

TIP SHEET #10

The Curriculum Review FAQ

First off, what's that deadline again?

February 1!

And the audience?

Although the curriculum review is a required step in the ALC process by the Board of Education, it is probably most helpful to think of the audience for this particular document as the next set of reviewers who will be coming to appraise your program at some point in the future. The document should serve as an overview of where your department purposefully focuses on the various domains and outcomes to which you have committed in your earlier ALC outline.

What format should we use for the review?

We are not requiring any particular format for review. The bottom line is that the review should identify the commitments you are making in your department to the formal instruction related to the university domains. Because the skills we have adopted in the university plan are central to good instruction across disciplines, in most cases the vast majority of your courses might be identified as opportunities to enhance all the skills. However, the review should indicate those learning contexts in your major that commit to or guarantee critical formal experience. Another way to look at this challenge is to think about the level of performance you expect seniors to demonstrate in their capstone courses just prior to graduation. Which courses in the major are central to helping them achieve those outcomes?

What formats can you suggest?

You may come up with just the right format in consultation with your department but here are three different approaches that might be useful:

1. Curriculum Audit

In this approach, you develop a complete matrix in which you might list the domains across the top and each course along the side. (This approach tends to appeal to both quantitative gurus and anal retentives!). This approach produces a total picture of your offerings. You can place codes in the intersections that might help you distinguish required versus recommended courses. The advantage of this approach is that you can determine at a glance if the curriculum provides sufficient experience in any given domain. For example, it is quite likely that formal instruction in ethics/integrity has not been given much priority to date in your curriculum. Or if you teach a discipline-based course in ethics, perhaps that is the only place formal instruction occurs. The overall sweep provided by this format can provide a good snapshot of the spread of your domain-related instruction. You may want to track writing, speaking, and technology expectations under communication separately.

2. Required Course Emphasis

You might identify within the curricular offerings a set of courses that each student must have. As such, these required courses may be the best vehicles for guaranteeing instruction within the domains. Think through how each of those required courses should make a contribution to your graduation outcomes.

If you have a set of courses from which students must pick alternatives, try to think through what the common domain objectives might be for that set of courses. Then the representative outcomes from that cluster of courses could also be addressed in your review. For example, you might allow students to choose either an internship or independent research project as a capstone work. What elements do those two have in common that they are grouped together? They might both involve sophisticated project planning, integration of academic and practical skills, working with others, and so forth. So, the domain-related goals could be very similar even if the content in the related courses is not.

In this plan, you might not need to focus on electives. However, you would certainly want to encourage instructors delivering elective courses to support the departmental outcomes at least informally. Because elective choices provide a wide variation in student experiences, they may be less critical to the kinds of outcomes in which your department plans to “guarantee” experiences.

3. Developmental Outcomes

The type of curriculum review starts from the vantage point of the specific domain and identifies the individual progression through the major. In the cognitive science literature, this approach is probably best described as “novice to expert.” Beginning courses are built on the assumption that are students are cognitive novices and they need to build their expertise through appropriate sequences of experiences.

This approach is probably the most challenging, but might also produces the best opportunity for scholarship in this area. (If you are curious about this approach, I can refer you to an article on developmental progression in my home discipline in psychology to give you a flavor of how this activity can translate into publication).

Here are questions that might guide your examination in each domain:

Content:

- Are your courses representative of the common expectations for “best practice”?
- Do you offer any cutting edge courses?
- Have you sequenced your course experiences in a way that maximizes student development?
- Are there any courses that should be put to sleep?
- Are there any courses that serve professor’s special interests rather than students’ developmental needs?

Critical Thinking

- How does the introductory course introduce critical thinking?
- How do subsequent basic courses follow up on the foundation?
- As students progress to advanced courses in the junior year, how do their critical thinking demands change?
- Which courses are critical in helping them develop critical thinking skills that look more “professional?”

Communication

- Do beginning courses require good novice writing/speaking experiences? (e.g., short or revisable/repeatable work)?
- Where do writing projects occur in the curriculum?
- Where does public speaking opportunity reliably occur?
- Do the students receive formal instruction in computer technology to support their disciplinary learning?
- Are there sufficient learning experiences to help them accomplish sophisticated work at the capstone level?

Character/Ethics/Integrity

- Where do students get introduced to formal ethical regulations?
- Do students have the opportunity to reason through ethical dilemmas that are part of the history (and future) of practice related to the discipline?
- Do they receive any formal instruction in how to cope with ethical challenges?
- If ethics issues are housed in a specific course, should there be other courses that help lay some groundwork for that instruction?
- How should integrity and character be reflected in a good capstone performance?

Project Management

- Do students receive any formal training in self-regulating skills (setting deadlines, planning how to overcome obstacles) in the existing curriculum?
- Are there courses where their effectiveness as group members gets formal instruction and feedback?
- How might work of this type be sequenced or integrated into existing project work in the discipline to enhance students’ ability to self-regulate?

What if we can’t decide on the best approach?

Choose door #2. For our immediate purposes, concentrating on required courses for your curriculum review if effective and efficient.

What happens if we discover we aren’t really addressing the domain in a way that students either get formal instruction or feedback?

That’s the point of the review. If you find holes in the curriculum from the standpoint of the student learning outcomes, it is a good indication that you need to refine the curriculum to address the holes.

Does this approach also dictate how our syllabi should be designed?

Not necessarily. However, the outcome of doing an audit or review is that your department is one step closer to a COHERENT curriculum. That is our goal. The graduating student should be able to recognize that there is a sensible and logical organization behind the curricular choices we have asked them to make. In an ideal world, they should even be able to articulate the rationale without prompting when they graduate. When the department embraces the outcomes, it can create a climate in which the emphasis assists students (and faculty, too) of making the most sense of the offerings they provide. Therefore, good and consistent syllabus construction should be part of the coherent departmental plan.

If we need more help or time on this one?

Anything can be negotiated. Please strive for the February 1 deadline as we want to assemble as much as we can in preparation for the SACS visit. If you will be delayed, please notify me at jhalonen@uwf.edu so we can keep things our roster up-to-date. If you need help, same e-mail address.

What's next?

The challenging requirement of developing an assessment plan that helps you answer questions about how your students are doing in your curriculum. The deadline for the assessment plan is May 1 and we hope to have more tip sheets to walk you through your options as well as some other learning opportunities sponsored through CUTL and the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) funding.