the changing profession

External Reviews

JANE K. BROWN

ONE OF THE MORE JOYOUS FORMS OF WORK WE DO AS FACULTY MEMBERS IS REVIEWING OTHER DEPARTMENTS AND PROGRAMS IN OUR fields when we serve on external review teams. The purpose is to provide a status report on the department or program for its administration as part of a regular (commonly decennial) review process. In pursuing this work, one sometimes encounters odd complaints like "A big problem in this department is the temperature of the building we work in." Then there are the occasions when all the interviewees express dislike of their colleagues. Although such extreme cases suggest why many voices are raised against the process, calling it pointless or trivial, they also identify some of its interesting and positive aspects. What appears to be a cog in a massive bureaucratic process often turns into an opportunity to make a difference. The temperature in that building really was intolerable, and complaints to external reviewers can lead to the resolution even of such annoyances.

External reviews are common in the insurance industry, especially health insurance, and in state departments of labor and health. In those contexts the term refers to outside adjudication of denied claims. No such appeals process exists for academic departments going about their business. In the old days the university where I was an undergraduate had an institution called the visiting committee, and I remember, as one of a small minority of students at a table full of distinguished-looking male trustees and (presumably wealthy) alumni with a special interest in my field, telling them (truthfully) how much I appreciated the school and my department. Whatever function external review may have served then and there, it is now normally part of the full-fledged program review that became a regular part of the landscape at public research institutions with the increased legislative interest in accountability in the seventies and eighties. A *Google* search these days brings up nearly a hundred thousand (and growing) results for "academic program review."

The process goes more or less like this. The department laboriously prepares a self-study. This document compiles statistics

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of department productivity (student credit hours, numbers of majors, degrees granted over the last ten years, etc.), a narrative of the department's history, developments since the previous report, department achievements, issues facing the department, perhaps long-term planning, and a list of what the department hopes will follow from this review. And, of course, CVs of all the faculty members. Depending on the institution, the reports can be large. Some institutions have an internal review committee analyze the document and even meet with constituencies in the department to write its own report before the external review committee arrives. Others arrange for the external reviewers to be joined on campus by representatives from the home faculty (with varying degrees of engagement). The external members examine the self-study, whatever other documents are made available, and the questions, if any, they are requested to address. Then they visit the campus, typically for two full days of meetings with administrators, representatives from the committee overseeing the review process, the department chair, each department member, and other faculty members affiliated with the department or who have an interest in it; sometimes they meet with the relevant librarian, the graduate students, and representative undergraduates. If they are lucky, the external reviewers are given a few hours to discuss their findings with one another and plan the drafting of the report before they are debriefed by some or all of the functionaries with whom they first met. Then it's off to the airport to rush home and write your share of the report, review drafts, and get the report in so you can collect your (usually generous) honorarium.

The administration meets its obligations to comply with institutional accountability requirements, but what about the rest of us? Demanding as it is for administrators, staff members, department chairs, and the faculty committees, the process does have considerable benefits, even in the current economic situation, when we may well be told not to expect additional funding no matter how glowing the evaluation. However wearisome, it is healthy for departments to think about where they are going every ten years. Furthermore, the academic committees that oversee completed evaluations offer their rotating memberships the opportunity to learn not only about the strengths and limitations of their home institution's programs but also about what colleagues in other departments do with their time. During my stint, for example, I informed scientists that the English department actually taught the analysis of literature, not grammar. From serving on the program review panel I have learned many—and perhaps sometimes equally elementary—truths about fields beyond my ken. A thoughtful review can validate—or help correct—a department's sense of its effectiveness and the institution's view of the department's standing in its field. A well-written, specific report may be less useful for an institution's external public relations, but it makes administrators take a more nuanced view of survey rankings, which are often misleading, and it provides department chairs with ammunition. It can call attention to special strengths of the group or of individuals that CVs might not show; it can give candid evaluations, especially of the younger faculty members. External reviewers visiting an institution lower in the pecking order than their own can make a big difference, particularly, I suspect, on impersonal campuses where the decision makers don't know all their players. If a place is well run, it is exhilarating to go there, meet people in your field you did not know, listen to enthusiastic students, see how creatively the members use their limited resources, and tell the people who hold the purse strings how proud they should be of this group.

Most rewarding are the occasions when a department proves better than it is thought to be and when outside reviewers can help upgrade or even preserve a program that has

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been undervalued. I witnessed a case where an institution signaled to an external review team that it was looking to cut a program back—not a good strategy, as it turned out, for the report was so strong that the effort backfired. Outside reviewers can also direct attention to inequities in salary and workload and can identify the department's position and contributions, internally and externally, more constructively than on-campus colleagues can. Much of our best work as faculty members is done in a supporting role that is hard for administrators from other fields to recognize adequately. In these cases, and they are not rare, the visitors, who know what work in a specific field requires and offers to the institution, can provide the most effective communication to decision makers about what lies before them unseen or unacknowledged. It can be a program as a whole, a component of a program, or individuals in it; it can be the coordinated effort of the team to create an effective major or a graduate curriculum; or it can be the constructive contributions of one or all to the extradepartmental or interdisciplinary linkages that unify the university. Research activities can be quantified without the strain and expense of program review, but often outsiders who are in the know and who can make persuasive comparisons with departments elsewhere are essential in building and gaining recognition for programs.

Even when a review comes up only with the expected, the process focuses the department and the institution on their mutual functioning and requires both to identify and prioritize their central concerns. A review assesses not only the general standing of a department but also how its organization and programs compare with those of other institutions. It identifies large and small strengths and weaknesses, ranging from facilities to people who deserve special recognition. Because reviewers usually interview faculty members individually and in confidence, they can help identify appropriate candidates for chair. They can also help persuade bashful candidates to take on the job. Indeed, my own institution routinely uses a mini version of this process when a chair is needed: two colleagues from relevant departments interview members of the faculty and staff to find out what is on people's minds and which potential chairs will be acceptable to colleagues and why. In a large and potentially impersonal institution, the process is invaluable.

More interestingly, and probably more usefully, external reviews can come up with the unexpected. They can offer administrators and even chairs and colleagues insight into department morale. Sometimes morale problems are well known, but sometimes they really aren't. I've seen external reviewers help a chair rethink or recontextualize a department feud so that it could be moderated, if not neutralized. I've seen reviewers help a dean go beyond well-known mutual antagonisms to see what some of the "difficult" colleagues have to offer. A large department I encountered, for example, was unaware that the graduate students had serious difficulties with the TA coordinator; at another department, deservedly respected, only one out of the dozen graduate students gathered answered yes to the question, "Would you recommend this program to a friend?" In both cases the reviewers were able to open communication channels in the departments that no one had realized were blocked. And in such cases neutral parties, by sharing their experiences of other institutions, can help "plaintiffs" put their concerns in perspective.

Indeed, opening channels of communication is the single theme that connects the several reports I have helped write. Departments can be so tied up in structural or personal problems that they lose sight of where the discipline is going and how irrelevant their old feuds have become. Or, alternatively, departments can have so much invested in one achievement that they forget what else might be possible. I once saw a department unable

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to produce a current version of its degree requirements, or at least unable to agree which was the current version. A heads-up from an outsider can make a big difference in such an impasse. I once encountered a situation where various department members, the chair, and several deans each had a different version (on the same day) of how, why, and even whether a department (an unusually effective and efficient one, by the way) was running a mind-boggling deficit. I took the idealistic approach and hoped that if I described the confusion in my report, someone would sit the parties down and at least establish an agreed-on version of the facts. A more cynical approach might have been to reassure the faculty colleagues on the basis of experience that a situation so hopelessly tangled would probably just hang there forever and that they should continue doing their outstanding job of rebuilding programs.

After all, not all problems can be solved. The suffocating building, for example, was restricted by historical-preservation guidelines. Still, an architectural consultation offered hope for amelioration, and the university found funds to execute the plan even in bad budget times. Where reviewers cannot intervene, they can be a useful sounding board or can furnish cover for stronger actions like recruiting outside chairs. Furthermore, they can offer a sympathetic ear, advice, and models for addressing problems that face us all—it is always helpful to exchange information about how we, especially we small foreign language departments, can make ourselves indispensable in cooperative programs like humanities and honors. Finally, although fraternizing between reviewers and reviewees is not extensively encouraged, there are still moments for stimulating professional exchange. Whenever my department is being reviewed, however uncertain I may be about what will result, I find it heartening and energizing to discuss the issues with outsiders who share my concerns and values and to learn how they confront the problems facing us. At a minimum, talking to outside reviewers offers reassurance about one's sanity.

Apart from an honorarium and a nice trip, possibly to a warmer or more exotic clime, what's in the process for reviewers? All kinds of things. Reviewing offers a great opportunity to meet colleagues in the field whose specializations differ from yours. Even someone who has taught at a variety of institutions can find it interesting and helpful to see what is going on at other places, to get a sense of prevailing norms. You learn not only from the department under review but from the other reviewers as well. I come back from reviews with ideas about kinds of courses we could be offering, areas we could introduce into our curriculum, structures for cooperating with other departments or for organizing extracurricular activities. The challenge is to get my colleagues at home interested in all these new possibilities. Not surprisingly, it is easier to give advice to people being reviewed than to those who aren't.

So without being too naive about one's effectiveness, it is still possible to say that external reviewing is joyous work. The preparation, execution, and reporting are intensive and done under pressure, but they get you away from routine cares briefly. It is less stressful to calm down other people's graduate students than your own. You are deeply engaged with promoting effective research and teaching—things we all care about—to people who live on the same planet and don't usually need to be convinced that what we do is important.

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