



# NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

## PROGRAM REVIEW OF CORE FACILITIES

### Reviewer's Guide

[Shared and Core Facilities](#) | [Northwestern University Office for Research](#) |  
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## I. Executive Summary

The overriding goals of Program Review are to evaluate the unit, to make a determination as to how well it is meeting strategic goals, and to provide recommendations that will further help the unit to achieve those goals. The latter may include a plan to strengthen and/or consolidate its function with other units on campus. ***Please note that while opportunities requiring additional resources may be identified during the self-study, the document should not be regarded as a tool to persuade colleagues or the administration to allocate additional resources to the program. Every effort should be made to identify areas from which resources should be reallocated toward a better use (i.e. one that contributes more toward the strategic goals of the unit).***

This Guide provides an overview of the history, purpose, administration and processes involved in Program Review. It also describes the process of selecting reviewers and their roles in Program Review. The review committee includes Northwestern faculty who represent the interests of the University and provide advice and insights regarding University policies and procedures. The committee also includes external members who provide disciplinary expertise and a broader perspective on the issues representing interests of the field at large. External members are responsible for generating a written assessment (report) of the unit that includes input from internal committee members. The report is shared with the unit and central administration who work together on a plan to implement its recommendations. This Guide includes information about reimbursement of expenses, and the importance of confidentiality in the process.

We hope that you will find your participation in Program Review an informative and rewarding experience.

## II. History of Program Review

Program Review at Northwestern University began in 1985 as a faculty initiative to achieve and maintain the highest standards within all academic and administrative units of the university. The central administration and General Faculty Committee (now the Faculty Senate) collaborated to create a systematic review process that has been continually adapted to the changing needs of Northwestern.

Since it began, more than 400 academic and administrative unit reviews have occurred and nearly 700 faculty and administrators have participated in the process as members of the Program Review Council or Review Subcommittees. In addition, more than 700 highly regarded experts from other universities and organizations have visited our campuses to serve as external reviewers. The reviews have been conducted in cycles lasting seven to ten years. After the completion of each cycle, a hiatus year is taken during which the process itself is reviewed and, at its request, the Board of Trustees may also be reviewed.

The evaluation of the program review process following the third cycle affirmed its value for both academic and administrative units and made twenty-four specific recommendations for further refinements to the process for the fourth cycle. These focused on the areas of benchmarks and data, communication, follow-up, and general process improvement. An important objective was to further engage deans and vice presidents throughout the process, including the identification of key issues and follow-up on the implementation of recommendations. Another point of emphasis in the revisions for the fourth cycle is increasing the use of data that can help measure indicators of a unit's quality, strengthen strategic planning, and help ensure the unit's goals are aligned with those of its school / division as well as the university at large.

## III. Purpose of Program Review

Northwestern as an institution has had a longstanding commitment to continuous improvement and Program Review is an important mechanism for that goal. The purpose of Program Review is to assess each unit's quality and effectiveness, to stimulate planning and improvement, and to encourage strategic development in ways that further the University's priorities. Since the majority of the units to be reviewed have participated in previous cycles, there is certainly an opportunity to build on specific recommendations and strategic goals that have been previously identified. However, as the University is a highly dynamic environment, each review cycle is also an opportunity to re-examine where each unit is today with the purpose of re-positioning it for strength in the coming years.

Done properly, Program Review requires a commitment of time and effort from all involved. In light of the costs of resources required, it is appropriate to ask, "Why should the University continue to engage in program review?" This has been the fundamental question that drives the review of the program review process at the end of each cycle. And each time, the value of Program Review has been affirmed because the benefits of doing it outweigh the costs. Further, the President, Provost, and Board of Trustees have indicated that they uniformly value Program Review's insights into unit performance and utilize the findings as key inputs in University-wide strategic planning and decision-making.

***The benefits of Program Review include:***

- ***Providing opportunities for self-study, strategic planning, and change in units.***

Program Review ensures that each unit systematically takes time to step back from everyday challenges to evaluate its strengths, weaknesses, and progress in order to create a strong foundation for the development of future strategic plans and priorities.

- ***Facilitating continuous improvement.***

The specific recommendations included in the implementation agreements resulting from Program Review help units benchmark progress in critical areas.

- ***Providing information utilized in area-wide strategic planning and decision-making.***

Recommendations derived from Program Review are systematically integrated into the plans and budget requests for the various schools and administrative areas.

- ***Providing information utilized in university-wide strategic planning and decision-making.***

Program Review has created a base of knowledge and shared understanding that provides a critical backdrop to all University decision-making processes, including the setting of priorities, hiring plans, budget setting, space allocations, fundraising priorities, and program sizing.

- ***Encouraging better communication and collaboration.***

Program Review is designed to foster communication both within the unit as well as between the unit and central administration. The process also provides an opportunity for each member of the unit to provide feedback to external reviewers.

- ***Providing candid assessment by external experts.***

Program Review provides a mechanism for rigorous evaluation and feedback by experts in the field that are valued by both the unit and the administration. (In some cases, the department or dean has used the panel of outside experts for continuing consultations after the review.)

- ***Fostering interdisciplinary understanding and socialization.***

Faculty and administrators frequently remark on the improved understanding among related units thanks to the involvement of internal subcommittees. A similar benefit is seen in faculty-administration relations as a result of faculty subcommittees gaining a deeper understanding of the administrative operations of the university.

- ***Fostering appreciation of complexity and diversity of the University.***

Whether it is the variance in governance between departments or the details of what drives excellence across varied fields, Program Review makes these differences more visible and helps the university strategically address these variations in constructive ways.

- ***Providing increased external visibility.***

External reviewers often note the unanticipated strengths they observe at Northwestern or comment on the deepening of their respect for the institution as a result of their visit. The Program Review process also fosters dialogue amongst exemplary peers about the most effective ways to assess the quality of the university.

- ***Providing accountability to the Board of Trustees.***

Each year, review summaries, implementation agreements, and follow-up reports are provided to the Board of Trustees. The candor and commitment represented by this effort provides an important assurance to the Board that the University is evaluating itself and continually striving for improvement. The Board's faith in this process is also evidenced by its request to be reviewed at the end of each cycle.

## IV. Program Review Administration

**Program Review of core facilities is administered by the Office for Research.** Each review involves a committee comprised of 2 senior faculty members working in tandem with 2 external expert members. The Chair and members of the review committee are appointed by the Associate VP for Research (AVPR) in consultation with the Executive Director of Research Facilities (EDRF) and the Unit. Members of the committee *cannot* be members of the unit under review (including oversight committees) and must also be free of any other potential conflicts of interest. The AVPR is given the opportunity to veto potential members if she/he believes such conflicts may exist. One faculty member of the committee is usually from a cognate field or related area and the other member is from an area that is not directly related to the unit under review.

The EDRF provides administrative and support services for Program Review of core facilities, and is responsible for coordinating the activities and assuring completion of each review.

## V. Review Scheduling

Two or three core facilities are reviewed annually. The AVPR and EDRF select the facilities to be reviewed in consultation with the Office for Research's Core Facility Advisory Board (comprised of AVPRs, research deans and one senior core director from each school). To facilitate cooperation and coordination across campuses, some facilities are reviewed together based on functional compatibility (e.g., imaging, informatics, genomics, etc.) rather than organizational lines (e.g., department, school). The EDRF will consult with units about scheduling options, and will make the final determination on scheduling. While most preferences can be accommodated, some alterations in the typical schedule (see Timeline below) may occur in order to accommodate participants' schedules.

## VI. Review Timeline

Program Review of a core facility takes place over a 9-month period, spanning Spring-Summer-Fall. Annual follow-ups are then conducted until all issues identified have been sufficiently addressed. Typically, preparation for the review begins in the Spring after units are formally notified in the Spring of the year before. The actual review is conducted during the Summer of the following year.

*An accelerated review schedule may be possible depending upon reviewer availability. Units are asked to notify the Executive Director of Research Facilities of this preference in advance.*

<b>TIMELINE</b>	<b>ACTIVITIES</b> (performed by entity in <i>italics</i> ; reports listed in <b>BOLD</b> )
Spring (year prior to review)	<i>EDRF</i> notifies Unit Head (Faculty Director or whomever is directly responsible for the facility) and key stakeholders (research dean, dept chair, center leadership) that Program Review will take place the following fiscal year.
March 1 (year of review)	<i>Unit Head</i> submits list of potential internal and external reviewers to AVPR/EDRF.
March 15	<i>AVPR/EDRF</i> select internal and external reviewers (Review Committee) based upon Unit's nominations and other relevant selection criteria.
April	<i>AVPR/EDRF</i> host kick-off luncheon for members of the Unit to learn about Program Review and to provide an opportunity to ask questions about the process.
May 1	<i>Unit Head</i> submits <b>Annual Report</b> .
May 15	In coordination with AVPR/EDRF, <i>Unit Head and faculty advisory committee</i> identify key issues to focus on during Program Review.
June 1	<i>Unit Head</i> submits <b>Vision Statement</b> and <b>5-year Strategic Plan</b> to AVPR/EDRF incorporating key issues.
June 15	<i>AVPR/EDRF</i> provide Annual Report, Vision Statement and 5-year Strategic Plan (and PR Guide, etc.) to Review Committee approximately one month prior to on-site review.
July	External reviewers visit campus and <i>Review Committee</i> meets with faculty, staff and administrators of Unit and central administrators overseeing core facilities.
10 Days After Visit	<i>External reviewers</i> submit <b>Preliminary Report</b> with recommendations to internal committee members.
August	<i>Internal committee members</i> review Preliminary Report and follow-up with external reviewers and Unit Head on any outstanding issues that need further clarification – and modify the report as needed noting any edits by internal committee members. A <b>Minority Report</b> may be submitted (in Addendum) by any committee member that disagrees with the Preliminary Report and its recommendations.
September 1	<i>Internal reviewers</i> distribute Preliminary Report to Unit Head for fact checking. Unit will have until September 15 to correct any discrepancies and communicate them to the reviewers who will incorporate them into the Final Report.
October 1	<i>Review Committee</i> submits <b>Final Report</b> to the Unit Head, AVPR, EDRF and other stakeholders (research dean, center leadership) for review.
October 15	<i>Unit Head</i> coordinates with Unit staff and advisory committee to review the Final Report. <i>Unit Head and advisory committee</i> develop a written response to the Final Report - <b>Implementation Plan</b> – addressing each point and how each recommendation will be addressed.
November 1	<i>Unit Head</i> submits Implementation Plan to AVPR/EDRF and other stakeholders.
mid-November	<i>AVPR/EDRF</i> organize meeting with Unit Head and other stakeholders to discuss Implementation Plan and timeline of action.

## VII. Process Overview

The program review process includes the following steps, each of which is discussed in more detail below:

1. Notification
2. Kick-Off Luncheon
3. Data Elements
  - a. Annual Report
  - b. Vision statement
  - c. 5-Yr Strategic Plan
4. Identification of Key Issues
5. Review Committee Selection Process
6. Review Committee Visit and Interviews
7. Review Committee Preliminary Report
8. Review Committee Final Report
9. Submission and Distribution of Final Report
10. Submission of Implementation Plan
11. Implementation Plan Meetings
12. Communication of Review Outcome
13. Annual Follow-Up

### **Notification**

In the Spring of the year prior to program review, the EDRF notifies the unit that it will be reviewed in the following fiscal year.

### **Kick-Off Luncheon**

In April of the review year, EDRF's office schedules a Kick-Off luncheon for members of the unit on a mutually convenient date for its Unit Head, advisory committee, and staff. The Kick-Off luncheon is an informational session during which the unit is encouraged to pose questions about the process, requirements, and expectations.

### **Data Elements**

Data elements help to frame the review, enhance the self-study process, and lead toward a cycle of continuous improvement. Three data elements are used in program review of core facilities: (A) annual report, (B) vision statement, and (C) 5-year strategic plan.

#### ***A. Annual Report***

Due May 1, the Annual Report is a key data element that is submitted annually to the EDRF. Components of the Annual Report are the following:

- Administration



- Research and Technical Staff
- Facility Publications and Grants
- Resource Management
- Operating Support Request
- Customer Satisfaction Survey
- Customer Base
- Customer Publications and Grants
- Educational Activities
- Outreach Activities
- Communication of Services
- Self-Assessment

Instructions for compiling the Annual Report are found on the Core Facilities website: <https://facilities.research.northwestern.edu/operations#annualreports> and can be accessed by logging into the site.

### ***B. Vision Statement***

The Vision Statement is a concise description of the unit's overall mission and goals (one page maximum). It includes sufficient information to allow the non-specialist to understand who the target audience is and how the facility is meeting their needs. Prior to submission, it is expected that the unit will work with that the AVPR/EDRF and its faculty advisory committee to identify key issues to focus on during Program Review. The unit will then incorporate these issues into the vision statement and submit it by June 1 to the AVPR and EDRF.

### ***C. 5-Year Strategic Plan***

The 5-Yr Strategic Plan is a more detailed description of how the unit plans to accomplish its overall mission and goals (three pages maximum). This might include adding new instruments and services, new personnel and technologies, and/or working with other core facilities to provide coordinated services. Prior to submission, it is expected that the unit will work with the AVPR/EDRF and its faculty advisory committee to identify key issues to focus on during Program Review. The unit will then incorporate these issues into the Strategic Plan and submit it by June 1 to the AVPR and EDRF.

The EDRF's Office will provide additional financial analyses (charts, etc.) and copies of annual feedback to the Unit for each year since the previous program review (or since the facility's creation, whichever is relevant).

### **Identification of Key Issues**

By May 15, the unit and its faculty advisory committee will provide the AVPR/EDRF with a list of key issues to be addressed during program review. These should be the critical issues currently facing the unit as well as those anticipated over the next three-to-five years. The AVPR/EDRF will review the list and provide feedback highlighting any additional issues that should be addressed. This feedback should be incorporated into the Vision Statement and 5-Yr Strategic Plan due June 1. While additional issues will certainly arise during program review, the initial identification of issues can give significant early focus to the review process, although the scope of the review is certainly not limited to these issues.

## **Review Committee Selection Process**

The Review Committee is comprised of two internal and two external reviewers. The AVPR and EDRF are responsible for selecting internal and external reviewers (by March 15). Reviewers should be faculty or senior staff who are familiar with the operation of core facilities but who do not have a conflict of interest with the unit under review.

The unit is responsible for nominating individuals to serve as external reviewers by March 1. Reviewers should be eminent leaders in their field and come from highly reputable peer departments and institutions. Units are asked to avoid any conflict of interest in their nominations and explain anything that might have the appearance of a conflict of interest. Units may also delineate reviewers by their areas of expertise and ask that the team be comprised of reviewers from each group to ensure coverage of sub-fields within the unit. Finally, units may request that a reviewer from a previous cycle serve again, if appropriate.

The Review Committee provides a written evaluation of the unit based upon a review of the unit's data elements, interviews conducted during a visit to campus, and site visit to the facility. The expertise and objectivity of external reviewers has been relied upon heavily by the University and is often cited by units under review as a particular strength of the Program Review process.

## **Review Committee Visit and Interviews**

Prior to their visit, the Review Committee receives this Reviewer's Guide and data elements. They are also provided with reports and recommendations from the previous review, if applicable, and are asked to study all materials prior to their visit. In addition, the reviewers are given contact information of all participants in advance of their visit, in case they want to ask them questions or solicit comments directly, if appropriate (especially in situations where someone will be unavailable during the visit).

Upon arrival, external and internal reviewers meet for dinner to share preliminary assessments and discuss key issues related to the facility. The following day, the committee interviews the unit's leadership and staff, faculty advisory committee, business administrators, central administrators, and other stakeholders appropriate to the review. The Office of the EDRF is responsible for coordinating the schedules of all participants involved in the review. Whenever possible, meetings with central administrators are consolidated into a single session to permit more time for unit interaction with the reviewers.

The visit is usually one and a half days in length and includes a visit to the facility as well as time for the Review Committee to meet privately at the end of the day (usually over dinner) to discuss impressions and outline their preliminary report. Depending upon needs and schedules, the visit can be extended as needed. After returning from the site visit, external and internal reviewers are encouraged to continue sharing ideas with each other as they develop their report.

## **Review Committee Preliminary Report**

Within ten days of the visit, external reviewers provide a written assessment - *Preliminary Report* – to internal reviewers assessing the strengths, weaknesses, personnel, leadership, and opportunities for the unit. Internal reviewers proof the report and identify any issues that need further clarification. Reviewers are encouraged to make the report and recommendations as specific as possible and to remain in contact throughout this process to ensure consistency and cooperation. A

joint Preliminary Report endorsed by all reviewers is strongly encouraged, but a *Minority Report* is acceptable if any committee member wishes to provide advice that adds or retracts from the Preliminary Report. Any differences of opinion that cannot be resolved between reviewers will be clearly documented.

### **Review Committee Final Report**

By September 1, internal reviewers distribute the Preliminary Report to the Unit Head for fact-checking. Though program review incorporates data elements into the process, certain statements or recommendations will inevitably be based upon perceptions. Occasionally, despite the best efforts of reviewers, factual errors based on *misperceptions* occur in the final drafts of reports. In the interest of creating a valid and trustworthy report, the unit head will be given an opportunity to review the report to ensure that there are no factual errors. The unit will have until September 15 to correct any factual errors and report them to the Review Committee who will incorporate them into the Final Report.

### **Submission and Distribution of Final Report**

The Review Committee submits the *Final Report* to the Unit Head and central administrators (AVPR/EDRF, research deans, center directors) no later than October 1. The report is considered confidential and, generally, is *not* to be copied or distributed. All members of the unit and advisory committee will have the opportunity to provide comments on the report to the Unit Head. The Unit Head is encouraged to incorporate these comments into the Implementation Plan.

### **Submission of Implementation Plan**

By November 1, the Unit Head submits a response to the Report and its recommendations and submits it to the AVPR and EDRF. The response, or *Implementation Plan*, is intended (1) to address each issue raised in the Report and (2) to describe clear action items that address each issue.

### **Implementation Plan Meeting**

In mid-November (or as calendars permit), the Unit Head, AVPR, EDRF and other stakeholders (research dean, center director) meet to discuss the Final Report, recommendations, and proposed Implementation Plan. The group will discuss each action item, add any missing items that need attention, and reconcile who is responsible for carrying out each of them (unit, central administration, research dean, center director). Each stakeholder is encouraged to be explicit about any resource commitments they are willing (or not willing) to make. The EDRF will document the outcome of this meeting and share it with all participants for feedback on accuracy and approval.

### **Communication of Review Outcome**

A summary of findings and agreements for each unit is presented by the EDRF at the next meeting of the Core Facility Advisory Board (comprised of AVPRs, research deans and one senior core director from each school). These summaries are also provided to the Review Committee. In addition, they receive a report on the progress demonstrated during the annual follow-up for those units reviewed during prior years.

### **Annual Follow-Up**

One year after the Implementation Plan is approved, the EDRF solicits a progress report from the Unit Head. The progress report is shared with the Review Committee and Core Facility Advisory Board. The unit receives written feedback on their progress-to-date following that meeting. This

feedback also includes a determination as to whether another formal follow-up report will be required the next year or whether all key issues have been adequately addressed. Subsequent annual follow-ups (if necessary) are then carried out in the same manner. All follow-up reports are also shared with the same aforementioned groups.

## VIII. Conclusion

The goal of program review is to encourage improvements in the quality of each unit at the University by providing a comprehensive and collaborative process to assess each unit on:

- Current strengths and weaknesses of the unit.
- Areas of comparative opportunity.
- Key issues to address in order to maximize opportunities.
- Important future developments in the discipline or profession that need to be addressed in strategic planning.
- The relationship of existing faculty and staff resources to these opportunities.
- The quality of leadership in the unit.
- Potential areas of cross-unit collaboration where the University and units' resources could be leveraged.
- The adequacy of other resources to carry out the mission of the unit.

The product of this process should be plans which are explicit, realistic, and viable for helping each unit continuously improve and reach their highest aspirations.

## IX. Appendices

### Honorarium and Reimbursement

An honorarium of \$1,000.00 is provided to each external reviewer, in addition to covering all justifiable expenses (e.g., meals, ground transportation, hotel internet charges). There is a university-mandated \$65.00 limit per meal (including alcohol). External reviewers are reimbursed for expenses associated with the review and must submit a "Visitor's Travel Expense Form" with associated receipts and an "IRS form W-9". These forms are provided with the initial package of materials. It is helpful for these forms to be submitted as early as possible to expedite payments.

#### Forms:

- Visitor's Travel and Expense Form (attached for external reviewers)
- [IRS Form W-9](#)

### Confidentiality Agreement

In the course of conducting each review, the goal is to obtain the most candid and accurate information possible. Also, the aim of program review is not to publicly embarrass a facility if problems are discovered, but rather, to find a way to correct them. To achieve these goals, judiciously maintaining confidentiality - both regarding individual perspectives that are shared with you, as well as findings and recommendations - is an integral aspect of the program review process. Therefore, anything you hear or that is discussed with you in the course of the review should be considered confidential and not discussed with others outside of the scope of the review process. Confidentiality

is of particular importance during any group meetings and it should be emphasized to the participants that they, too, should not share with anyone else, the remarks made during the meeting. This expectation of confidentiality exists not only while the review is being conducted, but also once the review has been completed.

Of course, edited program review reports and resulting agreements are shared with directors and advisors of the respective facility (minus any confidential addenda as necessary) and with the University's senior leadership. Facilities may choose to share their review materials (for example, a facility may find that sharing the report with potential strategic partners could be beneficial).