Program Review Guide

Introduction to the Program Review Process

The Program Review Process

Colleges and universities have done program review for centuries. Put simply, program review is the commitment to reflect on what we are doing and think about how we can do it better. Thomas Aquinas did it in the thirteenth century, John Henry Newman did it in the nineteenth, and we’re still at it.

In recent decades, the development of the field of educational research has brought new levels of sophistication to the process of program review. Contemporary models of program review center on the desire to measure different aspects of the educational process. Understandably, accrediting agencies have adopted insights from educational research and use them in order to do their job professionally and equitably. In our case, WASC requires Westmont to use good practices of program review as these are defined in the relevant literature. But we can continue to ask the same questions that Aquinas, Newman and others did, questions about how best to integrate and teach new ideas in our fields (think of Aquinas addressing the challenge of Aristotle’s thought), for example, or about how to respond to challenges to the liberal arts (Newman thought much about how to respond to nineteenth-century critics of the traditional Oxford curriculum). We can reflect on our disciplines in our particular situation in ways that they would have recognized.

Our desire is that our students will learn. Program review, done properly, will help us understand how our students are learning and whether your academic program is effective and sustainable. The challenge is how to make program review work for us: how to put together the expertise that faculty have in their disciplines and the vision they have for their students with the best that educational research has to offer. Some departments will stay closely to the latest findings in educational research; others will want to critique some of its premises. As with the strategies we use in the classroom, some combination of old and new, of program review à la Aquinas and the findings of educational research, will probably be best. We do, however, have to work within the general framework laid down by our accrediting agency not least because accreditation is essential for the millions of dollars in federal and state aid that our students receive each year.

Why are you doing program review? Annual reports? Assessing student-learning outcomes? For WASC...WRONG answer! For the Provost and the Program Review Committee...again, WRONG answer! Can you imagine your department engaging in program review and assessment for the sole purpose of improving your academic program and enhancing the educational experience of your students? If not, then this is where you and your colleagues need to begin designing your next six-year plan. Sure, WASC will be looking in on your work and so will the Program Review Committee and the Provost; but
before you start another cycle of review, commit the time to making the process meaningful and important to your most critical audiences...yourself and your students. Use the next six years to study and reflect upon what really matters. Don’t settle for “compliance” as your motivator. If this means changing the department’s mission statement or program learning outcomes, do it. Identify real issues, problems and questions that are worthy of a six-year study. The Program Review Committee desires to partner with you in a process that when completed, we will agree something important has been learned about your program that benefits you and your students. Don’t hesitate to let the Program Review Committee know how it can facilitate your department moving forward so that you have the opportunity to showcase the quality of your program.

The key is for departments to be in charge of the process. Departments need to determine what they want to know about their students and their program. The department can then use educational research—which like every academic field includes the good, the bad, and the ugly—to serve the department’s needs. You ought to address the previous PRC’s recommendations and place the current assessment work in the context of previous assessment activities carried out by the department. The college is committed to a regular process of program review with ongoing annual assessment projects and culminating in departmental reports every six years. This document aims to explain how this process works.

WASC also requires that we do program review on an institutional level, to see whether the college helps students gain the skills we outline in our core documents. This is not part of the six-year report that is the focus of this document. But faculty should anticipate hearing from the Dean of Curriculum and Educational Effectiveness about this broader level of assessment of Westmont Learning Outcomes.

A final clarification: program review is the larger process of which assessment of student learning is a part. In program review, you should explore how well your students are doing, but you will also look at your curriculum, your finances, your staffing, and so on. Throughout this document, assessment refers to student learning, program review to the larger project.

Click here for a quick guide on who is responsible for what in the process of program review.

Here is an overview of the whole process. The year in which each takes place is in parentheses.

1. A Review of Your Department (Year 6 of current cycle)
2. Looking Back and Looking Forward: Identifying Key Questions (Year 1 of next cycle)
3. Making an Action Plan and Multi-Year Assessment Plan (Year 1)
4. Answering Your Key Questions (Years 2-5)
5. Assessment and Program Review (Years 2-5)
6. Closing the Loop and Producing Your Six-Year Program Review Report (Year 6)
The following diagram provides an outline of the process.

Year 1
The PRC’s Response

Year 1
External Review

Year 1
Discussion with Provost and Dean of Curriculum and Educational Effectiveness
Action Plan and Multi-year Assessment Plan, including Key Questions (DUE: June 15, summer of Year 1)

Provost’s response with the input from the E-Team and the Academic Senate

Year 2: Annual Report on PLO 1 Assessment; Key Question if applicable
DUE: September 15

Year 3: Annual Report on PLO 2 Assessment; Closing the Loop on PLO 1; Key Question if applicable

Year 4: Annual Report on PLO 3 Assessment; Closing the Loop on PLO 2; Key Question if applicable

Year 5: Annual Report on PLO 4 Assessment; Closing the Loop on PLO 3; Key Question if applicable

Year 6: Closing the loop on the PLO 4 and Six-Year Report preparation and submission
September 15