



# Virginia Commonwealth University

## Academic Program Review Handbook



**VCU**

Office of the Provost

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Academic Program Review  
Handbook

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## Preface: Purpose of this handbook

The purpose of this handbook is to provide VCU's faculty with a simple but comprehensive resource for conducting successful academic program reviews. The goal is that faculty would find this resource helpful and make use of it in their academic program reviews. The handbook is required reading as part of academic program review orientation, and it can serve as a reference manual throughout the process.

### Foundation and values

At VCU, academic program review rests on the foundation of faculty leadership in a culture of shared governance. Core values of academic program review include excellence, transparency, collegiality, collaboration and shared responsibility for results. The importance of this foundation and these values is evident in each aspect of academic program review, beginning with the early conversations that take place during the orientation process and form the basis for trust going forward.

### Additional materials

In addition to this handbook, the Office of the Provost maintains additional materials to support academic program review. Materials are reviewed and updated periodically and users may consult with the provost's office to confirm they are using the most recent version.

### Points of contact

The Office of the Provost is responsible for supporting academic program review. Please direct questions to Andrew Arroyo, EdD, assistant vice provost for academic programs ([atarroyo@vcu.edu](mailto:atarroyo@vcu.edu)).

## 1. General overview

This section provides a general overview of academic program review for quick reference. Details are located in the body of this handbook.

### 1.1 Definition and essential ingredient

Academic program review is the faculty-driven, holistic evaluation of a degree program's quality and effectiveness, in support of continuous improvement for program excellence.

The most essential ingredient of a successful academic program review is the *willingness and ability to learn and change—i.e., to transform*.

### 1.2 Role of faculty

At VCU, academic program review is:

- Faculty-driven, administration supported
- Action research
- An opportunity for rigorous, data-informed conversations
- Positive, visionary and transformative

As a faculty-driven process, academic program review preserves and reinforces the rights and responsibilities of academically qualified individuals to create and maintain a comprehensive, coherent and relevant plan of study for students. It is incumbent upon the faculty to include other key stakeholders in the academic program review process, when applicable. Other stakeholders may include adjunct faculty, staff, students, alumni, employers and other community members.

### 1.3 Unit of analysis and timing

The unit of analysis in academic program review is the degree program (undergraduate, graduate or professional). Typically, all degree programs in a degree-granting unit are reviewed together on an eight-year cycle. This approach of grouping programs degree-granting unit creates efficiency and maximizes opportunities for strategic, holistic conversations. As a result, in addition to the degree program(s), the degree-granting unit also becomes a focal point of the review.

Exceptions to the above approach may be necessary. Under certain circumstances, as determined by the provost, senior vice president for health sciences (for health sciences programs) and deans, an academic program review may focus on an entire school or college, a subset of degree program(s) in a degree-granting unit or a single interdisciplinary degree program involving separate units. The timing of a review may deviate from the typical cycle due to unexpected challenges, leadership changes or the need to coordinate with an external accreditation.

Note regarding accredited programs: All degree programs at VCU go through academic program review as it is a university process. *Specialized accreditation is for alignment with the professional field to which the program belongs, whereas academic program review is for the university*. However, programs with specialized accreditations may go through a modified program review to avoid unnecessary duplication of accreditors' requirements. Specific modifications are decided on a case-by-case basis through a conversation between the dean's office and the Office of the Provost.

## 1.4 Phases

Academic program review occurs in phases (see Figure).

**Figure: Phases of Academic Program Review**



During a typical cycle, the self-study is written in the fall semester, with the action plan being finalized in the spring semester after a peer review. VCU utilizes a hybrid peer review approach with internal and external reviewers. Generally, non-accredited programs use one external and two internal peer reviewers. Modifications are an option for accredited programs, depending on the accreditor's peer review requirements. Modifications are decided on a case-by-case basis.

The culmination of the program review process is implementation. Units conduct the self-study, undergo peer review and create the action plan during a single academic year, which creates momentum for continuous improvement efforts that begin in the subsequent academic year. Implementation is ongoing and continues to the next program review cycle.

## 1.5 Scope

Program review addresses multiple areas:

- Teaching and learning
- Research, scholarship and/or creative expression (to focus on work that has been peer-reviewed, critically reviewed or has received significant recognition due to impact at a local/national/international level)
- Service (to include contributions to R.E.A.L., community engagement, inclusive excellence, service-learning, patient care, other vital college/school and university priorities and outside/non-VCU professional service)
- Other subjects as determined by faculty and administration in dialogue

It is worth noting that academic program review supports and/or informs many other activities critical to the academic enterprise. These activities include (for example) program prioritization, resource allocation and budgeting, student learning outcomes assessment, strategic planning, degree program accreditation and regional accreditation. Still, academic program review is a distinct activity with its own purpose and goals.

## 2. Primary purpose and institution-level goals

### 2.1 Primary purpose

Academic program review is a forward thinking endeavor. It provides a cyclical, structured opportunity for faculty to answer three questions, take two actions, and achieve one primary outcome relative to their degree programs.

The three questions are:

1. Where are we now?
2. Where do we want to go?
3. How will we get there?

The two actions are:

1. Reflection
2. Planning

The one primary outcome is *program excellence*, as defined by the faculty in dialogue with administration and other key constituents.

Using data to drive inquiry, analysis and direction forward, the academic unit gains a current snapshot, envisions the future and creates a roadmap to where it wants to be. More specifically, academic program review facilitates focused reflection and planning to

1. Promote standards of excellence in teaching and learning, research/scholarship/creative expression (peer-reviewed, critically reviewed or having significant impact) and service;
2. Support responsible stewardship of resources within colleges/schools and departments;
3. Foster continuous improvement of academic programs reflective of the university's commitment to quality and effectiveness.

Program review results in an ongoing implementation plan that faculty use to close the loop between review cycles. Full engagement in academic program review is highly encouraged as it has implications for the degree-granting unit, college/school and university as a whole.

## 2.2 University-level goals and metrics

Goal setting is a critical part of program review. When paired with metrics, goals provide a clear picture of “success.” This section presents VCU’s university-level goals and metrics (see table). Faculty and key stakeholders in academic units should familiarize themselves with these institutional goals and metrics. Understanding them increases a unit’s awareness of its influence on or contribution to institutional success.

The Office of the Provost assesses institution-level metrics with quantitative and qualitative data collected from unit action plans and periodic progress reports (see section 4). A unit’s action plan creates a two-way communication that allows the faculty to make progress toward their local goals, and it enables the deans and provost to evaluate VCU’s academic program review process and make adjustments for continuous improvement.

**Table: Institution-level goals and metrics**

Institution-level goals	Institution-level Metrics
Make meaningful, strategic improvements (i.e., quality and effectiveness) to VCU’s academic programs.	Extent to which units achieve planned strategic improvements to academic programs by target dates in action plans.



Clearly define and achieve standards of excellence in key areas: teaching and learning, research/scholarship/creative expression, service and patient care.	Extent to which units achieve standards of excellence for each area (e.g., teaching and learning, research/scholarship/creative expression, service and patient care) by target dates in action plans.
Steward resources responsibly within colleges/schools and departments.	Extent to which units achieve goals by target dates within existing resources and/or by creating efficiencies.  Extent to which units meet revenue generation targets (if applicable).
Increase measurable contributions by academic departments to the current VCU strategic plan	Extent to which units achieve planned contributions to the current VCU strategic plan by target dates in action plans.
Enhance a culture of continuous improvement where academic program review becomes a routine part of VCU's culture.	# of departments that complete academic program review in assigned cohort.  Extent to which academic program review shapes positive, strategic conversations about academic units and programs.

### 3. Methodology

In addition to institution-level goals and metrics, VCU's practice of academic program review rests on a methodological foundation based out of the literature (e.g., Barak & Breier, 1990; Collins, 2005; Gardner, 1977; Lincoln & Guba, 1981). Having a clearly defined methodology is important for two reasons. First, it underscores the fact that academic program review is a research study. It is a form of action research to support positive organizational change. Second, a methodological grounding supports the quality and consistency of reviews as each academic unit proceeds from a common framework.

VCU's methodology has three parts: goal-based approach, responsive approach and good to great in the social sectors approach.

#### 3.1 Goal-based approach

Goal-based evaluation is "the process of identifying program goals, objectives, and standards of performance, using various tools to measure performance, and comparing the data collected against the identified objectives and standards to determine the degree of congruence or discrepancy" (Gardner, 1977, pp. 577-578). The model organizer for this approach is goals and objectives. Evaluation questions ask:

- To what extent is the program achieving its existing goals and objectives? (Where are we now?)
- What are our new goals and objectives? (Where do we want to be?)

### 3.2 Responsive approach

As a complement to goal-based evaluation, units are strongly encouraged to utilize responsive evaluation. The responsive approach comes from the qualitative research tradition of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1981). The model organizer for this approach is the concerns and issues of stakeholders that could not be anticipated ahead of time from a standardized set of guiding questions. Responsive inquiry asks:

- What are the activities and effects of the program?
- What does the program look like from a variety of perspectives?
- What issues need to be raised—or voices need to be heard—that might be missing?

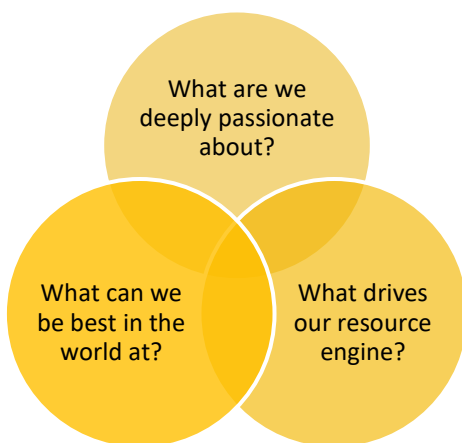
It is important to note that, while the responsive approach is vital to a thorough academic program review, it does not replace the core work of using guiding questions in a goal-based approach. The responsive approach is an accent to the goal-based approach.

Equally important, a responsive approach should be intentional. Good results do not come by accident. The faculty should give space to all voices. These voices include, especially, individuals traditionally marginalized in higher education environments. In this way, the responsive approach aligns with VCU's commitment to inclusive excellence.

### 3.3 Good to Great in the Social Sectors approach

The third methodological approach is Good to Great in the Social Sectors (Collins, 2005). Units are encouraged to keep a central question in mind: “How can we more effectively deliver on our mission and make a distinctive impact, relative to our resources?” (Collins, 2005). Three sub-questions, displayed in the below figure, can support this line of thoughtful inquiry.

**Figure: Three Good to Great questions (Collins, 2005)**



To the degree faculty can construct clear, mutually agreeable answers to questions such as, “What are we most deeply passionate about?”, “What can we be best in the world at?” and “What drives our resource engine?”, the benefits of the program review process will last for many years.

In sum, faculty are strongly encouraged to be mindful of the three-part methodology and its guiding principles, in order to make the most of the academic program review process at each specific stage.

## 4. Specifics: Deliverables and process

This section covers the specific deliverables and process of academic program review. A complete academic program review contains two deliverables from academic units: self-study (deliverable 1; fall semester) and action plan (deliverable 2; spring semester). Results from an onsite peer review, conducted in the spring, inform the final action plan. Details regarding timeline are located in the section on Scheduling and timeline.

Note: Information on modifications for accredited programs is located in subsection 4.5.

### 4.1 Leadership, ownership and engagement

#### 4.1.1 Importance of distributed ownership and engagement

In collaboration with key stakeholders, the self-study is the faculty's opportunity to lead a holistic evaluation of a degree program's quality and effectiveness, in support of continuous improvement for program excellence. Due to its holistic nature, and the fact that people tend to buy into what they help to create, academic program review should not be borne by a single individual or even a small group of individuals. Distributed ownership and engagement is vital for optimal results.

The specific organization and distribution of the time and effort required to complete the program review will vary by unit based on a number of factors (e.g., size, complexity, other simultaneous initiatives, etc.), but the principle of shared duty is paramount. Examples of key roles a unit might consider filling include the following:

- Record keeper to maintain detailed minutes or highlights of all meetings
- Point persons for collecting self-study information on:
  - Teaching and learning
  - Research/scholarship/creative expression
  - Service
  - Other
- Report writer(s) and editors
- Logistics and hospitality coordinator for peer reviewers
- Representatives from key non-faculty stakeholder groups (staff, students, community, employers)

#### 4.1.2 Leadership and coordination

The dean and/or department chair may appoint a program review chair or co-chairs to provide special leadership and coordination throughout the process. The program review chair does not shoulder the entire workload; rather, the chair is empowered to organize and delegate, even as the chair bears responsibility for submitting a complete, coherent self-study.

As the program review chair is a significant leadership role, the individual(s) must be full-time tenured or term VCU faculty. Program review chairs should be:

- Considered mature, seasoned and deliberative

- Able to call upon firsthand institutional memory for historical context
- Respected as a collaborative colleague with a demonstrated record of significant leadership experience in the department
- Aware of departmental faculty members' talents and expertise to facilitate appropriate formation of teams and/or delegation of roles

For these reasons, tenure-eligible faculty should not serve as program review chair or co-chair.

In recognition of the substantial commitment required by a program review chair, the dean and/or department chair should consider the following:

- *Early notice.* Program review chairs should be given ample time to prepare to assume the role. Ideally, notice will be provided as soon as the following year's cohort is finalized (see section on Scheduling and timeline).
- *Service credit.* The nature of program review chair duties warrant significant service credit, as well as the reduction and possible temporary elimination of other college/school and department service duties for the duration of the review period. Although the chair should complete the duties as a member of the university community, all efforts should be made to ensure the chair's regular workload is adjusted commensurate with the contribution.
- *Course release.* Where possible and appropriate, course release(s) may be considered.
- *Equity.* Care is necessary to ensure the role of program review chair does not reconstruct or perpetuate traditional hierarchical inequities endemic to higher education. These may include, but are not limited to, placing extra service burdens on junior/untentured faculty, women and racial minorities.
- *Recognition.* The program review chair is a major leadership position with implications for the unit, college/school and university. Individuals should receive recognition for outstanding contributions.

The aforementioned considerations are guidelines. Academic units will recognize program review chairs' contributions in a variety of ways.

#### 4.1.3 Orientation

The Office of the Provost provides mandatory orientation for all program review chairs during the spring prior to the fall self-study. Units may send additional team members to the orientation. A kick-off refresher may occur in the fall and as-needed.

### 4.2 Self-study

Representing the first deliverable of the program review process, the self-study requires careful attention to detail. This attention to detail begins with data.

#### 4.2.1 Data

Data drive inquiry in VCU's program review process. Four types of quantitative and qualitative data are relevant for academic program review.

1. *Standard data.* The first type of data are standard quantitative data. These data are provided by the Office of the Provost via Institutional Research and Decision Support (IRDS) prior to the spring orientation session. All units receive a standard data sheet with definitions. IRDS staff

may work with the college/school budget officer (or similarly positioned individual) to cross check central data with local data and resolve discrepancies. Thus, arriving at a final version of the standard data sheet may require deeper investigation and dialogue. IRDS will provide training in the use of the data for program review.

2. *Non-standard data.* The second type of data are non-standard quantitative data. This information goes beyond the standard data template to address additional questions units may have. Units may contact the Office of the Provost for support with non-standard data requests of a central nature, or they may work in-house to generate additional data. An example of the latter may be student pass rates on a high-stakes examination.
3. *Emergent data.* The third type of data emerges during the preparation of the self-study and can be quantitative or qualitative. Units applying a responsive approach (see Methodology) can expect information to surface that is useful to the evaluation effort. Data gathered using responsive methods (e.g., meeting minutes, interviews or surveys of stakeholders) require an iterative approach to the self-study, whereby newly collected insights lead stakeholders to challenge and re-think initial conclusions. The iterative process concludes, ideally, when responsive data become redundant and/or stakeholders reach a sense of closure. In qualitative research terms, this is the point of “saturation.” Impending deadlines may preclude true saturation, though it remains the goal. Accredited programs can use emergent data to pre-identify unforeseen challenges ahead of the re-accreditation process, giving them additional time to address those challenges.
4. *Benchmarking data.* The fourth type of data come from [benchmarking](#) against peer and aspirational programs.

#### 4.2.2 Self-study guiding questions

Units conduct the self-study by responding to a set of self-study guiding questions (see separate Self-study guiding questions template). The questions combine standard queries that all units and programs must answer, with unit or program-specific queries. The source of the latter may be concerns raised by the provost, dean, faculty and other stakeholders. Overall, the final set of questions promotes reflection and planning in key areas:

- Teaching and learning
- Research, scholarship and/or creative expression (to focus on work that has been peer-reviewed, critically reviewed or has received significant recognition due to impact at a local/national/international level)
- Service (to include contributions to community engagement, inclusive excellence, service-learning, R.E.A.L., patient care, other vital college/school and university priorities and outside/non-VCU professional service)
- Plus, other subjects as determined by faculty and administration in dialogue

Throughout the self-study process, three questions should remain salient across all issues:

1. Where are we now?
2. Where do we want to go?

### 3. How will we get there?

The self-study should reflect:

- Evidence of frank discussions and inclusivity of perspectives regarding answers to guiding questions
- Analysis, evaluation and application of data, avoiding use of unexplained data
- References to peer and aspirational programs for context and benchmarking, which is especially important when defining “program excellence”

#### 4.2.3 Writing tips and format

Self-studies should be comprehensive and parsimonious, covering all relevant points economically. Self-studies that combine substance and brevity take on greater relevance for a range of audiences. Best practice is to appoint a lead author who writes the first and final draft, and a minimum of one to two readers who provide critical comments for improvement. *Writing* the self-study should not be confused with *conducting* the self-study, as the latter involves all program stakeholders.

To promote self-study narratives that are equally concise and complete, the Office of the Provost may prescribe page and/or word limits for individual sections or the entire document. Additionally, self-study questions may be preloaded into the university’s assessment management system with defined text boxes. This use of technology has the advantage of producing a variety of report formats. Details on a cohort’s particular requirements are provided during spring orientation sessions.

#### 4.2.4 Submitting the self-study

Specific instructions for submitting the self-study are provided to program review chairs during the orientation session. Readers should also consult the Scheduling and timeline section of this handbook.

### 4.3 Peer review

All self-studies go through peer review. Rigorous peer review is foundational to the integrity and progress of the academy. Units use the peer review feedback to generate additional conversations and to prepare an action plan.

#### 4.3.1 Responsibility for coordinating site visit

Peer reviews take place in the spring semester following completion of the self-study. The program review chair coordinates a physical site visit, which typically takes place over 1.5-2 days. The Office of the Provost provides required orientation materials for peer reviewers. Specifics on the site visit are available in the Scheduling and timeline section of this handbook, as well as provided during the spring orientation.

#### 4.3.2 Reviewer composition and number

VCU uses a hybrid model of internal and external peer reviewers. Several factors determine the number and composition of required reviewers. The Office of the Provost begins working with individual units on these requirements as soon as a program review chair is appointed. The final number of reviewers will be determined by:

- Number of programs in a unit
- Level of programs in a unit (e.g., baccalaureate, master’s, doctoral)
- Number of accredited and non-accredited programs in a unit

- Feasibility of external reviewers contracted for accredited programs being willing and able to take on additional responsibilities (i.e., review additional programs while onsite)

Although the specific number and composition of reviewers will vary, the following guiding principles inform the decision.

#### *4.3.2.1 Internal reviewers*

All program reviews will involve at least one internal reviewer per unit. Internal review is important for several reasons:

- Provides special insider insights that external reviewers may not have
- Builds institutional capacity
- Supports culture of continuous improvement
- Engages more VCU faculty in academic program review on an ongoing basis beyond those involved in the current cohort
- Offers valuable professional development for reviewers
- Could lead to new multi- and interdisciplinary partnerships

Internal reviewers are part of a pool that is maintained by the Office of the Provost. Internal reviewers may join the pool by special invitation or by responding affirmatively to a call for reviewers and meeting certain selection criteria. Criteria may include, but are not limited to:

- Be employed as full-time (nine- or 12-month) T&R faculty with VCU
- Be available for a site visit during the scheduled time
- Have no undeclared conflicts of interest with the unit (not all conflicts of interest are disqualifying, but all must be declared)

The Office of the Provost works with program review chairs and internal reviewers to assign reviewers to units/programs. Internal reviewers may be re-assigned to the same programs over time to provide longitudinal perspective, if they are available. Internal reviewers receive a letter of recognition and may count their efforts as university service, pending agreement of their home college/school and department.

As noted, depending on the number and composition of a unit's programs, some units may require more than one internal reviewer to provide adequate coverage and expertise.

#### *4.3.2.2 External reviewers*

External reviewers come from outside VCU. They provide a valuable third-party perspective from the field, and should meet certain minimum selection criteria:

- Be of the same discipline (e.g., history to history; chemistry to chemistry)
- Come from a peer or aspirational department and institution, and/or enjoy regional or national recognition as an expert in the disciplinary field (combination of both preferred)
- Be available for a physical campus visit during the scheduled time
- Have no undeclared conflicts of interest with VCU (conflicts of interest are evaluated on a case-by-case basis to ensure they will not impede an impartial, rigorous review; not all conflicts of interest are disqualifying, although some may be)
- Ideally, have prior experience as an external reviewer (preferred, not required)

External reviewers are identified and nominated by the dean and faculty. The names are submitted to the Office of the Provost for review and approval.

The specifics of a unit's programs will determine whether external reviewers are required. Non-accredited programs will require at least one external reviewer to provide a perspective from the broader field. Accredited programs will not usually require an external reviewer, as external reviewers are the norm in many accreditations. At the discretion of the provost or dean, accredited programs may be required to involve additional external reviewers beyond those assigned to satisfy accreditation requirements. Moreover, if a unit combines accredited and non-accredited programs in the same disciplinary field (e.g., social work; psychology), and if schedules can be coordinated and the fit is appropriate, external reviewers contracted for accredited programs may be offered the opportunity to expand their review to include non-accredited programs for additional compensation.

#### 4.3.3 Exclusion of reviewers

The provost and the senior vice president for health sciences (for health sciences programs) may exclude the use of any internal or external reviewer, at any time, if the reviewer is deemed unqualified based on the selection criteria.

### 4.4 Action plan

The self-study and peer review culminate in an action plan, which is the second major deliverable of program review. An action plan contains a narrative, goals, key tasks, metrics, resource plan, target dates and responsible faculty/staff by task.

#### 4.4.1 Narrative

The narrative portion of the action plan is a response to the peer reviewer feedback report. Peer reviewers will deliver a feedback report to the unit within two weeks of the site visit. Upon receipt, the faculty should convene to discuss the feedback and prepare a narrative response. The response will not be sent to the external reviewers, but will be attached to the action plan and can be useful for processing the feedback and forming the basis for the action plan.

#### 4.4.2 Template for action plan

The Office of the Provost will provide units with an action plan template. Specifics are provided to dean's offices before action planning begins.

#### 4.4.3 Writing tips for goals and metrics

A compelling action plan rests on well-conceived goals and metrics. Goals are intended results; they reflect what the unit considers most important to reach the next level of excellence. Metrics are how progress and/or achievement toward goals is measured. Together, goals and metrics answer the question, "What does success look like?"

Goals should align with the data-informed conclusions of the self-study. An objective third party should be able to see a logical, clear and compelling link between a unit's self-study and action plan. Even if the objective reader may disagree with an action plan, the grounds for disagreement should not be that the goals and self-study are misaligned or illogical.

Additional guiding principles apply to goal setting. Goals should be:

- Ambitious—innovative and in the spirit of increasing national prominence



- Realistic—not overly large or impractical
- Resource neutral—can be accomplished with existing resources, unless the goal involves securing new resources

The process of setting goals often requires extensive deliberation and consensus building among stakeholders. First, the stakeholders must agree on goals in conceptual form. Then, the stakeholders must agree on precise wording so the goals are easily understandable across audiences. Finally, the stakeholders must reach agreement on appropriate measures. For this reason, units might schedule multiple meetings to accomplish the action planning process.

As noted, precise wording is key for writing goals. Selecting the most appropriate action word is essential. Similar to student learning outcomes, which draw from a set of common verbs (e.g., students will identify, evaluate, assess, etc.), a stock set of verbs can be helpful during goal setting. Units may consider drawing from the below list of action words that are commonly associated with goals in higher education. The list is not exhaustive, and units may find other words to express their goals.

- |                |                           |
|----------------|---------------------------|
| • Create       | • Redirect                |
| • Innovate     | • Reduce                  |
| • Invest       | • Suspend                 |
| • Improve      | • Prioritize              |
| • Reinforce    | • Terminate (i.e., cut)   |
| • Grow         | • Close                   |
| • Enhance      | • Reallocate              |
| • Redistribute | • Integrate (i.e., merge) |
| • Monitor      | • Reorganize              |

The total number of goals will vary by unit and program. Units will be encouraged to refine and prioritize their goals. In so doing, units will sharpen for themselves “what matters most,” and produce a set of goals that is achievable in number and in scope. In final analysis, success is not defined by setting goals, but by reaching them.

Additional questions that can be useful for action planning are located in section 3.3 of this Handbook.

#### 4.4.4 Submitting the action plan

The submits the narrative and action plan to the dean’s office. The dean’s office then sends the final package to the Office of the Provost.

#### 4.4.5 Implementation

Action plans should be living documents. They should affect the direction of a unit’s programs over the course of years, and an action plan developed during one review cycle should become the evaluation focal point in the next cycle. Moreover, the Office of the Provost aggregates achievements from unit action plans in order to assess the institution-level goals of academic program review. To this end, implementation is critical.

After the dean, provost and/or the senior vice president for health sciences (for health sciences programs) review and approve a unit’s final action plan, the department chair (or equivalent, if no chair position exists) implements the plan. The implementation requires a monitoring/tracking protocol that

is accessible by multiple parties within the college/school for continuity in case of a leadership transition. The Office of the Provost will provide a repository and support for implementation.

#### 4.5 Modifications for accredited programs

Units with accredited programs may submit, through their deans' offices, proposed modifications to any aspect of the VCU academic program review process that overlap with accreditors' requirements. Modifications allow units to capitalize on accreditation and program review for mutual benefit.

Because accreditors' requirements vary widely and program accreditation and program review serve fundamentally different purposes, a blanket substitution of the accreditation review for the program review is not possible or desirable. Modifications can be challenging and time-intensive, with exemplars difficult to locate (Bowker, 2017; Subramony, Wallace, & Zack, 2015). In some cases, units may find it easier completing both without modifications.

Approval for modifications is required from the Office of the Provost. The dean's office initiates a formal proposal for modification in the spring semester prior to the fall when the self-study is scheduled. In order to ensure sufficient time for due diligence by all parties, the Office of the Provost will provide a deadline for modification proposals when the fall cohort is announced. No proposals will be considered after the deadline. Typically, the deadline will be no later than March 1.

The proposal for modifications should contain the following items:

1. Brief cover letter to
  - a. Detail the projected milestone dates for the accreditation, including self-study start and end date, and accreditation site visit date
  - b. Propose how the VCU program review dates will coincide with the accreditation dates (e.g., whether VCU program review will be completed before or concurrent with the accreditation process)
  - c. Discuss the role of external reviewers in the accreditation process
2. An accompanying table that contains the following columns: purposes and requirements of specialized accreditation crosswalked to purposes and requirements of VCU program review; and gap analysis with explanatory notes. Use of verbatim language from accreditor and VCU documents is encouraged to promote ease of direct comparison. The Office of the Provost may provide units with a template prefilled with VCU program review requirements to make the crosswalk and gap analysis easier.

Proposals should be sent via email to the Office of the Provost. It is anticipated that the proposal will lead to a dialogue and revision before a plan is approved. The approved modification plan will become the unit's program review plan for that cycle only. New requests for modification are required for each subsequent cycle as accreditation and/or program review requirements may have changed.

#### 4.6 Modifications for other reasons

Modifications to one or more aspects of academic program review for reasons other than specialized accreditations may be warranted. One reason might be organizational, in the case of a school where staff are shared across programs that are scheduled for program review in multiple years. In this example, the staff section of the Self-study guiding questions template might be modified. Such modifications are considered on a case-by-case basis.

## 5. Scheduling and timeline

### 5.1 Cohort scheduling

The provost and the senior vice president for health sciences (for health sciences programs), in collaboration with the deans, approve assignments of programs to cohorts. Standard practice is that all programs in a unit go through academic program review at the same time. Programs with external accreditations go through VCU academic program review prior to or concurrent with the accreditation (see section on Modifications for accredited programs).

An eight-year master list of VCU's program review cohorts is located on the Office of the Provost website. The list is subject to change each year, subject to the needs of units, colleges/schools and the university.

### 5.2 Timeline

The program review timeline is as follows.

#### Approximately 14-16 months before self-study is due (i.e., September-October)

- Office of the Provost:
  - Confirms with schools/colleges the programs for the next cohort (website is updated to reflect any changes)
  - Meets with deans individually to discuss the upcoming process for the identified units
  - Conducts orientation for self-study chairs and other designees
  - Distributes data sheets (after census II)
- Accredited programs begin work on modification proposals in close collaboration with Office of the Provost, if appropriate

#### Approximately 10-12 months before self-study is due (i.e., mid-Spring semester)

- Deans and/or department chairs (or equivalent) appoint program review chairs and logistical coordinators, and send the names to the assistant vice provost for academic programs
- Program review chairs, in collaboration with college/school/departmental leadership, creates detailed calendars for self-studies, including setting and announcing meeting dates; also, creates work plan with roles, tasks and assignments for unit faculty
- Accredited programs submit modification proposals

#### Mid-spring - December

- Units conduct faculty-driven self-studies
- No later than October, schools/colleges send names and contact information of potential external reviewers to the Office of the Provost via the assistant vice provost for academic programs
- Office of the Provost formally invites external reviewers to serve
- Program review chairs send draft self-studies to deans and department chairs for review and approval at an internally agreed upon date, no later than December

#### January-early February

- Deans' offices provide copies of self-study to the Office of the Provost via the assistant vice provost for academic programs
- Units finalize site visit schedules

#### February

- Office of the Provost coordinates reviewer meet-and-greet meetings and distribution of orientation materials, site visit schedules and self-studies to the reviewers

#### February-May

- Site visits are conducted
- Reviewers send narrative feedback reports to the Office of the Provost approximately two weeks after the site visit concludes
- Office of the Provost sends reviewer reports to the units via the deans' offices
- Units draft action plans after receipt of reviewer feedback
- Units submit draft action plans to deans at internally-agreed upon date

#### June-August

- Deans send draft action plans to the Office of the Provost via the assistant vice provost for academic programs
- Debriefings are held between Office of the Provost, Office of the Senior Vice President for Health Sciences (for health sciences programs), and key college/school/unit personnel

#### Semester following debriefings

- Units implement approved action plans with ongoing monitoring to close the loop between program review cycles