

Chapter 7

Ongoing and Systematic Academic Program Review

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ABSTRACT

Systematic program review is proposed as a semi-formal means to proactively involve higher education faculty, staff, students and administrators in analyzing and making decisions about the future of their programs. The chapter first examines issues facing higher education, issues that provide a rationale for annual program reviews. The chapter positions program review as a form of participant-oriented program evaluation, and describes features of annual program reviews. A case study illustrates how a program review was conducted. Summary benefits and implementation guidelines are provided for administrators and faculty.

INTRODUCTION

Current accountability approaches in higher education focus on the accreditation of the overall institution with specialized accreditations for many curricular programs. Academic administrators, particularly department chairs and program coordinators, are tasked out with these reporting requirements, instead of using data for program improvement and better understanding who their students are and the impact of academic programs on students.

Within the culture of academia, the prevailing stance is the status quo, a stance that resists any attempt to add to the current responsibilities of faculty and any change in familiar habits and practices. Administrators who have attempted to instill innovative practices, particularly any strategic planning or program evaluation efforts, have faced resistance. While higher education remains fixed in view of curriculum, outcomes, and faculty work, continual “disruptions” are occurring in demography, economics, and culture (McGee, 2015). How can higher education administrators, faculty, and staff jointly face these ever-changing realities and re-think how to serve the needs of a learning population and overall re-frame how they look at their work in academic programs?

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0672-0.ch007

Rather than formal program evaluation or strategic planning, this chapter proposes a less formal approach or program review. The purpose of program review is to periodically discuss how academic programs have provided good value to students and to answer important questions, such as “Who are our students?” and “What changes need to be made or what gaps exist in our programs, gaps that students need?” The focus on annual program reviews is to better understand the student and the needs of the student, how the program meets those needs, and uses this understanding to direct future work. Program review is an annual activity conducted by faculty, staff, and students. In this way, program review becomes a regular fixture and responsibility of faculty members.

The chapter first summarizes four issues facing higher education, issues which suggest the need for a means to understand students, societal changes, enrollment changes, and accountability requirements. The second section describes program review as form of participant-oriented program evaluation, while a third section identifies features of program review. A case study of program review is provided so the reader can see how the process might work and what questions guide the annual review. A final section summarizes major benefits from annual program reviews, as well as implementation guidelines for faculty members, program coordinators, and dean-level administrators.

ISSUES FACING HIGHER INSTITUTIONS

Four specific issues facing higher education provide a rationale for why ongoing and systematic program review may be helpful and necessary.

First, the complex physical and psychological nature of the learner is always changing. The brain’s neurological system undergoes constant change and whatever we put in front of people impacts their thinking and behavior (Restak, 2003). Ultimately what we are motivated to pursue is based on what we choose to pay attention to (Gallagher, 2009). Schools and institutions are organized around stable features, such as a well-defined management-worker structure, workplace needs were known and roles were clear, and technology was less an influence than today. According to his “then” versus “now” perspective Chester (2005), identified values as one major category of differences in young people. These value shifts, according to Chester, involve digital choices, self-expression, immediate involvement, and a free-agent work ethic. Digital thinking embraces a re-boot approach to behavior rather than a traditional analog view that behavior has consequences. Self-expression differences in “then versus now” can be seen with the notion of personal respect, which was traditionally viewed as earned over time as opposed to now where respect by young people is expected immediately. Rather than working “up the ladder” today’s young people want to make a difference. Their motivation to stay in the classroom or on the job may be keyed to the opportunities they have at becoming immediately engaged in real world issues. Traditional views saw life as an unfolding sequence, but life is viewed by young people as immediate involvement in games of reaction. Today’s young workers see themselves in numerous occupations over their lifetime, as opposed to one career. One can see this value shift in higher education in what enrollment managers label as “swirl,” in which students enroll in multiple institutions and attend classes intermittently (Adelman, 2006). Parents see their identity influenced by their work, while younger people see their identity as a network of relationships and work as a changing reality over their lifetime.

A second issue is that educational structures have not adapted to these individual and social changes. Digital media production and learning, for example, occurs by young people in public network “hang outs” outside of adult control. The skills and literacies learned are not configured as learning outcomes

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