Self-Study Leveraging: The QPC Model for Comprehensive Academic Program Review.

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If we focus only on program efficiency, we will merely have a prosperous university, not a great one. Economic growth is the means, not the definition, of a great university.

Paraphrased from Collins 2005

The past twenty years have brought about a paradigm shift in higher education. During that time, we have changed our focus from what we want to teach to what students need to learn. The academy's position of unassailable authority has been usurped by public cries for transparency, accountability, quality assurance, and quality improvement. To cut expenses, and therefore deter the rising cost of postsecondary education, institutions have borrowed best business practices and started focusing on productivity, efficiency, and reallocating resources.

These shifts produced a mixed bag of results and a perplexing dichotomy of institutional priorities that seem to pit quality and fiscal responsibility against one another in ways that erode campus culture, challenge shared governance, and often create adversarial relationships between faculty and administration. In the end, it is incumbent upon us to find ways to advance both quality and efficiency if we are to deliver on the promise of education for our students. And, it would be best if we could reach this balance through processes that improve university culture, rather than through processes that erode trust and divide constituency groups.

To accomplish this goal, many have turned to Dickeson's (1999) seminal plan for prioritizing academic programs and reallocating resources in an effort to achieve a strategic balance that strengthens institutions. Unlike the typical program review rotation found in most institutions, Dickeson's comprehensive approach assesses all programs simultaneously, which allows for cross-program comparisons. Dickeson further distinguishes his approach from program review by explaining that his model focuses on program prioritization and resource reallocation, rather than quality enhancements or other program improvements.

Dickeson's model may be quite useful for administrators faced with saving their institutions or restoring vitality to their institutions through program cuts and cost reductions. However, the reactive nature of the model may be less useful for administrators interested in developing a long-term resource allocation plan designed to sustain stable environments and support an evolving mix of high-quality, market-smart, mission-driven programs. These administrators need a transparent, comprehensive program review process driven by a concern for quality improvement, but also grounded in diligent attention to the market and fiscal realities.

How the QPC Model Leverages the Self-Study

Most campus constituents are well aware that The Higher Learning Commission's Criteria for Accreditation revolve around how well an institution supports its stated mission. Particular to this issue, the questions becomes, does the institution support quality academic offerings across a viable program mix? If not, what plans does the institution have to address those quality concerns? Through systematic assessment of program QPC—quality, potential to serve students, and cost-related variables—a study grounded in the QPC model results in answers to both of these important questions.

The QPC model for comprehensive program review provides a transferable template for assessing academic programs and outlines a process that nests program review within the scheduled self-study process, which makes the idea of program review less threatening. The QPC procedure leverages the self-study process and takes program assessment to the next level by making it comprehensive and aimed at quality improvement. This approach makes the QPC model much less threatening and divisive than initiatives launched to reallocate academic resources—which has become code language for cutting programs and faculty lines.

Inception of the QPC Model

The QPC model was envisioned, developed, and implemented by the vice president of academic affairs (VPAA) and deans at Millikin University from 2005 to 2007 (Comstock et al. 2006). With financial stability firmly in place and financial viability on the horizon, Millikin's leadership became engaged in determining how best to chart the appropriate future course for the institution. Toward that end, the board charged the finance VP and the academic VP with conducting a cost study of academic programs in order to determine how resources might be reallocated to support cost-effective programs. As would be expected, this cost study was not well received by the academic division. At the request of
the VPAA, and with the full support of the president, cabinet, deans, and the board, the cost study was incorporated within a more robust study of program effectiveness, which included assessment of program quality and potential, as well as costs. This study was then nested within the institution’s mission-centered self-study processes. Thus, in keeping with The Higher Learning Commission’s expectation, the QPC model was born out of a desire to ensure that resource allocation would protect the institution’s primary mission by enhancing program quality and program potential to attract, retain, and serve students, while still considering the importance of a cost-effective program mix.

Defining Program Quality, Potential, and Costs

The QPC model is a transparent, inclusive process for comprehensive program review based on systematic assessment of program quality, potential, and costs. Recognizing quality, potential, and costs as complex multidimensional variables, the model includes adoptable conceptual and operation definitions of the dimensions supporting each variable. Although campuses employing the QPC model can and should begin with generalized definitions of program quality, potential, and cost, an important first step in the QPC-related assessment is to work collaboratively with deans, department chairs, and program directors to create institution-specific definitions of the variables. In this way, those responsible for delivering academic programs contribute openly to the criteria used to evaluate the programs, which engenders buy-in and quells fears of administrative bias. Table 1 illustrates the key components of the quality, potential, cost definitions utilized at Millikin. These criteria can serve as the place to start for other institutions.

Table 1. Elements of the QPC Model Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Potential</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External validation</td>
<td>National and local demand</td>
<td>Total student credit hours produced per major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty and student inputs</td>
<td>Internal impact</td>
<td>Discount rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student outputs</td>
<td>Essentiality to mission</td>
<td>Cost per student credit hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricula and program factors</td>
<td>Other justification, future opportunities</td>
<td>Contribution margin (net tuition revenue minus direct costs per program)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Operationalizing Quality, Potential, and Costs: The QPC Matrix

The QPC model provides a means of equalizing data so that single variables (such as cost) are not viewed in isolation from other variables that can and should be used to assess program effectiveness and contribution to the university mission. The model also provides a simple shared language for academic leaders to employ when discussing and conducting program assessment. Application of the QPC model results in the ability to situate all academic programs into one cell of a twenty-seven cell matrix, representing a 3 (high, moderate, low quality) X 3 (high, moderate, low potential) X 3 (high, moderate, low cost) design. Placement in the matrix requires careful amalgamation of the qualitative and quantitative data gathered for each key component of the QPC model. Each program should be rated as high, moderate, or low on each of the dimensions of quality, potential, and cost. These subratings can then be used to compute summary ratings for each of the three overarching variables (see Table 2 for a QPC matrix example).

Table 2. Example of QPC Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Cost</td>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Cost</td>
<td>Directing</td>
<td>Art History</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Cost</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Org. Lead.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With all programs incorporated into the QPC matrix, administrators can easily share the comprehensive results and work collaboratively to develop short- and long-range plans for how best to allocate resources to support quality enhancement and program potential. In
the example above, Communication is a high-potential program, with moderate costs (primarily due to fixed costs for equipment), but low quality (primarily due to faculty inputs and curriculum design). In such a case, the institution would likely want to invest resources in the Communication program in order to maximize its potential.

How to Get There: Implementing a QPC Model

The QPC model includes several steps that require appropriate endorsements from the board, senior leadership, and faculty along the way. Therefore, successful implementation of the QPC model requires tenacity, transparency, and a willingness to take the long view.

As a first step in conceptualizing the QPC model, the Millikin VPAA and academic deans invested heavily in reviewing best practices for assessing and prioritizing academic programs. Consequently, those who employ the model can be assured that it incorporates and extends best practices (Comstock et al. 2006; Booker and Hilgenberg 2008). As a second step, the academic leaders identified key components of each QPC dimension and generated the associated QPC analytical matrix, which illustrates low, moderate, and high levels of quality, potential, and costs. These definitions are explained above in hope that they may serve as a useful starting place for other institutions employing the QPC model.

With this initial conceptual work readily available, institutions conducting self-studies can incorporate the QPC model as part of their institutional assessments. Implementation of the process should begin with in-service training for the academic department chairs and program directors. At Millikin, this phase included four two-hour training sessions allowing for a detailed overview and discussion of the QPC dimensions and key components to be used as assessment criteria for each of the three dimensions. Adjustments were made to the assessment criteria based on feedback from chairs and directors. Making these adjustments was key to obtaining buy-in and cooperation.

Once chairs and directors reach agreement on the assessment criteria, they should be charged to utilize the criteria to analyze the effectiveness of their respective academic programs and report their findings. To facilitate the report writing and to promote ease of cross-program comparisons, the central academic leadership should provide detailed instructions and a guiding rubric. Deans should review the QPC reports for their areas and provide feedback based on a rubric established to evaluate the reports. With final reports in hand, deans can submit to the chief academic officer an executive summary of the reports from their respective units. These reports should be shared among the deans and made available for review by all academic chairs and directors.

Working as a collaborative team, the academic leaders should then carefully review the written reports and supporting data in an effort to isolate the most meaningful assessment criteria within each of the three dimensions. These may vary across institutions. By focusing on the variables most likely to differ among programs, the academic programs can be systematically categorized as ranking high, moderate, or low on each of the QPC dimensions. These data should be shared with the department chairs and program directors as an opportunity to provide a validity check for the rankings. Once all appropriate adjustments have been made, programs can be placed in the matrix cells appropriately. After careful analysis, the academic leaders can formulate a market-smart, mission-driven plan for academic program improvement that may or may not involve resource reallocation. This plan then becomes a key component of the institution’s self-study report. If implemented in this way, the QPC model allows institutions to leverage the self-study process to conduct comprehensive program review in a way that enhances, rather than erodes, university culture.

Note

The authors would like to thank their Millikin University colleagues involved in the QPC project, Dean Jim Dahl, Dean Barry Pearson, and former Dean Ralph Czerwinski, for their strong contributions in the development of the QPC model.

References


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