Reviewing the Departmental Review

By Richard L. Fleming

Departmental reviews provide an opportunity to determine where we are, where we want to go and how we want to get there. There is great latitude in developing and carrying out such a review based on needs and opportunities. U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperative State Research Service guidelines are entitled "Special Review" because the initiating unit can tailor the review to special needs. It is important to take advantage of this flexibility to tailor the review to the department needs.

A review team expects a department to provide the focus. This means that the department should be pro-active in such determination, with emphasis on the future, rather than the past. The focus is determined by objectives, as well as specific questions to be addressed.

An Information Exchange

The review can be termed an information exchange. This involves exchange of information among department members as well as review team members. Department members can share ideas on various activities before, during and following the review. Members of the review team can provide ideas, feedback and opinions based on their experiences. Therefore, it is essential that review team members have expertise in various areas of department activity. The review might be compared to a workshop which provides for exchange of information through large and small groups as well as individual discussions. A free and open two-way exchange is essential to the success of a review. Real progress can be achieved in this type of atmosphere.

All department members have ideas and expertise which can relate to various areas of activity. In addition, information can be gathered, through studies and other means, to bring various topics into sharp focus. The review team can be a sounding board for addressing various needs and opportunities.

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There are many ways to enhance exchange of information. One is a report of basic data. Another is to determine how various activities meet the role and mission of the unit. Such studies can indicate program impact as well as future directions. The most meaningful and productive method of information exchange takes place between people—formal and informal discussions between members of a review team and the "department" may lead to ideas which can help the department achieve its goals.

Preparing for the Review

To achieve maximum benefit from a review, identification of needs and opportunities is essential. The outcome of these discussions become the basis for establishing review objectives. If this is not done, the review may be of little value as far as serving the needs of the department. In the final analysis, both members of the department and of the review team devote considerable time and effort to the process. Thus, the value of the review must be determined by what happens in terms of achieving goals during the period ahead.

In addition to overall review objectives, the department should provide some key questions. Some may relate to the department as a whole, while others may key on specific activity areas. If these questions are not shared with the review team, they may not be considered during the review. Other questions may arise, but the department should provide a list of key questions for the team to consider during the review.

Once objectives and key questions are determined, steps should be taken to provide the necessary information. Some of this information will be readily available. In other instances, it may be necessary to search out the needed information. Information must address objectives and key questions as well as background on the department.

After different types of needed information are identified, then it must be determined who can provide the information—members of the department, other individuals in the institution and external individuals, as well as data bases and other sources. The point is that information sources must be matched with the needs.

When sources have been determined, it then becomes necessary to identify who will obtain the information. Who will design a questionnaire? Who will be contacted in a study? Who will carry out and summarize the study?

Finally, the method of organizing the information must be determined. While review guidelines often relate to teaching, research and extension, most reviews focus on areas of activity. Therefore, it makes sense to arrange information by activity areas. Then the activities can be related to teaching, research or extension programs.

Sharing Information

How information is shared in preparation for a conduct of the review is critical. Channels of communication must be open throughout the process. This includes discussions for developing objectives, key questions, background information and actual conduct of the review. The objectives, key questions and background information must be transmitted well in advance to the review team. This provides time for members to review the materials and become acquainted with the department. If materials are not provided at least a month in advance, the team will not be in the best position to be well prepared.

Department members should suggest a review format which provides ample opportunities for discussion and interaction. Those discussions represent the essence of the review. It is then that everyone involved can explore ideas and possible directions. Both members of the department and of the team should make every effort to create an atmosphere for idea exchange with the overall goal of meeting objectives of the review. Department members should feel free to attend all discussions with the review team in that such discussions enhance departmental understanding. In the final analysis, the review is carried out to serve the needs of the department, so members of the department and team share equal responsibility for the review's success.