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Undergraduate Academic Program Review
Conceptual Introduction

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Every dean knows that the way to guarantee the absence of a quorum in a faculty meeting is to announce that there is to be a discussion of the curriculum. Eyes glaze over; tempers shorten; people of generosity and good will become intolerant, and those of sound judgment and thoughtful balance become rigid, hard-line advocates. Changing the curriculum, it has been said, is like moving a graveyard; it is a solemn undertaking.

But faculties must tackle the issue, like it or not, for unless they can agree on meaningful educational goals, universities can never succeed. The trouble with having no goals, it has been said, is that you may achieve them.

...The best way to begin developing a curriculum is to consider not what courses universities should require, but what qualities they should seek to nurture in students.

Frank H. T. Rhodes, President Emeritus, Cornell University
The Chronicle of Higher Education, Sept. 14, 2001, B-8-9.

When many of us hear about "institutional" or "programmatic" assessment, our reaction is predictable—like our reaction to the annual reminder that the IRS tax deadline approaches. We groan, we think of avoidance strategies, we recall past experiences being forced to "account" to accrediting agencies and

administrators. We may feel fear, a sense that once again we're being measured up and may be found wanting. Such reactions in higher education are reasonable because we're steeped in traditional practices of evaluation and accountability. Students turn in work and take tests. Faculty submit to formal peer reviews of their efforts. We grade, and are, in turn, graded.

Apprehension about NC State's campus-wide undergraduate program review is normal under these circumstances. But the growing team of faculty and administrators who have spearheaded this review are finding it difficult to contain their enthusiasm for this project, their sense that we're breaking new ground nationally and that this time, the effort promises to propel the University into the ranks of the finest institutions in the country for undergraduate teaching and learning.

Why is the present assessment any different? Why should we submit to it, take time away from our important research agendas to consider and reconsider what it is we do singly and collectively when we work with students?

It's About NC State—and It's About Us. The process of undergraduate program review had its genesis in a conviction not just among administrators but among dedicated faculty at NC State that undergraduate education is central to the mission of the institution and ought to receive the same level of attention in the pursuit of excellence as any other aspect of our work. Instead of coming from beyond us or above us, this assessment initiative has grown from within us. Faculty and administrators from many campus programs and offices are involved: the Campus Writing and Speaking Program, the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning, the First-Year Inquiry Program, the Honors Program, the Office of Undergraduate Affairs, University Planning and Analysis, University Housing, the Office of Student Conduct, and the Office of Leadership, Ethics, and Moral Development. Leading the way is a special, faculty-run and faculty-representative body called the Committee for Undergraduate Program Review (CUPR for short). Chaired by Jon Rust of Textiles Engineering, CUPR has representatives from every college and from many departments across campus. As the conduit for information about the assessment process, as the leader for policy-making regarding undergraduate program review, and as a forum for the development of consensus about any and all actions in support of assessment, CUPR ensures that NC State implements an assessment program that is highly responsive to the needs and interests of every program on campus.

It's About Every Program. Think about some of the worst examples of assessment you know. Typically someone higher up is mandating that you engage in an assessment that may mean nothing to you or your department. If you're lucky,

you can crunch some numbers and send them in, and perhaps it will all get lost in the mix until the next assessment, half a decade later, begins casting its shadow again over your freedom to teach and design your curriculum as you wish.

But there's a crucial philosophical difference between the current program review and what many of us are used to. This time, the assessment is about us—about our own courses, our own curricula, our own standards of excellence within our departments, created on our own terms, on our own time, for our own reasons. Accreditors may be requiring it—how else to be sure it happens?—but “it” is shaped from our own needs as faculty and administrators trying to create the best undergraduate programs we can. The administration is saying, “We want you to evaluate yourselves in ways that go beyond a simple reliance on student grades, course evaluations, and core requirements for majors. We hope you’ll ask yourselves how you know you’re teaching well, what evidence you can find that demonstrates not only your successes at preparing students but your shortcomings. But we want you to decide what’s meaningful to you, and what methods or instruments make the most sense to you as you find out how you’re doing. We want you to choose the best practices to improve those areas you identify as needing attention.” Such a message reflects a paradigm shift that's been developing over the past decade in the way that institutions engage in program review and assessment.

How Does it Work? The process of undergraduate program review begins with articulating outcomes for graduating seniors. Outcomes are teachable, measurable characteristics—abilities, skills, knowledge, and attitudes that students are supposed to acquire to be considered fully educated both as undergraduate students generally and as majors in their fields. Without outcomes, nothing we do makes much sense. Most of the time, our outcomes remain rather tacit, buried beneath requirements for the major. But do we really know whether our students are achieving the expected level of knowledge, ability, skill, and attitude? Can a series of courses with “pass” grades guarantee that? Can grades alone, with all their variability across instructors and all their idiosyncrasy within particular courses, predict whether our students are graduating with all the intellectual capacities we wish and demand of them? Can hastily completed course evaluations, pencilled by students in a few minutes, really tell us how effectively we're preparing them in our courses? Experience and research tell us that the answer is no.

By establishing outcomes, every undergraduate unit on campus creates for itself a benchmark for everything that it does educationally. Fortunately, NC State is well on the way to having outcomes, in one form or another, for every department. With the help of various support units on campus, as many as fifty

departments have already produced curricular outcomes for majors. The first phase of undergraduate program review will fill in the gaps. As a result, NC State will be one of the only research-extensive institutions to have defined learning outcomes for every aspiring major on campus.

After this first phase of program review, departments will begin various kinds of assessment that are paralleled by curricular revisions, faculty development, and new approaches to teaching and learning. It's important to realize that the effort to assess the curriculum and its effectiveness is ongoing. Once in motion, this review will never end. As each new bit of information comes into the program, that information can be used to continuously improve the educational process. Every seven years, each program is asked to provide a synthesis of its work, but the efforts continue year after year in cycles of assessment, revision, and improvement. It can hardly be otherwise; a curriculum can't stand still because the very conditions to which it responds are in state of constant motion: changing students, changing disciplines, and a changing world. A fixed curriculum with routines of teaching that last for decades is a curriculum doomed to intellectual obsolescence and pedagogical failure.

It's Supported. Unlike many institution-wide assessments, NC State's undergraduate program review is backed by several sources of support, the URLs for which are listed here:

http://www.ncsu.edu/provost/governance/Ad_hoc/CUPR/

<http://www2.acs.ncsu.edu/UPA/assmt/resource.htm>

<http://www2.acs.ncsu.edu/UPA/assmt/index.html>

http://www.ncsu.edu/undergrad_affairs/assessment/assess.htm

<http://www2.acs.ncsu.edu/UPA/index.htm>

<http://www.ncsu.edu/fctl/>

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