

Session E-1: Best Practices in Assembling Peer Review Submissions

Panelists: Heather Peltier, John Olson, Tracey Hembry, Jeffrey Hauger

Moderator: Elizabeth Witt, U.S. Department of Education, Office of State Support

Peer reviewers discussed what makes for an effective peer review submission of evidence. They offered general observations on evidence consolidation and index development to make the review of evidence straightforward and clear. This session addressed all critical elements.

Ms. Witt opened the session and introduced the panelists. She stated that she saw this as a two-part way to look peer review: **(1) What should states consider; and (2) What do peer reviewers wish states had done differently?**

Ms. Peltier said to start the process early, as early as the test design and development stage. That lays the groundwork for successful testing. Compiling evidence as you go is much easier than trying to do it all at once. Assemble your team in the areas of measurement, technology, content, assessment, communications, and vendors. Make sure peer review is considered as the planning evolves. Peers may have differences, but the main concern should be making sure the submission is clear and organized. Naming conventions are important. Linking to a website is best avoided because links may change. Also, don't link to a home page and expect the peer reviewer to find the information. Instead, consider using screen captures. Page numbers are very important. Any RFP from a new vendor should include these requirements.

What did you learn from being a peer reviewer about how you would put together a submission?

For states that have not done a peer review, Mr. Jeffrey Hauger highly recommended that they do one. Test directors typically have only one to three years of experience, so it's important to reach out to other states and build a network. He learned this from the consortia. Conversely, he said the assessment world seemed to be "going tribal." The expectation was that the reviewers and reviewees know exactly what the Guide says. States could do better at using the comment section to help peer reviewers understand how they met the requirements. The validity aspect of the peer review process can be built into the RFP, although some are in mid-contract. If the state describes the principle, the evidence becomes more contextual. He said to be proactive in the narrative, in part by explaining any weaknesses and how your state intends to address them.

With regard to explaining your evidence, how much explanation are reviewers looking for?

Ms. Tracey Hembry said it depends. The narrative can be a great tool, but there are some critical elements where answers must be supplied. Others relate to alignment and require explanation. If you don't explain a weakness, you are implying that you think your evidence is fine the way it is. She recommended explaining "Here's what we learned, and here's what we intend to do going forward. We wanted to do it the right way, but here's why we couldn't. This is what we did instead." She said not to restate what's in the manual.

Mr. John Olson said advising on the front end is easiest. Often, peer review-related issues come up at TAC meetings. Best practices come from treating this as a planning event and using a dissertation approach: (1) As a team, outline what to do and what you need to go through for the critical elements. (2) In the literature review, include all your existing documents and identify any missing ones. (3) Methodology requires getting documents and building an electronic file. Get documents from your vendor. If some evidence doesn't exist, vendors may be able to help, especially for validity evidence (3.1-3.4), where research may be involved. (4) Look at other things, such as findings or data that need to be analyzed. Remember that data submitted should be understandable to the reviewer. (5) Follow the peer review guide when presenting summaries or conclusions. Use the index template that's part of the

system, and add annotations. Enter all of this information into the federal secure site (MAX.gov). The more you organize ahead of time, the more straightforward the data will flow into MAX.

Ms. Witt said states will get a MAX password, and they should check it immediately. Everyone should have the same due date, but if everyone submits at once, the system will have problem, so start early.

Is it important to demonstrate how your evidence proves what you did and how you interpreted it?

Mr. Hauger said to focus on the left-hand column with examples. Ms. Hembry added that sometimes a state may “hit hard” on a particular critical element but forget to address others. It’s important to read thoroughly and submit evidence for all subparts. Mr. Olson said every effort should be made to avoid missing a critical element. Conversely, too much information (fluff) wastes reviewers’ time. Another person in the office should read your submission and look for extraneous material. Mr. Hauger to avoid “going down rabbit holes” and not focusing on the relevant content (e.g., submit one technical manual, not 10). Highlight the relevant parts. Use a checklist for the vendor to be sure the technical manual addresses everything needed for the peer review. Mr. Hembry added that tone can be an issue. The panel wants the state to be successful. Sometimes they provide feedback if, for example, one critical element is addressed under another critical element. Ms. Witt said the peer reviewer may not be able to find something because you submitted too much information and they can’t find the place where you met the critical element. If you submit a manual, refer reviewers to the relevant page number(s) in the manual.

Many peer reviews are re-reviews and contain a much smaller subset of documents. How much context do you need?

Mr. Hauger said that for re-reviews, states should focus primarily on the notes from the previous review and may not need to provide extensive background information. Ms. Witt commented that it could be helpful to provide some context in case there’s a new peer reviewer. Ms. Hembry’s state was able to reconvene the same panel, although that’s not always possible. Mr. Olson reviewed two states the previous year, including thousands of pages and 300 or more documents. For re-reviews, he focuses on the new evidence, i.e., does the evidence now satisfy what was missing that led to the re-review?

What can you say to states to show that they understand the critical elements?

Mr. Hauger said a successful review is when the state shows that it is proactive—for example, by demonstrating that evidence was useful in a particular way and that the state effectively used the results. He suggested reaching out to other states and replicating what they did if it applies to your state. Ms. Hembry addressed training. Sometimes, states describe training events and report that they happened on particular dates but provide no evidence that anyone attended. He suggested including information about how many people in the state need to be trained and how many attended. Mr. Olson said understanding what the critical element requires is important, but you have to look at your evidence to be sure it addresses the requirement. Many things have changed in recent years. Monitoring is an area that is frequently found lacking. You need evidence that sufficiently shows you’re meeting that requirement. Look at the evidence cited in the peer review guide. Alignment used to be a requirement that was frequently not met, but states have improved in this area. Validity is an ongoing issue. States always need more evidence. Get what you can, work with your vendor, make a multiyear plan, and show progress toward a goal. Critical element 1.5 is new. When talking about meaningful collaboration/consultation, the definition of “meaningful” may be interpreted in a variety of ways. The amount of evidence needed and whether it is sufficient remains to be determined. Ms. Witt suggested talking to people in the agencies are responsible for submitting plans.

Questions and Comments

- A participant asked, of the 300 peer review documents that were submitted to Mr. Olson, how much was considered “fluff?” Mr. Olson noted that it’s not always apparent what information is essential versus nonessential. Mr. Hauger said the information usually resides in logical places. The assessment office needs to know where they should focus—and not be referred to the whole document.
- Mr. Hauger noted that states are good about saying “general assessment.” He likes to go through each assessment individually, rather than looking at all the critical elements at one time. Programs differ, and accordingly, he looks for different things.
- Another participant asked about “meaningful consultation” and the ELP assessment. They need material for stakeholders. A peer reviewer said certain items are designated to be reviewed by staff, so ED has some discretion. ED will have to consider questions about stakeholders. There’s a timeline in place for this. The ELP standard requirement (2011) does not apply. It’s new, so the response to it applies only to the standards adopted since then. The requirement relates to the adoption of content or ELP standards, not the alternative assessment, which is aligned with the academic standard. Achievement level is much less complex. But no requirements should be adopted by the state. Some states create an index for each test. Reviewers like to go through this information in a linear manner.
- Ms. Witt summarized by saying that what counts is organization, page numbers, labeling, and explanation, but not too much explanation. She strongly suggested that a disinterested person review the submission to see if it makes sense and to confirm that essential information can be found. A peer reviewer said that for states that are part of a consortium, they can provide their part and say, “See consortium submission.” When evidence is repeated, it gets confusing and annoying to reviewers. Ms. Witt concluded that rule number 1 is “Don’t annoy the reviewer.”