Structuring the Six Self Study Questions

The following document is meant to provide context, structure, and explanation to the six self study questions which form the basis for Academic Program Review. These guiding questions are meant to allow units to reflect not only on what they do and how well they do it, but also how those activities and initiative fit within institutional priorities.

**What Do We Do?**

This introductory section is a description of unit/faculty effort in undergraduate and graduate programs and instruction, research and scholarship, outreach and engagement, and service across the campus. It is a functional piece which sets the context of the unit and should serve as the framework for the rest of the document. Topics raised in this self-definition piece should appear later in the self study. This section should also begin to draw alignments to other processes such as programmatic accreditation or institutional initiatives (i.e., Bolder by Design).

This section is not meant to be merely a descriptive narration of demographics. For example, reporting enrollment figures for the past ten years is useful only if they are illustrative of something that is impacting the unit (for example, growth in “service courses,” substantial increase or decrease in the number of majors). This is also not meant to be a statement which establishes the level of quality of the unit. It should be focused clearly on what the unit does.

**Why Do We Do It?**

The question “why do we do it?” is one which focuses on the mission of the unit, unit goals and priorities, and the role of the unit within the discipline, college and institution, both nationally and internationally as appropriate. If a unit has recently engaged in a process of examining its mission, this should be included in the self study as a point of reference. A statement of “the mission is widely understood and shared across the department” provides some information but no evidence. A unit might write something which explains that as part of the last programmatic accreditation process, the site visit team strongly encouraged a re-examination of mission. As a result, the department spent two years engaging faculty, academic and administrative staff, and students in the process of studying the mission. These focus groups resulted in a revised mission statement whose meaning is widely understood and shared across the department. This example ties programmatic accreditation to the APR self study and makes use of existing data gathered from focus groups.

The discussion of goals, priorities, and role of the unit within the college and university should be situated within the context of mission. The role of the unit might have changed over time and an analysis of how the mission aligns with the actual responsibilities of the unit may be appropriate.
How Well Do We Do It and Who Thinks So?

This section is a data-driven analysis of the strengths and challenges of the unit. It includes such topics as instructional and research productivity, faculty recruitment and retention, student retention and graduation rates as well as the discussion of student learning outcomes assessment. External judgments of quality such as national academy memberships, national and international faculty awards and undergraduate and graduate student awards may also be discussed in this section. Other issues important to the unit also belong here as appropriate.

Statements of quality are most useful if they are made in a comparative fashion, for example how a particular department or unit compares to the CIC, the Big Ten, or other benchmark institutions. If a unit is discussing ranking it is important to go beyond a simple statement of what the ranking is into an explanation of why that ranking is significant. For example, a unit might state it is consistently ranked among the top five departments in the nation by a particular journal. The narrative might further explain the journal is highly regarded in the discipline, a top five ranking bestowed by it is considered a distinguished honor, and rankings are routinely considered by industry, graduate schools, and funding agencies. This explication provides context and establishes the credibility of the external measure as well as linking back to the role of the unit nationally and/or internationally.

The assessment of student learning outcomes is an essential part of this section particularly in how it relates to decisions around curriculum. Measures of learning outcomes may include but should not be limited to student survey data. Student learning outcomes should include direct measures in which students demonstrate their learning. Examples of direct measures include papers, presentations, direct application of skills, capstone experiences, etc. The discussion should include the ways in which student learning outcomes have been measured, what the data showed, and any action taken as a result of the data analysis. For example, to assess writing within the discipline a department compares samples of student writing from an introductory course with essays written for upper-division courses. The evaluation indicates significant progress in writing skills over the course of the major, with the average score increasing from 80.5 to 92 over the course of study. If students showed no change in writing ability then this example would also include the changes implemented in an effort to improve.

A unit’s analysis might indicate the process for assessing student learning requires attention. If so, that should be addressed in the last two sections of the self-study document.

What Difference Does it Make Whether We Do It or Not?

This section is a discussion and analysis of the intellectual and scholarly value of the unit, its activities and functions, and the extent to which those activities are still appropriate. What are the implications for the College and the University should the unit cease to engage in some particular areas? What are the contributions the unit makes to support institutional initiatives and how would that change if the unit changed? For example, if a unit has a specialization with high enrollment but low completion rates the discussion should center around what those data indicate to the unit and what the impact of
disbanding or continuing that specialization would be. Explication of compelling reasons in terms of supporting college and institutional initiatives would need to be explored.

**Given Our Present Status, How Do We Intend to Change in Ways that Help Us Advance?**

The discussion around change should be clearly grounded in interpretation of the data used as the basis for analysis in the preceding topics. Items and issues in this section should have been discussed and referenced elsewhere in the self-study document. Reasons for particular targets for change should be clearly linked to something such as a strategic plan, an accreditation-identified issue, changing industry standards, university initiatives, retention rates, placement data, etc. For example, a unit might have identified issues around a required course in a major that include demand for the course and the unit’s ability to handle projected capacity as well as student performance in the course. The discussion of change around this issue should be framed in terms of unit priorities as they relate to college and institutional priorities and it should address how the intended changes will assist the unit/college/institution to move forward.

**How Will We Evaluate Our Future Progress and Successes?**

This section of the self study should provide the framework for the action plan the unit intends to use to measure progress with particular focus on the changes discussed in the preceding section. It should set measurable priorities which clearly align with college and university metrics, particularly Boldness by Design. This discussion links back to intended change strategies and what those strategies are meant to accomplish and moves forward into the metrics and measurements which will be used to determine the extent to which the change was successful. Inclusion of incremental steps and a timeline help to shape realistic goals.

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