

Report of the Working Group on Curricular Approval Processes (9/3/21)

Introduction

As part of the revision to shared governance undertaken by the President's Committee on Governance in the spring of 2019, a working group was formed in December 2020 and charged to evaluate our current curricular approval processes and suggest changes that would reduce approval times while maintaining the overall quality of proposals, as measured by the standards and guidelines of the Office of the University Registrar (OUR).

The working group members are Stephen Biscotte, Rosemary Blieszner, Noel Byrd, Gary Costello, Joe Eska, Kim Filer, James Hawdon, Bob Hicok, Lara Khansa, Robin Panneton, Michel Pleimling, Kim O'Rourke, and Rick Sparks.

After initial conversations that focused on members' perceptions of the nature of our system, both its positive and challenging features, the group proceeded to discuss the elements of course and program proposals (new minor, major, or degree, discontinued minor, major, or degree, etc.) in detail; the appropriate number of times these elements would be reviewed by a committee or administrative office; the committee structure that would best accomplish these reviews; the pros and cons of eliminating multiple discussions about the formatting of proposals and their adherence to OUR guidelines; and the system of communication that would help us inform the appropriate parties about the existence and progress of proposals, especially early in the process of developing program proposals, among other topics. This report presents the working group's findings and recommendations.

In addition to this introduction, the report includes the following sections:

- Current and recommended stages of proposal review and approval
- Rationale for the recommended changes to the stages of proposal review and approval
- Proposal overlap and recommended communication changes
- Additional recommendations
- Full list of recommendations
- Table of recommended stages of proposal review and approval

The recommendations herein to eliminate or revise committees and commissions require changes to the University Council (UC) Constitution and Bylaws, and if accepted, must be part of the resolution that will carry the new UC Constitution and Bylaws through governance in Spring 2022, with implementation in Fall 2022. Consequently, this report focuses on the structural and organizational aspects of our recommendations. Other recommendations could be accomplished administratively and are presented in varying stages of detail, as the overall work is ongoing and could be completed over the summer of 2022 and beyond. Though the working group's recommendations focus on the university-level review, the variability in proposal review by college curriculum committees, among other topics, has been noted by members of the working group and faculty members outside the group on multiple occasions, and is an issue that the working group believes can and should be addressed.

It is also important to note that our recommendations include increased staffing provisions for the administrative offices involved in the development and approval of course and program proposals, as their obligations would increase if the recommendations are approved.

Finally, apologies for the acronym soup you are about to receive. Amen.

Current and recommended stages of proposal review and approval

Current

Courses move from departments to college curriculum committees, then pass through 15-day review and are next reviewed by the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee (UCC), the Pathways General Education Curriculum Review Committee (PGECRC), or the Graduate Curriculum Committee (GCC). Undergraduate and graduate courses also require approval by the Commission on Undergraduate Studies and Policies (CUSP) or the Commission on Graduate and Professional Studies and Policies (CGPSP). Final approval of courses by these commissions is accomplished by acceptance of UCC or GCC reports submitted to the commissions. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1: Current stages of course proposal review and approval

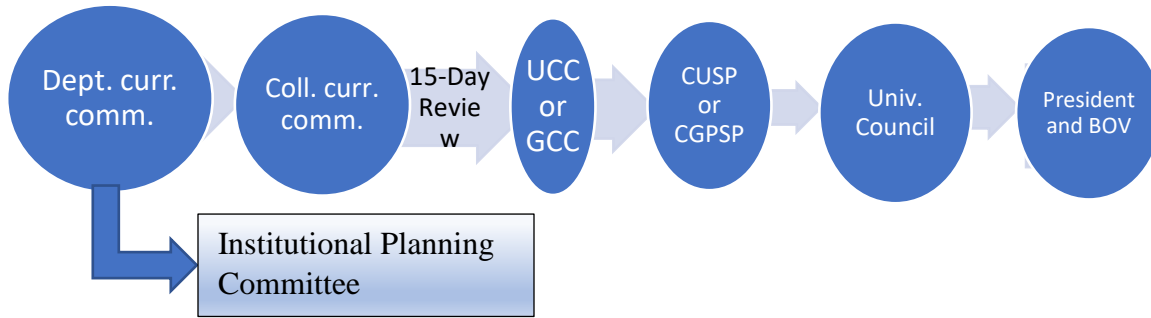


During 15-day review, administrative governance staff in the Office of the University Registrar (OUR) and the Office of General Education (OGE) review course and program proposals for compliance with established guidelines and procedures and coordinate feedback to proposal author(s) with the assistance of the College Curriculum Coordinator. 15-day review is also meant to give faculty and administrators a chance to express concerns about a course or program proposal, particularly regarding possible duplication or overlap between departments and/or colleges. OUR/OGE staff can only suggest, not make, formatting or typographical changes or corrections to proposals. And though 15-day review allows anyone with access to JIRA to comment on proposals, no faculty or administrators are required to do so. If no concerns are raised during 15-day review, the proposal advances to the appropriate university-level curriculum committee.

Program proposals entail far more development and include substantial efforts by topical experts and SCHEV compliance staff. Some proposals are also subject to initial or early review by the Institutional Planning Committee (IPC), which determines if there is institutional support for certain program proposals, such as new degrees or organizational changes and additions, and coordinates aspects of the development of these proposals.

Program proposals follow the same approval path as courses, except at the commission level, program proposals are advanced through a resolution that requires (2) commission readings and (2) readings by the University Council before advancing to the president and finally, in most cases, the Board of Visitors. (See Figure 2)

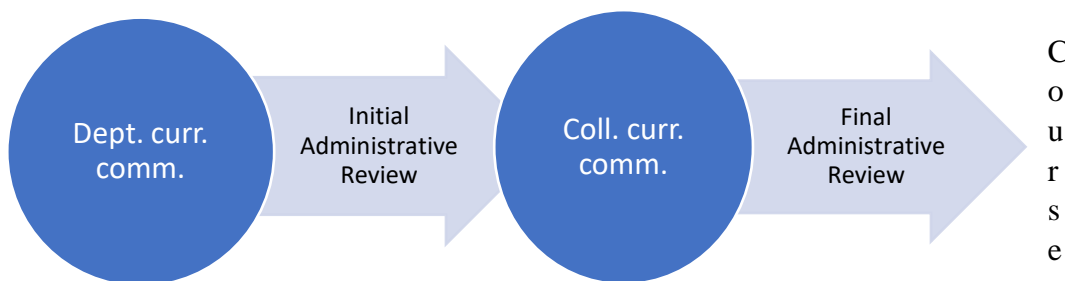
Figure 2: Current stages of program proposal review and approval



Recommended

For courses, the working group recommends that proposals move from departments to an Initial Administrative Review by OUR/OGE¹ staff (this would replace 15-day review). After Initial Administrative Review, proposals would move on to college curriculum committees. Once college curriculum committees have completed their work, proposals would return to OUR/OGE staff for Final Administrative Review. This would be the end of the line for course proposals. (See Figure 3)

Figure 3: Recommended stages of course proposal review and approval



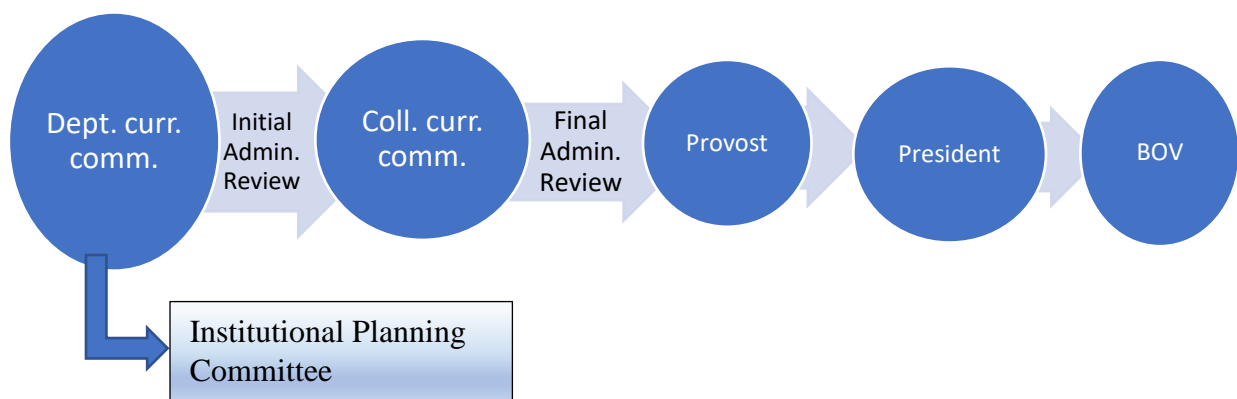
The group also recommends that OUR/OGE staff have the authority to correct formatting and typographical errors and omissions. As is the case now, they would still only have the authority to

¹ The University Curriculum Committee for General Education (UCCGE) would be consulted at the admin. review phase in the event that broader disciplinary and outcome expertise is needed by OGE. A similar advisory role for CUSP and CGPSP will be considered by the working group.

suggest editorial changes based on the language conventions and requirements contained in OUR’s course and program approval guidelines. They would then be able to make simple changes and corrections and suggest editorial changes during Initial Administrative Review, which would allow college curriculum committees to focus on the substance of proposals. The administrative reviews would be similar to 15-day review in purpose, though not necessarily duration, including the nature of faculty involvement in the process, both as proposal authors and faculty concerned about potential duplication or overlap of courses or programs. Faculty would also be involved in the Final Administrative Review, as they are now in the phase between review by the university-level committees and completion of work on the proposals by OUR/OGE staff.

Program proposals would be developed as they are now and approved through the same stages as course proposals, but then require the provost’s, president’s, and BOV’s approval, depending on the type of proposal. For example, a new degree requires BOV approval but a degree modification does not. (See Figure 4)

Figure 4: Recommended stages of program proposal review and approval



Rationale for the recommended changes to the stages of proposal review and approval

The working group believes that there are insufficient differences in nature and outcome between the proposal reviews carried out by college curriculum committees and those conducted by the UCC, GCC, or PGECCRC to warrant the substantial time devoted to these university-level committees.

This conclusion is based on the experiences of faculty on the working group who have served on university-level committees; statements by other faculty members, department heads and chairs, and administrators; the observations of OUR/OGE staff who have worked in support of these committees for years; a review of four years of UCC and GCC reports; and averages for the amount of time devoted to the proposals reviewed by the GCC² between 2019-2021 (see Table 1 below). While an exhaustive review of the historic content of changes requested by UCC/GCC/PGECCRC

² Though the nature of the changes requested during these two years may be anomalous, they appear to be in line with the four years of UCC and GCC reports we reviewed (but did not

and the time devoted to this work was beyond the capacity of the working group, we thought it important to evaluate the anecdotal statements of faculty and administrators against some of the data we had available to us.

Table 1: A breakdown of the time devoted to proposals reviewed by the GCC between 2019-2021

Year	Time between proposal date and end of 15-day review (stage 1)	Time between end of 15-day review and GCC review (stage 2)	Time between GCC review and “resolved” date (stage 3)	Overall time for proposal approval
2019-2020 all proposals	106 days (36% of total)	121 days (42%)	64 days (22%)	291 days
2019-2020 courses only	106 days (39%)	122 days (44%)	47 days (17%)	275 days
2020-2021 all proposals	112 days (43%)	96 days (37%)	50 days (20%)	258 days
2020-2021 courses only	107 days (45%)	96 days (40%)	35 days (15%)	238 days

Between 2019 and 2021, the GCC evaluated 253 proposals, the majority of them (85%) courses. In 2019-2020, the GCC required “minor” (GCC designation) or no changes to 93% of the proposals it reviewed; in 2020-2021, 94% of the proposals required “minor” or no changes. The distinction between “minor” and “major” revision is a convention of GCC. While there is no written standard for the distinction between “minor” and “major,” the difference seems to be the extent of changes required, not the type. (The convention in UCC is to “approve with no modifications” or “approve with modifications.”)

Based on our review of the actual content of the changes, we agree with the GCC that the majority of changes required by the committee between 2019-2021 were minor in nature. That is not to say that the changes did not improve the proposals. Whether math errors in the tabulation of topic syllabi, grammatical errors, misalignment of learning objectives and justifications, or improperly phrased catalog descriptions, among other matters, GCC members frequently found what they considered mistakes or editorial choices that warranted change, either because they were inherently wrong (grammatical errors, etc.) or were thought not to comply with OUR guidelines. However, in the four years of UCC and GCC reports reviewed by the working group, the requested changes were rarely substantive and often strayed into areas that the committees, by their charge, are asked to stay away from, including “grammar errors, typos, and/or word choice,” in order to fulfil the expectation that committee members “review the course and program proposals to the established guidelines and procedures” and “not to help create an “excellent” or “better worded” proposal” (from “Responsibilities of the Governance Committees and Governance Support Staff”).

compile statistics for), and OUR staff have confirmed that they are consistent with historical trends, both in nature and the amount of time devoted to the work.

The working group concluded that faculty on department and college curriculum committees, along with OUR, OGE, and SCHEV compliance staff, consistently produce curricular proposals that are rarely altered in a substantive way by university-level review. Though appreciative of the efforts of faculty who engage in this work, the group believes that the amount of time devoted to review at this level is not warranted, based on the extent and nature of its impact on proposals, and consequently, we would eliminate this level of review. Turning again to the table above, doing so would save all of the time devoted to stage 2 and all or most of the time devoted to stage 3. Because department faculty are in the best position to evaluate the curricular needs of their programs and disciplines, it is our belief that if a department and college support a proposal, and the college and administrative staff believe that the proposal adheres to university guidelines, then no further committee review or approval should be required.

We also believe that the resolution process, which can add months to the approval times of program proposals, does not have sufficient impact on the substance of proposals to warrant the time devoted to it. While the commission discussions can improve the quality of proposals, there is little evidence that they often do, or that the resolution process itself adds substantial value to the proposals. The four constituent groups, most notably Faculty Senate, almost always waive their right to comment on curricular resolutions, and University Council rarely discusses these resolutions. In general, there is little evidence that we are catching mistakes or problems by taking curricular proposals through shared governance in the form of resolutions.

Finally, though improvements could be made in the functioning of the university-level committees and the resolution process, the group believes that we cannot stop faculty from straying into “minor” matters, that the university-level work largely repeats the college-level work, that elimination of a stage in the approval process will be more productive than making improvements to it, and that resources should be devoted to improving the stages of this process that cannot be eliminated, such as review by the college curriculum committees.

Proposal overlap and recommended communication changes

Potential overlap between courses and programs was another concern the working group tried to address. Our system relies heavily on 15-day review to surface “turf” issues that arise from curricular proposals. Additionally, both college- and university-level committees are asked to look for course or program content that may “duplicate” or “affect” their department, school, or college, and OUR/OGE staff participate in this kind of screening as well. In large measure, our current system does a good job of surfacing these conflicts before proposals reach the university-level. As evidence of that, in the four years of GCC reports from 2017-2021, no instances were found where the committee identified “potential overlap and/or concern related to other university courses.”

In the rare instances when a “turf” problem with a proposal is discerned at the university-level, inadequate communication about the existence and progress of the proposal is often the source, and not the quality of the work done at earlier stages in its development. It is worth looking at one example in some detail:

A college proposed to change its name by adding an additional descriptor. This change was supported by the initiating college, went through 15-day review, was reviewed and

approved by the university committees, and then went on to CUSP & CGSP. There were no comments during 15-day review or any of the other stages prior to the commissions. However, when it came up for discussion at CUSP/CGSP, another college sent representatives to strongly oppose the additional descriptor. The motion was tabled in order for the deans of the colleges to meet and discuss the proposed change. A second college then joined this discussion as they too objected to the additional word in the college's proposed name change. Eventually, this motion was passed by CUSP/CGSP, went on to UC, then to BOV for final approval.

Faculty and administrators who should have been aware of this proposal early on, either did not receive or did not respond to communication about it, and only became aware of or weighed in on the proposal late in the process. While 15-day review is meant to identify these issues, 15-day review is passive in that it offers information about proposals but does not require an acknowledgement that the information has been received or acted on. In this case, due to the discussion in CUSP, the issue was discovered, but the ability of a committee or commission to discover these issues is fairly dependent on the level of curricular awareness and expertise that faculty bring to the review of any one proposal, which can vary substantially by subject matter and from year to year, depending on the makeup of the committee or commission.³

Rather than depend on university-level review and passive communication to catch these issues, changing the extent and nature of communication about proposals should help reveal these potential conflicts early on. In addition to the general notifications that will be provided through CourseLeaf, the new content management software that will soon replace JIRA, the working group believes that the approval process would benefit from an array of targeted notifications to curriculum committee chairs, department heads, and associate deans, including at least one notification that would ask academic associate deans to identify conflicts and give a “go/no go” response before the proposal could advance out of CourseLeaf.

The group also suggests adding a small “tracking” committee in the Faculty Senate charged to keep senators and senate leadership informed of the progress of program proposals through the approval process. This committee would not be part of the approval process itself and would not track course proposals. Its sole purpose would be to act as another source of communication about the existence of program proposals, with the aim of ensuring that faculty members in the appropriate departments are aware of and engaged in their development. A member of this committee would also be a member of the IPC.

Additional recommendations

- The creation of a common set of “best practices” guidelines for college curriculum committees

³ In the rare instances when disagreements arise that cannot be resolved between departments, colleges, and administrative personnel, in the system proposed here, the working group recommends that CUSP and CGSP&P resolve them.

- Training for faculty members of college curriculum committees
- Periodic audits of the quality of proposals (through CUSP and CGPS&P)
- Review of proposal contents (justification, learning objectives, etc.) to determine if they still serve the needs of students and faculty
- Depending on the degree of customization CourseLeaf allows, we also believe the quality and consistency of proposals would be increased by creating menu options that embed language conventions and formatting requirements within the software. These conventions, requirements, and menus would vary between undergraduate and graduate courses and would help faculty more consistently meet the expectations for the various portions of proposals, such as justification and learning objectives, by providing consistent language or immediate examples of proper language and/or format

In general, the group recommends devoting resources to improving the work of department and college curriculum committees, rather than maintaining university-level review that substantially increases the length of approval times.

Full list of recommendations

- eliminate the UCC, GCC, and PGECRC
- maintain the UCCGE (largely to fulfill advising, assessment, and proposal review as needed)
- remove CUSP, CGPS&P, and the University Council from the standard approval sequence
- use CUSP and CGPS&P to resolve proposal conflicts that cannot be resolved at the department or college level
- add a member of the Faculty Senate to the IPC and create a small program proposal tracking committee in the Faculty Senate
- create a more robust system of communication for proposals
- give OUR/OGE staff the authority to correct typographical, formatting, and grammar errors in proposals
- add staff to OUR/OGE to handle the increased workload
- create a set of university “best practices” guidelines for college curriculum committees to follow
- periodically evaluate the quality of proposals
- review proposal requirements

Table of recommended stages of proposal review and approval

Course proposals

Stage	Communication	CourseLeaf holds
1) Department		
2) OUR/OGE (for review and formatting)	1) General CourseLeaf notice 2) Position- and action-specific notices, including a “Go/no go” notice to all academic assoc. deans	If a conflict is identified, proposal cannot advance out of CourseLeaf w/o resolution. If parties to conflict cannot resolve it, CUSP or CGPS&P will.
3) College		
4) OUR/OGE (for final review and editing)	Same as stage #2	Same as stage #2

Program proposals⁴

Stages	Communication	Approvals
1) IPC review (not all proposals require IPC evaluation)	1) OUR informs relevant dept./school heads, assoc. deans, and curriculum comm. chairs of upcoming proposals 2) The FS member of the IPC will announce upcoming proposals in FS	
2) Department		
3) OUR/OGE (for review and formatting)	1) General CourseLeaf notice 2) Position- and action-specific notices, including a “Go/no go” notice to all academic assoc. deans	If a conflict is identified, proposal cannot advance out of CourseLeaf w/o resolution. If parties to conflict cannot resolve it, CUSP or CGPS&P will.
4) College		
5) OUR/OGE (for final review and formatting)	Same as stage #2	Same as stage #2
6) Provost’s approval		
7) President’s approval (if req’d)		

⁴ This table does not account for the manner in which proposals are developed, only the stages of academic governance approval. As noted earlier, program proposals require extensive work by many parties well before they enter academic governance.

8) BOV approval
(if req'd)

--	--	--