EDITORS' NOTES

Peer Review in Assessment and Improvement: An Overview of Five Principles to Promote Effective Practice

Stephen P. Hundley and Caleb J. Keith

In this special issue of *Assessment Update*, we profile select recipients of the 2021 *Excellence in Assessment* (EIA) Designation, a national-level recognition co-sponsored by VSA Analytics, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). As described on NILOA's website (https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/eia/), the EIA Designation recognizes institutions that successfully integrate assessment practices throughout the institution, provide evidence of student learning outcomes, and use assessment results to guide institutional decision-making and improve student performance. This issue features articles from some of the institutions receiving the 2021 honor, including IUPUI, our home institution.

As many readers know, IUPUI also hosts the Assessment Institute in Indianapolis, the oldest and largest U.S. higher education event focused on assessment and improvement. Following two years offering a virtual engagement to accommodate disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, **we will resume our in-person Assessment Institute, held October 9–11, 2022, at the Indianapolis Marriott Downtown Hotel**. We look forward to presenting an array of workshops, keynote presentations, concurrent and poster sessions, and networking opportunities at the 2022 Assessment Institute. Learn more about this year's event, including registration details, schedule overview, and program tracks and topics, at our website, https://assessmentinstitute.iupui.edu/index.html.

The theme of our Editors' Notes for 2022 is "Peer Review in Assessment and Improvement: Five Principles to Promote Effective Practice." Peer review has long been used in the higher education sector to serve a variety of purposes and meet the needs of several audiences. Activities supportive of assessment and improvement also increasingly rely on peers to offer credible subject matter expertise in respective contexts, provide judgments, develop recommendations for enhanced performance, and make contributions to creating and sustaining a culture of continuous improvement and innovation. The five principles to promote effective practice in peer review for assessment and improvement are:

1. Recognize the purpose of the peer review process in higher education assessment and improvement.
2. Value the multitude of perspectives, contexts, and methods related to assessment and improvement.
3. Adopt a consultative approach to the peer review process.
4. Make effective judgements using inclusive sources and credible evidence.
5. Provide relevant feedback to stakeholders.

Principle #1: Recognize the purpose of the peer review process in higher education assessment and improvement

One enduring feature of the higher education sector is its use of peers in processes to generate, evaluate, disseminate, and curate knowledge for a variety of purposes and audiences. Peers are often individuals who are regarded as subject matter experts in a particular domain, and they usually have educational and professional preparation and experiences comparable to those desirous of and reliant on the peer's perspectives, judgment, and feedback. Depending on the purpose of the peer review process, peers may be local in nature (e.g., within the institution), represent a valued external constituency (e.g., community members, employers, or alumni), or have an "arms-length" distance from the activity under review (e.g., colleagues from the discipline or profession working in other institutional settings). The type of review informs which peer(s) are appropriate to engage. Indeed, peers have the potential to contribute to a variety of worthwhile activities, including reviews of teaching; evaluations of academicians for tenure and promotion purposes; making judgements about the significance and quality of scholarly contributions; as part of periodic, internally oriented program review processes; as colleagues serving on accreditation teams; and, increasingly, as part of assessment and improvement activities taking

reviewers, co-sponsors, endorsers, and the assessment community writ large, we recognize that to ensure relevance the EIA Designation needs to evolve.

What's Next?

NILOA is now going through its own transitions, and we, too, need to acknowledge change. In response to these changes, AAC&U, a long-time collaborator on the EIA, will take on stewardship of the award beginning in January 2022. Under the leadership of Kate Drezek McConnell, Vice President for Curricular and Pedagogical Innovation and Executive Director of VALUE, AAC&U will engage the broader assessment community in a robust and reflective evaluation of the EIA Designation's mission, processes, and outcomes in order to identify areas of excellence within the current protocols as well as opportunities for change, growth, and enhancement. Drawing on its history of community engagement and crowdsourcing within the higher education community, AAC&U is excited to embark on this important work. You can expect a call to engage in this process in the near future.

At AAC&U, we believe now is the right moment for further reflection, review, and possible enhancement of the EIA designation. As we work to ensure the long-term viability and relevance of the EIA designation, there are questions we will continue to ask of ourselves and of the designation, from deciding whether or not there should be additional levels (e.g., a "Rising to Excellence" or "Honorable Mention" for those institutions who were told to resubmit their application) to addressing the dynamic tension between articulated and enacted assessment practices, along with demonstrated results of these processes. These questions and more will assist in our evaluation of the EIA process and help decide the path forward.

Final Thoughts from NILOA

NILOA has shepherded the EIA process through its many changes, and while it is tough to let go of the reins, we are excited for EIA's future. We know and trust it is in the good hands of AAC&U, and we look forward to assisting where needed. We want to recognize the hard work of our expert assessment reviewers in providing feedback to institutions that applied each year.

And most of all, we want to thank the 41+ institutions that have applied and made the EIA Designation what it is today. As we continue to highlight and celebrate your excellence in assessment, we hope to have earned your trust and friendship. For those of you with whom we have interacted over the past few years discussing and lifting up your excellent assessment practices, it was our pleasure. ■

Gianina R. Baker is the acting director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment and the associate director for evaluation, learning, and equitable assessment in the Office of Community College Research & Leadership at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign; and Kate Drezek McConnell is the vice president for curricular and pedagogical innovation and executive director of VALUE at AAC&U.

Peer Review in Assessment and Improvement: An Overview of Five Principles to Promote Effective Practice

(continued from page 3)

place within learning experiences at the course, program, and institutional levels. We will discuss Principle #1 in greater detail in Volume 34, Number 2.

Principle #2: Value the multitude of perspectives, contexts, and methods related to assessment and improvement

Peer review processes require an understanding of how perspectives, contexts, and methods support assessment and improvement activities. *Perspectives* in peer review include those of reviewers, stakeholders, and decision-makers. The value of peer review is often maximized by leveraging and incorporating feedback from multiple peer reviewers, including internal colleagues, external subject matter experts, community members, and other important constituents of the activity undergoing review. Stakeholders include administrators, who may sponsor the peer review process; faculty and staff of the activities involved in the peer review process; students and alumni who are often direct beneficiaries of learning interventions; and partners, including those on-campus or elsewhere, who make specific learning contributions. Decision-makers are individuals at various levels who lead and champion the work being peer reviewed and are often able to affect change as an outcome of feedback received from reviewers. *Contexts* for peer review in assessment and improvement include both the type and scope of activity undergoing peer review and its placement in the activity lifecycle, along with the institutional culture for assessment and improvement, the motivations for peer review, and how outcomes from peer review processes are used. Finally, *methods* employed in the peer review process are often informed by the goals and scope of the activities being reviewed. Such methods may include a blend of direct, indirect, quantitative, and qualitative approaches to data gathering; use in-person, virtual, hybrid, or independent review of artifacts; involve observations, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis; rely on individual or team judgements; and range from highly prescribed/structured to highly emergent/semi-structured review processes. We will discuss Principle #2 in greater detail in Volume 34, Number 3.

Principle #3: Adopt a consultative approach to the peer review process

Effective peer reviewers often adopt a consultative approach to the peer review process, which involves reviewing information, querying stakeholders, evaluating evidence, making judgements, and generating recommendations. Such a consultative approach entails having the peer reviewer serve as a "critical friend" to the program, entity, or context undergoing review, along with understanding desired roles, behaviors, and expectations of a consultant. The consultative process in which peer reviewers participate include phases such as preparation, initial entry, engagement, analysis, judgment, feedback, clarification, and exit, with specific stakeholder relationships unfolding in each phase. There are numerous other considerations involved in the consultative approach, including using specific tools and resources to engage in peer review; adopting an appreciative inquiry perspective to the work; placing the review of an activity in its broader context, such as institutionally, disciplinarily, or nationally; navigating ambiguity, complexity, and interpersonal or political dynamics; and fostering an environment that allows for candid exchange of ideas and experiences. We will discuss this principle in Volume 34, Number 4.

Principle #4: Make effective judgements using inclusive sources and credible evidence

One principal role of peer reviewers in their assessment and improvement work is to make effective judgements using inclusive sources and credible evidence. This entails determining who are "inclusive sources" and what counts as "credible evidence" in reviewing the activity. It also relies on peer reviewers ensuring that all necessary stakeholder perspectives are included in the process; such stakeholders often include students, alumni, faculty, staff, administrators, colleagues elsewhere in the institution supporting or interacting with the activity undergoing review, and external partners. The goal is to invite and promote the multiplicity of sources to inform themes. As peer reviewers engage in their analysis of feedback from stakeholders, it is necessary for them to identify isolated incidents, patterns of behavior, and systemic issues, all of which should yield information about what is working well, what are areas for improvement, and what are specific recommendations or observations. As peer reviewers make effective judgements, they will need to recognize the broader environmental considerations; this entails placing the activity in its proper comparison context. Often this involves an understanding of satisficing vs. maximizing performance or outcome of the activity being reviewed, with an appreciation of the activity's resources, contexts, and priorities. Finally, peer reviewers need to always keep in mind the scope of the review and remind themselves—and others involved in or benefitting from the peer review process—of the type of information the reviewer is being asked to provide perspectives. We will discuss this principle in Volume 34, Number 5.

Principle #5: Provide relevant feedback to stakeholders

Ultimately, effective peer review processes yield outcomes that can make a positive difference to enhancing the performance of individuals, learning environments, programs, and institutions. This requires peer reviewers to provide relevant feedback to stakeholders. There should be distinctions made between evaluative and improvement-oriented feedback, along with an understanding of the format in which feedback is expected and the intended audiences and uses for feedback. The timing and nature of feedback—*formative*, to make improvements vs. *summative*, to provide evaluations—also needs to be clarified as part of expectation setting for peer review processes. Often feedback from peers involves sharing of recommendations; thus, care and attention is necessary to prioritize recommendations, including identifying sequential or interdependent actions and the time or cost horizons associated with recommendations. In some instances, it may be necessary for the recipients of feedback to grapple with differing perspectives held by multiple peer reviewers—either from reviewers as part of a multi-reviewer team or from feedback received by multiple individual reviewers. Finally, responding to feedback, socializing the feedback with stakeholders, adopting recommendations, and institutionalizing components of the peer review process are all vital components to ensuring feedback from peers is used effectively by stakeholders. We will discuss this principle in Volume 34, Number 6.

There are plentiful opportunities and contexts for using peer review to support assessment and improvement in higher education. Thus, we look forward to focusing more fully on each of these five principles in Editors' Notes throughout the remainder of 2022. Thank you for reading *Assessment Update*. ∎

Capella University's Journey Toward Sustained Excellence in Assessment

- start early and identify required sections within the application. It's especially helpful to *begin with the end in mind*: start your project with a clear vision of your desired direction and destination;
- identify subject matter experts who can contribute knowledge to the plans, strategies, and use of data that will be showcased in your application;
- create a project management timeline with agreed upon deadlines; and
- get an editor involved to review your application to ensure flow, accuracy, clarity, and lack of errors in your final product. ∎

Jaclyn Zacharias, Nancy Ackerman, and Christine S. Yates are assessment specialists at Capella University.