

MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE

Guidelines for Department and Program Reviews

Introduction

Reviews of departments and programs allow departments and programs to assess their work periodically and systematically, and help their members and the Dean of Faculty plan for the near- and long-term future within the context of staffing and budgetary realities.

Departments and programs should aim for a review once a decade, and no department or program should go longer than fifteen years without one. Factors other than the calendar may also trigger a review. A department or program (hereafter "department") may seek advice on curricular renewal or structural reform. A department requesting a tenure-track or lecturer position should have a review to help test its arguments and guide its planning. Occasionally a department facing curricular or personnel challenges will seek, or will be advised by the Dean to seek, the perspective of a visiting committee. Impending retirements or other structural changes in a department may also prompt a review. More often than not, a review is set in motion by a combination of these factors.

A review has five stages:

- 1) Initiating the review: the department agrees to undertake a review, identifies possible reviewers and dates for their visit, and invites reviewers to campus.
- 2) The self-study: the department prepares a self-study.
- 3) The visit: one or two semesters after initiating the review, the outside committee visits, usually for two or three days.
- 4) The committee's report: the visiting committee submits to the Dean, the President, and department members a substantial report of findings and recommendations.
- 5) The follow-up: the department chair discusses the visiting committee's report with his or her colleagues and with the Dean. The APC and the Education Committee of the Board have access to the self-study, the committee's report, and any comments the department wishes to submit.

The department usually absorbs the costs of preparing the self-study, while the Dean of Faculty pays for the committee's visit and honoraria.

1. Initiating the Review

Once a department decides to undertake a review, early in the first semester of the process it submits to the Dean of Faculty a list of possible members of the visiting committee. In constructing their list, members of the department should seek diversity and balance among the specialties and strengths of the visitors. Normally the final committee consists of three senior members of the teaching faculty from liberal arts colleges or research universities. The Dean of Faculty may consult with deans and colleagues at other schools before approving the final list.

Once the list is approved, the department should consider possible dates for the visit. The department chair should check with the administrative assistants of the President and Dean of Faculty to verify that they both will be available on the suggested dates. Normally the committee meets first and last with the Dean and the President, so the chair should also ask the President's and Dean's administrative assistants to hold possible times for these meetings. As soon as the dates of the committee's visit are set, the department chair should confirm the dates and times for these appointments.

When considering possible dates for the visit, keep in mind that they usually take place at the very beginning or the very end of a week and that the committee will need a minimum of a day and a half on campus to do their work. In other words, they often arrive on Sunday evening and depart on Tuesday late afternoon or evening, or arrive on Wednesday evening (or Thursday morning) and depart on Friday (or Saturday morning). Many departments have found it convenient to schedule the visits near the beginning of a semester.

When inviting reviewers, the department chair suggests possible dates for the visit and sometimes asks one member to chair the committee.

2. The Self-Study

After discussing with the Dean possible areas of emphasis, the department determines the scope and content of its self-study. Mount Holyoke prescribes no rigid format for self-studies, but they should address some basic questions about the department or program: What do we do? Why do we do it? Why do we do it in this particular way? How well do we do it? What should we do differently? What resources (staffing, facilities, budget) are required, and how effectively do we use them? On what issues should the visiting committee especially focus?

In answering such questions a department may find it useful to consider,

- the history, design, structure, intents, and outcomes of its curriculum (including courses for non-majors and courses for majors), pedagogy, and enrollment trends.
- the research interests of the current faculty.
- the factors that have shaped, or will in the future shape, the fields of expertise represented in the department.
- connections between the department and related Mount Holyoke or Five College departments.
- how the department sees itself in relation to excellent departments elsewhere and to the present state of the discipline.

Visiting committees usually expect to see syllabi, CVs, data on enrollments and majors, and information on where the department's students go after graduation. Recent committees have also asked for a mission statement, learning goals for the major (what should students come away with?), an honest appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses in the department, and a discussion and assessment of the use of adjuncts and visitors.

Members of the department decide for themselves who will write the self-study (e.g., the chair of the department, someone chosen by the department as a whole, a committee of department members). Those preparing the self-study will naturally consult with colleagues in their department, senior and junior, so that the document reflects as broad a discussion and consensus as possible. They may also wish to consult students (majors and non-majors), alumnae, faculty members in other departments, and faculty from the Five Colleges or other institutions who know the department's work.

Although the self-study is sometimes the most useful component of a review, it is wise to resist the temptation to overdo it. There are many possible models. An especially efficient one is for the chair to ask each member of the department to write a two-page statement about the most important issues that he or she thinks the department faces. A follow-up discussion of these statements in the department will help those drafting the study to formulate and focus the questions to be posed to the review committee. Departments sometimes schedule a retreat for this discussion, although this is by no means required. Indeed, the statements themselves, prefaced by a summary of their dominant themes and questions as determined in the department's discussion, may comprise the bulk of the self-study. It is also possible to underdo the self-study, focusing it so intently on a single challenge (the need for a new position, for example) that the outside committee has no larger context from which to advise on the challenge.

The self-study is not an evaluation of the teaching or scholarship of individual faculty members.

The department should send a copy of the self-study to the Dean of Faculty and President as soon as it is completed. About a month before the visit, the department should send copies to members of the visiting committee.

See Appendix A for an example of a department's procedures for the self-study.

3. The Visit

Once the Dean has received his copy of the self-study, he will send a charge to the visiting committee, with a copy to the department. In general, a visiting committee is asked to study the department and to measure it against the department's own standards, against excellent departments elsewhere, and against the state of the discipline.

The department chair in consultation with the Dean will coordinate the visiting committee's schedule, keeping in mind that it usually meets with the Dean first and the President last. The committee will also meet with the department chair, with departmental faculty members individually or in groups, with faculty in related departments, with Five-College colleagues as appropriate, and with students.

Committee members will make their own travel arrangements. The department is responsible for reserving hotel rooms. The Office of the Dean of Faculty will pay for hotel accommodations and reimburse the committee members for their expenses, including travel and dining. An honorarium is paid by the Dean of Faculty to each visitor upon receipt of the visiting committee's report.

See Appendix B for useful comments from a visiting committee about preparations for its visit.

4. The Committee's Report

The visiting committee will submit to the Dean and President a substantial report of its findings and recommendations. The most helpful reports candidly assess a department's current work and offer concrete suggestions for improvement. The report will be read by faculty members in the department or program as well as the Dean and President. The APC and the Education Committee of the Board of Trustees also have access to the committee's report. Sensitive comments (for example, specific personnel observations) should be made, if at all, in a separate letter to the Dean.

5. The Follow-up

After the review, the department chair discusses the visiting committee's report with his or her colleagues and with the Dean. The report and the department's discussion usually lead to consensus on a set of steps to be taken over the coming year and beyond.

Appendix A
An Example of a Department's Procedures for the Self-study

A. Procedures

We began by asking two members of the department to peruse the course catalogues of several undergraduate institutions in order to compare our curriculum with theirs (see attached samples). Another pair consulted with Prof. [], who chaired the [] department during its review, about the details of that process. Around the same time and in the spirit of helping out with the administrative burdens of the chair of the department, I volunteered to lead our departmental review. To this offer my colleagues gave their unanimous and probably relieved assent.

Before the end of the semester, I circulated to all permanent members of the department, including those on leave, a set of questions to elicit each individual's candid sense of the department's strengths and weaknesses (see faculty questionnaire). I explained that the letters written in response would provide the raw material for a series of collective discussions to be scheduled from January to May. All but two colleagues submitted letters before our first meeting; one submitted his letter before our third meeting; one, who was on sabbatical, was unable to write or participate. Before our first three-hour meeting in January, I circulated these letters to us all (see faculty letters). At that January meeting, which all but two colleagues attended, I summarized points that either cropped up in several of our letters or were new and arresting enough to emphasize even if mentioned by only one of us. I also handed out an outline of topics (see discussion agenda); we then decided on the order in which we would take them up.

B. Our collective self-assessment

What follows is the sense of the three long conversations we had about our department's strengths and weaknesses.

Appendix B
Comments from a Visiting Committee about Preparations for its Visit

Review of the [] Department, Mount Holyoke College

Our report on the Department of [] at Mt. Holyoke College offers (first) a brief account of our visit last October and the documentation supplied for our review, (second) an evaluative discussion of the present state of the Department, and (third) a quick summary of the recommendations embodied in our report.

The Process

The preparation for our visit was outstanding by any measure. We were provided with unusually full accounts of the issues facing the department, and the visit was carefully and thoughtfully planned so that our time on campus was well used. Especially useful to us was the fact that each faculty member provided a brief, personal statement about what issues seemed most pressing, so that rather than the usual single-voice analysis, provided by the chair or a select committee, we had multiple points of view to work from even before we talked to a single individual on campus. And very useful to the Department itself (and in turn useful to us) was the fact of a Department-wide retreat held last Spring in which the faculty began to identify and thrash out a series of questions and problems that apparently had been silently accumulating over a long period of time. The conversation begun at those sessions is a very important first step for the Department in what needs to be a series of continuing discussions about some quite basic matters involving scheduling, curriculum, collegiality, priorities, and even the definition of the Department's mission in the College. The fact that this conversation was held—and the fact that faculty members began to articulate some of their long-standing differences and to wrestle critically with some habitual Department practices and policies—means that the groundwork has been laid for more cogent and coherent long-term planning. But we must emphasize from the first that this meeting was merely the first step in what needs to be a long series of conversations, discussions, and debates about how the Department sees and presents itself.

The visit itself was well scheduled and efficient: we had sufficient time to meet the people we needed to see, and although the schedule was brisk, we were able to set aside a few moments here and there for reflection and discussion among ourselves. The initial materials sent us provided the advance information we needed, and once we were on campus, we were given, promptly, additional materials we requested. Everyone in the Department, starting with the chair and administrative staff, was responsive and eager to make the visit and the review pleasant and productive. The opening sessions—the dinner on Wednesday evening with (almost) the full faculty present and the early-morning session on Thursday with the president and deans—were useful in "grounding" us adequately and in giving us a human sense of the problems. In short, the planning for the review and the spirit in which it was carried out were just about perfect. If we had to pick a bone, it might be that the original contact/correspondence had not made it clear that we were expected to arrive by dinnertime on the eve of the review itself, resulting in a reviewer having to reschedule an expensive travel arrangement and another having to miss the opening night dinner because of teaching obligations. But we arrived basically well prepared and found the opening sessions to be fundamentally good maps to the territory we would survey.