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Academic Program Approval and Review in the United States and Selected Foreign Countries

This report is the second in a series of research briefs issued by the Educational Policy Institute (EPI) of Virginia Tech. The Institute is an interdisciplinary group of faculty who shares a common interest in education policy in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The mission of EPI is to: (a) establish an organization devoted to educational policy research and service in the Commonwealth of Virginia and the nation, (b) conduct research intended to inform educational policy makers, (c) focus research interests of the faculty and graduate students on educational policy issues, and (d) act as a service unit for educational policy groups such as the State Board of Education and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.

This brief summarizes a study that Dr. Steve Janosik and I, along with several graduate students, conducted on the implementation of academic program approval and program review processes in the United States and eight selected foreign countries and regions. The study was made at the request of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. The State Council has been studying this issue for the last several months and considers this issue as one of their top policy priorities. As members of the research team conducted their interviews, we found that approving academic programs and assessing the quality of these programs once approved is a concern of state chief academic officers across the country. In fact, many states have their procedures under review at the current time.

I wish to thank the State Council and its staff for their help and contribution to this study. I also wish to acknowledge the other members of our writing team: Chunmei Zhao, Miya Simpson, and Mike Perry, all graduate students in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies; and members of our advisory committee: John Muffo, Pat Hyer, Gerry McLaughlin, Joan Hirt, Valerie Conley, and Phyllis Sheldon for their help.

This brief is written by Dr. Steve Janosik, EPI's Associate Director. Copies of the complete report can be obtained by contacting him or can be accessed from EPI's web site. I hope you find the information to be of interest. The URL is <<http://www.vt.edu:10021/chre/elps/EPI>>

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Executive Summary

- The purpose of this study was to assess program approval and program review procedures currently in practice and to identify useful models for consideration by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.
- Accessible written materials were collected from the states and countries and analyzed. Semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with the academic officers of the responsible state agencies to determine current practices, perceived strengths and weaknesses of current academic program approval and review procedures, and future plans for change in these procedures.
- While program approval procedures are very similar, some differences do exist from state to state. These differences can be categorized as follows: (a) those that require a pre-planning proposal; (b) those that require institutions to only submit full proposals; and (c) those having no authority over program approval processes. Academic officers in those states that use the pre-planning model suggested that this early screening process saved time and resources.
- State academic officers perceived that program approval practices: (a) tend to improve the quality of academic programs, (b) increase the inter-institutional communication, (c) incorporate assessment criteria and accountability measures into institutional activity, (d) ensure program demand and need, (f) reduce program duplication, (g) conserve resources, and (h) encourage the application of state planning priorities.
- Program review occurs in differentiated patterns from state to state. Central themes can be identified and categorized as (a) centralized review procedures, (b) decentralized review procedures, (c) limited or no review procedures in place, and (d) states having no authority to conduct program reviews.
- The strengths and weaknesses of program review practices may vary according to the model or approach chosen. Generally, however, the strengths of program review were perceived to be that it: (a) provides an on-going quality assurance check, (b) serves as an incentive to ensure quality at the institutional level even when done on an irregular basis, (c) offers a greater measure of objectivity can be obtained when outside reviewers are used. As for weaknesses, institutions may focus on the review process itself and do little with the results. Reviews are not done with great enough frequency to provide real quality control. The process is time consuming and expensive.
- Quality assurance approaches in international locations are similar to practices in the United States in many respects but offer several distinctive features. Three general models were identified: (a) self-regulated, (b) externally regulated, and (c) a combination approach.
- As a result of this inquiry, the researchers identified and attached labels to three general models of program approval and review and placed them along a continuum representing the degree to which the state agency exerted control over the evaluation process. They were identified as: the accreditation model, the state/institution collaboration model, and the state-mandated model. In addition, the researchers developed two additional evaluation models for the Council's consideration. These were identified as the Quality Assurance Audit Model and the Modified Collaboration Model. These last two models may offer administrators opportunities to do less "gatekeeping" while focusing more of their scarce resources on ensuring the quality of their academic programs.

Academic Program Approval and Review in the United States and Selected Foreign Countries

by Steven M. Janosik

The purpose of this study was to assess program approval and program review procedures currently in practice and to identify useful models for consideration by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) in achieving its state goal to decentralize responsibility for the initiation of new academic degree programs to public and private colleges and universities by 1999.

Method

The Higher Education and Student Affairs faculty and doctoral students undertook a study of 50 states and eight selected foreign countries and regions to identify these models. Accessible written materials were collected from the states and countries and analyzed. Semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with the academic officers of the responsible state agencies to determine current practices, perceived strengths and weaknesses of current academic program approval and review procedures, and future plans for change in these procedures. Phone calls to 20 states also were made to assist the State Council in collecting certain information about the use of productivity standards in program review.

Findings

After a thorough review of policy documents and a series of semi-structured interviews with the academic affairs officers in the various state agencies for governing or coordinating their respective systems of higher education, three program approval and review models were defined.

Program Approval in the States

While program approval procedures are very similar, some differences do exist from state to

state. These differences center around the need for preliminary approval to submit a proposal and a state agency's authority to approve programs and can be categorized as follows: (a) those that require a pre-planning proposal; (b) those that require institutions to submit full proposals without preliminary approval; and (c) those having no authority over program approval processes.

Academic officers in those states that use this pre-planning model suggested that this early screening process saved time and resources. As part of this "notification of intent to propose (NISP)" institutions determine the need for the program on their own campuses. Decisions about mission, program priorities, and resource needs are made. Some states also require that institutions planning to request approval for a new program share their intentions with other colleges and universities in the system. Other institutions are encouraged to critique the pending proposal. This feedback is given to the institution and the state agency.

This preliminary proposal, also referred to as an NISP, may include a description of the program and statements about mission centrality, financial considerations, resource availability, student demand and employer need, and institutional ability. This pre-planning phase is concluded when the program request receives all of the necessary approvals from the institution's internal governance system.

If the program receives preliminary approval, a formal proposal is developed and sent forward to the state coordinating or governing board. Several states do not require a notification of intent and instead receive and evaluate formal proposals from their institutions. In some instances, states consider proposals on a two-year cycle. Others consider proposals whenever institutions feel they are ready. State agencies may use a variety of techniques to determine the fate of a formal proposal in the agency decision phase including the use of

outside reviewers, various committees, and accrediting agencies.

Criteria for program approval usually include, but are not limited to, statements on: system need, mission centrality, student and employer demand, program duplication, cost, ability to deliver the program, adequacy of curricular design, the program evaluation plan, a diversity plan, the demonstration of technology use, and an accreditation plan. Once all of the required materials have been submitted and evaluated, the state agency board may disapprove, conditionally approve, or approve the request to begin a new academic program.

More and more states are building program review processes into their approval decisions. Such an evaluation may be used to move a conditional approval to full approval. In other instances, it may be used as a quality control check on the initial decision. States that do not build in the evaluation as part of their approval process may use productivity triggers to identify and evaluate programs that may no longer be serving a sufficient number of students or employers. This process may involve a review of progress made on the goals established in the original proposal or an examination of other progress measures previously identified such as the number of students enrolled and the number of students graduated.

State academic officers perceived that program approval practices: (a) tend to improve the quality of academic programs, (b) increase the inter-institutional communication and collaboration, (c) incorporate assessment criteria and accountability measures into institutional activity, (d) ensure program demand and need, (e) reduce program duplication, (f) conserve resources, and (g) encourage the application of state planning priorities.

The same group of administrators, on the other hand, identified: (a) reduction in institutional autonomy, (b) program delay, (c) the politicization of decision-making, and (d) drain of

staff resources as weaknesses inherent in the program approval process.

Finally, there are a few state agencies that have little or no authority over the program approval procedures for higher education institutions and appeared to serve in more of a facilitating or coordinating role. In these instances, the task of program approval was left to the institutions themselves.

Program Review in the States

Program review occurs in differentiated patterns from state to state. As with program approval procedures, three general approaches can be identified: (a) independent institutional review, (b) interdependent institutional review, and (c) state-mandated review.

In the independent institutional review, the state agency delegates authority to the institution to conduct program reviews. The state agency does not supervise or audit the process.

In the interdependent model, the institution conducts the program review on a regular basis but does so under the guidance of the state agency. While the criteria may be generally spelled out by the state agency, the institution determines the review process and specifies the review criteria within the context or characteristics of the institution. Based on the information that the institution provides, the state agency will make recommendations to modify, consolidate, or eliminate the program.

In the state-mandated approach, the state agency determines the criteria and the procedures for the program review. Often, when the state conducts this type of review, the review is focused on one or more disciplines (or discipline clusters) or on broad categories such as degree level programs across an entire system. The review criteria are very similar to the list found in the program approval process.

In this latter model, the state agency most often uses external reviewers of various types to help complete the review.

The strengths and weaknesses of program review practices vary according to the model or approach chosen. Generally, however, the strengths of program review were perceived to be that it: (a) provides an on-going quality assurance check, (b) serves as an incentive to ensure quality at the institutional level, even when done on an irregular basis, (c) provides a greater measure of objectivity when outside reviewers are used.

As for weaknesses, institutions may focus on the review process itself and do little with the results. Reviews are not done with great enough frequency to provide real quality control. The process is time consuming and expensive.

Program Approval and Review in Other Countries

Quality assurance approaches in international locations are similar to practices in the United States in many respects. Three general models were identified: (a) self-regulated, (b) externally regulated, and (c) a combination approach.

Distinctive features of these international practices include:

1. Institutional self-regulation is combined with external quality assurance agency review or audit. The quality assurance agency ensures that the institutions implement their own quality assurance procedures effectively.
2. The institution may either design its own quality assurance procedures or adopt a formal quality assurance policy determined by the quality assurance agency or by the government.
3. External reviewers or assessors play an important role by offering objectivity and

expertise, promoting the exchange of good practice, and responding to the needs of the society.

4. In some countries, quality assurance initiatives are very extensive, including an assessment of institutional teaching and learning practices of all academic programs and an assessment of the research skills and training of junior faculty.
5. Quality assurance results are scored, ranked, or published in several countries. Decision-making on such issues as funding and program elimination is based on these scores or ranks.

Policy Alternatives

As a result of this inquiry, the researchers attached labels to three general models of program approval and review and placed them along a continuum representing the degree to which the state agency exerted control over the evaluation process.

Accreditation Model. A model describing total delegation of program approval or program review to the institutions or some other external organization was identified as the Accreditation Model. This model represents the least amount of state agency involvement.

State/Institution Collaboration Model. In many instances the institutions work with the state agency to develop a set of procedures that are used in the approval and review processes. In some instances, reviews are conducted by the institutions and summary reports are sent to the state agency. The model of shared responsibility was identified as the State/Institution Collaboration Model and is characterized by moderate state control.

State Regulatory Model. Some states centralize the responsibility for program approval and review processes in a single administrative organization – the state agency. Here, the state agency defines the

process for the institutions, collects all of the data and makes the decisions.

Believing that none of the three U.S. models in practice met the needs of the Council with respect to the agency's newly adopted Strategic Plan for decentralizing these and other mandated activities, the researchers developed two additional evaluation models for the Council's consideration. These were identified as the Quality Assurance Audit Model and the Modified Collaboration Model.

Quality Assurance Audit Model. This is a decentralized model of program approval and review characterized by: (a) delegation of appropriate state agency authority to institutional governing boards, (b) development and application of institutional-level quality assurance policies and procedures (referring to policies and practices that include quality, duplication, and productivity issues), and (c) cyclical or triggered state-level audit of these policies and procedures.

This model represents considerable change in current practice by SCHEV since it does not involve the state agency directly in either program approval or review; however, it offers considerable advantages within the context of the strategic goal of decentralizing program approval and review functions.

Modified Collaboration Model. This is a centralized model of program approval and review characterized by: (a) shared institution and state-level oversight authority, (b) institutional-level program approval by classification according to mission relatedness (within mission, related to mission, outside of mission) and the requirement for new resources, and (c) cyclical reviews by state-level agency (for example, at five-year intervals) depending upon classification of initial approval.

This model represents the least change in policy by SCHEV but may represent

considerable change in actual practice since many current activities would not be required. Further, it shifts greater autonomy to the institution when a new program falls within the institution's current mission.

Both alternatives are attractive for different reasons. The Quality Assurance Audit Model places SCHEV in a policy/coordination role where the Council and its staff would provide broad oversight for the process. SCHEV would be integrally involved in process development and management but would leave the implementation of the process to its respective institutions. The precedents for adopting such a role are numerous. The post-tenure review and restructuring processes are excellent examples of this guidance/monitoring role.

The disadvantages of the Quality Assurance Audit Model may be that too much authority and control are delegated to the institutions. However, using a periodic system-wide audit of program offerings noting year-to-year changes might serve as an excellent way to monitor institutional activity. Self-study reports and accreditation visits, processes already in place, would provide additional information on institutional decision making in the area of program approval and review.

The Modified Collaboration Model is attractive because it stratifies the approval and review process based on two critical factors--mission and cost. The model dictates that additional attention be given to programs that require supplementary resources and fall outside an institution's current mission--the areas of greatest risk to the institution and the state. At the same time, however, institutions building new mission-related programs by reallocating existing resources receive additional control and authority. The disadvantage here is that risk-taking and innovation may be reduced if institutions act to avoid the more rigorous

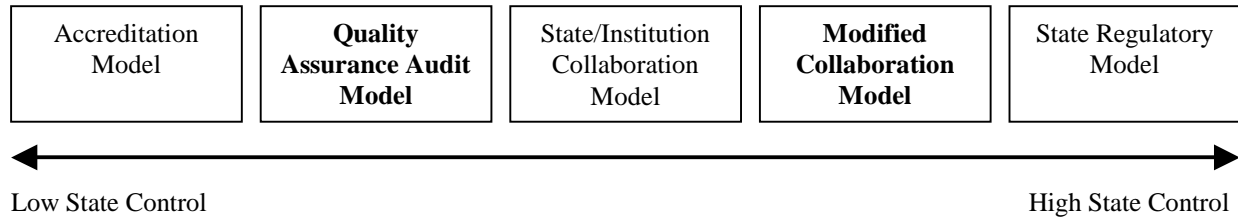


Figure 1. Degree of Control in Various Review Models

reviews that come with programs that may fall outside their current mission or require new resources.

The models observed in practice combined with the alternative models suggested by our research may be conceptualized by relative position regarding state agency control as shown above in Figure 1.

Conclusion

Academic program approval and program review procedures are viewed by many as an important way to ensure the wise use of state resources and to ensure consumers of a high quality educational experience. In this study, many state agency academic officers reported high levels of satisfaction with the results of their respective program approval processes. The procedures used across the country were well-defined and results were

easily demonstrated. On the other hand, these same administrators felt less comfortable with their established program review procedures and were less certain about their efficacy. Several academic officers expressed concern about the regularity of these reviews and were less comfortable about the effectiveness of their results.

The Quality Assurance Audit Model and Modified Collaboration Model attempt to address these concerns by offering academic administrators two variations on the same theme. Both models delegate more responsibility to the institutions for these processes, particularly program approval, and place the state agency in a better position to monitor program quality. These models may offer administrators opportunities to do less “gatekeeping” while focusing more of their scarce resources on ensuring the quality of their academic programs.

The Educational Policy Institute (EPI) of Virginia Tech is sponsored and maintained by the Higher Education Program in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies of the Virginia Tech College of Human Resources and Education. Its purpose is to facilitate the distribution of information and to stimulate discussion of policy issues affecting public education and higher education in Virginia. The contents of these pages express the independent views and opinions of the authors. They are not intended to represent the official comment or position of any elected or appointed official or any state agency. Those wishing to contact EPI may do so by writing to the director, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, 304 East Eggleston Hall, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia 24061.



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