

INSIGHTS

On Equity and Outcomes
September 2021 Issue 25

Office of Community College Research and Leadership

Advancing High-Quality Program Review for Student and Academic Support Services

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The expansion of high-quality student and academic support services has been identified as a strategy to advance equitable outcomes across Illinois' higher education systems, particularly for Black, Latinx, low-income, rural, and working adult populations (Illinois Board of Higher Education, 2021). This is especially critical for the state's community colleges given that they serve as the most accessible entry point to postsecondary education for these student subpopulations (American Association of Community Colleges, 2021; Koricich, Chen, & Hughes, 2018). This emphasizes the importance of a quality program review process for these community college student-support services. The Illinois Community College Board (ICCB, 2021) has expanded the Student and Academic Support Services program review template to support a more comprehensive review of the following areas identified in the program review schedule:

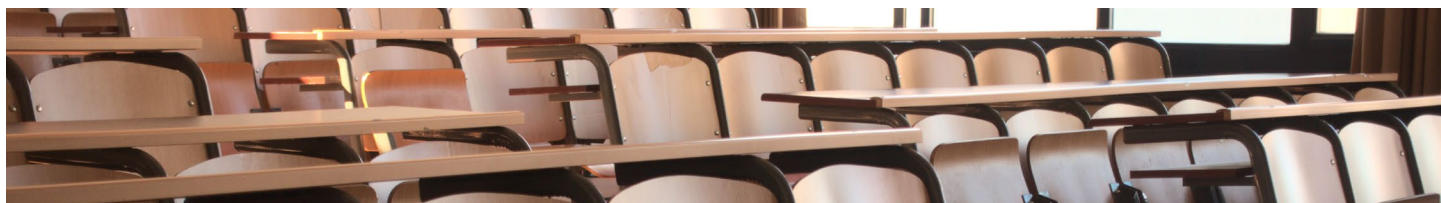
- Admissions, registration, and records
- Recruiting
- Learning and tutoring centers
- Career and placement services
- Financial aid and bursar

- Disability services
- Counseling and advising
- Library services
- Athletics
- Student activities
- Other areas: veterans' services; diversity, equity, and inclusion centers and programs; campus security; and online learning

This research brief provides community college educators who are facilitating these reviews with tips, suggestions, and resources to ensure a high-quality review that advances equitable student outcomes.

Review Team

As colleges are identifying members of the review team, it is important to include diverse and deeply connected members of the campus community who work closely with the student populations being served by the department. Using an equitable lens, these community members are better positioned to speak to the successes and challenges of the review area compared to those who might have





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minimal interactions with students utilizing the services. It is also critical to encourage students to be a part of the review team. Student voices are integral when examining the effectiveness of postsecondary programs and services, especially in the community college sector (Thrill, 2019).

Mission

When completing the program review process, department leaders are encouraged to review their institutions' mission statements and determine the ways in which their programs and services are in alignment. This practice helps to ensure fairness and uniformity on campus. Some institutional mission statements may emphasize terms such as diversity, equity, and inclusion, but programs and services on the campus may fail to put them into practice. Therefore, it is important for the review team to think critically about how the types of programs and services offered further these aspects of the institutional mission.

Advancement of Equity

When thinking about how programs and services help advance equity, the review team must recognize that all students are different in terms of their cultural backgrounds, academic preparedness, socioeconomic status, and other intersecting social identities. Equity will signal each individual's specific needs when the sociocultural and historical aspects of each person's social identity is considered in all decision-making processes and resource allocations. Once those needs are acknowledged, it is up to educators in positions of power, or those holding privileged social identities, to address said needs, thus closing equity gaps or, to put it another way, level the playing field. All programs and services should be conceptualized with these thoughts in mind, particularly when reflecting on how the review area seeks to advance equitable outcomes for students currently underserved by the state's higher education systems (e.g., Black, Latinx, low-income, rural, and working adult populations).

Indicators: Need, Cost, and Quality

In addressing the need(s) of a student program or support service, review teams must articulate and demonstrate the necessity of the area for providing opportunities for academic, social, or career development; assisting students with academic and career goals; and ultimately contributing to an environment that supports students in the successful completion of their individual goals. Therefore, teams should incorporate an analysis of student utilization

and satisfaction or evaluation data. Assessments that are already in place can serve to inform the review process and identify gaps for additional or future data-collection efforts. If assessment efforts have not been previously employed regularly in a department, review teams can engage students through focus groups to measure demand and ensure that the services are fulfilling and addressing the needs of the student population.

Review teams should assess the extent to which current funding levels are meeting the demand for services, particularly as they relate to advancing equitable student supports across the institution. Completing a high-quality program review process that identifies needs associated with expanding upon or scaling existing services can assist departments in being well positioned to pursue external funding if an opportunity becomes available. Furthermore, the program review process can support departments in advocating for the resources necessary to ensure student needs are being met.

In discussing and measuring the quality of the programs and services offered, review teams should recognize the program review process as an opportunity to comprehensively examine and assess the department. This may include the following:

- Reviewing the extent to which current methods of delivery are meeting student needs
- Evaluating student participation in departmental services and programs and disaggregating data to identify gaps in outreach or utilization
- Assessing the extent to which services and programs enhance student learning and sense of belongingness
- Anticipating how needs for the services offered may change over the next five years
- Benchmarking similar departments at peer community colleges
- Identifying staff professional development needs that will support the identified goals

These are starting points to identify the overall strengths and challenges within the department. Exploration of these areas contributes to dialogue and the development of critical questions regarding how the work is being done and where there may be gaps in services or opportunities for growth and change. Further, a team that engages a broad group of stakeholders will be able to overcome silos and address needs by building relationships and connections to other areas of the college. Dr. Amy Kuspa Sims,



coordinator of student activities and holistic wellness at Joliet Junior College, explains that addressing quality in program review is a campus-collaborative moment to systematically evaluate effectiveness and document successes, as well as examine spaces for growth and development to advance institutional priorities as a long-term success strategy (Georges, Jr. & Bourne, 2021).

Review Results and Concluding Thoughts

The practical strategies and tools provided encourage stakeholders' active participation in the review process to ensure a high-quality and thorough assessment of student services and programs. In discussing best practices for completing a quality program review process, particularly in student and academic support services, the prioritization, development, and sustainment of equitable practices that support the success of students holding minoritized intersecting social identities is fundamental.

While ICCB requires program review once every five years, ongoing internal assessments of programs and services are highly encouraged to improve student experiences and outcomes. In developing an action plan to approach quality program review, developing SMART goals (see below) is encouraged. The SMART format is adopted from Mind Tools (n.d.), where it is noted that for objectives to be attainable, each one should be:

- Specific (simple, sensible, significant)
- Measurable (meaningful, motivating)
- Achievable (agreed, attainable)
- Relevant (reasonable, realistic, resourced, result-based)
- Time-bound (time-based, time-limited, cost-limited, timely, time-sensitive)

In addition to utilizing the SMART format, the review team should apply an equity-conscious lens to examine how program and service objectives meet the individualized needs of diverse student groups. This is an opportunity to think critically about how the work being done in the review area impacts students and other relevant stakeholders.

Additionally, the review team should maintain updated records of all internal assessments and past program reviews. Even if there is turnover among staff, there should be a robust knowledge-management system to maintain data from past reviews, particularly regarding action steps taken throughout the years to improve programs and services. If there were challenges to implementing action steps, these should be adequately documented and explained within the program review.

This research brief highlighted the importance of program review in student and academic support services as an opportunity to inform campus policies, practices, and initiatives. Alex Berry, director of student success at Lincoln Land Community College, challenges the mindset that stakeholders can sometimes have with program review approached as a “one more thing to do” task or as “something that we check a box on, get it done and sits on a shelf and is never again looked at until the next time you are scrambling to complete it” (Georges, Jr. & Bourne, 2021,11:15). This research brief is designed to support community colleges in approaching program review not as a task to be checked, but rather as an opportunity to look at long-term goals, successes, and challenges.

Resources

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This publication was prepared pursuant to a grant from the Illinois Community College Board (Grant Number: D5355).
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