

Looking from the Outside In: Considerations for External Assessment

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Abstract: Grant projects. Program review. Accreditation. All of these may involve the use of external reviewers to provide consultation and objective evaluation. Working with external visitors, or serving in this capacity, can be a complicated process to navigate. While external review strategies have clear advantages, they also present distinct challenges to the external reviewers and those internal to the project. Staff in departments undergoing review may experience anxiety and wonder how to maximize chances for success. Using Bolman and Deal's (2017) four-frame model of perspectives on organizations, the authors offer considerations for student affairs professionals engaging in the external review process for both external reviewers and internal parties. These considerations include encouraging individuals to be thoughtful about campus culture, logistics, access to information, effective working relationships, and explicit clarification of the nature and purpose of the task(s). Ultimately, these considerations focus on ways to make the external review process positive and effective.

Keywords: External review, program review, assessment, organizational theory

Assessment is the effort to capture an accurate picture of programs, processes, and outcomes to improve practice (Schuh et al., 2016). By gathering data from multiple sources, assessors can create a mosaic to picture what is happening. Often, faculty and staff involved with the program or process are in the best position to identify and gather that data. Those closest to the object of the assessment have a deep understanding of the component elements, and their investment in the results yields effective assessments. However, in some situations, it is helpful to have new eyes and perspectives on the work. Sometimes this is mandated; institutional or program accreditation processes, for example, commonly require external visitors to review a self-study and talk to stakeholders to come to conclusions and make recommendations to the accrediting body. This external review is seen as an essential part of the process and vital to the validity and credibility of the outcome. Many institutions employ a similar model for their internal academic program and student affairs unit reviews as part of an overall institutional effectiveness plan.

Similarly, student affairs units or divisions conducting self-studies based on the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education standards of practice frequently invite professionals to visit campus to review the self-study and offer recommendations for improvement. It is also common for grant funding agencies to require an external assessment team to provide an objective review and evaluation of the grant-funded work. An external assessment provides objectivity, fresh perspective, and wisdom from experts, which self-studies may lack. Certainly, some of the expertise necessary for the review

process is internal; however, this article focuses on external reviewers. Additionally, external is broadly defined and may mean part of another in-house unit—or external to the institution entirely. The terms used to describe this role may vary with the context—external visitor, reviewer, evaluator, assessor—but for this article, we use reviewer as a broad term to encompass all of these.

While such external assessment strategies have clear advantages, they also present some distinct challenges to the external reviewers and those internal to the project itself. Bolman and Deal's (2017) four-frame model for understanding organizations offers a useful perspective and context for approaching an external review process. In this article, we offer considerations for student affairs professionals embarking on the external review process, whether as external visitors or internal parties working with them. Ultimately, these considerations are focused on easing anxiety, maximizing chances for success, and making the process positive and effective.

Our Experience / Context

Before exploring the considerations, we describe our experiences with external assessments to provide helpful context. Individually, we have assessment experiences at many levels ranging from departmental-level program review to evaluating large-scale institutional strategic initiatives. These experiences include the following:

- serving as an external visitor for both accreditation and institutional program reviews,
- hosting external reviewers for division and program-level evaluation activities,
- serving as an external assessor and intervention strategist for department-level programmatic initiatives,
- building and sustaining multifaceted outcomes-based assessment plans for various departmental programs, and
- serving as external assessors for departments throughout a division of student affairs.

The authors recently worked together as members of the external assessment team for an ambitious, multi-year, grant-funded initiative at a mid-sized private university.

Organizational Framework

To discuss takeaways from our experiences as external reviewers, we utilize what Bolman and Deal (2017) called the four frames (i.e., structural, human resource, political, symbolic). These frames give us a way to think about how organizations operate and, relatedly, how external reviewers experience organizations. While we acknowledge the inherent limitations in applying one structural framework to external reviewers' broad and varied role, we find it helpful to ground our considerations within a commonly used framework. We utilized the four frames to situate the successes and challenges we encountered while serving as external reviewers for two primary reasons:

1. they provide a framework for identifying potential pitfalls in the planning and execution of external assessment, and
2. the lessons we learned from serving as external reviewers primarily focus on how organizations operate.

The structural frame explains that organizations rely on goals, policies, systems, and hierarchies to maintain their functions. In higher education, leaders use the structural frames to meet institutional goals, establish policies for students and campus personnel, and create systems that ensure the learning environment is seamless for students. For example, an administrator may create a one-stop-shop for registration, financial aid, and the bursar to serve students seeking to enroll in classes, ultimately fulfilling the institution's mission. The human resource frame capitalizes on the employees' strengths within an organization and focuses on building relationships to achieve a common goal. In higher education, a senior student affairs officer may encourage collaboration between departments, relying on the relationships among departmental employees, to achieve the mission of student engagement. The political frame values competition within an organization and positions conflict as necessary to get the best result. Within the lens of the political frame, conflict is seen as a good thing. On college campuses, we may find senior-level professionals operating within this frame during decision-making meetings to achieve the best result for students. Finally, the symbolic frame focuses on an organization's culture, emphasizing rituals, ceremonies, and stories to maintain its culture. Many higher education institutions are steeped in traditions and rituals, such as orientation, convocation, and commencement, which serve as symbolic representations of the institution and the educational process.

Though the four frames provide a structure for discussion, and we presented them in distinct ways, some considerations may fall across several frames; they are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, throughout the article, we situate considerations within these four frames to link external assessment to relevant organizational development theory.

Considerations for External Reviewers

What follows are considerations for those who may take on the role of external reviewers. Whereas *recommendations* would suggest what should be done, and *lessons* would imply what not to do, we have chosen to talk about *considerations*. We introduce these considerations in the form of questions. In posing questions to consider, we intend to prompt thinking that is careful and deliberate, takes account of the local context, and leads to decision-making or strategic processes that are informed and intentional.

Consideration 1: How will you gain access to the information and resources needed to carry out the task effectively? How will campus structure(s), policies, and procedures affect your work in this role?

As external reviewers begin to engage in the assessment process, it is important to discuss, at length, the logistics that will impact the ease of sending and receiving information. Because it is critical for external reviewers to have a full picture of the data they are assessing, full access to the data is paramount. But, depending on the areas under review, there may be FERPA or HIPAA considerations that limit it. It is here that external reviewers begin to engage Bolman and Deal's (2017) structural frame, examining the "social architecture of work" (p. 66):

- Is the external assessment team in the best position to send and receive data with ease?

- What are the systems that hold the data that are being assessed?
- Do the external reviewers have access to those systems?
- What is the process for getting data, and what level of access is needed to review the systems and processes in place?
- Who are the people that have and/or need access to the data to be successful?

If part of the role of the external reviewer is to collect data, where will that data be held, and who is responsible for it? These are just a few questions to consider upon entering as an external reviewer. There are legal and ethical considerations involved, and the Institutional Review Board may be a valuable resource in assuring that data are handled appropriately. This may require some strategic relationship building to make sure all those related to the project, or those who play critical roles in getting accurate data, are on the same page.

In addition to having access to data, it is important to have a comprehensive plan to ensure that external reviewers have full and equal access to all relevant and needed information. This type of access may require reviewers to be connected to the right people, which could help separate logistics from organizational culture and politics. For example, although it may be the institutional culture to send formal requests through several offices to get data, this may not be a necessary process for external reviewers. Instead of receiving permissions through several offices, it may be best for external reviewers to receive direct access to the source. While this may not be an easy feat, consider how you might gain access through relationships with key stakeholders to enable an efficient, accurate, and beneficial process to all those who need the information.

In addition to logistics and access, structural considerations may include the workload and reviewers' expectations. These considerations are especially important when the review or relationship takes place over an extended time. These are structural considerations because they pertain to maximizing efficiency and product(s) and clarifying roles and objectives. For ongoing, formal external assessment, it is important to decide at the onset of the project issues like percentage of work time, compensation, and specific desired outcomes of the assessment team. Additionally, it is helpful for the reviewers to establish regular check-ins with the unit under review to make any necessary adjustments. Check-ins can be in the form of face-to-face meetings, virtual meetings, and/or submitting formal reports. Regardless, it is vital that all project members check-in regularly and that the frequency of the check-ins is established at the onset of the project.

Consideration 2: What are the political and power dynamics in the campus culture that may provide context for your work?

Campus culture differs at every institution and situates the assessment effort within a unique context. Before engaging in external assessment, learn what you can about the institutional culture, politics, and values. An examination and understanding of cultural displays, such as rituals (both formal and informal), customs, symbols, and language, reveal helpful and necessary insights into the complexities of campus culture and what community members deem important and meaningful (Manning, 2017). Campus culture

includes norms of campus stakeholders, university traditions, taboos, and current on-campus discourse. While campus culture may be difficult to glean, depending on the positionality of the external assessment team, finding ways to get a more well-rounded view of the campus is critical to effective assessment. What an external assessment team may deem as harmless could be harmful or problematic given the campus culture.

Additionally, it is necessary to consider the positionality of the external assessment team. Bolman and Deal's (2017) political frame describes organizations as jungles, where power is always at play.

- Are there power dynamics, formal or informal, that impact the relationship between the assessment team and the assessment site?
- Is there mutual respect between both parties?
- Does trust exist between the two entities?

These are all questions to consider before engaging in the assessment.

Below we offer a few strategies for gaining a better awareness of campus culture:

1. **Chat with as many stakeholders as possible.** Whether they be students, faculty, staff, alumni, or community members, it is important to get several accounts about the campus culture. While it is important to approach this exploration with transparency and delicacy, it is necessary to get a variety of perspectives.
2. **Inquire about possible landmines.** As external reviewers seek to build relationships and obtain accurate information, it is important that they watch for the landmines that will restrict access to essential information or affect how they are received and perceived. What are the taboo topics and cultural faux pas on campus?
3. **Seek to understand recent campus events.** As external reviewers look to assess with precision and accuracy, a conversation about recent campus events may help provide context. To gather the most authentic and accurate data, it is important that external reviewers understand recent controversies that could prove detrimental to effective assessment. To clarify how this may manifest, we offer the following example: A student group brings a controversial speaker to campus. The speaker polarizes the campus and causes unrest among the student body for the weeks following. Without knowing this information, an external assessment team conducts a campus climate survey soon after the speaker comes to campus. Though the external assessment team may receive rich data, a lack of understanding about the abnormal campus environment results in the external assessment team's skewed perspective on the current climate. Therefore, external assessment teams must understand recent campus events for accurate assessment and reporting.
4. **Recognize how positionality affects approach.** It is important to consider the perspectives of both the external assessment team and the assessment site throughout the process. While external reviewers may approach projects with a big-picture, and perhaps a theoretical lens, it is necessary to consider the perspective of the assessment site. While the assessment team may view something negatively, it may be positive to the constituents on campus—or the reverse.

Consideration 3: How will you navigate relationships on campus that will support your work?

Bresciani and colleagues (2009) identified several barriers to effective student affairs assessment: coordination of the process, collaboration, and trust. While they were not explicitly referring to external review processes, these barriers must be considered and intentionally navigated in an external review context. Healthy relationships between the unit under review and external reviewers are a key consideration in assessment work. Schuh and colleagues (2016) remind us that this process is akin to ethnography, and the concepts of building trust and rapport in negotiating access to the field apply. Relationships between and among constituents influence nearly every aspect of the project.

For reviewers to be successful, they need to galvanize support for initiatives; gain access to files, students, and/or personnel; develop and sustain trust and rapport; and ensure the ability to recognize and navigate institutional politics. Reviewers must exercise agency in garnering campus-wide support for a large-scale initiative. To make progress on pieces of the initiative, reviewers will likely need access to (and support from) various offices, materials, and data. Logistically, reviewers who are external to the institution may face great difficulty accessing said items. Having well-cultivated relationships across campus helps gain access, share the project's narrative, and bolster campus-wide knowledge and understanding.

The human resource frame centers the people within the organization, emphasizing the importance of relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The relationship between internal parties and external reviewers is much like the relationship between qualitative researchers and their interviewees. Some level of familiarity and rapport is quite helpful for a mutually beneficial, conversational partnership. For example, when the researcher and participant share the same language and have some prior knowledge of one another, interviews feel conversational, interviewees need less prompting, and the content produced may well go above and beyond the initial scope of the interview protocol. Similarly, external reviewers who have some degree of collegiality and familiarity with the individuals internal to the project can use a common language, understand institutional environmental factors that influence the project, and express a productive level of candor throughout the assessment process. However, the boundary between external reviewers and internal parties can become blurred if there isn't an intentional, formative review of the differences in these roles. Indeed, it becomes difficult to refrain from making suggestions (beyond that which is appropriate or a function of the assessment team) or assisting in brainstorming sessions, for example, if the distinctions between roles become conflated due to a high degree of familiarity.

Consider an audit of both existing and developing relationships using the following prompts:

1. Who do I know on campus? In what ways will our familiarity affect the external/internal relationship both positively and negatively?
2. What sorts of information and resources will I potentially need or want access to? Who is/are the gatekeeper(s) of that information? How do I best navigate institutional

culture to form a relationship with colleagues whose roles are relevant to this information?

Consideration 4: Broadly, what is the purpose of the assessment effort(s)? To whom will the results be made available, and to whom are reviewers accountable?

Schuh and colleagues (2016) outlined questions that should guide the assessment process. The top two are:

1. What are the issues at hand?
2. What is the purpose of the assessment?

Although the nature of the need or the task may initially seem self-evident, it is important for all parties to clearly articulate their perspective, understanding of the process, and desired outcomes. First, on a broad, conceptual level, what is the purpose of the work? Assessment data can be used to identify areas for improvement, but it can also be used to evaluate the effectiveness or success of an initiative. Relatedly, who is the audience for the work? To whom is the team answerable? How will the results be used?

Considering the audience and their expectations is crucial to effective assessment efforts (Bresciani et al., 2009). Assessment data are valuable to those who are in a direct position to make improvements, but evaluation data may be important to the funding agency, the unit responsible for program reviews, the senior administrator, or the office of institutional effectiveness. Although the same data inform conclusions in both scenarios, the areas emphasized and how reports are framed may differ depending on the audience and their interest.

Ewell (2009) pointed out that improvement and accountability are the primary purposes of assessment. Perhaps the most important questions to clarify are those related to the nature of the task (e.g., evaluation of outcomes, identification of areas for improvement) and the party to whom the reviewers are ultimately accountable. For example, an external reviewer might be invited to review a program in its second year of existence. Suppose the program director makes the invitation and the purpose is program improvement. In that case, the goal is formative assessment, and the visit and report focus on opportunities and areas for further development. If, on the other hand, the vice president makes the invitation and the purpose is evaluation, then the visit and report may use a more critical lens to determine whether the program is achieving intended outcomes, is cost-effective, and should continue to be funded. In this case, the review may be summative, where the goal is to provide a final evaluation of the achievement of the projects' goals. This is not to say that an external review cannot focus on evaluation and improvement or that they cannot be used for accountability to stakeholders. Ultimately, one is likely to be prioritized over the others. Additionally, this is not to discount the symbolic elements of external review. Bolman and Deal (2017) describe some common practices in organizations as ritualistic or ceremonial, as just something we do. Whether for improvement or accountability, it is important to keep in mind the purpose of the assessment, including its symbolism, and tailor the delivery of results appropriately.

Conclusion

Whether serving as an external reviewer or working with such visitors, these collaborations can be rich opportunities for professional enrichment, program improvement, and productive exchange of perspectives and ideas. External entities continue to encourage higher education to pursue collaborations in teaching and research (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Nevertheless, collaborations—particularly as external reviewers—can be challenging to navigate, with issues related to logistics, campus cultures, relationships, the clarity of the purpose of the task, and the lines of accountability. There is a saying that an expert is someone who comes from 50 miles away, and someone external to the program or institution may be viewed as more objective and, therefore, more credible. Such reasoning can lead to the assumption that using an external reviewer is always a good strategy; this may reflect the perception of the accreditation model as the gold standard of validating self-studies. However, the advantages of a fresh perspective and different expertise must be balanced with the deep understanding of those closest to the object being reviewed. Ideally, whether external reviewers come from outside the institution or just outside the unit, such collaborations offer the best of both worlds. To ensure their effectiveness and success, all those involved must commit to explicit expectations, clear communication, and honest exchange of perspectives. Only then can the full value of looking from the outside in be realized.

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How to cite this article: Burr, K. H., Wallace, J. K., & Dean, L. A. (2023). Looking from the outside in: Considerations for external assessment. *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry*, 6(1), 51-58. <https://doi.org/10.18060/27925>