

Peer Review in Assessment and Improvement: Principle #5, Provide Relevant Feedback to Stakeholders

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AS MANY READERS OF *Assessment Update* know, we serve as organizers of the Assessment Institute in Indianapolis, the oldest and largest U.S. event focused on assessing and improving higher education. Next year, the Institute will be held October 29–31, 2023, at the Indianapolis Marriott Downtown. The Call for Proposals is open, with a priority deadline of March 1, 2023, for proposal submission. Please consider submitting a proposal for 60-minute concurrent sessions, 20-minute Rise-and-Shine sessions, and poster sessions. Information about the Institute—including the range of assessment and improvement topics, resources from our sponsors and partners, and handouts and materials from previous programs—is available at our website: assessmentinstitute.iupui.edu. We look forward to seeing you and your colleagues in Indianapolis next October.

Throughout 2022, the theme of our *Assessment Update* Editors' Notes is "Peer Review in Assessment and Improvement: Five Principles to Promote Effective Practice." 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, 4, and 5 we described principles 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. In this issue, we discuss principle #5: *provide relevant feedback to stakeholders*. This principle highlights that effective peer review processes yield outcomes that can make a positive difference to enhance the performance of individuals, learning environments, programs, and institutions. To do so, peer reviewers must identify how and by whom feedback will be used; determine the timing and nature of feedback; and develop recommendations and observations.

Identifying How and By Whom Feedback Will be Used

Each instance in which a peer reviewer is engaged in lending their expertise to assessment and improvement activities has its own unique context, activities, outcomes, and stakeholders. This requires peer reviewers to provide relevant feedback to the respective stakeholders of the review in which they are engaging. In the case of an external program review, for example, Sowcik et al. (2013) noted, "Outcomes of an external review include greater awareness of the program's strengths and weaknesses, in addition to the opportunity to identify threats and areas of growth for program enhancement"

(p. 69). To align these outcomes with the priorities of the peer review process, there should be an understanding of the format in which feedback is expected and the intended audiences and uses for feedback.

Peer reviewers must be familiar with and appreciate the audiences for the feedback provided as an outcome of the peer review process. This understanding may be closely aligned with understanding and attending to the purpose, scope, and context of the review—as discussed in Volume 34, Number 5. For example, in a program review for a cocurricular department, reviewers ought to understand the primary and secondary audiences for the feedback. In some instances, the primary audience for the feedback may be the staff and practitioners in the department under review, with the secondary audience comprising leadership within the division and other campus administrators. As another example, peer reviewers engaging in a review of materials for the purposes of evaluating the performance or outcomes of an individual faculty member in a promotion and tenure process may direct feedback to review committees and administrators involved in the decision-making process—often by placing the faculty member's work in its larger disciplinary context.

Finally, it is imperative for peer reviewers to understand how feedback will likely be used. Will such feedback be considered as part of the evaluation process for an individual or program?

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attending to faculty development grew after experiencing personal satisfaction and students' improved learning.

- Flexibility for faculty members to select appropriate best practices was preserved.
- Faculty members' teaching strategies and successes were shared widely.

These factors enabled the creation of an environment ready for new learning improvement projects going forward.

References

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Learning Improvement Community (LIC). 2021, Dec. 9. *Goals, Scope, and Tenets*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3UWujJK>.

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structures are effective?

- The learning improvement process includes evaluating student learning. What are appropriate practices for establishing trustworthiness and credibility in assessment processes given its purpose?

Thoughtful designs are required to address such questions and likely will need input from diverse stakeholders such as students, faculty, assessment professionals, instructional designers, and centers for teaching excellence. Scholarship of this sort would allow assessment practitioners to plan more robust assessment activities. It would also provide greater insight into how context affects effectiveness, which is a departure from much of the assessment literature in which crucial situational factors such as institution type, student demographics, faculty make-up (e.g., tenure system; adjunct faculty) are glossed over.

Making space for assessment professionals to conduct scholarship will likely require a shift from their expending energy on reporting and compliance tasks to their engaging in critical inquiry. Institutions that provide the time and resources to do such research will benefit from the enhanced student learning that will result.

Conclusion

We know that monitoring learning achievement and writing assessment reports will continue; these are useful activities when done well. Our vision of the future is that assessment professionals and institutions make space and resources for assessment projects that place student learning improvement as the primary goal. Importantly, centering equity, instilling a collaborative mind-shift, and supporting assessment scholarship will support this path forward. Our community

of practitioners in the LIC is committed to providing resources, tenets, and success stories, and we encourage readers to explore and contribute their own. Visit the LIC website at <https://www.learning-improvement.org/>.

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Is feedback intended to jump-start processes such as curriculum revision or strategic planning? Will it be used to inform resource prioritization or (re) allocation, including implications for physical, technological, fiscal, and human resources? Or is the feedback to provide for stakeholders a holistic understanding of the quality and viability of the program, unit, service, or activity under review?

Determining the Timing and Nature of Feedback

The timing of feedback—*formative*, to make improvements vs. *summative*, to provide evaluations—also needs to be understood and used to inform peer review processes. Similarly, the nature of feedback from peer reviewers is most useful when reviewers embody the consultative approach, or that of a “critical friend”—as discussed in Volume 34, Number 3. Peer

reviewers should strive to provide responses that neither serve as “champion” nor “detractor” of the activity under review, but instead provide feedback related to strengths, opportunities for improvement, and additional factors reliant on the peer reviewer’s role or vantage point. Feedback that considers the specific context in which the individual, program, or unit works—instead of the reviewer’s own context, for example—can signal to recipients that the reviewer understands and appreciates the unique aspects of the activity undergoing review.

Feedback from peers often involves specific recommendations. Thus, care and attention are necessary to prioritize actions, including identifying sequential or interdependent actions and the time or resource implications 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. Recipients of feedback must also situate the information they receive within their respective context, including linking the findings from the peer review process with other related processes (e.g., planning, budgeting, merit reviews).

Developing Recommendations and Observations

Peer reviewers are often asked to develop recommendations as a result of their engagement in a review process. Depending on the scope of the review, such recommendations may be organized in varying ways, including:

- By *major themes*, including a synthesis of information uncovered as part of the review or through addressing any questions posed to the reviewer at the outset of the process.
- By *stakeholder groups consulted*, including students, faculty, administrators, alumni, or campus and campus partners.
- By *recommendation audience*, including individual faculty or staff

recipients of feedback, program leaders, colleagues in areas supporting the activity under review, or unit/division/campus leadership.

- By *time/cost horizon*, ranging from immediate and low-cost to longer-term and high-cost implementation.
- Any combination of the above that emerges based on how the review process unfolds.

Peer reviewers ought to be judicious in making recommendations solely contingent on resource (re)allocations. For example, in the case of a program review, all programs could likely benefit from an infusion of resources, including personnel, money, and space. Whenever possible, reviewers should endeavor to offer creative recommendations or opportunities for how programs can maximize existing resources or pursue alternative revenue streams in advancing their missions and ensuring their continued quality and vitality.

Not all feedback takes the form of a specific recommendation. Indeed, reviewers may be in the position to offer *observations* to the recipients of their feedback. As an example, a reviewer may observe how interpersonal dynamics unfolded within a particular setting—such as a senior faculty member’s comments having a seemingly chilling effect on their junior colleagues’ willingness to engage in further discussion. When reporting observations, it is often helpful for reviewers to identify what was observed and the significance or implication of the observation, while avoiding the temptation to make a value judgement or develop specific recommendations. Such observations made by reviewers may help decision-makers understand the contextual factors associated with the activity under review, including corroborating prior experiences or impressions held by stakeholders.

The use of peer review for assessment and improvement provides third-party perspectives on a range of activities—from individual assignments, courses, and instructors to broader program, service, and institutional resources and interventions. For optimal results, stakeholders

involved in the activity under review need to respond to feedback, adopt recommendations, and institutionalize components of the peer review process. Doing so requires a commitment by leaders—at all levels—to appreciate the role peers can play in providing useful feedback and leverage the peer review process as one vital component in assuring and strengthening quality in higher education.

Summary and the Year Ahead

We began our discussion earlier this year with a broad view of peer review—a hallmark of the higher education sector to serve a variety of purposes and meet the needs of several audiences—and worked through five principles of effective peer review practice. These principles are intended to guide, support, and enable peers to offer credible subject matter expertise in relevant contexts, provide judgments, develop recommendations for enhanced performance, and make contributions to creating and sustaining a culture of continuous improvement and innovation. We wish you success in incorporating these principles in your specific settings and contexts, whether these include 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; or part of assessment and improvement activities taking place within learning experiences at the course, program, and institutional levels.

As we look ahead to 2023, we will co-author a series of Editors’ Notes throughout the year focused on five phases of the strategic planning process. Please send your ideas and feedback to aupdate@iupui.edu. Thank you, as always, for reading *Assessment Update*. ■

Reference

- 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://bit.ly/3U1ERoo>.