EDITORS' NOTES

Peer Review in Assessment and Improvement: Principle #1, Recognize the Purpose of the Peer Review Process in Higher Education Assessment and Improvement

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THROUGHOUT 2022, THE THEME OF our Editors' Notes 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. In Volume 34, Number 1, we provided an overview of the *five principles to promote effective practice in peer review for assessment and improvement*:

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.

In this issue, we discuss principle #1: *recognize the purpose of the peer review process in higher education assessment and improvement*. This involves defining peer review, identifying appropriate peers, and understanding the strengths and challenges to peer review processes.

Defining Peer Review

One enduring feature of the higher education ecosystem is its use of peers in processes to generate, evaluate, disseminate, and curate knowledge. Indeed, *peer review* is often a hallmark of academic work, where the breadth of its scope, responsibility for its activities, and respect for its results is widely recognized (Banta 2002; Hammann and Beljean 2017; Webb and McEnerney 1997). Peer review is often employed for a variety of important academic purposes, including:

- *scholarly*, where peers within a discipline or knowledge domain determine the appropriateness of topics, methods, analyses, and conclusions in the development of published works or comparable creative artifacts;
- *technical/professional*, where peers use specialized knowledge and expertise in providing consultation to or evaluation of work in each context; and
- *improvement-oriented*, where peers provide feedback to individuals, programs, services, or institutions for the purposes of strengthening educational goals, processes, and outcomes.

Peer review processes typically involve a "triggering event" for a review, such as an editor of a publication receiving a new manuscript for consideration, a program director desirous of seeking initial specialized accreditation for their program, or a faculty member preparing to advance in academic rank. Decision makers then select peers to review appropriate artifacts and make judgments in accordance with the goals of the peer review process. These peers may come solely from a narrowly defined discipline, field, professional identity, or area of specialization; alternatively, they may represent interdisciplinary, cross-functional, or boundary-spanning perspectives. Feedback is provided by peers and used by decision makers to determine next steps in each context (e.g., to publish a manuscript, to accredit a program, to grant tenure or promotion to a colleague). To ensure information from peer review yields optimal utility, it is important for decision makers involved in orchestrating peer review processes to exercise care and attention in identifying appropriate peers.

Identifying Appropriate Peers

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.,

Combatting Apathy and Burn-Out for Institutional Effectiveness by Igniting Inquiry

The challenge to combatting organizational apathy and burn-out may reside in responding to this question: How well are you igniting inquiry into the *questions your organization* (or parts of your organization) *cares about* and then aligning curriculum/programming and your IE and OBAPR processes to answering those questions? ■

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within the institution), represent a valued external constituency (e.g., community members, employers, or alumni), have an "arms-length" distance from the activity under review (e.g., colleagues from the discipline or profession working in other institutional settings), or a peer review team may be comprised of a blend of these roles.

The type of review informs which peers are appropriate to engage, and such peers have the potential to contribute to a variety of worthwhile activities. These activities include reviewing faculty teaching; evaluating faculty members for tenure and promotion purposes; making judgements about the significance and quality of scholarly contributions; participating in periodic, internally oriented program review processes; serving on accreditation teams; and facilitating assessment and improvement activities taking place within learning experiences in a variety of contexts.

Decision makers involved in peer review processes can seek peers from a variety of potential sources. In highly structured processes—such as those related to accreditation or publication activities—an existing roster of pre-determined or -selected peers may exist. For other ad hoc activities—such as those related to periodic internal program review or evaluation of colleagues for potential advancement in rank—decision makers may seek recommendations from colleagues locally or elsewhere, leverage existing groups within professional associations or disciplinary societies, or identify individuals from peer or aspirant programs or institutions from which potential reviewers may be invited to participate in the peer review process. Regardless of the source from which peers are drawn, it is necessary to understand the strengths and challenges associated with peer review processes.

Understanding the Strengths and Challenges to Peer Review Processes

Those reliant on peer review outcomes often do so with the realization there are inherent strengths and challenges to such processes. *Strengths* of peer review include the engagement of credible experts who can provide an objective, critical, and often external view of a particular activity. Ideally, such peers will provide feedback to decision makers that is actionable for ongoing improvements. Finally, peer reviews allow an opportunity for reflection and renewal by those stakeholders benefitting from the process.

Challenges associated with peer reviews are the resources—including time and finances—needed to effectively engage peers in the process. Relatedly, it may also be difficult to identify and seek commitment from appropriate peers to participate in peer review activities. Feedback received from peers may not fully appreciate the goals of the review or the context in which work occurs. For example, recommendations may be too resource dependent or range from being either too friendly or too judgmental. Finally, without proper alignment to and integration of peer review with other activities or valuing of the process by those stakeholders reliant on its outcomes, peer reviews may be perceived as having little value or merely as a bureaucratic imposition.

The potential for peer review to make important contributions to assessment and improvement activities is significant.

Indeed, as Banta (2002) reminded us, such reviews "can encompass all aspects of the life of an academic department—from the credentials and research interests of faculty members to the methods they use to demonstrate student learning—and the collective judgment of peers is the form of departmental assessment most universally accepted by faculty" (p. 183). Defining peer review, identifying appropriate peers, and understanding the strengths and challenges to peer review processes are important first steps. Concurrently, it is also necessary to *value the multitude of perspectives, contexts, and methods related to assessment and improvement*. We will discuss this principle in Volume 34, Number 3. ■

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including on-demand consultations with the PASS team, sample exemplary assessment reports from previous years, and detailed explanations of the rating process and criteria. Additionally, CARS offers various professional development opportunities every academic year, including a week-long assessment crash course, workshops for both new and returning assessment coordinators, and assessment report rater training. Participation in assessment report rating in particular serves to provide quality feedback to the programs submitting assessment reports while developing the assessment skills and knowledge of the faculty who participate in the rating process.

COVID-Related Adjustments to the Typical Timeline

After receiving feedback from assessment coordinators and other stakeholders within the university, two major adjustments were made to the annual reporting process. The first adjustment was to offer programs a choice between two postponed due dates for submitting the assessment report: August 1 and October 15 (instead of the standard June 1 deadline). The programs that submitted the report in August received feedback in early October (close to the typical feedback date), whereas the programs who submitted the report in mid-October received feedback in mid-December. Although receiving feedback later in the year may prevent some programs from incorporating feedback into their 2020–2021 AY assessment processes, delaying the due dates allowed crucial additional time for programs that were unable to meet the standard deadline. Of the 111 programs required to submit reports in 2020, 43 programs met the first due date, 66 met the second due date, and only two programs met neither.

Additionally, we offered programs their choice of two feedback types. The formal feedback option retained the typical, highly structured feedback, including quantitative ratings along with the qualitative comments provided in typical years. The second option, informal feedback, provided a less structured feedback report that omitted the quantitative ratings but provided a brief summary of the assessment strategy and targeted suggestions for improving the assessment process. This option was specifically developed to accommodate pandemic-related disruptions. We were motivated to introduce the informal feedback option for programs that were severely affected by the pandemic and were concerned that they would be unable to meet the typical reporting standards. Programs pursuing this option were provided with briefer feedback that considered the impact of the pandemic. This option reduced the time spent both producing the reports (for the program) and rating the reports (for the PASS team) while easing fears about the repercussions of disrupted assessment during the pandemic.

Reflections, Reactions, and Lessons

Regardless of the deadline and feedback type selected by a program, we encouraged all Assessment Coordinators to provide a narrative of the impact of the pandemic on their assessment process. A review of these narratives provides an overview of common disruptions, which we have used to provide targeted support as the pandemic continues. Multiple programs reported canceling signature assessments, such as poster presentation sessions, due to the abrupt shift from campus-based learning. Other programs indicated low response rates to assessments, as contacting students became more difficult without face-to-face meetings. Finally, many programs noted faculty were overextended and overwhelmed because of the pandemic, necessarily reducing the available person-hours to devote to assessment work. Notably, a handful of programs reported the pandemic did not result in disruptions to their assessment procedures.

Responses to these barriers provide insights that will be useful long after the pandemic ends. First, it is imperative to consistently communicate expectations