

# Guidelines for External Reviews of Interdisciplinary Studies Programs

## An overview of the external review process

Union considers external reviews one of the most important ways in which it assesses and ensures the effectiveness of its interdisciplinary studies programs. They occur for each program on a ten-year cycle and consist of six steps:

- a. Under leadership of the Program Director, the program steering committee (or equivalent)<sup>1</sup>, conducts a self-study whose results are reported to the external review team, the President, the Dean of the Faculty, the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs, and the Director of Interdisciplinary Studies Programs (**Year #1**);
- b. During a two-day visit to the Union campus, the external review team conducts an independent and in-depth review of the program (**Year #1**);
- c. The external review team issues a report of its findings and recommendations, which is sent to the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs, who in turn distributes it to the Director of Interdisciplinary Studies, the Program Director, and the Dean of the Faculty. The report should be made available to all the tenure-track faculty members on the program steering committee. Although not required, the Interdisciplinary Studies Program (ISP) may prepare a written response for the Dean of the Faculty, the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs, and the Director of Interdisciplinary Studies Programs (**Year #1**);
- d. The self-study, external team report, and the optional response from the program is sent to the AAC for review. The AAC drafts questions arising from the review, for the ISP's consideration. After meeting with the Program Director, the AAC prepares a letter to the Dean of the Faculty (with copies to the Program Director, the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs, and the Director of Interdisciplinary Studies Programs) presenting their advice on how best to respond to the recommendations of the external review team (**Year #2**);
- e. The Academic Affairs Committee of the Board of Trustees considers the external review team's report and the AAC's letter (**Year #2**);
- f. After 4 years (**5 years after the team visit**), the program formally assesses its progress

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<sup>1</sup> At the outset of the process, the Program Director(s) and the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs will confirm the list of faculty who will be involved in the self-study and the external review process.

towards achieving the recommendations arising out of the external review and sends a report (3-4 pages is sufficient) to the Dean of Faculty, Dean of Academic Departments and Programs, and the Director of Interdisciplinary Studies Programs. All tenure-track members of the program steering committee should sign this report indicating that they have been consulted in its preparation. This report should not bring up issues or needs beyond those already addressed in the external review. **This report can serve as a replacement for the annual assessment report (Year #5).**

### **The program self-study (Previous ISP external reviews are available on Nexus)**

The Program's faculty will conduct a self-study that will provide the external reviewers with extensive information about the faculty, the curriculum, the facilities, and the students. The Program Director should coordinate the compilation and generation of the self-study. Information for the self-study can be gathered from departments, Tableau, and Institutional Research. Topics covered in the self-study will normally include:

- a. College Description: a brief introduction to the College, its mission and a concise statement of the priorities of the Strategic Plan (see sample statement in Appendix 1);
- b. Program Description: the mission and/or vision statement of the program, the number of faculty and departments contributing to the program; general descriptions of the program and relationships to other programs; program-specific space or facilities; program-related grants, gifts, prizes, or collections; and any publications about the program;
- c. Faculty Information: faculty ranks, years in service, areas of specialization, research interests, publication records, grant support, courses taught for the program, etc. A *curriculum vitae* should be provided for each faculty member considered core to the program, as well as a brief statement of future scholarly or curricular plans as they relate to the program;
- d. Curriculum Information: degree requirements, programs for majors, ways in which program courses contribute to General Education and Writing-Across-the-Curriculum requirements, course descriptions (syllabi), enrollment figures for the past 3 years (for enrollment and other data not accessible through Tableau or PowerBI, please contact Institutional Research), future course revisions and curricular plans;
- e. Student Information: number of majors/minors, demographic breakdown of majors/minors;

- f. DEIB Initiatives: program efforts to diversify faculty and curriculum (including by making individual courses and syllabi more inclusive), responses to shifts in major/minor demographics, support plans for junior faculty and faculty from underrepresented groups, recruitment and retention plans;
- g. Staffing, Curricular and Facilities Plans and Needs: identification of staffing, curricular and/or space and facilities plans and needs for the next ten years in order to meet the program's vision and mission;
- h. Questions and Concerns: the program should provide the review committee with a list of possible questions or concerns to which they might respond to assist the program in planning for the future;
- i. Appendix: this appendix should contain all recent annual assessment reports from the program.

The self-study should involve the participation of all tenure-track faculty members who are considered core members of the program and who are not on leave. This important undertaking should not be carried out only by the Program Director or a small subset of the tenure-track faculty. At the discretion of the Program Director, lecturers may also be invited to help with the preparation of the self-study report.

**When completed, please send electronic copies (unless hard copy is requested) of the self-study report to each member of the external review team, to President Harris, to the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs, to the Dean of the Faculty, and all other individuals slated to meet with the review team. The report should be shared at least 2 weeks before the date of the campus visit.**

### **Selection of the external reviewers**

The program will prepare for the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs a list of at least 20 individuals who would be qualified to serve on the external review team. When formulating this list, the program should try to avoid, and at the very least signal, any potential conflicts of interest, such as previous employment at the College, or any close personal or professional connections with program members. Using this list as a starting point, the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs will select three or four reviewers. Normally at least two reviewers will be selected from primarily undergraduate colleges; the program may discuss with the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs whether to select reviewers from prestigious research institutions. Every effort will be made to include women and underrepresented faculty on the committee. Final selections are determined by the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs

in consultation with the Program Director. For each reviewer, the Dean will pay travel and meal expenses and an honorarium.

The Dean of Academic Departments and Programs will send the names and cvs of the external reviewers to the offices of the President and the Dean of Faculty two weeks ahead of the campus visit by the external reviewers.

### **Hosting the visit of the external review team**

The campus visit normally lasts two full days. The Chair of the department arranges for hotel accommodations for the team (the Parker Inn, Double Tree Inn, or the Landing Hotel are recommended) and suggests a restaurant for dinner(s). These expenses will be paid by the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs according to current College-wide standards. In addition, the director should reserve a room on campus in or near the department that can serve as an operations' base for the visiting team. Check for accessibility when reserving this room and when putting the campus schedule together. ***Refreshments should be available for the team throughout the day.*** For most meetings, have interviewees come to this room rather than have the team move about.

The schedule for the visit should include:

- a. A 90-minute opening meeting with the Dean of the Faculty, the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs, and the Director of Interdisciplinary Studies;
- b. A 30-minute meeting, immediately following the opening meeting if possible, with the Assistant Vice President of Academic Planning and Operations (Greta Donato) to talk about the program budget;
- c. A 30-minute meeting with the Assistant Dean for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion;
- d. Individual interviews with all the tenure-track faculty, visiting faculty, and lecturers who make significant contributions to the program;
- e. Interviews with the chairs of departments and Directors of other programs that interact regularly with the program under review on matters of curriculum, staffing, equipment purchasing, etc.;
- f. Interviews with the Chair of the AAC, and the Dean of Studies, may be held as a joint interview;

- g. Interviews with students (usually majors in the program), possibly with lunch;
- h. A 90-minute exit interview jointly with the President, the Dean of the Faculty, and the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs in Feigenbaum Hall. The President joins the meeting for the final 30 min of the exit interview.

If possible, the schedule should include some time for the review team to meet amongst themselves to gather their thoughts prior to the exit meeting with the Deans and the President. At the very least, the team should have dinner on their own after the first full day of meetings to enable discussion about the team's observations about the day's meetings without department members present.

### **The report from the external review team**

The external reviewers will be asked to assess the program from the following perspectives, which may also address other areas if they consider them important:

- Vision and Mission
- Curriculum and connections to departments and other programs
- Number of contributing faculty and range of sub-specialties
- Faculty scholarship
- Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging
- Facilities
- Engagement of students and student satisfaction
- Budget
- Assessment and long-range planning
- Support staff
- Effectiveness of the program leadership
- Coordination and cooperation within the program
- Contributions from departments
- Questions specifically addressed to the team in the self-study report

The team will also be asked to make suggestions for future development in any of these areas. The final report will be submitted to the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs who will forward copies to the Dean of the Faculty, Director of Interdisciplinary Studies Programs, and the program Director(s). The Director(s) will, in turn, share it with all tenure-track faculty members who contribute to the program.

### **Letter from the program responding to the external review report**

As an optional step, the ISP may respond to the external review report with a letter to the Dean of the Faculty and the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs. The letter should be signed by all the tenure-track faculty members who contribute to the program acknowledging that they have read both the external team's report and the program's letter of response. Any faculty member who does not concur with the contents of the letter must be invited to attach a letter describing their reasons.

### **Review of the external review report by the Academic Affairs Council**

The report and the optional program letter, if any, will be submitted to the AAC, except for those sections or appendices that deal with personnel matters or are of a confidential nature. After meeting with the program Director(s), the AAC will issue a letter to the Dean of the Faculty and the program leadership in which it will present its recommendations for future action. The AAC's letter is to be made available to all the tenure-track faculty members who contribute to the program.

### **The Mid-Term Progress Report (MTPR) from the program**

During the 4<sup>th</sup> year after the year of the external review (during year #5 where the year of the external review campus visit counts as year #1) the program leadership prepares a 3-4 page mid-term report on its success at implementing the recommendations of the external review team and the AAC. Please organize the MTPR so that each recommendation of the external review team or the AAC is stated separately and followed by a description of the actions the program has taken to address each one. All tenure-track faculty members who contribute to the program should sign this report indicating that they have been consulted in its preparation. This report should not bring up new issues or needs beyond those addressed in the previous external review. Copies of the MTPR should be sent to the AAC, the Dean of the Faculty, the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs, and the Director of Interdisciplinary Studies Programs. This program progress assessment completes the external review cycle.

## Appendix 1. Sample description of Union College

Founded in 1795, Union College describes itself as “a small, residential, independent liberal arts college committed to integrating the arts, humanities and social sciences with science and engineering in new and exciting ways.” The college’s stated mission is to provide “a rigorous, holistic, and immersive liberal education that emphasizes integration, innovation, inclusion and reflection for every student.”

Union enrolls 2050 full-time undergraduates including students from forty states and territories and fifty countries. X percent of the students are women, and Y percent are men; 23 percent are domestic students of color, and 10 percent are international students. The student-faculty ratio is 9:1, and the average introductory class size is 24, with an average of 14 students in advanced classes. [check against Union at a Glance website]

The college’s most recent strategic plan (included in the supplementary documents) revolves around two goals: (1) to strengthen its vibrant community of learners, scholars and teachers, so that we can more fully blend the liberal arts and engineering, transcend disciplinary boundaries, bridge classroom and immersive experiences, and engage and embrace diverse experiences and perspectives; and (2) to ensure that it has the resources required to thrive in a changing higher education landscape.