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The Relationship between Department Chairs and Academic Program Review

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Abstract:

Academic program review is increasingly mandated in higher education in the current environment of academic accountability. At the same time, the role of the department chair is growing in responsibility and complexity. This review of the literature attempts to explore the intersection between the role of the department chair and the successful implementation of academic program review recommendations or results at the department level.

Introduction

Academic program review is increasingly mandated in the current environment of academic accountability. In particular, the use of academic program review as a measurement tool for quality is growing in Tennessee as a result of its continuing participation in the state’s performance-funding program. Although program reviews are increasingly required and the implementation of their results is expected, the results are not always used. The failure to use academic program review results at the department level has been the topic of a limited number of studies in higher education (e.g., Poulton, 1978a). This failure may result in low departmental morale, faculty resentment (Breire, 1985; Poulton, 1978a), and a low level of engagement for future planning and program reviews.
(Mets, 1995b). The chair’s leadership role is a key factor in the successful implementation of results (Mets, 1998).

This literature review will present the development of 1) academic program review, 2) the use of program review results, and 3) role of the department chair in using the review results at the department level. Few studies have looked at the intersection between the department chair’s role and the implementation or usage of academic program results. Is there a relationship? If so, what is the nature of the relationship? What has been the impact on academic departments?

Academic Program Review

Program evaluation is only one of several historical antecedents related to the origin of program review. Barak (1986) describes five major historical antecedents that led to the creation of academic program review. They include the development of

1. the concept of “program”,

2. the emergence of the accreditation movement,

3. the emergence of the profession of educational evaluation,

4. the rise of the accountability movement, and

5. the development of sophisticated approaches to the management of higher education (p. 2).

By the mid-nineteenth century, academic programs in higher education were influenced by a number of factors. The passage of the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 created programs in agriculture, engineering, and military training at land-grant institutions. The American college curriculum and an increase in faculty (Auclair, 1990). The success of the elective system led to “(1) the acceptance of a philosophy of the importance of all subjects; (2) the rise of scientific and utilitarian courses; (3) the development of subject matter specialization, with the attendant departmentalization of the curriculum; and (4) the seemingly endless proliferation of courses. The influence of German-trained professors, who wanted to carve out a niche for their disciplines, also contributed to the proliferation of specialization on campus. All of these factors contributed to the complexity of academic programs.

By the latter half of the 1950s and 1960s, many states created coordinating boards for higher education to provide rational planning for institutions. These boards have the greatest external impact on academic programs (Barak, 1986).
In the 1970s, the accountability movement demanded that institutions come under tighter public scrutiny. During this time the role of system-wide and statewide evaluations increased (Barak, 1975, cited in Shapiro, 1986). External program review gained greater significance because of the inability of funding sources to maintain quality programs.

In 1979 the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) instituted its performance-funding program to provide a financial incentive to institutions for meritorious performance of student learning and program quality. This system gives institutions the opportunity to receive additional funding above their instructional budget for their performance on ten quality standards. An institution can earn up to a total of 100 points each year. Points are converted into additional funding for the following year’s base budget at a current rate of 5.45% for the maximum 100 points (Banta et al., 1996). As part of this program, Tennessee’s public colleges and universities are required to have external review of their undergraduate and master’s programs. Since the inception of performance funding, external peer review has grown in popularity among public institutions in Tennessee (Banta et al., 1996). As of 1997, doctoral programs were also included in the review process (Performance Funding Annual Report, 1996-1997).

Of performance funding’s 10 standards, the two relating to external peer review of academic programs are the most favored performance funding standards according to a survey of Tennessee’s performance-funding coordinators at each of the state’s 23 public two-and four-year higher education institutions (Banta et al., 1996). “Peer review is a process of considerable intellectual appeal for faculty” (p. 27). The respondents reported that peer review of the master’s programs produced substantive change in the department. “For instance, admissions standards have been strengthened, curricula has been modified, and comprehensive examinations near the end of the degree program have been instituted where none existed previously. On some campuses, master’s degree programs have been eliminated or consolidated with other programs in response to reviewers’ recommendations” (p. 32).

Momentum for academic program review has been growing since its initiation within Tennessee’s performance funding program. By 1982 the first five-year plan for performance funding was launched. To assess student outcomes and program quality, institutions used surveys, locally and nationally developed tests, and peer reviews. During the second five-year plan, 1988-1992, campuses contended that “surveys and peer review were more
influential than test scores as criteria for funding higher education" (p. 27). In the third five-year plan, 1997-2000, program review will be implemented at all three levels ranging from undergraduate to doctorate (Performance Funding Annual Report, 1996-1997). The trend among Tennessee’s public higher education institutions to use academic program review as an assessment tool for program quality is growing stronger.

Use of Program Review Results

The increasing popularity of academic program review in Tennessee’s public institutions supports an earlier finding in which Barak (1982) surveyed a third of the nation’s public and private postsecondary institutions and found 82% used some form of program review. In his study of program review in community colleges, Hoey (1993) believed that the increasing demand for accountability in assessing outcomes has most likely caused this percentage to increase. This section describes Hoey’s study that used a conceptual framework to explain the various types of program usage and their possible relationship to certain organizational factors within community colleges.

The primary purpose of Hoey’s (1993) study was to determine (1) the extent of program review usage in community colleges in the United States; (2) the degree and the kind of usage of the review results, and (3) the extent to which certain organizational factors were related to the type of usage of program review results within community colleges.

Hoey (1993) developed a taxonomy of program review usage as follows:

1. Direct usage may be measured in terms of decisional outcomes or immediate changes, such as program budget expansion or program closure.

2. Incremental usage, or long-term impact, may be assessed by observing to what extent factors such as student outcomes or organizational communication have improved as a result of cumulative program reviews.

3. Persuasive usage may be assessed by determining to what degree program review findings were used politically, to leverage change in an organization or to convince someone of the necessity of change.

4. Conceptual usage, the least tangible usage component, nevertheless has support in the literature. Measuring this component may only be possible through self-reports. (pp.64-65)

Hoey (1993) used the following organizational factors to determine if there was a significant relationship to program review results: (1) organizational
communication, (2) leadership support for evaluation, (3) institutional size, (4) degree of centralization, (5) the organizational locus of the program review function, and (6) the involvement of stakeholders, (7) purposes of the review, and (8) the accreditation region in which the colleges were individually located. A survey instrument was mailed to 253 chief academic officers at community colleges throughout the United States. The response rate was 62%.

Correlational analysis showed the effects of the organization factors (the independent variables) on the usage of program review results (the dependent variables). Stepwise multiple regression was used to determine which of the identified organizational factors accounted for the greatest amount of variance in the usage of program review results.

Similar to Banta’s et al.’s (1996) finding on the increase of program review as a form of evaluation in Tennessee’s four-year institutions, Hoey’s (1993) study found that the use of program review as an evaluative mechanism had increased nearly 25% over a two-year period at the community colleges. Findings showed that nearly 87% of community colleges had an operational program review program. Related to Hoey’s four types of program review usage, the study showed the following:

1. Respondents deemed the clarification of program goals, strengths, and weaknesses to be the form of direct usage occurring most frequently.
2. Respondents regarded improved academic decision making as occurring to a greater extent than other incremental usages of program review results.
3. The gaining of a better understanding of academic programs as a result of program review was the conceptual usage cited by respondents as occurring to the greatest extent.
4. One item under persuasive usage was identified by respondents as occurring to a greater degree than others: the extent to which program review had enabled respondents to persuade others that changes were needed. (Hoey, 1993, p. 141)

Hoey’s (1993) study also found that leadership support for program review was significantly and positively related to all four types of usage of program review results. College-wide change was less likely to take place without the approval of key leaders. Several studies stressed that leaders were the key to the successful implementation of program review results (Barak & Sweeney, 1995; Ruhland, 1990, cited in Hoey, 1995a).

The Role of the Department Chair in Using Program Review Results at the Department Level
This section is about how program review results are used generally within the university and the department, and it assumes the importance of the chair’s role in program review. Tucker (1993) described in detail department chair duties relating to the coordination of program review and implementation of the program review results. More specifically, the department chair is expected to assist evaluation by providing information about the department, responding to evaluations, and presenting plans for change and/or improvement. A chair’s duties include “the overall coordination of the self-study, selecting possible consultants (though usually not the final choice), maintaining faculty morale in the face of the added workload of the review, verifying and, in some instances, collecting data, and explaining the program to consultants or other reviewers” (Barak & Breire, 1990, p. 83).

If the department fails to perform these functions, it may receive a poor review. Other than data collection, these responsibilities are so important that they cannot be delegated to any other person in the institution other than the chair (Barak & Breire, 1990). Chair leadership is also the key to the implementation of program review results (Mets, 1998). Thus, the chair’s leadership in program review is vital.

Poulton (1978b) highlighted program review’s impact with specific emphasis on the department chair. The chair, by virtue of her/his position, along with faculty have more of an interest in the outcome of departmental program review than the central administration. The review results usually led to evolutionary changes that were already known to the chair, and this gave credibility and legitimacy to any actions taken to implement the results. As program review contributed to the awareness and understanding of problems, actions were precipitated sooner than might otherwise be the case.

By virtue of their prior knowledge, chairs held the capability to effect change but could not act until recommendations provided the justification for actions to take place. “The analysis, clarification, and the communication of issues and recommendations provided by program reviews influenced the decision-making process at the department level as well as other levels of the organization by contributing to the legitimate and credible basis upon which actions could be taken” (p. 7). Recommendations typically reinforced the inclinations of deans, chairpersons, and faculty to act (Poulton, 1978b).

Although Poulton’s
research (1978a,b) examined the department chair’s role in relation to the use of program review results, few other studies have addressed this topic. The purpose of Briere’s (1985) study was to examine how the policy of program review was implemented both institutionally and within a statewide system. The study also sought to determine attitudes of academic employees toward the program review process.

Briere (1985) found that academic employees’ roles in the organization influenced their responses to program review and, therefore, had an impact on review results or output. Given the unstable environment, stress of the review, and threat of external consultants, faculty and administrators in schools and colleges of education experienced the review process negatively based on their interpersonal roles. University administrators and board members were less defensive because they saw the process as an opportunity to disseminate information and negotiate decisions. “The fact that the process was viewed so differently by various participants is important for those charged with implementing such processes in the system” (p. 103).

Similar to Briere’s (1985) study of academic employees’ attitudes toward program review in state institutions, Banta et al.’s (1996) study focused specifically on the evaluation of program review as a measure of quality for undergraduate and master’s programs in public universities participating in Tennessee’s performance funding program. The purpose of the study was to assess the attitudes of the public universities’ performance funding coordinators about each of the 10 performance funding standards used as a measure of quality of higher education. The population consisted of Tennessee’s 23 performance funding coordinators at each of the state’s public college and universities. Some coordinators were administrators with faculty rank and others were full-time administrators without faculty affiliation. All were responsible for compiling the annual performance funding report.

Banta et al. (1996) found that external peer review of academic programs was the most favored standard for assessing quality by the performance funding coordinators, receiving a “B” rating on a scale with “A” representing an outstanding measure and F representing poor standards. “Peer review of unaccreditable undergraduate programs and of master’s degree programs and external accreditation— also a peer review process—headed the list” (p. 29). Positive perceptions of the program review process by faculty and administrators have contributed to its popularity as a standard in the performance-funding program. According to Banta et al., peer review has considerable intellectual appeal to
A limitation of the study cited by Banta et al. (1996) related to response bias. Coordinators rated the overall performance funding process with a grade of “C”. The researchers suggested that if samples of faculty and administrators at the institutions had been surveyed, the results of the study would have been different. However, Banta et al. do not mention surveying the department chair about the most popular standard in the performance-funding program.

A few studies have focused on chairs’ perceptions of how program review results have changed their department (Mets, 1998; Wroblewski, 1995). These were single-institution studies and highlighted strategies used by the departments to implement results. The studies looked at the impact of review results at the department level at private institutions.

Wroblewski (1995) evaluated the results of academic program review and ways the program review results changed the departments at a single private institution. Chairs of 29 departments and programs were surveyed about the overall effectiveness of the review process for their departments. Survey items asked about the effectiveness of each part of the review process, the implementation of each department’s recommendations, and the overall results for the department. With a 76% response rate, the study’s findings showed that the majority of the chairs benefited from the process. They gained a sense of their strengths and limitations. The process also stimulated creative

Similar to Wroblewski’s (1995) study, Met’s (1995b) also focused on the perceptions of department chairs in a private four-year institution regarding the use of program review recommendations. Using focused interviews with chairs, Mets ascertained the strategies used to implement the review recommendations in departments. The study found that lack of administrative support was a concern for department chairs as they responded to the implementation of recommendations. Findings showed that though chairs understood that institutions had financial constraints and could not hire faculty immediately, some chairs used creative ways to create new positions in their departments, e.g., used bridge appointments to fill positions of faculty anticipating retirement and joint or courtesy appointments to build faculty strength.

In a related study, Mets (1995b) found that chairs believed that recommendations improved graduate curricula in departments, quality of entering students, and
advising. The chairs worked through existing structures in the departments.

Many department chairs agreed they needed to pursue outside funding more aggressively, but only a few departments actually initiated any efforts. These departments were viewed as entrepreneurial and skilled at finding external funding and raising matching funds from both inside and outside the institution. Thus, some department chairs used review results to the benefit of their departments irrespective of financial constraints.

The perceptions of department chairs differed regarding the tangible benefits from program review results. While some chairs were positive, the review process discouraged some. They believed their departments did not benefit, and, therefore, would participate less enthusiastically in future reviews.

Another example of chairs’ perceptions regarding the impact of program review’s results relates to their credibility with the administration. Similar to Poulton’s (1978b) study that examined the credibility of chairs to take action, Mets (1995b) also examined the program review recommendations’ impact on chair credibility. Some chairs felt it helped to communicate the quality of their departments not only to the central administration within the university but also throughout the country through the visit of external reviewers. Nearly two-thirds of department chairs responded that their departments were better today than they were at the time of their review, and three-fourths agreed that program review had contributed in some way to their improvement. A little more than one-third of the department chairs felt that their departments were not better off because of program review. They saw little or no value added to the quality of their department after recommendations were for activities that they were already engaged in independent of the review (Mets, 1995b). “Department chairs felt that administrators are reluctant to accept their word regarding their status and needs” (p. 24).

In both the Mets (1995b) and Wroblewski (1995) studies the departments were told explicitly that they should not expect additional resources following their reviews. It appears that both studies showed different departmental responses to this message. Mets found mixed responses. Some department chairs heard the message but were not deterred, following other avenues to achieve departmental needs. She noted that other department chairs who believed they were not better off as a
result of program review heard the message of no resources and were disappointed when they did not receive the administrative support for resources for which they felt were obvious needs. In contrast, Wroblewski found that, although faculty did not necessarily enter the planning and review process with expectations, external reviewers’ reports and a review committee’s recommendations “set the stage for resource increases, attitude changes, and restructuring” (Wroblewski, 1995, p. 62).

Academic program review is increasingly mandated in four-year public institutions of higher education in the current environment of academic accountability. At the same time, the role of the department chair is growing in responsibility and complexity. In the face of budget constraints, some chairs are able to successfully implement academic program review results, while others do not. This review of the literature attempted to explore the intersection between the role of the department chair and the successful implementation of academic program review recommendations or results at the department level. Is there a relationship between department chair leadership and the implementation of academic program review results? What strategies do successful department chairs use in implementing the review results? More research needs to be done in this area. Knowledge of various types of strategies employed by those chairs that successfully implement program review results would be of great benefit to other leaders in academia as well as those in other organizations outside of higher education.

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