Guidelines for External Review of Academic Departments and Programs

All departments and programs at Colgate undergo external reviews on an 8-10 year cycle. The goal of a review is for a department to engage in a self-study of curriculum and pedagogy, receive external feedback and assessment, and to initiate improvements based on both the self-study and the external feedback.

External reviews have helpful impact in proportion to the seriousness with which the department prepares for and follows up on them. The actual visit by the reviewers is the immediate focus, but much of the value from a review is generated by the process of self-study prior to the visit, and successful outcomes require a commitment to implementation after the visit.

Preparing for the Review

There is some flexibility in timing of a review. A department facing significant issues may wish to go earlier in the normal cycle, while a department with a significant number of faculty on leave or away from campus may want to delay a review until more faculty are available.

Preparation for a review should begin no later than early in the academic year prior to the visit by the external evaluators. The Division Director and Associate Dean should meet with the department chair to begin a conversation about the review, to go over the steps involved and the department chair’s duties, and to suggest various topics that the department may want to consider in its self-study.

The department arranges for a series of meetings (a retreat is often a good way to start) to discuss what issues they face and how to structure the self-study.

Departmental self-studies should include the following elements:

- What are the department’s goals and/or mission? How do departmental goals relate to the broader mission of the university?
- How are the department’s curriculum and pedagogy designed to achieve those goals?
- How does the department assess whether it is successful in achieving its goals? The self-study should provide data and evidence.
- How is the department responding to changes in the academic preparation and interests of the student body?
- How has the department participated in all-university programs? List all contributions over the last five years.
- What is the department’s analysis, based on the items above, of the strengths and weaknesses of its program(s)? What questions does the department face? What options is it considering?
- What specific questions will provide a useful organization for the visit? The department should identify significant issues with respect to curriculum, major requirements, interdisciplinary commitments, personnel issues, future directions, etc. that it would like the external review to address.

Departments may wish to form subcommittees to work on specific issues, and the department may wish to consult with the Division Director (and Associate Dean) as they proceed with the self-study.

Around the time when the department is completing a draft of the self-study document, there should be a discussion of proposed external reviewers. The final review team should include three, or occasionally four, reviewers. Review teams should include at least one academic from a comparable liberal arts college and often include an academic from a research university as well. Review teams should also be balanced in terms of subfields, approaches to the discipline, etc. The process for choosing external reviewers involves the department, Division Director, and the Dean:

- The department submits a list of 6-10 possible reviewers to the Division Director. The list should provide contact and background information for each possible reviewer. Any links between possible reviewers and members of the department (e.g., if a proposed reviewer was a visiting chair three years ago or is a co-author with a department member) should be noted.

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1 All references to department also apply to programs.
2 Point to department annual reports.
• The Division Director will meet with the Dean and Associate Dean to discuss selection of reviewers. The Dean may choose reviewers from the department list, but may also add names to the list or contact the department or proposed reviewers for additional names.
• The Dean’s office, with the help of the Division Director, will send invitation letters and make arrangements for the visit. The reviewers are normally offered a modest stipend (currently, $1,000 for members and $1,500 for the team chair) plus expenses (least-cost travel, accommodation and meals). The Dean’s Office pays for this.

The packet sent to external reviewers (with copies to the Division and Dean’s offices) should contain the following material:
• the department self-study
• the three most recent department annual reports
• curriculum vitae for all members of the department
• syllabi for all classes
• a copy of the Catalogue
• admissions brochures for the department, division, etc.
• any other documents that the department believes would be useful, careers they follow, and any other materials department members feel will be useful

The Visit

The department creates a detailed schedule that includes individual meetings with all members of the department (including visiting faculty and senior lecturers, and lab instructors), students from the department, colleagues from cognate departments or programs, and anyone else, e.g., the Division Director for University Studies, that the department, the Dean, or the review team might designate. Departments may consult schedules set up for earlier reviews as guidelines. Departments may consider a final meeting with the whole department. The schedule should be sent to the external reviewers in advance for their comments and proposed changes.

The Division Director, Associate Dean, and Dean have a preliminary meeting with the review team at the start of the visit to go over procedures, outline the scope of the review, and inform the members of the team of any particular concerns or questions the Dean may have. They also conduct an exit interview with the team.

The completed report comes to the Dean and is reviewed before being sent to all continuing members of the department.

Follow-up

The post-visit process begins with the Division Director, Associate Dean, and Dean meeting with the whole department to discuss their reactions to the report. The department and the Dean discuss the report and begin to evaluate which recommendations require follow up action, what those actions are, and what resources, if any, the department may need.

More focused department meetings should follow this initial overview meeting. Departments may not accept all of the conclusions of an external review, but all of the recommendations should be discussed and evaluated.

Approximately one year after the visit, the department should report to the Dean on what actions have been taken or are ongoing as a result of the external review. This report may be a written or may take place at a department meeting to which the Dean, Division Director, and Associate Dean are invited.

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