

Standard 4: Creating an Organization Committed to Learning and Improvement

Reflective Essay 4a: Shifting to a Culture Based on Evidence

Introduction

National conversations about higher education emphasize the importance of providing evidence of student learning as a principal gauge of educational effectiveness. Additionally, research over the past 20 years indicates that student learning occurs both inside and outside the classroom and can be enhanced by developing purposeful institutional practices that lead to greater student engagement. Thus, it is important that the traditional boundaries between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs so common on many campuses, including our own, be crossed to recognize that student learning occurs holistically from multiple sources of influence.

This essay will describe two examples, one from Academic Affairs and another from Student Affairs, of intentional planning efforts to improve student learning. The example from Academic Affairs describes changes that have taken place in the Academic Review process and the very recent alignment of this process with the yearly Academic Plans initiated by Provost Marlin in 1998. The example from Student Affairs describes recent changes in both organization and intention that began with the arrival of a new Vice President for Student Affairs in 2000.

Academic Affairs: The Alignment of Academic Plans and Academic Reviews [CRFs: 4.3, 4.4, 4.6 4.8, and 2.7]

The Academic Review process recognizes our abiding commitment to improving the academic quality of our programs in a collaborative and reflective fashion. The process is operated under the auspices of Academic Affairs and has been undertaken since the early 1970s. The Provost delegates operational functions to either the [Office of Undergraduate Studies](#) or the [Office of Graduate and Research Affairs](#), depending on whether a department does or does not have graduate programs. The administrative team that conducts all reviews includes the Provost, the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, the Graduate Dean, the Undergraduate Dean, the relevant College Dean, as well as a panel of three faculty members. Two members of the panel are faculty from appropriate universities with expertise in the discipline of the department under review, while the third member is an SDSU faculty person from a department in a different college than the department being reviewed. If a department or program undergoes external accreditation, it may ask for permission to substitute this process for the Academic Review process.

The primary purpose of the Academic Review is to provide a systematic process designed to improve the quality of our degree programs. Operating procedures are clearly described in the [Senate Policy File](#) and additional information is sent to departments from either Graduate Division or the Division of Undergraduate Studies prior to the review. Most reviews are held approximately every 7-9 years. Each department or program undergoing review develops a [self-study](#) that serves as the basis of the review process. While there was no standard format for the self-study until fall 2003, it has long been expected that departments provide quantitative and qualitative evidence, in support of their narrative, to indicate how well programs are meeting their goals. The visiting panel has an initial meeting with the SDSU administrative team at the beginning of the review process and another meeting at the conclusion of the visit. The panel then writes a report detailing the strengths and weaknesses of the department and provides recommendations for strategies to assist program improvement. This report is shared with the department/program and with the SDSU administrative team. Within a month, a follow-up meeting is held with the department chair and the administrative panel to discuss the report and any potential changes including curricular offerings, advising practices, faculty hires, or budgetary issues that would facilitate program improvement.

In 1999, in recognition of the growing conversation about student learning outcomes in higher education, the Academic Review process was expanded to incorporate discussions of the assessment of student learning. Departments were given specific [instructions](#) and materials to guide them with assessment and were directed to contact the Associate Dean in Division of Undergraduate Studies who chairs the [University Committee on Assessment](#) (UCA). An assessment workshop was held February 25, 1999, to assist departments with their assessment plans. In March of the same year the graduate dean sent a [letter](#) to all department chairs and program coordinators that outlined the time table for incorporating student learning outcomes assessment in Academic Reviews. Departments or programs reviewed in the AY 1999-00 were expected to incorporate an assessment plan into their Academic Review. Departments/programs being reviewed during the [AY 2000-01](#) were expected to submit their assessment plan for review to the UCA during the previous year. And beginning academic year 2001-02, each department/program was to submit their assessment plan to UCA the year prior to their review and include assessment results as part of their Academic Review self-study. However, these changes were not entirely effective as no mechanisms were in place to ensure that departments submitted their assessment plans to UCA prior to their review. In addition, there was no follow-up on how departments used the results of their assessment of student learning to improve their programs.

Provost Marlin initiated annual academic planning by departments in 1998. As part of our shared governance process, the Provost worked in concert with the University Senate AP&P committee. These initial [plans](#) were primarily focused toward the allocation of tenure-track positions, which was to be tied to programmatic planning by departments, programs, and colleges. Each January, Provost Marlin [requests](#) that departments develop an Academic Plan that includes the following planning issues: 1) the department's overriding academic goals; 2) a description of programs that the department wishes to maintain and/or develop and their alignment with department academic goals; 3) a discussion of curricular and/or hiring changes required; 4) alignment of departmental goals with College and University goals; and 5) a summary of the comprehensive hiring plan.

More recently, to improve our capacity to examine student learning, additional changes have taken place to the Academic Plan process. In spring 2003, a [description](#) of student learning goals and objectives and a summary of the implications of assessment results was also included as part of the Academic Plan. During spring 2004 the [Provost](#) decided that the traditional academic plan would be modified to focus entirely on student learning and its assessment. In addition, beginning AY 2004-05 an [annual report](#) will be submitted by all departments/programs that describes modifications that have been instituted as a result of the assessment of student learning. These recent changes in policy and procedures demonstrate our commitment to create intentional planning efforts on student learning.

During the AY 2002-03, the Provost and the Deans of the Graduate Division and Undergraduate Studies worked together to align the Academic Plan and the Academic Review processes to streamline the process and make it more relevant to long-term planning. In addition, this alignment assists our efforts to shift the culture from one in which academic reviews are seen as periodic events undertaken every seven years to a culture that is truly committed to continuous improvement processes.

To facilitate this change in culture, the content of the Academic Review materials has been dramatically changed. Departments now write five reflective essays, one of which is an analysis of student learning outcomes, including a summary of results and how they were used for program planning and improvement. [See [cover letter](#) and [written materials](#)] Departments

undergoing reviews in the 2003-04 AY were to be the first to undergo the new procedure; however, the Provost temporarily suspended the Academic Review process due to budgetary constraints. Therefore, our ability to assess the effectiveness of this change will be delayed.

Student Affairs: The Development of Student Affairs Learning Outcomes [CFRs: 1.2, 1.5, 2.11, 4.6]

The Division of Student Affairs has undergone significant changes in the past three years. These changes include reorganization of the division and the creation of a new [mission](#), changes and additions in personnel, and the development of a Dean of Students (DOS) model to create more intentional links between academic and student affairs.

Prior to 2000, each department within the Division of Student Affairs had its own director who reported to the Vice President of Student Affairs. This structure resulted in silo-like functioning, with each director essentially operating independently and with little interaction with other units within Student Affairs. Consequently, in 2001 the Division of Student Affairs was [reorganized](#) into three subdivisions: Dean of Students, Student Affairs Administration, and Student Services and Budget Administration. For example, the Dean of Students has responsibility for the following units within Student Affairs: Residential Education, Centers for Student Involvement, Career Services, Office of Student Rights and Responsibility, and Counseling and Psychological Services. The Dean of Students works with the assistant deans for student affairs from each College at SDSU and the Imperial Valley Campus. Departments within each subdivision work closely together toward common goals, resulting in coordinated efforts toward supporting student success.

The programs under the Dean of Students are in the process of defining their mission and purpose to students and to the campus community using learning outcomes as a framework. The goal is to identify learning experiences, within the overall University goals for student learning, that these programs currently offer, or should offer, to students. Additionally, these programs, services and activities will be organized to support, facilitate, assess and provide reflective opportunities about student learning.

To initiate this process, a retreat was held in January 2003 where the Dean of Students' directors worked with small groups of faculty, staff and students to identify Student Affairs learning outcomes. Six learning outcomes have been identified and include the areas of [mentoring](#), [involvement and leadership](#), [wellness](#), [personal and career development](#), [ethical and civic responsibility](#), and [cultural awareness](#). Conversations continue about the development of activities and services to support these outcomes. Next steps include developing strategies for assessing the outcomes and creating regular opportunities to reflect on evidence to ensure that continuous improvement processes become an embedded part of the Student Affairs division. Future plans include developing web-based materials for easy access for students, faculty, administrators, and others that create intentional links between what is going on inside the classroom with experiences outside the classroom. A Director for Testing, Assessment, and Research (TAR), hired in March 2004, will work with directors on refining outcomes, developing activities that align with the outcomes, and developing direct measures of student learning. The use of direct measures of student learning has not been a part of the culture of Student Affairs on our campus, where student perceptions of satisfaction with services have been the dominant form of assessment. Thus, we are in the very beginning stages of moving toward an evidence-based culture in Student Affairs.

Summary

Academic Reviews of all graduate, undergraduate, and interdisciplinary degrees and programs have been a part of our culture since the early 1970s. This process incorporates external and internal reviewers to ensure that program quality is evaluated on a regular basis. In addition,

qualitative and quantitative data gleaned from students, employers, and alumni are used to provide feedback on the currency and vibrancy of the curriculum and the learning experiences of the students. As a result of these processes, the curriculum is constantly evolving and new degrees are developed to ensure that students have the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for our complex, diverse, and global society. Recent changes to these procedures are critical to moving the campus forward in the use of inquiry and evidence as part of these processes. Evidence of and reflection on student learning outcomes is now embedded within both the annual Academic Plans and the periodic Academic Review procedures. These changes are quite recent and we look forward to reflecting on the evidence gathered from reviews of departments that undergo the new procedures. Similarly, the changes in the Division of Student Affairs are also very recent. The addition of the TAR Director will enhance the ability of the Division to make progress in defining and measuring student learning outcomes for its programs. It is still too early to ascertain the impact the departure of the Dean of Students in May 2004 may have on the organizational structure of Student Affairs and/or the programs reporting to the Dean of Students.