November 3, 2003

MEMO

TO: Mark Gromko
   Vice Provost for Academic Programs

FROM: Committee to Review Program Review
       Neal Carothers, Department of Mathematics and Statistics
       Julie Barnes, Department of Computer Science
       Charles Onasch, Department of Geology
       Madhu Rao, Department of Applied Statistics and Operations Research

RE: Final Report

Background

The committee was charged with evaluating strengths and weaknesses of the current program review process and with providing a set of recommendations for consideration in future program review cycles.

To begin, we conducted a survey of four groups: Chairs and directors (henceforth simply "chairs"), current and former members of the university’s Program Review Committee (PRC), deans, and cabinet members. On August 18, 2003, the committee distributed questionnaires (as email attachments) to each of these groups, asking for responses no later than September 5, 2003. We received (nontrivial) responses from 28 chairs, 18 PRC members, and one dean; no members of the cabinet responded.

We were asked to present a summary of our initial findings before Deans Council on September 24, 2003. On October 2, 2003, Dean Balzer then forwarded a response from what he described as a majority of the deans. Based on all of the responses we were able to collect, the committee has prepared summary comments on strengths and weakness of the program review process as well as a list of recommendations for consideration in future program review cycles.

Summary

There was almost universal consensus that self-study is highly beneficial. Most chairs reported that their units benefited from the internal discussions that accompanied strategic planning. Many chairs reported that they appreciated the opportunity to get feedback on their programs from peers outside the university (i.e., the external review team). It was also generally agreed that the program review process has evolved over time to become more effective and less adversarial. In addition, the deans who
responded felt that the program review process has been very successful in assessing the quality and direction of programs and has provided a mechanism for making choices that serve the university’s strategic direction.

On the other hand, there was almost universal consensus that the data-gathering/reporting process is in need of revision. Most chairs told us that the data they were asked to report could not be directly harvested from the data supplied to them by the Office of Institutional Research. Moreover, the fact that data are reported in a non-uniform manner was a cause for concern by some PRC members, who suggested that such data manipulation could be misleading. More generally, PRC members suggested that the self-study should have less emphasis on data and more emphasis on a critical review of the unit’s strengths and weaknesses. Dean Balzer’s group also suggested revising the data collection/reporting process.

A nearly global concern voiced by chairs was the added workload for them and additional expense to the unit incurred by actually preparing for and conducting the review, which one chair referred to as a "tax" on chairs. Another chair went so far as to suggest that this "tax" is sufficient to discourage chairs from seeking a second term or, indeed, from running for chair in the first place.

Many chairs suggested a need to consolidate efforts between the program review process and external accreditation.

Many PRC members as well as many chairs raised questions about the role of the dean in the review process, especially with regard to potential misunderstandings or miscommunications in the latter stages of the process, but also with regard to more systematic follow up and revision of unit plans.

A general concern of both chairs and deans is the fact that program review can result in an "unfunded mandate" with little or no impact on resource allocation (especially in the short term).

Finally, there was general agreement that the overall review process takes too long, although there were a variety of concerns. In particular, chairs pointed out that while they were given very short deadlines for certain responses, there seemed to be very generous deadlines for responses from the PRC and the dean.

**Recommendations**

The committee recommends the following (in no particular order):

1. Format the data supplied to units by the Office of Institutional Research so that they can be directly attached to the self-study with no further revision or manipulation. Although there may be some inconsistencies in the data available, the committee feels that such inconsistencies will at least be constant across units. Each unit would then be responsible only for such data that are unique to that unit or that are outside the purview of the Office of Institutional Research.

2. The administration should be mindful of the potential for additional expenses incurred by units in conducting the review as well as the potential for added costs associated with implementing the changes mandated by the review process. Departments
should be eligible for reimbursement for extraordinary expenses associated with the review (e.g., meals for external reviewers). If final recommendations include personnel, facilities, or space, then operating budgets should be increased accordingly.

3. Because the chair will be called on to implement the dean’s final recommendations, it is essential that the chair fully understand these recommendations and their implications for the unit. For this reason, we would recommend more open discussions between the dean and the chair during the latter stages of the review process, and especially during the interval between the PRC’s final report and the dean’s final report.

4. There should be greater opportunity for follow up and revision between reviews. We would recommend that the dean meet with the chair each year to discuss the unit’s progress on recommendations resulting from program review, to acknowledge limitations imposed on the department (due to budget constraints, retirements, resignations, and other factors), and to acknowledge any changes to the recommendations.

5. Units that undergo both external accreditation and program review should be allowed some flexibility in assembling their self study. While the two processes have different goals, chairs have nevertheless reported a burdensome duplication of effort, especially in the event that the unit undergoes both processes in the same calendar year. At the least, a unit should not have to undergo both program review and external accreditation in the same year.

6. The PRC should evaluate both strengths and weaknesses of a unit in their final report and should give a point-by-point justification for their recommendations founded in their review of the unit.

7. All of the groups surveyed voiced concerns of one sort or another about deadlines and response times. We recommend that the overall timetable be revised with an eye toward shortening the process, when possible, and toward setting realistic, viable deadlines, when feasible.

8. Units should be consulted on, or at least be made aware of, the charge given to the external reviewers by the dean or the PRC. In the event that there are specific issues the dean wants the external review team to address, the unit should be consulted in advance of the self study so that they may include the appropriate materials.