Overview of the Academic Program Review: From Self-Study to Strategy

The Academic Review Process (APR) at Albright College is a joint faculty-administrative process implemented by the Educational Policy Council and the Office of Academic Affairs. The goal of this assessment process is to develop a strategy for the continuous improvement of departments and programs in the context of the college’s mission and strategic plan. The review is a four-part process that unfolds through two semesters: self review culminating in a self-study document, internal review from outside the department but within the institution, external review from peers outside the institution, and finally development of a departmental plan.

Review of academic programs takes place informally through the normal course of college life when reflective faculty consider their program’s educational goals and whether they are being met, and they share these reflections with other faculty and administrators. Institutions of higher education have long recognized, however, that moving forward collegially to desired levels of excellence requires that institutions engage periodically in a more structured and systematic analysis. Formal reviews typically include an outsider’s perspective to help faculty analyze their program in the context of current educational practices and to learn from experienced peers how other schools approach similar educational goals.

When done well — i.e., with willingness, commitment, and an open mind — program reviews benefit everyone. Both faculty and administrators learn the program’s activities, strengths, weaknesses, and needs, some of which may not be readily apparent. Future goals can then be articulated in light of relevant data and discussions of departmental mission, and the process gives the department a forum for influencing budget and other decisions that can facilitate its goals. The Provost can plan funding to help implement approved action plans. Most importantly, students benefit when programs and services are improved. For these reasons, departments are scheduled to initiate an academic program review as part of the ongoing cycle of assessment at the College.

Generating a report that simply presents facts like past offerings, teaching loads, and activities of the department is relatively straightforward. However, providing a good analysis of these facts as a way to reflect upon your department’s goals, strengths and weaknesses and of how they affect student learning, and furthermore generating a strategy to guide your future direction, will be the challenges. The final action plan should include specific action statements and assessment measures that reflect the mission of both the department and the College. To achieve this goal and to assure common ownership of the analysis and plans, all department faculty members should participate in the review process. This should not be the chair’s burden alone, both for the sake of the chair and for the sake of the process.
The present document will describe the process of academic program reviews at Albright College and identify the required components of the self-study report and final action plan. See the Appendix for supporting documents, including a flow chart representing an overview of the review process and its timeframes.

## The Process of Academic Program Review

1. **Self-Study Review Team Appointed**
   The EPC will typically schedule two departmental reviews for each semester. The exact date of the presentation of the final Action Plan (explained below) will be set by the EPC for each department. In the semester prior to the semester in which the self study is written, a four-person team will be selected to facilitate each department self study that is scheduled. The team consists of a member of the EPC, appointed by the EPC chair; a faculty member who is a member of the reviewed department’s division but not of the department itself and is appointed by the provost in consultation with the chair; a faculty member of the Assessment Committee; and the dean of undergraduate studies or another designee of the provost.

2. **Department Initiates Stakeholder Data Efforts**
   Feedback from stakeholders such as current students, alumni, faculty, and “end-users” like employers or community members can give valuable perspective not only on curriculum, but on advising, resources, internships, or most any aspect of departmental operations you wish to learn about. Historically departments have used survey research, although there are other means to pursue such feedback, and have worked with Institutional Research to implement and analyze surveys. Obviously it takes time to develop, send, receive, and compile/analyze the results of surveys, so this process needs to be started in the semester prior to the semester in which the self study is written.

   The Alumni Office can facilitate by providing alumni contact information, but also by sending your survey emails/letters once a request has been properly submitted. Such requests will need to be specific and inclusive in terms of degree concentrations you are searching for and in terms of graduation timeframe. In return, you should let that office know if you learn any updates to improve their database. Following are Alumni Affairs guidelines for such requests; the current contact is Megan McGrath.

   - Contacts the Alumni Office with email/mail idea and list request
   - Advancement secures contact list from database (please allow at least two weeks to process)
   - Once list is received, Alumni Affairs informs department of email/mail quantity
   - Department delivers materials to be distributed to contact person
   - Alumni Office completes emailing and/or mailing and charges postage to department’s account
   - Department receives responses and informs Alumni Office of constituent data updates
   - If no updates are received, Alumni Affairs will contact the department to obtain updates, if any.
There is a web survey template set up on Survey Monkey that departments often use as a basis for creating a customized instrument for their particular needs. You can go to <surveymonkey.com> and use the member login <smiller@alb.edu> and password <suem3239> (case-sensitive) to access the templates and see what departments have done in the past. Of course you need not use these models or use Survey Monkey at all if you have other tools, preferences, or expertise. Some departments, for example, have used Google.docs and embedded surveys in emails to get better response rates, or have used social media like Facebook.

The point is that departments need to develop usable information from stakeholders – deciding who those populations are, what you want to know from them that will help you understand their educational experience better, and how best to approach them (web survey, paper survey, focus groups, emails, phone calls, etc.). When you discuss stakeholder responses in the self study report, focus on summarizing and interpreting the data and its significance; relegate extended charts, tables, etc. to an appendix.

3. **External Reviewer Identified**
Also at this time, the department chair consults with the dean of undergraduate studies to identify one or more outside reviewers who will receive the self-study report and visit the campus to review the program first-hand. It is important to identify reviewers early in the process in order to maximize the chance of engaging the candidates of choice, since scheduling them may prove difficult. The chair should nominate to the dean a short list of potential candidates having appropriate academic credentials and no direct ties to Albright faculty that could give any appearance of partiality. Often professional or disciplinary organizations are good sources for locating reviewers. When an interdisciplinary program is at issue, an attempt may be made to find a reviewer who can address it as a specialist in addition to other reviewers whose focus is the department’s discipline. The provost has final approval over all external reviewers. *See the Appendix for more detail on reviewer selection and the site visit process.*

4. **Departmental Data Received**
It is important that data for the self study be received by the department early enough in the process to be able to use this data in its analyses and deliberations. It is intended that most data can be provided to the departments by administrative staff in a standardized in a template (see the current version in the Appendix) that will make the review process more transparent and comparable across programs. In addition, departments will be provided with 3-5 years of teaching assignment data, since aggregate numbers cannot address individual loads or distribution of courses across faculty and ranks.

Of course, such data is only one kind of information needed for the review, and like all information needs to be put to use rather than simply pasted into the text or appendix. In the case of the template, include specific data only in the appropriate section of the report and only to the extent that it furthers the discussion.

5. **Department Self-Study Report Prepared**
The department conducts a self-study review based upon the Self-Study Guidelines found in the Appendix. The department must consult with the internal review team as it prepares its report
and should schedule its writing process to include interim steps of discussion and drafting. The deadline cited in the timeline represents a final draft that the department should expect to revise after final comments from the internal readers. The self study is the entire department’s responsibility, not the chair’s alone, and its results must reflect inclusive effort and ownership. Note that the process also includes a consultation with the Library, which should be arranged early in the self-study semester (or earlier if the Department prefers). Additionally, departments submit syllabi to the Curriculum Committee for review during this period (it is also advisable to prepare a hard-copy file of syllabi for the external reviewers to peruse.)

Using the Guidelines as a template for the report ensures consistency in the review process across departments, though it should be emphasized that the Guidelines should not limit information the department feels is important to its presentation. All programs offered by your department should be addressed in the materials submitted. Note that current practice calls for the EPC to schedule IDS concentrations for evaluation with the department that is its major stakeholder in terms of courses or faculty, though to some degree identifying that department is an administrative convenience. Interdisciplinary programs should be discussed in the report as a clearly identifiable entity, so that if a specialized external reviewer is engaged for that particular purpose, the report will be sufficiently useful. There will be continuing conversation with the faculty and EPC about how to better serve interdisciplinary programs in this process, given their importance to Albright’s educational mission.

6. Team Review and Comment
The internal review group represents the College as an audience for the report and serves as a critical reader before it is sent to the outside reviewers. The team prepares a brief written response to any draft of the report that it receives and provides comment for consideration by the department. The department faculty may wish to meet with the team for an exchange of ideas on the content of the report. Once the self study is completed, the department chair transmits it to the internal review group for any further comments and ultimately for transmission to the provost and external reviewers.

7. The Outside Review
In advance of the scheduled review visit, the reviewer(s) will be sent a copy of the self study, and other information about the College that the department or administration or the reviewers themselves deems helpful for the reviewers’ preparation. Once on campus, the reviewers meet with faculty, administrators, the internal team, and students – individuals are selected according to preferences of the reviewers foremost and the faculty. Administrative details concerning travel and daily itinerary are processed through the provost’s office in consultation with the department, whose participation is necessary in both planning and executing the visit. See the Appendix for details about the site visit process.

8. Planning Meeting with Provost
After the external review report has been received (about a month after the visit) and shared with the department and internal review group, the provost and undergraduate dean then meet with the department to discuss its perceptions of the entire review process to date, what steps it envisions for going forward, and what resource or other implications are entailed. This meeting lays the
groundwork for the department’s next step, creating a feasible Action Plan. To prepare for this meeting, the department should sort out beforehand its own impressions and desired plans.

9. **Action Plan Prepared**
The department prepares an Action Plan based on all preceding elements of the review process. The Action Plan Guidelines found in the Appendix describe the format and content of this report. It is important that the Action Plan be developed with explicit reference to the stated strategic goals and priorities of the College. The Action Plan is reviewed first by the internal review group and then submitted by the department to the EPC after making any desired revisions.

10. **EPC-Provost Review**
The department meets with the EPC and provost, typically during a regularly scheduled EPC meeting, to review the Action Plan. The purpose of this review is to assess the correspondence of the Action Plan with the strategic goals and mission of Albright College. A representative of the department attends, and all full-time members of the department are invited, as are members of the internal review group. At this or a subsequent meeting, the EPC will resolve by vote to recommend the plan, recommend with reservations, or not recommend it, for reasons to be reflected in the minutes. The EPC will be provided with the complete review portfolio for context: self study, final internal response, library consultation, external review report, and action plan.

11. **Implementation and One-Year Briefing**
If approved by the provost, the Action Plan is implemented. One year after the review process has been completed, the department schedules a meeting with the provost and undergraduate dean to review whether implementation of the plan, from both the departmental and administrative sides, is on track or needs re-tooling. The Action Plan should inform the department’s subsequent annual reports and its resource requests to the provost. By clearly attaching its needs and priorities to a plan congruent with the College’s goals, a department gives itself the best chance to have its needs met. Significant revisions to the Action Plan should be a matter of discussion with the provost.