

ACADEMIC PROGRAM PRIORITIZATION AD HOC COMMITTEE REPORT

Introduction

President Wiewel established the *Academic Program Prioritization Ad Hoc Committee* in response to a straw poll from the Faculty Senate (January 6, 2014 meeting), and recommendations from the Faculty Senate Steering Committee, the Provost, and the Faculty Advisory Committee. The Ad Hoc Committee was charged with developing the initial groundwork for how PSU will conduct its academic program prioritization process. The Ad Hoc Committee was given four specific charges:

- 1) Identify and investigate approaches used at other universities (including feedback from participating faculty and administrators);
- 2) Recommend a framework for PSU;
- 3) Determine a timeline and representation on subsequent committee(s);
- 4) Provide a definition of what constitutes a program and the scope of the review.

The Committee had four full-time faculty members (Kris Henning, Mark Jones, DeLys Ostlund and Barbara Sestak), two faculty members currently serving as administrators (Shelly Chabon and Jonathan Fink), and was staffed by Steve Harmon from OAA. The Committee held the first of five two-hour meetings on February 18th and was charged with delivering its final recommendations to Faculty Senate and the Provost at the Senate April 7, 2014 meeting. This report is organized around the Committee's four charges.

Background: Why Perform Program Prioritization?

Many universities and university systems have launched program prioritization programs, initially guided or influenced by external factors including financial and political pressure. At the same time, several have developed processes that eventually became part of a standard snapshot of a university's programs on a multi-year cycle. This type of periodic review allows a university to adopt a portfolio perspective that looks at the institution's performance as a whole; it is the aggregate analysis of how individual academic programs perform according to such criteria as research productivity, enrollment growth, and graduation rates. Such comprehensive assessments can help guide strategic investments in individual programs that best support specific institutional goals. In contrast to the piecemeal evaluation that occurs during specialized accreditation or individual program reviews, academic program prioritization processes can leverage consistent, institution-wide data sets to inform resource allocation/reallocation decisions that look at all programs simultaneously. This approach can allow a university to regularly take inventory that guides decisions about immediate funding choices and the fulfillment of longer-term institutional goals. Adopting a portfolio perspective positions a university to fairly and strategically respond to externally driven change. Ideally such processes should be regularized, rather than being implemented on an emergency basis; as they are repeated, they should be refined and revised with the goal of continuous improvement. To be respected and thus successful, academic program prioritization must build trust in the data as well as the process.

Charge 1: Identify and investigate approaches used at other universities (including feedback from participating faculty and administrators)

The Committee spent considerable time reviewing other institutional program prioritization plans, as well as articles and monographs on the topic. Some of the key materials reviewed included:

- Dickeson, R.E. (2010). *Prioritizing academic programs and services: Reallocating resources to achieve strategic balance* (2nd edition). Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Eckel, P. (2000). The role of shared governance in institutional hard decisions: Enabler or antagonist? *The Review of Higher Education*, 24(1), 15 – 39.
- Education Advisory Board (2012). *Revitalizing the program portfolio: Elevating academic program performance and strategic alignment*.
- Final reports on program prioritization from¹:
 - Appalachian State University ([website](#))
 - Boise State University ([website](#))
 - California State Polytechnic University, Pomona ([website](#))
 - Cleveland State University
 - East Carolina University ([website](#))
 - Humboldt State University
 - Indiana State University ([website](#))
 - North Carolina State University
 - University of Alaska, Anchorage ([website](#))
 - University of Central Oklahoma
 - Western Carolina University ([website](#))

Our review of these resources led to the following general conclusions about program prioritization at other institutions.

- **Universities develop and implement program prioritization for a range of reasons** - While most public institutions cite declining state support for higher education as a primary factor, many universities use this as an opportunity to reallocate resources to strengthen core programs, to pursue new initiatives, and to develop focused areas of excellence.
- **Variability in the scope of reviews** - All of the institutions we looked at evaluated and categorized academic units. More commonly this involved separate reviews of each degree or certificate nested within academic departments. About half of the universities also reviewed and ranked administrative and “supporting” units managed by their offices of academic affairs. In some cases this required the development of alternative metrics and/or evaluation teams beyond those used for review of academic units.
- **One size DOES NOT fit all** –We found significant variability in how academic program reviews were conducted (i.e., number of committees, composition of committees, number of people rating each program), the metrics used (e.g., some or all of Dickeson’s 10 criteria; additional items), the final categorization of programs into distinct groups (e.g., enhance, maintain, restructure, suspend), opportunities for academic units to appeal the decision and/or provide feedback, and how the information ended up being used. Leaders at Cal Poly Pomona, conducting a similar review of institutional approaches to program prioritization, concluded: “*Prioritization efforts at other universities continue to show that each campus is customizing their approach to match their campus culture, circumstances, and needs.*”

Based on our review of the above resources we concluded that PSU should develop a prioritization process that is consistent with our current governance structure, institutional history and fiscal situation.

¹ All of these reports can be provided to further committees in PDF format.

At the same time, this does not mean that we need to devise an entirely new approach to program prioritization. Many of the policies/practices we saw at other institutions appeared beneficial and could be modified for PSU and are similar to practices that PSU has used in the past. With that in mind, we developed a list of guiding principles that appear to be associated with successful implementation of program prioritization at other institutions.

- **Identify clear objectives** – Program prioritization is a difficult and potentially unsettling activity for academic units. At some universities it has been used to discontinue degree programs; at others it has led to reduced funding and reorganization of faculty and staff. It is important, therefore, for institutions to be as clear as possible from the outset about the goals and objectives for implementing a prioritization process. These goals should be communicated to the entire campus, and opportunities should be provided for feedback and clarification of goals wherever possible.
- **Maintain transparency and open communication** – All aspects of the program prioritization process should be open and regularly communicated to the campus community. At many institutions a website is created to provide consistent updates and solicit feedback from faculty, staff, and administrators.
- **Engage faculty** – Dickeson and others argue that program prioritization is only successful when faculty members are engaged in all aspects of the process from the outset. This includes opportunities to define goals and objectives, to devise metrics and evaluation rubrics, to participate in conducting the reviews, and to provide a forum for feedback regarding the findings and the ultimate use of the results.
- **Focus on the “big picture”** – People chosen to participate directly in the development and application of review criteria need to represent the university as a whole rather than their individual academic programs, colleges, or schools.
- **Develop a repeatable process** – The effort required for a full round of program rankings and prioritization is significant. A successful outcome is less likely if people perceive this as a “one-time” activity rather than a permanent change in university operating procedures. Moreover, each round of reviews is likely to highlight distinct challenges (e.g., availability and accuracy of data) so a formal assessment should be conducted at the conclusion of each cycle to identify modifications that are necessary for future reviews.
- **Develop a data driven process** – Program prioritization necessitates access to consistent, accurate, and agreed upon performance indicators. Quantitative, easily interpretable data need to be identified early in the process and made readily available to academic programs for planning purposes. Academic programs should also be provided opportunities to correct or contextualize quantitative data (i.e., through the use of qualitative information). Evidence and feedback from stakeholders should be used to inform the process itself.

Our recommendations for Charges 2-4 are based on the best practices that we perceived from this investigation.

Charge 2: Recommend a framework for PSU

In recommending a framework for PSU, the Committee considered the following principles and values:

Academic program prioritization should be a standardized, dynamic process on an agreed upon schedule (e.g., every five to seven years). For academic programs, this may begin with a faculty committee that determines, in consultation with the Provost's office, the parameters and benchmarks against which programs will be assessed based on the university's mission and strategic goals, as well as the type of information that needs to be gathered. It should also include questions about how they would allocate additional financial resources, should they become available. The next step would be the gathering of such data from academic units, with OIRP assistance, for all academic programs in their purview. This information would go to a second committee (and in a parallel process to the deans that informs the committee's work), which could evaluate and place all programs in categories, such as:

- Exceeds expectations
- Meets expectations
- Does not meet expectations

From such an initial triage, programs that fall within the third category would be asked to provide more input including a report of the impact they have on other programs within the university. With this information in hand including deans' assessments, the committee would make recommendations to the Provost for any changes to the programs. The Provost (and other vice presidents, in the case of university-wide prioritization beyond academic programs) will forward recommendations to the president for final decisions. Changes to any program would follow established processes for implementation.

Our goal was to develop a framework for program array review that:

- Enables the university to develop a campus-wide understanding of its portfolio of academic programs.
- Facilitates evidence-based decision-making about the evolution of the academic portfolio and the allocation of resources to and between its component programs.
- Can be completed in a timely manner.
- Is open and transparent.
- Engages the faculty at all stages as a key component of shared governance.
- Can be repeated, either on a regular cycle or on an as-needed basis.
- Includes an assessment component to support continuous improvement of the process by learning from experience gained in earlier iterations.
- Leverages the experiences and processes of similar efforts at other universities, but adapts those ideas to address the specific needs and context of PSU.

Given the charge given to this committee, our focus has been on academic programs. We recommend, however, that academic program array review should be pursued as part of a broader evaluation that includes all parts of the University. We recognize that such a broader review would require the development and use of evaluation procedures and criteria that may be different from those used in academic program prioritization.

Process Structure

The process design that we have developed has five components:

1) An initial parameter-setting phase (one term) that:

- (i) Finalizes the choice of *evaluation criteria* (see below for examples).
- (ii) Verifies that the selected criteria are an appropriate reflection of the University's goals and mission.

- (iii) Identifies the *key metrics* and *qualitative components* that will be used to measure and evaluate each of the criteria.
- (iv) Applies the definition of an *academic program*, provided elsewhere in this report, to determine the list of academic programs that will participate in the review;
- (v) Identifies a collection of *categories/priorities* (see below for examples) into which programs will be organized.

Once the prioritization process becomes established, we expect that this phase can be completed within one term by building upon the sets of criteria, metrics, and priorities identified in previous iterations. Additional time, however, will be required to set up these parameters for the first iteration.

2) A data gathering, measurement, and analysis phase (one term) that:

- (i) Initiates the process of collecting data from each academic program (with the support of centrally-generated data from OIRP);
- (ii) Performs an initial *scoring* of the collected data and an initial categorization of the set of programs across the previously identified collection of priorities;
- (iii) Solicits feedback, rebuttals, corrections, and endorsements from each program with particular emphasis on those whose initial categorization signals a likely need for change;
- (iv) Develops a revised assignment of programs to prioritization categories, including a summary of the classification rationale, and providing an opportunity for each program to include a statement responding to its categorization including the impact of any changes to other programs.

We expect this part of the work might extend into a second term, as the revised classifications process overlaps the next phase.

3) A reflection/recommendation phase (one term) that:

- (i) Analyses and reflects on the data collected in the previous phase, particularly the assignment of programs into categories;
- (ii) Takes account of the University context, distinguishing, for example, between times where there is a need to focus strategic investment of new funds; or to inform plans for reallocating existing resources between programs; or to guide budget reduction efforts.
- (iii) Engages relevant university committees (e.g., educational policy, budget, etc.), and administrative units as appropriate;
- (iv) Formulates and presents recommendations to the faculty senate and administration.

The recommendations that are produced in this phase are, of course, subject to the same, existing procedures and oversight that would be required for the adoption of any other set of recommendations for program-level changes.

4) An assessment component, operating throughout the multi-year cycle, which monitors any changes, collects suggestions and feedback, and prepares recommendations that can be used to improve future iterations.

5) A communication component, again operating throughout the review, with responsibility for timely sharing of information about the status of the review using an appropriate combination of web sites, mailings, and informational meetings. The communication component plays an essential role in meeting the goals of transparency and openness.

Examples of Evaluation Criteria

The review process described above relies on the selection of a set of evaluation criteria; in effect, these criteria will form the basis of a structured questionnaire to which each program in the review will be expected to respond. Given our short timeline, it was not feasible for our committee to identify the specific set of criteria that should be used in the initial program array review at PSU. Our survey of similar processes at other institutions, however, showed that many begin with the following ten criteria proposed by Dickeson:

1. History, development, and expectations of the program
2. External demand for the program
3. Internal demand for the program
4. Quality of program inputs and processes
5. Quality of program outcomes
6. Size, scope, and productivity of the program
7. Revenue and other resources generated by the program
8. Costs and other expenses associated with the program
9. Impact, justification, and overall essentiality of the program
10. Opportunity analysis of the program

As one illustration of possible alternatives, the following list of nine criteria were used in the recent review at Appalachian State University:

1. Centrality to University's mission
2. Quality of the program
3. Faculty involved
4. Facilities/equipment
5. Demand
6. Costs
7. Duplication
8. Critical mass
9. Recommendation about the program

Criteria must be selected that can be used to evaluate each program. Each of the two lists above, for example, has associated sets of quantitative metrics and qualitative questions. We recommend that traditional retrospective metrics like enrollment history, publication counts, SCH, and sponsored research be supplemented by prospective indicators like the ability of a program to become more nationally prominent or regionally valuable through the investment of new funding.

One of the goals of the initial, parameter-setting phase is to identify the specific criteria and associated metrics and questions that will be used for the purposes of the review. We expect that this task will be accomplished by using the lists of criteria developed elsewhere as an initial "menu" of selections that can then be customized and adapted to suit the needs of PSU.

Examples of Categories/Priorities

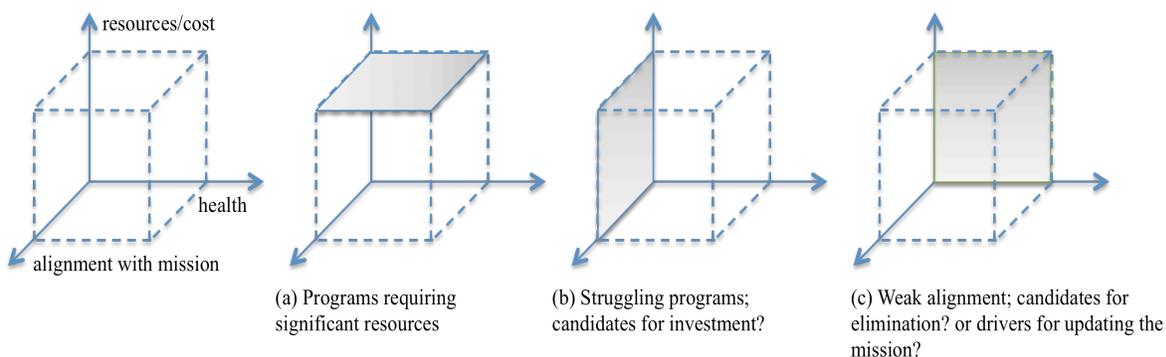
The result of the second (data gathering, measurement, and analysis) phase of the review process is an assignment of programs into different prioritization categories. The use of categories avoids the need for a total rank ordering of all programs, which is likely to be difficult to do with high precision, unnecessarily contentious, and overly detailed for the purposes of generating subsequent recommendations. According to Dickeson, the most common approaches are to rank programs by thirds or quintiles. Dickeson's three-point scale, for example, uses categories "top" to identify candidates for enrichment; "middle" for programs to be retained at present level of support; and "lower" for programs where reduction or consolidation may be appropriate.

The process used at Appalachian State University again provides an example of a different approach using the following set of categories:

- Programs that are poised to move forward toward national excellence
- Programs that have capacity to increase research funding or scholarly productivity
- Programs that have capacity to increase the service mission
- Programs that help poised to add additional degrees
- Programs that have insufficient enrollments or productivity to justify continuing in their current state

Using a set of categories like this would allow the results of the second phase of the review to reflect more specific attributes or areas for development within individual programs than the simple three-point scale.

Finally, we considered the possibility of using an approach that attempts to separate categorization from recommendations by positioning each program within a cube whose axes measure a program's overall health, alignment with university mission, and resource requirements. The following diagram includes three examples to illustrate how the positioning of a program within different regions of the cube might suggest subsequent recommendations, not just for a program, but perhaps also as guidance for updating the university mission.



Identifying a suitable set of categories/priorities is again one of the goals of the initial, parameter-setting phase in our process. We expect this task to be accomplished by a careful review and selection from examples like those listed above in combination with whatever revisions are necessary to adapt them for use at PSU.

Committee makeup

To lead the review process, we propose the formation of an *Academic Program Prioritization Committee (APPC)*, formally established by the President on the basis of recommendations from the Faculty Senate Steering Committee, the Provost, and the Faculty Advisory Committee. The APPC will have between 6 and 10 members, all tenured faculty with prior leadership experience at PSU, who are recognized as trusted representatives of the university community. Members of the APPC are expected to serve, not as representatives or advocates for their individual units, but rather as members-at-large and advocates for the PSU faculty and for the university as a whole. The APPC will conduct the work in the initial, parameter-setting phase of the review process, and will be responsible for the assignment of programs to prioritization categories in the second phase and for oversight of the assessment and communication components of the review.

The initial scoring of programs in the second (data gathering, measurement, and analysis) phase will be conducted by the *Prioritization Scoring Team (PST)*. We envision that this will be a larger group,

perhaps with as many as 30 faculty members organized into smaller teams, and with broader representation; members are recommended by the Faculty Senate Steering Committee, the Provost, and the Faculty Advisory Committee. These smaller teams score a portion of the academic programs and their reports go to APPC for compilation. APPC then continues the second phase with steps iii and iv. We expect that the third (reflections/recommendation) phase of the review process will be a combination of joint efforts by APPC and existing standing committees such as Budget, to determine final recommendations.

As indicated previously, the APPC will oversee the work of the assessment and communication components of the process. We expect, however, that much of the work in each area will be delegated to an appropriate subcommittee or separate group.

The current committee has had to work within a relatively short timeframe to develop this report. As a result, we have not had a chance to discuss full details about the composition and function of the PST, or about the manner in which those responsible for assessment and communication activities would be identified and appointed. We expect, therefore, that the members of the APPC will need to work further on these issues when that committee is first appointed.

Charge 3: Determine a timeline and representation on subsequent committee(s)

As noted above, we are recommending that there be two committees: the APPC (with a membership of 6-10 tenured faculty members) and the PST (with a membership of up to 30 members representative of the full-time teaching faculty at PSU).

Timeline:

APPC appointed Spring 2014. Depending on their timeline and charges, it is anticipated that APPC could indicate what data and information needs to be collected earlier in their process so that OIRP and units could start preparing information mid-Fall to be submitted to APPC in January 2015.

PST members appointed middle to end of Fall 2014 to begin work in January 2015 with goal of completion mid-Winter 2015. Scoring reports given to APPC for compilation, classification and work with selected programs to provide additional information.

Additional information required from programs due beginning of Spring 2015. APPC will make revised recommendations early to mid-Spring 2015. Follow up hearings and joint meetings with other standing committees occur during Spring Term with final recommendations to provost and president beginning of June 2015.

Charge 4: Provide a definition for what constitutes a program and the scope of the review

An "academic program" is any collection of activities that consume resources and either contributes transcribed courses to a credential (e.g., UNST, Honors) or leads to an academic credential (e.g., Minor, BA, BS, Certificate, Graduate Degree). Academic programs are not necessarily the same as academic units (units contain programs; programs do not contain units). An academic unit is an organizational entity such as a department or school and can house one or more programs within it.

The scope of the review can be considered a picture in time, but in order to provide a more accurate representation, we recommend that data be provided for a spread of three years. An academic program prioritization review examines both the output (e.g., number of graduates, SCH generated, national ranking) as well as the cost in dollars and other resources. Some data provided will be at the program level and some, such as expenses, may need to be provided at the unit level.