

Guidelines for Union College Departments Undergoing External Reviews

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 academic departments. They occur for each department on a ten-year cycle (twelve years in the case of Engineering Departments) and consist of 6 steps:

- a. The department conducts a self-study whose results are reported to the external review team, the President, the Dean of the Faculty and the Dean of Academic Departments and 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 department (**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 department Chair and the Dean of the Faculty. The report should be made available to all the tenure-track faculty members in the department. Although not required, the department may prepare a written response for the Dean of the Faculty and the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs (**Year #1**);
- d. The self-study, external team report, and the optional departmental response is sent to the AAC for review. The AAC drafts questions arising from the review, for the Department's consideration. After meeting with the department Chair, the AAC prepares a letter to the Dean of the Faculty (with copies to the department Chair and the Dean of Academic Departments and 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 department formally assesses its progress towards achieving the recommendations arising out of the external review and sends a report (3-4 pages is sufficient) to the Dean of Faculty and Dean of Academic Departments. All tenure-track members of the department 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 department self-study

The department will conduct a self-study that will provide the external reviewers with extensive information about the faculty, curriculum, facilities and students. 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. **Department Description**: the number of faculty and support personnel, general description of departmental and interdisciplinary programs that the department supports, office and laboratory space, departmental grants, gifts, prizes, or collections and publications about the department, if any;
- c. **Faculty Information**: faculty ranks, years in service, areas of specialization, research interests, publication records, grant support, courses taught (both departmental and college-wide), consulting activities, etc. A **curriculum vitae** should be provided for each faculty member as well as a brief statement of future scholarly or curricular plans;
- d. **Curriculum Information**: degree requirements, programs for departmental and interdepartmental majors, General Education and Writing-Across-the-Curriculum requirements, Gen Ed and FYP/FYI and SRS commitments, honors programs, 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**: department 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. **Grades**: average GPA in majors in 100, 200, 300, and 400 level courses, as well as college and division averages (if available);

- h. Future Plans and Needs related to Staffing, Curriculum, Space and Facilities: identification of staffing, curriculum, space and facilities plans and needs for the next ten years in order to meet the department's goals;
- i. Questions and Concerns: To assist the department in planning for the future, it should take the opportunity of the external review to seek the advice of the team regarding any questions, issues or concerns it may have;
- j. Appendix: Should contain all recent annual assessment reports by the department along with any other data or documents referred to in the study.

The self-study should involve the participation of **all** tenure-track faculty members of the department who are not on leave. This important undertaking should **not** be carried out only by the Chair or a small subset of the tenure-track faculty. At the discretion of the Chair, 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 department 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 department 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 department 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 department 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 Department Chair. 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 Chair 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 60-minute opening meeting with the Dean of the Faculty and the Dean of Academic Departments & Programs in Feigenbaum Hall. This meeting will be scheduled by the DADP;
- 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 department budget; the department needs to schedule this meeting;
- c. A 30-minute meeting with the Assistant Dean for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; the department needs to schedule this meeting;
- d. Individual interviews with all the tenure-track faculty, visiting faculty and lecturers in the department;
- e. Interviews with the Chairs of departments that interact regularly with the department under review on matters of curriculum, staffing, facilities, etc. If appropriate, this can be a joint meeting or some combination of joint meetings;
- f. A joint interview with the Chair of the AAC and the Dean of Studies. If the department is a major contributor to the First-Year Inquiry or Gen Ed programs the Director of General Education should also be included in this meeting;
- g. A half-hour individual meeting with the Director of Interdisciplinary Programs; (in the interest of saving time on the schedule, (e) and (f) meetings can be combined into one 45 minute meeting);

- h. Interviews with students (usually majors in the department), possibly with lunch;
- i. A 90-minute exit interview jointly with the President, the Dean of the Faculty, and the Dean of Academic Departments & Programs in Feigenbaum Hall. The President joins the meeting for the final 30 min of the exit interview. This will be scheduled by DADP.

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 department from the following perspectives. They may also address other areas that they deem important.

- Curriculum
- Faculty size and range of sub-specialties
- Faculty scholarship
- Student information (enrollment, majors, grades)
- Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging
- Space and other facilities
- Engagement of students and student satisfaction
- Budget
- Assessment and long-range planning
- Support staff
- Effectiveness of departmental leadership and administration
- Coordination and cooperation within the department
- Contributions to interdisciplinary programs
- 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 and the department Chair. The Chair will, in turn, share the report with all the tenure-track faculty members in the department.

Letter from the department responding to the external review report

As an optional step, the department 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 in the department acknowledging that they have read both the external team's report and the department'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 department 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. The AAC will generate a set of questions that is shared with the Department through the Dept Chair. The Chair is advised strongly to consult with the tenure-track members of the Department when preparing responses to the AAC. After meeting with the Department Chair to discuss the responses, the AAC will issue a letter to the Dean of the Faculty and the Department in which it will present its advice for future action. The AAC's final letter is to be made available to all the tenure-track members of the department.

The Mid-Term Progress Report (MTPR) from the department

During the 4th 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 department 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 department has taken to address each one. Describe any steps you have taken (or plan to take) to assess improvements in outcomes related to these changes. All the tenure-track members of the department 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 external review. Copies of the MTPR should be sent to the AAC, the Dean of the Faculty and the Dean of Academic Departments and Programs, and the Director of Assessment. This departmental progress assessment completes the external review cycle, and is done in lieu of an assessment report in that year.

NOTE: As Engineering Departments are typically on a 12-year cycle of external review, the midterm report should be submitted in the 6th year (5 years following the site visit).

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.