



Academic Program Review

Review of Existing Academic Programs

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The review of existing academic programs, along with the approval of new academic programs, is one of the main responsibilities of state higher education coordinating boards. The purposes of these reviews include quality improvements, more efficient use of resources, accountability, and cost effectiveness. Typical criteria for the review of existing programs at the state level relate to quality, cost, duplication, employer and student demand, and reallocation of resources.

1. Background

From 1976 to 1987, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) conducted three reviews of existing programs. The first program reviews assessed all doctoral programs in the late 1970s. Then master's programs and bachelor's programs were assessed. After focusing on degree levels, the next two rounds of program reviews in the 1980s were conducted by discipline. In the 1980s, the Procedures for Review of Existing Programs noted that the four purposes of program review were to determine (1) which programs were operating well; (2) which programs needed to be improved and what resources would be required; (3) which programs were no longer needed in their present form; and (4) which programs were needed but not presently offered.

Focusing on disciplines was more useful than focusing on degree levels, but there were problems with that approach as well. The discipline reviews focused on productivity and duplication, but there were no specific criteria because institutions believed that criteria should vary by mission and institutional size. In addition, there were no clear objectives (e.g. generate dollar savings or decrease the number of programs), so there was also no agreement on acceptable rationales for maintaining programs.

After the review cycle in 1987, the CHE determined that the process should be redesigned with two concepts in mind: (1) institutions should be involved in the design of the new process and (2) the process should focus on program quality. The Council of Chief Academic Officers was charged with redesigning program review. A subcommittee of CAOs was created to develop a definition of quality, but it did not produce one that was accepted by all institutions. Staff and CAOs finally agreed that each institution would define quality for itself. Institutions then noted that the review process was duplicative of SACS and program-specific accreditation reviews. As a result, in May 1989, staff suggested to the CHE that program review activities be merged with statewide and institutional planning activities. The reasoning was that program reviews, especially the assessment of strengths and weaknesses and the determination of the appropriate program mix, would help shape strategic plans and then provide feedback on the implementation of the plans.

The redesign of the program review process, which began in 1988, was completed with the adoption of a new policy in November 1990. The updated policy's guiding principles were to:

- Promote the qualitative improvement of individual degree programs and institutions.
 - How are institutions defining and assessing quality?
 - How are institutions trying to improve quality?
 - Do institutions follow through on plans to improve quality?
- Ensure an array of degree programs appropriate to each institution's mission.
 - Are programs performing adequately? What are the strengths? What are the weaknesses?
 - Is the current array of programs meeting the needs identified in the statewide and institutional strategic plans?
- Contribute to planning activities at the institutional and state levels.
 - Has the consolidation of planning and program review been beneficial to both processes?
 - Is program review performing as desired in this new alignment?

As the policy was being revised, there were five expectations of program review extrapolated from the statewide plan for higher education:

- Provisions for assessing quality would be strengthened.
- New procedures should be comprehensive, i.e. contain a mixture of quantitative and qualitative standards which address quality, performance, cost effectiveness, contributions to institutional and statewide goals, and unnecessary duplication.
- Strengthening of undergraduate programs would take precedence over graduate programs.
- There would be increased scrutiny of programs and a more rigorous assessment of their viability and feasibility.
- Program review standards should be incorporated into the review of new programs to ensure quality and prevent unnecessary duplication.

It was agreed that outcomes of the program review process would be:

- Increased emphasis on qualitative considerations and program improvements over time.
- Improved coordination of programs based on institutional and statewide perspectives.
- Targeted institutional missions.

In 1991, the fourth round of reviews was implemented and focused on qualitative assessments that would lead to program improvements. The updated process recognized two categories of programs – nucleus and special. Nucleus programs were traditional liberal arts disciplines at the baccalaureate level that were considered “standard” at most universities. Nucleus programs were considered essential or highly desirable in operating coherent undergraduate programs. All other programs were considered special.

All programs underwent a qualitative review by the institutions, while special programs also underwent a quantitative review by CHE staff. Institutions created their own definitions of and criteria for quality, the reasoning being that the institutions were

responsible for improving the quality of their own programs so they should also assume the responsibility for defining and assessing quality.

The quantitative review addressed productivity levels,¹ unnecessary duplication,² and disciplinary concerns. It analyzed items such as workforce shortages and surpluses, pass rates on licensure exams, rapid enrollment growth, and staffing and equipment problems. Each round (i.e., qualitative analysis by institutions and quantitative analysis by CHE staff) of reviews took two years to complete. Staff assumed that actions taken by institutions to improve programs could be analyzed during the next program review cycle five years later. Most institutional reports did not include recommendations to suspend or withdraw programs. Program reviews were interrupted by Gov. Brereton Jones' Higher Education Review Commission and were officially suspended in October 1993.

In November 1999, the Council on Postsecondary Education (the Council) passed a series of guidelines related to academic programs that streamlined the process of reviewing programs and recognized the need for institutional flexibility within the new postsecondary structures of the Kentucky Postsecondary Education Improvement Act of 1997. The Council's Guidelines for Review of Academic Program Productivity established the following thresholds to be used to identify programs for review:

- Associate programs - average of fewer than 12 degrees awarded during a five-year period.
- Baccalaureate programs - average of fewer than 12 degrees awarded during a five-year period.
- Master's programs - average of fewer than seven degrees awarded during a five-year period.
- Doctoral programs - average of fewer than five degrees awarded during a five-year period.

After the policies were streamlined, the Council conducted four rounds of program productivity review. In the first round, the Council staff reviewed degree output from 1994-95 to 1998-99, and the Council approved the results in July 2001. In the second round, staff reviewed degree output from 1996-97 to 2000-01, and the Council approved the results in May 2003. In the third round, staff reviewed degree output from 1998-99 to 2002-03, and the Council approved the results in January 2005. At its January 30, 2006, meeting, the Council amended its Guidelines for Review of Academic Program Productivity to specify a four-year review cycle.

The most recent review was conducted in 2008-09 and examined degree output from 2003-04 to 2007-08. First, Council staff analyzed official degree data to identify associate, baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral programs at each institution that were below the thresholds. Next, staff notified institutions of those programs that were below

¹ Low productivity was defined as an average of fewer than 10 degrees awarded over a five-year period for certificate, associate, and baccalaureate programs; fewer than 5 degrees for master's and specialist programs; and fewer than 3 degrees for doctoral programs. Source: March 20, 1997 Memo

² Duplication was defined as programs offered by more than four institutions. Source: March 20, 1997 Memo

the thresholds and asked them to apply an efficiency index to programs below the master's degree level.³ If the efficiency index for a program at the comprehensive universities was 540 or above, the program was considered to be productive and removed from further review. If the efficiency index for a program at the research universities was 360 or above, the program was considered to be productive and removed from further review. Finally, the institutions were asked to review each remaining low-productivity program and make written recommendations with supporting rationale for continuation, alteration, or closure of the program.

2. Policy

In 1997, KRS 164.020 was amended and provided the Council with additional guidance concerning program review. The statute allows the Council to eliminate or change existing programs at any public institution based on consistency with the institution's mission and the state's postsecondary Strategic Agenda, alignment with the state's postsecondary strategic implementation plan, unnecessary duplication, and interinstitutional cooperation. In addition, Goal 6 of HB 1 (1997) challenges postsecondary institutions to "deliver educational services to citizens in quantities and of a quality comparable to the national average." KRS 164.020 (16), HB 1 (1997), and *Stronger by Degrees: A Strategic Agenda for Kentucky Postsecondary and Adult Education 2011-2015* form the basis of the Council's program review policy.

- a. Institutions will conduct periodic reviews of approved academic programs. Each institution may create the forms and internal procedures for the review, but Council staff will require some uniform types of information from all institutions. Each institution will be required to include this information in its internal review process.
- b. New associate programs will be reviewed by the institution and the results forwarded to Council staff for review after three years. Upon a successful Council review, these programs will be placed on the regular institutional program review cycle.
- c. New baccalaureate programs will be reviewed by the institution and the results forwarded to Council staff for review after five years. Upon a successful Council review, these programs will be placed on the regular institutional program review cycle.
- d. New master's degree programs will be reviewed by Council staff four years after implementation. Upon a successful Council review, these programs will be placed on the regular institutional program review cycle.
- e. New doctoral programs will undergo an abbreviated interim review by Council staff after three years and a full review three years after the interim review. Upon completion of a successful abbreviated Council review, these programs will be put on the regular institutional program review cycle.
- f. In addition to newly approved programs, Council staff will review all existing programs based on each institution's review cycle. Programs will be subject to the same program

³ The efficiency index formula was defined as the total student credit hours in one year (fall and spring semesters) by program or department divided by the total FTE faculty (full-time faculty + 1/3 part-time faculty).

review criteria as newly approved programs. Institutions will need to obtain historical data from existing programs in order to evaluate them based on the criteria outlined in the next section. For existing programs, institutions should provide data for at least five academic years.

- g. As required by KRS 164.295 (3), comprehensive universities must submit annual reports to the Council identifying the full cost of and all funding sources for each approved applied doctorate and the performance of each approved program.

3. Procedures

Institutions will submit the results of program reviews to Council staff for statewide review. Institutions may use previously established review procedures, but must include the following information.

Consistency with institutional mission/Strategic Agenda/strategic implementation plan will be evaluated by:

- a. Contribution to institutional mission.
- b. Contribution to economic and social welfare goals of HB1 as delineated in the statewide postsecondary education Strategic Agenda.
- c. Alignment with statewide postsecondary education strategic implementation plan.

Program quality and student success will be evaluated using:

- a. Evidence of attainment of student learning outcomes.
- b. External awards or other recognition of the students, faculty, and/or program.
- c. Average actual time and credit to degree.
- d. Employer satisfaction with graduates as measured by surveys and/or alumni satisfaction.
- e. Job placement or graduate school admission.
- f. Pass rates on licensure/certification exams (if applicable).

Cost and funding will be analyzed in terms of:

- a. Student credit hour per instructional faculty FTE.
- b. Extramural funding.

Program demand and unnecessary duplication will be evaluated using:

- a. Number of students enrolled and credit hour production.
- b. Number of degrees conferred.
- c. Explanation of how the curriculum is different from existing programs at other institutions or that access to these programs is limited.
- d. Explanation of pursuit of collaborative opportunities with similar programs at other institutions and how collaboration will increase effectiveness and efficiency.

Institutions will post the data for the program review criteria on the Kentucky Postsecondary Program Review System (KPPRS) as well as their recommendations for each program. Council staff will review the data and institutional recommendations to

determine whether the program should continue without modification, continue with modification, or be closed within three years.

For programs that will continue with modification, institutions should submit a three-year plan for program improvements. Institutions shall submit a progress report and a recommendation for the program's future at the end of this three-year period. The Council staff will review the progress report and institutional recommendation and will confer with the institution before determining if the program should continue without modification or should be closed within three years.