

California State University, Stanislaus

Evaluation of the Support Unit Review Process

This document is a three-year summary of the evaluation of the Support Unit Review (SUR) process that is required of all administrative support offices on campus. CSU Stanislaus is committed to excellence in its academic and administrative support units throughout the university and, therefore, conducts support unit reviews on a five-year cycle. The first reviews began in 2004/05 and a full cycle of all offices completed in 2008/09. The process results in an evidentiary-based self study with a focus on the effectiveness of the unit in support student learning and student success, along with operational and service efficiency and effectiveness. This self study is followed by an assessment of unit effectiveness by an external review team (external to the unit, including faculty, staff, and administrators) and an approved strategic implementation plan for the unit.

SUR Review 2007-2008

A preliminary evaluation of the Support Unit Review process prompted changes to clarify procedural elements and reporting expectations. Further emphasis was given to the ways in which administrative units contribute to student learning and success by expanding upon this element throughout the review process. As a result, the working manual provided by the Provost at the annual Support Unit Review workshops was revised to provide greater clarification and assistance in the completion of the Support Unit Review process. A summary of refinements is provided below.

Phase 1: Self Study

1. Expanded timeline for completion of a more comprehensive self study
2. Clarified responsibilities for participants through creation of a self-study checklist
3. Revised self-study instructions and provided sample possible questions for exploration in the self study

Phase 2: External Review

1. Clarified faculty selection of faculty representatives on external review teams (faculty governance committee selects faculty)
2. Revised timelines
3. Created external review checklist
4. Added external review instructions
5. Established external review team suggestions and approval process
6. Added possible template for external review

Phase 3: Executive Summary

1. Clarified the process of writing and approving the executive summary
2. Clarified development of strategic implementation plan
3. Created a template for electronic posting of executive summary

SUR Review 2008/09

An evaluation of the Support Unit Review process was conducted at the completion of the 2008/09 review cycle, with information derived from the Council of Deans, President's Administrative Group, SUR workshops, and individual comments included in the reports of external reviewers. A summary of overall findings follow:

1. Administrators rated the importance of SUR as very high, especially with regard to its focus on student learning/success.
2. Administrators from academic affairs and student affairs were more positive about the review criteria than those from business/finance and university advancement. This finding is predictable in that criteria focus on organizational structures and services directly related to student academic achievement and student success, areas of direct responsibility for academic and student affairs. While the other divisions are equally committed to this academic mission, their services are more indirect, thereby making it more difficult to address the criteria.
3. While the process is designed to be flexible and able to be tailored to the indicators of quality unique to each unit, some administrators reported that the self studies tended to be bureaucratic and did not capture the essential questions/issues for evaluating and improving their administrative support offices.
4. Administrators indicated that while SUR was important, time constraints and daily demands tended to interfere with giving SUR priority and delaying timely completion of the self study.
5. Staff members within the units participated in the review process primarily as either the authors of the draft self study or reviewers of the draft self study document, although some reported no participation at all.
6. A few administrators and staff who participated in lead roles for the SUR, as well as external review teams, reported difficulty in conducting the review without reference to personnel needs/budgetary needs. This is a particularly important element as the SUR is designed *not* to be a budget request, although budgetary implications of the SUR results certainly influence fiscal, organizational, and staffing decisions.
7. External review members cited the importance of SUR; a few of the teams commented that some self studies were mostly descriptive rather than evidentiary based, thus making it more difficult to give helpful evaluative feedback.

8. Faculty serving on external review teams reported several suggestions for improving the process and their effectiveness in providing feedback. Examples include the following:

Surveys

- a. Improve survey data presentation by providing raw numbers of survey respondents in addition to percentages and disaggregating data by responding departments so the external review team is able to assess representation of sample and extrapolate directly fairly
- b. Provide an executive summary of survey findings based on the perceptions of the unit
- c. Conduct surveys of students directly to get their impressions of experiences with departmental offices and faculty

Format Coloration

- d. Remove coloration (red font) and placing special issues related to student learning and success in bold (photocopies and printers do not display color)

Process Simplification

- e. Simplify the policy and procedures to increase understanding, ensure more complete results, and improve the efficiency in writing the document by the external review team

Orientation Workshop

- f. Include administrative assistants and external review team members in the annual orientation workshop that is conducted currently by the provost with the unit administrators

Conclusions

Although the current Support Unit Review process was designed to focus on a common set of criteria, the policy and procedures document simultaneously encouraged administrators to exercise flexibility in tailoring the review methodology, criteria, and salient issues to those most meaningful to the unit. While several units employed a modified or alternative methodology and criteria, the pervasive view of others, as derived from this assessment, is that the current SUR process remains too restrictive.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Support Unit Review process be examined and perhaps revised, particularly resulting in a more streamlined approach. It is further recommended that methods/best practices used by other universities in their evaluation of unit effectiveness be undertaken to inform this review process.

Next Steps

In 2009/10, the President's Executive Cabinet, Provost's Council of Deans, Academic Affairs Council, and Assessment Leadership Team will review this evaluative report and make its recommendations to the president. Any recommended revisions will be forwarded to the appropriate governance and administrative bodies.