2. What are some common challenges to useful program reviews?

- Lack of clear purpose, lack of specific intended uses, lack of identifiable intended users
- Uncertainties regarding process, by both external reviewers and program insiders
- Minimal or non-participation by key stakeholders (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators, students)
- Insufficient or unreliable empirical data to answer review questions; methods not articulated to specific uses for information
- Insufficient or inadequate use of time on site by reviewers
- Uncertain criteria for rendering judgments about the program
- Fear, misunderstanding, resistance to review by program insiders
- ‘We know best’ attitude by external reviewers
- Incomplete or inaccurate reporting back to intended users of the review
- One-shot evaluation, minimal impact, not integrated into overall program evaluation framework
- Ineffictual process that is responded to only perfunctorily by the program and the reviewer (‘we have to do it’)

3. How can we make the most of the program review process?

⇒ A useful program review depends considerably on identifying one or more reviewers who (a) understand and reflect the values and context of the domain, discipline, and program itself; (b) are capable of collecting and interpreting meaningful evaluative data in systematic ways; and (c) are committed to making impartial judgments and recommendations on the basis of findings. Reviewers who are identified and justified by the program, in consultation with whomever is requesting the review, will stand a better chance of gaining traction with the program than will reviewers who are assigned or mandated from ‘above’. Where possible, a team of reviewers might include members with evaluation expertise alongside scholarly domain experts and experienced peers.

⇒ Well in advance, key participants (reviewers, program insiders, other interested stakeholders) will need to establish a consensus on the purpose, intended uses, and intended users of the review. Why is the review occurring, and what decisions or actions will be based on its outcome? This consensus should be built through interactions among the parties involved, rather than mandated by any single entity. Once established, the purpose of the review should be shared with the interested public, such that all likely stakeholders (e.g., faculty, staff, students) understand why the review is taking place and how/when it will proceed.
Where applicable, the program, institution, or other requesting entity should make clear from the outset what procedures, standards, or judgmental criteria are to be used, if any. Is the review required by an institution or agency, and if so do they provide guidelines, standards, and criteria?

All program review activities should be guided by specific evaluation questions. Once the overarching purposes, uses, and users have been identified, joint development of evaluation questions enables participants to focus on high-priority issues in need of attention. No program review will be able to answer all possible questions about all aspects of a program; hence, focusing on specific issues from the outset is essential. Well-crafted, targeted questions will help guide the gathering of data appropriate to the review’s purpose.

Program insiders can enhance the value of a review by producing documentation and ideally a self-study report that illuminate the theory and practice of the program, as well as any empirical evaluation data that have been gathered about the same (or specifically about the targeted evaluation questions). Self-study reports, or other available documentation on the program, should be made available to the program reviewers well in advance of a site visit.

A plan and agenda for the reviewers’ site visit should be set well in advance, with input from key participants in the process. Time and space must be allocated, and advance warning given, for any interactions, observations, or other data collection and meeting activities pursued by the reviewers. The reviewers should take the lead in establishing how best to utilize the time available, such that evaluation questions can be answered adequately and any other goals of the review can be accomplished.

Key steps in the site visit may include: (a) initial meeting to review the purpose and agenda for the site visit and make any necessary adjustments, to answer stakeholders’ questions or concerns, and to review ethical considerations of participation and data collection (e.g., protecting anonymity of respondents); (b) observation activities to gather impressions regarding program facilities, resources, activities; (c) focus group and/or interview activities to garner perspectives from particular individuals or constituencies within the program; (d) reviewer team meetings to collect, summarize, synthesize observations and thoughts; (e) open time/space for unplanned but necessary additional interactions (including the possibility for any stakeholder to offer ideas to one or more of the reviewers); and (f) an exit reporting session where reviewers share their initial judgments and recommendations with program stakeholders.

Responsibilities of program reviewers may be best divided among team members in advance, including: (a) chairing site visit activities, (b) conducting individual meetings with diverse possible constituencies, (c) running additional data collection activities (e.g., administering surveys or focus groups), and so on.

A full program review report should be drafted by the reviewers, covering: (a) context and purpose of the program review, identity and qualifications of the program reviewers; (b) intended uses, users, and evaluation questions; (c) process and methods pursued during the review; (d) findings, judgments, answers to the evaluation questions; and (e) recommendations for actions to be taken. Where possible, the report should be reviewed by key program stakeholders for accuracy and clarity prior to production and dissemination of the final report. A deadline for the report should be included in the agenda (above).

If not included in the main body of the report, a program evaluation addendum can usefully suggest how to articulate such program reviews with other on-going evaluation activities related to the program. Such an addendum might offer the reviewers’ ideas on what sources of information can be collected through what methods on a regular basis (e.g., student satisfaction surveys, outcomes assessments, job or graduate school placement statistics, etc.), such that evaluation becomes a standard practice within the program (i.e., not an idiosyncratic one-shot occurrence that only happens when it is time to engage in another program review).

The program should be enabled/encouraged to comment and act upon the report, ideally in the form of a program review response document that outlines specific plans for using the review to inform program improvements, pursue future evaluation activities, or take other next steps.

4. Questions for the panelists:

- What are the major purposes for engaging in program reviews in MELPs?
- What are the roles/expectations/responsibilities of external reviewers, and who should they be?
- What are the roles/expectations/responsibilities of program insiders, and who should participate in the review activities?
- Which methods/activities seem to work the best during site visits to MELPs?
- Which information should be included in a self-study conducted by program insiders, typically prior to a site visit?
- How can we maximize the usefulness of mandated program reviews?

Notes:

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