Amherst College Guidelines for External Reviews of Academic Departments and Programs

Faculty Legislation
“The Faculty endorses the inauguration of a regular schedule of departmental and program reviews. Each review will include an internal self-study and an evaluation by an outside committee, the appropriate form of which will be determined conjointly by the Dean of the Faculty and the department. The evaluation will be sent to the President, Dean of the Faculty, and to the department.” (Voted by the Faculty, March 1993)

Why Do a Review?
All departments* at Amherst College should undergo external reviews on a ten-year cycle or as warranted by special circumstances. External reviews are intended to allow departments to review and assess their work periodically and systematically, and to help departments and the College plan for the near- and long-term future within the context of staffing and budgetary realities. These reviews, which are structured to be independent and comprehensive, have proven to be very informative. They aid departments in identifying and assessing curricular needs and directions. Requests for FTEs that have been informed by external reviews are often strengthened as a result.

Scheduling and Preparing for the Review
The schedule for the review is set by the Dean of the Faculty in consultation with department chairs and the President. Each summer, the Dean names those departments to be reviewed during the next academic year, as well as those departments tentatively scheduled for review over the next two years. Each year, the Dean will inform the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP) of the departments that will be reviewed. Preparation for the review should normally begin at least three semesters prior to the visit by the outside committee. The Associate or Assistant Deans of the Faculty responsible for the review will meet with the department chair to discuss the review, outline the steps involved and the chair’s responsibilities, and suggest topics and forms of evidence-gathering for the department to consider in its self-study.

A review is usually a two-semester process, with the first semester (which can be either in the Fall or the Spring) devoted to preparation of the self-study and the second semester to the visit of the outside committee. Members of the outside committee should be invited as early in the process as possible and should receive the department self-study at least a month in advance of its visit. Department members hold a series of meetings to discuss what issues they want to address, what evidence they need, and how they will organize the self-study report. The department indicates what sub-fields the outside committee should represent. After the department has met, the chair will meet with the Associate or Assistant Dean to formulate a list of objectives for the review. The CEP may suggest additional questions for the department to consider.

Outside Reviewers
The Dean and the department work collaboratively to assemble a team of outside reviewers, with the final decision about the composition of the team resting with the Dean. The team typically consists of three or four reviewers, with the aim of covering desired subfields. The department proposes up to eight reviewers, indicating the sub-fields they represent. If a close professional or
personal relationship exists between anyone who is participating in the review process and an outside reviewer, that relationship should be disclosed. Together, the Dean and the department choose two reviewers, occasionally three, from among the department’s proposed individuals. Through consultation with provosts, deans, and faculty members at other institutions, the Dean assembles a list of proposed reviewers, from which one or two evaluation team members will be drawn. The Dean will seek the input of the department before making his/her final selections. The final list of reviewers should include at least one representative from an undergraduate liberal arts institution and one from a research university. The Dean appoints the chair of the evaluation team.

**The Self-Study Report**

After consulting with the Dean about particular areas of emphasis, the department determines the scope and content of its self-study. Amherst prescribes no rigid format for self-studies, but proposes that departments consider the questions that follow:

1. What are the department’s goals with respect both to the general education of all Amherst students and the education of its majors? How do departmental goals relate to the broader mission of the college? How do they relate to the recommendations of the Committee on Academic Priorities (CAP)?

2. How are the department’s curriculum and pedagogy designed to achieve these goals? How does the department’s program compare with those of peer institutions? What is the department’s relationship to other Amherst College departments?

3. How does the department assess its success in achieving these goals? The self-study report should provide data and evidence, with particular attention to the assessment of student learning.

4. What is the context for the review? Is the department anticipating retirements, requesting new positions, etc?

5. What are the department’s aspirations with respect to program development, staffing, and facilities?

6. How will the department incorporate the goal of diversity and inclusion into its planning for and approach to pedagogy, curriculum, and new positions?

7. What does the department hope to achieve through the review?

8. What are the research interests of the present faculty and the factors that have shaped, or will in the future shape, the fields of expertise represented in the department?
The self-study report should include faculty CVs, course syllabi, and enrollment statistics, as well as reports on the various professional activities of graduates (to the degree known). A department may find it useful to consider the history, design, structure, and intents of its curriculum, including courses for non-majors as well as majors, honors, advising, pedagogy, and enrollment trends. Outside committees often wish to understand connections between the department and related Amherst or Five-College departments, and how the department sees itself in relation to excellent departments elsewhere and to the present state of the discipline. Those preparing the self-study will naturally consult with colleagues in their department, senior and junior, so that the document reflects as broad a discussion and consensus as possible. They may also wish to consult students, alumni, Amherst faculty members in other departments, and faculty from the Five Colleges or other institutions who know the department. Departments are encouraged to share their self-study reports with the CEP.

The Visit
The Dean’s office will work with the department to create a detailed schedule that includes individual meetings with the Dean of the Faculty and possibly the President, members of the CEP, all department members (including visiting faculty, lecturers, and lab instructors), students (majors and non-majors), and colleagues from affiliated departments and programs. A department may decide whether it would like to have a final meeting. An exit interview will be held with the Dean of the Faculty. The outside committee will receive a draft of the schedule and will be given an opportunity to suggest additional meetings before it is finalized. The outside committee should submit its final report within four weeks of the review to the Dean of the Faculty, who will distribute it to the President, the department, and the CEP. If the final report or the exit interview includes confidential information regarding personnel or other matters, the department and the CEP will receive a redacted version of the report.

Follow-up
Once the department has met to discuss its initial reactions to the report, the Dean and designated Assistant or Associate Dean of the Faculty will meet with the department to discuss the report and to begin formulating recommendations about the next steps the department will take. After this overview meeting, the department will meet to discuss the recommendations in more detail. Departments should carefully weigh, but are not obliged to accept, all the recommendations of an external review. Approximately one year after the visit, the department should report to the Dean of the Faculty on the actions it has taken as a result of the review. This report may be written or may take place at a department meeting to which the Dean and a designated Associate or Assistant Dean of the Faculty are invited.

*In this document, the term department will be used to indicate an academic department or program.

These guidelines were approved by the Committee on Educational Policy on November 7, 2008.