread remote work is perplexing.

And if those aren't reason enough, the audit process is intellectually interesting and challenging as well and makes a program review worth doing – something that won't just sit on the shelf after completion. Many faculty members involved an academic audit or quality process review participate say they like the experience and that it causes them to think about their work in new ways. Finally, the audit effort should reduce the work needed to comply with the requirements of accreditors and state coordinating boards that are focusing more on quality processes than ever before.

The Five Questions

While many of the ideas we are talking about are familiar, others aren't. The primary difference is that using an academic audit or quality process review focuses on the following five questions throughout the review and ultimately helps a department apply the quality principles in a practical way afterward.

1. What are we trying to do?

Traditional thinking equates quality to inputs like faculty size and qualifications—e.g., "Quality improvement requires more and better faculty." But inputs are means to ends and it's the ends—what one is trying to accomplish—that ultimately matter. In education, the ends pertain to students' knowledge and skills, values, and quality of life. In research, it's the publications, citations, and other outcomes that count. This leads to the first principle: *Define quality in terms of outcomes.*

2. How are we doing it?

Quality gurus say, "All work is process." In other words, to do something you must engage in some kind of process even if it's ad hoc. It stands to reason, then, that paying attention to process can improve quality. In other words: *Focus on how things get done.*

3. Who is responsible for doing it?

Tasks can be assigned to teams or left to individual initiative. While individual initiatives are salutary, teams usually outperform "lone wolves" when it comes to sustaining and improving quality. Hence the principle: *Work collaboratively.*

4. How do we know we're succeeding?

It's hard to consistently produce quality without feedback on how you're doing. The feedback should be rooted in evidence rather than anecdote, and evidence is important in applying the other six principles as well. Therefore: *Base decisions on evidence.*

5. How can we do even better?

While focusing on outcomes, processes, responsibilities, and evidence gets the improvement ball rolling, the remaining three principles will help you move to the next level. Do your efforts "hang together" or are they situated in silos?" A good way to escape the silos is to: *Strive for coherence.*

Are you interested in how others solve the same problems you're working on or does "not invented here" dominate? In other words: *Learn from best practice.*

Do you work pro-actively on improvement or wait for problems to arise? To be pro-active: *Make continuous improvement a priority.*

Going Live

In summary, the essential tenet of is approach is that faculty members want to provide quality education and scholarship and will do so when supported by good processes. The audit's purpose is to encourage departments to reflect on and then strengthen the processes they use to maintain and improve the quality of their work.

Our program review engagements are customizable to meet almost any department or academic center situation. Start the ball rolling by reaching out to any of our senior consultants to arrange an introductory video meeting.

CONTACT
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Steven Graham, Ph.D., steve@ta-stl.com
Daniel Clay, Ph.D., M.B.A., dan@ta-stl.com
Marc Frankel, Ph.D., marc@ta-stl.com

6642 Clayton Road, #382
Saint Louis, Missouri 63117 USA

www.ta-stl.com   projects@ta-stl.com
+1.314.725.8889