2011 Middle Eastern Languages Western Consortium
Language Program Evaluation Workshop
“Making the most of program evaluation”

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION SESSION #1
How can we make the most of the mandated program review process?

07/30/2011, 4:30 - 6:00
Panelists: John Norris (facilitator), Nahal Akbari, Mahmoud Al-Batal, Kirk Belnap

**Theme:** Academic programs are regularly encouraged or required to engage in so-called 'program review', typically involving a self-study and a brief site visit by faculty from peer programs or other domain experts. Unfortunately, the utility of such reviews is often threatened by a variety of challenges, including the lack of a guiding framework or evaluation questions, minimal or non-participation by important stakeholders, inadequate/invalid/unreliable data to illuminate program activities and outcomes, and external reviewers with insufficient understanding of the target program and/or of evaluation purposes and methods. In this roundtable discussion, participants offer suggestions for how to improve program reviews, with an eye towards developing recommendations for practice in MELPs.

(1) John Norris (University of Hawaii)

As the convener of the Roundtable Session, John Norris introduced the roundtable discussion and provided a proposal for maximizing the usefulness of program reviews.


Main themes introduced by John Norris were the following:

a. **What do we mean by ‘mandated program review’ and why does it happen?**
   A program review is a holistic evaluation of educational units on their outcomes, activities, resources, and capacities, and often takes the form of a self study and a site visit by a panel of external experts. The reviewers provide objective judgments and a set of recommendations for program improvement.

b. **What are some common challenges to useful program reviews?**
   Some challenges pointed out were: (a) lack of clear purposes and intended uses, (b) non-(or minimal) participation by key stakeholders, (c) insufficient/unreliable empirical data, etc.
c. How can we make the most of the program review process?

A number of recommendations were made:
(a) identifying good reviewers
(b) establishing consensus on the purpose, intended uses, and intended users of the review among key participants
(c) setting procedures, standards, and judgment criteria from the outset
(d) clarifying and prioritizing evaluation questions
(e) preparing self-study reports to illuminate program characteristics
(f) consideration of key steps during site visit (e.g., initial meeting to review the purpose and agenda, etc.)
(g) identifying and dividing responsibilities of program reviewers
(h) drafting a program review report that focuses on actions to be taken
(i) encouraging/recommending ways to use the review recommendations for on-going internal evaluation
(j) encouraging response (action plans) from the program on the basis of the external review

(2) Nahal Akbari (University of Maryland)

How can our own internal review practices and self-studies prepare us for an external review process that is often imposed from the outside, short-term, not engaging, and non-participatory? How can it be turned into a positive learning experience?

a. Take a proactive approach to program evaluation

At some point in the life-cycle of a program, even before an external program review, proactive programs are already collecting data and engaging in the evaluation process in a collective manner that involves the faculty, community, and the students.

Many external reviewers and regional accreditors are focused on student learning outcomes. External reviews will be much more advantageous, if you can clearly state what it is that your program does, what it seeks to accomplish, how, and why. If you are doing it already in a comprehensive way, then you are ready for the external review no matter when it comes up.

b. Involve faculty in the learning process

Turn it into a learning opportunity for the program well in advance. It may be a gradual and extended process to get evaluative thinking in place and get people familiar with the core ideas and practices. If everyone is already exposed to and used to doing evaluation, then external review should be much less threatening.
For example, people may not be clear about the mission statement of the institution, department/college, and a given program. Working collectively on vision or mission statements can be a good starting point for programmatic thinking in response to the question “How do you understand your program”?

When focusing on developing the program, you may not have an opportunity to explicitly state how theories have been (or are supposed to be) translated into practice and to what extent what we do is informed by (pedagogic) theory or philosophy. If you involve faculty in the process of developing and reviewing the program, they will begin thinking about these crucial issues and…

…be much more engaged and invested in the program
…gather documents [data] in a more systematic way
…encounter much less resistance and/or difficulty, when they face external reviewers

c. Two thoughts on preparing for peer review

Context: “Peer reviews” between Flagship programs. The purpose of the peer review was not for accountability and accreditation, but for programs to learn best practices from each other. Some institutions were prepared to showcase their program, but some weren’t.

**Thought 1: Be honest about program weaknesses.**

One program was well prepared with their program information (systematic program information gathered and displayed, etc.). The program honestly identified weaknesses as well as strengths. Although the weaknesses the program staff identified were indeed problematic, the fact that the program recognized its weaknesses made positive impressions on the peer reviewers.

**Thought 2: Be ethical!**

In one program, a program coordinator was always in the presence of the peer review team, even when meetings were for the reviewers to talk to students about the program, etc. The coordinator seemed to want to prevent uncontrolled access to students and appeared as if the coordinator was coaching students what to say and what not to say. Careful scheduling and agreed upon practices prior to the site review can help prevent such challenges.
a. External review as a vision check

External review is a way to check program vision. A vision check shows where we (i.e., the field in general) are going/heading and where individual programs fall within the overarching vision of the field.

First address the program’s vision internally. Then have objective external review from experts who are well informed about the field and can confirm where we are heading and whether we are going into the right direction or not, both as individual programs and in terms of the ‘big picture’.

b. Internally-motivated external review

Think of external reviews as supplement to internal reviews. As professional educators, what we would like to see is external reviews that are motivated and requested by the program’s own faculty and not by the college dean or funders. We should seek reviews because we want to do them, to hold ourselves accountable to the discipline, and because we see it as important for professional growth.

c. Make specific requests to external reviewers

Typically, in external review there are not any specific a priori questions provided, but for a successful and useful review it can be helpful to request a focus on specific questions and aspects of the program. Don’t expect everything to happen in the site visit, since time is limited. External review can begin even before the site visit by providing self-studies and questions to reviewers ahead of time. Have the reviewers do their homework, and encourage them to begin their queries prior to the visit (e.g., send a survey to students or faculty before the site visit).

d. Need for a follow-up by the external reviewers

Follow-up is very important. It would be helpful for external reviewers to interview stakeholders 5-6 months after the site visit, to find out (a) how things are going, (b) to what extent the department has been able to implement recommendations, and (c) where they are heading, as well as to reflect on the value of the review process itself.

e. Carefully choose external reviewers

Carefully choose external reviewers. Some consideration for reviewer selection criteria:
- Has an ability to see the big picture of the field and the contribution of the program in it
- Has a vision of the future of the field
- Can guide/council on the direction of the vision, based on experience and innovation
(4) Kirk Belnap (Brigham Young University)

a. Internally-motivated external review
   Reviewers should be invited because the program wants to have input in order to strengthen what they are doing and to move forward as the field shifts. Successful reviews happen when insiders genuinely want to improve the language program. This commitment may also lead to unintended benefits (e.g., a basis for requesting and getting upgrades of instructor or faculty positions, the commitment of funds to support future external reviews).

b. Take advantage of the accountability/accreditation wave or be crushed
   The [accountability/accreditation] wave is coming. We can try to criticize/fight against the accountability movement, or we can catch it and make the most of the process. Departments will do better if they catch it, try and make the most of it rather than go kicking and screaming in the opposite direction. Experience shows that programs do well because they are positive/active in responding to requirements for stating and assessing student learning outcomes, as well as other aspects of mandated evaluation. Stating, assessing, and demonstrated what you are able to accomplish can on its own have dramatic and long-lasting benefits. In the case of BYU Arabic, the proactive take on assessment was showcased as an exemplary case in the college and led to the confirmation of a new tenure-track faculty position.

c. Importance of follow-up by the external reviewers
   Citing an example of good program review practice, Kirk conducted an external review and was invited back for a followed-up 10 years later for another review. These long-term follow-up reviews will do good for the field by providing some consistency of vision and meaningful long-term checks on the reality of that vision. In the end, a major message needs to be that “Evaluation is our friend.”

(5) Questions and Answer

a. What do external reviews generally examine?
   What are the things besides mission statement and learning outcomes that we should specify for the external reviewers (e.g., facilities, teacher training, etc.)? What are the trends? What can we do during internal evaluation to prepare for the external program review?

Suggestions from the panel and the audience:

→ Develop a logic model: A logic model explains visually and conceptually the different components of your program in a very systematic way. It helps you understand and describe how each program element builds up and is related to other
elements. This helps you decide what kind of data to collect and how each program element is interwoven with everything else.

→ **Balance between imposed and internally-generated list**: Institutions often provide a list of program components reviewers have to look at. However, this list may not correspond to the vision, theory, and practice of the program. You need to find a balance between what comes out of the logic of your own program and the list of mandated foci.

→ **Ensure shared understanding of the review**: People, on the inside and outside, need to define what the program is and what will be in focus during review. Both reviewer and participants need to have a shared understanding of what makes up the program. Reviewers and the program faculty need to be on the same page for what uses are expected out of the review process and what specifically will be reviewed, and how.

→ **Generate discipline-based standards for an external review**: What is needed is a discipline-specific set of standards to create clarity for the structure and process of reviews. Such standards exist in other professional fields and can be examined (e.g., TESOL, law, medicine, etc.) as an inspiration to create our own discipline-based criteria and standards for good program practice and good reviewing procedures. There are generic strategy guidelines/templates that we might be able to use. Take what’s out there, customize it, and create our own.

  o **Caveat** → One set of standards may not fit all, clearly.

  o **Caveat** → We don’t want to dismiss the unique nature of each individual program and overwhelm the program with review criteria. Perhaps as part of the standards, it would be good to (a) include a criterion that examines the unique nature of the program, and (b) include a prioritization process for asking questions and gathering data that are meaningful/useful to each program.

**For study abroad institutions:**

  o **Suggestion** → Communicate with the feeding schools what they expect from the overseas institution. However, the criteria and expectations may vary from one feeding institution to another.

**b. What is the definition of a good FL or MEL program?**

Can we generate an agreed upon set of basic criteria for what constitutes a good language program, as a first step towards standards of program design and practice, as well as a basis for review?
1. **Program have examined and understand stakeholder needs**: Are you doing what you say you are doing? What are the things you said you do for the people you serve? Who are the stakeholders you serve? Do you know enough about your actual students? Do you know why your students are in the program? Why are they in your program as opposed to other programs? Is the program based on the needs of the students?

2. **Notion of a “program” and criteria for “quality of a program”**: There is a set of program elements that are described often in program evaluation literature which can be used to define the nature of a language program and how it is supposed to work. However, when it comes to defining the “qualities” of the program elements every program will adhere to, it becomes more challenging.

   {Note: Discussion continued in this vein for some time. The above points are to be taken only as a starting point towards the kinds of criteria that might appear in any set of program standards or recommended practices.}

   b. **How do you [as an external reviewer] know when you are really just being called in to “endorse” certain agendas rather than evaluate a program?**

   **Response**

   You need to do background work and find out the impetus for evaluation and intended uses beforehand. Evaluators/reviewers have a responsibility to engage in ethical practices, and if there are evaluation requests that will not in the best interest of the stakeholders (e.g., intended to be done for a particular group’s political interest), then the evaluator has the choice not to take the job. **In the standard/criteria/template for program review, it will be good to include a phase for such background work and negotiation at the beginning of each review process.**