

## **Assessing the Assessors: Views from the Inside and Outside**

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Program reviews are an important process for any type of program to remain current within the field of work, and to examine where the field aligns with the local context. For assessment offices in particular, a program review presents professionals with an exciting opportunity to apply a lens of curiosity to their own work in the interest of identifying opportunities for growth. The purpose of this paper is to describe the typical actors in a program review process, the different types of program reviews, and to share stories from the perspective of an external reviewer and of a person whose department was reviewed.

Before delving into the “nuts and bolts” it is important to consider program review through the lens of inquiry as a critical reflection of the process. As assessors one must reflect on the purpose of the program review and the expected outcomes. Continuous improvement is foundational to any program review. The premise is to measure quality of the program while providing opportunities for innovation, development, and advancement. Across higher education, program reviews have become a way to also address the allocation of resources based on the outcomes of the review process (Kelly, 2017). Questions linger about the effectiveness of assessment in general (Suskie, February 28, 2018). Is all the assessment we do having an impact on our campuses, our divisions of student affairs, students, or their success? Program review of assessment is a way to bring these questions to the front of our work and to motivate us to be the best assessment professionals we can. Arguably this is not the only option and alternatives are discussed in the section on types of reviews. For this work

understanding the views of assessing the assessors is relevant and imperative when selecting program review as the right fit for your institution.

This paper is based on the perspectives of individuals from two different institutional types. One institutional type is in the southwest, Carnegie research classification with over 45,000 students. Their division has both traditional student affairs areas and enrollment services across 29 departments. The writer from the outsider perspective includes their institutional understanding of how they also view the process and the experiences from the outside. The other institutional type is in the northwest, Carnegie research classification with over 30,000 students. Their division includes both traditional student affairs areas as well as international programs and academic support services, spanning 31 departments.

Program reviews present an opportunity for assessment professionals to apply elements of the assessment cycle to their work in an effort to continue striving for relevant and innovative practice. Much like the assessment process, program reviewers begin with established criteria against which evidence is to be analyzed and the resulting analysis is used to form recommendations, which are used to inform practice. This mirrors some of what assessment professionals strive to influence in the divisions they serve - thoughtfully established criteria, gathering and analyzing evidence, and using results to inform practice. It is important for assessment practitioners, just like any other practitioner, to pause to examine the relevance and effectiveness of their work.

### **Types of Program Reviewers**

Program reviews can take many different forms and levels of depth. Generally, there are three type of actors who may be involved in a program review: members of the department under review, external partners from the same institution, and external

subject matter experts from outside the institution. Each of these types of reviewers brings a different level of expertise to bear, which can inform what type of review is pursued. Each of the three reviewer types is described below. See figure 1 in Appendix A for a graphical depiction of the types of reviews in which each type of actor may become involved.

### **Members of the department under review**

Members of the department under review hold the deepest level of knowledge of internal context at the program level and how that interacts with the broader institutional context. Additionally, they hold subject matter expertise and a thorough understanding of the ways in which the program operates on a regular basis. With that said, in some cases being involved in the work every day may create a sort-of tunnel vision which could benefit from consideration of outside perspectives.

### **External partners from the same institution**

Campus partners carry deep knowledge of institutional considerations as well as hands-on experience with the program under review. However, it is important to consider that campus partners may be lacking technical knowledge of the field and trends or good practices in the field. This makes it important for them to have a solid set of standards from which to work, and to research good practices that have been implemented at other institutions, if serving as reviewers.

### **External subject matter experts from outside the institution**

External subject matter experts hold knowledge of trends in the field as well as experience. When working with reviewers who are from outside the institution, it is crucial to help them understand the local context. While knowledge of good practices from literature and other institutions is incredibly helpful, knowledge of institutional

and departmental context is critical to the successful implementation of new approaches.

### **Types of Program Reviews**

The type of review one chooses to do depends on why the review is being conducted and what results are expected to come of the review. Some may opt to conduct a program review for the purpose of self-improvement, some institutions have units on a cycle in which reviews are conducted on a regular basis, or a unit may be asked by division leaders to conduct a review as needed. For an example, if a reorganization or change in leadership occurs, a program review can be a helpful tool to inform future directions. The reason for conducting the program review will inform who should be involved in the review, as well as the type of review that would be most appropriate. The next sections will outline different types of reviews and describe the pros and cons, which are outlined in table 1 (see Appendix B).

#### **Internal review**

All reviews will essentially elicit a review of performance by the department under review, at least at some level. The process of preparing evidence for a review sets up an opportunity for the department to consider where their work meets or does not align with the priorities in the field. A more in-depth approach to an internal review may include strategic efforts with a focus on reviewing evidence against the established standards, incorporating research and good practices from other institutions, making recommendations for how this information can inform practice, and implementing plans for creating change. Internal reviews can occur as a formal process or could be built into the ways in which the department operates on an ongoing basis. A strictly internal review could be potentially problematic in that the bias of the department may

exclude external voices. There will be situations where this may be the only or preferred option.

Positive aspects of using a strictly internal review are the intimate knowledge of the subject matter expert is taken into account, and the practitioner in the office has ownership of the growth and changes from the review and thus investment in the process is more likely. Also the knowledge of the culture and climate of a campus is important in any review process and an insider will have this knowledge. Reviews that are internal-only also requires less financial resources for a department and has the potential to require the least amount of time. However, this can lead to a one-sided review. Often, we do not know what we do not know and if only one perspective is taken into consideration then the probability of overlooking an opportunity is great.

### **Internal and external review**

An internal and external review can take several different forms, all of which involve a review conducted by people who work within the program or department under review. The external reviewer role may be filled by campus partners, subject matter experts from outside the institution, or a combination of both. Engaging campus partners as external reviewers provides an opportunity for them to both learn more about the work that the department under review performs, and for them to provide feedback on how that work is approached, which will be entrenched in their institutional knowledge. Engaging subject matter experts from outside the institution creates an opportunity for the department under review to learn from those who have a depth of knowledge and experience in the field, and potential for introducing new ways of thinking about their work. Perhaps the most involved and thorough approach is one that engages both campus partners and subject matter experts from outside the institution as

external reviewers, bringing multiple perspectives to bear on the program under review. Involving external actors can be problematic if care is not given to the selection of the external actor. A review with both internal and external input can also put a draw on resources which should be considered before choosing this route.

Most of the positive outcomes from an internal-only will apply here with the addition of bringing in an external view. This removes the negative outcome of being one-sided as described in the internal-only approach. Having multiple perspectives in a review allows for a holistic view. However, there is an investment of both finances and time to make this work. There is a significant investment in the coordination of an outside team to do the review. From possible travel logistics and costs to the facilitation of meetings with stakeholders these are all investments from the institution that needs to be considered.

### **External review**

An external-only review would involve outside actors examining the work of a program or department, absent of any internal review. Parties involved with an external review could include campus partners from within the institution, subject matter experts from outside the institution, or a combination of both. External actors from within the same institution will add an institutional lens and cultural context to the review. External actors who are subject matter experts from outside of the institution can add perspectives from the content area, promising practices, and national landscape. A strictly external review could be potentially problematic, as it lacks the internal context, input, and rationale. However, there may be situations where this type of review may be the only option for a department and will be based on the leadership's intended direction.

The most significant positive outcome of an external-only review is the removal of bias. An external party has “no dog in the fight.” They are able to look at work of the office with a fresh and open perspective without the personal or professional investment of those within. With this review type, you are not taking into consideration the view from inside which is the intent. However, this external-only review may seem invasive, intrusive, and possible hostile to the department. Using this type of review requires a cultural acceptance into the need for low bias to help the office accept the review outcome without apprehension or resentment.

### **No program review**

In recognition that not doing a review is an option some alternatives to address effectiveness of assessment garners mention here. One way to look at effectiveness is to use benchmarking. Benchmarking will bring attention to ways that assessment work may look the same or different. This will allow for an internal measure of work as compared to others and could be perceived as similar to an internal only review with some external resources. Another option to look at effectiveness is attending focused professional development. In employing this method one can learn new practices or affirm current practices. The accountability to follow through will rely on the one attending and may have some benefits depending on the person or institution. A third option that may share some similarities with an external review is studying the work of others worthy of emulation. This practice would allow an assessment professional to survey the field and to find assessment work that is being done that would directly apply to their campus and could work toward replication of effective practices to their own work. These three options have value and could be a subject of work in their own right.

Having noted that no program review is an option the sharing of the internal and external perspectives of program review for assessment is relevant in this work.

## **The Review from Two Perspectives**

### **From the Insider's Perspective**

This is a perspective taken from an assessment office from within a division of student affairs at a 4-year institution who underwent an internal and external review with subject matter experts from outside the institution. While some find the prospect of undergoing a program review to be scary, this team of assessment professionals really looked forward to engaging in the inquiry process in this way. Gaining insight from trusted professionals external to the institution was important to this team, as they continually strive to improve their work and seek innovative ways to serve departments and students in ways that make a difference. With that in mind, this team opted for an internal and external review (see Appendix A) which involved an examination of their own work (internal review), and a review of evidence by reviewers external to the institution. This process also included interviews with partners from the same institution, external to the department (external review). The process included preparing for the visit, the time during the visit, and follow-up. Preparing for the program review was the most involved and really helped the team launch into introspection.

### **Preparing before the visit**

The department under review chose to use the 2015 Assessment Services Self Assessment Guide (SAG) from the Council for Academic Standards (CAS) as a guide for an internal and external program review. The Assessment Services SAG served as a helpful guide rather than a blueprint, as it was used to view the work of the department



through the standards and guidelines of CAS. Just like how a department needs to consider the local context when implementing good practices from literature, the same is true for the way that a department considers how its work locally aligns with standards for the field. As the team gathered and prepared evidence, it was noticeable where the work aligns, where it could be better aligned, and where it differs with purpose.

As the team gathered evidence, they found it helpful to create an organizing tool using a spreadsheet in cloud storage where all of the pieces of evidence recommended in the SAG were listed, with links to the documents that contained the evidence. Additional other sections of the spreadsheet were used to document the timeline for the review process and the site visit schedule as they developed. This allowed the team to organize their work in a way that the external reviewers could clearly navigate and understand. Serving as an external reviewer can be a large undertaking, therefore, being respectful of their time by making the information and process as clear as possible was important.

The process for selecting external reviewers mostly centered on seeking people who have expertise in student affairs assessment, an understanding of the unit's local context, and working within the available budget. The department had a modest budget available for this process, so it was required to keep travel costs at a minimum. Luckily, the department has a great working relationship with assessment professionals at neighboring institutions who had existing understanding of the local context, and they are colleagues whose perspectives and expertise are greatly valued by the department. The team was grateful that they accepted the request to serve as external reviewers.

The team brainstormed a list of people who should/could be interviewed by the external reviewers and initially listed out more people than the reviewers would be able

to meet with, knowing that people's schedules would inevitably prevent some of them from participating. The team works with departments across the Division of Student Affairs so it was important to the department to have different perspectives represented, including colleagues with whom the team directly liaises, members of the Student Affairs Assessment Council, the Vice Provost for Student Affairs, and people who report directly to the Vice Provost for Student Affairs. Additionally, efforts were made to involve people who had many years of experience working with the team as well as those who were fairly new to working with them.

Many considerations went into planning the site visit schedule. As previously mentioned, the budget was tight so the unit under review opted for a one day review. After sharing the collection of evidence with the external reviewers, the team sought their input on who they would like to meet with and for how long, as well as how many breaks and times to check in with one another should be scheduled throughout the day. Reviewer feedback, combined with the list of stakeholders that the team drafted were used to inform who would be invited to meet with the reviewers.

The team purchased and e-mailed parking passes to the external reviewers with a map prior to the review day in an attempt to make their day go as smoothly as possible. Since the day was action-packed for the reviewers, minimizing travel time between meetings was required and it was important that the reviewers were set up in a comfortable space for the day. Given that, external reviewers had a comfortable room reserved by the department that they could work from for the whole day and the campus partners went to them for their interviews.

The final schedule consisted of a one-hour meeting with members of the team under review, a 20-minute meeting with the Vice Provost for Student Affairs, three 15-

minute meetings with people who report directly to the Vice Provost, and six 15-minute meetings with other division partners with whom the team works. Breaks were scheduled throughout the day for reviewers to have time to check in between interviews, and of course, to actually take a break. In addition, the reviewers took a tour of the work space, and had a 30-minute meeting at the end of the day with the director of the department to allow for any additional questions that arose throughout the day.

### **During the process**

Prior to the site visit, external reviewers were given access to the cloud storage where the evidence was stored. The team whose program was under review remained in communication with the external reviewers as they continued to plan for the site visit and the reviewers examined the evidence. The majority of the work and introspection takes place prior to the site visit for those whose program is under review. During the site visit, team members focused on participating in interviews where necessary, thoughtfully responding to their questions, and hosting the external reviewers. After the visit, the reviewers were encouraged to follow-up with any remaining or lingering questions as they prepared the report.

### **After the site visit**

Shortly after the site visit, the external reviewers provided a report. As assessment professionals, receiving feedback from trusted professionals is an appealing prospect. Assessment work is often focused on helping others assess the impact of their work so having an opportunity to learn from trusted colleagues about their views on strengths and opportunities for improvement is exciting. This is an opportunity for the assessment team to use that information to do the hard work of pushing the work

forward in ways that will make a difference for students; engaging in the work that they encourage their colleagues to do daily by closing the assessment loop.

Through the process of gathering evidence for criteria, the team under review learned about where they could use more work and where they were alright with not aligning with criteria due to internal needs. It was helpful to gain insight from experts in the field who are familiar with the local context but also have a fresh lens through which they can examine and critique processes and practices based on what they learned about the program under review. The reviewers expressed appreciation for having an organized process from start to finish, which punctuates the importance of the communication and preparation work that occurred before the site visit.

### **From the Outsider's Perspective**

The view from the outside looking into another assessor's office is both an honor and a responsibility. The initial reaction feels much like a trusted friend calling you to be "best man" or "maid of honor." After the "I got the call" feeling starts to wear off the real work of being an external reviewer begins. The preparation before the visit, the work "on-site," and the completion of a final report are duties to be considered in full before committing.

### **Before accepting an evaluator role**

Outside evaluators have several things to consider. As with many obligations that one takes on the commitment to the required time should top the list. How much preparation is required before the site visit? How long is the visit expected to take? What is the turnaround time for the final report? These are some of the questions about time commitment that should be considered. Outside evaluators need to recognize if an honorarium matters to them. Some institutions may require you to take personal time

off when away from the office or days unpaid. An honorarium can affect the overall outcome and should be known in advance. Evaluators also need to consider if they have the ability to be unbiased. Evaluating another assessor's shop requires one to take a step away from not only their operation but the biases that their experiences have provided. Participation as a reviewer can have benefits for the reviewer's department and institution and should also be part of the considerations before accepting a role. Adaptation to new culture/climate is also a skill that evaluators need to be able to hone before accepting this role. Each campus has nuances that make it a great, yet different, institution from one's own. The agility of an evaluator to understand these differences will result in a positive review for the department that is inviting them.

### **Preparing before a visit**

The purpose of the outsider perspective is multifaceted. One purpose of the outsider is to get a comparison of what is happening outside of the campus to the work the department/office is doing. As an evaluator a critical step is to find intentional ways to get connected to what is going on in assessment offices. Attending conferences, consulting archives from the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders listserv archives, and regularly reaching out to colleagues are some activities that an evaluator could do before attempting to review another office.

Knowledge of the standards and guidelines of an assessment office is another preparation step that will develop an evaluator's skill base. "The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) was founded in 1979 as a profession-wide entity to establish standards to guide practice by student affairs, student development, and student support service providers employed by institutions of higher learning" (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2017).

CAS has standards for assessment services and is a way to save an evaluator time and energy on finding standards.

Depending on the campus that has invited the evaluator time will be needed for document review of the office itself. This is a critical step to do before the visit. Based on past experience, this step requires plenty of time to review this as assessment offices tend to have many functions and many reports to share. Time reviewing the campus information and allowing for sleuthing on your own is also important. As mentioned earlier, becoming familiar with assessment offices to benchmark the office to be evaluated provides useful insight before the time on-campus. The time spent benchmarking their peer and regional institutions will prepare the evaluator to be more valued resource.

### **Culture learning as a step**

Not only does an evaluator need to be nimble in new environments but understanding the culture of a different campus is be key. Understanding the culture occurs as a bridge between the preparations for the visit and the on-site time itself. An evaluator relies on their skills of observation, the ability to read deep into the documentation, and sense of adapting to and working in a potentially different culture. This step in the process of being an evaluator will make the on-site review process go more smoothly.

### **During the review process**

The interviewing and observational skills honed will pay off here. It also helps to have a little bit of endurance training as well. The schedule for an assessment office will be filled with meeting everyone that the office interacts with; and that is almost an entire division of student affairs. Although each on-campus visit is not identical, many

facets remain the same. As the outsider you are invited to meet with stakeholders (typically both internal and external to the department). Prior to the time on campus, you may be given an opportunity to review the schedule and discuss the possible meetings; this step is important to the campus that invited you. As an external reviewer, consider who your stakeholders are and translate that to inform who you need to hear from to complete the picture for the department you are visiting. Being proactive and asking for stakeholders to be included prior to arrival will make your time on campus most productive. Asking in advance is also helpful to your final report as you cannot include perspectives that you did not see or hear. The schedule is defined by the stakeholders that you are asked to spend time with. Often the campus has the final influence over who you see and why. Being aware of the schedule and your meetings is an important observation.

### **After the review process**

Whether a member of a team or a solo reviewer, the post visit work will become the most critical in the process. The final report not only documents preparation work and on-site time it also provides that department reviewed with critical data. The report will take considerable time and effort in ensuring that you are not only accurate but considerate of the campus and the climate.

### **Editing process**

Once submitted a report should be considered a draft. There are many opportunities for misperceptions of processes, reporting lines, culture, etc. Evaluators need to use the post submission time as another opportunity for engagement with the institution and department. The timelines associated with this part of the evaluation will be determined by the institution and their processes and the evaluator should be open to

those expectations. Allowing flexibility for the draft to be re-written and then re-submitted also allows the institution you are working with time to best reflect on what the review process will look like after the work is complete. Evaluators want this final report to not only reflect their best work but also have utility beyond the review process itself.

As a reviewer, many lessons can be learned. First and foremost, our colleagues are often working within a culture and climate that is more complex than meets the eye. One's initial impression is often more superficial than the time spent "digging into" the finer details. The grass is also not always greener on the other side. Time spent on another campus often shows the best side of a campus and an observant reviewer should also be able to see opportunities for the area being reviewed. Learning how to hone an evaluative observation skill set comes with time and a keen focus on both what you see and what you do not see. One of the biggest takeaways of being a reviewer is the opportunity to take a step back, sharing stories with colleagues, and being submerged into a space where best practices and continuous improvement is the task at hand. As the assessment professional on your own campus being at another campus is a gift to your own campus of re-focus that is worth every day out of the office.

### **Conclusion**

The ways to approach reviews of assessment offices, or program reviews in general, are multifaceted and must center on the departmental and institutional needs while addressing what is to be accomplished through the review. This brings a full circle to the opening questions of the relevancy of program review. There are other approaches to understanding the effectiveness of an assessment function at an institutions, including benchmarking, attending focused professional development, or studying the



work of others worthy of emulation. It is a hope that this work can stimulate more dialog on other options for addressing ways to critically examine the work of assessment professionals. Focusing on what works best for the local context should be a first consideration followed by the options that are available to the department. This work discussed benefits and challenges posed for both reviewers and those who are part of a program under review and a variety of things to consider both when selecting reviewers and when deciding whether or not to participate as a reviewer. Overall, regardless of the approach and actors who participate in the review, a department review will increase one's focus on continuous improvement and can propel the work of a student affairs assessment area forward.

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