

Peer Review in Assessment and Improvement: Principle #3, Adopt a Consultative Approach to the Peer Review Process

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AT THE TIME OF WRITING, WE ARE preparing for the 2022 Assessment Institute in Indianapolis, the oldest and largest U.S. higher education event focused on assessment and improvement. This year's Institute will resume as an in-person event October 9–11, 2022, at the Indianapolis Marriott Downtown Hotel. We are excited to offer more than 300 unique educational sessions, including pre-Institute workshops, keynote presentations, and concurrent and poster sessions. To learn more about this year's Institute, including registration and program details, please visit our website: <https://assessmentinstitute.iupui.edu/>.

Throughout 2022, the theme of our *Assessment Update* Editors' Notes is "Peer Review in Assessment and Improvement: Five Principles to Promote Effective Practice." Peer review has become a hallmark of the higher education sector for a variety of purposes and for multiple audiences. Activities supportive of assessment and improvement also increasingly rely on peer reviewers to offer credible subject matter expertise in respective contexts, provide judgments, develop and provide 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.

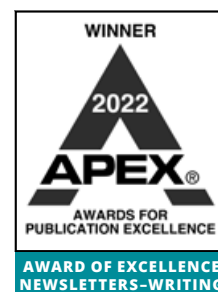
In Volume 34, Number 2, we described principle #1 and in Volume 34, Number 3, we described principle #2. In this issue, we discuss principle #3: *adopt a consultative approach to the peer review process*. This involves determining how a consultant differs from other forms of peer review roles, engaging in the consultative process, and recognizing considerations for consultants.

Determining How a Consultant Differs from Other Forms of Peer Review Roles

In the context of assessment and improvement activities, effective peer reviewers often adopt a consultative approach to their work. This 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.

A consultant differs from other peer review roles, such as evaluator or accreditor, although there are not always sharp distinctions between these roles. An *evaluator*, for example, makes rational judgments about an entity or activity being reviewed, often maintaining neutrality and objectivity during the process. An *accreditor* typically uses agreed upon standards to determine the extent to which programs meet minimal compliance to those standards, usually for the purposes of making assurances to an external body—the accreditor. While a *consultant* would be expected to make rational judgments and use any agreed upon standards in performing their work, the role is best conceived of being similar to that of a coach to the principals involved in the review process. As such, a consultant examines the strengths and opportunities for improvement, along with making recommendations that consider the context and culture in which the individual, program, or unit works. They do so through constant engagement with the principals involved in the review process—not from an "arm's length" distance that tends to characterize other

(continued on page 15)



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(continued from page 3)

forms of peer review (Halonon and Dunn 2017; Lubinescu, Ratcliff, and Gaffney 2001; Luo 2010).

Engaging in the Consultative Process

To be effective, those involved in a consultative process of peer review for assessment and improvement need to embrace the approach as one that has merit and can produce results that improve both processes and outcomes (Schein 1997). For consultants, such a process typically involves several stages: preparation, entry, engagement, analysis, feedback, and exit.

- **Preparation:** recognizing the purpose of the review process, making a commitment to serve as a peer reviewer, and reviewing relevant background materials (self-study, course portfolios, student learning artifacts, etc.).
- **Entry:** becoming familiar with the review context, making introductions to the principals involved in the review process, setting ground rules for the engagement, and understanding the intended uses of the review process.
- **Engagement:** following the agreed upon schedule and framework for the review, displaying appropriate behaviors (e.g., courtesy, respect, dignity, professionalism), asking appropriate questions, and seeking additional information to augment emerging findings and impressions.
- **Analysis:** reviewing information and artifacts uncovered during the review process, synthesizing and summarizing notes from meetings/interactions/observations with stakeholders involved in the process, making judgments about sources of strength and opportunities to improve, and developing recommendations appropriate to the review's purpose and context.
- **Feedback:** framing recommendations

informed by the review process, organizing recommendations so they have utility and meaning for the entity or activity undergoing review, linking recommendations to external standards or promising practices in the discipline or profession, and offering recommendations that are typically not overly reliant on one singular resource or action for their effective implementation.

- **Exit:** returning or destroying any confidential materials used during the review process, agreeing not to disclose aspects of the review to others, providing feedback on the review process, and, if appropriate, being available for follow-up queries from program principals.

Recognizing Considerations for Consultants

Throughout the consultative process stages, there are considerations consultants need to keep in mind as they engage in peer review for assessment and improvement purposes. Among other actions, these include bringing subject matter expertise to bear, evaluating the currency of the entity undergoing review, and avoiding certain reviewer tendencies.

- **Bringing subject matter expertise to bear:** A consultative approach may include bringing content knowledge and professional expertise to the review process. This may include perspectives on curriculum and sequencing, disciplinary standards and norms, interaction with and contribution to scholarship, industry engagement (as appropriate), etc.
- **Evaluating the currency of the entity being reviewed:** A consultative approach necessitates that peer reviewers determine the contemporary relevance of the entity undergoing review. This involves making comparisons to

trends in the discipline or profession, examining the composition and qualifications of program principals relative to external norms or standards, and recognizing how various stakeholders of the entity undergoing review have their needs and expectations met.

- **Avoiding certain reviewer tendencies:** A consultative approach is best served when reviewers avoid making comparisons to the reviewer's own institution, instead making comparisons to "industry" norms/expectations/best practices, to include "peer" units or programs identified by the entity under review. Reviewers also need to maintain appropriate boundaries and avoid "going native" by becoming too involved in the individuals, programs, or units they are reviewing, thus taking on too much of an advocate role rather than that of consultant (O'Reilly 2009).

This month's NILOA Perspectives column on page 10 provides additional examples of considerations for engaging in a consultative peer review process. Such a process produces actional recommendations for the principals involved in, and other beneficiaries of, the entity being reviewed. To develop these recommendations, it is necessary for reviewers to *make effective judgments using inclusive sources and credible evidence*. We will discuss this principle in Volume 34, Number 5. ■

References

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