

Peer Review in Assessment and Improvement: Principle #2, Value the Multitude of Perspectives, Contexts, and Methods Related to Assessment and Improvement

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THE THEME OF OUR *Assessment Update* Editors' Notes throughout 2022 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: *recognize the purpose of the peer review process in higher education assessment and improvement*. In this issue,

we discuss principle #2: *value the multitude of perspectives, contexts, and methods related to assessment and improvement*. This involves understanding the various perspectives of constituents in the peer review process, acknowledging the various contexts informing peer review, and employing appropriate methods to facilitate the associated peer review activities.

Understanding Perspectives

Perspectives in peer review include those various viewpoints of reviewers, stakeholders, and decision-makers. If, as Hamann and Beljean (2017) suggested, "the primary form of recognition that counts in the world of academia is peer recognition" (p. 6), then 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. These multiple peer reviewers can bring to bear their various disciplinary backgrounds, subject-matter expertise, and experience engaging with the program, unit, or service under review. For example, internal colleagues may be able to provide contextual knowledge based upon their own internal understanding of the organization, often with an "arm's length" perspective. Similarly, external reviewers may provide a disciplinary perspective informed by their own

work and engagement with national or international professional organizations. Likewise, community members can provide important insights, whether through sustained activity with the unit under review or through perceptions of how the unit engages with the embedded and surrounding communities, however defined.

Stakeholders include *administrators*, who may sponsor the peer review process or contribute to financial budgeting and allocation at the institution; *faculty and staff* of the activities involved in the peer review process; *students and alumni* who are often direct beneficiaries of learning activities and interventions; and *partners*—including those on-campus, in the local community, or elsewhere—who make specific learning contributions or receive the benefits of the activities under examination through the peer review process. *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. Such decision-makers are most often those faculty or staff members who receive feedback from peer reviewers and are tasked with implementing the ongoing improvement-oriented activities recommended through the review process.

Acknowledging Contexts

Contexts for peer review in assessment and improvement include both the type and
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improve our culture of evidence and betterment. While there is still work to be done, significant improvement was made and demonstrated in the self-study report. The results from this survey will support ongoing understanding of institutional culture as we compare feedback year to year. It is our hope that other institutions can benefit from our work. By sharing our process, results, and plans for action, we hope other

institutions may be inspired to assess their own culture of evidence and betterment and use the results for improvement. ■

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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. The *type and scope of activity undergoing peer review* may vary. The type of activity may include a single assignment, course, program, process, experience, scholarship, or even a person, team, or unit. Alternatively, the activity under review may be comprised of a collection of connected units of analysis from the preceding list. Accordingly, the scope of the review may exist within a single organizational unit, such as a program or department, or may exist in a larger organizational structure, such as an academic unit or other division within the institution.

The *placement in the activity lifecycle* similarly merits consideration. It is important to acknowledge and understand in what phase the activity under review exists: start-up, growth, maturation, decline, retrenchment, or discontinuation. Each of these phases has important implications for the reviewers—both in understanding the activity under review, as well as in how they might prioritize and provide feedback to respective decision-makers. The *institutional culture* is another significant consideration. The peer review process will feel different at an institution where assessment and improvement are viewed

positively—perhaps even enthusiastically—than it will in a setting where these activities are perceived as burdensome, onerous, or as a waste of time. Similarly, the *motivation for review* is important; an internally motivated, improvement-oriented process will differ significantly from that of an externally mandated process, through which activities are held up to a minimum set of outside standards.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge and understand the *outcomes of the peer review process*, including when and how results and feedback will be used, how the process aligns and integrates with other valued or strategic activities at the institution, and potential benefits and consequences of the peer review activities. In planning the peer review process, it is imperative to consider the appropriate contexts on which to focus, thus enabling decision-makers benefitting from the review to be enabled and empowered to implement appropriate improvements based upon feedback provided through the review.

Employing Appropriate Methods

The 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 judgments; and range from highly prescribed or structured to highly emergent or semi-structured review processes. When considering methods to utilize during the peer review process, it is important to *consider and value disciplinary norms and traditions* coupled with general best—or promising—practices in higher education. The discipline and institutional setting can provide context and explanation for operations and activities, but cannot be an excuse for poor behavior, performance, or outcomes. As Sowcik, Lindsey, and Rosch (2013) observed, "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" (p. 69). As such, peer reviewers must deliberately consider the suitable methods to employ during the review, while balancing them with the appropriate perspectives and contexts inherent in the respective review process. To address these concerns, it is necessary for reviewers to *adopt a consultative approach to the peer review process*. We will discuss this principle in Volume 34, Number 4. ■

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