Assessing the academic program planning and review process

A quality initiative institutional report

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The Quality Initiative (QI) project for the University of Wisconsin-Platteville (UW-Platteville) was a formal plan to assess and support the implementation of a new academic program planning and review process. Most importantly, it was intended to provide support and feedback in order to improve and establish this process.

The development of the new academic program planning and review process began in 2010 when the Academic Planning Council (APC), a faculty governance committee, recognized the need to revise the process they were using for program review. It took a few years to develop, but by the fall of 2013, the APC was ready for implementation.

The new planning and review process consists of two parts — an annual program report to be used for resource planning, and a six-year program review for quality assurance. The annual program report, Form A, is completed by every academic program. Having all programs complete Form A at the same time provides the APC an opportunity to compare these snapshots in an institutional context, thus allowing them to make meaningful recommendations on resource allocation to the administration. Additionally, all academic programs must complete an in-depth program review report, Form B, every six years. Form B requires discussions of assessment, continuous improvement, academic standards, program needs, and program goals. These program review reports are reviewed by various faculty governance committees so that the APC can consider their perspectives when making an overall evaluation of the program’s quality.

The QI team formally observed and assessed the first two years of implementing these two components of program planning and review during the 2013–14 and 2014–15 academic years. The specific goals of the QI, taken directly from the QI proposal, are listed below.

**Goal 1**  Fully implement and evaluate a full cycle of annual and comprehensive program reviews.

**Goal 2**  Ensure that Form A is manageable, effective, and meaningful for reporting and institutional planning.

**Goal 3**  Ensure that Form B is manageable, effective, and meaningful for comprehensive program review and quality assurance.

**Goal 4**  Ensure that all stakeholders understand the importance of institutional planning and academic program review.

These goals were to be met primarily by observation, information gathering, and subsequently making recommendations to the APC. Members of the QI team interviewed and led focus groups of key stakeholders in these processes. Specifically, the QI team met with academic program heads, the members of the APC, chairs of the committees involved in the comprehensive review, and the deans of the three colleges. Additionally, two members of the QI team were also members of the APC. To be embedded within the committee that developed and used these processes allowed the team members an unfiltered view. Moreover, they gained a familiarity with the review process not otherwise attainable. From the information gleaned through their experiences, the QI team developed recommendations that were shared, and at times implemented, by the APC.

During the first year of implementing the new review process, the APC made significant changes to both the review process and Forms A and B. These changes were made spontaneously as new information surfaced that made them necessary. Consequently, the QI team opted to postpone some of the initial interviews until after the APC had an opportunity to implement their newest changes. Apart from postponing early interviews, the QI remained largely unchanged from the original proposal.
SCOPE AND IMPACT OF THE INITIATIVE

2. Explain in more detail what was accomplished in the Quality Initiative in relation to its purposes and goals. (If applicable, explain the initiative's hypotheses and findings.)

As previously identified, the main purpose of the QI was to support the APC in their attempts to implement and establish this new approach to meaningful academic program planning and review. To this end, members of the QI team attended and participated in APC meetings and interviewed parties involved with the new process. Through these activities the QI team was able to accomplish, at least in part, each of the goals outlined in the QI Proposal.

   **Goal 1.** Fully implement and evaluate a full cycle of annual and comprehensive program reviews.

The APC initiated the new review process in the fall of 2013. Consequently, during the course of the QI project, the APC reviewed Form A twice for each academic program: once during the 2013–14 academic year, and once during the 2014–15 academic year. The review of Form B, the comprehensive academic program review, is a two-year process. As such, only one group of programs has completed the review process over this same time period. Programs in the second group are midway through the process.

Perhaps the more important component of Goal 1 was the evaluation of the new review process. Through first-hand experiences and interviews, the QI team was able to evaluate Form A, Form B, and the general review process associated with each form. Specific details are outlined in responses to Goals 2–4.

   **Goal 2.** Ensure that Form A is manageable, effective, and meaningful for reporting and institutional planning.

Form A is the annual report that informs APC for purposes of resource allocation. This form contains two parts. The first part is a data table that is designed to provide a snapshot of each program. Much of the information in the table is supplied to each program, though programs are asked to verify the data and provide any missing information. The data in this table generally falls into three categories: staffing of the program, student and credit hour production, and budget. The second part of Form A is narrative in nature and asks programs to identify significant concerns, especially those related to their current level of resource allocation.

There are three phases in the process of completing and reviewing Form A. In phase one, data is supplied to the program; in phase two, the program verifies the data supplied and completes the remainder of the form; and, in phase three, the APC reviews, evaluates, and analyzes the resulting data. Of course, a successful annual review process requires success at each phase.

   **Phase One:** While reasonably successful, phase one has been the most cumbersome of the three phases. Currently, much of the data required on Form A is provided to the programs. However, as the new process was implemented, there was no single source for this data. Consequently, much of the data was collected manually. This was a significant concern for two reasons. First, the collection of the data was very labor intensive and really beyond what could reasonably be expected of a faculty member serving on a governance committee. The second, and larger, concern was consistency. As the data was initially collected manually by various people, what was provided was dependent on the interpretation by the people collecting the data. Until the process is completely standardized, interpreting the data and comparing data from year to year will be difficult.

Members of APC became well aware of this concern early in the first year of implementation. In response, members of the QI team initiated regular meetings of information systems and reporting staff from across campus to improve the process of data collection. These conversations, over two different spring semesters (2014 and 2015), have resulted in the development of automated processes to gather the data. Additionally, as the university implements a business intelligence tool (Oracle Business Intelligence Enterprise Edition; OBIEE), more of the data will be available whenever it is needed.
Phase Two: In the second year of implementing the annual program report, every academic program participated. One hundred percent compliance across the institution suggests that phase two of reviewing Form A has been overwhelmingly successful. We believe academic programs accept the necessity of participating because the new review process was developed within the context of faculty governance. Continued familiarity with the process and continued strides toward an automated system will help maintain this success.

Phase Three: Phase three of reviewing Form A approaches the limits of manageability, despite the APC’s and the QI team's best efforts. The data collected as part of Form A includes 29 data points per program, with nearly 60 programs completing the form. This is obviously a lot of information. Though the institution invested in an online system to manage this data, it still requires a level of manual oversight. Someone must comb through the data to verify that any outliers are accurate and organize the information appropriately within a spreadsheet.

The APC is then faced with the equally overwhelming task of analysis. The first step in this analysis is to collate the data, followed by computing various metrics for each program (cost per student credit hour, for example). Then, as a group, the APC needs to review those metrics and make recommendations. This is where the APC has had the most difficulty. They have struggled with formulating proposed recommendations, let alone approving them. The purpose of this process, after all, is to enable the APC to make recommendations to the administration regarding resource allocations to academic programs.

Some progress has been made in this regard, however. The APC has begun to develop some benchmarks for these metrics to inform their decision making. Additionally, since programs perform different roles on campus, the APC has begun to develop categories of programs. For example, some programs are categorized as service programs, while others are categorized as general education programs, and others are categorized as professional programs primarily serving their own majors. Categorizing these programs is a first step in being able to compare similar programs.

Finally, in order to start a discussion about the reallocation of the university's limited resources, one of the QI team members took an additional step during the second year of implementing the Form A process. Specifically, the team member further analyzed the data using multiple metrics and presented a proposed list of programs for disinvestment. This additional step was successful in moving the discussion forward, but no final recommendations were made. Still, the mindset of the APC, and the campus as whole, seems to be changing. Rather than simply recommending a program receive an increased or decreased level of resources, the APC is beginning to adopt a finer identification scheme. At present, they are considering identifying programs that should be closed, those that should be disinvested in, those that should be watched, those that should remain intact, and those that need additional resources.

Goal 3. Ensure that Form B is manageable, effective, and meaningful for comprehensive program review and quality assurance.

Form B is the comprehensive program report completed by every program on a six-year cycle. In the initial implementation, this form was reviewed by the Assessment Oversight Committee (AOC), the Academic Standards Committee (ASC), the Academic Information Technology Commission (AITC), and the University Academic Budget Commission (UABC) prior to being reviewed by the APC. Each of these committees had a specific section within Form B that they had designed to gather the information they needed to perform their evaluation. As the first year of implementation ended, however, it was decided that including each of these committees in the process, though comprehensive, was unnecessary if not counterproductive. Consequently, the APC, in consultation with the AITC and the UABC, removed these two committee’s from the review process. A more detailed account of this decision is provided in our response to question three.

Like Form A, the completion and review of Form B has three phases. In phase one, programs complete Form B, which requires them to respond to questions relating to their goals, alignment with the university’s mission, assessment plan, and plan for maintaining rigorous academic standards. In phase two, Form B is reviewed by the AOC (for the program’s assessment plan and implementation) and the ASC (for the program’s standards). In phase three, Form B, along with the evaluations from the AOC and the ASC, is reviewed by the APC.
Form B is much less cumbersome than the form it replaced. Moreover, the form is viewed by multiple committees over an extended period of time. Consequently, each program receives a more in-depth review than what was provided in the past. Our interviews with major stakeholders suggested that the new process is a vast improvement over the old review process. Still, a few modifications will further improve the process. The APC, AOC, and ASC tried to make their components of Form B as general as possible to accommodate for the differences between academic programs. This flexibility proved problematic. Program chairs found some questions difficult to answer and reviewers found that the responses did not match what they were looking for. Based on the first round of reviews, the AOC and the ASC modified their questions. The APC is now planning similar modifications. Overwhelmingly, the most frequent suggestion is for the APC, AOC, and ASC to generate rubrics for their evaluations of Form B responses. Our interviews suggest that each of these groups see the value and importance of such rubrics. Moreover, each group has identified rubric development as a beneficial future goal. However, the APC, AOC, and ASC plan to wait until they have a more solidified review process in place before developing these rubrics.

**Goal 4.** Ensure that all stakeholders understand the importance of institutional planning and academic program review.

While Forms A and B are new, institutional planning and academic program review are not. For years the APC has asked programs to complete very long reviews every five years. These reviews were prepared, and subsequently evaluated in isolation. As a result, nearly every program was identified as doing a good job while being under-resourced. The exercise of having to write a long report every five years, having it reviewed, and then receiving the same, minimal response as five years earlier resulted in the old process developing a reputation of being an exercise in busywork. The new process offers two fundamental improvements that are beginning to change this impression. With the new annual review process (Form A), all programs are reviewed annually, allowing a university-wide snapshot of resource allocation. With this mechanism in place, the APC is in a position to make meaningful recommendations on resource allocation that take into account the entire institution. Secondly, Form B is less cumbersome for program heads. Moreover, the protracted review schedule, including multiple review bodies, allows for more meaningful and valuable feedback to programs.

Interviews by the QI team provided evidence that not only do stakeholders understand the importance of institutional planning and academic program review, but also that they are committed to doing so in a meaningful and efficient manner. Because APC’s previous review process was ineffectual, there are some lingering concerns that the APC will continue to be ineffectual. However, there is general optimism that the APC is moving in the right direction with an improved focus on efficacious academic program planning and review.

Overall, the purposes and goals of the QI project have been accomplished. We set four specific goals and worked towards each. While there are certainly places for continued growth and improvement, we are confident that the APC program review process, and the institution, have benefited from this project.

3. Evaluate the impact of the initiative, including any changes in processes, policies, technology, curricula, programs, student learning, and success that are now in place in consequence of the initiative.

The impact of the QI project to assess and support the successful implementation of the new APC processes was felt early on—during and after the first year’s implementation. During the first year’s implementation (2013–14), there were significant issues with the data that had been collected for programs within Form A, as well as with the roles of the four committees initially reviewing Form B. Because the program data collected for Form A was incomplete, and the validity of what was there was suspect, the APC had to change their expectations in terms of the recommendations they could offer that year. In fact, it was decided that the APC couldn’t make any recommendations regarding program allocations, but that they could still go through the process of considering programs across the institution. As part of this, the APC held a winter “retreat” with the deans from across the campus to discuss the general review process and consider how recommendations might proceed. Additionally, after discussion with stakeholders, the QI team recommended that the data collection process be reviewed and that additional resources be brought to bear on the issue. The result of this was that starting in January of 2014, in preparation for the second year’s implementation, key information systems and reporting personnel
began meeting to discuss the process of delivering more accurate and thorough data for the Form A process. The personnel included our Chief Information Technology officer, our top information systems person, our head institutional researcher, a representative from Human Resources, and the comptroller. This group was pulled together by a member of the QI team and also included the co-chairs of the APC itself. These discussions greatly improved not only the quantity of data provided in the second year’s implementation, but also the reliability of that data that was collected. It was also in these discussions that the automation of gathering the needed data was first discussed. With the implementation of a new business intelligence tool (OBIEE), it will soon be possible to simply run a single report to gather all the data needed.

As spring of 2014 and the first year’s implementation continued, the QI team began its tasks of conducting interviews and focus groups. What became most apparent as a result of these was that two of the committees reviewing the Form B reports for the APC were unsure of their roles in the review. The Academic Information Technology Commission (AITC) was uncertain as to what it could review, and therefore suggest, in terms of the use of technology by a program. More specifically, they struggled with being able to accurately evaluate how well a program used technology as well as with making a recommendation on how a program should use technology more effectively. The University Academic Budget Committee (UABC) was uncertain how it could review the resources allocated to the program and whether they were sufficient or not. They felt that any allocation of resources to a program should be evaluated in the context of the institution as a whole, rather than in isolation. Additionally, the AITC and UABC felt that reviewing technology and budget resources once every six years was inadequate. Consequently, the APC began discussing how the AITC and UABC might be included in the annual Form A recommendations rather than in the Form B reviews. After discussion with the chairs of these committees, they were dropped from the Form B process.

As is hopefully apparent with these few examples of changes that have been made, the impact of the QI team’s systematic review of the new APC processes has been significant. Their efforts have greatly improved the institution’s process of faculty-led academic program prioritization. Additionally and significantly, the perception of that process by the campus community has improved as well. After some initial skepticism, there is now an acceptance of the process as legitimate, as well as an appreciation that the process is being systematically improved to enable it to be more effective in the future.

4. Explain any tools, data, or other information that resulted from the work of the initiative.

The most apparent data that resulted from the work of the QI were the notes taken from the interviews and focus groups conducted with various stakeholders of the APC processes. These were used to make recommendations to the APC on how to improve the process. Some of the QI team’s recommendations also resulted in modified versions of the tools used by APC—that is, modified versions of Form A and Form B.

5. Describe the biggest challenges and opportunities encountered in implementing the initiative.

There were not many challenges in evaluating how to make improvements to the APC’s new review process. In fact, the stakeholders interviewed were enthusiastic about sharing their perceptions and thoughts. After the first year’s implementation, and after subsequent changes were made for the second year, it seemed that there was even an increased investment in making sure that each of the processes was made both more effective and more efficient.

The biggest challenge was perhaps simply finding the time to meet with various individuals and groups to conduct the expected interviews and focus groups. Secondary to that was simply taking the feedback from those meetings back to the APC and discussing how best to use the feedback to improve the review process.

The biggest opportunity in this initiative was to improve a process that had a significant campus-wide impact. In particular, the QI team had the opportunity to help improve the cumbersome but fundamental task of data collection. As the core of a university’s identity is its academic program array, improving the process by which the faculty make decisions about that array obviously has a significant impact.
6. Describe the individuals and groups involved at stages throughout the initiative and their perceptions of its worth and impact.

In the initial QI proposal we divided the stakeholders in the APC process into different groups in order to make interviewing and meeting with them more effective. The three groups of stakeholders consist of members of the APC and heads of the involved faculty governance committees; heads of academic programs across campus; and finally, college deans and other relevant administrators (notably the Provost). These three groups of individuals were involved throughout the initiative.

The APC members and heads of the involved faculty governance groups included faculty members representing the three colleges on campus. The members of the APC saw the QI as having value because it would directly improve their work in evaluating academic programs. The heads of the other involved faculty governance groups became aware of the QI early on, though they were not interviewed about the Form B process until late in first spring semester (2014). Though they had already been in informal discussions with the APC at that point, the focus group in which they participated allowed them a formal opportunity to present their views and recommendations on how to improve the process. These committee heads, along with the members of the APC, found that the QI had a significant impact on their work.

The heads of the academic programs, all of whom completed the annual Form A reports, and only some of whom completed the Form B reviews, saw value in the formal evaluation process. As you can imagine, when the heads of academic programs are asked to do something new, particularly in regard to reporting data on their program, they have opinions on how best to do it, as well as questions about the process. The focus groups with these individuals provided the forum in which they could present those opinions and get clarification on parts of the review process that they did not understand.

7. Describe the most important points learned by those involved in the initiative.

The APC has built a solid foundation for academic planning and review, and in its beginning stages, the transition to the new review process has been successful. While the structure of the review process seems solid, the QI team’s careful review over the past two years has helped us learn some important lessons. Most importantly, what was learned was that the broad-scale implementation of such a new process is an iterative process; new things are learned with each revised version of the process. As things stand at this point, the most important points are outlined below.

**APC Workload:** The first issue to address relates to the increased workload expected of APC members, especially the chair. The new academic review process was designed to be less cumbersome for those preparing Form A and Form B as well as those reviewing them. However, because the process is new, the APC has spent a considerable amount of time and effort bringing programs up to speed on the new procedures. The bulk of this responsibility has fallen on the shoulders of the APC’s chair. Furthermore, the APC has retained all of its old responsibilities while adding the annual review of all programs to its annual agenda. This is a substantial increase in workload for the APC. Moreover, the responsibility for preparing the data for analysis has fallen on the chair. This is an additional time-consuming responsibility in an already labor intensive position. In order to address this factor, the newly developed and staffed Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment (OIEA) will be taking over the data management responsibilities.

**APC Membership Turnover:** A second issue relates to a lack of continuity among APC members. Since the APC is a faculty governance committee, new members are elected each year as terms of service expire for other members. Currently, there is only one member of the APC who was involved in the development of the new process. In fact, the incoming chair for 2015–16 will be the first APC chair since the initial implementation who was not involved in planning the new process. The QI team believes that familiarity with the development of the new process, as well as familiarity with some perceived missteps by the APC, are fundamental to maintaining forward momentum. Thankfully, past members and chairs of the APC have indicated a willingness to continue to participate with the APC and to contribute. This should alleviate some of this concern.
**Communication:** The third most important current lesson is that we must maintain an adequate level of communication between constituent parts of the review process. The review process was designed to be inclusive. The guiding philosophy was that opening the review to more committees would result in a better informed university community and would facilitate communication between committees that had been functioning in isolation. While the new process was successful in producing a more informed university community, scheduling conflicts continue to hinder meetings of APC, AOC, and ASC. As such, these committees still struggle to work in a fully coordinated fashion. As part of the QI, the chairs of the APC, AOC, and ASC were interviewed simultaneously. All parties agreed that adding a regular meeting in this format at least annually, and ideally more often, was beneficial.

**Resource Provision**

8. Explain the human, financial, physical, and technological resources that supported the initiative.

In our QI proposal we wrote,

The APC was granted a break from its previous program review activities to develop and implement these new processes. Many areas on campus, including Financial Services, Human Resources, and Institutional Research, will provide data and support to the APC. The university has been concurrently implementing a Business Intelligence system that will eventually provide the needed information and data to programs and committees in a much more automated process than currently exists.

The university purchased Campus Lab’s Compliance Assist program to use for handling and storing the data and forms for the Form A process. Eventually Compliance Assist may also be used for storing and routing Form B.

Finally, as part of the work in developing this new process, the committees and administrators of the university identified a need for more centralized assistance in program assessment and evaluations. Therefore, the university is establishing an Office for Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment, and is currently searching for a director for this office. As this office becomes functional it will be able to assist the APC in its execution of the new academic program planning and review process.

While this has remained true, the bulk of these resources are related more directly to the APC review process than specifically to the QI. As previously stated, the QI is not the implementation of the new academic review process but rather an initiative to provide assistance with and analysis of the new process, along with suggestions to further refine the process. Hence, the resources that relate most directly to the QI are human resources.

Although the specific members have changed over time, the QI project was proposed, conducted, and reported by a team of two to three faculty and administrators. However, the team has had to rely heavily on volunteers from constituent parts of the review process to participate in its interviews and focus groups.

**Plans for the Future (Feature Milestones of a Continuing Initiative)**

9. Describe plans for ongoing work related to or as a result of the initiative.

The work conducted by the QI team has helped the APC implement and improve their new process for academic planning and review. However, the process is still relatively new and is not truly established yet. To help the APC fully establish their new processes, the QI team has offered to continue their work with the APC for at least one additional year. During this next year, the QI team will continue to attend meetings and to serve as a liaison between the groups associated with the review of Form B.

The QI team will also offer to help in ways that were not a part of the original QI proposal. The QI team will also serve in an advisory role to the APC in general, and in particular, to its chair. In this capacity the QI team will reduce the effect caused by the loss of human capital through the natural turnover of committee members. The continuation of the QI team’s involvement, along with a modified purpose, will help the APC to continue to strengthen its new process for academic review. Ideally, the QI team will assume this modified role for no more
than two years. By that point in time the new process will presumably have had enough time to become established within the university’s culture.

10. Describe any practices or artifacts from the initiative that other institutions might find meaningful or useful and please indicate if you would be willing to share this information.

The QI team, though probably more importantly the APC, has developed both practices and artifacts that they are willing to share with other institutions. The APC and members of the QI team developed a complete handbook of both the Form A and Form B processes that includes examples of the forms themselves, the timelines used, and the responsibilities of the different committees involved. Additionally, since all the Form A data has been managed within a commercial product (CampusLabs’ “Compliance-Assist: Planning”), templates of how to manage that data, and the subsequent reports can be shared as well.

It should also be noted that the QI team has already taken the initiative to share its work. This past March they presented a session at the HLC Annual Conference in Chicago, Illinois. The session, “Developing a Faculty-led Annual Academic Program Review Prioritization Process,” was well attended, indicating at least moderate interest. As the name suggests, the session described how the APC changed their process. At this session, the QI team shared excerpts from the APC handbook, a document that contains an overview of APC, Form A and Form B, timelines for the completion of these forms, and evaluation sheets for these forms. The QI team would be happy to share the PowerPoint slides from this presentation as well as the APC Handbook.

Lastly, the development of a QI team to help assess and support the implementation of a new academic program planning and review process was both a meaningful and useful practice. When other institutions begin vast-reaching initiatives, such as the one being tackled by the APC, they may wish to consider forming an independent team like the QI team to help establish the new process.