

Peer Review in Assessment and Improvement: Principle #4, Make Effective Judgements Using Inclusive Sources and Credible Evidence

Caleb J. Keith and Stephen P. Hundley

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, Numbers 2, 3, and 4, we described principles 1, 2, and 3, respectively. In this issue, we discuss principle #4: *make effective judgements using inclusive sources and credible evidence*. This principle underscores a principal role

of peer reviewers in their assessment and improvement work—determining who are "inclusive sources" and what counts as "credible evidence" in reviewing the program, unit, service, or activity. The goal is to invite and promote a multiplicity of sources to inform themes. To this end, "program critique and feedback should be based on triangulation of data versus a single source and based on the mission, outcomes, and goals of the specific program under evaluation" (Sowcik et al. 2013, p. 69). Coupled with efforts to triangulate data and information from various sources is the need for recognition of the context and environment in which the program, unit, service, or activity under review exists and acknowledgement of the scope of the request of the review. Taken together, these concepts and activities allow peer reviewers to make effective judgments about the state of the entity under review.

Seeking Inclusive Sources for the Review Process

Making effective judgements relies on peer reviewers ensuring all necessary stakeholder and other perspectives are included in the review process of the entity or activity undergoing review. Depending on the context, such perspectives might include a combination of the following:

- students,
- faculty and staff members,
- administrators,
- alumni,
- internal partners (including those in co-curricular, research, global

learning, community engagement, and professional development contexts),

- external partners (including those in experiential, community, and international contexts, along with other institutions in partnership or consortia arrangements),
- disciplinary and professional associations and accreditors,
- program and institutional peer or aspirant benchmarks, and
- best/promising practices as reflected in a review of the higher education professional literature and discipline-based educational research literature.

Ideally, reviewers will have the opportunity to interact with as many stakeholders as possible to collect the perspective from several "inclusive sources." Reviewers should be attentive to those stakeholders with whom they interact or otherwise receive information. In addition to those stakeholder groups who are represented in interactions, reviewers should also note those groups *without* representation during the review process. This may require inquiring how stakeholder groups were identified and solicited, selected, or invited for participation.

As peer reviewers engage in their analysis of feedback from stakeholders, it is also necessary for them to endeavor to identify and contextualize isolated incidents, patterns of behavior, and systemic issues. Appropriately identifying in which category stakeholder experiences belong is as much art as it is science and should

(continued on page 15)

Peer Review in Assessment and Improvement: Principle #4, Make Effective Judgements Using Inclusive Sources and Credible Evidence

(continued from page 3)

draw upon the reviewers' experience and judgement. Nonetheless, the act of considering stakeholder feedback and its frequency or pervasiveness should yield information about what is working well, what are areas for improvement, and what are specific recommendations or observations to provide the entity under review.

Using Credible Evidence

In addition to incorporating stakeholder and other perspectives in the peer review process, it is necessary for reviewers to insist on and use credible evidence in making judgements (Banta and Palomba 2015; Ludvik 2018). Based on the purpose of the entity being reviewed, evidence may be sought from one or more of these contexts: individual; course or program; support service, function, or initiative; or institutional.

- *Individual:* Evidence here may include a review of teaching philosophies; curricula vitae; instructional materials, such as syllabi and assignments; scholarly artifacts, including publications, presentations, or grants awarded; assessment findings and their uses; professional development experiences undertaken; contributions to important initiatives, such as diversity and inclusion, retention, student success, and mentoring activities; and other reviews, including peer reviews of teaching or formal performance evaluations.
- *Course or Program:* Evidence here may include a review of course goals, including student learning outcomes; curricular maps and assessment plans/reports; direct evidence of learning, including assignments, student ePortfolios, tests or exams, performance in capstones or in applied settings, and other relevant measures (e.g., licensure or professional certification); indirect evidence of learning, including feedback through course evaluations,

surveys, focus groups, and exit interviews; GPA and retention data; post-graduation information (e.g., job placement and advanced education plans/experiences); the resource base to support the course or program; and, increasingly, disaggregated data to uncover equity gaps and opportunities for improvement in courses and programs.

- *Support Service, Function, or Initiative:* Evidence here may include a review of the goals or mission of the entity being reviewed; the resources allocated to support the work; progress and outcome reports on the effectiveness of goal attainment; feedback from stakeholders; and elements of professional practice identified from appropriate external sources (e.g., functional area standards from the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education).
- *Institutional:* Evidence here may include a review of institutional mission, vision, and values statements; strategic and academic plans; the fiscal health of the institution; productivity measures and cost analyses; rankings and reputational studies; feedback from accreditation reports; internal systems, processes, policies, and procedures to govern/manage the institution; and alumni, philanthropic, and community engagement activities.

Attending to the Purpose, Scope, and Context of the Review

As peer reviewers make effective judgements, they need to recognize the broader environmental contexts in which the program, unit, service, or activity under review exists and operates. This recognition entails placing the activity in its proper setting for comparison. Several factors—environment, personnel, resources—may exert their influence on

outcomes and performance. As such, peer reviewers need an understanding of satisfying vs. maximizing—accepting an outcome or result as good enough as opposed to the best, or optimal, result—related to the activity being reviewed, with an appreciation of the activity's resources, contexts, and priorities. Although there may be an ideal scenario or outcome of the program under review, no activity exists in a vacuum and a variety of mediating factors may impact the ultimate result or product of the entity under review. Peer reviewers need to be able to recognize these factors or influences and understand the scope and magnitude of their influence, using this knowledge to inform not only their judgement through the review process, but also their recommended priorities and actions.

Peer reviewers also need to 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. This includes understanding the intended audience(s) of the review and culminating recommendations, along with the areas of focus of the review. Often in a request for peer review, there may be explicit areas about which the entity under review would like insights, feedback, and recommendations. Although it is often not necessary to solely limit perspective-taking during the review process to a single focus, it is incumbent upon the reviewers to ensure there is emphasis on the topic or area about which they are being asked to provide perspectives. For example, in a program review for an academic department, it is important for reviewers to understand whether they are being asked to focus on the curriculum, staffing structure, resource allocation, student profile, community engagement, or some combination thereof. Additionally, it is important to understand and acknowledge whether recommendations might include seeking additional resources or if reviewers are being asked to offer creative

(continued on next page)

recommendations or opportunities for how programs can maximize existing resources.

Ultimately, effective peer review processes yield outcomes that can make a positive difference to enhance the performance of individuals, learning environments, programs, and institutions. This

requires peer reviewers to *provide relevant feedback to stakeholders*. We will discuss this final principle in Volume 34, Number 6. ■

References

Banta, T. W., and Palomba, C. A. 2015. *Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education*

(2nd edition). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
Ludvik, M. J. B. 2018. *Outcomes-Based Program Review: Closing Achievement Gaps in and outside the Classroom with Alignment to Predictive Analytics and Performance Metrics* (2nd edition). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
Sowcik, M., J. L. Lindsey, and D. M. Rosch. 2013. "A Collective Effort to Understand Formalized Program Review." *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 6(3), 67–72. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21259>

Assessing Mission Fulfillment: Utilizing Collaboration to Support Strategic Planning and Decision-Making

(continued from page 2)

With this foundation, MSUB fully launched the next phase of the strategic planning process. Core theme leads recruited members for their committees, who were tasked with identifying indicators of success. In late March 2019, SUU leadership returned to campus and worked with teams responsible for each of the core themes to assist them with developing meaningful indicators to be used in ongoing decision-making and assessment efforts.

The Results

In September 2019, MSUB hosted an open forum to introduce the strategic plan to all constituencies, including campus and community members. Leads for each sub-objective of the plan were identified, and each lead was empowered to create implementation teams comprised of faculty, staff, students, and community leaders who were charged to move forward with action items. SUU's guidance has enabled the university to enact meaningful, measurable outcomes that have broad support. The recent hire of a Director of Assessment and Accreditation allows MSUB to modify strategic plan metrics as appropriate to ensure systematic collection of data. Furthermore, MSUB's institutional research staff travelled to SUU and worked with SUU leadership to create the foundation for an MSUB dashboard that launched in fall 2021. The results of these efforts enabled all constituents and stakeholders to track MSUB's progress on strategic plan implementation. One example of the early

results of this collaboration was MSUB's Strategic Program Assessment process that used data on student achievement, including graduation rates, to make decisions on the institution's program portfolio. The university has plans for ongoing program assessment that will utilize a common data set provided by Institutional Research.

While MSUB experienced significant transformation, the process yielded significant learning opportunities for NWCCU as well as SUU. Being able to discuss with senior MSUB leadership the process the institution was about to enter, and then to watch it unfold, provided insights to be used in subsequent strategic planning efforts at SUU. Visiting with MSUB subcommittee members as they discussed their areas of interest and concern and encouraging these smaller groups to try to capture the needs of their specific areas while maintaining focus on institution-wide performance indicators was challenging but ultimately highly satisfying as the MSUB plan began to take shape and many of the pitfalls experienced by SUU were avoided. These insights and experiences were reported to the SUU President and Cabinet for consideration as SUU entered its next phase of strategic planning.

For NWCCU, the pilot demonstrated the critical role of accreditation when it moved beyond a compliance focus to a focus upon quality and formative assessment. Partnering with institutional stakeholders to refocus the purpose of assessment activities to student outcomes led to better day-to-day decision-making on

campus, and kept stakeholders aligned in their focus on outcomes.

The results of these efforts were apparent during the spring 2020 special visit by an NWCCU Peer Evaluator, who found that the institution had made incredible progress toward addressing the recommendations made by the Commission, as well as addressing the ongoing challenges of difficult decision-making in the unpredictable and challenging higher education ecosystem.

The support of accreditation activities and peer mentoring helped to radically transform the assessment of mission fulfillment at MSUB and to integrate the strategic plan into all aspects of the university's function and operations. Ongoing efforts around program alignment and university budgeting are impacted and informed by the results of the assessment of student learning and student achievement, helping the institution to better position itself and allocate resources aligned with student success. ■

Susan Balter-Reitz is a professor of communication and special assistant to the provost at Montana State University Billings; Steven E. Meredith is the associate vice president for enrollment—graduate and online programs at Southern Utah University; Mac Powell, formerly is the senior vice president at Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, is president of the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges and Melinda Arnold is provost and vice president of academic affairs at Texas A&M University-Texarkana.

View this journal online at
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/15360725>.