Curriculum Approval Process Improvement Task Force
Concept Paper

Chalk drawing seen at Sagecrest Park, Las Cruces on May 6, 2020
attributed to school children in the community.

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Committee Charge: Provide recommendations to the Associate Provost for Academic Affairs on improving NMSU's curriculum approval process.

Overview: The cover image of a Hopscotch game, created during the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrates the concept that a process intended to be used by a community should be visually easy to follow, serve a specific purpose, and can take unique and creative forms.

For this task force, our goal is to streamline the NMSU process by which new academic programs are reviewed and secure approval, with the specific goals of reducing the time and complexity involved and making for a nimbler process.

1. Recommendations

The working group that has discussed this over the summer of 2020 proposes that we build a new review body, the University Program Approval Committee (UPAC) that seeks to integrate several of the current review groups into UPAC to streamline the process.[1] The diagram below lays out a general flow by which this process would occur:
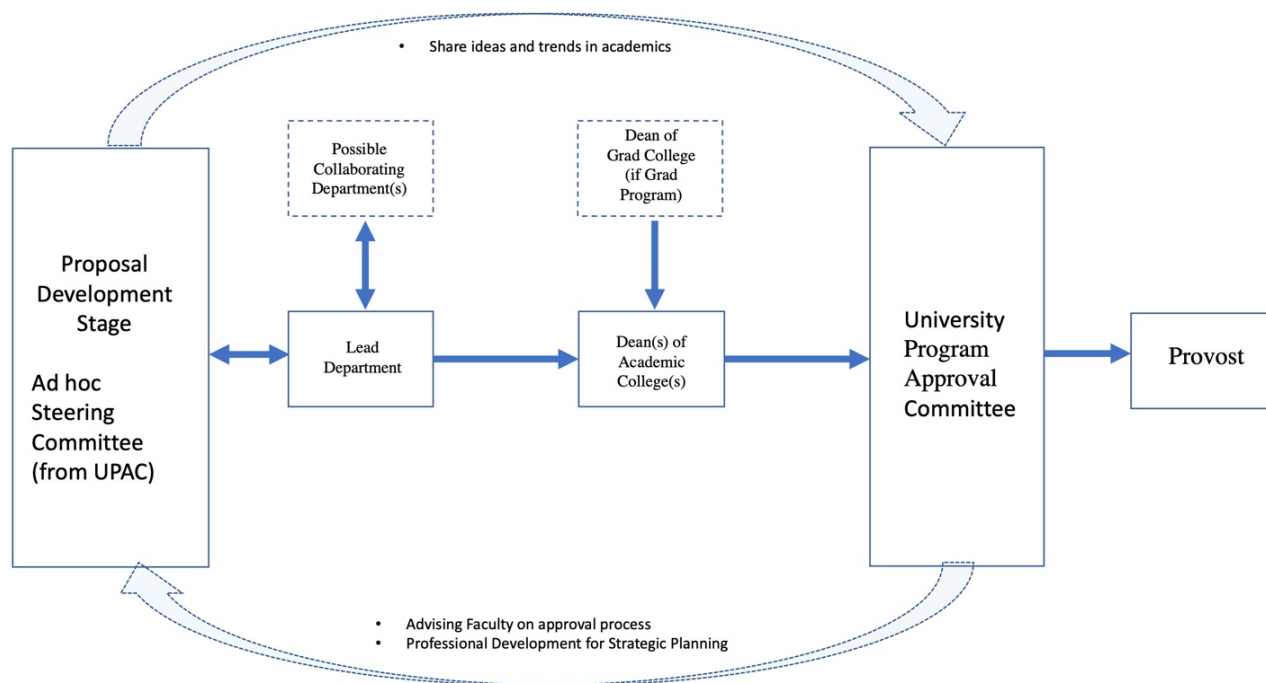
Proposed membership of UPAC

- Academic Deans Council - Chair or designate
- Associate Deans Academic Council - Chair or designate
- Community Colleges System Academic Council - Chair or designate
- Faculty Senate - Vice Chair or designate

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[1] For detail on the current review process and review groups involved, see https://arp.nmsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2018/01/Appendix-4-81-A.pdf.

- Graduate Council - Vice Chair or designate
- Graduate Deans Office - Dean/Associate Dean
- Registrar's Office - Associate Registrar for Curriculum Systems
- University Research Council - Chair or designate
- ASNMSU - President/Vice President or designate
- Vice Provost for Digital Learning - Vice Provost or designate

Leadership - Given the primary role of the Faculty Senate and NMSU faculty in the development of academic programs, we propose that the Vice-Chair (or designate) of the Faculty Senate co-chair the UPAC with the Chair (or designate) of ADAC.

2. Assessment of Current Curriculum Approval Process

Prior to about 2015 or 2016
Proposals for new programs were subject to review and approval by ADAC, ADC and Faculty Senate prior to moving to higher levels of administration in the university or the state. There was no uniform format for proposals other than the requirement that the library be asked to review the availability of materials related to the program. There were no requirements for providing the catalog description in a systematic way, and those descriptions were entered as catalog revisions by the relevant department – rather than through a centralized process. Changes in the curriculum for a major or degree were not subject to a review process once the program was in place.

Often proposals came to ADAC and were approved in a single meeting, but a member of ADAC could ask for an additional two weeks for the purpose of providing information to their college about the program. That is, there was not necessarily a second read on proposals. The Chair of ADAC would then make sure that the proposal was placed on the agenda of the next ADC meeting for review. Very often the proposals were approved there in a single read.

Minors were presented to ADAC for information purposes; there was no approval outside the college. As with new degrees and majors, information about the minor was entered into the catalog during the annual update process by the relevant department.

Process as of 2019

The process for entering information into the catalog became more centralized with the acquisition of new software, making it more important that the catalog editor have a mechanism for knowing what new programs or program changes had been approved. At the same time there were extensive discussions about what bodies needed to approve degrees, majors, minors, and concentrations – which are documented on transcripts. Outcomes of this process included requirements for approval of changes in majors, minors, and concentrations by groups outside the department and forms were developed with requirements for documenting the changes. (ARP 4.81 – Degrees, Majors, Minors and Other Academic Programs of Study)

People who were accustomed to functioning under the earlier, looser process often were frustrated to find that there was a new approval process. They were also sometimes surprised to find that they could not add new curriculum or curriculum changes to the catalog if they had not met the requirements associated with new deadlines. For example, the Finance Department sought to incorporate new concentrations in its major and was told that this material could not appear in the catalog until a year later because the approvals from ADAC (and beyond) had not met the required timetable.

One or more administrative bodies (for example, UAC) adopted a more formal process of review involving a first and second read. ADAC evolved in that direction – without any formal discussion, as at least one former chair of ADAC can recall.

Advantages of the existing process
- The process is documented in detail.
- Departments are required to provide the catalog changes they are proposing. What goes into the catalog must have been approved fully.
- Information is shared across colleges about new programs and changes to programs.

Disadvantages of the existing process
- The process can be time consuming after the proposal leaves the college. ADAC meets twice monthly, but meetings of ADC have not been so regular. The number of approving bodies at NMSU is MUCH greater than many other universities, which drives the delays we experience.
- Departments which had become accustomed to the relative autonomy of the old system may have had trouble adapting to the new process.
- There is lack of agreement as to the appropriate criteria to be used in deciding whether to approve a program.
- It is not clear what financial factors should be considered and by what body(ies).

Another concern is the length of time needed in the current system to have the curriculum receive official approval (Table 1):

TYPE	AVERAGE TIME FROM "START" TO "IN BANNER"
Bachelor's Degree	2 years +
Master's Degree	1.5 – 2.5 years
Doctoral Degree	1.5 – 2.5 years
Graduate Certificate	1 – 1.5 years
Community College Certificate	6 months – 1.5 years
Associate's Degree	1.5 years

3. Survey of Curriculum Approval at Other Universities

University approval systems vary widely, but they have several common features. First, documents, calendars, and review committees are often provided on web sites that are easily searchable over the internet. At the University of Arizona, while the approval process can be relatively complex and dependent upon the type of program or level of change being proposed, the web site provides forms and detailed information to help faculty understand how to initiate the process and the format needed to carry the proposal through the process. https://academicadmin.arizona.edu/curricular-affairs/academic-program-approval/curricular-updates/undergraduate-proposal-approval

Take home: Provide more than a policy page and have a comprehensive page that provides all the information and forms needed.

Automation via technology systems for curriculum approval processes are also popular. The ability to automate different approval steps and allow tracking across a university with multiple campuses seem to be attractive features for these institutions. Links to examples from the University of Kansas, University of Arkansas, Arizona State University are given here:

https://mediahub.ku.edu/media/Propose+a+New+Program/0_fqhoi8r0
https://registrar.uark.edu/program-unit-changes/index.php
https://provost.asu.edu/curriculum-development/changemaker

NMSU currently has CourseLeaf (CAT) for catalog maintenance and has already acquired CourseLeaf (CIM), and it will be deployed this year. CourseLeaf can also be used for maintaining and approving courses and curriculum by providing a useful technological tool for curriculum approval.

Take home: Use automated systems to increase transparency and improve workflow.

One of the more innovative approaches to course and curriculum change approval is the University Course Challenge system in place at the University of Saskatchewan for over 20 years. The process allows for rapid changes at the university level. When a new University Course Challenge has been posted, an email is sent to all Deans, Associate Deans, Assistant Deans, Department Heads, and academic advisors to alert them to the Challenge post. Anyone wanting to challenge a proposal has two weeks to stop the change from automatically occurring(https://secretariat.usask.ca/proposals/course-challenge.php).
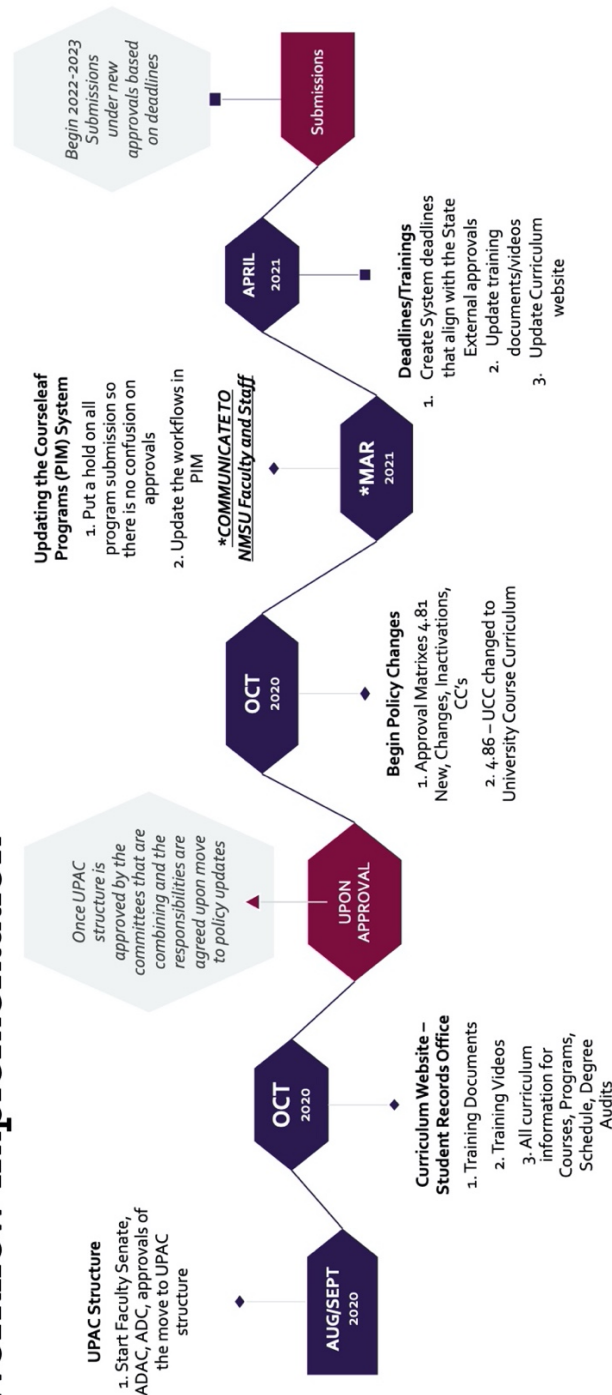
Take home: For changes to courses or existing curriculum, utilize the CourseLeaf system to manage the approval process in a way that reduces overall time for implementing the changed and reduces workload.

4. Diagram on Steps to Implement the New Process

For guidance on the timeline and steps needed in order to make the curriculum process approval change described in the recommendations section, the following visual workflow and timeline are provided as follows:

Tentative New Program Approval Workflow Implementation

AUG/SEPT 2020

UPAC Structure
1. Start Faculty Senate, ADAC, ADC, approvals of the move to UPAC structure

Once UPAC structure is approved by the committees that are combining and the responsibilities are agreed upon move to policy updates

OCT 2020

Curriculum Website – Student Records Office
1. Training Documents
2. Training Videos
3. All curriculum information for Courses, Programs, Schedule, Degree Audits

UPON APPROVAL

OCT 2020

Begin Policy Changes
1. Approval Matrixes 4.81 New, Changes, Inactivations, CC's
2. 4.86 – UCC changed to University Course Curriculum

Updating the Courseleaf Programs (PIM) System
1. Put a hold on all program submission so there is no confusion on approvals
2. Update the workflows in PIM

COMMUNICATE TO NMSU Faculty and Staff

*MAR 2021

APRIL 2021

Deadlines/Trainings
1. Create System deadlines that align with the State External approvals
2. Update training documents/videos
3. Update Curriculum website

Begin 2022-2023 Submissions under new approvals based on deadlines

Submissions

*The delay between policy and updating the system is to allow the time for all approvals and to allow the Fall 2020 submission cycle for departments to get program changes/additions/inactivations into the 2021-2022 catalog. There is no way to get this approved and allow new submissions to meet the next catalog. This structure change will go into effect for 2022-2023 Catalog changes.

5. Concluding remarks

The task force believes that while the curriculum approval process has made improvements over the past few years, in order to meet the needs of students entering a future workforce that will likely be impacted by the global pandemic and the ensuing economic disruption for a number of years, NMSU should instill a culture of continuous improvement in how academic programs are created and modified. The proposed changes are considered to be timely as well in that they can help attract more students by providing more formative assistance to faculty across disciplinary boundaries in formulating new academic programs, given the long term economic effects on higher education that is expected, as well due to demographic changes in the student population that are being seen in the fall of 2020 throughout US institutions of higher education.