

Fostering Organizational Integrity through Departmental Program Reviews

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Conducting a departmental program review can be a stressful and arduous process. At the same time, the final report can provide valuable insights. The challenges and benefits of program reviews have been well noted by scholars. We seek to add to this conversation by arguing that program reviews can prove beneficial by fostering and maintaining organizational integrity. In our essay, we review relevant literature on program reviews, provide an explanation of organizational integrity, present a narrative of our program review process, and explain how this process fostered organizational integrity.

Introduction

Departmental program reviews, when completed effectively, allow both faculty and interested university administrators to re-examine where a department has been, where it is at present, and where it might be going in the future. Furthermore, as we argue in this essay, the departmental program review process provides important opportunities for departments to foster and/or maintain organizational integrity. This occurs, in part, because a program review can serve as a catalyst for critical conversations, including some that may not take place otherwise. In other words, while the final outcome of a departmental program review process (i.e. a report) ideally provides its own valuable set of assessment tools for external reviewers, this process might provide an added and more immediate benefit by fostering organizational integrity within the department itself, giving department members a better sense of how they fit into the department, college, and university as a whole.

In what follows, we present our own recent experience with a departmental program review as an instructive case study for considering how an oft-dreaded task might be reconceptualized as a valuable (albeit mandatory) means through which to foster organizational integrity. Each of the authors played an important role in our department's most recent program review, serving as either chair of our department's program review committee or as chair of our department's planning and assessment committee. While there is nothing inherently unique about our own departmental review process, we believe that our shared proximity to the work involved in helping to collect, analyze, and explain the data included in our self-study offers a combined perspective on the program review process—and its challenges and benefits—that can provide useful insights for other faculty who find themselves in a similar position.

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Literature Review

Program Reviews

Backlund and Arneson (2000) note that the “assessment movement” began in the mid-1970s and as it “developed and matured” became “institutionalized at virtually every level of education” (p. 88). Although educational assessment incorporates a wide range of activities, program reviews constitute a particularly essential component of the assessment process. Backlund, Bach, Procopio, Johnston, Mello, and Sypher (2011) argue “Similar to its companion concept, *assessment*, increased interest in program review is based in the need for defining program quality, justifying dollars expended, and developing better educational programs for students” (p. 281). Novodvorsky, Tomanek, Foor, and Burd (2015) explain the relationship between outcomes assessment and program reviews. In their case study of the University of Arizona, they argued that “A problem with outcomes assessment at our institution has been the low priority it holds in many programs. We decided to use a *carrot-and-stick* approach to change this” (p. 4). They found the “stick” and the “carrot” each constitute necessary components of a successful program review process.ⁱ

While universities have utilized the program review process for several decades, the specifics of the process remain somewhat fluid. Backlund et. al. (2011) provide an overview of the National Communication Association’s updated program review standards and share data from a survey of department chairs. They note that “the data and the comparisons” from the survey are limited (p. 294), and that future surveys (updated every three years) will allow programs to have a better basis for comparison. Worth noting, however, is that these numbers have not been updated since 2011, which further illustrates the challenge many Communication Studies departments face in doing program review work without the specific accreditation guidelines that many other disciplines employ.ⁱⁱ As of this writing, our university system is creating a standardized process for program reviews across campuses, and we are pleased to note that our department played a role in furthering this initiative.ⁱⁱⁱ

Several scholars have already written about the program review process itself (e.g., Backlund & Arneson, 2000; Backlund, et. al, 2011; Banta, 2014; Clark, 1980; Eicholtz & Baglia, 2013; Lees, 2015; Leonard, 1988; McGlone, 1984; Morreale, Backlund, Hay, & Moore, 2011; Novodvorsky, et. al., 2015; Paulson, 1980). In the early days of the “assessment movement” (Backlund & Arneson, 2000), a variety of authors contributed narratives of their experiences going through the program review process in the *Association for Communication Administration (or ACA) Bulletin*. For example, Clark (1980) provides an overview of program reviews as well as recommendations for departments set to embark upon one. Clark points out how program reviews can be a “burden,” but also notes that “the consensus is that we had better make the most out of the review process that we possibly can; use it, in other words, to shore up our weaknesses and spread the good word about our strengths” (p. 8). Leonard (1988) also provides an overview of the program review process, using the then-Speech Communication Department at her institution of North Carolina State University as a case study. She outlines some of the same anxieties and concerns that Clark identifies, but saw the process as a success overall and provided some thoughts on improvements for the next time her department begins their review. Similarly, Paulson (1980) provides an early review of the process based on his extensive experience with program reviews at The Pennsylvania State University and presents some recommendations for others to follow. Similar to other authors, he argues that departments should not resist the review process or provide scant information. Instead, departments should provide as

much information as possible to external reviewers, in the hopes that a better program review will be the result.

Meanwhile, McGlone (1984) explains how the results of a program review were used to eliminate a French program at Mississippi State University, as well as other programs across a variety of institutions in the state. Having endured this process, he closes with advice for other programs facing a review, including the importance of being “clear and candid about the purpose of the review” (p. 23). McGlone’s essay speaks to some of the concerns and anxieties faculty members have about program reviews, namely that identified areas of improvement provide a rationale for abandonment of a program rather than investment in further developing it.

Other authors argue that the program review process can serve as a needed transformation agent that forces departments to make necessary adjustments. For example, Lees (2015) discusses how external program reviews can force a department to change in response to feedback from external reviewers. Lees contends that this allows departments to adapt, resolve conflicts, and address potential weaknesses. Banta (2014) also notes how the program review process can foster positive change, pointing out that “Savvy department heads use program review recommendations for several years as evidence to argue for new resources” (p. 4). Specifically, Banta provides four examples of “change stimulated by program review” (p. 13), such as the creation of subcommittees to address recommendations, syllabi analysis, undergraduate surveys, and “new emphasis on cross-disciplinary collaboration” (p. 13).

While many authors discussed the program review process and noted its challenges and benefits, the contribution we wish to make is to focus on how the program review process fosters and maintains organizational integrity. Much has been written about the stress and anxiety that an impending program review can produce among faculty members. Likewise, several contributors note how program reviews can be useful to inspire change among departments and universities alike. However, we argue that when a department bands together to undertake a program review, the faculty members involved are also having important discussions about the mission and goals of the department—which helps to foster and maintain organizational integrity.

Organizational Integrity

According to Palazzo (2007), “Organizational integrity refers to the ethical integrity of the individual actors, the ethical quality of their interaction as well as that of the dominating norms, activities, decision making procedures and results within a given organization” (p. 113). In other words, organizational integrity upholds expected standards of behavior among organizational participants. Similarly, Young (2011) defines integrity as “the combination of attributes and actions that makes people and organizations coherent, consistent, and potentially ethical” (p. 1). This definition is helpful because it underscores the importance of coherence, consistency, and (potentially) ethics, which all figured into the program review process in important ways. Furthermore, coherence, consistency, and ethics play important roles in the everyday business of a university—including its various departments. Interestingly, Young points out that the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (a regional accrediting body) “requires colleges and universities to demonstrate integrity in order to be accredited within its region of service” (p. 1), which provides a nice link between this body of literature and the present work. Universities as a whole value

integrity—many mention it in their mission statements—and our department discussed the importance of integrity throughout the program review process.^{iv}

We argue that the principle of organizational integrity plays an important role in program reviews because through the process of engaging in the discussions necessary in the course of a program review, participants—especially those who are new to the department—learn what it means to be a member of the organization and how to act accordingly. Of course, program review committee meetings are not the only place in which meaning and behavior are negotiated, but we suggest this is an undertheorized dimension of the program review process. Specifically, we argue that the productive value of these meetings and discussions underscores the important role that narrative plays in the program review process. We suggest that our analysis of this particular case study yields some preliminary insights into how several relevant theories of human communication, particularly in the area of narrative, might be usefully adapted to the work of program review.

Arnett and Fritz (2003) discuss the importance of narrative in sustaining institutional integrity, and we find this contribution especially pertinent for the present work. We see a specific connection to the program review process when Arnett and Fritz argue “an organizational narrative guides through the challenges posed by different historical moments, suggesting lines of action appropriate to meet the need of the historical moment without putting at risk the organization’s identity” (p. 42). We believe their argument gets at the very essence of what we experienced in the program review process, in ways both formal and informal. As we outline below, there were several instances in which we discussed our goals as a department and how they fit into the goals of the college and university as a whole. These conversations often involved the use of narratives of past actions and how those experiences shape present goals. As Arnett and Fritz note, we also discussed how goals could be updated or adjusted based on present needs without compromising the core of our departmental identity—and narratives played a vital role in this deliberative process.

In struggling with “management in a postmodern moment,” Arnett and Fritz suggest “story” as an appropriate metaphor that “might offer guidance for management in a postmodern era” (p. 48). Furthermore, they note:

In an information age that rests within an era of postmodernity, guidance emerges from historically appropriate good stories—stories that give meaning to disparate pieces of isolated information. We live in a moment in which information exists without connecting links of meaning, creating a communicative context where storytelling must frame information and our participation together. (pp. 51-52)

The above statement is especially useful for conceptualizing the meaningfulness of the program review process. As a committee, we were tasked with assembling a collection of data, but we could not simply submit the data on its own. Instead, the data had to constitute evidence backing up a broader *story of our department*. Arnett and Fritz point toward this notion when they claim “How we talk about our tasks and responsibilities in an organization frames the *communicative background* or *story* for organizational life” (p. 62). Thus, narratives function in a variety of ways: stories were told during meetings that shaped the report, the report itself constituted a *story of our department*, and the process of creating the report became another story—or set of stories—we would tell in future meetings that continue to play a role in shaping our department at the present moment.

Arnett and Fritz's writing is based on a theory of narrative that is informed, in part, by Walter Fisher's (1987) conception of narrative rationality as it applies to the work of "weaving" narratives. Specifically, they note that Fisher

offers criteria for testing the adequacy of "weaving" of a narrative. First, a story needs to have internal coherence; it needs to be consistent over time and "hang together" to form a clear picture. Second, a story needs to make sense for the community - it needs fidelity to the community's values as the story meets the historical moment. (Arnett & Fritz, p. 53)^v

In our own case study, we found that the process of weaving stories (across meetings, across sections of the report, etc.) was key to establishing a shared set of community values. Having reviewed scholarship related to the program review process and explained the concept of organizational integrity as informed by narrative theory, we now provide a brief overview of how our department undertook the program review process.

The Program Review Process

Overview

The program review process officially began with the department's election of committee members and a committee chair approximately two years before the final report would be due. At our institution, program reviews are completed every five years, thus the prior report was a starting place for considering what work needed to be done. However, one of the challenges of organizing a program review can be the selection of what specific criteria to assess, which items should be discussed at meetings with whom, and what findings to include in the final report; this challenge can often be complicated by shifting requirements/directives from those external entities that receive the final report (university assessment offices or administration, accrediting bodies, state governance, etc.). The first year of our program review was largely comprised of data collection, documentation review, and the initial structuring/formatting of what would become the final report; collectively these efforts laid the foundation for the year in which the review itself was conducted.

In the first year of the program review process there were two central considerations that became especially important to address en route to ultimately crafting the story the department would tell about itself in the final report. First, the committee looked closely at the recommendations from the prior program review and at the department's more recent strategic vision statement (one that had been used to advocate for resources) and met to discuss the relative successes and failures of attaining the range of goals that had been set by the department in the recent past. For example, the 2011 program review had indicated that the department should work on refining its undergraduate curriculum in the next few years and the department's 2013 Strategic Plan document focused this idea by specifically suggesting that the department's master syllabi needed to be rewritten. That slight goal adjustment was developed in consultation with the Office of Planning and Assessment who, in responding to a university-wide review by accreditors, had deemed the process of revising master syllabi to be an important best practice for implementing more meaningful course assessment. In response, our program review committee worked closely with the department's curriculum committee to both review progress on these goals and facilitate goal attainment by the end of the period under review. In short, much of the first year of the

program review process was concerned with establishing what had been done (and how to document it), what could be done (and who could do it), and what would not be done (and why) in the remaining period so as to set the department up to best incorporate a clear progress narrative in the final program review report.

Second, the first year of the program review was designed to incorporate useful outside input into the review process and, as such, offered an opportunity for department members to hear what impressions other interested entities had about the department. During this period, for example, the committee developed and distributed surveys to students and alumni and met with key administrators to gather their input on both the department broadly and the review process specifically. While the review of internal documents had allowed the committee to gather a sense of extant internal narratives about the department, this part of their work was a chance to hear what narratives others had to tell about the department. What, for example, did alumni value the most about their education? What did administrators believe to be the relative strengths and weaknesses of the department? What concerns did outside entities have about the department, what beliefs had they established, and how closely did these perspectives align with the stories the department told about itself? Before a document could be crafted that might pull together and address disparate ideas about the department (from within and without), these initial conversations and data gathering processes were requisite.

In addition to data gathered from constituencies outside of the department, we also utilized data from the university's Office of Institutional Research to tell the story of the department's contributions to the university as a whole, particularly the strategic goal of meeting the needs of students. For example, in 2012 (just after we completed our previous program review) the university adopted a new general education program. Utilizing data from institutional research, we were able to establish the importance of our department's contributions to that new program. Specifically, while the number of student seats in general education courses within our college generally declined, the department's contribution (in terms of percentage) of those seats increased. In conjunction with the data on our overall contribution of general education course seats, we were able to use assessment data gathered by the department in these courses to make claims about the quality of our students' experiences in meeting student learning objectives. We were able to use that data to advance our narrative about the importance of our role within the college in providing general education.

We were also able to use institutional research data on retention and graduation rates to establish the quality of the student experience within our department. One of the key markers of the quality of our program is our ability to move students to graduation in a timely fashion. Most of our majors (approximately 80%) are internal transfers, meaning they start at the university as undeclared students or with a different declared major. On average these students transfer into the major during their fourth semester. We were able to use data provided to us by our university's Office of Academic Achievement to establish our efficiency in moving students to graduation by showing that on average most of our students graduate in 8.1 to 8.5 semesters, even those who transfer into the major as juniors. Comparative data from the same office also allowed us to establish the department's record in successfully graduating students who identify as underrepresented minority students. For instance, the department's graduation rate for students who identified as Black or African American was approximately 30% higher than the university's overall rate for graduating students from that demographic group. In these instances we were able to effectively utilize institutionally-provided data to establish a coherent narrative regarding the quality and

integrity of our program consistent with university values of academic integrity and fiscal responsibility in meeting the needs of diverse populations.

The full and final program review committee was set to officially begin its work in fall 2015, but some preparatory tasks needed to be completed over the summer. Specifically, we needed to assemble a list of possible candidates to serve as our external reviewer. The names were to be submitted to the Dean in late summer/early fall, so the chair solicited rankings of candidates from faculty via email over the summer. Once the list of rankings was submitted to the Dean, we had to “hit the ground running” as soon as the fall semester began.

Additionally, most of our departmental committees are re-constituted each academic year to accommodate shifting faculty commitments, so we needed to form a new committee in the first weeks of the fall semester. The committee chair’s primary concern was to have enough people to serve on the committee so the work would be distributed evenly, a concern that was alleviated when almost everyone in the department volunteered to serve on the committee. Once the committee was in place, we needed to divide up the responsibilities. To accomplish this, the chair made a list of all of the tasks that needed to be completed and asked for people to volunteer to work on them. We then established a list of due dates for the various tasks. Since we had a very large committee, soliciting volunteers and dividing up the tasks was not a problem. While there was some initial stress regarding whether the tasks could be accomplished on time, we worked as a department to set a reasonable timetable and stuck to it.

Meanwhile, our university’s Office of Planning and Assessment was working on a new template for program reviews to simplify the process. Rather than writing up a narrative report (which was how past program review reports were organized), we just needed to follow the elements put forth in the template. It is important for our purposes here to note that the sections of the template still required narration and explanation, but the document no longer needed to be structured as one large essay. While it was an adjustment at first, in the end having the template made the process much easier because it provided a guideline that allowed us to know whether or not we were on the right track. We worked closely with the Office of Planning and Assessment and, as noted above, what became our department’s final report (utilizing the template) contributed to the creation of a system-wide template.

As each person fulfilled her/his responsibilities, the overall report began to take shape step-by-step. Once we had a document in place, we would have meetings where we would revise sections and work to finalize the language of the report in a fashion that was agreeable to the committee. After we had a complete draft, the chair sent it out to the entire department for review and suggestions, repeating this process until the final draft of the document was ready for submission to the university’s Office of Planning and Assessment.

How Program Reviews Foster and Maintain Organizational Integrity

As noted above, the creation of the program review report involved a lengthy process of meetings and deliberations. These discussions fostered organizational integrity because we were able to develop a more coherent sense of where the department has been and where it is going. We also gained a better understanding of how the vision and goals of the department fit into the vision and goals of the college, university, and state system as a whole.

Throughout the process of having meetings and working together on the report, we realized the importance of this process for understanding who we are as a department—

particularly for newer faculty members. In fact, our department typically tasks a newer colleague with the responsibility of chairing the program review committee. This helps junior faculty members learn more about the history of the department in the process of guiding the review. However, everyone had important roles to play in providing critical contributions to the overall report. While stressful, we finished the process with a sense of accomplishment: we came together as a department to complete the report—fostering a stronger sense of organizational integrity along the way.

This sense of promoting and maintaining organizational integrity took place in ways that were both formal and informal. Specifically, there were certain meetings in which the focus was on discussing our departmental vision, which also involved a discussion of our departmental history. These were occasions in which organizational integrity was an obvious focus. However, these discussions manifested themselves in informal ways as well. For example, we met as a committee—and later as a department—to discuss and edit each section of the final report. Senior faculty members played an invaluable role in these discussions, as we made adjustments that fit with our long-term vision. We also were guided in directions that avoided previous concerns of which newer faculty were not aware (e.g. procedures for resource allocation). At each step of the process, organizational integrity was promoted and maintained through careful consideration of whether our vision and goals were coherent and consistent with where we have been and where we want to be as a department, as well as with the broader vision and goals of the college, university, and state system. Ethics played a major role in these discussions, as we repeatedly asked ourselves “how can we best serve students in the Commonwealth?”^{vi} This question factored significantly into the decisions we ultimately made regarding our mission, vision, and goals going forward.

This collaborative process fostered organizational integrity because as a group, we developed a stronger and more coherent sense of who we are and where we are going as a department. An example of how this manifested itself was when our department met with members of the (now-previous) administration to discuss the final report and the findings of the external reviewer (a mandatory end-of-review-process meeting at our university). Some suggestions made to the department at that meeting were largely non-responsive to the report itself, instead speaking to concerns that were outside of the scope of our departmental mission, vision, and goals (for example, that we might consider offering Spanish-language versions of some of our courses). However, because the faculty had worked collaboratively to complete the report and had previously discussed the findings across several meetings together, we were able to respond appropriately to these comments as a unified collective instead of exacerbating the confusion they could have caused.

In many instances, narratives were utilized to tell the broader *story of our department*. This was unavoidable because the report required narrative coherence; we could not just include a decontextualized list of data tables. While various forms of data were required, we also needed to provide an overall argument for and explanation of our current and future direction as a department. In other words, narratives without data were not sufficient, nor were data without narratives; we needed to utilize both to create an effective final report. In addition, while formal narratives were essential in developing the report as a whole—even with the template format—narratives were also utilized informally in the course of meetings and discussions. For example, as we addressed our goals from the previous report, more experienced faculty shared stories that explained why those goals were included in the first place, and how they were created in response to goals from prior program reviews. Newer faculty had an opportunity to learn a bit more about how things came to be the way they

currently are, as well as an opportunity to provide their input as we decided upon future directions. As a group, we were able to explain which goals from the previous report were met, why some goals were not, and what can be done to address them. Of course, we also developed new goals going forward, which we are in the process of addressing for the next program review. Each step in this process involved the sharing of stories. Newer faculty learned much more about the history of the department from the discussions that took place in these meetings, and those faculty members can convey what they learned to new faculty (hired since the last program review) during the next program review.

The program review process fostered and maintained organizational integrity in a variety of ways. It provided an opportunity to discuss where we have been and where we are as a department, and deliberate about where we want to be in the future. These conversations helped develop more coherence and consistency as a department. Those who were not present for the previous program review gained a greater understanding about our mission, vision, and goals as a department. We also worked to ensure that our mission, vision, and goals were coherent and consistent with those of the college, university, and state system, and fulfilled our ethical obligation to serve our students in the best possible way. Having to undertake a program review created the exigency for these important conversations.

Finally, this case study offers a new kind of context for considering how existing concepts of organizational integrity and narrative coherence might be productively extended. That is, we believe that the value of applying well established communication theory to analyses of the inner-workings of those processes found within communication departments themselves is generally understated in extant literature; this essay might be productively read, in part, as an encouragement towards further research in this vein.

Conclusion

Our purpose in this essay has been to demonstrate how the program review process can help a department foster and maintain organizational integrity. Program reviews can be challenging and stressful. However, they provide an opportunity for faculty to discuss their department's overall mission, vision, and long-term goals. It has been well-noted how program reviews can serve as a valuable assessment tool. We hope that faculty also recognize its usefulness in fostering and maintaining organizational integrity.

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Notes

ⁱ In short, the “stick” is accreditation and corresponding assessment requirements (or the potential repercussions of failing to adhere to those requirements), the “carrot” is organizational integrity and quality, especially as it correlates to the allocation of resources. Novodorovsky et. al. elaborate “The [annual program review] *stick* is a necessary incentive for programs to practice the [university] outcomes assessment model” and that establishing “*carrot* activities, create[s] goodwill that translates into willingness to work toward a common goal” (p. 15).

ⁱⁱ For instance, the Council on Social Work’s accreditation standards for social work programs or the National Association of Schools of Theatre’s required standards for theatre programs.

ⁱⁱⁱ Specifically, we were one of the first departments to utilize a standard template the university wishes to implement and our department’s report is now used as a model for other departments to follow. Furthermore, the data generated from our report is currently used in a system-wide pilot program for standardizing data collection efforts for the purposes of staying up-to-date on departmental assessment goals.

^{iv} Middle States accreditation guidelines, while operative at our institution at the level of general education curriculum (of which some of our courses are a part) and broader institutional assessment, did not figure substantively into our own departmental deliberations around program review. A consideration of the role that accrediting bodies which are external to the discipline may play in departmental review processes is a potentially fruitful topic for subsequent research.

^v Elsewhere, Fisher (1984) refers to these concepts as narrative probability (the extent to which a story makes sense) and narrative fidelity (the extent to which it “rings true” [p. 8]). Both must be in place for a story to communicate “good reasons” to an audience (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). Fisher’s theories about narrative have been previously applied to organizational contexts in essays such as “Narrative Rhetorics in Scenario Work: Sensemaking and Translation” (Li, 2014) and “Narrative as a Tool in Organizational Socialization: Secular Sermonic Rhetoric in Employee Orientation Programs” (Davis, 2005).

^{vi} “Ethics” as used here, refers primarily to Young’s (2011) work above, which specifies that the term encompasses dimensions of both “structural soundness and ethical direction” and “structural and ethical integrity” through an extension of Paine’s (1997) ideas that organizational integrity itself necessarily incorporates “self-governance, responsibility, moral soundness, adherence to principle, and constancy of purpose” (p. 2). In other words, our driving questions about serving students in the Commonwealth align with this conception of how ethics might inform organizational integrity.