

Title: Telling Your Organization's Data Story through Peer Review: A Guide to Conducting an Independent Review of Evaluation Findings

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A. Why would an organization choose an independent review?

The peer review that typically occurs when a scholar submits a manuscript to a journal is a vital component in assessing research quality and relevance. However, when it comes to evaluation, journal peer review may not meet an organization's goals or timeline. Furthermore, the process is not necessarily designed to assess findings in context of the entire body of data on a particular intervention. An alternative approach—one that may better fit the internal evaluation goals and timeline of many programs and organizations—is an independent expert review of evaluation findings.

Case Study: The Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) chose to conduct an independent review because it had a story to tell about the overall impact of their courses in effective teaching from across ten evaluations of impact and wanted external input on the value of the papers as a unified body of work.

B. What are the benefits to the organization?

An independent expert review of evaluation findings allows for an intentionally selected panel of individuals to offer the critical oversight of peer review to a body of evaluation work while also contributing to the program's overall conclusions by offering fresh insights on the program's impact.

Case Study: The review process and summary document has offered ACUE a new way to communicate about their results. In particular, this independent panel of experts provided commentary on the methodology and the meaning of the results in context of the field (faculty development).

C. What are the benefits to reviewers?

Independent reviews benefit the participants by bringing together a group of individuals all working within a field to review new programs, discuss evidence of impact with fellow experts, and offer judgements for broader consumption. Independent reviewers often forge valuable professional connections.

Case Study: ACUE invited experts in higher education, research, and faculty development to review their evaluations and comment on the methodologies, conclusions, and areas for future work.

D. What are the challenges inherent in this process?

The work of preparation is primarily logistical in nature. Identifying appropriate experts, contacting them and securing their participation, and coordinating logistics for an in-person and collaborative working time are the most important steps of preparation.

Case Study: Over a period of several months in spring 2019, ACUE invited and confirmed experts, prepared electronic portfolios of all relevant materials, and convened the panel of four experts in-person in New York City for a period of two days.

E. Why is peer review important for evaluation studies?

Evaluations can generally be divided into those conducted internally versus those conducted by an independent external evaluator, with an external evaluator typically perceived as objective and unbiased. The National Science Foundation suggests that when an internal evaluation is the only option, “one compromise...is to conduct an internal evaluation and then hire an outside agent to both review the design and assess the validity of the findings and conclusions” (Frechtling, Frierson, Hood, Hughes, & Katzenmeyer, 2002, p.11). While many program evaluations are published and shared publicly, the avenues of publication less frequently require peer review. The external program evaluator is therefore the most common final authority on conclusions.

Originally designed to assist editors in curating manuscripts for publication, the process of peer review has been a sustaining cornerstone of academic research. Arguably the primary benefit of peer review is that it opens up a researcher’s work to scrutiny by other authorities in the field, thereby promoting authentic, high quality work that is conducted with integrity (Fitzpatrick, 2010).

Case Study: The independent review for ACUE was used to additionally communicate the impact of ACUE’s courses as summarized by independent voices. The general approach of ACUE to its work in program evaluation, as well as the findings today, were jointly evaluated.

F. How can this process help tell a data story?

An external voice can help highlight important findings, identify themes that cut across evaluation studies, and offer input on future direction the organization might take. This wholistic approach can help guide the organization’s overall journey on telling its data story.

Case Study: ACUE used the independent review to provide a coherent narrative across all 10 studies it had conducted up to that point. The review process added an important component to the overall story of impact because it spoke to the collection of work as a whole and not just the merits of an individual evaluation.

Frechtling, J.A., Frierson, H.T., Hood, S., Hughes, G.B., & Katzenmeyer, C.G. (2002). *The 2002 user-friendly handbook for project evaluation*. Alexandria, VA: National Science Foundation.

Fitzpatrick, K. (2010). Peer-to-peer review and the future of scholarly authority. *Social Epistemology*, 24(3), 161–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2010.498929>