Overview

Academic departments at Grinnell College conduct their self-study and external review every ten years. The self-study gives departments a chance to reflect on current interests, accomplishments, and professional goals of the faculty; the structure and content of the curriculum (as experienced by both non-majors and majors); faculty-defined learning goals and evidence of student learning outcomes; current engagement of the department with its own alumni, and alumni comments on what they gained from their experience with the department. The review also provides an occasion to consider the state of this particular academic field or discipline nationally or internationally, and how its current practices and trends are represented at Grinnell. Through the self-study, a department reflects on its history and contributions to the College, and commits to significant changes that will support a successful future.

The Academic Year before the Review: Launching the Review

At its first meeting to discuss the upcoming review, department members should decide whether the department chair will coordinate the review, or if another faculty member will assume this responsibility. This first meeting should also identify whether most of the tenured and tenure-track (or Regular) members of the department will be available to participate in the review. If not, the timing of the review may need to be altered. In any case, the extent of participation by any faculty members who are away or on leave during the review should be discussed and agreed upon.

Reports and materials from the previous review offer an ideal starting-point for the upcoming review. As one of its first tasks, the new self-study should summarize findings and recommendations from the last review, and analyze to what extent these were put into practice. What has most significantly changed in this department since ten years ago? What was expected to change, but hasn't? Another useful resource is to compile all the tenure-track/Regular faculty position proposals (whether or not approved) submitted to Executive Council over the decade. How and why has staffing evolved in the last ten years? Relevant sections of the last institutional self-study report (2008), and materials recently produced by the Task Force on Learning Assessment, may also help the department organize its self study.

Equally vital is to gather everyone's initial sense of the key issues for this review to address. For example, is the department's curriculum newly revised, long-established, or in transition? What innovations for teaching are being contemplated? Are teaching and learning facilities adequate? Does the department regularly collect data on student learning outcomes, and use the results to re-structure curriculum, revise course plans, and modify how material is taught? Is the department still in the process of defining key learning goals, or of figuring out how to make use of early assessment findings?

Early in the Review Year: Inviting External Reviewers

The department self-study is followed up with a two-day campus visit by a team of (usually two) external reviewers. For this team to be invited, early in the review year the self-study coordinator
should bring to the Dean a suggested list of external reviewers' names, titles, and contact information. The list should include senior colleagues from the corresponding department in institutions similar to Grinnell College, and can include other names from less similar institutions as long as they have a particularly strong department in this field. Please note any particular strengths of the recommended individuals, as well as any known affiliations or previous relationship they have with Grinnell College. It is helpful if one or both reviewers have previously served on an external review team and/or as a college leader (division chair, chair of faculty, associate dean, etc.).

First Semester of the Review Year: Composing the Self-Study Dossier

As its central responsibility in the review, the department gathers information about the goals, processes, and results of its own work. Presented and summarized in the form of a self-study dossier, this material prepares the external reviewers and guides them through their visit. A view should be presented of what place this department occupies in the liberal arts program of the College as a whole.

The dossier will normally include the following components:

- Brief history of the department and description of its current circumstances and culture (e.g., tradition and format of department meetings, activities and involvement by the SEPC, practices of mentoring early-career faculty and of advising students, sense of community among the majors)
- A list of key questions or issues on which the department would like research or advice
- Description of a bold or transformational change currently being considered by the department
- Basic information about the College to frame the review (Dean's Office can supply this section)
- Vitae of all department faculty; e.g., has the department produced faculty who are campus leaders? nationally-recognized teachers or scholars? What areas of specialization and interdisciplinary expertise?
- An account of how the department's staffing and curriculum have evolved over time, and whether the current curriculum is new, well-established, or currently in transition;
- How frequently members of the department faculty participate in directing Mentored Advanced Projects, and whether the department sees MAPs as an integral piece of departmental curriculum
- How frequently members of the department faculty teach interdisciplinary and non-departmental courses; leadership and service commitments that entail course releases for the faculty
- Catalog listing of department
- Syllabi of recently offered courses
- Departmental course enrollment records, standardized format compared with course enrollments in the division and the College as a whole; # of majors over past 10 years (with comparisons for context)
- A statement of department learning goals for majors and non-majors
- A "map" of departmental courses that identifies just where in the curriculum students are offered opportunities to meet each of the specific learning goals
• Reports of transcript analysis, e.g., student paths through the curriculum
• Reports of surveys of current students and of alumni majors
• A statement of the findings of department learning outcomes assessment work

• If relevant and helpful, departments may consider including additional information, such as:
  o Interviews with, or statements by, faculty describing their professional and departmental goals;
  o Surveys of faculty in other departments that require/recommend courses in this department;
  o Departmental events or special programs (seminars, lectures, awards) sponsored by the department;
  o The involvement and contributions of the Student Educational Policy Committee (SEPC);
  o Interviews with Writing lab, Math lab, DASIL, and/or Science learning Center staff members;

Assessment: Reflection on Cycles of Data Collection, Analysis, and Application of Insights Gained

Review teams will expect departments to have clear learning goals appropriate to the discipline or field of study, both for its majors and for non-majors. Ideally, the department will describe progressive goals that enable students to develop increasing sophistication within the discipline or field. Further, the department should be able to specify where in its curriculum students can be expected to learn the various knowledge, skills, or capacities outlined.

In its self study, the department should report evidence showing whether students have reached the learning goals. Reviewers will also expect the self study to note changes in courses, curriculum, or pedagogical practice the department has made in response to what was learned by assessment.

Evidence of students’ learning may be gathered by in-class activities embedded in the regular components of a course, or in separate activities designed for the purpose of assessment. The primary purpose of assessment is to discover the effectiveness of current pedagogies and curriculum; it is not about evaluating individual students or individual faculty members. The results of assessments should be used to take a fresh look at what the department teaches and how it is taught. At their best, assessment practices will be focused on current, meaningful inquiries that the department generates for itself, and which can guide substantive improvements in teaching methods and curricular structures.

Course grades are typically not considered an adequate means of direct assessment. For example, a student could have good marks in attendance and even improvement, but these measures say nothing about whether the student ultimately acquired particular skills or knowledge that the department deems important. Likewise, asking students how much they have learned is not a sufficient measure, though research has shown that self-reports can enhance and support direct measures, especially when student comments help identify specific pedagogical practices that may have detracted from or supported students’ motivation and engagement as a basis for effective learning.

Departments will receive help from the Office of Analytic Support and Institutional Research in the design and practice of assessment activities. This office can help identify resources, methods, and data to further the department’s assessment interests. The OASIR may assist with development of student
and alumni surveys, transcript analyses, documentation of learning goals, interview protocols, or learning outcomes assessment activities. The chair of the self study should work with this office early in the process to develop a plan of work that can reasonably be done in the time available. For example, surveys often require six or more weeks for development, data collection, and reporting cycle.

Assessment should be an ongoing activity over the years, but the self study is a good time to report on current findings and the actions being taken in regard to them. This information will give the external reviewers and the Executive Council a more complete perspective on the department's program.

Second Semester of the Review: Approximately One Month Before the Visit

The chair provides the Dean's Office with three copies of the department's self-study dossier. A copy of these materials, together with a copy of the Grinnell College Catalog, Grinnell College Fact Book, and any other materials requested by the reviewers, will be sent by the Dean's Office to each of the reviewers. The Division chair should also be provided with a full copy of the self-study dossier. The Division chair serves as a liaison between the department and the Executive Council in the department review.

Second Semester of the Review: External Review Visit Planning

Once the Dean's Assistant sets up travel and lodgings, a detailed schedule is developed for the external reviewers' visit to campus. Their visit usually spans a full two-day period. The reviewers will arrive the evening prior to the first day, and may depart the evening of the second day or early in the morning after the second day. It is sometimes beneficial for the reviewers to meet with several members of the department at one time, either as supplement or in lieu of individual meetings. If such a meeting is to be conducted over a meal, we need to limit the number of department faculty members in attendance to no more than four, and regret we cannot include partners or spouses of department members. As categorized for auditing purposes by the Finance Office, this is a meeting for business rather than social purposes, where discussion should focus on departmental issues.

The Dean's Office will prepare an itinerary for the reviewers' visit. This itinerary will normally include:

- Information about who will pick up the reviewers at airport and transport them to campus.
- Lodging information.
- At the beginning of the visit, an initial one-hour meeting with the Dean (this may also include the President for part of the meeting) and an Associate Dean selected by the Dean;
- Meeting with department's divisional representative to Executive Council (Division chair);
- Meetings with all department members, including both the Regular (tenured, tenure-track, Senior Lecturer) faculty and also the faculty members In term positions;
- Meetings with members of departments with which there is regular interaction by the department being reviewed;
- Meeting with the SEPC and (if appropriate) other student groups. These meetings often work well over lunch or an informal dinner (such as a pizza dinner);
- If appropriate, visits to observe individual classes or rehearsals;
- At the end of the visit, a concluding one-hour meeting with the Dean.
Review teams appreciate having some time to meet by themselves at the conclusion of the visit, to divide responsibilities and begin their work on the review report. Attempts should be made to arrange for such time, if possible, at the end of the visit. If the reviewers are remaining on campus through dinnertime on the second day of their visit, for example, it can work best for them to have dinner just with each other, to allow them time to discuss their visit and outline the report.

Expenses associated with departmental reviews are charged to an account administered by the Dean’s Office. Please have all invoices, bills for transportation, meals, and lodging sent to the Dean’s Office for payment. The Dean’s Office will also issue payment of the honorarium to the external reviewers upon receipt of their final report, a W-9 and Iowa CER form.

Following the Review Visit

Be prepared to answer any follow-up questions from the reviewers as they write the report.

Once the reviewers’ report is received, the self-study coordinator (or, if appropriate, the department as a whole) is invited to meet with the Dean to discuss the report.

If possible by the end of the academic year in which the external review visit took place, the department should prepare a concise written response to the external reviewers’ report which

- responds point by point to each recommendation made by the reviewers,
- addresses all significant findings that emerged from the self-study, and
- outlines specific plans for carrying out changes which the department is committed to make, based on the findings of the self-study and/or suggestions made by the reviewers.
- A clear and detailed timeline should indicate dates by which stages of progress will be reached toward achieving the new departmental goals and initiatives that result from this review.

The Dean will take the key review materials (the Department’s self-study report, the external reviewers’ report, and the department’s response, including new commitments and timeline) to the Executive Council for discussion. The Division chair, having a deeper familiarity with the review materials and having met with the external reviewers, will add perspective and be able to answer questions that arise in the Council discussion. Having studied the department review materials, and reflecting a college-wide perspective, the Executive Council will create a brief statement that concludes the review, setting forth its own recommendations as appropriate for consideration by the department, other College committees, and the administration. Finally, the Dean and Chair of the Faculty will make plans to follow up on behalf of Executive Council for updates from the department as the planned timeline is followed.

The statement of department learning goals and assessment methods may be posted online alongside other departments’ statements. The intent of this posting is to foster broader understanding of current assessment practices within the Grinnell College community and to document departmental priorities and objectives.
Appendix I: SAMPLE SELF-STUDY QUESTIONS

What are the expectations of the department for:

- How best it can contribute to the College’s mission and related learning goals
- What students ideally will gain from their experience in this department
- Faculty professional development
- Helping to prepare students for post-graduate experience
- Ongoing engagement with alumni who took courses or majored in the department

I. What knowledge, skills, abilities, and other outcomes does the department expect of students who graduate with a departmental major?

II. How does or how will the department determine the extent to which its students meet these expectations? How does or how will the department determine if its majors meet the College’s expectations that our students learn to make effective written and oral arguments, including the use of quantitative reasoning in these arguments?

III. What changes have occurred in the department during the past ten years in the following areas:
   A. Faculty and Personnel
   B. Curriculum (including short courses, MAPs, labs, and any credit-bearing activity)
   C. Uses of class time, learning activities, teaching methods
   D. Physical facilities
   E. Equipment and use of technology
   F. Co-curricular projects sponsored by department (event series, awards, etc.)

IV. What does the department regard currently as its greatest strength?

V. What significant changes does the department anticipate during the next three to five years?

VI. What does it regard as its greatest deficiency or challenge at this time in history?

VII. What could improve the department’s program? What stands in the way?

Answers to these questions may lead to more detailed analysis of specific issues such as the success of introductory courses in presenting the discipline to students who plan to major and to those who do not; the quality of the senior-year experience of majors; the extent to which alumni pursue successful careers and develop life-long learning skills; or the department’s response to needs of one or more interdisciplinary concentrations or to strategic directions set at the institutional level.
Appendix II: CURRENT SCHEDULE OF ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT REVIEWS

*Year of the most recent review is in parentheses.

2013-14: Anthropology (01-02); Art (01-02); Biology (03-04); Classics (01-02)
2014-15 Chinese (01-02); German (2004); Spanish (01-02); Philosophy (02-03)
2015-16 French (05-06); Russian (05-06); Theatre (04-05)
2016-17 Economics (06-07); History (06-07); Physical Education (06-07)
2017-18 Computer Science (07-08); Math/Stats (07-08)
2018-19 Sociology (08-09); Library (08-09)
2019-20 English (10-11); Political Science (09-10)
2020-21 Religious Studies (10-11); Psychology (10-11)
2021-22 Music (2011-12)
2022-23 Chemistry (12-13); Education (12-13); Physics (12-13)