

WCU Program Prioritization Task Force
Final Report, Part II:
Task Force Observations and Recommendations
on University Processes related to
Program Prioritization
June 2013

PROGRAM PRIORITIZATION TASK FORCE FINAL REPORT, PART 2

The Program Prioritization Task Force was created in September 2012 for the purpose of fulfilling the university's promise to better serve the educational needs of our students, state, and region, as stated in Strategic Direction 1 of the 2020 Strategic Plan:

Western Carolina University is committed, first and foremost, to fulfilling its academic mission of providing each student a rigorous and relevant curriculum with learning experiences that emphasize knowledge and skills that are durable, flexible, and transferable. WCU is committed to providing an education grounded in a strong set of foundational knowledge and skills combined with specific practical knowledge in content degree areas, the outcome of which is personal, intellectual, and economic enrichment for each student. WCU seeks to ensure educational opportunities that result in graduates who are prepared for success, who are ready to compete in a challenging, changing, and global environment, and who are committed to contributing to the intellectual, cultural, and economic development of our region and state.

Goal 1.1 of the Plan seeks to "deliver high-quality academic programs (undergraduate, graduate, and professional) designed to promote regional economic and community development." To that end, initiative 1.1.1 promises to "undertake a rigorous and inclusive process to prioritize all undergraduate and graduate programs based on universally applied criteria, including quality, regional need, demand, enrollment trends, retention and graduation rates, and alignment with the University mission and the following integrated curricular focus areas: creative arts, education, environment, health, innovation and technology, and recreation and tourism."

The Program Prioritization Task Force designed and implemented a process to accomplish this initiative. Our charge was to provide a comprehensive review of programs, with a goal of program-specific recommendations to Chancellor David Belcher. These recommendations are found in the Program Prioritization Task Force Report, Part 1 (released in May 2013), including a discussion of our process, as well as comments and evaluations for each of the 130 programs reviewed.

This report, Part 2, includes broad Task Force observations and recommendations on university processes related to program prioritization. Throughout the 2012-2013 academic year, as members of the Task Force became more familiar with the wide range of programs offered at WCU, our view of the university became increasingly holistic. Task Force conversations turned to broader systemic issues and challenges that our university, like most others, faces, including: curricular approval and management; overlapping systems of program review and assessment; program leadership and support; common definitions of academic quality; and, most notably, data collection and analysis. While our programs at WCU are diverse, many of the challenges we share are common. The following observations are offered with the hope that attention to these matters might aid future prioritization efforts, and to encourage faculty and administrators to integrate the principles driving prioritization proactively into decision making at our institution.

The following categories were noted by the Task Force as areas where faculty, staff, and administrators should have conversations about current practices and determine means for improvement:

- I. Data used in program review
- II. Academic quality
- III. Reviewing, prioritizing, assessing programs: streamlining divergent processes
- IV. Curricular approval and management
- V. Program leadership and support
- VI. Barriers to interdisciplinary program evaluation, success, and innovation
- VII. Barriers to student retention
- VIII. Future program prioritization recommendations

The report concludes with a brief executive summary of recommendations in each of these categories.

We appreciate that many of these issues have been the subject of many conversations in departments, colleges, committees, workshops, senate meetings, and various other forums. However, we add our voices to the chorus in seeking improvement so that WCU may become the institution envisioned within the 2020 Strategic Plan.

I: DATA USED IN PROGRAM REVIEW

The Task Force began its process by producing a lengthy list of criteria and possible metrics intended to capture in the most complete fashion possible the quality, centrality, and productivity of the 130 programs under review. However, our criteria ultimately were limited by the types of data that were available at the department and program levels in short timeline of the review.

The data available to the Task Force revealed two primary challenges. First, much of the data provided by the Office of Institutional Planning and Effectiveness (OIPE) and the Registrar was unavailable at the program level (see criteria list in Final Report, Part I, pp. 13-14). The department, rather than the program, was frequently the unit of review in our assembled data; only retention and graduation data were available at the program level. This deficiency made precise and consistent analysis more difficult, particularly given the broad range of programs considered in our prioritization effort. In most cases, the narrative statements provided important program-level context for quantitative metrics. Second, the unavailability of data measuring quality outcomes, particularly in the areas of teaching and scholarship, limited the scope of our review.

Some suggestions for useful data, both quantitative and qualitative, for future program prioritizations include:

- Program-level funding or financial data
- Program-level records of faculty contributions
- Program-level records of Liberal Studies involvement
- Program-level list of courses and course enrollments (averages for 100-900-level)
- Clarification of student status (part time/full time status)
- Creation of data indicators reflecting quality measures (program, faculty, student)
- Aggregation of data for related undergraduate programs (i.e. BA & BS, BFA & BA)
- Uniform recording of student and alumni placements, successes
- Uniform recording of pass rates for programs with required testing or licensure issues
- Program learning objectives
- Official catalog description of program (*available and consulted in the AY 2012-2013 prioritization, but should be provided in all future prioritization data*).

Other problems persisted with individual data sets, such as educational programs within other disciplines (i.e., English Education or Social Sciences Education at the undergraduate level, and a range of MAT/MAEd programs at the graduate level). For example, a program like the MAT/MAEd in English Education had full retention and graduation data at the program-level, but the remainder of the data reflected the program's place as one of a myriad of MAT/MAEd programs. While national accreditation standards necessitate the linkage of educational and disciplinary programs, the Task Force encourages our university administration and program heads to work with the OIPE to determine more effective ways to display this data for the

purposes of assessment and prioritization. Likewise, the minors that were evaluated also proved particularly problematic because of limited data available.

The program prioritization process also revealed considerable inconsistencies with the administration and accounting of pre-majors. Because of these inconsistencies, the Task Force chose not to consider declared pre-majors in its data and deliberations, but did recognize that pre-majors demand additional work on the part of the program. The inclusion of pre-majors also changes the way that retention data may be interpreted. For the future, the Task Force suggests that the university administration consider adopting uniform definitions and policies regarding the use of the pre-major designation.

Finally, there were also notable differences in how departments and programs offer release time to faculty, which created difficulty for the Task Force in interpreting some metrics. This specific issue relates more generally to the lack of clear guidelines regarding how programs should be managed relative to faculty load. This variability was particularly apparent in the calculation of generated/allocated FTE. Viewing this phenomenon from the institutional perspective revealed inconsistent and divergent practices regarding the granting of release time that often adversely affected program metrics. The Task Force recommends that the university consider creating consistent guidelines for the awarding of release time for such responsibilities as program director or participation in creative or engaged projects. Program data, such as allocated/generated FTE, should be reported in a way that appropriately accounts for the effect of release time granted to faculty according to these guidelines.

The program prioritization process revealed the need for improvements in capturing institutional data that will serve as the foundation for future program prioritization events, as well as other review or assessment events. Goal 4 of the UNC Strategic Directions 2013-2018 also notes that data collection and analysis are state priorities for more efficient and effective management of our institutions. Creating a unified, accessible, and flexible data warehouse or dashboard interface will allow program directors, department heads, faculty and administrators to better account for programs' successes and challenges. Data must be readily available and maintained with enough flexibility in presentation and organization that they can be used meaningfully in all review activities.

Our peer institutions which have recently engaged in program prioritization, most notably East Carolina University (ECU), have also faced challenges in producing reliable and high quality institutional data. ECU's University Dashboard provides one model of useful data presentation (<http://performance.ecu.edu/universitydashboard/>). WCU's current development of data warehouse reports should provide a good starting point for a high quality, reliable data set from which a dashboard system can be designed.

In addition to useful models at other institutions within the state, our institution also should consider maximizing the databasing resources that we currently possess, such as Digital Measures. Digital Measures is used variably across our colleges, but a university-wide application of Digital Measures could provide access to comparatively uniform and updated

faculty data for future prioritization efforts. Faculty productivity data, as could be provided through a platform like Digital Measures, were not included in the current prioritization process but could be emphasized in future evaluations.

Recommendation: The Task Force recommends that relevant units within the university undertake a review of institutional data, data management, and data definitions in order to create more effective means of tracking program-level data. Variations or inconsistencies in how release time and pre-majors are included within institutional data should also be examined. Additionally, we recommend that program data reports, like those used in the first phase of program prioritization, be provided regularly (at least once an academic year) to program directors and department heads. If a common set of institutional data is used or consulted regularly, with additional program-specific metrics, as available, we may come to more common agreement on data validity, interpretation, and utility. With these improvements, program development, growth, and change can be monitored and articulated more accurately and consistently.

II: ACADEMIC QUALITY

The Program Prioritization Task Force was charged with establishing a process for prioritizing academic programs based on available institutional data, including both qualitative and quantitative inputs. Implicit in this process was the need to develop a definition of what constituted program quality. Here, the Task Force noted several problems. First, data limitations on programs inhibited our ability to access potential metrics related to program quality. Second, and more importantly, members of the Task Force realized that our discussions and evaluations of quality often were department- or discipline-specific. Phase I narrative statements, therefore, were as essential to our discussions of program quality as any particular metric or metrics.

Recommendation: The Task Force strongly recommends campus-wide conversations to articulate and clarify expectations of program quality and excellence. These conversations could take place in a range of forums, including the Faculty Senate, departmental or college meetings, or other workshops or discussions. Our hope is that discussion of quality will include pedagogical outcomes, the QEP, various success indicators and other student measures, as well as broader measures of program quality. Perhaps quality metrics can be individualized and articulated for broad disciplines or colleges (Arts, STEM, etc.) to better assess, discuss, and define program quality.

III: REVIEWING, PRIORITIZING, ASSESSING PROGRAMS: STREAMLINING DIVERGENT PROCESSES

During one of our open forums, the Task Force heard that WCU would be well served to link program review, assessment, and prioritization processes more efficiently and effectively. Department heads, program directors, deans, staff, and faculty are involved annually in the

production of various reports on program performance. No member of the faculty, staff, or administration wants to spend time working on or reading reports that do not yield actions or feed effective decision-making processes. Each review process must be meaningful, with clear outcomes. Streamlining and strengthening our review processes, including the five-year review, annual program assessments, QEP assessments, and program prioritization, by relying on a similar pool of data and narrative expectations, would create a more meaningful and singular outcome. Ultimately, these processes are meant to create long-term improvements within programs, leading to more positive student learning outcomes, educational enrichments, and mission-central activities.

Likewise, while our process was not linked to the annual budget process, the timeline of the Program Prioritization Task Force paralleled that of various budget committees on campus. These parallel processes should be better articulated in future.

Recommendation: WCU must develop a more streamlined, coordinated, and strengthened process of program assessment, review, and prioritization. The result would make more consistent and efficient use of available resources and omit redundancies and additional workload upon program directors, department heads, deans, other academic leaders and administrative offices. This recommendation is in line with 2020 Strategic Goal 5.3, Initiative 5.3.3, "Consolidate and centralize similar operations across campus."

IV: CURRICULAR APPROVAL AND MANAGEMENT

The work conducted throughout the program prioritization process exposed weaknesses within the extant policies and practices surrounding the adoption, approval, and modification of curriculum and programs. The Task Force routinely faced questions of program and curricular creep. In the decade since WCU's last program review, some additional programs were added or modified based on faculty interests and offerings rather than through guided growth based on field-specific information or the strategic plan. Several members of the Task Force possessed useful historical knowledge of the growth of WCU's programs, and oftentimes programs were created to accommodate unique curricular offerings affiliated with particular faculty members. At other times administrative desires to seize apparent opportunities inspired the creation of and investment in programs that were not thoroughly researched or vetted. The Task Force members recognized that curricular responsibility resides with the faculty, but we also noted that in some cases, the means by which curriculum is approved can lack rigor or reason. As curriculum moves from program through department, college, and dean's approval, through various university committees and the Faculty Senate, oversight and scrutiny can be reduced to uninformed approval under the assumption that rigor had been applied at earlier stages. The review process at present seems to include an *a priori* assumption that the faculty who have created the curriculum "know best." Each level of review should be progressively broader in scope and vision, moving from disciplinary expertise through greater institutional assessments.

One area in particular where curriculum management issues became apparent was in the review of stand-alone minors. The program prioritization process uncovered considerable inconsistencies regarding the administration of minors. Aforementioned data issues proved especially problematic in the case of minors, due to the limited information available. Greater attention needs to be paid to the roles of minors, including how minors fit into the larger curriculum schema, and how minors should be administered. These issues need to be addressed whether minors and stand-alone minors continue to be evaluated as part of future program prioritization processes or are evaluated in other processes.

Related to the issue of minors was the issue of approved programs, which was raised by a department head during our Phase II meetings. WCU historically has paid little mind to oversight of minors, as is reflected in the minimal data retained on these programs. One potential detriment to the success of some minors could be the proliferation of approved programs. Department heads, program directors, and advisors should be more attentive to advising in minor programs. Data on approved programs may provide additional insight into whether or not this is a practice that merits attention or modification when it comes to impact on minors.

Recommendation: WCU would benefit from a thorough review of our curriculum approval process and practices, including the process by which new programs are proposed, the 'Intent to Plan,' and placement in the top three new program priorities as required by General Administration. The faculty are owners of the curriculum, and must behave as responsible owners of the process, offering strict and clear scrutiny of all proposals with a strategic focus. The Task Force members resolved that greater accountability at all levels, including administrative, is needed as new curriculum and programs are proposed, and greater scrutiny is needed along the path to approval.

V: PROGRAM LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORT

The program prioritization process relied upon department heads and program directors as primary points of contact for each program, and also for essential feedback that was instrumental in shaping and improving our review process. WCU must more effectively maintain current and accurate accounts of graduate and undergraduate program directors in addition to department heads. Simple acts of communication and identification of relevant parties for emails and questions could be difficult. The Task Force also found widely varying roles of program directors and department heads throughout our review process. Additional clarification of the roles and expectations of program directors would aid future prioritization efforts. Not unlike lists of program directors, lists of majors, minors and other programs, particularly those found online, are not updated and maintained uniformly. We hope these fundamental points of documentation and record keeping have been corrected during this academic year, but they must be monitored and maintained in the future.

Program directors and department heads produced reports, reviewed and corrected data, answered questions, attended forums, provided feedback, attended Phase II meetings, and ultimately were held accountable in the final Task Force assessments of their programs. The Task Force recognizes that these program leaders are increasingly asked to take on major responsibilities like program prioritization, often within short timeframes.

Recommendation: The Task Force encourages our university's administrators to be thoughtful of the tools, skills, and training needed by program leaders to make their programs successful. Program leaders should be intimately knowledgeable, as part of the annual program assessment and especially before the next prioritization process, of all of the data available for these processes. The Task Force recommends that the university administration consider providing increased professional development opportunities and resources for program directors and department heads. Additional forms of support for program leaders may include training in areas such as leadership, marketing, budgeting, external funding, data management, curricular design, and student recruitment.

We also recommend that Department Head Workshops include some annual discussion of issues related to program prioritization and evaluation. Program directors and department heads from Category 1 programs might be invited to speak about their perceptions of and approaches to the prioritization process. The strongest narratives in our Phase 1 process took both a local and global view of the programs described, contextualizing the program within the university, community, or region. This breadth of vision must be imparted to all program leaders so that all programs can be more thoroughly contextualized within our institution and envisioned beyond disciplinary boundaries and duties. These prioritization discussions should also serve to dispel misconceptions commonly heard throughout the prioritization process. We frequently heard that certain programs operate "at no cost" to the university. We frequently were told that programs faced hardships because of turnover in leadership. We frequently heard that programs simply could not grow or succeed without additional investment. These statements, while containing elements of truth, are common but potentially self-defeating perceptions across many programs. The Task Force hopes that discussion among program leaders, with participation and guidance from department heads and program directors whose programs earned a Category 1 recommendation, will yield new and creative solutions to common problems.

Finally, we also suggest that these discussions carry through college and departmental leadership to the faculty as a whole. Implicit in these discussions is the need to create a university-wide culture of shared ownership and responsibility for both program and university success. While Department Heads are held responsible for the management of programs, all faculty should be attentive both to program-level concerns and a common, university-wide citizenship.

VI: BARRIERS TO INTERDISCIPLINARY PROGRAM SUCCESS AND INNOVATION

Throughout the Task Force proceedings, important discussions ensued regarding WCU's approach to interdisciplinary programs and innovative collaborations between colleges. Initiative 1.1.2 of Goal 1.1 of Strategic Direction 1 states that WCU must become "a hub of innovation, facilitating interdisciplinary connections among academic programs...." Our review of WCU's programs revealed numerous built-in barriers toward the accomplishment of this goal. Currently, interdisciplinary programs cannot be assessed according to most metrics at the program level, when faculty, courses, and funding data are provided from departmental records. Concerns over SCH and generated FTEs, among other metrics, provide disincentives for faculty to teach courses for which their departments may not get credit.

Additionally, historical divisions between some colleges, departments, or programs, or a lack of knowledge of program connections have prevented clear, logical, and fruitful collaborations between related programs. In some cases, indifferent or antagonistic relationships may exist between aligned programs. Part 1 of our Final Report included encouragements to individual programs to establish or reestablish connections with related faculty and programs across the university, to enhance student experience and opportunity, and to foster new connections and ideas among faculty.

Recommendation: We encourage Chancellor Belcher or relevant university administrators to act on Strategic Initiative 1.1.2 to make full and efficient use of all resources, programs, and opportunities that these related programs can offer.

VII: BARRIERS TO STUDENT RETENTION

One issue related to program growth and success that emerged mostly anecdotally was the availability of seats in some larger programs. Students enroll either as majors or pre-majors in these programs, but are unable to stay in the majors because they cannot meet a minimum GPA or other program requirements, or there are not enough seats available for them. Many of these students then leave WCU, affecting university retention. Programs that limit student enrollments need to find ways to grow, or acknowledge limited availability when recruiting and advising students. A second issue related to student retention is the adoption by some programs of minimum GPA requirements above University standards. While this requirement may be justified for some programs, it may be problematic for those programs which currently have low student enrollment.

Recommendation: WCU must consider additional, proactive ways to retain these students who are not accepted into the programs which recruited or attracted them to WCU. We also recommend that the use of overall GPA requirements above the university standard be examined or reconsidered.

VIII: FUTURE PROGRAM PRIORITIZATION RECOMMENDATIONS

The membership of the AY 2012-2013 prioritization Task Force included a broad array of faculty from all colleges, as well as the faculty chair, a staff member, three students, two associate deans, and a representative from the Council of Deans. While the Task Force members worked efficiently, effectively, and in overall consensus, the representation of future committees or task forces may require adjustment. It was challenging for some graduate coordinators and administrative representatives to participate in discussions when the Task Force had agreed on a refusal from any programs with which they had worked. Future committees must be attentive to the challenges faced by task force members with administrative duties that require them to work with multiple programs.

The aggressive timeline for the AY 2012-2013 prioritization process was one of the most frequently cited points of discussion in early forums, feedback, and Task Force conversations. The timeline did offer some internal flexibility, but the deadline of the academic year was firm. Although the Task Force and program leaders were able to work within the mandated time constraints, future committees may consider the benefits and detriments of longer timeframes. Reviews within a single academic year offer many challenges, but also ensure expedited results. Our preliminary research showed that prioritization efforts longer than an academic year allow program directors, department heads, and committees more time to resolve questions or to solicit additional feedback if necessary. A longer timeframe also allows the review to be more extensive and provides adequate time to address potential problems in data. Should future prioritization efforts take place over an extended timeframe, committees could be formed prior to the semester during which reviews take place. This would allow members of the committee more time to study prioritization criteria, process, outcomes, metrics, comparative cases, and other elements relevant to review, all of which our current Task Force completed within the Fall 2012 semester. Additional time for planning and discussion of process could allow for more innovative solutions to some of the challenges faced within a truncated timeline.

Future efforts at prioritization must be more attentive and sensitive to timeline, not only with respect to committee or Task Force activities, but with respect to requests placed upon program leaders, administrators, staff, and other involved parties. Our timeline was structured around the Task Force activities only, but did not include post-recommendation items and administration. Future prioritizations must be more fully conceived from outset to conclusion.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the members of the Task Force recognize that this year's efforts were long overdue. Western Carolina University must mandate a regular program prioritization cycle. As stated above, this process should dovetail with extant review and assessment processes across campus. The Task Force recommends that program prioritization must be regular, must be tied in to other assessment activities, and should take place no less than every five years, and perhaps more frequently for the next prioritization cycle.

Recommendation: The members of the Program Prioritization Task Force saw both positive and negative aspects in the process and timeline which we followed in AY 2012-2013. In addition to our recommendations about committee membership and timeline, we strongly encourage the

administration and faculty to commit to a regular and scheduled process of program prioritization with a five-year cycle.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS OF FINAL REPORT, PART 2

I. Data used in program review

- Build a unified, accessible, flexible data warehouse reports or dashboard interfaces to be used in all program review events.
- Clarify data sets for complicated programs housed in multiple departments or colleges.
- Clarify and examine how release time and pre-majors are used in institutional data.
- Distribute annual data reports like those used in program prioritization Phase I.
- Ensure that program-level data is collected and used routinely.

II. Academic quality

- Create agreed-upon metrics or data points to help assess quality at the program level.
- Hold campus discussions at relevant levels (department and college, Faculty Senate, department head workshops, etc.) to discuss and define 'academic quality' expectations for programs or departments.

III. Reviewing, prioritizing, assessing programs: streamlining divergent processes

- Coordinate extant review, assessment, and prioritization processes to create more efficient, effective, and meaningful review events that lead to long-term program improvements and more singular outcomes.

IV. Curricular approval and management

- Review, at all levels, the curriculum adoption, approval, and modification process for courses and new programs, including the Intent to Plan.
- Encourage greater oversight and attention to advisement and curriculum in minors, especially stand-alone minors, and investigate the impact of approved programs.

V. Program leadership and support

- Maintain updated lists of all graduate and undergraduate program directors.
- Provide program leaders with increased opportunities for training in leadership, marketing, external funding, budgeting, data management, student recruitment.
- Include program prioritization exercises or discussions within department head workshops.

VI. Barriers to interdisciplinary program evaluation, success, and innovation

- Improve data collection or innovate new metrics for interdisciplinary programs.
- Facilitate and encourage open communication and interdisciplinary cooperation between related programs across the university.

VII. Barriers to student retention

- Review effects of seat limitations in large programs on student retention at the university level.
- Review effects of GPA requirements within majors that exceed university minimums on student retention at the university level.

VIII. Future program prioritization

- Review program prioritization timeline, committee selection, membership for future review events.
- Mandate a regular cycle of program prioritization, linked with other review or assessment events, at least every five years.

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