

Curriculum review

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A quality educational program must

- be consistent with its institution's mission,
- have clearly defined outcomes it intends to produce,
- use the best combination of learning experiences to help each learner achieve these results,
- include an assessment process that shows whether the results are being achieved, and
- use the findings of assessment to improve program effectiveness.

An approach to continuous program improvement that asks the right questions can provide academic administrators, faculty members, and others with the information they need to develop an appropriate, effective, and efficient academic program. The focus here is on undergraduate programs, but identical principles apply to curricula at the graduate level as well.

Listed below are a number of key questions to ask when reviewing curricula. Most of them are germane whether a curriculum is in general education or a specialized field. Although designed for reviewing curricula that already exist, many of these questions also can be helpful when beginning to design a new curriculum.

Asking these questions can help ensure the maximal learning possible with available resources and minimal waste.

A. Being clear about purpose and desired results: Mission statements, goals, and objectives

1. Is the curriculum consistent with and does it naturally flow from the institution's or unit's mission statement?
2. What assumptions have been made about entering students' developmental levels, knowledge, skills, and affective characteristics – all important inputs for the curriculum and each course. Have entering students been carefully assessed to ensure these assumptions are correct?
3. Does the curriculum have a formal set of intended learning outcomes that articulate the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values it proposes to introduce or reinforce and that every student should have achieved upon graduation?
4. Are these intended outcomes written in specific language that is understandable in the same way to students, faculty members, and all other users?
5. Are the intended outcomes stated in terms of effective goals and objectives that permit assessment of students' success in achieving them?
6. When identifying and developing these intended outcomes, was there appropriate input from all concerned stakeholders, depending on the type of curriculum, such as faculty members, professionals in various fields, employers, and alumni?

7. Have agreed-upon intended learning outcomes been identified for each of the major areas within the curriculum – for the humanities, natural and social sciences, and fine arts within general education or for a major field curriculum within the disciplines?
8. Does each course have a set of clearly stated intended outcomes derived from the intended outcomes of the curriculum?
9. Do these outcome goals and objectives prominently include higher-order cognitive and other complex behaviors as appropriate?
10. Will achieving each course's intended outcomes materially contribute to learners' achieving the outcomes of the curriculum in a deliberate and predetermined way?
11. When the intended outcomes of all the curriculum's courses are considered together, will every student have ample opportunity to achieve each of the specific intended outcomes of the curriculum itself?
12. For a major field in which certification or accreditation exists, are all of the outcome goals and objectives required for certification built into the curriculum's intended outcomes; or if requirements are stated in terms of courses, are all of these courses part of the curriculum?
13. Is the curriculum carefully sequenced such that the learning outcomes of prerequisite courses provide all required inputs for successive courses?

B. Monitoring program quality: Knowing and improving actual results

1. Is there an assessment plan that can ensure graduates of the program have the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values described as intended outcomes of the curriculum?
2. Is the curricular program being assessed as a whole and not merely by assessment of the intended outcomes of each of its individual courses?
3. Are diverse methods of assessment being used as appropriate for each type of learning engaged in and outcome desired?
4. Is there a close alignment between the intended outcomes of each course and the ways in which students are assessed in the course? Are a variety of assessment techniques being used?
5. Are intended outcomes being measured directly in both curriculum and courses – as opposed to surveying students' opinions about their learning – to reveal clearly what graduates know and can do, including their important affective qualities?
6. Are the findings of assessment made public and effectively communicated, as appropriate, to all interested stakeholders in a timely manner and in language they can understand?
7. Specifically, how have faculty members used information generated by assessment to improve the amount of learning produced?
8. Do faculty members collect data from students about their perceptions of and their level of satisfaction with the courses they have taken? Specifically, how is this information being used to improve courses?

C. The education process: Producing learning

1. Are the educational processes employed to help students learn in each course or activity fully consistent with research on learning and student development and thus appropriate for reaching both the course's or activity's specified outcomes and those of the curriculum?
2. Has the curriculum been designed such that each student has the sustained opportunity to apply to important issues, situations, and problems the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that have been identified as intended outcomes?
3. What percentage of class time do students spend passively listening to traditional lectures?

4. Are students consistently actively involved in learning, not only in their courses but also through such methods as participating in internships, practica, and work-study and study-abroad programs?
5. Do students understand the purpose, structure, and processes of the curriculum, their responsibilities for learning, and how their progress will be assessed? Is each student helped to understand these things at the beginning of the curriculum and throughout every course?
6. Is the formal academic curriculum specifically linked to non course-based opportunities for learning on campus such as orientation, developmental academic advising, the cocurriculum, residence life, and employment?

D. Other important considerations

1. Are students able to enroll in both required and elective courses as needed? Are they completing the curriculum in a timely manner? If not, specifically why not?
2. Is the program attracting an adequate number of students to support accomplishment of the institution's or unit's mission and to make it cost-efficient? If not, specifically why not?
3. Are students completing the program and each of its courses at a high rate? If not, specifically why not?
4. Do the dropout or failure rates in the curriculum as a whole and in each of its courses indicate a problem and, if so, has the problem been identified and is it being appropriately addressed?
5. Do graduates find appropriate employment in their major fields after graduation? If not, specifically why not?

Resources for Further Learning

- Diamond, Robert M. 1998. ***Designing and Assessing Courses and Curricula: A Practical Guide***. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. [321 pp.]
 - This book provides a model for designing, implementing, and evaluating courses and curricula and addresses the roles of faculty curriculum committees and administrators in these processes.
- Stark, Joan S., and Lisa R. Lattuca. 1997. ***Shaping the College Curriculum: Academic Plans in Action***. Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon. [460 pp.]
 - Defining the curriculum as an "academic plan to foster students' academic development," this book synthesizes much research about curriculum planning.

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