

# Comprehensive Departmental Reviews

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This is the age of evaluation. We are singly and collectively reviewed, poked, probed, “bent, spindled, and mutilated,” it seems without end—all in the name of promotion and tenure, merit pay increases, job retention, resource allocation, productivity measure, adherence to affirmative action guidelines. And then the evaluation procedures are evaluated!

Familiar to many of us are the periodic department and program reviews conducted under the leadership of the Cooperative State Research Service (CSRS) of the

United States Department of Agriculture. CSRS reviews are distinguished from the various others to which we are all subjected by their low frequency (every 4–6 years) and, in their most effective form, by being run and controlled to a great extent by those being reviewed. There is a wide diversity of opinion regarding the benefits of these reviews, ranging from “waste of time” to “indispensable.” I feel qualified to point out some advantages and disadvantages of such reviews because I have led, participated in, and been subjected to reviews of plant pathology and related departments. Twice, CSRS reviews have played a major, positive role in my own personal career development.

The CSRS review process evolved to its present form during the 98 years since the Hatch Act creating formula funding for experiment stations was passed in 1887. As early as 1888, an Office of Experiment Stations (OES), reporting to the secretary of agriculture, was formed to ensure that institutions receiving Hatch funds were using the funds as intended—in short, reviews of accountability. In a way, accountability is still the primary aim of reviews.

The first program reviews took place in the early 1950s, when the OES was administratively located in the Agricultural Research Service. Initially focusing on research, these reviews now consider all aspects of a department’s or program’s research, education, and public service functions and how they interact. Cooperative State Research Service became a separate office in the Department of Agriculture in the early 1960s and has been a separate functioning organization (with occasional name changes) since that time. Subject matter (department) reviews started in the 1960s and are still the most frequent, but

not exclusive, form. The peer panel concept developed in the 1960s and 1970s and now represents the approach most reviews take.

One disadvantage is the amount of time a properly prepared and executed CSRS review takes—conceivably up to 3 or 4 working days per individual. Since time is money, the process is costly, even without consideration of travel and per diem costs. Some faculty members of reviewed departments react negatively. They may resent an outsider’s comments about their programs. Those who are failing to meet job requirements or are mid- or late-career “coasters” are uncomfortable about perceptive, in-depth examinations of their programs. Others are just naturally uncomfortable under close scrutiny. In extreme cases, cries of infringement on academic freedom may be heard.

One of the roles of the panel is to seek out ways the department can improve its performance, and this involves identifying problem areas and weak performances. Unproductive individuals may have trouble with this, but rarely does the panel uncover problems not already recognized locally. What it can do is reinforce the department’s or administration’s perception of problems and provide support and incentive to find solutions. Sometimes, peer reviewers have insight into local conditions and make recommendations that local professionals have overlooked.

The overriding factor, of course, is that in this era of erosion of resources for research, teaching, and extension, administrators are being forced to take increasingly close looks at the performance and potential of units under their control. The review then becomes a powerful tool for a department or discipline unit to use in presenting its story to the local administration through a third party. For this process to be positive for the department, the preparation and long-range potential of its activities must be carefully assessed and clearly communicated. In my opinion, a careful self-assessment process presents one of the biggest advantages for the individual project leader and the department. It is one thing to talk about past accomplishments and future plans, but fiction is separated from reality when one is forced to put it all down on paper to be scrutinized and measured by well-informed colleagues. The well-done, positive communication of an effective, forward-looking program to an outside peer panel can give a big boost to a department.

There are often honest disagreements about the input of peer panels, and one of the strengths of the process is the opportunity to air these disagreements in an open and professional manner. To make the process pay off, both the reviewers and the reviewed must make the effort. Remember the computer-age aphorism: “Garbage in, garbage out!”