Guidelines for Program Review

Montana State University: Guidelines for Program Reviews

Updated September 2025

Program reviews serve a variety of purposes including meeting the requirements of the Board of Regents of the Montana University System (BOR) and providing valuable input into the planning and analysis processes at the University. The Board of Regents requires a review of every degree (including options and minors) every seven years (Policy 303.3), but the Montana State University administration can require a Special Program Review at any time.

Externally accredited programs may use portions of their accreditation self-study and review findings to satisfy the provisions of BOR policy and MSU Program Review. However, when external accreditation reviews do not provide the information needed for institutional planning and analysis, additional information or a focused program review may be required. Externally accredited programs and the Provost (or designee) should periodically review which elements of their external accreditation meet the information needs for institutional planning and analysis. Review is paramount when accrediting bodies change their standards or procedures. All programs, including externally accredited programs, must file a Dean's Recommendation Report to the Provost every 7 years according to the Academic Priorities and Planning schedule filed with OCHE and the BOR.

Programs Requiring Intensive Review – Productivity Benchmarks

In the past, the BOR asked for increased scrutiny of programs that fall into any of the following categories:

- **Undergraduate Programs**: An average graduation rate of fewer than 10 students per year

- **Masters Programs:** An average graduation rate of fewer than 3 students per year

- **Doctoral Programs:** An average graduation rate of fewer than 2 students per year

- **Loss of Majors:** The number of enrolled majors has decreased by 20% or more since the last review.

- **Loss of SCH:** The number of student credit hours generated has decreased by 20% or more since the last review.

These benchmarks are used for special program reviews at Montana State University (MSU).

Montana State University: Academic Program Review

Purpose: Systemic academic unit review should assist the faculty, unit administrator, dean and University administration in: 1) evaluating how effectively the department is achieving its program learning outcomes and educational goals; 2) identifying the department's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT); 3) developing strategic directions and priorities for the future of the department, faculty, and academic programs; and 4) fulfilling the MUS Board of Regents (Policy 303.3) requirements.

A departmental review has three parts: 1) a self-study of the department and its programs by the department head and faculty; 2) a peer review by external and University faculty members from outside the department; and 3) a summary from the dean identifying key opportunities and future directions for the department based on the self-study and peer review.

Timing: The MUS Board of Regents (Policy 303.3 – Program Review) requires campuses to conduct regular internal reviews of academic programs at least once every seven years. The reviews "shall include all programs in the "degree and program inventory" maintained by the office of the commissioner of higher education, and shall include options, minors and certificates of more than 29 credits."

Responsibility and Scope: Reviews will be conducted at the academic unit level, typically the departmental level, the primary organizational structure for academic programming at MSU. An academic unit review must cover all undergraduate and graduate instructional programs (degrees, programs, options, minors and certificates). Reviews are forward-thinking and should be evaluative, not just descriptive. Any plans for improvement and future directions require judgments about the program(s), curriculum, learning outcomes, students, staff and faculty within existing resources. Academic unit self-studies, peer reviews and dean's summaries should provide concise, honest appraisal of programs and academic unit strengths and aspirations as well as future directions.

Peer Review Teams: Program reviews are conducted by teams of at least three members comprised of at least one MSU faculty from outside the college and at least one external disciplinary expert. The reviewers will be selected by the Provost. When a site visit is required, the Office of the Provost may cover a portion of the cost, however costs associated with professional accreditation visits are borne by the colleges.

Program reviews are normally conducted during a one or two-day visit (depending on the size of the academic unit and number of programs). Final review reports are to be submitted to the Office of the Provost within three weeks of the visit. Academic units have the primary responsibility for scheduling all events associated with a site visit.

Checklist for Program Reviews

- ☐ Provost/Vice Provost notifies Dean and Department Head/Director of the Academic Program Review and potential dates for review

- ☐ Vice Provost meets with the Department Head/Director and all academic unit faculty to review the guidelines, answer questions, set expectations and reinforce the opportunities, purpose and value in participation in the program review process

- ☐ Dean and Department Head/Director establish date for an on-site visit, notify Vice Provost

- ☐ Dean or Department Head/Director forwards reviewer nominations to Vice Provost

- ☐ Provost selects and invites reviewers to a site visit

- ☐ Department Head/Director arranges for external reviewer travel and accommodations

- ☐ Department Head/Director coordinates writing of self-study with academic unit faculty

- ☐ Department Head/Director provides self-study to the reviewers, Dean and Vice Provost no less than one month prior to the on-site visit.

- ☐ Dean and Department Head/Director establish schedule for site visit

- ☐ Provost provides charge letter to review committee

- ☐ Peer reviewers meet with Provost/Vice Provost at beginning of site visit (Charge meeting)

- ☐ Peer reviewers interview identified groups according to schedule provided

- ☐ Peer reviewers meet with Provost/Vice Provost (Exit meeting)

- ☐ Peer reviewers complete draft report within two weeks, submit to Department Head/Director and Dean for fact check

- ☐ Department Head/Director responds to peer reviewers within five days

□ Peer reviewers complete final report, submit to Dean, Provost and Vice Provost within three weeks of completion of site visit

□ Dean submits recommendations to Provost within two weeks of submission of final review team report

□ Vice Provost writes Board of Regents summary report

Program Review – Academic Unit Self-Study Report

The self-study is to be carried out by the academic unit as a whole. It is evaluative, not just descriptive, and it should provide a meaningful assessment of the curricular and co-curricular offerings of the academic unit. It will also identify priorities and directions for the future that take into consideration student enrollments and degree completion rates.

Participation: Academic units are encouraged to have all members of the faculty participate in the self-study and a draft should be made available to all academic unit faculty for input or comment prior to electronic submission to the Vice Provost one month prior to the scheduled site visit.

General: The self-study report should be limited to 35 pages with data or additional documents included in appendices. This limit has been established in order to make sure that evaluators are able to find the information that is most relevant for future decision-making in the unit.

Data: The use of data in standard formats already available in academic units and colleges, and from University Data and Analytics (UDA), Tableau, and CIM will reduce the need for special data collection efforts. Specific university data sources are indicated in [brackets]. Academic units must include enrollment and graduation data tables in the self-study as these data are required by the BOR to be included in program reviews. [Tableau – Program Review Dashboard]. Enrollment and graduation data tables should be included in Appendix A.

Report Format:

A. Title Page: Academic Unit name and list of all academic programs offered

B. Departmental Overview and program(s) alignment with university mission, goals and strategic plan

　　a. Brief description of academic programs offered by academic unit and the balance within the academic program portfolio to the functioning of the academic unit.

b. The overall mission and goals of the academic unit and how the academic unit contributes to the college and University missions, goals and strategic plan.

C.   Student-focused academic program data. Explanatory, forward-thinking interpretations of student enrollment and graduation data. The goal is to explain any observed trends since the last program review and provide projections for the next seven years based on current trends and academic unit goals. <u>Enrollment and graduation data tables must be included in Appendix A</u>. Necessary tables and graphs may be added to Appendix A.

a. Interpretation and analysis of student success measures for the 7-year review period for each degree program.

     i.   student enrollment and graduation data [Tableau – Program Review Dashboard]

     ii.   retention [Tableau - Dash - Dept Retention & Export Rates]

     iii.   time to degree completion [Tableau – Time to Degree Dashboard]

b. Describe measures the academic unit is taking to improve student success in the areas listed above.

c. Focused discussion of degree programs not meeting or nearly not meeting productivity benchmarks (stated above), by degree.

d. Where appropriate and available, include an analysis of data disaggregated by student demographics (e.g. First Gen, Pell-eligible, race and ethnicity, gender).

D.   Summary of Assessment of Academic Programs - Annual program assessment plans and reports should not be included in the body of the self-study but should be included in Appendix B.

a. Curriculum map or other representation showing the relationship between learning outcomes of the program(s) and curriculum content. [Information may be available in CIM or should be available in program assessment reports.]

b. Student achievement of program learning outcomes for all programs. [program assessment reports]

c. Summary of significant curriculum or course changes since last program review, what the changes were meant to address, and how the changes related to the program(s) learning outcomes. [changes are recorded in CIM]

d. Describe departmental goals and plans for improving student curricular success, including reducing curricular complexities and other initiatives to improve time to degree completion and to ensure continued improvement of student retention and persistence. [Tableau – Time to Degree]

e. Briefly describe the composition of external curricular/co-curricular advisory groups and how curricula enhances student career-readiness. [UDA and Student Success (Destinations data) may be able to assist with identifying sources of data on our post-graduate placements, O*NET OnLine US Department of Labor, US Census – Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes Explorer, MT Department of Labor & Industry – Post Secondary Outcomes]

f. Any proposed/anticipated changes to curriculum or programing in the department

E. Student-focused co-curricular program data. The goal is to explain any observed trends, measures taken by the academic unit, since the last program review and provide projections and plans based on current trends and academic unit goals.

a. Summary of departmental advising assessment and mentoring of students in all degree programs. Annual advising assessment plans and reports should not be included in the body of the self-study but should be included in Appendix C. Describe departmental goals and plans for faculty advising and partnerships with Advising Commons. [advising assessment reports – inaugural report in 2025 is a survey]

b. Briefly describe departmental goals and plans for other academic unit specific co-curricular initiatives.

F.   Quality, depth, and significance of research or creative works to the academic program(s). Describe the strengths and areas of research activity in the academic unit and its integration into undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

a. Assess the number and quality of research-intensive courses, independent studies, honors theses, and research methods training and other similar activities in the program. Briefly describe how and in what ways undergraduate and graduate students are involved in research. [Faculty Success]

b. Describe how and in what ways research is integrated with teaching and learning in the academic unit. Provide a brief assessment of the core research strengths of the academic unit and indicate how they are conveyed in the curriculum and program. [Faculty Success – Research Productivity Report]

c. Describe the graduate specializations in research and how they are strategically significant for the unit.

G. New Degree Programs/Options – Discuss new degrees or options implemented since the last program review.   Compare actual program enrollment, graduates, curriculum cost to the original proposal approved by the BOR. [original proposal in CIM]

H.   Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) Analysis emphasizing the collective evaluation of all academic programs within the academic unit.

I.   Strategic Directions for the Future of the Academic Unit – Describe the strategic direction(s) of the academic unit in the context of the academic unit's entire program portfolio. This section should include description of plans for adding and/or sunsetting of degrees, options, certificates, minors, and courses; significant curricular revisions; innovations in pedagogy and advising; and significant changes to unit structure.

Appendices

A. Program Enrollment & Graduation Table for the Board of Regents (template provided by Vice Provost), additional student-focused data.
B. Program Assessment data, curriculum maps
C. Advising Assessment data
D. Faculty CVs (1-3 pages each) [format can be standardized in Faculty Success]
E. Other supporting data or descriptions directed at helping reviewers better understand the academic unit and its faculty, students, and staff.

Program Review Site Visit

Most program reviews include a site visit, unless the scope of the review is very narrowly focused. During a program review site visit, peer reviewers typically meet with the following individuals or groups:

1. Provost and Vice Provost

2. College Dean

3. Graduate Dean (if graduate programs are reviewed)

4. Department Head/Director

5.   Tenured and Tenure-Track Faculty

6.   Non-Tenure Track Faculty, Post-Doctoral Teaching Fellows, and others

7.   Staff

8.   Graduate Students

9.   Undergraduate Students

10. External Constituencies (if appropriate)

11. Others at the request of the reviewers

The peer reviewers conclude their visit with an exit interview with the Provost and Vice Provost. During this interview, and in the subsequent peer review team report, the peer reviewers will be asked to address the following issues:

1. Overall observations and initial determinations regarding the quality and effectiveness of the academic programs and co-curricular support.

2. Status of each program curriculum in terms of breadth and currency with the discipline. That is, is each curriculum still relevant and has the curriculum kept pace with changes in the discipline?

3. Quality, depth, and significance of research or creative works to the academic program(s).

4. Summary of strengths, weaknesses or unrealized opportunities, with specific recommendations for action.

5. Specific areas of focus outlined in the charge letter.

Program Review: Peer Review Team Report

Scope of Report (typically 5-8 pages): The peer review team report provides an objective analysis of the academic unit's strengths, weaknesses and plans for the future. The analysis should be based on disciplinary standards of the reviewed department but may recommend ways to enhance academic unit's academic programs and support of student success. The report should be constructive, offering praise for strengths and options for development or modification where appropriate. The report should address the areas noted above and the specific areas of focus outlined in the charge letter.

Program Review: Dean's Recommendation Report

Scope of Report (typically 1-2 pages): The college dean provides feedback to the department to direct them towards next steps, actions, alignment with college and university strategic goals and initiatives, and potential campus collaborations. Recommendations and justification for the recommendations should be addressed in the report.

1) Recommendations for the future of the program(s): The dean's report should be forward-thinking, offering recommendations about specific changes, strategic growth or contraction of any academic programs. The dean may also recommend immediate attention, planning or a three-year follow-up around programs that are not implementing program assessment and improvement practices or are experiencing low or declining student credit hours, enrollment head count or degrees awarded. The Dean's report should also address recommendations for future directions relative to strategic goals or initiatives at the department, college or university level.

2) Rationale or justification for the recommendations based on the program review/external accreditation process: The dean's report should include brief rationale or justification for the above recommendations based on evidence from the internal program review or external accreditation process.