

# **Academic Program Review Process and Procedures Guide**

**Office of the Provost  
Northwestern University  
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# Academic Program Review Overview

## Goals and Purpose

Northwestern's [Academic Program Review](#) process is based on a longstanding commitment to continuous improvement that dates back 40 years to when the University developed and implemented a nationally recognized model. Since 2023, the Office of the Provost has led all reviews of academic units at Northwestern University.

The goals of Academic Program Review are to assess each unit's quality and effectiveness, understand our strategic priorities in teaching, research, and scholarship, and encourage strategic development and planning in ways that further the University's priorities. These goals help ensure that Northwestern maintains the integrity and quality of its academic offerings and is able to anticipate future directions and needs of disciplinary areas.

The review process is designed to give departments the opportunity to both reflect and plan for the future. Recommendations resulting from this process help inform other strategic planning efforts at the University, school and departmental levels.

## Oversight

The Office of the Provost oversees all Academic Program Review functions, in close consultation and partnership with the Chair of the department undergoing the review, the relevant school Dean, and the Faculty Advisory Council. This partnership model helps ensure that the questions guiding the review process and the outcomes of the review are strategic and will enable long-term positive impact for the department.

The Faculty Advisory Council is a group of senior faculty members from across Northwestern. The Council plays a critical role in the process, providing the Academic Program Review team and department Chairs with valuable feedback on the development of review materials, the review report recommendations and the resulting Action Plan. A current list of council members can be found on the [Academic Program Review website](#). Council members are identified in consultation with the Deans and invited to serve by the Provost.

## Scope

The scope of a review is the department's entire academic operations and its related components, including teaching and learning (undergraduate/graduate), student enrollment and outcomes, faculty hiring and recruitment, areas of research, interdisciplinary academic efforts, internal and external collaborations, department staffing, and facilities/space, as is relevant to the academic mission.

When possible, the Office of the Provost will schedule reviews of thematically related disciplines in the same academic year to assess opportunities for collaboration and interdisciplinary academic efforts among these units. These thematic reviews help Northwestern to identify ways to strengthen departmental impact across areas of strategic importance for the university.

## **Review Schedule**

Departments are typically reviewed once every ten years. The review calendar is determined by the Office of the Provost, in partnership with Deans and is aligned with Decanal reviews, specialized accreditation processes, and other strategic planning processes, where possible. View the current schedule of academic program reviews on the [Academic Program Review website](#).

## **Academic Program Review Process**

### **(1) Notification and Orientation**

Departments will be notified of their upcoming review by the Associate Provost for Faculty, typically during the spring or summer of the prior academic year of the upcoming review. The Office of the Provost will notify units as far in advance as possible, to allow ample time for preparation and coordinating the review logistics. Following this notification, a meeting with the department will be scheduled to provide an overview of the review process and upcoming deadlines. In advance of this meeting, the Academic Program Review (APR) team will provide the Chair with access to a SharePoint folder which will house templates and information for all review materials, including access to previous review materials for the department.

In the fall, the APR team will organize an optional workshop for department Chairs to provide examples of best practices regarding the review materials (e.g., Key Issues, Self-Study, etc.) they will need to submit over the upcoming year. A [Sample Review Timeline](#) is available on the Academic Program Review website.

### **(2) Faculty Working Group**

The APR team recommends the department assemble a small faculty working group to guide and support the completion of review materials in the coming year. Working groups are typically comprised of 3-5 faculty members and should be representative of the various disciplines and faculty ranks within the department. At least one junior faculty member should be represented in the working group.

### **(3) Review Team**

Each Academic Program Review team is comprised of three external reviewers and two internal reviewers.

#### *External Reviewers*

External reviewers are senior faculty members from peer institutions who are considered to be leaders in the discipline area. External reviewers provide valuable feedback on a unit's academic strategy and operations from leading experts in the field. The external reviewers are responsible for authoring the post-review report, described in further detail below. They should be tenured faculty members and when possible, have leadership experience in their own departments and institutions. External reviewers should represent the unit's aspirational program peers and a diversity of academic perspectives for the discipline.

The department will generate a list of 8-10 potential external reviewers for the Provost and Dean to review; in some cases, the Provost and/or Dean may request additional names for review. An [External Reviewer Nominations Worksheet](#) is available on the Academic Program Review website. The APR team will coordinate all invitations, correspondence and travel logistics with the external reviewers prior to, during, and after the review visit.

#### *Internal Reviewers*

Two internal reviewers, both Northwestern faculty members, are identified to serve alongside the three external reviewers during the review visit. Where possible, at least one of the two internal reviewers will be a current Faculty Advisory Council member; this practice lends expertise to the team and provides continuity of process throughout the review.

Internal reviewers serve as a resource for the external reviewers throughout the review preparation and visit and provide valuable context on Northwestern and its schools. Internal reviewers attend all review visit meetings and provide input on the external reviewers' report before its final submission to the Provost. The internal reviewers will also meet with the Faculty Advisory Council to present the review report recommendations.

The Office of the Provost, in consultation with the Dean, generates a short list of potential internal reviewers for the department Chair to review; the department provides sign-off before internal reviewers are invited.

#### **(4) Key Issues**

Each department will identify 4-5 critical issues they would like the review to address and examine in greater depth. These Key Issues may take the form of known challenges that the department is currently facing, or critical issues they anticipate in the future. Key Issues should focus on long-term, strategic issues that are of importance to the department's academic strategy or standing in the field, and that would benefit from external reviewer feedback. Key Issues may cover issues related to faculty operations, research focus and strategy, department governance, undergraduate or graduate teaching and learning, collaborations, operations and facilities, staff support, etc.

Key Issues are generated by the department through a process of dialogue and input. This may take the form of a series of faculty meetings and open discussion, a faculty retreat session, or through small group discussions led by members of the faculty working group. The final list of Key Issues should reflect the input of all full-time faculty in the department. A [Key Issues Template and Guiding Questions](#) document is available on the Academic Program Review website.

Once the department has agreed on their set of Key Issues, they are submitted to the APR team, who will then share them with the Dean, Provost, and Faculty Advisory Council for their feedback. Occasionally, the Provost and/or Dean may request additional topics be added to the department's list. Any such feedback will be shared with the department Chair for further discussion and to inform the final set of Key Issues for the unit.

#### **(5) Faculty Survey**

The APR team, in partnership with the Institutional Research (IR) team in the Office of the Provost, will administer a Faculty Survey to gather feedback on the strengths and opportunity areas for the department. The IR team will tailor this survey to the department's core faculty audience, depending on the structure and composition of its faculty. The department will also have the opportunity to add custom questions to the survey. Results are kept confidential, responses are not attributed to any individual, and personal identifiers are removed prior to sharing.

Full survey results are shared with the Provost, Dean, APR team, Faculty Advisory Council Chair, and department Chair. A summary of the survey results is shared with the full faculty respondent population, the review team, senior leadership in the Office of the Provost, and the Faculty Advisory Council.

The survey contains Likert scale questions covering three areas: *Academic Vision and Strategy*, *Department Culture*, and *Department Governance*. A series of open-ended questions is also included.

See the [Faculty Survey Template](#) on the Academic Program Review website for more details on the questions and format of the faculty survey instrument.

## (6) Data Profile

The APR team, in partnership with the IR team, the school Dean's office, and The Graduate School, will compile a robust data profile on each unit. A core data profile is used as a baseline for each unit, and custom requests from the department are incorporated as needed.

The following metrics are included in the core data profile. Metrics are generally provided over a ten-year period.

- **Faculty:** Headcount/FTE, Demographics, Recent Hires, Retention Success Rate, Publications and Citations, Sponsored Research Funding, Honors and Awards
- **Undergraduate:** Course Enrollments, Average Class Size, Degrees Awarded, Major/Minor Combinations, Student Demographics, Course Evaluations, Career Outcomes, Senior Survey Data
- **Graduate:** Admissions and Yield, Time to Degree, Student Demographics, Admitted Student Survey Data, Exit Survey Data, Career Outcomes
- **Program Rankings** (if applicable)

See the [Sample Data Profile Metrics](#) document on the Academic Program Review website. Departments may request additional custom data sets to support the analysis of their identified Key Issues.

## (7) Self-Study

The department is responsible for preparing a Self-Study report that summarizes its history, faculty and governance structure, academic programs, research portfolio, and collaborations. The Self-Study should also contain an in-depth analysis of the Key Issues identified by the department, and should address any feedback provided by the Provost, Dean, or Faculty Advisory Council. A strong Self-Study makes use of the Data Profile and Faculty Survey results.

The department should circulate a draft of the Self-Study to its faculty for feedback prior to finalization.

See the [Self-Study Outline and Overview](#) document on the Academic Program Review website for more details on how to structure the Self-Study, and what type of content is typically included.

Once the Self-Study is complete, the APR team will assemble a full set of review materials including the Key Issues, Faculty Survey Results, Data Profile, and Self-Study, to share with the Provost, Office of the Provost leadership, Dean, department Chair, Faculty Advisory Council, and review team members approximately one month before the scheduled review visit.

## **(8) Review Visit and Report**

The APR team will partner with the department to organize a Review Visit, typically in the fall quarter; the department provides the APR team with their availability for the review visit. During the visit, the review team will meet with faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders across Northwestern to gather feedback on the strengths and opportunity areas of the department.

While each review visit is customized based on the needs of the department, a typical review visit schedule is as follows:

- Day 1: Review team dinner with the department Chair and/or Dean at 6:30 P.M.
- Day 2: Full day of meetings with faculty, staff, students, and collaborators; private review team working dinner in the evening.
- Day 3: Debrief meetings with the Provost, Dean, and department Chair; visit ends at 2 p.m.

See the [Review Visit Logistics and Sample Schedule](#) document on the Academic Program Review website for a more detailed overview of the Review Visit logistics, hospitality, and schedule.

The External Reviewers are expected to submit their report to the APR team within 2-3 weeks after the visit concludes. See the [External Reviewers Report Template](#) on the website for a suggested organization for this report.

The report is shared with the department Chair for fact-checking and corrections are noted as footnotes within the report. The report is then shared with the Provost, Office of the Provost leadership, Dean, the Faculty Advisory Council, and the department Chair. The Office of the Provost will later share the report via email with all core faculty in the department.

On rare occasions the review team may feel it necessary to include a confidential addendum to the report for limited viewing by the Provost or Dean only. In this

circumstance, the review team should discuss this with the Academic Program Review team, who can provide further guidance.

The Faculty Advisory Council will meet to discuss the Review Report and recommendations. The Internal Reviewers will be invited to present the report to the Council, and the Council Chair will lead a discussion on the recommendations. The Council's feedback is summarized by the APR team and shared with the department Chair before the department prepares their materials for the upcoming Action Plan meeting.

## **(9) Action Plan**

An Action Plan meeting will be scheduled for the department Chair, Dean, Provost, APR Team, and other University leaders as needed, to discuss the External Reviewers Report and any resulting action items. This meeting is an opportunity for the department Chair, Dean, and Provost to discuss the report findings and to align on the prioritization and implementation of any recommended action items within the context of unit, school, and university strategic priorities.

In advance of the Action Plan meeting, the department will briefly respond to each recommendation laid out in the External Reviewers Report with their feedback. The department may also flag other potential action items that should be addressed that are not included in the External Reviewers report. This document is shared with attendees in advance of the Action Plan meeting.

During the Action Plan meeting, the APR team will guide the group through discussion of the report recommendations and the department's responses. The following questions guide group discussion:

- How urgent is this recommendation?
- How critical is addressing this recommendation to the department's long-term strategy and success?
- Who would "own" this recommendation?
- What support/collaborators would be needed to achieve this recommendation?
- Is this recommendation feasible? (In terms of capacity, resources, culture, etc.)

After the meeting, the APR team will work with all parties to align on a final Action Plan. The Office of the Provost, led by the APR team, will work with the department to facilitate additional follow-up or connections with resources that may be available to address specific items contained in the Action Plan. More details on the Action Plan



components are included in the [Action Plan Overview and Templates](#) document on the Academic Program Review website.

### **(10) Review Follow-Up**

Approximately one year after the Action Plan has been finalized, the department and Dean will provide a formal update on items contained in the documented Action Plan. The department's response should note any challenges it has experienced in implementing the Action Plan items, and any further support it needs to make progress on the recommendations. The APR team will coordinate this update with the department and the Dean.

### **Contact Information**

For general questions on Northwestern's Academic Program Review process, please contact [program.review@northwestern.edu](mailto:program.review@northwestern.edu).