

**Education and Student Affairs Committee**

Board of Regents, State of Iowa

**Subject:** Audit of Academic Program Review and Student Outcomes Assessment Procedures

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**Date:** September 1, 2004

**Recommended Actions:**

1. Receive the audit report on academic program review and student outcomes assessment of existing programs.
2. Approve the recommendations for institutional process improvements noted at the end of the findings for each university.
3. Request a follow-up report next year with a focus on the changes that occurred as a result of this audit.
4. Update the Board of Regents' policy (§6.05B) to clarify the desired focus and emphasis on academic program reviews and student outcomes assessment.

**Executive Summary:**

Two State Approaches to Academic Program Reviews

State higher education boards' program reviews of existing academic programs can be categorized into two general approaches: (1) Centralized – there are those state boards whose staffs directly conduct the periodic reviews of existing programs. The state board staff hires the consultants, identifies the programs to be reviewed, and writes the final reports on all the reviews; (2) Decentralized - other state boards require the reviews to be conducted by the universities with or without periodic reports to the board.

Decentralized Approach Used in Iowa

The centralized approach was not adopted in Iowa because of cost, staffing, and tradition. There was also a strong feeling that the best reviews are frequently conducted at the institutional level. The annual reports were adopted to give the Board of Regents a periodic reminder of the academic program reviews, their purposes, and their outcomes.

Academic Program Review/Student Outcomes Assessment Process Audit

Last Spring the Board approved an evaluation of the Regent University Academic Program Review and Student Outcomes Assessment procedures based on best practices. In June, the Education and Student Affairs Committee received a status report on this evaluation which noted that the Board Office had completed a comprehensive review of the institutional procedures. The next step would consist of an on-site visit by Board Office staff to follow-up on issues and concerns raised during the review of procedures. The visits conducted by Board Office staff have been very helpful in clarifying the issues and in the development of the recommendations.

## Audit Report

A preliminary draft of the findings and recommendations was shared with the institutions and changes were made where appropriate. This memorandum contains the Board Office final conclusions and recommendations.

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### Purposes of Academic Program Review

Academic Program Review and Student Outcomes Assessment processes in various forms represent the signature mechanism by which academic programs are periodically evaluated by peers from across the country. The purposes of Academic Program Review and Student Outcomes Assessment are many and varied. The purposes range from sincere efforts to improve program quality while enhancing teaching and learning to mechanical efforts to comply with some administrative or external mandate. Not surprisingly, the former constitute the best reviews because the participants in the review process are committed to improving practice while the reviews conducted just because there is a mandate tend to be less effective. Some of the latter can even be considered to be a waste of time and resources.

### Some Characteristics of Good Academic Program Reviews

The academic program review and student outcomes assessment processes that are conceptually sound and conducted for purposes of improving practice have frequently been associated with the best universities. Such academic program review/student outcomes assessment processes are characterized by some common characteristics:

- ◆ They are conducted primarily for the purpose of improving teaching and learning.
- ◆ They utilize a well thought-out cohesive process that begins with sound principles of evaluation.
- ◆ They are a joint effort of all the shareholders – faculty, students, and others.
- ◆ They take full advantage of the best minds available in the program area.
- ◆ They result in a plan of action that is actually utilized for teaching and learning enhancement.
- ◆ The processes themselves are periodically evaluated.
- ◆ They incorporate principals of objectivity.
- ◆ They minimize bureaucratic and time consuming procedures.
- ◆ They frequently have support and assistance from outside the program area to assist in the review effort.
- ◆ They focus on existing resources or strategically focused areas where additional resources are essential for program improvement.

These general principles guided the Board Office evaluation of institutional practice. The findings and recommendations at each Regent university are noted below.

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Audit Purpose

The purpose of the academic program review and student outcomes assessment process audit was to assess how institutions' policies and procedures guide their academic program review processes and to identify "best practices" for process improvement.

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Audit Process

The audit consisted of two components – (1) review of institutional policies and procedures relating to academic program review and student outcomes assessment to identify specific aspects where there may be problems or concerns; and (2) two-day campus visits for the purpose of following up on the specific issues identified in the policy reviews. The campus visits occurred between July 29, 2004 and August 13, 2004.

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Comments and  
Suggestions  
Regarding All  
Three Regent  
Universities

1. The universities should consider not substituting administrative department reviews for academic program reviews. There is an important distinction between academic program reviews and administrative department reviews. Academic program reviews typically focus on outputs, such as student learning, while administrative department reviews tend to focus more on inputs, such as faculty, facilities, and budgets. The Board of Regents' policy requires that the institutions review their academic programs regularly, at least once every seven years.
2. The universities should consider enhancements in their approaches to student outcomes assessment. There are two types of student outcomes assessment. One type of assessment, which can be formative or summative, focuses on student performance. The results are typically used to inform students of their progress in the course/program; to provide the instructor with feedback about his/her instructional performance; and to make changes in classroom behavior, although changes in curriculum might also occur. The other type of assessment focuses on feedback from students, employers, advisory groups, or other similar audiences typically at a specific point in time, e.g., graduation, licensure testing, five years after graduation. Information from this type of assessment is typically used to make changes in the curriculum and the program, two objectives that are both desirable.
3. The universities should review their use of accreditation as a substitute for a rigorous academic program review. While it appears that academic program reviews and accreditation reviews might be duplicative, in most cases the purposes are vastly different. Accreditation reviews typically focus on meeting minimum standards, while good academic program reviews focus on enhancement of the teaching and learning process. Accreditation reviews should not normally substitute for academic program reviews except by prior agreement and demonstration that the accreditation review will meet all the purposes of the academic program review.

4. The universities should make explicit that self-studies should be evaluative, not just descriptive. They should be oriented to the future and address how programs will accomplish proposed improvements. To this end, self-studies should explicitly describe program strengths and weaknesses and include recommendations for improvement using existing resources.
5. The universities should consider ways to encourage the inclusion of procedures and academic program review options that go beyond just continuation for some programs. Such options and follow-up action plans might include possibilities for program modifications, such as changes in program structure, curricular design, mode of delivery, reductions in program/staff, elimination of subfields, and general phase-down. This could also lead, on occasion, to program mergers, conditional continuation, sunset provisions, and even termination of specific degrees and programs.

For some programs, the academic program reviews might include internal criteria<sup>1</sup>, such as:

- ♦ Number of graduates from the program in each of the last five years.
- ♦ Number of students enrolled in the program; rates of entry and dropout.
- ♦ The size of classes and the cost to courses identified as integral elements in the program.
- ♦ Cost per program graduate.
- ♦ Faculty workload.
- ♦ Program quality.
- ♦ Number of program graduates of similar programs from peer institutions.
- ♦ Economies or improvements in quality to be achieved by consolidating or eliminating programs.
- ♦ Student interest and demand for the program.
- ♦ Centrality of the program to the institutional mission.
- ♦ Consistency with state/national workforce needs.

While no single criterion should cause a program to be considered for reduction or elimination, a program not meeting the preponderance of the criteria might be cause for a closer examination of the program and a decision on its future. A number of these criteria are already a part of some of the institutional policies.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Melchiori, 1982.

## University of Iowa

### Strengths

1. There were a number of strengths in the academic program review procedures used by the respective units, although there appeared to be significant variation in practices among the colleges.
  2. Some units have clearly defined student learning outcomes, including detailed procedures for multiple measures and timeframes.
  3. Some deans enhance the review process by directing faculty attention to specific focus areas for review purposes.
  4. Each college appears to use the academic program review process to inform the strategic planning process.
  5. The deans are using external review to understand and improve their departments.
  6. Faculty members in many units appear to have on-going discussions about student- and program-related issues.
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### Weaknesses

1. Both university- and college-level policies exist concerning the review of academic units. The university's policies should be appropriately flexible to accommodate the differences among the 11 colleges. However, there appears to be confusion on the part of some faculty and administrators in the relationship between and use of college- and university-level policies. Where inconsistencies exist, it should be clear which set of policies takes precedence. Furthermore, the two levels of policies appear to have created the following problems:
  - a) Lack of understanding of university policies;
  - b) Disregard of university policies;
  - c) Difficulty in regular updating of policies (both collegiate and university);
  - d) Lack of consistency in addressing key university focus areas.
2. The university's mechanism to review and update university-level (or college-level) Academic Program Review and Student Outcomes Assessment policies does not appear to be regularly employed to resolve inconsistencies.
3. There appears to be no mechanism for the development of a follow-up program action plan that uses the review findings and includes timelines for implementation. The final component of the review process appears to be the collegiate response to the recommendations.
4. In some instances, the availability of the external team report to program faculty is not consistent with university policies.
5. Some collegiate policies do not appear to call for a regular academic program review cycle. Some reviews appear to occur only irregularly or after an administrative change; such reviews are likely to be "administrative reviews" and are not typically focused on program or student issues.

6. There is a lack of consistency in applying the Board of Regent policy to use at least two external evaluators for the academic program review. In addition, the external reviewer appears to be relegated to an advisory/consultant role. This would seem not to be the best use of this expertise.
  7. Student outcomes are not defined for all programs.
  8. Student outcomes assessment results are not routinely used to inform decision-making related to program improvements.
  9. Student outcomes assessment is not perceived as a high priority at the highest administrative levels regarding budget/resource allocations.
  10. SUI's academic program review admonition that reviews should be evaluative, not just descriptive, does not appear to be uniformly followed.
  11. There is significant variation in the perception of value in the use of non-unit institutional evaluators.
  12. There appears to be a perception that, for review purposes, department and program are interchangeable. Academic program reviews need to focus on student outcomes, curriculum, etc.
  13. The purpose of academic program reviews is not widely understood at all program levels. There appears to be a perception that the purpose of review is to inform deans and the provost's office for their decision-making rather than to guide program improvement and to communicate direction to program faculty. In some cases, faculty members do not see, or directly participate in, follow-through on recommendations.
  14. Participation of all faculty members in the academic program review process, including the development of the self-study, is not uniform.
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#### Recommendations

1. The university should consider improvements in its policy that academic program reviews should address how a program fits within the overall university mission and goals (centrality) to make the concept better understood by those doing the reviews.
2. The university should consider ways to provide more emphasis on the fact that the focus of recommendations should be on program improvement within the context of existing resources to avoid unrealistic recommendations.
3. The university should consider a review of its overall academic program review policies and how they relate to the individual college policies, and, where necessary, articulate the need for college-specific differences. This should result in making the purposes and procedures clearer and more consistent and eliminate misunderstandings. The university should also consider procedures for periodically updating policies.

4. The university should consider policies and procedures to develop follow-up action plans that facilitate the use the results of the academic program reviews for decision-making and program improvement.
  5. The university should consider ways to ensure all programs have student outcomes assessments and that the results are used to improve student learning and teaching.
  6. The university should consider a university-level policy that describes critical and/or minimum parameters to be covered in the academic program review.
  7. The university should re-consider its use of external evaluators. Unique to the Regent universities, SUI's procedures call for a team of non-unit campus reviewers with one external reviewer in an advisory or consultant role. The university should consider reversing these relative roles where possible, i.e., the external review would be conducted by at least two external evaluators, with assistance from one or more non-unit campus faculty acting as advisors. At a minimum, it would seem that the external evaluators should be more active participants in the external review process.
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## **Iowa State University**

### **Strengths**

1. ISU's philosophy of benchmarking for the best provides a valuable focus to the external review and should be considered by the other Regent universities.
2. There are detailed policies and procedures for conducting Academic Program Review and Student Outcomes Assessment and they appear to be well understood.
3. The provost's office provides valuable direction relating to specific questions or focus areas for particular attention in the self-study and external review.
4. The purpose of Academic Program Review and Student Outcomes Assessment, program improvement, is clearly embedded in the process.
5. Questions from ISU's strategic plan are used to focus the self-study.
6. At least two external reviewers conduct the external review. Questions for external reviewers are provided up-front in the self-study. The external review team includes its responses to the specific programmatic questions posed by the institution in its report.
7. The self-study is not just a description of where they are now or where they have been. The self-study is seen as forward-looking - "Where do we want to be 5 or 10 years from now?" This allows the department to use the academic program review to plan its future.
8. There is visible recognition of the need for recommendations to be made in the context of existing resources. The use of additional resources is used to portray desired states, but does not limit the extent of the recommendations from the external team.

9. There is widespread use of entrance and exit interviews by the deans and/or the provost with the external evaluation team.
  10. The general practice is to assign the oversight of the academic program review process to an academic associate dean.
  11. A mechanism exists to assure that interdisciplinary programs are routinely evaluated.
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#### Weaknesses

1. Not all reviews (self-studies or external reviews) are structured around the identified criteria for academic program review.
  2. The results of student outcomes assessments are not consistently used to inform the self-study process regarding teaching and learning and program improvements.
  3. Not all reviews follow the procedures for the external review, including defining the major areas for the external review team.
  4. Some self-studies do not explicitly define and highlight strengths and weaknesses. Identifying strengths and weaknesses allows the departments to focus more clearly on needed changes.
  5. Follow-up program action plans which require multi-year monitoring and evaluation are not prominently in evidence. Some level of monitoring of the action plan might need to be assigned to the department and require action steps and implementation timelines.
  6. Not all external reviews addressed the "two key dimensions" of academic program review identified in ISU's policy.
  7. For jointly administered (interdisciplinary) programs, there appears to be a need for specification of procedures and timelines regarding mutual obligations and respective responsibilities.
  8. Faculty participation in the self-study process appears to be variable, not uniform across all programs. In some departments, there appeared to be high involvement; in others, it appeared that one individual assumed all of the responsibility for the self-study. The self-study should reflect the involvement of all faculty members.
  9. Administrative turnovers may cause academic program review recommendations to be shelved; without someone to guide implementation, sometimes the recommendations are disregarded.
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#### Recommendations

1. The university should consider ways to ensure that the self-studies and external reviews include all faculty members and address the prescribed criteria, including student outcomes assessments.
2. The university should foster the inclusion of both program strengths and weaknesses in the self-studies.
3. The university should consider ways of making the follow-up plans resulting from the reviews better utilized, especially when there are administrative changes.



4. The university should consider developing specific academic program review procedures for the growing number of interdisciplinary programs.
  5. The university should consider developing more process training for the academic program review participants.
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### **University of Northern Iowa**

#### **Strengths**

1. The Committee on Academic Program Review provides some excellent value to the self-study process, including organization of the process, clear due dates, communication, support and guidance. The other Regent universities might benefit from a similar support group.
  2. There is strong evidence of faculty participation in the development of self-studies.
  3. Policies and existing practice make clear that academic program reviews should focus on curriculum and student outcomes.
  4. Student outcomes assessment appears to inform faculty discussions regarding program delivery methods.
  5. Standardized data are easily accessible to departments for purposes of program review. The other Regent universities might benefit from similar efforts.
  6. The Academic Program Review and Student Outcomes Assessment procedures clearly define the purpose and goals of academic program review.
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#### **Weaknesses**

1. The procedures for assuring that interdisciplinary programs are reviewed are not widely understood and may need to be communicated more effectively.
2. The use of direct measures of student learning, such as course assessments and portfolios, was less in evidence in the academic program review process than the use of indirect measures, such as student and employer surveys. Direct measures of student learning typically guide teacher and program improvements more effectively.
3. Many faculty members see student outcomes assessment as an administrative responsibility. To enhance the process, student outcomes assessment should be a partnership between faculty and administration in the interests of program improvement.
4. Existing procedures for timeframes for contacting prospective external evaluators appear to result sometimes in first-choice external evaluators being unavailable.
5. The departmental program review committees sometimes failed to request active participation and input of all departmental faculty members as required in the university's academic program review process.

6. It appeared that the process for selecting external evaluators did not always follow the University's procedures.
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Recommendations

1. The university should consider requiring that the Committee on Academic Program Review periodically review its own processes with input from departments.
  2. The university should consider providing additional support for faculty members regarding the use and presentation of institutional data. Higher level analyses of data would be useful to inform judgments at different administrative levels.
  3. The university should consider ways to make the external team selection process more consistently objective. The university's existing standards should more consistently guide the external evaluator selection process, including the timing of the external team selection, to ensure that the best reviewers are selected.
  4. The university should consider updating written policies to be more consistent with existing practice to indicate that deans' exit interviews with external evaluators should not be optional.
  5. The university should consider communication improvements in the academic program review/student outcomes assessment processes for interdisciplinary programs.
  6. The university should consider inservice training for faculty on the value and practice of student outcomes assessment.
  7. The university should consider ways to involve all faculty members in the review of their program area.
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