Planning and Conducting Reviews

U.S. Department of Agriculture

CSREES Guidelines for Review Teams

Revised

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PREFACE

These guidelines draw heavily on the review experiences of University Deans, AES Directors, Department Heads, CSREES scientists, and former review team members. Important insights and ideas were gained from an extensive survey of documents developed by universities preparing for reviews and the review reports drafted by CSREES scientists. These documents represent a cross section of universities and scientific disciplines. Valuable contributions were made by a committee appointed by the CSRS (now CSREES) Administrator in 1991, consisting of CSREES scientists and administrative personnel from colleges of agriculture and home economics. The committee's charge was to evaluate the CSRS review program and recommend changes for improving the efficiency and impact of the process. It also provided important information in drafting these guidelines.

CSREES' mission is to work with its partners and customers to advance research, extension, and higher education in the food and agricultural sciences and related environmental and human sciences to benefit people, communities, and the nation. CSREES is accountable to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and

Congress for the use of federal funds in the support of research and education programs conducted by the institutions[(1)]. The primary goal for the review program is to promote relevance, excellence, usefulness and partnership. CSREES is also required by the Congress to justify the continued federal support of institutional research and education programs on the basis of performance and benefits to the agricultural industry, rural communities/environment, and consumers, and in meeting other social goals stated in the authorizing legislation. CSREES conducts reviews because they are a cost-effective management tool which enhances excellence, evaluates relevance and usefulness of programs and strengthens the Federal / Land Grant partnership. The review process is supportive of the agency's duties and responsibilities in the judicious administration of federal funds that support institutional programs. CSREES places high priority on reviews in allocating its scientists' time and other resources.

Kinds of Reviews

Departmental - The review of the program(s) in a single academic department.

Program - Programs that cut across departmental and/or college boundaries such as a plant biotechnology or agronomic program. (Multi-disciplinary reviews)

Issue - Based upon a single issue such as sustainable agriculture, integrated pest management, water quality, or food safety. Issue based reviews most likely cut across both departmental and disciplinary boundaries. (Multi-departmental reviews)

CSREES solicits review requests from Institutional Administrators annually. Institutional requests are submitted in late fall for the next fiscal year. It is the responsibility of Agricultural Administrators to share this request for reviews with appropriate unit administrators and coordinate a response to CSREES.

INTRODUCTION

These guidelines apply to whatever type of review an institution has chosen; a comprehensive review of an entire department, a review of selected issues or sub-programs within a department or a multi-disciplinary program review including several organizational units of the university.

Suggestions in these guidelines will facilitate the systematic and efficient conduct of reviews and the preparation of the team's final report. Drafting the final report should be completed before the team leaves the institution, thus minimizing team members' work after the site visit. The guidelines may be especially helpful to those who have not previously served on review teams, or to those who are serving as review team leader for the first time. Team members will find it helpful to refer to the more detailed companion document, Planning and Conducting Reviews, Guidelines for Institutions. The team leader should refer to Appendix A in the Institutional Guidelines, which summarizes the steps in planning and conducting reviews and indicates responsibilities of the team leader.

BEFORE THE REVIEW

Units to be reviewed are asked to prepare a review document and have it in the hands of the review team members three weeks prior to the review. The purpose of the document is to acquaint the team with the unit's programs, personnel, accomplishments, future plans, and the areas on which it wants to focus the review. It is essential that team members schedule time to study these materials prior to leaving for the on-site review. Doing so will help increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the review and result in better utilization of time by faculty, administrators, and the team during the site visit. Any last minute adjustments in the schedule or deliberation time required by team members should be made by the team leader and unit administrators. The CSREES team leader should review the previous review report for the unit undergoing a review to understand previous recommendations and to determine the unit's response to previous recommendations.

DURING THE REVIEW

Depending on the size and complexity of the unit, the on-site review will take from 3 to 5 days. This includes time to conduct interviews, schedule site visits, draft the written report, and prepare and present the oral closing reports to administrators and faculty.

Organizational Meeting

The CSREES team leader will designate a time for an on-site organizational meeting. This is usually the evening before the start of the review, so team members should schedule their arrival at the review site no later than 5:00 p.m. the day before the review. Demands on the time of team members during the review are such that it is not possible for them to participate in special seminars or social events other than those scheduled for the entire review team.

Each member of the team accepts responsibility for leading the team's analysis of part of the unit's programs, presenting the team's analysis in the closing sessions, and in preparing the write-up for the final report. These responsibilities are coordinated through the CSREES team leader in advance of the review. When there are internal university members or students on the review team, their role should be clarified at this meeting. A major purpose of the organizational meeting is to reach agreement on the organizing theme, for the division of labor among team members, and the initial conceptual framework for the oral and written reports. The organizing theme may be focused on subject-matter lines; functional lines of research; extension and teaching; and related groups of programmatic and administrative/managerial issues or a combination.

At the organizational meeting, the team discusses the agenda and plans the review; checks the review documents; determines if additional information is needed; clarifies issues; and identifies questions that should be raised with the unit administrator, faculty, and college administrators. If the unit to be reviewed is large, or if the unit has presented a large number of issues, the team may want to select a tentative list of the highest priority issues where attention may be focused to maximize their contribution in the time available.

Opening Sessions

There is usually a preliminary meeting with the unit administrator or program leader, which may include the leaders of the various program units or members of the unit review committee. The objectives of this meeting are: 1) to discuss the review schedule and procedures; 2) to obtain the administrator's and other leader's perceptions of the problems and issues to be addressed by the review team, and 3) to prioritize their relative importance for review team emphasis.

There is also an opening session with College and University administrators, which typically involves the dean, the directors of research, extension, and resident instruction, and occasionally the director of international programs or other administrators. The major objective of this session is to understand the administrators' objectives and expectations of the review beyond those identified in the review document, and for them to indicate the issues they consider of highest priority for the review team to address. Sensitive issues that may affect the review should be shared with the review team during this session. It is very helpful for the review team to receive a written statement of objectives and expectations of the review from the administrators.

Conducting the Review

As an early step in planning reviews, institutions are urged to develop a clear statement of objectives for the review. The review objectives should take into account critical issues, needs, opportunities, and constraints faced by the unit. The objectives help guide the units review planning process, the units development of materials for the review team, and the procedure for the conduct of the review. The review team should help to determine whether the issues identified by the unit are the most important ones they face. Also, the objectives help the team arrive at an organizing theme and division of labor.

Reviews are most helpful if they are developed in conjunction with strategic planning, and it is CSREES's philosophy that reviews are conducted more to help units adjust to changes and plan for the future than to review work of the past. Understanding the impact of previous research and educational programs is important as the foundation which may form the basis for future change. Thus review team members are expected to primarily focus on future goals and objectives with less attention on past programs.

Review of the unit's programs and future goals are the heart of the review process. In these sessions, institutions are strongly encouraged to focus on broader program areas within the unit rather than on individual projects. Review teams are urged to avoid being inundated by individual projects or areas of special interest. The amount of time needed to view facilities and equipment varies, depending on the needs of the institution. Unless facilities are identified as a major issue in the review, a minimal amount of time should be spent on this activity.

Team members, faculty and administrators share responsibility for the review's success. An important responsibility of team members is to elicit additional information that will be essential in the team's understanding and analyses. Indeed, soliciting additional information not included in the review document is one of the most crucial functions of the review team. In carrying out their responsibility, team members often need to ask pointed questions. When done in a tactful manner, this is accepted as a necessary and useful part of the review process. Through a friendly and helpful approach, team members can contribute to a positive atmosphere for information exchange that is encouraged as a part of the review process.

Team members can share information and experiences from other institutions with faculty during the review. However, it is important that individual team members not anticipate the entire team's final conclusions or make major independent recommendations to faculty or administrators prior to the preparation of the final report. Further, review team members should be alert to the possibility that long-time colleagues or friends may ask them to promote special interests. Review teams should avoid an advocacy role for special interests or programs. The team's role is to evaluate and through constructive critique make recommendations to improve the total effectiveness of existing programs and plans. The review teams should not play an advocacy role on behalf of the unit being reviewed.In fact, during a time of shrinking resources, recommending large increases in resources for the unit is likely to be futile, and it may reduce the credibility of the team's recommendations on other issues. Recommendations should be realistic yet innovative in relation to exigencies and future potential resources.

Team Deliberations

The team leader establishes the tone, sets expectations and identifies processes that will be used to complete this report. The speed and efficiency of preparing reports can be improved considerably through the use of word processing equipment during the reviews. Team members are encouraged to bring their own lap-top PCs to the reviews, or request the unit being reviewed provide word processors and a printer for the review team. Secretarial assistance is occasionally sought by the review team.

To carry out its deliberations, the team may hold closed work sessions each evening during the review to summarize significant issues of the day and discuss how they will be addressed in the report. Scheduling sufficient time for these deliberations during the review results in improved team performance, allows for consensus building needed for the final report, helps organize ideas for presentation in the closing interview and reduces the time needed in home offices working on the final written report to be forwarded to the institution.

During these closed sessions, the team digests and analyzes the information it has received in the review documents and in sessions with faculty, unit administrator, college administrators, and others. The team then determines conclusions and recommendations, prepares its oral reports for the closing sessions and completes a draft of the final written report.

As indicated in the organizational meeting, the team agrees on a division of labor in which each member accepts leadership for one or more elements of the team's report. However, every member of the team should participate in the discussion of individual elements and present his or her interpretations, reactions, and suggestions. Team members are expected to give and take during the deliberations with the intent of arriving at consensus judgments that are supported by the entire team rather than being the views of an individual team member. As individual efforts, team members then prepare initial drafts of their sections of the report. These drafts should be consensus statements incorporating the assessments, suggestions, and recommendations of the entire team.

After the sections of the report have been drafted, the team reconvenes for a review. Each team member presents the initial draft of his/her section of the review report to the team. Each team member should receive a draft copy of each section for further modification and additional input toward the interest of consensus of the entire team. The modified drafts of these statements will be orally presented to the administrators and faculty at the respective closing sessions, and later are finalized and incorporated into the written report. Copies of written materials by the review team should not be distributed or left with anyone at the institution being reviewed.

Some review teams have used the technique of "Brain Storming" issues and recommendations. Then the Review Team Leader writes the report, sends it to each team member for review and further input before it is finalized. The process that will be followed should be clearly articulated by the leader at the team organizational meeting at the start of the review.

Review Reports

Through its oral and written reports, the review team can make important contributions by helping the faculty identify departmental strengths that can be built upon, identify weaknesses that need attention, vision the future through constructive critique and present realistic recommendations for improvement. There is room for considerable variation in reports in terms of topics emphasized, style, and format.

However, experience indicates that the following broad guidelines can result in reports that are most useful to the institutions.

Program Evaluations There are several elements that should be included in the oral and final reports to the faculty and Administrators. The excellence of science programs should receive special attention. In addition, relevance of the programs should be addressed. Is the faculty addressing the priority issues for the state, region and nation? An assessment of the usefulness and importance of the program to solving priority issues will be beneficial to the report.

Emphasis on Performance The ultimate objective of science and education program reviews is to improve the performance of individuals in meeting the future goals and objectives of their unit. Units are urged to provide as much objective empirical data as possible on program performance in their review documents. The most useful program performance information is (1) outputs or accomplishments and (2) impacts of programs on audiences the unit addresses. Analysis of program performance is one of the most crucial parts of the process. The review team's analysis of performance and recommendations are based upon these data. Also, this approach lends rigor to the review process and enhances its credibility with university administrators, state and federal officials, and others. Items to consider under program performance are outlined in detail in the Guidelines for Institutions, Appendix D.

Other Suggestions Review reports are more likely to be read and used if they focus on a selected number of the most important issues and kept relatively brief. It is suggested that reports on comprehensive reviews of entire units not exceed 25 one and one-half space pages. Reviews focusing on selected issues may be as brief as 10 or 12 pages. Review teams are not expected to offer comments on every subgroup in the unit, and certainly not on the program of every faculty member; attempting to do so results in a long, rambling report with little focus. As emphasized earlier, in the organizational meeting and subsequent discussions by team members, maintaining a focus for the review will prove valuable in preparing the report.

The team leader has the responsibility of editing the report and seeing it is a scholarly document of consistent style on format, headings, use of first versus third person, and similar matters. The report should be viewed as confidential until released by CSREES to the University or college administration.

It is useful for written reports to contain (1) a table of contents, (2) reasons for the review and/or review objectives, (3) the review schedule, and (4) name and position of members of the review team. In a comprehensive review, it is often useful to outline the major strengths of the unit. The report describes recommendations for the program, not individuals. An executive summary giving strengths, concerns and recommendations may be an effective addition to some reports. Since the reports are often used for many years, expressions of appreciation for hospitality can more appropriately be put in a cover letter than incorporated into the reports.

Reports are easier for readers to follow and more useful to institutions if a format such as the following is used for each section or major issue.

One to two line title of the section or issue.

1. A clear statement of the current situation, issue, or problem. Teams often omit this step since both they and the faculty present at the review usually have the issue clearly in mind. But a clear statement is needed for administrators unfamiliar with the unit, new faculty, and other readers of the report.

2. The team's analysis of the issue, with the information, data, and logic by which the team arrived at its conclusions. In general, specific reference to individual faculty members should be avoided. If the team feels that individual faculty or administrators should be singled out for criticism or praise, this should be selectively conveyed in oral fashion and/or under separate cover with the final written report.
3. Team recommendations: Teams are urged to produce conclusions and recommendations that are as pointed, specific, and realistic as the available information and time for analysis will permit. Whether or not the reviewed institution agrees with all of the recommendations, most institutions find specific conclusions and recommendations more useful than general statements. The team's findings are offered and accepted in the spirit of being helpful to the unit and the institution.
4. It is suggested that the recommendations stand out in the written report; this can be done by numbering them and perhaps also putting them in bold type. Faculty are sometimes overwhelmed by a large number of recommendations from the review team; a smaller number (6 to 12) of well documented recommendations are likely to have more impact than many small recommendations. Recommendations should be sufficiently clear that they can be used in decision making and in assessing direction and flow of progress.
5. If possible, the review team should include comments on why it would be beneficial to follow their recommendations and potential consequences of not following the recommendations. Suggested strategies for implementation of the recommendations should be offered, when possible.

Closing Sessions

With College Administrators: The team has a closing session with the college administrators involved in the opening session. If time permits, each team member gives a condensed summary of the sections of the report for which they have provided leadership. If time is limited, the team leader can give a summary report covering all sections.

The summary report should be completed in no more than one-half the time allotted for the session. The remainder of the time is available for the team members to respond to questions raised by the administrators, and for two-way discussion of issues surfaced in the review. This time is important to the college administration in capturing the review team's assessment and recommendations, and in reacting to them. Some sensitive issues may be best addressed verbally or in a separate letter to the Institutional Administrator.

With Faculty: The review team leader chairs the closing session with the entire faculty of the unit. Each member of the team makes a presentation covering the sections of the report for which they have responsibility. These reports can be more detailed than the reports to administrators, but should summarize and highlight the team's major points.

The reports from the team should take no more than about two-thirds of the time allotted for the session. The remainder of the time is devoted to responding to questions from the faculty, further elaboration of key points, obtaining feedback and reactions from the faculty to the team, and general discussion of plans and issues. This reporting session is likely to have wider participation and more impact on the faculty than the final written report; the session should be conducted in a seminar fashion to encourage a two-way dialogue.

AFTER THE REVIEW

Much of the benefit of the review process is attained by the time the exit sessions have been concluded. However, the written report provides additional help to the institution by providing a record of what has been suggested. The written report to the institution should be a concise well written scholarly document. The sooner the report is received by the institution, the more impact it will have. Thus, it is urgent that it be completed promptly. CSREES policies require the report to be prepared, reviewed, submitted to the agency and forwarded to the institution within 6 weeks following the end of the review. With time required to move materials through the mails, this requires development of and adherence to a tight schedule. (See the schedule for activities in Institutional Guidelines, Appendix)

The objective of the team should be to have drafts of the sections completed and preferably on diskettes by the end of the review. Where team members need or wish to do more work on their sections after the on-site review, this should be completed, electronically transmitted and incorporated into the report within a week of the review.

The team leader will prepare a "first" draft of the entire review report and send a copy to all team members for review. Their comments should be returned to the coordinator by the deadline stated in a cover memo. Overnight air courier, fax, or electronic mail can facilitate this process.

The team leader will then prepare a "final" report, incorporating appropriate changes recommended by the team and copy edited for accuracy, content and consistency. The final report will be reviewed and forwarded from CSREES to the relevant Institutional administrator.

The institution should be sent two or more bound copies (as deemed appropriate for each review) and one unbound copy (so the institution can reproduce additional copies for faculty members and others). Most institutions provide copies of the report to the College administrators, selected members of the central university administration, and to all members of the faculty in the unit that has been reviewed. Team members are not to release copies to friends or colleagues at the institution until after the document has been shared with the reviewed unit by the Institution's administration. Review reports with their analyses, conclusions, and recommendations are valuable to the units as a basis for further deliberations on their missions, goals, and plans for the future. One bound copy will also be filed within CSREES by the CSREES Records Clerk.

While it is not necessary that the reviewed department / unit accept all of the review team's recommendations in the final report, it is expected that the recommendations be given serious consideration as future unit plans are developed, and that a follow-up report which describes unit actions based on the report be submitted to CSREES prior to scheduling the next review.

1. In these guidelines, the term "institution" refers to the universities and colleges who receive funds through and cooperate with CSREES, and the terms "institution" and "university" are used interchangeably.