

THE JOY OF REVIEWING: IMPLEMENTATION OF A NEW PROGRAM REVIEW PROCESS

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The Joy of Reviewing: Implementation Of A New Program Review Process

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Sylvia Wallace, Associate Vice-President (Academic) of the University of Saskatchewan, whose inspiration and guidance made Systematic Program Review a reality.

Section 1: Program Review at the University of Saskatchewan

1.1 Introduction

In February 1999, the Council of the University of Saskatchewan approved a new process for reviewing all of the University's academic programs: Systematic Program Review (SPR). Now, one and a half years later, we can say that this review process is truly 'up and running'. External reviews of almost thirty programs have been completed, with ten more underway this year and many more waiting in the wings. The review administrators have set up mechanisms and resources to support the review process, selected over fifty internal and external reviewers, arranged fourteen site visits, read 30 self-study documents, worked closely with Deans and Department Heads, made countless decisions on policies and procedures, and begun to act on the results.

But these statements are just the tip of the iceberg. How did we actually move from the concept of a university-wide program review process to its successful implementation? What strategies did we use, what hurdles did we overcome, and what lessons did we learn? This paper will discuss one university's experience of the process of implementation, from large issues such as facilitating a change in institutional culture, down to practical details such as applying for tax waivers for honorarium payments to American reviewers. While there is no single model for success in such ventures, it is hoped that this case study will provide guidance — perhaps even inspiration — to institutions considering similar processes, and stimulate discussion in institutions already familiar with program review.

1.2 The University of Saskatchewan context

As the only medical-doctoral university in a province with two universities, the University of Saskatchewan has a unique responsibility to provide "a rich array of challenging academic programs",¹ including liberal, professional, and applied education. The University offers degree programs in over 80 undergraduate and 60 graduate areas of specialization, as well as 12 certificate programs, two diploma programs, and medical residency programs in 20 specialties. Roughly 19,000 students register annually in the fourteen colleges, and sponsored research funding approaches \$70 million annually.

The simplicity of our provincial university system lends itself to self-regulation — there are no provincial processes for program review, student outcomes surveys, or program approval. On the other hand, the size and complexity of the University of Saskatchewan, its mission to achieve scholarly excellence, and the realities of the current fiscal climate all provide potent reasons for implementing systematic internal review and planning procedures. The new program review process is one of several closely linked planning activities that the University has introduced in recent years to promote renewal and accountability.

¹ *University of Saskatchewan Mission Statement*, approved by the Board of Governors, May 1993.

1.3 History of program review at the U of S

SPR is not the University's first review process. As one of the early innovators in unit reviews in the 1970s, the U of S adopted a policy for regular external assessment of colleges and departments prior to the appointment of a new Dean or Head. The primary objective of this process was to provide "the opportunity for the college to undertake an intensive self-review and [to] provide the new Dean or the incumbent with a base of information which will enable him or her to more effectively plan and implement desirable changes over the next five years or so."² These reviews were intended to be supportive, not punitive; and external reviewers' reports were not widely circulated. Colleges or units which already underwent review through accreditation processes were not included. From 1976 to 1981, 37 units were reviewed under this process, including some non-academic units.

In the 1980s, several other Western Canadian universities conducted reviews modelled on the U of S process. However, the U of S itself directed its focus to other planning activities after the first cycle of reviews, and the review process lost momentum. It was not until 1992, when Vice-President Browne's *White Paper on Academic Planning* encouraged a new start for university reviews, that a working group was established to study university review processes and recommend a process for this University. This working group submitted *A Background Paper and Proposal for a Systematic Programme Review Process at the University of Saskatchewan*, which proposed the underlying principles and basic structure of a new review process that would focus on programs rather than departments. The approval of this report meant that SPR was approved in principle; the next few years would see the gradual transformation of this concept into an operational review process.

A new review process must undergo four main phases: 1) *planning* (e.g. identification of the need for a review process; development of evaluation criteria, policies and procedures; approval); 2) *implementation*; 3) *outcomes* (recommendations and use of results); and 4) *evaluation* of the process. For SPR, phases three and four are yet to come; but the following overview of the planning stages should help to show how we made it to phase two:

- In 1993 the University approved a Mission Statement with several core goals and values related to academic programs. In the same year, a provincial commission (Johnson) commented on the need for greater accountability within the provincial university sector and suggested that the University develop a process for systematically evaluating the range and quality of programs.
- Systematic Program Review was approved in principle in 1994, in conjunction with a new set of University Objectives which recommended a cyclical review of all academic programs.
- In 1995, a Program Audit was conducted to provide an information database on the University's current array of programs, identify programs which might be appropriately reviewed in the first SPR cycle, and reveal issues related to program delivery and evaluation (such as completion rates in some areas, and the fact that most graduate programs had never undergone review). The report confirmed the need for a systematic review process.³

² Blaine Holmlund, *Report on College Reviews*, a report prepared for the Board of Governors, 1980.

³ *The Challenges Ahead: The University Of Saskatchewan Looks Toward Its Second Century*. Final Report on the Programme Audit Project Prepared by the Academic Planning and Priorities Committee, December, 1995.

- In 1996, Council approved university-wide criteria for program evaluation, a major consultative effort which provided most of the criteria, measures and self-study questions used in SPR.⁴
- 1998 saw the development of a graduate program review process. Although completed in advance of the university-wide process, the graduate process was so close to the final form of SPR that it was incorporated into SPR almost in its entirety. The fact that the undergraduate and graduate processes are consistent is a tribute to the groundwork laid in previous years and evidence of a shared vision for program review — one of the keys to successful implementation of a new review process.
- The University’s *Framework for Planning*, approved in March 1998, notes “a commitment to change and renewal” throughout the campus community.⁵ Again, such a climate is a crucial prerequisite to successful program review. Systematic Program Review was highlighted in the planning document as a key strategy for realizing the University’s core values (scholarly autonomy, quality, accountability) and achieving its highest priority goals (improving the quality of instructional programs, intensifying research efforts, fostering the teacher-scholar model, and responding to the needs of Aboriginal peoples).
- In February 1999 the policy and procedures for the University-wide process were approved, and work immediately began on implementation.

And that is the primary focus of this paper: *Implementation*. Section 3 will describe the mechanisms set up to implement the review process and coordinate reviews, and issues related to operationalizing and refining the approved policy and procedures. Section 4 will discuss the benefits of program review, and the evolution of a climate conducive to change within a university environment. But first, we should describe the review process itself.

Section 2: The Systematic Program Review Process

2.1 Overview of SPR

‘Systematic Program Review’ is a standardised, comprehensive process for reviewing all of the University’s degree programs over a recurrent six-year cycle. Its primary purpose is to ensure that these programs undergo a periodic external evaluation of quality. The process is intended to satisfy three fundamental needs:

- 1) to encourage program improvement and innovation;
- 2) to demonstrate accountability for the academic programs delivered by this University; and
- 3) to provide information to assist University-level decisions about program revisions, program deletions, and resource allocation.

SPR reviews *programs*, not departments or other academic units. A ‘program’ is a generally defined set of courses and other requirements as described in the University Calendar, which a student must successfully complete to obtain a specific degree in a Council-approved area of specialization. Unique degree designations (e.g. B.Sc.(Nutr.), M.D.) are considered separate

⁴ *A Framework for the Evaluation of Academic Programmes*, prepared by the Academic Planning and Priorities Committee, approved by University Council 1996.

⁵ *A Framework for Planning at the University of Saskatchewan*, Approved by University Council, March 1998.

programs, as are the different majors and graduate areas of specialization (e.g. B.A. in History, M.Sc. in Physics). It will take at least six years to complete one cycle of undergraduate and graduate program reviews.

As a University-level initiative, SPR is administered by the Vice-President (Academic). This responsibility is shared by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research when graduate programs are reviewed. A full-time Coordinator reports to the Vice-President (Academic); she is assisted by committees such as the SPR Executive and SPR Implementation Committee (described in Section 3.2).

Each review consists of:

- a *self-study* by the academic unit responsible for the program;
- a *site visit* by external reviewers, one from a cognate department at this University and at least two from other universities in North America;
- a *report* and recommendations by the external reviewers;
- *responses* to the report by the college dean and the program head;
- a *final assessment* by the Vice-President (Academic), Dean of Graduate Studies and Research, and the Planning Committee of Council; and
- *outcomes* such as increased resources, an action plan for program improvement, or even a recommendation for program deletion.

In evaluating programs across an institution, it is important to employ the same basic set of criteria, while taking into account differences among disciplines, program types (e.g. professional vs. liberal arts), and program levels (e.g. undergraduate vs. graduate). The criteria used in SPR are based on the program characteristics considered to be of primary importance to the University of Saskatchewan. In *A Framework for the Evaluation of Academic Programmes*, the three most fundamental characteristics were identified as:

- *high quality* (as indicated by quality in the curriculum, faculty, learning environment, infrastructure and outcomes);
- *demand* by students, the market, and/or society; and
- efficient use of *resources*.

In addition to these primary characteristics, for some programs it is also important to consider uniqueness and relevance to the province. Such criteria assume greater importance in cases of high-cost or low-demand programs which are not one of the ‘core’ disciplines of a university. Reviewers are also asked to bear in mind other University of Saskatchewan objectives such as the commitment to fair and equitable access to our programs, equity, environmental responsibility, and an international perspective.

2.2 Program Review

A prominent feature of SPR is its ‘*program-focussed, unit-based*’ approach.⁶ ‘Unit’ or ‘departmental’ reviews are the most common form of review process, and the one with which

⁶ See the discussion of review options and rationale for this approach in *A Background Paper and Proposal for A Systematic Programme Review Process at the University of Saskatchewan*, Prepared by the Academic Planning and Priorities Committee, Approved by Council March 1994.

most people will be familiar. However, unit reviews have certain disadvantages from the perspectives of strategic planning and the student experience. They tend to miss major components of student programs which are delivered by other units, overlook interdepartmental relationships, and provide little incentive for changes to the existing array of programs. On the other hand, true ‘program reviews’, conducted on a program by program basis, would be inefficient and would not address relationships among programs delivered by the same department or college. SPR neatly resolves this dilemma by focussing reviews on the programs delivered to students, but reviewing all programs within a unit simultaneously, where possible, and designating the administrative base for each review (e.g. preparation of the self-study) as the department or college with primary responsibility for the program.

This emphasis on programs yields many benefits:

- Programs are reviewed in their entirety, including portions delivered by ‘outside’ units.
- Interdisciplinary programs no longer fall through the cracks.
- Attention is focussed on the student experience. As Brian Nedwek notes, the focus of higher education management has changed from a ‘provider-centred culture’ to a ‘learner-centred world’⁷, and SPR reflects this new emphasis.
- Changes can be made to the institution’s program ‘portfolio’. The first goal of the University’s Mission Statement is ‘to offer a rich array of challenging academic programs’, and SPR facilitates this by providing a process that can link program creation, review and termination in a program planning continuum.⁸
- The coordination of review scheduling within units yields insights into the ‘interconnectedness’ of programs (e.g. undergraduate-graduate interactions, relationships among majors) which provide a better basis for resource allocation and strategic planning. Where possible, all programs in a college are reviewed in the same academic year and all undergraduate and graduate programs within a department are reviewed simultaneously.
- This grouping of related programs is also cost-effective, since departmental programs are reviewed by one review team during one site visit.

However, the focus on programs also generates certain challenges. For instance:

- Unit-based university statistics, such as operating expenditures, faculty and other human resource data, and research revenue must be manipulated to reflect programs rather than departments or colleges.
- It can be difficult to identify an appropriate administrative base and ‘program head’ for interdisciplinary programs.
- If ‘outside’ faculty or departments play a major role in program delivery (e.g. through service teaching of core courses), units must be reminded to include them in the preparation of their self-study and in their site visit itinerary.

Some of the challenges of implementing *program* reviews are discussed further in Section 3.

⁷ Brian P. Nedwek, ed. *Doing Academic Planning: Effective Tools for Decision Making*. Society for College and University Planning, 1996.

⁸ Daniel Seymour provides excellent advice on encouraging innovation by viewing academic program planning as a continuum. See *Developing Academic Programs: The Climate for Innovation*, 1988.

2.3 A systematic and university-wide process

SPR will review all degree programs on a regular ongoing cycle, according to a standard set of criteria. Much of the literature on program review advises that a comprehensive and standardized process, applied on a published schedule, is more likely to encourage ongoing improvement, to be perceived as fair, and to be accepted as a routine feature of program management than a process that is selective or developed in response to some crisis.⁹

Since SPR reviews are University-level, the review team reports to the Vice-President (Academic) and Dean of Graduate Studies, NOT to the department head or college dean. We found it was important for this fact to be highlighted during site visits, as it enhances the credibility of the reviews and sets the program evaluation in a wider context than the individual unit. The fact that external experts are brought in from other North American universities also heightens credibility and broadens the review context to include national and/or international perspectives on program quality.

The systematic, university-wide approach encourages the integration of the review process with other planning and programming activities such as program approvals, academic strategic planning, and fiscal management. For instance, the committees which determine the final outcomes of each review are the same committees which handle program proposals, and information from one activity can thus form a basis for the other (see Section 3.2). Such integration is critical to the translation of reviews into action.¹⁰

In addition, the criteria identified in *A Framework for the Evaluation of Academic Programs* constitute a standard, university-wide set of criteria for all types of program evaluation at the U of S. Besides forming the basis for SPR, the criteria are used in the assessment of proposals for new programs and major program revisions, and are a point of reference in many other endeavours related to academic programming. Such widespread use has increased the acceptance and familiarity of these criteria throughout the university community, thus enhancing their credibility when used for program review. It also assists in the linkage of program review with other academic planning processes. The approval of such criteria is a crucial step in the development of a university-wide program review process.

The standardized approach to program review also streamlines information requirements, as opposed to ad hoc reviews which demand customized data collection, analysis, and reporting.

2.4 Combination of formative and summative evaluations

While the *primary* intention of SPR is program improvement, the U of S process incorporates summative features to ensure that the reviews have real consequences (the report cannot simply sit on a shelf!) and to enable changes to be made to the University's array of programs, e.g. by

⁹ See especially Robert Barak and Barbara Breier, *Successful Program Review: A Practical Guide to Evaluating Programs in Academic Settings*, 1990 and Ernest Roe et al., *Reviewing Academic Performance: Approaches to the Evaluation of Departments and Individuals*, 1986.

¹⁰ See Robert Barak and Janet Sweeney, "Academic Program Review in Planning, Budgeting, and Assessment" and Lisa Mets, "Lessons Learned from Program Review Experiences", both in R.J. Barak and L.A. Mets, eds, *Using Academic Program Review*, 1995; Jack Magruder et al., "The Right Idea at the Right Time: Development of a Transformational Assessment Culture", in P.J. Gray and T.W. Banta, eds, *The Campus-Level Impact of Assessment: Progress, Problems, and Possibilities*, 1997; and Barak and Breier 1990.

requiring terminations or mergers. In order to achieve this, SPR reviews place a program in one of four possible outcome categories:¹¹

Category A: Few, if any, fundamental changes are required. There will be a commitment to at least sustain the program at the existing levels and provide additional resources where justified.

Category B: Some changes should be made. There will be a commitment to sustain the program at approximately the current level and to consider additional resource needs in the context of regular university resource allocation processes.

Category C: Fundamental changes must be made to achieve adequacy and provide a credible program. There will be a requirement for development of a concrete and realistic action plan by the unit/College to address deficiencies within an identifiable time frame.

Category D: Many fundamental changes are required. There will be a requirement to consider initiation of approved Council procedures for program termination.

The combination of summative and formative features inevitably gives rise to more anxiety than would be generated by a purely formative approach. Along with the ‘joy of reviewing’ there can be ‘the despair of reviewing’, the very real possibility of negative consequences, which has already been felt by more than one program. The key, as many program review manuals point out, is to emphasise the positive consequences, encourage prior acceptance of the review process by all concerned, and create a non-adversarial climate conducive to change — issues which will be explored in Section 4.

2.5 Relationship to accreditation reviews

A ‘frequently asked question’ from faculty, students and others is “If a program is already reviewed under a professional accreditation process, why do we need SPR as well?” There is legitimate concern about duplication of effort and resources, particularly on the part of units preparing self-studies. One effective response to this concern was to schedule SPR reviews close to accreditation reviews, where possible, so that self-study information could be used for both purposes. In encouraging acceptance of the new review process, we found it helpful to highlight that feature of the schedule, and also to point out some key differences between the University’s program review process and accreditation. For instance:

- SPR encourages improvement of all programs, even outstanding ones, while accreditation processes usually judge whether a program meets a predetermined standard, with little encouragement to exceed the minimum.
- Accreditation reviews generally do not encourage innovation and interdisciplinarity.
- While accreditation reviews focus on the goals of the accrediting body and/or the profession, SPR is also interested in the extent to which a program contributes to the *University’s* goals and mission. Similarly, SPR includes some criteria that are important to the wider academic context of a university-level program, to which an accreditation review may pay scant attention.

¹¹ The full text can be found in the *SPR Policy and Procedures*, 1999, Section XIII.

- Unlike accreditation, SPR provides an opportunity for college and university-level administrators to consider the ‘bigger picture’: the priority of a program within the overall array of program offerings; the impact of a program on other institutional programs, units and activities; and resource allocation.
- Since few graduate programs undergo accreditation review, they must be reviewed by other means. SPR enables graduate programs to be reviewed in the context of the total departmental and/or college program offerings.
- Few accreditation reviews include serious evaluative self-study. Some program directors remarked that their SPR self-studies were more useful, more a true ‘self-study’, than the reports required by their accreditation process.

Section 3: The Mechanics of Implementation

3.1 Practical issues in implementing and coordinating a new review process

This section provides practical advice on implementing and coordinating a new review process, particularly as it applies to program reviews. Although review processes must be tailored to individual institutions, there should be much in the experience of the University of Saskatchewan that can assist other institutions which are going through, or considering, similar processes. And this experience was significant in our first year alone: in its first year of implementation, SPR completed external reviews of 15 undergraduate and 14 graduate degree programs, involving the selection of 34 reviewers (23 from other Canadian and US institutions) and the organization of 10 site visits.

Although the scale of this task meant that we often felt we had been thrown in at the deep end, there were advantages to beginning the implementation with a large number of programs. We learned many lessons in the first months and were able to apply those to subsequent reviews; and the wide range of disciplines covered gave us confidence that our new procedures would be applicable to most other programs. It also ensured that we encountered — and overcame — a variety of difficulties, from minor logistical problems to near-disasters such as an external reviewer being rushed off to the hospital for major surgery three days before the site visit. Thus we entered our second year with optimism, a tested set of new procedures, and few illusions.

Speaking of near-disasters, the main word of advice in this section is the old boy scout motto: *be prepared!* The organization of reviews is rarely straightforward, but most obstacles can be overcome if you have conducted the planning phase with good judgement and foresight, and follow recommended guidelines for implementation. This will ensure that problems are less likely to occur, and that when they do, their impact is minimized.

1) *Plan well, so that you are starting with sound policies and procedures.* Many sources provide helpful guidelines for setting up a successful review process.¹² A typical list might include: clarify the mission, goals, needs and problems of the institution; gather baseline data; ensure that policies, procedures and criteria adhere to principles of fairness, objectivity, credibility and

¹² See, for instance, Barak and Breier 1990; Roe et al. 1986; Mets 1995a; H.R. Kells, *Self-Study Processes: A Guide to Self-Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1995; and Trudy Banta, “Moving Assessment Forward: Enabling Conditions and Stumbling Blocks”, in P.J. Gray and T.W. Banta, eds, *The Campus-Level Impact of Assessment: Progress, Problems, and Possibilities*, 1997.

utility; establish mechanisms to ensure the results of reviews are used in decision-making; and schedule reviews so that all programs are reviewed on a regular basis. The success of our initial implementation suggests that many of the approaches taken by SPR can be used as models of a ‘well-designed’ process.

2) *Establish a supportive infrastructure and climate.* Many sources note the importance of strong leadership; adequate support for the coordinator, review committees, and units preparing self-studies (e.g. clerical staff, teaching release, etc.); a strong institutional research capacity; and sufficient funds to support the process and to implement at least some resource-related recommendations. On the climate side (explored further in Section 4), planners must take into account factors such as level of politicization and trust, previous evaluation experiences, governance structure, and internal motivation for reviews.

3) *Be adaptable and flexible in the implementation phase, but at the same time, beware of setting unacceptable precedents.* One of the most demanding tasks of implementation is to determine which policies and procedures merit flexibility and which are crucial matters of principle. While we were strongly guided by the approved policies and procedures, most weren’t set in stone: the implementation process resulted in some refinements, a few revisions, and occasional compromises where circumstances warranted. We reminded participants that we were in the early stages of implementation, and asked for feedback and patience. Such communication, honest but not apologetic, is especially important when faculty see that procedures have changed slightly since their own review, or when the process stumbles over some unexpected hurdle.

4) *Create effective lines of communication, and use them frequently.* There can’t be too much communication! Establish a good rapport with units under review, and then if problems arise, there is a sense that you are solving them together. Bring the university community on-side by publicizing activities, results, and positive feedback. Keep all participants updated on matters such as revisions to procedures, progress with reviews, progress with self-study documents, and selection of the review team. Effective and frequent communication will go a long way towards ensuring a successful and widely accepted review process.

The following sections describe some specific practical issues addressed by the University of Saskatchewan during the implementation of its new program review process.

3.2 Organizational Structure for Successful Implementation: the U of S model

The U of S established the following organizational structure to facilitate the implementation and ongoing coordination of SPR:

1) The *Vice-President (Academic)* has overall responsibility for the review process; this responsibility is shared with the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research when graduate programs are reviewed. This locus of responsibility lends SPR authority, a university-level perspective, and visible priority within the institution. Strong leadership is a vital component of a successful review process,¹³ and we are fortunate to have institutional leaders who are actively committed to the new process.

¹³ See Robert Barak and Janet Sweeney, “Academic Program Review in Planning, Budgeting, and Assessment” and Joseph Hoey, “Impact of Program Review on Community Colleges”, both in R.J. Barak and L.A. Mets, eds, *Using Academic Program Review*, 1995; Mets 1995a; and Kells 1995.

2) A full-time *Coordinator* reports to the Vice-President (Academic). Several sources note that the Coordinator is a key position in the review process,¹⁴ and it has certainly proved to be the linchpin of SPR in terms of establishing procedures and templates, ensuring that activities are carried out and issues resolved, liaising with and mobilizing all participants, and generally, as the title implies, ‘coordinating’ the process. It is especially helpful to have a single point of contact for guidance, management and coordination. The SPR Coordinator is a university administrator with doctoral level qualifications and experience in institutional research and planning, but other universities may use other models. The Coordinator is assisted by one full-time secretary.

3) The review process is managed by the *SPR Executive Committee*, whose core membership comprises the Vice-President (Academic), the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research, the Director of Academic Affairs (Executive Assistant to the Vice-President Academic), and the Coordinator of Systematic Program Review. The Executive resolves issues of policy and procedure and assists the Vice-President (Academic) and Dean of Graduate Studies and Research in such tasks as developing the review schedule, selecting reviewers and determining review outcomes.

4) An *SPR Implementation Committee* met approximately once a month during the first year to address the day-to-day business of implementation. This committee included the Coordinator and representation from the SPR Executive, the University’s institutional research office, the College of Graduate Studies and Research, and the undergraduate and graduate student associations. Working groups were established as needed, including:

- an Information Requirements Working Group to identify and meet the short-term and long-term information needs of SPR;
- a Site Visit Logistics Working Group to identify the essential components of a site visit, responsibilities, documents for the review team, and guidelines for itinerary development.

The Implementation Committee and its groups proved to be an extremely valuable forum for working out details such as roles and responsibilities of participants, timelines, procedures and documents, communications, data requirements, and site visit logistics. The only improvement we would make if we were in the initial stages of implementation again would be to include student representation on this committee from the beginning — they were invited somewhat late in the process and so we did not reap the full benefits of their liaison and input.

5) An *SPR Overview Committee* was established to provide liaison with the major committees of Council, advise on the process, receive progress reports, and approve policy decisions where necessary. This committee includes representation from the SPR Executive, Implementation Committee, and the major committees of Council (Planning, Budget and Academic Programs).

6) The *Planning Committee of Council* is the key planning body of the University, in which academic and fiscal planning are merged. With wide representation from senior administration, faculty and students, the Planning Committee is the body which recommends to Council on new programs, major revisions, and deletions. In SPR, it is the Planning Committee which determines the outcomes of each program review, based on the reviewers’ reports, departmental and college responses, and recommendations by the Vice-President (Academic) and Dean of Graduate Studies. Involvement of the Planning Committee in the final stages of SPR ensures

¹⁴ E.g. Kells 1995 and Barak and Breier 1990.

that the results of the program review process are incorporated into University planning and resource allocation processes—an important feature of successful review processes (see Section 2.3).

Although most units establish self-study committees, and review teams are chaired by the internal U of S reviewer, there is no separate steering committee for SPR reviews or a ‘final report’ as such. It is the Planning Committee which determines the final outcome category, while detailed action plans are developed by the relevant department and college under the supervision of the Vice-President (Academic) and Dean of Graduate Studies and Research. Actions arising from review recommendations are implemented through the normal university procedures, e.g. for course change, program revision, and so on.

Some additional notes regarding organizational structure:

- An essential part of our process is an initial organizational meeting with the college and program heads at an early stage in the process, to clarify procedures, respond to queries, establish the structure of the review and discuss any program-specific issues.
- Frequent liaison with all participants is also critical to the smooth operation of the process.
- A tracking document is used to ensure that no steps have been overlooked, to notify units and individuals well in advance of due dates and ‘chase’ them when necessary, and to provide a record of the progress of each review.

3.3 Resources needed to support a review process

Adequate resources are a prime prerequisite for successful program review.¹⁵ The policy with SPR was to be extremely frugal with salaries but to provide adequate funds for the operation of reviews. Thus in the first year, nearly all SPR human resources were provided through re-assignment of existing personnel and re-allocation of existing staff budgets, while the initial operating budget of \$65,000 per year was intended to support travel expenses, honoraria, printing costs, and the like. Apart from the realization that full-time rather than half-time secretarial support was needed for SPR, we were able to operate fairly closely to the original resource plan.

Although the re-allocations created some hardship for the units involved, they sent a strong message to the campus community which helped to encourage acceptance of the new process. In the first place, the University was still dealing with cutbacks, and colleges had recently lost faculty positions, so this was not seen as a time to be creating new centrally-funded administrative positions. Moreover, no extra operating budget funds had been allocated to the units undergoing review; with a few exceptions, their review costs were the responsibility of the college and departments. By re-allocating their own resources to implement SPR, the University’s central administrators demonstrated their own commitment to the process, and highlighted the importance of this activity to the University.

The resource requirements for SPR will be re-visited in its second year, and support established for its long-term operation. In the meantime, the following might be used as a guideline for the resource needs of a similar review process:

Costs of reviews: In the range of \$6000 - \$8000 per site visit. This includes:

¹⁵ See Kells 1995; Roe et al. 1986; Banta 1997; and Mets 1995a.

- An honorarium of \$1000 per external reviewer.¹⁶
- Expenses of roughly \$1500 per external reviewer (including airfare, with a Saturday night stay if possible, accommodation, etc.).
- A small ‘thank-you’ of \$50 per internal reviewer (gift certificate to the campus bookstore).
- \$800 - \$1500 for printing and postage.

In addition, at least \$1000 per year should be budgeted for meetings, office consumables, etc.

Human resources for SPR: To cover 10-15 site visits per year, SPR requires:

- 1.0 FTE coordinator
- 1.0 FTE clerk-steno II
- 0.33 FTE senior clerical to develop and compile graduate program reports
- 0.75 FTE data analysts
- 1.0 FTE graduate data entry (partially for SPR, partially required in any case for graduate database)
- occasional graduate student assistants (e.g. for website development, assisting departments with self-studies and surveys).

Of these, the Coordinator and her secretary were the only ‘new’ positions needed to run the review process, and only the secretary was paid (partially) out of SPR funds. The other support staff were primarily for data provision and were part of the University’s existing institutional research and administrative infrastructure.

Human resources from units under review: Units used various mechanisms to prepare their self-studies, such as committees, department head plus a support person, a designated faculty member, or a graduate student. They found that the self-study required a total time of four to six months, devoting 30-60 person-day-equivalents to the project. Some assistance was available from SPR in the form of graduate student assistants (for graduate program reviews only), but apart from that, it was hoped that college Deans would use resources that might previously have been used for internal review processes, or that departments might be able to grant some teaching release. It is certainly easier to ‘sell’ a review process if the institution has sufficient funds to assist the self-studies, but the U of S is not in that enviable position. Both SPR personnel and unit staff put in a lot of unpaid overtime!

Other in-kind contributions: If a review process has personnel, it needs office space and facilities. The College of Graduate Studies and Research saw SPR as such a high priority activity that it donated an office, furniture, and some computer equipment to the cause.

Institutional Research capacity: A review process cannot function without the resources to collect and analyse institutional data.¹⁷ These are likely to be most heavily used in the planning and implementation stages, when standardized ‘data packages’ and means of distribution are being developed, but an ongoing IR capacity is also essential to the ongoing success of program review and its linkage with other planning and budgeting activities.

¹⁶ Based on a survey of Canadian universities (via the CIRPA listserv), this appeared to be the most usual amount offered in similar circumstances.

¹⁷ Stressed by Kells 1995; Barak and Breier 1990; and Gertrude Eaton and Javier Miyares, “Integrating Program Review in Planning and Budgeting: A Systemwide Perspective”, in R.J. Barak and L.A. Mets, eds, *Using Academic Program Review*, 1995.

3.4 Selection of reviewers

The selection of appropriate reviewers is one of the most critical factors in ensuring a high-quality external review. Evaluators need to be both competent and fair, and to be perceived as such. The approved *SPR Policy and Procedures* identified criteria and procedures for selection which addressed these requirements, but of course the details had to be worked out — that is part of what is meant by ‘implementation’!

The SPR procedures call for a review team of at least one internal University reviewer (external to the unit responsible for the program under review, but normally from a cognate discipline) and at least two external reviewers (from other universities), with the number of reviewers to be determined in collaboration with the Dean of the program under review. Nominations for reviewers are solicited from the Dean of the program, and the review team is approved by the Vice-President (Academic). External reviewers are to be “well-respected national and international scholars capable of rendering a sound judgement on the academic merit of the programs and ... not themselves in conflict of interest with the program, for example, by prior association.”¹⁸ Internal reviewers are normally to be “distinguished faculty, at the full professor level, who are scholars with at least a national reputation in their discipline.”¹⁹ The review team is normally chaired by the internal reviewer, who also coordinates preparation of the team report. Units are not to contact nominees directly.

In implementing these procedures, the Executive Committee faced a steady stream of issues and challenges, whose resolution led to a more complete and effective set of guidelines. Some examples:

- It was discovered that one paragraph of the *SPR Policy and Procedures* inadvertently implied that the Vice-President (Academic) was required to restrict his selection to the list of nominees submitted by the unit. One college cited this paragraph when objecting to the fact that the SPR Executive had proposed a reviewer themselves. To avoid such a situation in the future, the SPR Overview Committee formally confirmed the Executive’s interpretation, and the policy document will be revised to clarify this. In addition, the Executive now routinely returns to the unit for recommendations if the original list is exhausted, as well as exploring external sources.
- The above experience underlined the importance of consultation with Deans and program heads throughout the selection process. Such consultation serves several purposes:
 - Deans may feel their power over their own programs is diminished when the locus of control of a review is external to a unit, as in SPR. Ensuring that they have a role in critical matters such as approving self-study documents, proposing reviewers, and determining outcome actions will encourage their support of the review process and its results.²⁰
 - If reviewers have been nominated by the units themselves, there is little risk that units will cast doubt on the reviewers’ expertise or impartiality in order to discredit a negative review.
 - In general, collaborative processes are more likely to promote collective engagement in the review process and use of the results for improvement.

¹⁸ *SPR Policy and Procedures*, 1999, Section X.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See Barak and Breier 1990.

- In order to maintain flexibility, particularly in cases where the pool of candidates is limited, no strict definition of conflict of interest was established. The original guidelines simply stated that all connections with the University and program must be declared, whether personal or professional. After the first year's experience, the guidelines were expanded to include some examples of conflict of interest, such as ongoing collaboration with a faculty member, being a graduate of the program under review, or having served as thesis supervisor of a faculty member in the program. This improved the selection process in the second year by reducing the number of ineligible candidates on the college's nomination lists.
- One of the most frequent pleas from units was, "We need reviewers who will understand us — reviewers from universities with similar-sized programs and a similar socio-economic context." The Executive explained that the nature and purposes of SPR demand external reviewers who will assess program quality in a national and even international context (hence reviewers were invited from the USA as well as Canada); and that the point of these reviews is not to receive a pat on the back or to make ourselves look good in comparison to small, primarily undergraduate institutions, but rather to obtain fresh perspectives and recommendations for improvement from reviewers familiar with top-calibre programs, reviewers who can help us to aim for excellence, not adequacy. In some cases, this message is still falling on deaf ears; but the climate of the institution appears to be changing in favour of a more confident, outward-looking perspective (see Section 4).
- Since this paper is intended for a Canadian audience, readers might appreciate a few practical notes about non-Canadian reviewers: (1) Although reviewers may receive an honorarium, they are not usually acting as paid consultants. When entering Canada, therefore, they should not say anything to immigration officials that would imply they are here for a 'job' or that they will be 'paid', as that may prompt lengthy questioning! (2) The host institution may apply to the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency for a waiver of the 15% withholding tax on honorarium payments to non-residents if the reviewer will earn less than \$5,000 from Canadian sources in that tax year. Forms for this purpose are available from the CCRA.

3.5 The self-study process and document

One strategy for ensuring a successful review process is to encourage units to view the self-study component as a developmental opportunity rather than merely an administrative requirement or descriptive preparation for the externals — i.e. to view it as a process, not a document.²¹

Feedback from units at the U of S shows that the self-study has been a valuable exercise in itself, providing units with a wealth of useful information about their unit and programs, assisting with plans for program revision, and motivating them to reflect on their program array and objectives. One unit noted that the SPR process was much more a true 'self-study' than their accreditation report was. The process also encouraged units to survey students and provided a strong stimulus to make changes which might have been 'in the pipeline' for years with little action.

It is important to highlight such positive benefits, because the self-study requires significant effort on the part of the responsible unit! At the U of S, some assistance was provided from central sources, e.g. graduate student assistants, statistical reports, and guidance from the Coordinator. However, the bulk of the work fell to the individuals designated by the units to

²¹ Recommended by Kells 1995 and Roe et al. 1986, among others. Kells provides an excellent set of guidelines for a 'good' self-study document, p. 94.

prepare the self-study (often the department head). Institutions with more resources for program review may be able to enhance acceptance of the process even further by offering assistance such as teaching release for faculty in charge of the self-study.

Peter Ewell notes that new assessment programs usually experience a tension between units which prefer the freedom of an open process with few details specified, and those which prefer to know exactly what the authorities ‘want from us’.²² This certainly was true of the programs under review in our first year. The published guidelines were designed to tread a fine line between flexibility and prescriptive detail, but since it was our first year of implementation, we couldn’t always give definitive answers to queries until we had seen what worked. In addition, SPR self-studies are not an iterative process; documents are sent to reviewers as is, not vetted by SPR or returned to the unit if deficient. As a result, some units suffered the ‘massive tome syndrome’, fearful of providing too little information, and some reviewers complained that they couldn’t see the forest for the trees. We were able to provide much more specific guidance in the second year!

The graduate and undergraduate self-study guides follow the same basic format, and both are based on the categories and criteria of the *Framework for the Evaluation of Academic Programs*.

The fact that SPR reviews *programs* rather than units gives rise to some complexities in the self-study process. It can be difficult to break down faculty and infrastructure data by individual programs within a department, and units developed various strategies such as pro-rating data or simply providing common sections. Input must be obtained from all units that play a major role in program delivery, and some units experienced difficulties in persuading others to provide information such as faculty cv’s. In addition, some units, still within the old ‘departmental review’ paradigm, tended to include material that was not particularly relevant to the programs under review. But these are minor inconveniences; we are all still learning.

A final note on the self-study process: *communication* is vital at every stage, to provide guidance up front, to encourage ongoing queries so that units do not waste energy going in the wrong direction, and to ensure that units are on track to finish the self-study in time for the site visit.

3.6 Site visit logistics

A well-designed site visit can make all the difference to a review. Kells provides useful guidelines for site visits,²³ including the need to clarify the purpose of the site visit, create a schedule that permits useful interaction, specify the nature of the report desired, and provide a strong, experienced and sensitive review team chair. U of S site visit guidelines were developed over the course of the first year of implementation and include the following:

- The itinerary is developed by the unit in close collaboration with the SPR Coordinator, and approved by the SPR Executive.
- Visits are no less than two full days, three for multiple or complex programs. Basic components include a tour of facilities, plenty of time for the reviewers to confer (e.g. working lunches and dinners), and meetings with Deans, department heads, faculty, staff,

²² Peter Ewell, “From the States: Ten Turbulent Years.” In T.W. Banta, ed, *Assessment Update: The First Ten Years*, 1999.

²³ Kells 1995 pp. 139-144.

students, SPR administrators, external people as appropriate (e.g. from industry or the profession), and others according to the program (e.g. research centres, advisory committees). We also try to schedule ‘white space’ to allow for delays, additional meetings, and breaks.

- Since the review team reports to the Vice-President (Academic) and Dean of Graduate Studies and Research, the initial briefing and final exit meeting should be with them.
- Practical matters include the provision of a spare self-study document on-site, a workroom and computer for the review team, and parking for the internal reviewer.
- Normally all meetings take place in the college under review so that all documents are on hand and time is not wasted walking across campus.
- Additional guidelines reflect the program focus, e.g. interviews with ‘outside’ department heads and faculty, tours of facilities, etc. where these make a major contribution to the program under review.

3.7 Scheduling of reviews

The SPR Executive worked for several months prior to the official ‘launch’ of SPR to plan the initial 6-year review cycle. Consultations were held with Council committees and the Deans’ Council at that stage; since then, the schedule has been forwarded to Deans annually to ensure that there are no major objections. The SPR schedule is based on the following considerations:²⁴

- The ‘guinea pig programs’ of the first year were selected for a variety of reasons such as tie-in with accreditation review, enthusiasm for the process, strength, urgent problems, and special request by the program. It is especially helpful to identify and make use of ‘early adopters’ of program review within the colleges.²⁵
- General considerations in scheduling include accreditation and other existing review cycles, length of time since previous review, academic grouping (we try to review all programs in a college in the same year), change of Dean, plans for major revisions, program difficulties, review load for each year, and special requests.
- The schedule should be sufficiently flexible to permit ad hoc reviews when necessary. We have had to accommodate four requests for early reviews in the first two years alone.

By publishing a review schedule at the outset which covered all degree programs, we helped the University community to see the process as fair — programs aren’t selected because they are on someone’s ‘hit list’ — and to see reviews as routine and normal rather than as a crisis (see Section 2.3 above). There should be no stigma attached to being reviewed.

3.8 Student outcomes surveys

Neither the University nor the Province currently conducts surveys to determine graduates’ satisfaction with their educational experience or success in employment and further education. Given the importance of such data to program assessment, units are encouraged to conduct their own student outcomes surveys. However, some units, particularly the smaller departments, do not have extensive resources or expertise for such activities; and the time required for a survey process can also be prohibitive. In addition, the guidelines for research ethics require Ethics

²⁴ Jeffrey Seybert provides guidelines for selecting programs for the first year of reviews (“Community College Strategies” in T.W. Banta, ed, *Assessment Update: The First Ten Years*, 1999); while Roe et al. 1986 and Barak and Breier 1990 provide general guidelines for scheduling.

²⁵ See Seymour 1988.

Committee approval of all surveys of former students, and many units are unfamiliar with the approval process. The University of Saskatchewan has addressed these issues in several ways:

- A University-wide survey of graduates was conducted in 1999, and results were provided to each college. The University is considering whether this process might be undertaken on a regular basis. Some units might still choose to conduct their own surveys, e.g. if they wish to ask program-specific questions or if their sample size on the University-wide survey is very small.
- Through its Graduate Service Fellowship program, the College of Graduate Studies and Research has been able to provide some assistance to graduate programs in the development and analysis of surveys of former graduate students.
- The most substantial solution was a *survey template* developed by the SPR Coordinator on the basis of the University-wide student outcomes survey and the SPR self-study guidelines.

This SPR survey template assists units in two ways:

- 1) It provides a pre-approved template for student outcomes surveys, so that units are saved the step of applying for ethics approval.
- 2) It provides a complete set of tested questions relevant to SPR criteria, including both general and program-specific options, at undergraduate and graduate levels. Using the template, units can quickly create a questionnaire that captures information relevant to program review while meeting specific needs of their program.

To maintain the pre-approved status, units are required to adhere to strict guidelines regarding informed consent, confidentiality, storage of data, allowable modifications, and provision of a copy of the survey instrument to the Office of Research Services for information. Units are also encouraged to use the templates for surveys of current students, which do not require ethics approval. For the convenience of units, the templates and guidelines are provided on the SPR website (<http://www.usask.ca/vpacademic/spr>) in both pdf format for viewing and Word for downloading and editing.

To date, several units have used the templates for surveys of current and former students, and have found them extremely helpful. Even institutions with campus-wide or provincial survey processes might consider developing such templates for the use of smaller units or units which wish to address program-specific issues. It is gratifying to hear the relief in the voices of department heads when they learn about the existence of SPR survey templates!

3.9 Information requirements

The long-term goal for SPR is to develop an interactive web-based database so that units can download their own statistical reports. This is well underway at the graduate level: a web-based Graduate Student Information System (GSIS) has been developed which will assist in day-to-day program management as well as providing data for program review; and standardized ‘Graduate Program Reports’ are provided to units at the beginning of their self-study. The program reports include a 5-year history of items such as faculty, student programs, completion rates, and courses offered, as well as results of the exit survey administered to all thesis students.

At the undergraduate and university-wide level, several issues remain to be resolved:

- Technical issues: creating a searchable, on-line database.

- Content issues: identifying the information needed for SPR and the data elements which might yield that information.
- Freedom of information issues: determining whether some information should be accessible by password only, and by whom.

Of these, the content issues are the most time-consuming. The literature provides useful guidelines for selection of data elements²⁶, most of which stress the importance of avoiding data overload: “it is not uncommon for the hunt for information, once it has begun, to develop a kind of wild momentum of its own.”²⁷ The purposes of the review should be kept in mind; and data should be relevant, usable, verifiable, and not too difficult to obtain. Where several conflicting sources of a data element are available (e.g. enrolment data collected on different census dates), explicit choices need to be made to ensure consistency.

A special challenge for SPR is the *program* focus. For instance:

- It can be difficult to disentangle the ‘program’ portions of faculty and infrastructure.
- Units are expected to gather information on ‘outside’ units which contribute to the program.
- In undergraduate Arts and Science, there is enough flexibility among majors that it is not always clear which ‘program’ students are in until they are close to graduation.
- Interdisciplinary programs pose significant challenges for data collection.

Once a University-wide, searchable, web-based mechanism for generating statistical reports has been developed, it will serve many purposes besides program review, thus reducing the number of ad hoc requests received by our institutional research office. Some examples might be enrolment management, tracking of student progress, program revisions, and special projects by administrators, faculty, colleges and departments.

While the above sections provide a sample of practical issues related to implementation, many others could be discussed: for instance, the development of document templates, development of the SPR website, and confidentiality of various types of documents. However, it is helpful at this point to step back and reflect on the original purposes of the review process, and the benefits realized thus far.

Section 4: Benefits of the Process

4.1 Achievement of the primary goals of the review process

Even at this early stage, we are beginning to see fulfilment of the primary goals of SPR. With the determination of outcomes and implementation of action plans, progress should be even more apparent. Effective communication of this progress is essential to maintain support for the process: the university community wants to see results!

²⁶ E.g. Roe et al. 1986; Kells 1995 App.B; Barak and Breier 1990.

²⁷ Roe et al. p. 28.

Program improvement and innovation, with a student-centred focus:

- SPR provides a mechanism to ensure that all of the University's degree programs are evaluated on a regular basis, and programs have now been reviewed whose last review was in the 1970s — or never! It provides a regular, structured opportunity for units to reflect on what they do and to develop plans for the future.
- The program focus demonstrates an increasing emphasis on the student experience, and has encouraged better follow-up of students regarding satisfaction and outcomes.
- Steps are being taken to ensure that programs are rewarded for strength (e.g. by being given more administrative autonomy), that deficiencies are addressed, and that some programs are phased out or merged where necessary.
- The use of external reviewers means that programs are being compared against national rather than local standards, in keeping with the University's emerging 'outward-looking, more confident' culture. It has also increased external awareness of our University and its programs.
- SPR provides units with "externally validated arguments for program changes and resource requirements".²⁸

As the process unfolds, SPR should also lead to an improvement of the extent to which programs contribute to the University's broader goals, and the identification of programs as areas of institutional priority. The latter has had a head start through linkage with the recently implemented 'Priority Determination Process', which has successfully re-allocated funds to strengthen priority areas such as biotechnology.²⁹

Accountability:

In the recent decades of cutbacks in funding, universities have come under increasing pressure from governments, the public, and students, among others, to provide assurances that they are fulfilling their mandated roles of teaching, research and service and are using public funds efficiently as they do so. In order to maintain the level of autonomy traditionally enjoyed by such institutions, they must demonstrate accountability. Program review is one of the most effective means of demonstrating the quality of the programs delivered by an institution, as well as showing a willingness to self-evaluate. Saskatchewan has no provincially administered review process; therefore by taking the initiative to establish a process, the University of Saskatchewan has been able to maintain a high degree of autonomy in its selection of evaluation criteria and development of procedures.

Information for university-level decision-making:

SPR is improving the information available to support university-level decision-making in several ways:

- Its files provide a central repository of information on programs, which can be consulted by all of the University's decision-making bodies.
- The process was designed so that results of reviews can be incorporated into the University's academic and fiscal planning processes.

²⁸ *A Background Paper and Proposal for A Systematic Programme Review Process at the University of Saskatchewan*, 1994, p. 11.

²⁹ It is anticipated that a paper will be presented to CIRPA in the near future on this process.

- The University-wide program review cycle will build up a picture of the institutional array of programs which will assist with decisions about new programs, program revisions, program deletions, resource allocation, authorization to recruit to faculty positions, allocation of graduate scholarship funds, devolution of authority over graduate programs, and institutional priorities.

4.2 Other practical benefits of the process

Even before the implementation of recommendations, specific benefits have emerged from the first year's reviews:

- The self-study component of SPR has already proven its worth by providing units with information about themselves, helping them to reflect on their programs and objectives, and improving their plans for revisions. In one case, the directors of a small interdisciplinary program realized towards the end of their self-study that it would be more sensible to propose program termination at this stage and direct their efforts to the development of a strong new program, rather than expending resources on an external review. Theirs was a self-study in the true sense of the word.
- SPR has shown units the benefits of surveying students and graduates, and many plan to continue this practice in the future. Some units are also conducting surveys well in advance of their SPR review, assisted by the SPR survey templates.
- Central databases are improving in terms of both accuracy and completeness, and units are more aware of the importance of submitting and verifying statistics.
- As a result of SPR, Calendar entries are being clarified, and certain administrative functions have improved (e.g. more accurate registration, improved submission of graduate student progress reports).

4.3 A change in culture

Remember the academic version of the lightbulb joke: “How many faculty members does it take to change a lightbulb?” — “Change? What’s change?” Collegial systems are notoriously slow and complex, with much delegation of powers, fragmentation of departments, and ‘anarchic’ faculty. An effective program review process can be a powerful agent of change within such a system. Many sources advise that a climate conducive to program review is one of the crucial prerequisites to a successful review process; but at the same time, an institutional culture that embraces self-evaluation, innovation, and improvement can be an *outcome* of an effective review process.

At the U of S, we have seen both aspects. Little change could be observed at the conceptual stage of SPR; but as the process began to move forward under strong, committed leadership, and its credibility was established, we could sense the beginnings of a fundamental climate shift. From an insular, inward-looking, regional institution concerned with maintaining the status quo, the U of S began to evolve into an outward-looking institution, willing to innovate, ready to take tough steps to improve both programs delivered and the overall portfolio of programs, with the confidence to compare itself (via the external reviewers) to top-calibre institutions in North America. Program review is helping to transform the ‘culture of coping’ of last two decades into a new ‘culture of competitiveness’.

Such a directed shift in culture requires engagement by faculty members as well as the support of leaders. The literature provides a wealth of suggestions for encouraging faculty buy-in.³⁰ In the case of the U of S, such encouragement is especially important because of the summative features of the review process and the historical ‘us and them’ attitude of faculty towards administration. In addition, it should be remembered that faculty often bear the brunt of the self-study workload, so they need to see reviews as worth the effort! Strategies used by the U of S have been described throughout this paper. In summary, they include:

- *Communication and consultation:* Collaborative and well-understood processes are more likely to encourage collective engagement and use of the results for improvement. If units feel a review has been imposed on them, a ‘compliance mentality’ can be generated. The need for and purposes of SPR were well publicized initially, and progress and benefits have been communicated since then; the process is ‘transparent’ in that all policies, procedures and criteria are readily available and review results are published; program heads have considerable input into determination of individual review structure and selection of reviewers, and always have an opportunity to respond to the reviewers’ report; and feedback is sought from all participants after reviews.
- *Promote program review as a developmental opportunity:* Reviews should be presented as opportunities to evaluate and improve rather than as a nuisance to be endured and complied with. In particular, they need to be presented to faculty as an enterprise that will contribute to activities they view as intrinsically valuable rather than interfering with those activities (e.g. curriculum improvement, tracking student progress, incorporating research into teaching, external validation of proposals). This is done informally at the U of S throughout the review process, especially with respect to the self-study.
- *Identify and make use of ‘innovators’ and ‘early adopters’:*³¹ Besides relying on strong institutional leaders to champion the process, it is helpful to make use of others within colleges who are eager to adopt program review, willing to take steps to change their own programs for the better, and can help to spread the message. Many of the ‘guinea pig’ programs reviewed in the first year were selected on this basis.
- *Emphasise positive features of process:* Many features of SPR contribute to its perception as a fair and credible process: e.g., it is comprehensive, operated from a university-wide perspective, uses standardized evaluation criteria, employs competent and unbiased reviewers, is frugal with University funds, and is an ongoing process integrated with other activities (unlike some past planning exercises).
- *Ensure reviews result in action:* Nothing generates cynicism better than an expensive, labour-intensive review which yields nothing but a set of reports sitting on a shelf. SPR avoids that syndrome by: 1) incorporating summative features into the process, with specified actions (positive as well as negative) tied to outcomes; 2) integrating the review mechanism with other academic and fiscal planning processes; and 3) assigning responsibility for review outcomes to those with the power to take actions (such as authorizing new faculty positions or suspending program admissions).³²

³⁰ See Trudy Banta, “Encouraging Faculty Involvement in Assessment” in T.W. Banta, ed, *Assessment Update: The First Ten Years*, 1999; several articles in Peter Gray and Trudy Banta, eds, *The Campus-Level Impact of Assessment: Progress, Problems, and Possibilities*, 1997 (e.g. Gray, Magruder et al., Banta); Barak and Breier 1990; and Roe et al. 1986.

³¹ Seymour 1988 pp. 14-15; see also Gray 1997.

³² However, bear in mind the caution that decisions and improvements cannot always be linked *directly* to program review, since the review may be only one factor among others in matters such as budget allocation, and institutions

- *Provide assistance to units where possible:* SPR provides units with the services of a full-time Coordinator, program data, graduate student assistance (on request), pre-approved student outcomes survey templates, and detailed guidelines for every stage of the review. Scheduling reviews close to accreditation reviews also helps to reduce workload.

SPR is vital to the University's renewal agenda. As described in *A Framework for Planning*, SPR will assist the University in putting into practice its core principles of autonomy, quality and accountability. It is a key strategy for achieving the University's highest priority goals, particularly the goals of improving the quality of instructional programs and fostering the teacher-scholar model.

4.4 What comes next?

A crucial task, now that we have reached the 'outcomes' stage, will be to establish procedures for follow-up, and to monitor the use of review results and implementation of action plans. As Kells notes, "a process that results in recommendations but no action has *failed*".³³ Several features of the SPR process should increase the likelihood of success at this stage, such as: strong leadership; effective communication; and the integration of program review with academic and fiscal planning processes.³⁴

Additional procedures will help to ensure results are implemented. For instance, many sources note the importance of assigning specific responsibilities and timelines, requiring a report on the implementation of actions, and ensuring recommendations are realistic (e.g. in light of resources). U of S action plans will include these features and more: they will have to be approved by the Vice-President Academic (thus avoiding unrealistic recommendations), and certain consequences will ensue if an appropriate action plan is not developed by a certain date (e.g., in severe cases, suspending program admissions).

Thought must be given to the nature of the next cycle of reviews: will we continue the cycle of in-depth external reviews, or might the process be streamlined? The best approach appears to be a 'mini-review' process where possible, with in-depth reviews only where warranted (e.g. programs with problems, or which made few of the required improvements). While the savings in cost and workload will assist the long-term survival and acceptance of SPR, building efficiency into subsequent cycles can also increase the likelihood of reviews results being translated into action.

The process itself will also need to be reviewed.³⁵ Feedback has been obtained throughout the implementation phase, and improvements are continually being made; but a more formal, systematic assessment of the process will need to be undertaken at some stage.

may be reluctant to make links explicit for fear of raising expectations of additional resources. See Lisa Mets, "Program Review in Academic Departments" in R.J. Barak and L.A. Mets, eds, *Using Academic Program Review*, 1995.

³³ Kells 1995 ch. 6.

³⁴ Mets 1995a and Roe et al. 1986 provide useful guidelines for ensuring that reviews result in action, and the topic is well covered in Robert Barak and Lisa Mets, eds, *Using Academic Program Review*, 1995.

³⁵ See Barak and Breier pp. 73-75 for suggested evaluation criteria.

Section 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Implementation of a complex, university-wide process such as Systematic Program Review is clearly not simply a matter of taking the approved policies and procedures and following their prescriptions. While it is essential to begin with a well thought-out set of policies and procedures, a good design can fail if poorly implemented. The University of Saskatchewan found that successful implementation required:

- effective planning: start with a well-designed process!
- strong leadership committed to improvement and change;
- an effective organizational structure to guide implementation, including a single contact point for guidance, management and coordination;
- adequate resources to support the review process;
- a long-range review schedule, published in advance, with sufficient flexibility to accommodate special requests;
- frequent and effective communication and consultation, both in the administration of individual reviews and in informing the community;
- identification of information requirements and development of statistical reports;
- careful interpretation and application of the initial policies and procedures (e.g. resolving issues as they arise, establishing ‘best practices’, developing templates and tracking mechanisms, determining the line between acceptable compromises and unacceptable precedents);
- selection of highly-qualified and unbiased reviewers;
- effective organization of site visits;
- helpful guidance for the self-study and promotion of the self-study as a developmental opportunity;
- identification of obstacles and needs, and development of solutions (e.g. pre-approved student outcomes survey template, assistance to units, FAQ document);
- sensitivity to the current institutional climate and encouragement of a shift to innovation and self-evaluation;
- integration of program review into ongoing fiscal and academic planning processes of the University; and
- willingness to make continual improvements as the process unfolds.

There is still much to do. SPR cannot be considered a success until we have seen outcomes implemented, seen widespread program improvement and a program array that more clearly reflects our University’s priorities. We have been guided by the literature and by other institutions’ experiences, but our somewhat non-traditional approach has meant that there was much we had to figure out on our own. However, all indications are that we are on the right track, and that the vision enunciated by our late Associate Vice-President (Academic) has come to fruition in a way that could serve as a model for others.

As Gary Pike once wrote, “Assessment in higher education has tended to evolve as a cottage industry in which each department and institution develops measures in isolation from the experiences of others. Assessment is a difficult and time-consuming process, and we should not

try to reinvent the wheel every time we develop a new instrument.”³⁶ The same can be said for program review. If our description of the implementation of Systematic Program Review helps institutions that are considering a review process, or if it encourages other institutions to think a bit differently about their own review processes, this paper will have served its purpose.

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