

# Audit Report

## Academic Process/Operational Audit

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July 2022

## Summary – Academic Process/Operational Audit

We recently completed an audit of the processes related to adding new academic programs, making changes to existing programs, and reviewing current programs at UTA. The background, audit objective, scope, and ratings are detailed on page 12 and 13 of this report. Overall, the audit identified the need to improve processes and procedures. Specific observations from the audit are provided below:

Recommendations	Rating	Count
<h1>5</h1>	Priority	0
	High	1
	Medium	4
	Low	0

Observations	Recommendations	Rating	Page
A. Selection of External Reviewers	1. The Program Review Committee Chair should ensure external members are selected per the Program Review Manual and that they sign conflict of interest statements.	High	3
B. Program Review Manual	2. The Dean of the Graduate School should update the Program Review Manual to reflect the current processes and requirements.	Medium	6
C. Program Review Committee Member Composition	3. The Program Review Committee Chair should work with the Office of the Provost to track and document member selection and terms.	Medium	8
D. New Programs and Changes to Existing Programs	4. The Office of the Provost should implement the electronic workflow to document the approvals for implementing new programs and changes to existing programs.	Medium	9
E. Non-Substantive Change Procedure	5. The Office of the Provost should develop a written procedure for making non-substantial changes to existing programs.	Medium	11

Further details can be found on the following pages. Other less significant opportunities were communicated to management separately.

We appreciate the outstanding courtesy and cooperation received from the Office of the Provost.

## Observation 1 – Selection of External Reviewers

As part of the Academic Program Review (APR) process, UTA must select external reviewer's to perform the academic program review. These external reviewer's must meet certain criteria from both the Program Review Manual (Manual) and the Texas Administrative Code (TAC). Additionally, external reviews must affirm that they have no conflict of interest related to the program under review, as required by the TAC.

To assist in this selection process, the Manual requires the affected unit's administration to provide an un-prioritized list of individuals (approximately five in number) to their Program Review Team (PRT) with a brief written explanation of how each individual satisfies the criteria. In most cases, two of these individuals will be selected and contacted by the PRT Chair to serve on the PRT.

However, this is not how external reviewers are being selected. According to the Program Review Committee (PRC) Chair, during a preliminary meeting with the department chairs, they review the problem of conflict of interest and charge the chairs to screen and propose nominees who do not have any conflicts of interest.

The Departments then provide prioritized lists of external nominees and their curriculum vitae to the PRC Chair. This is based on the department chair's assessment of the qualifications of the reviewers as dictated by the information in the Program Review Manual. According to the PRC Chair, the department under review would know best who their peers are and who would be most qualified to review them. The PRC Chair reviews the nominees and determines whether they meet the criteria. No formal conflict of interest affirmations are collected from the reviewers.

***The success of Program Review critically depends upon the expertise and insights of selected External Reviewers.***

*Their task is to provide recommendations for actions that will add to the program's strengths and enable it to address critical challenges. Therefore, external reviewers should:*

- *be acknowledged experts in a discipline that is directly related to that of the program undergoing review.*
- *be tenured and have an understanding of both the academic and administrative aspects of programs similar to the program undergoing review.*
- *be employed at other institutions with reputations and profiles that match or exceed those of UT Arlington, or*
- *be active in a program similar to that of the unit under review that has a reputation which matches or exceeds it.*
- *not be affiliated with UTA. They should not be past employees, students, or colleagues engaged in on-going collaborative work.*
- *not be drawn from programs from the local area that compete directly with the program under review for students or other resources.*

– Program Review Manual

The academic program review process is a long and involved process requiring many of the department's faculties' time. The entire process can take over 18 months. By letting the academic unit provide a prioritized list of potential external reviewers and charging them to determine whether there is a conflict of interest, the risk that the reviewers would provide a biased report increases, essentially negating the purpose of the APR process.

### Recommendation:

We recommend that the PRC Chair ensures the academic units provide un-prioritized lists of potential reviewers as stated in the Manual, as well as their relationship to the reviewer. Additionally, requiring external reviewers to submit signed conflict of interest statements would reinforce to both parties the importance of an impartial and objective review, and help ensure compliance with the TAC is adequately documented.

### Management Response:

The value and impact of an evaluation of a program by an external review depends in large measure upon the extent of the potential reviewers' specialized knowledge of related programs. Experts in the field are recognized by programs and individuals are considered as possible reviewers because of their knowledge and expertise. However, even among a set of such experts, some may be able to provide uniquely insightful reviews because of their particular professional background experience. Hence, we will continue to require that reviewers with relevant background experience are drawn from programs that the UTA program identifies as peer or aspirational peers, preferably situated in Tier 1 universities. We believe a program should rank 4-5 potential reviewers in terms of their fit to these criteria and that we should give preference to more highly ranked candidates. To minimize concern with potential conflicts of interest we propose to have programs provide a ranked list of such candidates that includes an explicit written justification for their ranking based on those criteria. Potential reviewers will be contacted in order of rank until two are found who are willing and able to serve as reviewers. To further protect the review process from potential conflict of interest, we will create and then require these reviewers sign a conflict of interest statement indicating that they have no conflicts. These conflicts of interest statements will be reviewed by the Dean of the Graduate School and Assistant Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Policy, and they must be accepted before the individual is formally offered the opportunity to review the program. Those with conflicts will not receive an offer to review the program.

**Observation 1 – Selection of External Reviewers (Continued)**

High

Target Implementation Date:

May 1, 2023

Responsible Party:

Dean of the Graduate School

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), requires each public institution of higher education have a process to review the quality and effectiveness of existing degree programs, and for the purpose of continuous improvement. The TAC requires public universities to review all master's and doctoral programs every ten years, and while not required, UTA has extended this requirement to undergraduate programs as well. UTA developed a Manual that details the processes and requirements for performing reviews; however, we found several areas where the manual did not align with internal processes, or the information was not current:

### Strategic and Assessment Plans

The Manual states that the Provost will charge the academic unit with developing, in consultation with the program's academic dean, a concise strategic plan and an assessment plan that addresses the review's most significant issues. However, for all three programs that went through the APR process during the 2020-21 academic year, no strategic plans or assessment plans were developed. According to the Senior Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Policy, academic units are required to have a response to address the recommendations, but some colleges and departments do not have strategic plans so these could not be incorporated into it. However, our interpretation of this provision is different, and it should be clarified in the Manual.

### Executive Summary

The Manual requires that an executive summary be prepared along with a self-study; however, for two of the three program reviews (66%) that occurred during the 2020-21 academic year, an executive summary was not included with the self-study. According to the Assistant Vice Provost for Institutional Effectiveness and Reporting, the program review documents for undergraduate programs are not submitted externally, and the self-studies were reviewed without request of a summary; therefore, it was not necessary to request them.

### Outdated Information

- The Manual requires programs to be reviewed every seven years; although, the requirement was changed in the TAC to every 10 years, effective May 29, 2018.
- The Manual requires the selection of three of the program review committee members to be made by a position whose title is no longer in use.
- The TAC requires two additional measures be included in program reviews for professional doctoral degrees; however, these measures were not included in the Manual.

## Observation 2 – Program Review Manual (Continued)

Medium

Keeping the Manual up-to-date helps ensure that the current processes are clearly detailed, are consistently followed, and include all relevant requirements.

### Recommendation:

We recommend that the Dean of the Graduate School update the Manual to reflect the current processes, requirements, and responsibilities. Additionally, any differences in procedures or requirements between undergraduate and graduate programs should be clearly stated in the Manual.

### Management Response:

The Graduate School agrees with this recommendation, and we see opportunities to address other observations noted in the audit, by clarifying requirements and procedures for external reviewers, clarifying the roles of parties and stakeholders in the review process, and encouraging reviews that are substantive, strategic, and reflective in nature. There are also opportunities to encourage stronger use of IT and data resources to relieve some of the burden in creating departmental self-studies.

A consultative process will be needed to produce an updated Program Review Manual. Necessary stakeholders include the Graduate Assembly and Undergraduate Assembly (as representatives of the academic programs), the Graduate School, University Analytics, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Reporting, and the Office of Academic Planning and Policy.

We target the 3rd Quarter of 2023 for completion of a final draft, recognizing that minor revisions and formatting could continue into the 4th Quarter without compromising implementation of the new manual for reviews taking place in the 2023-2024 Academic Year. Initial consultations with stakeholders will take place in the 4th Quarter of 2022 and 1st Quarter of 2023, with substantial drafting taking place in the 2nd Quarter of 2023, followed by stakeholder review and revision in the 3rd Quarter of 2023.

### Target Implementation Date:

May 1, 2023

### Responsible Party:

Dean of the Graduate School

## Observation 3 – Program Review Committee Member Composition

Medium

The Program Review Manual states that the minimum membership of the PRC include one faculty member selected from both the Undergraduate Assembly and the Graduate Assembly, two members selected by the Faculty Senate, and three members selected by the Graduate School Vice Provost for Academic Programs and Curricula. PRC members are to serve three-year staggered terms and may be re-elected. In our review, we found that:

- A master list of current and past PRC members and dates served is not maintained.
- The PRC member selection process is informal, and documentation is not maintained supporting the selection of PRC members by their respective groups.
- PRC members are not currently serving staggered terms.

Tracking and documenting PRC membership helps ensure new PRC members are selected every three years, serving staggered terms as required by the Manual, and that the selections are made by the appropriate groups.

### Recommendation:

We recommend that the PRC Chair work with the Office of the Provost to track and document member selection and terms.

### Management Response:

We agree that a record of Program Review Committee membership and terms be maintained. However, since this a University Committee, records should be maintained by the Provost's Office in parallel with current documentation of other University Committees. Selection of members requires interaction with relevant stakeholders and is managed by the PRC Chair and Provost's Office staff as needed. The process will be documented and codified in revised Program Review Manual.

### Target Implementation Date:

November 1, 2022

### Responsible Party:

Dean of the Graduate School



## Observation 4 – New Programs and Changes to Existing Programs

Medium

When a school or college wants to add a new program or make changes to an existing program, there is a proposal review and approval workflow that includes a number of internal reviews and approvals. This includes the Department Chair and College Dean; the appropriate curriculum committees and the Undergraduate or Graduate assembly; as well as the Provost, CFO, and President. Once all internal approvals have been obtained, the final package is reviewed by Institutional Effectiveness and Reporting (IER) before being sent out for external review and approval by UT System, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), and SACSCOC.

All regulatory requirements were met, and external approvals were obtained; however, we noted:

- The internal approval process and the related documentation is generally informal.
- Department and college level approvals are not maintained by the Office of the Provost and had to be obtained directly from the department submitting the change.
- The minutes from the Undergraduate and Graduate Assemblies did not always enumerate the programs being approved.
- Since formal signatures are not required in certain cases, it was difficult to determine if approvals were granted.

The Office of the Provost has recognized the limitations of the current process and started a new project with a third-party vendor to develop an electronic workflow within CourseLeaf (an Academic Catalog Management solution currently utilized by UTA to manage course inventory workflow). The new project will extend the use of the application to include new programs and changes to existing programs. According to the Assistant Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Policy, the new workflow will formalize the process and document all the approvals. If there are any changes made during the process, it will reroute those items back through the necessary approvals.

Formalizing the process for obtaining and maintaining documentation of review and approvals will help ensure that the process to implement a new program or make changes to an existing program are consistently followed and all required approvals are obtained.

## Observation 4 – New Programs and Changes to Existing Programs (Continued)

Medium

### Recommendation:

We recommend that the Office of the Provost continue to work towards implementing the new electronic workflow in order to document and maintain all required approvals.

### Management Response:

The electronic workflow through CourseLeaf for program modifications and new program proposals is on track to complete development in Fall 2022.

### Target Implementation Date:

February 1, 2023

### Responsible Party:

Assistant Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Policy

## Observation 5 – Non-Substantive Change Procedure

Medium

Occasionally, minor changes need to be made to an existing academic program, or what is considered a non-substantial change to the THECB. These can include changes to the credit hour requirements, revisions to the degree title or designation, or a change of the classification of instructional (CIP) code.

These types of changes typically arise from a program committee and, after review and approval by the Departmental Chair and Academic Dean, they are presented to the Provost. If these changes are acceptable, the Provost consults with IER to determine if they must notify UT System and THECB of the proposed change. If notification is required, IER and the Provost work with the proposing program committee to prepare the appropriate Notification Form. The completed form is signed by the Provost, and IER submits the signed notification using the UTS Online proposal submission portal.

UTA addresses substantive changes to academic programs in policy, procedure, and a flowchart. However, there is no policy or procedure that details the process and requirements for non-substantive program changes. There were 14 program changes to existing programs that were approved by the THECB between July 2019 and October 2021 (27 months), and all were considered non-substantive changes. A well documented process helps ensure that the process is applied consistently to all program changes, and that all required approvals are obtained.

### Recommendation:

We recommend that the Office of the Provost develop a written procedure that details the process and requirements for making non-substantive changes to existing programs.

### Management Response:

We will develop the recommended procedure and implement it into the CourseLeaf program modifications electronic workflow.

### Target Implementation Date:

February 1, 2023

### Responsible Party:

Assistant Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Policy

# Background, Audit Objective, and Scope & Methodology

## Background

In order to maintain the integrity of academic programs at Texas public universities, the TAC requires all graduate and doctoral programs to be reviewed every 10 years. Additionally, there are a number of requirements that must be met and approvals that must be obtained to add a new degree program or make changes to an existing degree program.

## Audit Objective

The objective of the audit was to determine whether processes are in place to help ensure an adequate focus on scholarly ethics and academic excellence. Specifically, we determined whether policies and processes were sufficient to ensure:

- New programs met all external requirements and received all required approvals prior to implementation.
- Changes to existing programs were made in accordance with policy and in compliance with regulations.
- Academic program reviews were conducted in accordance with policy and in compliance with regulations.

## Audit Scope and Methodology

The scope of the audit included the following as well as a review of related policies and procedures:

- New academic programs implemented during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 academic years.
- Program changes implemented during the 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22 academic years.
- Academic Program Reviews occurring during the 2020-21 academic year.

Audit methodology included interviewing key personnel, reviewing processes, performing analytical procedures, and testing of supporting documentation.

Our examination was conducted in accordance with guidelines set forth in the Institute of Internal Auditors' *International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing*.

## Ranking Criteria – Academic Process/Operational Audit

### Ranking Criteria

All findings in this report are ranked based on an assessment of applicable qualitative, operational control and quantitative risk factors, as well as the probability of a negative outcome occurring if the risk is not adequately mitigated. The criteria for these rankings are as follows:

Priority	An issue identified by an internal audit that, if not addressed on a timely basis, could directly impact achievement of a strategic or important operational objective of UTA or the UT System as a whole.
High	A finding identified by an internal audit that is considered to have a medium to high probability of adverse effects to UTA either as a whole or to a significant college/school/unit level.
Medium	A finding identified by an internal audit that is considered to have a low to medium probability of adverse effects to UTA either as a whole or to a college/school/unit level.
Low	A finding identified by an internal audit that is considered to have minimal probability of adverse effects to UTA either as a whole or to a college/school/unit level.

None of the findings from this review are deemed as a “Priority” finding.

## Distribution – Academic Process/Operational Audit

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