

# **EXTERNAL REVIEW REPORT**

**Office of Academic Programs  
Cal Poly San Luis Obispo**

**Visit Dates: June 5 and 6, 2006**

**Submitted by:**

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## **Introduction:**

The external review visit to the Academic Programs Office (APO) at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo was conducted on Monday, June 5 and Tuesday, June 6, 2006 and consisted of interviews with administrators, faculty, and staff. The reviewers would like to thank Cal Poly SLO for their hospitality and openness during the visit. We would like also to express special thanks to David Conn, Sue Elrod, and Valene Mathews for assisting us with transportation and scheduling the meetings. The Academic Programs Office also provided several sets of materials that assisted us in understanding the context of the APO within Academic Affairs and the University. The recommendations contained in this report emanate from the review of that written material and from our interviews with campus personnel. In this final report, we begin with an overview that discusses the operation of APO's major duties within the larger organizational structure of the university. This overview is followed by specific recommendations regarding APO's structure and processes, program review, and assessment.

## **Overview**

This review was requested and approved out of a concern for maintaining the quality of academic programs at SLO with an understanding that the Academic Programs Office is the unit most directly charged with ensuring that quality. The functions of program review and program assessment are most closely associated with the quality of academic programs, and it is the reviewers' opinion that these functions are the ones that must receive the highest priority in terms of guidance and on-going oversight in order for the University to maintain its high standards of academic excellence.

It is also worth noting that these functions will receive extensive scrutiny during the next WASC reaccreditation process. Unlike the process prior to 2001, the new WASC framework requires universities to demonstrate a commitment to learning and improvement by employing a deliberate set of quality assurance processes at each level of institutional functioning. These processes include program review, ongoing evaluation, and data collection. They further include assessments of educational effectiveness, tracking results over time, and the use of assessment results to revise and improve structures and processes, curricula, and pedagogy. A number of CSU and UC campuses have been caught off-guard over the last few years having been unaware of the increased focus on assessment in the new WASC framework. We hope that the present review will be helpful to Cal Poly in preparation for their next WASC cycle.

**Commendations:**

- The reviewers commend the Vice Provost and his staff for working arduously to fulfill their responsibilities for all their many duties despite the reduction in resources during the budget crisis.
- The reviewers commend the work of the campus assessment coordinator, who has made much progress in bringing departmental assessment in line with current expectations of the Chancellor’s Office and external accrediting agencies.
- The reviewers commend the coordinators and directors in the APO for their commitment to program quality and student success at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo.
- The reviewers commend the APO for its collaboration with Student Affairs in addresses campus issues related to student success.

**Summary of Recommendations**

1.0 Curriculum

- 1.1 The Vice Provost should hold regularly scheduled meetings with APO directors and coordinators.
- 1.2 The Vice Provost should describe in writing the specific duties and responsibilities of the APO directors and coordinators.
- 1.3 APO should take advantage of various technologies available to increase the efficiency and accuracy of its administrative processes.
- 1.4 APO should conduct an audit of its course proposal process.
- 1.5 APO should consider and consult with the university community about moving to an online-only class schedule and university catalogue.

- 1.1 Academic Program Directors and Coordinators expressed a desire to have more frequent, regularly scheduled meetings that would allow them to communicate their activities to one another on a regular basis. The group felt that this method of communication would help create a greater sense of collaboration and team-work among the group. They felt that such meetings would also give them all a greater sense of the whole of APO’s efforts.
- 1.2 Some directors and coordinators felt that they did not have a clear sense of the expectations for their work and the limitations of their authority. They felt that a

more explicit statement regarding their responsibilities and authority would help them in carrying out their duties and provide a better understanding of their own positions.

- 1.3 A number of the people interviewed commented that APO could improve its own performance if more of the work of this office included the use of web-based management. Examples included web-based course proposal and program change processes from start to finish. In addition, some of those involved in the curriculum approval process felt that many faculty members do not understand the course approval process and hurry through the proposals, omitting important information and making consequential errors. Those folks felt that incorrect proposals should be sent back to departments for revision rather than correcting the errors in APO.

One issue on this subject that probably invites further discussion and consideration is the impact of curricular changes on degree audit. The registrar and one department chair commented, and others agreed, that what constitutes a “program” is constantly in flux. Therefore, it is difficult to provide students with an accurate audit because the degree itself is a moving target. This fact leads to a tremendous number of substitutions and exceptions, which appear to take up an inordinate amount of time for chairs.

- 1.4 APO should create a process for archiving course and program proposals. Such archives provide a historical record when courses that have been deleted are brought back into a program. They also provide the official description of a course when a new faculty member is assigned to teach a course they did not teach before and to avoid a large discrepancy in content among multiple sections of a course.
- 1.5 APO should consider moving to an online-only class schedule and university catalogue. However, before they embark on that effort, the APO would be well advised to consult with the university community about the advantages and disadvantages of such an initiative. The APO may want also to consider a transition plan.

## 2.0 Structure

- 2.1 Deans need to be brought into the assessment and program review processes in a more direct and responsive manner.
- 2.2 The Academic Programs Office is greatly understaffed and needs immediately to hire the new Associate Vice Provost, as planned.
- 2.3 Working closely with the Provost, the APO needs to develop a prioritization plan for the tasks and duties assigned to their office.

- 2.1 From a structural perspective, it is currently difficult for APO to fulfill their primary responsibilities of assessment and program review given the reporting structure of academic administration. Department involvement and efforts in program assessment and program review are largely affected by the emphasis and importance that deans place on these functions since department chairs are directly responsible to their deans, not Academic Affairs. Currently, deans are not accountable to Academic Affairs or the Provost for program review or program assessment.

The re-designed program review process at Cal Poly stipulates explicitly that the relevant Dean is expected to:

- (a) approve the self-study proposal and time line for its preparation;
- (b) approve the reviewers;
- (c) attend the reviewers' entrance meeting with the Vice Provost;
- (d) attend the Vice Provost's/Provost's meeting(s) with the department head/chair and faculty regarding the action plan.

Nevertheless, the deans are not held accountable so that he/she visibly attaches adequate emphasis and importance to the process. In fact, some of them are essentially removed from the loop of these activities. As a result, it is quite difficult for APO to fully engage faculty and chairs, who have many other duties and responsibilities. Unless deans are made responsible for these functions, by explicitly including them in their work plans, it is likely that APO will continue to face some difficulties in their efforts to serve the university by evenly maintaining and improving academic program quality, as intended.

In order for program review and assessment to move forward in a way that ensures rigorous programmatic quality, the deans need to be conspicuously involved in the process from beginning to conclusion. At the front end of these activities, the deans' offices need to encourage and require departments to conduct self-studies and assessment in a manner that includes wide faculty participation and reflection. Deans should also be involved in and responsible for the implementation of Action Plans developed as a result of assessment and program review. A final meeting at the signing of the Action Plan with the Provost, the Vice Provost, the Dean, the Department Chair, and, perhaps, some lead faculty, would emphasize the importance of the process to both chairs and faculty. A discussion of the recommendations in the Action Plan during this meeting would also serve as an opportunity for administrators in Academic Affairs to become more familiar with the specific strengths and weaknesses of academic programs and departments.

- 2.2 It was clear to the reviewers that Cal Poly, SLO should move ahead immediately, as planned, in hiring a new Associate Vice Provost. The office needs this addition in order to effectively fulfill its current daily responsibilities. In our opinion, the

division of responsibilities for the new Associate Vice Provost should involve duties that are specific in nature and mostly centered at the department and program level. This would include general education, course changes, proposal changes, and writing skills. The other responsibilities of the APO are broader in scope and to a large extent require prior knowledge of the functions named above. These duties include academic development, program review, program assessment, accreditation, and international programs. We strongly believe that whatever the decision may be on the division of labor, program review and program assessment should remain together under one person. The Vice Provost would be advised, however, to better articulate the need for this position to the campus community, in general, and department chairs and academic program directors and coordinators, in particular.

- 2.3 Working closely with the Provost, the APO needs to develop a prioritization plan for the various tasks and duties assigned to their office. This prioritization plan, along with the hiring of a new Associate Vice Provost, should help the office meet its goals and allow the Vice Provost and his staff to provide timely notices and information to all constituencies.

### 3.0 Program Review

- 3.1 Establish an Academic Senate standing committee on Program Review.
- 3.2 Reconsider the current structure for the program review process.
- 3.3 Eliminate the practice of having an SLO faculty member “piggy back” on an external accreditation visit.
- 3.4 Establish a closer relationship with the Office of Institutional Research.

- 3.1 Program review is most effective when it lies largely within the purview of faculty with the involvement of deans and oversight from Academic Affairs. Peer review carries great credibility and acceptance among faculty and strengthens their commitment to the process. Quite a few people interviewed commented that the Senate and the faculty were largely disengaged from the Program Review process. This fact undoubtedly influences the overall effectiveness of program review in maintaining program quality.

There are several models for faculty inclusion across the CSU system. At some campuses, there is an internal program review team that parallels the work of an external team. At other campuses, the external teams report and the self-study are handed over to a standing university level committee that writes a final report, which it submits to the Vice Provost. The specific structure is not as important as the fact that it is included within the faculty governance structure and integrated into the work processes of APO.

- 3.2 According to the personnel whom we interviewed, departments are currently allowed to choose the topics of focus for their program review. This approach

seemed to work for some departments but not for others. A number of those we interviewed felt that departments were actually given too much latitude in choosing the content of their reviews. The logic for this structure was that some accrediting bodies now allow programs or universities to take this approach, thus allowing departments to examine in depth issues that are of most concern to the faculty in the department. The drawback to the approach is that it also allows departments to ignore a review of some aspects of their programs that may actually need revision, but the department is not favorably disposed to examining. The WASC review avoids this conundrum by requiring two reviews: one that focuses on issues of capacity and process, and another that allows a university to choose special topics related to educational effectiveness.

Cal Poly could use one of several models to improve on their current process. Like WASC, they could require a two-pronged approach on the self-study with one section focusing on program capacity and another on academic and curricular issues. Alternatively, departments could be required to submit a self-study with structured guidelines but be given the option of choosing topics if their program is deemed by Academic Affairs to have no pressing capacity or process issues. Such a determination would require that departments maintain careful on-going records of assessment, enrollments, grade distribution, and student profile data, which should be easily accessible through the office of institutional research.

- 3.3 Departments that undergo outside accreditation are currently required to have an SLO faculty member “piggy back” with the external review team as they conduct their review. A number of chairs commented that this process does not work effectively because some external accreditation teams prohibit the involvement of any faculty member from the campus under review.

We suggest that the practice of “piggy backing” be abolished and that any department whose accreditation standards equal or exceed the University’s program review standards be exempt from regular campus review (but submit their self-study to Academic Affairs before it leaves the campus). For those agencies whose standards do not cover all areas required by Cal Poly’s Academic Program Review standards, the department should undergo a supplementary review process. In such a case, the internal reviewer(s) would simply focus on additional campus-specific questions, which should constitute the focus of this supplementary review.

- 3.4 Many department chairs mentioned their difficulty in obtaining current data for their program reviews. Data such as FTEF, FTES, SFR, total enrollments, degree completion rates, attrition, gender breakdown in enrollments in the department compared across the college and university were not readily available. We recommend that Academic Affairs work closely with the newly hired director of institutional research to develop a “boiler-plate” assessment and academic program review data-template and to make such data easily accessible on a

website that is available to any member of the campus community and is maintained on a regular basis.

4.0 Assessment

4.1 Dedicate more resources to faculty participation in program assessment.

4.2 Develop more guidance for faculty on how to develop a full process.

4.1&2 Knowing the extent to which students acquire the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes that the University expects requires that Academic Affairs track student learning outcomes assessment over time. Accrediting agencies as well as WASC will expect this, and they will also expect to have a look at these results at the program and/or department level. The only people who are qualified and able to conduct such assessments are the faculty. However, many faculty and departments don't have an understanding of what program assessment involves, according to the former campus assessment coordinator. Moreover, faculty need some release time or at least some monetary incentive to develop such a process. We recommend that Academic Affairs continue to employ a faculty assessment coordinator to work directly with departments, even after the new AVP is hired. We also recommend that this coordinator work especially with new faculty in orienting them to the increasing importance that assessment plays in all universities. We further recommend that some resources be allocated by the colleges and/or Academic Affairs to encourage departments who have not developed an acceptable and functioning assessment process to do so.