

Academic Program Review: Another Means of Accountability at Texas A&M University

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Higher education today is at war with constituents when it comes to accountability. With the rising cost of higher education and with student loan deficits at the highest it has ever been, colleges and universities have to prove their benefits to students. Compounded by waning resources from federal and state governments, lower appropriations, changing demographics and a financially unstable economy constituents want proof that their investment is worthwhile. Much like the accreditation process for an overall institution, the academic program review has been used to help review individual programs at institutions to help provide that reassurance and accountability for everyone.

J. Fredericks Volkwein has written extensively on the topic of accreditation and academic review. In Volkwein's estimation, it is important for institutions to focus on creating an environment that promotes the importance of "ongoing development and continuing improvement," (4). The best way to do this according to Volkwein is to conduct the inspirational self-review and the pragmatic assessment to gather data for external accountability (4). The same principles that are used in the accreditation process to ensure internal self-review and external accountability can be used to help evaluate academic programs.

R. J. Barak, in his article "Program Review in Higher Education: Within and Without," Barak notes that program review is a standard in higher education with over 82% of institutions reporting that they have some form of program review in place (Barak, 1982). Barak and his colleague B.E. Breier suggest in their work "Successful Program Review: A Practical Guide to Evaluating Programs in Academic Settings," suggest that there are four main reasons to conduct program reviews for an institution:

- 1) Improve programs
- 2) Aid in fostering accountability (certification and selection)
- 3) Market or sell a program by proving its value and increasing awareness
- 4) Exercise authority by influencing decision-making (Barak and Breier, 1990).

Because of the importance of accountability in today's world, program review has become an essential feature in most higher education programs. As Don Gardner suggests, there are five evaluative frameworks for program review. Gardner states in his article, "Five Evaluation Frameworks," that "decisions affecting all phases of university operations were routinely made on the basis of unchallenged assumptions regarding benefits (the "assumed good") or the unquestioned judgments of key administrators (Gardner, 1977). But in today's high-stakes world, administrators "are constrained to produce evaluative data to support even the most basic kinds of decisions (Gardner, 1977).

### **Gardner's Five Frameworks of Evaluation in Higher Education**

Gardner's five frameworks are 1) evaluation as professional judgment, 2) evaluation as measurement, 3) evaluation as the assessment of congruence between performance and objectives, 4) decision-oriented evaluation and 5) goal-free/responsive evaluation (Gardner, 1977). Gardner outlines the advantages and disadvantages of each of the models and states that it is important to adequately choose the best framework geared toward the results that you specifically want.

Professional Judgment – Best used in situations where objectivity is not required and can be done in a short amount of time when a professional in the field is available to make a judgment (Gardner, 1977).

Evaluation as Measurement – Best used in situations where objectivity is necessary and when reliability/comparability is needed to measure mathematically derived data-sets (Gardner, 1977).

Congruence Between Performance and Objectives – Best used when goals are important in the evaluation when objectives are identified and evaluated based upon a goal (Gardner, 1977).

Decision-Oriented evaluation – Best used when an impetus is necessary to help provide important input into policy and decision-making (Gardner, 1977).

Goal-Free/Responsive Evaluation – Best used when flexibility and fluidity are needed to evaluate the program when there are not clearly-defined goals or traditional measurements and can focus on affects outside of the pre-determined goals of the program (Gardner, 1977).

Gardner explains that “distinctions between the five definitions of evaluation are often blurred by practical considerations” and that in practice “hybrid types are abundant” (Gardner, 1977). Regardless of whichever framework is chosen, a lot of information is necessary to be synthesized to create a clear picture of the program to lead to self-evaluation and improvement of the program. With that, Gardner points out that Egon Guba and Daniel Stufflebeam in their work, “Strategies for the Institutionalization of the CIPP Evaluation Model,” suggests the importance of an “evaluation unit,” within the institution to create a “dynamic baseline” of information (Gardner, 1977). It is in these “evaluation units” where institutional research has gained a lot of its importance in collaborating with many units to plan, implement and evaluation academic program reviews.

### **An Integrated Approach to Academic Review**

Barak and Sweeney in their work, “Academic Program Review in Planning, Budgeting and Assessment,” point out that there is a lot of literature out there supporting the need for academic program review but the literature is slowly growing to promote the necessity of incorporating these program reviews into other decision-making processes within the institution (Barak and Sweeney, 1995). The literature shows the importance of combining these program reviews with the budget and strategic planning processes as noted by Barak and Sweeney and various other authors over the years (Cope, 1981, 1987; Keller, 1983; Below, Morrissey and Acomb, 1987; and Below, 1987).

As Barak and Sweeney state according to Priscilla Chaffe-Stengel in her work, “Integrated Program Review: Lessons from Assessment Research at California State University, Fresno,” not only is it important to incorporate program review into the various other decision-making processes such as budgeting and strategic planning but to also with student outcomes to help improve program learning and development (Barak and Sweeney, 1995).

According to Barak and Sweeney, academic review can be beneficial for a number of reasons. These reasons include:

- 1) Allows an examination of current objectives in relation to institutional goals
- 2) Allows for a collecting of output information necessary from each unit
- 3) Allows for the identification of resources used such as money, facilities, and human resources
- 4) Allows for recommendations regarding allocation of budgetary expenses
- 5) Allows for more rational approach to think about planning and resource allocation (Barak and Sweeney, 1995).

The process of academic review, as Keller notes allows for internal review of strengths and weaknesses (Keller, 1983), which an examination of this nature can easily be juxtaposed with similar conversations regarding a university’s strategic planning process. Not only can strategic planning and academic program review co-exist in a similar process to make the process more cost-effective and efficient, accreditation processes can also be developed and incorporated into the academic program review also decreasing costs associated with all of this assessment, site visitations and follow-up after recommendations from the process making the institution more reputable, accountable to its constituents and more closely connected to its mission (Barak, 1986).

### **Texas A&M University Vision 2020: Creating a Culture of Excellence**

Texas A&M University opened in 1876 as served as the first public institution of higher education in the state. Currently Texas A&M has more than 50,000 students enrolled in its programs with course offerings in more than 120 undergraduate programs and 240

graduate degree-granting programs within its 16 colleges. With outstanding research and dedicated, passionate and decorated faculty, students can engage in in and out of classroom experiences that truly can shape their experiences. With such a large research institution, it is extremely important that Texas A&M remains accountable to its constituents to ensure support, funding and staying competitive in a competitive market. To stay committed to world-class academics, Texas A&M has committed to conducting Academic Program Reviews for all programs at all levels on a 7-year cycle. According to the Office of the Provost and Executive Vice President, Texas Administrative Code requires all doctoral programs and stand-alone master's program to be externally reviewed on a 7-year cycle so the institution has committed to taking that one step further and reviewing bachelor's degrees as well (APR, 2014).

The Academic Program Review (APR) allows for an internal evaluation of specific programs and is a strong measure of institutional effectiveness and guided by “ongoing, integrated and institution-wide, research-based planning and evaluation” focusing on improvement outlined by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, CR 2.5, Principles of Accreditation and are conducted outside of the accreditation process for the institution.

In 1999, the Texas A&M Board of Regents adopted Vision 2020: Creating a Culture of Excellence. Vision 2020's thoughts outline a strong and bold mission for Texas A&M

“A culture of excellence will be the hallmark of Texas A&M University in 2020. Our energy and boldness will distinguish us, guide our decision-making, and empower us to continue to improve. Our vision for 2020 addresses, through careful and honest analysis, our strengths and weaknesses. It reflects a steadfast determination to build on strengths, eliminate weaknesses, seek opportunities, and face threats creatively and energetically. We will create a culture of excellence that fulfills the need for an institution with quality of the first order. In 2020 Texas A&M University will be more distinctive than it is today. That distinctiveness will be created on a foundation of quality that is widely recognized and measured by world standards,” (Vision 2020: Creating a Culture of Excellence).

In order to accomplish this vision, after benchmarking with many other institutions, Texas A&M developed 12 imperatives that would lead the charge. These imperatives are important as part of the 2020 plan because these imperatives are used as part of the academic program review. Though scholars such as Barak and Sweeney note that academic program review can lead to the development of a strategic plan, Texas A&M's strategic plan led to an integrated and very detailed APR process.

The 12 imperatives are:

- 1) Evaluate Our Faculty and Their Teaching, Research and Scholarship

- 2) Strengthen Our Graduate Programs
- 3) Enhance the Undergraduate Academic Experience
- 4) Build the Letters, Arts and Sciences Core
- 5) Build on the Tradition of Professional Education
- 6) Diversify and Globalize the A&M Community
- 7) Increase Access to Knowledge Resources
- 8) Enrich Our Campus
- 9) Building Community and Metropolitan Connections
- 10) Demand Enlightened Governance and Leadership
- 11) Attain Resource parity with the Best Public Universities
- 12) Meet Our Commitment to Texas

Though program reviews have existed at Texas A&M throughout its existence, with a call to enhance graduate programs, undergraduate academic experiences, build professional education and the letters, arts and sciences core, and evaluate faculty, their teachings, research and scholarship it became an imperative to develop a program that would allow for regulated evaluations of programs to as Volkein would encourage as creating and fostering an environment of improvement.

### **From The Vision Came the Academic Program Review**

The process itself is implemented in conjunction with the Academic Program Review Coordinator housed in the Office of the Provost and Executive Vice President. The program is detailed and very well organized with timelines through 2021 detailing which program and college are under review and when. Not only is the program very detailed and organized but all of the information and data are also published electronically on the Provost's website allowing a formal review over the years of each program to see where each program started and how they have improved from year to year. The actual program has five major components, which are similar to the accreditation process and take several frameworks from Gardner's philosophy.

#### **Step #1: Self-Study Report**

The first step of the process is a self-study report. The self-study report should focus on long-range planning looking towards the future and toward improvement. Including in the report should be a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis as well as measurements compiled with the Office of Data and Research Services (DARS) (APR Guidelines). The self-study gives the faculty the opportunity to provide an assessment of their program and can have freedom outline and organize the report to best fit the department (with a few exceptions that must be met to meet requirements created by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board). The self study allows for institutional research and "measurements" as Gardner would put it to be used to help create a more robust picture of the success of the program. The self report also allows for the goal-free/responsive evaluation of the program as well. The self-study also

allows the individual department to examine their outcomes and their own assessment techniques to see if those outcomes are being met.

### **Step #2: External Review Site Visit**

The second step is a site visit from external reviews. The external reviews spend about 3.5 days conducting entry/exit interviews with members of the APR administrative team, meetings with the Dean of the College, Department Heads, faculty members and students as well as take tours of the department and program facilities. The individual department is allowed to nominate eight to ten potential reviewers for the site visit. These reviewers are generally chosen from within Higher Education (however some exceptions may be made) and are usually nationally recognized in their field. The Provost approves who is chosen to serve on the review team with the goal of creating a diverse group with the majority of members serving as representatives from peer schools or aspirant peers of Texas A&M. Bachelor's or Master's programs only will have two reviewers, Master's and Ph.D programs will have three reviewers, and Bachelor's, Master's and Ph.D programs will have three to four reviewers. Two of the reviewers on each team must be employed by institutions of higher education outside of the state of Texas, must be part of a nationally recognized program for excellence in the discipline, must have knowledge of master's and Ph.D programs to help benchmark Texas A&M's programs with peers, and must affirm that there are no conflicts of interests related to the program under review (APR Guidelines). Bringing professionals to review the program ties into Gardner's framework of using Professional Evaluation to help evaluate the program.

### **Step #3: The Final Report**

The review teams submit final reports to the Provost and Executive Vice-President within 21 days of the on-site visit. The report looks at strengths and weaknesses and offers recommendations for improvement for the future (APR Guidelines).

### **Step #4: Department Response**

The APR Program Coordinator will forward the final report to the Department Chair or Dean and the Dean will go over the reports findings to the department and will have 14 days to provide a written response on the external-site reviews report to the Provost. In this written response, the Dean must address actions planned to address the report's findings (APR Guidelines).

### **Step #5: Post-Review Reporting**

The post review reporting process has several parts. The first part is the post-review meeting, which is held 60 days after the site visit. This meeting allows for the Dean or Department Head the opportunity to explain the report and to discuss the actions that the department has taken to improve upon the proposed actions of the site-visit team. The next step is the Post-Review Summary, which is submitted on behalf of the Provost to the Department as the "institutional response" to the report.

Following the post-review summary a 1-year status report update from the Dean to the Provost detailing the actions taken based upon discussions at the post-review meeting and outlined in the post-review summary. A 4-year status report is also generated from the Dean to the Provost detailing all actions taken and results of the changes (APR Guidelines).

The overall program is detailed and outlined with staff assigned to help assist with the process, to gather data, and to make sure that the process does what it is intended to do: be an impetus for future improvement and change. The goal is not to instill punitive damages or to intimidate the department or its faculty but to create a collaborative process that allows all parties to examine the strengths and weaknesses and to capitalize on those strengths and to improve weaknesses. Through this process, the program and an institution as a whole can see the value provided by the individual program and make sure that it is aligned with the Vision 2020 plan, the values of the institution and if the program is not only being successful but worth the resources that are necessary to carry out the program such as financial, human resources, facilities, technology, etc (Barak and Sweeney, 1995). This follow-up and the information provided from the site-visit and the progress of the Department to make necessary improvements allow for the “decision-oriented” evaluation that Gardner talked about by being able to inform strategic planning and policy input and enforcement.

The best part of the process is that it is extremely collaborative. The Provost and Executive Vice President and their employees allow each department and Dean a lot of flexibility in how the report is created and presented as well as allowing the individual departments to come up with and decide the best ways to implement the improvements and changes from the external site visit. The Provost’s office also allows the department to have a large say in who is chosen to serve on the site-visit and review team. This process allows for buy-in from the faculty and Dean of the department because it is not about pointing out their flaws or weaknesses but looking at opportunity to improve to continue to provide excellent, quality service to the students.

Because the report has very few actual requirements that need to be met other than what is outlined by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, there could be a lot of flexibility to the report that is generated and submitted. This is a good thing by allowing departments room to adequately present the intricacies of their department, their program and their assessments however it could also allow for confusion and create a very complicated process between different departments in how they present their material. Also the process, since it does not necessarily co-align with the accreditation process with Texas A&M, many departments, programs and faculty might get confused with what is due, when it is due and where, but it looks like Texas A&M does have a good process in place in keeping people organized and on task.

Texas A&M University has a very detailed process for their academic program review. Their process allows flexibility to meet the needs of each individual department and

program ensuring that the goal is not to be a punitive process but truly allowing for the Volkeinesque inspirational self-reflection and the pragmatic site-review for external accountability to all constituents. By creating a collaborative process between the individual departments as well as the institutional researchers and the Provost's office the process is beneficial for the department as well as the institution in making important decisions around strategic planning and budgetary expenditures. The process incorporates many different frameworks as suggested by Gardner to create a seamless assessment plan to foster the "culture of self-improvement" so that Texas A&M is on target to reach its Vision 2020.

## Resources

Academic Program Review (APR) Guidelines, 2014-2015. Office of the Provost and Executive Vice President, Texas A&M University. Retrieved from:

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