



## *Abstract*

Prior research suggests that Academic Program Review (APR) is most effective when it is a systematic process that supports program improvement. One potential way to increase faculty involvement in comprehensive APR processes is by engaging faculty members as internal peer reviewers (IPRs). This qualitative study investigated faculty members' experiences as IPRs of academic programs within their home institution but outside of their own departments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 faculty members at a public, research-intensive university who served as IPRs. Data analysis suggests that faculty members who engaged as IPRs (1) gained a deeper understanding of the APR process, (2) learned more about the work of other departments on campus, and (3) learned how to more effectively discuss and engage in assessment within their home departments. Suggestions are provided for structuring APR processes in ways that may further develop and promote a positive culture of assessment.

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# Academic Program Review: Examining the Experiences of Faculty Members Serving as Internal Peer Reviewers

**I**n addition to teaching classes and conducting research, faculty contribute their time and energy to a wide variety of campus programs and committees in an effort to enhance student learning and the educational environment. Many want these experiences to be impactful rather than time spent “spinning their wheels.” Perhaps they, like some of the participants in this study, are looking to participate in meaningful experiences that they can both contribute to and gain value from. This study suggests that utilizing faculty as Internal Peer Reviewers (IPRs) during Academic Program Review (APR) may provide an opportunity for faculty to do just that.

Academic programs in higher education are facing increasing demands to provide evidence of educational quality. These demands translate to increased expectations for assessment and accountability. APR is one example of a continuous, systematic process supporting ongoing quality assurance, program improvement, institutional autonomy (Creamer & Janosik, 1999), and an improved ability to advocate for new resources (Banta, 2014). The majority of U.S. higher education institutions began employing some type of APR process during the early 1980s (e.g., Barak, 1982), and APR has since become a common practice in most colleges and universities (Rickards & Stitt-Bergh, 2016). However, of the limited literature that exists regarding best practices and the effectiveness of APR, the majority is theoretical rather than empirical (McGowan, 2019).

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The use of IPRs, faculty members who review programs within their home institution but outside of their own department, is one such rarely examined practice that warrants further consideration. IPRs may benefit the academic programs being reviewed by offering unique perspectives that are not domain specific, encouraging collegiality, and increasing consideration of student learning at the program level (Bloom, 2010). IPRs may also reap professional benefits through developing collaborations across disciplines and participating in a meaningful assessment process centered on student learning and quality improvement (Banta, 2014).

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In this article we present a qualitative study conducted to explore the experiences of faculty members who participate as IPRs of other academic programs. This research builds on the limited literature concerning best practices and the importance of faculty involvement in APR. We provide a description of the APR process, report major findings, and examine how an internal peer review process can be used to further develop and promote a positive culture of assessment. The results fill an important gap in the literature on APR practices by elucidating the benefits of employing internal peer review as one element of a comprehensive APR process. This article is intended to be useful to individuals and institutions attempting to increase faculty involvement in assessment activities.

## Academic Program Review

Academic programs are held accountable through a number of review processes, including regional and/or professional accreditation, student learning outcomes assessment, performance-based budgeting, and formal program review. Even for those departments not required to participate in formal reviews by an official accrediting agency, there are often external pressures from administrators to demonstrate evidence of ongoing program improvement (Colón & Dana, 2015). At the onset of the assessment movement in the 1980s, periodic program reviews focused primarily on the availability of resources to operate a program and included few, if any, indicators of performance that might lead to meaningful programmatic change (Bresciani, 2006; Gentemann et al., 1994).

A comprehensive APR process should be tailored to the individual institution and program being evaluated, include student learning outcome data, and be undertaken as an ongoing process focused on program improvement. Ideally, APR should lead to informed decision-making regarding curricula and student learning (Rodgers et al., 2013). Given increasing demands for high quality education, calls to center student learning as the primary focus of program review have been prominent since at least the early 1990s (e.g., Gentemann et al., 1994). Yet, in a survey of 130 institutions across Carnegie categories, Wergin and Swingen (2000) determined that, with few exceptions, by 2000 most institutions still did not include student learning outcome data in the departmental evaluation process. This had changed by the time the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment conducted a national survey in 2013, and recent literature now suggests that the majority of program review processes do incorporate student learning outcomes (e.g., McGowan, 2019). However, in some cases, outcomes are still reviewed for the sole purpose of meeting accreditation standards rather than as part of an effort to make meaningful changes to courses or programs (Blumberg, 2017; Kuh et al., 2014).

## Faculty Involvement in Assessment

Effective facilitation of a meaningful APR process necessitates the active involvement of faculty members (Maki, 2004). In fact, systematic program review processes can be used as a tool to proactively involve faculty members in program decision-making (Shambaugh, 2017). As experts in their own program(s) and participants in the unique culture of their institution, faculty are in a position to be deeply aware of programmatic needs. Additionally, many faculty members are engaged in activities centered on student growth and achievement and possess an innate intellectual curiosity about their students' learning (Maki, 2004). Faculty commitment to assessment is crucial to focusing curriculum on student learning, fostering positive programmatic changes, and promoting a positive culture of assessment (Ndoye & Parker, 2010).

Though faculty involvement is critical to the facilitation of a meaningful APR process, faculty members have not always viewed the process as useful. At the turn of this century, Wergin and Swingen (2000) found that most faculty members did not identify the APR process as positively affecting their professional practice. Given a perceived lack of impact on programs and poor integration as a systematic practice within an institution, many characterized APR as burdensome and ritualistic. Resistance persists today, as many faculty members perceive the review process as authoritarian and non-collegial (Bowker, 2016). Faculty members are more likely to embrace APR undertaken for the purpose of program improvement (Novodvorsky et al., 2015; Rodgers et al., 2013; Townley et al., 2003). If faculty members are unaware of the quality improvement focus of the review, they may not recognize its utility or participate meaningfully in the process (Bresciani, 2006; Rodrigues, 2002; Wergin, 1999). Conversely, faculty who view assessment activities as being improvement driven and/or meaningful are more likely to acknowledge their value and embrace future assessment practices (Rodgers et al., 2013; Trullen & Rodríguez, 2013).

Emil and Cress (2014) indicate faculty attitudes and beliefs towards assessment affect faculty members' willingness to engage in assessment activities. For many years, increased demands for accountability have amplified reservations about assessment in general (Gentemann et al., 1994), and faculty resistance to assessment practices is well documented (e.g., Bowker, 2016; Rodgers et al., 2013; Shavelson, 2010). For example, in a survey of faculty members from business programs, Pringle and Michel (2007) found that of the 43% who acknowledged resistance to assessment practices, more than half felt overwhelmed or overloaded by assessment-related activities. Other frequently cited reasons for faculty resistance to assessment include fear of evaluation, loss of academic freedom, and little return on investment (Linkon, 2005).

Appropriate strategies are required not only to increase faculty engagement in assessment, but also to bridge the gap between APR best practices and actual review processes. Ideally, these strategies will also aid in the creation of program assessment processes that focus primarily on institutional and student learning improvements (Rickards & Stitt-Bergh, 2016). This suggests a need to address and improve faculty perceptions of and participation in assessment activities. One strategy for improving faculty perceptions and participation is to engage faculty as IPRs in the APR process.

### Internal Peer Review Teams

When an internal peer review is conducted as part of an APR process that assesses student learning and is focused on program improvement, faculty participation may result in a more meaningful process, dissemination of best practices, and improvement of the overall culture of assessment within an institution (Ketunnen, 2010). For IPRs, enhanced understanding of the purpose and value of APR may deepen and positively influence change within reviewers' own programs.

Cross-evaluation is a procedure in which representatives from various areas of an institution come together to evaluate a designated program through constructive communication to promote and encourage learning and to disseminate best practices of assessment within the institution (Ketunnen, 2010). Internal reviewers gain firsthand knowledge about the workings of other programs, including similarities to and differences from their own campus unit (Banta, 2014). Constructive communication between faculty members from different departments promotes innovation and learning from diverse experiences and views (Ketunnen, 2010). As individual faculty members begin to view assessment practices more positively, they can share these experiences with others both within and outside of their own programs, thereby contributing to a positive culture of assessment within their institution.

Similarly, by sharing their experiences and assessment knowledge with others in their programs and institutions, IPRs may aid in disseminating best practices. Many faculty members do not receive formal training in assessment and are not always aware of resources or other assistance available to them. Those faculty who participate in internal peer review

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have greater opportunities to learn assessment skills, gain experience, and draw on available resources, including assessment professionals.

## Incorporating Internal Peer Review Teams at Virginia Tech

Virginia Tech's current APR process was launched in 2015. Prior to 2015, using IPRs for APR was not a common practice. The APR process serves as a mechanism for ongoing, systematic review of academic departments and programs with the explicit purpose of fostering continuous improvement. Each academic department conducts a comprehensive evaluation of its activities every five to six years. The process emphasizes reflection, conversation, and feedback in order to facilitate a strong vision for the future through an honest assessment of program strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement. While Virginia Tech utilizes the typical APR stages of self-study, review, and final report (DiBiasio & Ecker, 1982), the process is supplemented by continuous administrative support from the Institutional Effectiveness (IE) unit; for example, an IE professional sits on each peer review team.

Peer review teams are a mix of individuals with disciplinary expertise similar to the unit being reviewed and expertise distinct from the unit in order to provide diverse perspectives. When APR was first launched in 2015, only IPRs were utilized, but now departments may choose either a team of all IPRs or a mix of internal and external reviewers. While several departments have utilized external reviewers, most departments participating in APR have opted for a review team that consists solely of IPRs. Although departments may nominate reviewers to serve on their peer review team, at least one member of the team is selected from a pool of Virginia Tech faculty members and administrators who have expressed interest in serving as an IPR. Departmental peer review teams are finalized in consultation with the department chair/program director. Both internal and external peer reviewers are offered a \$500 stipend per completed review and IPRs may serve on a maximum of two review teams per academic year. Once a peer review team is finalized, all of the reviewers on the team participate in an initial training meeting led by IE professionals at which the APR process, timeline, and peer reviewer responsibilities are discussed in detail.

## Steps in the APR Process

Each participating department/program completes a self-study report (SSR) designed to encourage departments to reflect on their current operations, develop a vision for the future, and create and implement a plan for continuous improvement. The analysis included in the report is informed by data provided to the department from Institutional Research and other sources, as well as faculty interests and current trends in the field. The SSR is submitted to IE professionals who distribute it to members of the peer review team. Peer reviewers independently analyze the SSR using a rubric designed by IE. An IE professional then facilitates a team meeting to discuss the SSR and identify questions that the review team would like to ask the department. The peer review team then participates in a face-to-face conversation with departmental representatives to discuss the SSR, where the department hopes to be in the future, and how the department plans to get there.

The IE professional sitting on the review team is responsible for compiling the team members' individual rubrics and creating a draft of the review team's report to the department/program. The APR rubric serves as the template for the peer review team's report. When the draft report is complete, the IE professional sends it to the rest of the peer review team to review and edit, and the entire team works together to finalize the report. After the review team's report is finalized and shared with the department/program, face-to-face conversations between each department and its respective dean(s) are held to discuss program review findings and, most importantly, the department's plans for moving forward. These conversations provide an opportunity to discuss implementation items and resource priorities. After each face-to-face conversation with a department, the respective dean writes a memo noting their conversation with the department, the department's plans for moving forward, and the dean's expectations for what the program will accomplish by the time of the next scheduled APR. This memo is shared with the department and the IE unit, which is responsible for archiving all APR materials.

**By sharing their experiences and assessment knowledge with others in their programs and institutions, IPRs may aid in disseminating best practices.**

## Methods

### Research Design

**18 faculty members who served as IPRs.... participate[d] in the study. ...The participants worked in a wide variety of academic disciplines including the arts, humanities, life sciences, and social sciences, as well as professional disciplines such as business, education, and engineering.**

The interpretive framework underlying this research is constructivism, which acknowledges multiple viewpoints and realities and assumes that individuals play an active role in making meaning from their experiences and interactions with others (Creswell, 2013; Jones et al., 2014). Given the gaps in the existing literature and the need for rich, in-depth data related to how faculty perceive their experiences participating as IPRs in APR, the research design is a basic qualitative study (Merriam, 2009). As Patton (2002) asserts “[T] here is a very practical side to qualitative methods that simply involves asking open-ended questions of people and observing matters of interest in real-world settings in order to solve problems, improve programs, or develop policies (pp. 135-136).”

### Participants

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, 18 faculty members who served as IPRs during the first two review cycles (Fall 2016 and Fall 2017) of Virginia Tech’s relaunched APR process were invited to participate in the study by the third author. Of these, 14 (78%) completed interviews. Table 1 displays basic demographic information about these participants. All study participants were full-time employees at Virginia Tech. The participants worked in a wide variety of academic disciplines including the arts, humanities, life sciences, and social sciences, as well as professional disciplines such as business, education, and engineering. The total number of years that faculty participants had worked in higher education ranged from a minimum of five years to a maximum of 40 years with a mean of 22 years of experience. Participants from two different APR cycles were interviewed to ensure that data were not overly influenced by circumstances occurring during a specific academic year.

Table 1  
*Characteristics of Study Participants*

Characteristic	Frequency
<b>Faculty Rank</b>	
Full Professors	7
Associate Professors	4
Assistant Professors	3
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	8
Male	6
<b>Semester Served as IPR</b>	
Fall 2016	9
Fall 2017	5

### Prior Experience as Reviewers

Of these participants, only three had previously participated on an internal APR peer review team; two had prior experience in conducting external APR peer reviews. Nine had no previous formal experience with any type of APR, but six of those respondents discussed participation in peer review in the context of articles, book prospectuses, promotion and tenure, and/or working on departmental committees preparing materials for a review team. Two had been engaged in accreditation activities for either their own department or similar departments at other institutions, while another had significant experience in conducting external reviews on behalf of an accrediting agency.

## Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted in two separate rounds of data collection. All interviews were conducted by the first two authors who had no prior interaction with the study participants. The third author did interact with each study participant during the APR process, but did not conduct any of the interviews. Faculty (n = 9) who participated on peer review teams during the Fall 2016 semester were interviewed during Spring 2017, and faculty (n = 5) who participated on peer review teams during the Fall 2017 semester were interviewed during Spring 2018. Each interview was conducted in person at a location selected by the research participant. Interviews were a maximum of 60 minutes in length.

An informed consent form was signed at the beginning of each interview. In addition to being invited to respond to the interview questions (see Appendix A), participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). The second author interviewed participants from the Fall 2016 review cohort, and the first author interviewed participants from the Fall 2017 review cohort. The first author transcribed interviews from both cohorts. Member checks were conducted after transcription; a copy of each interview transcript was sent to the respective participant for review and feedback.

## Data Analysis

Transcripts of the semi-structured interviews revealed that responses tended to address both the presented question, as well as previous or unasked questions. Structural codes, codes based on specific elements of the research questions, can be useful when “respondents return to earlier topics or make a cognitive leap” to topics addressed in later questions (MacQueen et al., 1998, p. 33). These structural codes served as an index for applying more focused coding and allowed for the synthesis of data for the purpose of thematic analysis (Auerbach et al., 1998).

Utilizing the structural codes, the authors were then able to analyze indexed responses and define themes based on participants’ experiences. To do so, the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was applied. This process involved a thorough analysis of each respondent’s comments within their own interview, as well as within the greater context of all of the interviews. The emergent codes from all interviews were defined, compared, and refined until the authors felt they had identified all relevant themes and integrated them into a coherent explanation of the general IPR experience. The qualitative software tool NVivo was used throughout the data analysis process.

**This study represents a convergence of information from a variety of IPRs who participated in APR during a two-year period at a single site.**

## Limitations

Acknowledging the limitations of a study is important to provide readers with a deeper understanding of the scope and nature of the research. This study represents a convergence of information from a variety of IPRs who participated in APR during a two-year period at a single site. This single-site study ensured consistency in the expectations and requirements of the institution’s specific APR process, but limits the understanding of the broader APR experience as conducted under varying institutional requirements. Additionally, while participants were not offered a monetary incentive for participating in the study, they were provided with a stipend by the IE unit for participating in the APR process. This stipend may have impacted participants’ decisions about whether or not to participate in the research study. Potential decreases in discretionary funds might not allow for such stipends to be provided at this or other institutions in the future, in turn impacting which faculty members may choose to participate in assessment-related activities. Finally, while participants and interviewers did not have a prior relationship, the interviewees were invited to participate in the study by the third author who had previously interacted with each participant during the APR process. These prior interactions by the third author may have impacted which faculty members were willing to be interviewed for this study.

## Findings and Discussion

**Participants identified three beneficial components of the APR process: (1) an organized structure, (2) a focus on improvement, and (3) the use of diverse peer review teams.**

Findings from the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews show a clear pattern aligning with best practices of APR. Participants identified three beneficial components of the APR process: (1) an organized structure, (2) a focus on improvement, and (3) the use of diverse peer review teams. The support provided by IE professionals emerged as another important aspect of the APR experience. The combination of the APR process and the support received from IE professionals allowed participants to build three avenues of learning as a result of their participation: (1) learning about the purpose and structure of the APR process, (2) learning about other departments, and (3) learning how to engage in and discuss assessment within their home departments. Two minor themes, cross-disciplinary interactions and service to others, are also briefly discussed. Table 2 summarizes the frequencies of qualitative codes from the interview respondents. Additional findings include factors motivating participation, recruitment, and engaging in future service on an internal peer review team. Please note that all quoted remarks come from participant interview data; however, specific quotes are not attributed to individual participants.

Table 2  
*Qualitative Codes and Frequencies*

Code	Frequency
P1: Challenge	17
P2: Effort	8
P3: General	7
P4: Improvement Focused	18
P5: Structure	16
P6: Team Composition	26
S1: Professional Assistance	16
S2: Resources	5
V1: Cross-Disciplinary Interactions	10
V2: Learning (Other Departments)	19
V3: Learning (APR)	9
V4: Learning (Home Departments)	10
V5: Learning (Other)	5
V6: Service to Others	6

*Note.* Process codes are P1-P6; Support codes are S1-S2; Value codes are V1-V6

### Benefits of the APR Process

Participants noted three key elements of the APR process that were beneficial: (1) an organized structure, (2) an improvement focus, and (3) the use of diverse peer review teams. In addition to utilizing the three primary stages of self-study, review, and final report suggested by DiBiasio & Ecker (1982), this APR process included reflection, feedback, and discussion within the structure of the process. Participants felt the structure of the APR process was “well executed” and “streamlined.” Review teams felt there was strength “in terms of our engagement, what we were told, how we got oriented, and the things that we were given.” One participant stated, “the process isn’t, I don’t want to say intense, but it was thorough.” The structure allowed IPRs “group time, but then also individual time to look over reports and add what it is we think is important.” Being given time to work both independently and as a group allowed reviewers to discuss “different perspectives to decide ‘what do I really think now that I know that?’” Some participants felt having an APR structure “that gives you that mix, that blend” was ideal.

In addition to the mechanics of the APR process, participants highlighted that it was “really about helping the department.” As suggested by Novodvorsky et al. (2015), faculty members seemed to embrace APR because it centered on program improvement. One respondent indicated that in comparison to similar reviews they had participated in,

This felt like the process was genuine in helping this department get better. And it felt like – it was almost like a fresh set of eyes to help them maybe see some things differently or suggest some things, which I thought was really really positive.

According to Banta (2014) and Flaherty (2016), departments under review reap quality results when they too recognize the APR process as meaningful and focus on improvement. Some reviewers expressed concern about viewing the purpose of program review differently from the department being reviewed, where the latter “took it more as an evaluative [process] and we took it as more of a formative assessment.” This was reflected in the way one reviewer felt the department

presented as a lot of, ‘here’s what we’ve done, here’s our accomplishments, here are our numbers’ and we were really, I think, more interested in where are you going, what are your opportunities, build on your strengths to get to the next level, or to sell yourself within the college in a better way.

Reviewers wanted faculty to be “aware that [APR] is not a punitive thing. We aren’t being the curriculum police. We’re just trying to find ways to make it better.”

Review teams were comprised of people from different departments and colleges, representing different experience levels and research approaches. The practice of selecting a diverse group of IPRs is one way of encouraging the type of constructive communication Ketunnen (2010) and Bloom (2010) have deemed necessary for promoting innovation and learning. One participant stated, “We had different kinds of questions. Different kinds of perspectives, which I think was very useful.” While some might be concerned about finding common ground in working in a diverse group, ultimately “the questions [they] were asked to address were general enough that people from...any discipline would be familiar with what was required to do it.” This diversity “just worked well. It was a good approach” and “that’s a strength to [APR].”

Respondents indicated that although they put forth significant effort during the process, prospective faculty members might have a “misperception as to the workload.” Contrary to the findings of Wergin and Swingen (2000), 93% of IPRs in this study did not characterize the APR process as burdensome. Although participants were informed that the time commitment for participating in APR was approximately 15 hours, only one respondent stated they would not participate again because “Wow! It was a lot of time.” Given the level of support from each team’s IE professional, IPRs were not required to “fill out a ton of reports.” Other participants reported “it was not a huge commitment of time,” “it’s not painful,” and “there was nothing in particular that was onerous about it.”

### Support from Institutional Effectiveness Professionals

IE professionals provided training, support, and resources that were identified as important aspects underpinning the APR process. Reviewers felt the IE unit “has the expertise in how to structure [APR]” and the documents and resources IE staff “had prepared in advance were helpful.” Participants also shared the materials for assessing the SSR were “all prepared pretty well in terms of laying out specific things that they were looking for in terms of the program that we were going to review” and that IE staff provided “cues as to how to evaluate success.”

Emphasis was placed on “having a point person who is really well versed in how [APR] works and isn’t afraid to do some of the heavy lifting.” In providing a “neutral party administrator-type person who was pulling things together, organizing it, and then sending it back out to us for review” APR was made “relatively painless from the point of view of the internal reviewers.” IE professionals assisted by “organizing the meetings, soliciting the original material from the department, facilitating the discussions that we had...helping draft

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our report” which freed reviewers up to “be a little bit more thoughtful or contemplative on a higher level” rather than focusing on the minutia of paperwork.

### Value in the Form of Learning

In addition to discussing the APR process and support provided, another significant theme that emerged during analysis was how participation in the APR process resulted in learning. All participants acknowledged there was value for the departments under review as they were able, according to one participant, “to get objectively appropriate feedback that you can use to make your department better.” The process also resulted in benefits to those serving as IPRs.

“Learning,” as a theme, pertained to developing a deeper understanding of APR, other departments within the institution, and how to discuss or engage in assessment within a participant’s home department. As one participant shared, “It’s always good to have an idea of what these processes are about, otherwise it’s like a black box.” Another respondent confessed they “came in without very much sense of what it is that we were doing or what we were looking for,” but used the opportunity as a learning experience “which is where [they] found the value.” There was a desire for many to “see how it worked. To see the criteria the programs are judged by. To see the kinds of materials that were submitted by the program under review.” Another participant discussed how their participation gave them a better sense of the purpose of APR: “I saw where the weaknesses were, not necessarily just in their program, but in the way they presented their program. And it helped me to think about what it is that program review should be for.” These results support Novodvorsky et al.’s (2015) findings that developing an understanding of the purpose of APR, how it is conducted, and what type of data are utilized are vital to building a positive culture of assessment within an institution.

As suggested by Banta (2014), learning about other departments within the institution was viewed as important to the majority of participants. One participant shared that “being a peer reviewer gave me the opportunity to find out how another department did certain things, like annual reviews, strategic planning, teaching assignments, [and] advising.” Another reviewer, who reported being familiar with the department under review, disclosed that “as we worked through the specific list of things that were covered in the review, there was a lot that I didn’t know...It ended up being worthwhile for that reason.” In addition to giving participants “a decent sense of what unique issues other departments are dealing with” and those issues that many departments share, the review process also “gives you insight into the bigger picture” of an institution.

I just think the more you learn about a university the better, especially in these days when you know collaboration and cross-disciplinary initiatives and interdisciplinary initiatives are being stressed by the university it is helpful to have a wider knowledge of the university and not to be in your silo, to appreciate and understand what people are doing.

This “opportunity to learn about operations and aspirations of another department” is useful because “you’re going back to your home program with kind of a new perspective.”

Reviewers also described the manner in which they used their participation in APR as a way to view, discuss, or engage in assessment in their home departments. Ketunnen (2010) asserts that faculty involved in improvement-focused APR will not only produce more meaningful outcomes during the process, but disseminate best practices and contribute to the overall culture of assessment within an institution. One participant stated, “I think when you do it for other departments, it helps you to think about your own program and your own department.” Participants mentioned having “a better sense of what to expect,” developing “sort of a feel from the other side” of the process, and the ability to “contextualize the way my own program looks at itself.” One respondent discussed how through working on the peer review team they were “in a pretty good position to have a template that I can follow of putting together the documents that a review team wants to work with.” Serving on

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the review team provided some faculty members with an opportunity to discuss different approaches to “a problem [their] own program faces” and then share that with leadership in their home departments.

The [program being reviewed] was so special because it did have components from all these other different departments. That was kind of interesting to me, and again something that was valuable because of my experience in administering a graduate program that also brings in diverse faculty from many disciplines.

Gentemann et al. (1994) suggested that participation in a well-supported APR may increase the likelihood that departments will seek out the support and expertise of assessment professionals. One participant commented that they “walked away from [the APR] wishing that [their] own department would use [IE professionals, resources, etc.] more effectively... there’s a tremendous value there.”

### Minor Themes

Two additional themes that emerged during analysis, albeit to a lesser extent, were cross-disciplinary interactions and service to others. Eight respondents mentioned cross-disciplinary interactions as a valuable part of their experience. When discussing potential benefits of participation in APR, Banta (2014) identified cross-disciplinary interactions as a way to promote professional development. One respondent reported “every time I do anything that’s cross-disciplinary, cross-college, cross-university – I get so much out of it.” While many people “enjoy meeting colleagues” they don’t already know, there is often added value in those interactions. “You learn where the resources are and who is doing what.” Another faculty member shared how they “got to know a completely different world” and because of that “reached out to one of the other members of our committee as a potential committee member for one of my students.”

**Serving on the review team provided some faculty members with an opportunity to discuss different approaches to “a problem [their] own program faces” and then share that with leadership in their home departments.**

While acknowledging their participation in APR would not likely be valued for promotion and tenure, four participants either identified themselves as “service-oriented” or described their involvement in APR as university service. One participant, a full professor, said, “I still try and contribute even though I’m never going to be promoted again.” Another participant felt that service did not need to be recognized in order to be valuable; rather the value came from assisting others in your institution:

To the extent that we can do that with and for each other within the university, I think that’s an important thing to do and I’m somebody who believes in putting your money where your mouth is...If I’m going to say that something is important, then I should be involved in it.

### Recruitment, Recommendations to Others, and Return Service

Recruitment for service activities in higher education can often be difficult given that some “faculty are very hesitant to get involved in things that don’t count for promotion and tenure.” Three ideas dominated participant suggestions for increasing recruitment of IPRs: (1) recruitment by senior administrators, (2) personal requests, and (3) clarity about the process. Some faculty felt calling on deans and department heads to nominate potential reviewers for the peer reviewer pool was key “because they should know what their faculty are doing. They should know what the faculty course load is...or if they have a little bit more time that semester than they normally do.” Many participants mentioned their appreciation for receiving personal requests from IE staff, as “an invitation is always more appealing, it’s easy to ignore something that is generic. It’s harder to ignore an invitation.”

Clarity about the process was the primary suggestion for improving recruitment of peer reviewers. Participants felt APR was important and that IE staff should “help the whole campus know what you’re doing...that the university cares about assessment.” Other suggestions include “explaining what [APR] is” and that “it’s not painful, it’s not punitive. We’re trying to figure out a way to help you make your program better and to help emphasize all the great things you’re already doing.” This coincides with communicating the level of

structured support and continuous involvement of IE staff. In keeping with Ndoye and Parker (2010), APR must aim to highlight student learning and positive programmatic changes in order to develop faculty commitment to assessment and the promotion of a positive culture of assessment.

The majority (93%) of participants indicated they would be willing to serve on a peer review team in the future. However, one faculty member within the 93% did indicate they would only participate again if directly requested by a department under review. Trullen and Rodriguez (2013) and Rodgers et al. (2013) found participation in a meaningful and improvement-driven assessment activity increased the likelihood that those faculty members would acknowledge the value of and engage in other assessment practices in the future. When asked to expand on their willingness to participate as an IPR again, many commented on how much they enjoyed service opportunities that exposed them to different parts of the university. Although a few mentioned the monetary compensation, for many their willingness to participate was rooted in the value they placed on assessment generally and the APR process specifically, as well as a desire to “do something that can make for a positive outcome.”

**[P]articipants voiced concerns about the extent to which APR reports are reviewed by the respective college dean and the extent to which suggestions provided by the APR internal peer review team are discussed and/or implemented.**

### **Challenges Experienced During the Review Process**

Faculty members who served as IPRs offered feedback about challenges they faced. Five participants voiced a concern that the value placed on assessment by the department and college administrators should be more manifest in the process. One of these participants shared, “I think a lot of assessments just die on the vine.” These participants voiced concerns about the extent to which APR reports are reviewed by the respective college dean and the extent to which suggestions provided by the APR internal peer review team are discussed and/or implemented.

The majority of participants reported challenges related to the department being reviewed. There were several comments about the development of the SSR. Reviewers wanted to see more transparency in how departments created this document, such as who was involved in its development and what methods of data collection were used to inform its content. One faculty member asserted it is “too easy for the department head to paint a very different picture than as experienced by everyone else in the department.” A second participant reiterated that “if problems exist in the department and if you can’t uncover them, then you can’t fix them.” Many commented on the desire to talk to department members beyond the department chair. As one respondent commented, APR is “a community activity. It’s not the ideas and visions of a single person, but is part of the larger vision” and there needs to be “community ownership” of not just the SSR, but of the entire process and its outcomes.

Some IPRs felt at loose ends about what happened after their role in the process ended. One participant asked, “What did my time and effort really mean?” These participants wanted to know more about the outcomes of the review or at least receive some type of assurance that the department gained something from the APR process. “There’s an emptiness of not knowing...did something wonderful happen because of some suggestions that were made or was it all ignored?” While a department’s confidentiality must be kept intact, Linkon (2005) does warn how a perception of there being little return on investment can result in a resistance to assessment activities.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study explored the experiences of faculty members who participated as IPRs for academic programs outside of their home department. Study findings suggest the following four elements are important in implementing a meaningful APR process: (1) the process should be well-structured, (2) the process should be improvement-focused, (3) peer review teams should incorporate diverse perspectives, and (4) peer review teams should receive appropriate support from administrative staff. In this study, with IE professionals providing significant support throughout the APR process, IPRs gained multiple benefits.

They (1) learned more about the APR process, (2) learned more about the work of other departments on campus, and (3) learned how to more effectively discuss and engage in assessment within their home departments. The additional themes of cross-disciplinary interactions and service to others were also considered. The results of this study also included insights about participation and recruitment. Challenges discussed by participants will contribute to the ongoing improvement of Virginia Tech's APR process.

There are always considerations when selecting internal peer reviewers vs. external peer reviewers. External reviewers can offer discipline-specific knowledge and insights that may promote innovation, while IPRs hold institutional knowledge that can help inform the feasibility of certain recommendations. The utilization of IPRs has streamlined the APR process at Virginia Tech in comparison to a traditional two- or three-day site visit conducted by a team of external peer reviewers comprised of individuals from multiple institutions. Since utilizing IPRs is considerably less expensive than utilizing external peer reviewers, this could be an effective strategy for APR in an era of declining budgets for higher education. The findings from this study suggest that engaging faculty as IPRs is not only a viable alternative to utilizing external peer reviewers for APR, but one that can be meaningful for the faculty who participate.

This research proposes that engaging faculty as IPRs in the APR process is one strategy for improving faculty perceptions of and participation in assessment activities, which in turn may contribute to a deeper understanding of the review process, influence changes within reviewers' home programs, and increase the dissemination of best practices for assessment. All of these factors contribute to building a positive culture of assessment within an institution of higher education. It is our hope that future research will more closely examine the impact that IPR participation in APR has on perceptions of and attitudes toward assessment practices.

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## Appendix A

### APR Study: Interview Guide

1. What previous experience do you have serving as an internal peer reviewer for academic program review or another peer review process? An external peer reviewer (e.g., serving on a discipline-specific accreditation review team)?
2. Please tell me about your experience as a peer reviewer for Virginia Tech's Academic Program Review process.
  - What made you decide to participate?
  - What was the most valuable aspect of participating?
  - Least valuable aspect?
3. What do you feel are the pros and cons of internal peer review vs. external peer review?
4. How might the internal peer review process be improved?
  - More meaningful for internal peer reviewers?
  - More meaningful for departments being reviewed?
  - Ideal composition of internal review teams (e.g., number of reviewers, disciplines, etc.)
  - How should internal peer reviewers be matched with departments?
  - Suggestions for recruiting faculty members to serve as internal peer reviewers (e.g., incentives)?
5. Would you serve as an internal peer reviewer again? Why or why not?
6. Would you recommend that other faculty members at Virginia Tech serve as internal reviewers? Why or why not?
7. What else do you feel might be important for us to know about the peer review process or your experience as a peer reviewer?

## Appendix B

### APR Demographic Questionnaire

Participant name:

Preferred pseudonym:

Primary academic department/school:

Primary academic discipline:

Faculty rank:

Number of years you have worked in higher education:

Gender:

Race/ethnicity:

After the interview, the audio recordings will be used to create a detailed transcript of the interview. Once the transcript is complete, you will be contacted and invited to read the transcript and make comments. You will also be invited to review a draft of the research findings.

Preferred email address: