TO:	Higher Education Committee
FROM:	John L. D'Agati
SUBJECT:	Office of College and University Evaluation (OCUE) Program Approval Process
DATE:	August 31, 2012
AUTHORIZATION(S):	

SUMMARY

Issue for Information

Provide the Board with information regarding the progress to establish a streamlined program approval process.

Reason(s) for Consideration

For Information

Proposed Handling

This item will be presented to the Higher Education Committee at its September 2012 meeting for information.

Procedural History

Consistent with Sections 224 and 237 of the Education Law, as well as Regents Rules and Commissioner's Regulations, the Department is charged with ensuring that all college and university degree programs offered in New York maintain the highest possible quality standards while ensuring access and affordability. Within the Office of Higher Education, general responsibility for this critical function rests with the Office of College and University Evaluation (OCUE). Consistent with Regulations, this office receives hundreds of proposals from degree-granting colleges and universities annually, seeking to either create a new degree program, offer a program at a new degree level (associate to baccalaureate degree) or offer a program in a new degree area (providing a degree in a health-related field for the first time). In June 2012, the Regents were briefed on some procedural changes that OCUE developed in an effort to streamline the process of program approval.

Background Information

The proposed process changes do not change the quality standards used to evaluate each proposal. The new process continues to use the same forms, and asks for the same information as previously required and that has been used for some time. However, these forms will now be available in an electronic format. In order to ensure that degree programs meet the state's quality standards, colleges and universities submit on these forms a range of information which is used to determine if the college meets the established requirements and expectations. Examples of the types of information evaluated include, but are not limited to:

Faculty: The institutions must demonstrate that they have appropriately credentialed faculty that have the experience and background necessary to teach each course, build and support all academic functions, including curricula, academic advising, policies and procedures.

Resources: OCUE will continue to review institutions' financial resources to ensure that they have the ability to fund the initial start-up of the program. They will also ensure that ancillary, yet essential, services such as student academic support services, financial aid guidance and career advising are also available to the student.

Curricula: The program's curricula must be developed consistent with expectations for the field of study and degree level, as indicated by submitted syllabi and, in some instances by external reviewers. The institution must indicate the faculty assigned to teach new courses, and demonstrate that those faculty have the credentials and background that would allow them to teach the course material at the indicated level.

Administration: The institution must demonstrate that it has the governance-structure and administrative personnel needed to support policies and operations such as setting tuition and fee changes and establishing admission, withdrawal and refund policies, all of which must be clearly stated for students and potential students. In addition, library resources and other physical facilities specific for the proposed program must be available before approval is recommended.

In recent years, the demand, and therefore the number of applications for new programs, has grown significantly as new fields of study present themselves as a result of a rapidly changing economy. In addition, higher education institutions have been faced with an increasingly competitive market.   Many traditional and non-traditional students are seeking specialized programs that will provide the specific skills and credentials necessary to enter a particular career field. These students are no longer limited to geographic boundaries as on-line technologies have advanced, and students' general mobility has increased. Today, there are many more options for acquiring the necessary credential, so it is essential that institutions remain responsive to the market. Being able to offer a degree in an emerging, high demand field is critical to the long-term success of any institution.

As a result, the Board of Regents has asked the Department to review its program review process. In response, the Department has undertaken this project in an effort to streamline the program approval process while ensuring that quality standards continue to be maintained.

Over the last several months, the Department has met with representatives from each of the four higher education sectors, (SUNY, CUNY, independent and proprietary) to discuss proposed changes to the approval process. Feedback from the field was generally positive, with several suggestions adopted based on a general consensus. Consistent with the original proposal, OCUE staff, working with the Department's Office of Information Technology Systems, established an application system which provides an electronic platform for institutions to submit the required forms for program approval. The electronic submittal system uses the currently required application forms which have been uploaded into an electronic format. Those forms will be completed by the institutions and submitted through the electronic portal directly back to OCUE for review.

New program registration and master plan amendment proposals will be reviewed by an OCUE evaluator within 30 business days of submission. The applicant will be notified of any deficiencies in the proposal and asked to clarify or amend the application. They will have 30 business days to respond to that request. Once they have responded, OCUE staff will review the additional information and will approve or deny the application. If denied, a reason for the denial will be provided. The applicant is free to resubmit at any time.

If the proposal requires a master plan amendment, the same process as described above will be followed, however additional time will be required to schedule a site visit if necessary, and a canvass of institutions as required by law.

During our trial phase, several institutions representing all four sectors submitted both actual and mock applications in order to test the system's electronics and provide staff with an opportunity to learn how to review documents in this on-line environment. We have also received feedback from those institutions, and continue to make minor adjustments to the electronic submittal platform to fine tune the system.

Using the electronic system offers several benefits: It provides for a consistent and structured application process. It allows for a more effective tracking of applications. It helps to ensure that all institutions use the same forms, and that applications will be reviewed in a more systematic way, which in turn will provide a sense of predictability in the process, leading to more efficient planning for the institutions. The key to an effective review process that ensures quality and is also efficient is to have an application that is complete and well documented. In many instances long delays have been the result of incomplete applications, or information that has been provided in a format that is difficult to interpret.

We are scheduled to transition to the new process in mid-September. As we move forward we will continue to work with our internal technology staff and representatives from the four sectors to improve the submittal process.