Appendix A: Suggestions for Conducting Team Reviews

American Sociological Association Program Reviewers and Consultants (PRC) are highly accomplished teachers, scholars, and department leaders who are trained in best practices for program reviews. When serving as an external reviewer, they offer empirically-grounded support for sociology departments regarding pedagogy, curriculum, and organizational structures.

Program reviews are often conducted in teams. Sometimes, the team is made up of reviewers who are all trained PRC members. At other times, it includes both PRC members and non-members. In either case, being asked to conduct a department review or to work as a member of a review team is a role to be taken seriously. Team members typically have some shared perspectives and some differences that they bring to their collaboration. Therefore, members need to be attentive to political and procedural dynamics in order to enhance the review experience and the credibility of the report. Below are some recommendations to ensure productive team collaborations that will be of highest benefit to the departments and programs we serve.

Note: Some institutions invite multiple reviewers for a site visit, but ask the reviewers to work independently, not as a team. In that case, a detailed template is typically provided to each reviewer. The suggestions below are for cases where multiple reviewers are collaborating on a team, not acting as independent reviewers.

The Importance of Developing a Shared Agreement by Communicating Ahead of Time with Team Members

Team members may not know why they or other members of the team were selected to be reviewers. It is essential to develop an open and productive team working style before the review begins and to continue being intentional about teamwork throughout the review and writing process. Acting in a professionally respectful manner with each other, even when there are disagreements, is essential at all times.

Symbolically, it is important to act like a team from the beginning, with each other and with the client. Reviewers may need to deal with unexpected contingencies, both with on-site issues and with dynamics of the reviewer team. For example, interdisciplinary teams may have to tackle differences in members’ perspectives. Gender dynamics may affect assumptions about the division of labor, invisible labor, and “emotional labor.” To proactively minimize team disagreements, address beforehand how you would deal with critical/divergent perspectives between reviewers (especially in reviews of multi-disciplinary departments, or departments that lack national guidelines). Consider assigning a head reviewer in such a case or consider assigning the writing of particular sections of the report to the most appropriate team member.

Have a conversation with your review partner(s) about the division of labor for the preparation, the site visit, and the writing of the final report. An abridged version of a Manual for department reviews is available for use by non-PRC program reviewers working in teams with members of the PRC.
Below are some tips to foster positive team dynamics:

- When you learn who your team members are, send each reviewer a note of introduction if you have not worked together or a note of “glad to be with you” if you know each other.
- Describe your expectations and previous work as a reviewer. Some people have done many reviews, some are less experienced. It can also be useful to exchange CVs to understand one another’s academic background.
- If you have a template that you like to use in reviews, say so. Seasoned reviewers often follow the same template with each review and this can be helpful for not re-inventing the wheel. When two seasoned reviewers are working together, come to an agreement prior to the review on how the two approaches will be integrated.
- Many campuses have a required set of questions that must be answered in the review and/or an outline that needs to be followed for the written report. One member of the team (typically the team leader) can volunteer to integrate those questions and/or outline with the template(s) used by review team members.
- Determine if the team will have a head reviewer. Some new reviewers may appreciate learning from seasoned reviewers. Experienced reviewers may decide others have more or less time to be the lead. There are times professionally when we are swamped with projects, publications, and grants deadlines so we may not want to be the lead; other times we have reasons why we are an appropriate choice. This should not be left to chance. If there is no leader, then make sure to act with each other, and the participating department, so that everyone is equal in whatever transpires. Decide the division of labor for the entire review process. There are typically many documents to review, people to interview, data to analyze, meetings to attend, questions to ask, and writing to be done. While everyone on the team needs to be familiar with all the components, a fair and equal distribution of labor is important.
- One important part of deciding the division of labor is for each team member to communicate times when their schedule is more and less busy. While we all have many demands on our time, one member may know, for example, that s/he has a book manuscript due two weeks before the on-campus visit. S/he may then do less of the advance preparation, but take on a larger role in writing the report after the campus visit.
- If there is a significant difference in the level of work done by team members, you may consider different levels of compensation. This can often be a difficult issue to discuss. It should, however, be discussed in a transparent manner with the members of the review team as well as the Department/Program and College/University.

Communicating with the Department/University

All of the general guidelines from the Training Manual apply with team reviews, but extra layers are added to the process because of the need to work as a team. Some of the material here repeats what is in the full Manual but emphasizes the extra level of communication that is necessary.

- Some institutions invite multiple reviewers, but ask that the reviewers act independently, not as a team. It is important to understand what the institution is expecting and to act accordingly.
When collaboration is expected, include all team members and university contacts on each email so that communication is clear and transparent.

As noted in the Manual, from the earliest stages of your contact with a department, and long before the campus visit, find out what the department/program needs and wants. Having this in writing is useful to make sure everyone is on the same page.

Decide as a team what materials you want the department/program to share ahead of time. Refer to the full list found in the Training Manual in the “pre-visit activities” section.

Have a discussion about how to divide up the e-mail communications between review team members. Choosing one team member to communicate with the department regarding the requested materials can avoid duplicate requests, which can undermine the team dynamic (and may stretch the patience of department contacts). Alternatively, if one person is responsible for all of them, that may “flag” them as being the most important member of the team. It also may increase their workload compared to other team members. In most cases, all team members should be cc’ed on all email correspondence.

It is very useful if the team member who communicates with the department/program first sends a draft of each e-mail to all team members for their feedback. This extra level of communication takes time; as a result, lead time needs to be built into the process. It is often useful to send the e-mail indicating that it is sent for feedback and editing, but if there is no reply by a certain date and time (5 p.m. on Sunday, for example), then the assumption will be that the e-mail is ready to send to the department/program.

If there are questions about department dynamics or information, discuss these with your team members before sending them out to the department.

Caucus together as a team ahead of time to come up with a plan for conducting the review and a timeline. Every team member should have the same information prior to the site visit and should be clear on the agenda, schedule of events, and timeline.

One significant part of knowing what will happen during the on-campus visit is to develop interview questions for each interview or session. Team members can circulate the sample questions found in Appendix D of the Training Manual to decide which ones will be used, and if additional questions are necessary.

If the campus guidelines for external reviews have a set of questions that must be addressed in the final report, one member of the team should take responsibility for going through the campus itinerary as well as the questions that will be used in on-campus interviews to make certain that data will be collected about all of the items that are to be addressed in the final report.

When Conducting the On-Site Visit

As noted earlier, all of the basic guidelines in the Training Manual apply to team reviews. Some of those are repeated and emphasized here.

Our shared goal as reviewers is advocacy for the program/department so it can be the best department it can be. Be sure to have a discussion about the department’s alignment with institutional mission and vision.

As was done in the leadup to the visit, it is useful to again ask the department chair whether there are particular issues s/he would like addressed, to best understand her/his sense of the purpose of the external review.
· Decide what questions are to be asked of who. Have a clear agenda of what you wish to accomplish or obtain in each meeting. This should all be determined well in advance of the visit.

· During meetings, decide ahead of time who is going to be the lead questioner. While everyone can and should ask questions, team members can trade-off who is going to take the lead in which meeting or there can be agreement that one team member is going to be take the lead in most situations. This will make the meetings flow more smoothly and avoid potentially awkward situations. One method that typically works is to alternate asking questions between reviewers. Meetings with the Dean, Provost, library representative, and department chairs from other departments are typically done with the full review team. Interviews with faculty members and administrative staff tend to be divided up and done by one reviewer. Gender and status should be kept in mind so that it is not always a male or a senior reviewer who asks the first question and/or the last question in an interview.

· Whether or not team members all go to all meetings varies by campus. Usually there are meetings that all team members attend--the Provost/Dean, the full department meetings at the beginning, the debriefing sessions at the end, IT and Librarians. Faculty interviews are typically one-on-one. Often the division of labor is obvious--in a joint department, for example, an anthropologist reviewer interviews the anthropologists, a sociologist interviews the sociologists, etc. In a department with graduate programs, some reviewers focus upon the undergraduate program (and thus do the meeting with undergraduate students), and some reviewers focus upon the graduate program. In larger departments logistics typically do demand that the reviewers separate. It is important, however, that they ask the same set of questions so that the information gathered is comparable.

· Ensure enough free time (breaks) and a space within the visit schedule to consult with one another—sharing thoughts, comparing notes and observations. If there is a last-minute cancellation with someone the team considers essential to speak with, schedule a phone conversation with that person within a few days of the visit. Divide the labor of touring department facilities, reviewing visible markers of the unit’s identity (departmental website, departmental bulletin boards, etc.) and exploring the campus without hosts.

· Make certain you have scheduled exit meetings with department and with administration. Use the debriefing to pursue clarifications, particularly if members of a team disagree on interpretations, and to solicit additional comments from department members and/or administrators. Allow enough time to digest fully the information you have gathered, to “cool down” or “decompress” and to consult with other team members and to refer to relevant scholarly literature where appropriate.

**Writing the Report**

The importance of maintaining team work continues in the report-writing stage of the process as well as during communications with the department/program/campus after the visit.

**Balance:** Consider offering a balance between affirming assets and addressing problem areas. When identifying problems, offer direction. Use caution to avoid exacerbating intra-departmental tensions when addressing internal departmental climate.
**Length of report:** Ensure that the report is value-added, not simply a duplication of information that is included in the self-study. When a report has been authored by multiple people, review the full draft to avoid repetition and insure a consistent “voice.”

**Disagreements among reviewers:** If the members of a team cannot agree on interpretations or recommendations, present the various alternatives in a draft report to the department acknowledging any uncertainties or disagreements.

When writing a co-authored report:

- As noted in the first section of this discussion of team reviews, it is typically useful to have an agreed-upon template for the final report and then have each team member take responsibility for the first draft of specific sections. When the first drafts of all sections are completed, they can be compiled and shared internally and informally with everyone to make edits until a final version is agreed upon.
- It may be easier if one person is identified as the lead in constructing the final document, especially if there are multiple team members.
- It is recommended that unless there is a clearly identified team leader, the authorship of the report is in alphabetical order.
- Do not share the report with the department or university members until there is reviewer agreement on the content of the report.
- When the report is shared, make sure it is clearly identified as authored by all team members. In the email to the department, include and acknowledge all team members. This can strengthen the department’s confidence in the report’s recommendations. In the case of multi-disciplinary departments and reviews, it is appropriate to note in the opening section of the report that recommendations for each discipline were written by reviewers from that discipline, but that the full team reviewed all of the report. If there is divergence in opinion about recommendations, that should be clearly and respectfully noted.
- There may be follow-up emails and correspondence with the university, so make sure to continue the team approach so that everyone is kept in the loop.