

Review of Student Life's Program Review Process and Effectiveness

University of the Pacific

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At the request of the Vice President for Student Life we were asked to evaluate the program review process in the division of Student Life at the University of the Pacific. Our analysis is grounded in an exceptional self-study report and confirmed by our own observations during our campus visit on October 31, 2011.

This review will be divided into four general categories: Overall Effectiveness, Self Studies, Team Reports, and Student Learning and Success. It will conclude with some overall impressions and recommendations.

Consultants were Greg Boardman, Vice Provost for Student Affairs at Stanford University and Harry Le Grande, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at University of California, Berkeley. The consultants met with Vice President Elizabeth Griego, students involved on teams or focus groups, Student Life Leadership Team, Student Life Directors and Faculty Program Review Team chairs.

Overall Effectiveness

The program review processes in the Student Life Division at Pacific certainly support the mission of “exceptional service and support to our students. Through innovative thinking and dynamic programs, each Student Life member focuses on all aspects of a student’s personal growth and educational experience.” Furthermore, as outlined in your website on this topic, “we take a team approach to assessment, thus creating a sense of community, inclusiveness, and shared accountability for student learning.”

Pacific Student Life has one of the most comprehensive program review processes that we have encountered in the student affairs divisions of most colleges/universities. In our interviews over the course of the day, we were struck by the energy most of the participants shared about the process. They commented on the fact that this was an incredible amount of work given all the other demands of their positions but felt it was well worth the effort in the end. Faculty, staff and students believed the process was in line with the institution’s values and priorities.

There is a sense of a culture of assessment in some of the areas of the division and as more departments go through the self-study process that sense will continue to develop. The fact that the campus is embarking on a campus-wide program review process is testament to the results that have come out of Student Life.

We were struck by the number of comments about the openness of the process and that no person or area was off limits as far as speaking with or commenting on. The underlying theme is the leadership must set the tone for the process and be open and accessible. The faculty commented that previous academic reviews have not been as effective because participants were concerned about program elimination and therefore went into a defensive posture rather than one focused on outcomes. The effectiveness of the program reviews were also lauded because folks could see results from the recommendations. There was a view from the faculty members that the reports didn’t just get shelved somewhere but provided a direction for the future. That transparency is key and even if a recommendation was not acted upon the fact that it was given consideration as is evident in the implementation plans made folks feel their input was taken seriously.

The reviews were effective because people felt they were not just checking off boxes. The focus and leadership on program review provided by the Student Life Division is effective and a best practice.

Self-Studies

A consistent message we heard was how helpful the CAS standards were in moving the program review process. There were a few comments made where the standards might not be applicable to their program, but with minor modifications or use of other professional standards they were able to complete the task.

The faculty and student life directors all spoke to the focus the standards and assistance provided. Clearly, graduate students in the student development master's program were involved in some of the writing of the reports and this provided a great learning opportunity for them. The undergraduates also commented on being able to contribute to the writing.

From some of the program directors there was not alignment on what coaching and training was provided. When asked specifically what role their supervisors played in assisting them in preparing their reviews, no one commented on their specific role other than maybe reviewing a draft. In defense of the comment several mentioned staffing changes and new leadership had many folks learning the process along with the director who was responsible for preparing the self study.

The faculty members were very appreciative of the effort and product produced by the Student Life directors. There was an appropriate level of detail so that they could really understand the department and services it was providing. It also allowed them to see where further resources and alignment could enhance the service delivery model. However, no one spoke about the learning outcomes that students achieved based on the reports; it mostly seemed to center on administrative structure or program enhancements. No one commented on the elimination of services that had little or no impact on student learning.

The recommendations are well written, clear and adhering to the CAS standards as appropriate. The self study obviously provided the various departments an opportunity to take a time out and do a deep dive into the programs and services that they deliver. The information garnered from that activity is well documented throughout the review process.

Team Reports

It was evident during our visit, that there is a collaborative, process-oriented, strategic and systematic approach to Pacific's assessment initiatives. And, as a result, the quality of the team reports is excellent. Both student and faculty involvement in the reviews demonstrate broad participation and a commitment to excellence. It was apparent that student and faculty teams are vested in this assessment initiative, and take great pride in their work. It serves as a model of true collaboration and partnership in an environment that can be difficult to get buy-in. Much was said about the transparency of the assessment projects. These are "not just white papers"; they are "seen, read and implemented!"

The students felt they gained a greater appreciation of the work being done on their behalf and the process provided a roadmap of what they were trying to achieve. They felt it allowed them to develop transferrable skills and new language for the work they do. It instilled a sense of pride in their work and can see what is expected of participants involved in their programs.

The faculty review team chairs were extremely complimentary to the process used in Student Life and applauded the administrative structure and support which allowed them to focus on what was important and that was the programs themselves. Faculty were very complimentary of Dr. Griego and stated wholeheartedly that the Student Life Division set the tone/tenor that was appropriate for what, hopefully, will serve as a model for the university plan moving forward. There was still some anxiety that the campus-wide program review may not have the same infrastructure and so may not be as effective as they found in the experience with Student Life.

In addition, it was noted that the self-studies effectively informed the teams and served as a roadmap. The focus on vision/mission was found to be helpful. And, there was satisfaction expressed by team members to the purposeful commitment to diverse representation on the review teams.

However, there was some angst expressed about the timing of the team assessment involvement – especially those that were scheduled later in the spring semester conflicted with typical end-of-year class expectations and other commitments.

In a couple of instances, concern was also expressed about the role of the teams; there was a request for some clarification here. An example of this was when a team submitted a reorganization of a department – there was some feeling that this recommendation went beyond the parameters or expectations.

There was strong sentiment among the faculty that the program review was “genuine”, and “earnest.” A strong sense of “openness” was apparent throughout the whole process – “you get the truth from Elizabeth.” Faculty felt they were focused on quality improvement – not a “rubber stamp.”

Student Learning and Success

For the most part, the program review process adequately addresses student learning results.

There was a great deal of reference to the Institutional Priorities Committee and the belief that program reviews would result in greater resources for programs within Student Life. This seemed to be a larger motivation than getting a sense on the effectiveness of the program and learning outcomes expected of students. More emphasis or clarity need to be provided about the intent of the reviews. It would also be important to separate out what divisional resources might result from the program review versus what the campus might be able to provide.

One interviewee mentioned that they use that as a motivator for some new staff leaders who are being asked to undertake the self-study process. This may set up unrealistic expectations on the outcomes of the process.

Students interviewed had seen immediate results from some of the recommendations from the team in which they participated. Faculty also had commented that changes had occurred based on

recommendations; while some were not immediate they did occur over the course of a couple of years. That action is an important component in keeping the teams engaged and motivated to devote the time.

One of the areas that struck us from an outcomes perspective to the self-study is we would have expected more discussion around what the students were expected to master from their participation in a given program. There is a lot of statistical information on usage and satisfaction but in the ones we read we could not find the correlation between the program and what the expected learning outcome was. The studies are very thorough and could benefit from some sort of executive summary in the beginning. This would insure that even if the reader did not get through all the documents they would know what the gist of the recommendations were.

Recommendations

The Student Life Division at the University of the Pacific is a best practice in the area of program review for student affairs in higher education. There are many institutions that would be envious of the dedication and focus that has been placed on this effort.

The review process at this point would need only minor changes to move it to the next level.

One enhancement would be an executive summary in the beginning of the review materials for each component. There is a lot of information to absorb and if you are not a practitioner it may prove to be tedious reading if you do not know the specific area. However, it was mentioned during our visit by the faculty in particular that they found the reports very informative and gave them a better understanding of the work and services being provided by the various departments.

There were some thoughtful concerns expressed about the focus of the assessment – learning outcomes. Some felt it would be serve the units/departments better if there was a review of the day-to-day services; and, a review of the current resources/budget/staffing and what is needed to provide these services better (operational v. learning outcomes).

Some clarity around the purpose of the program reviews is needed so that expected outcomes are clear to the leadership embarking on the assignment. In some cases it was viewed mainly as a way to justify budget increases which is different than assessing the learning outcomes expected of students who participate in the various services and programs.

There was not a consistent understanding on the role or value added of the leader's supervisor as it relates to coaching them in the review process. Also, there seemed to be some confusion among some participants as to what Sandy Mahoney's role is in this process– is there a “coaching” role she might play with the assessment teams;

Some expressed a desire to consider two external participants for each program review; a good idea, but this will depend on available resources.

Also, some inconsistencies were expressed whether it was to be a narrative report (tone/voice) or to simply address each standard; a question of style.

Moving forward, as the assessment project continues in future years there was questions about how useful, or to what degree, will the previous report be the next time around?

However, there was some expressed concerns whether there was appropriate closure to the process; specifically, in some cases faculty heard through the grapevine what the final action was; there was no “formal closing of the loop.” They are glad to know the assessment reports are on line – recommend that when the university implements their assessment project – they do the same. They want to see copies of previous reviews and relevant action/no-action. Question of sustainability is important – “Is the program sustainable?” “What is it you claim to do” And how do you do that?”

Pacific will have reached a milestone in creating a culture of assessment after all the departments have completed a program review. Everyone who had been through felt subsequent assessment will be easier and less daunting.

The fact that the university is expanding program reviews to areas outside of Student Life will further institutionalize the culture of assessment that has been started. The campus should take the opportunity to look at lessons learned from the Student Life process.

Please extend our thanks to all the individuals who took the time to meet with us. As is often the case we learn as much from the experience as we give. Please feel free to contact us if we can clarify any part of our report or answer any questions.