

Case Study
Academic Program Review: What Happens To The Results?
The Chief Academic Officers Role in Reframing Recommendations for Pragmatic Solutions

Background Information

Ellicott University, a private, independent institution on the outskirts of a metropolitan Midwestern city, has an undergraduate population of 2500 primarily residential students and 900 graduate students. The school offers a variety of traditional liberal arts majors along with undergraduate and graduate professional programs in business, nursing, and music. Like many institutions, the tuition dependent Ellicott University has a modest endowment and significant deferred maintenance on its 150-year-old campus. Relative to similar institutions, the faculty are disproportionately tenured and either at or near retirement age. Salaries approach the 50th percentile of the AAUP-IIA benchmark and teach an annual 24-credit hour load. Ellicott University's strategic plan embraces an increased emphasis on faculty and student scholarship, a 25-percent enrollment increase over the next seven years, and improvement in first-to-second year retention, which historically has trailed national averages.

Academic Program Review Findings – Biology Department

Twenty-percent of first year students major in biology, which offers a rigorous set of introductory courses with an institutionally disproportionate amount of D's, W's, and F's. Part-time faculty comprise over half of the instructors teaching first year courses. The department offers five advanced *tracks* once students reach the junior year: biochemistry, environmental science, forensic studies, pre-medicine, exercise physiology, botany, and petroleum science, and agricultural studies. Lower-level courses tend to have large enrollments and crowded laboratories, while upper-level *tracks* have low course enrollments. *Track* courses tend to rely on the area of specialization of particular faculty members, three of whom are near retirement. The biology department's curriculum provides service courses to the nursing program (an introductory two-semester biology course, anatomy/physiology, and microbiology). Faculty scholarship presentations and publications trail the institutional average, which is a sore spot for departmental faculty members who complain that teaching loads and class size are unreasonably high leaving little time for scholarship.

Reviewers' Recommendations:

1. Increase entrance requirements for students declaring a biology major to ensure academic success.
2. Hire five new tenure-track faculty members in anticipation of expected retirements, with particular emphasis on attracting expertise to match upper-level tracks.
3. Reduce teaching loads for fulltime departmental faculty by six-credit hours per year to permit sufficient time to pursue independent scholarship projects.
4. Renovate the underutilized gymnasium annex into new state-of-the-art laboratories for upper-level biology laboratories.
5. Assist the nursing department in development of its own anatomy/physiology course, which would be tailored to needs of nursing education and taught by nursing faculty members.

Instructions:

The results of academic program review often accurately identify problematic trends and areas for improvement. Likewise, the resulting recommendations usually match key findings, but may lack broad institutional perspective, realistic expectations for change, and institutional resource limitations. A common complaint is that not much happens to the results of an academic program review – a legitimate criticism because often the impracticality of recommendations poorly translates into actionable items.

The case study exercise is designed to help chief academic officers reframe the results of an academic program review and generate alternative, pragmatic solutions to program review outcomes. Participants are asked to discuss and answer the following questions:

1. From the perspective of a chief academic officer, identify three or four potential problems with the recommendations of the academic program review of the biology department at Ellicott University.
2. Reframe recommendations into pragmatic solutions that may be more realistic for the university to accomplish. Consider the Ellicott University's strategic plan as guiding principles and remember that solutions will be more likely to succeed if these are fiscally realistic and sensitive to faculty concerns.
3. For each solution, consider the component steps and sequencing a chief academic officer might employ to effect positive change and determine what additional data might be collected to help inform departmental actions.