# GUIDELINES FOR

# NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

# LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL (PROGRAM) REVIEWS

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## *I . INTRODUCTION*

These guidelines are to facilitate the systematic and efficient conduct of institutional reviews.

The primary goal for the NIFA institutional review program is to assist Land-Grant University (LGU) partners and other cooperating institutions in meeting their goals and enhancing their future. The knowledge gained by NIFA through review activities is valuable to the Agency in several avenues, including to: gain a broader perspective for activities supported through formula and competitive grants; enhance the Agency's knowledge; and create an enhanced understanding of the partners and, thereby, advance the partnership.

## *II. PRIOR TO ON-SITE REVIEW*

### A. NATURE OF A REVIEW

The institution requesting a review identifies the purpose, objectives and scope for a review at the time of the request. Generally, reviews are forward looking in nature and are based on a planning document developed by the reviewed entity which projects future needs and directions for some definitive time frame, for example five years.

### B. POTENTIAL SCOPE OF REVIEWS

The scope of a review may range from the review of existing organized administrative units (for example, departments) to programmatic reviews. The latter are most likely to be multidisciplinary and cut across existing administrative units. Programmatic reviews may involve the review of existing programs or institutes or it may, for example, involve exploring the potential or desirability of creating a program or institute focused on an area (for example, water quality).

### C. SCHEDULING A REVIEW

NIFA notifies institutional administrators annually about the opportunity to utilize the review service provided by the Agency. Institutional requests for NIFA facilitated reviews are submitted to the Director of the NIFA Planning, Accountability, and Reporting (PAR) staff and are accepted at any time during the year. LGU administrators are expected to share the information on the review service offered by NIFA with appropriate entities at their respective institutions.

A four to six month lead time is needed to schedule and conduct a review in order to provide ample time: 1) to identify and contact review team members for their commitment; 2) for the institution to conduct strategic planning and/or a self analysis, and 3) to prepare base documents to facilitate the review. Available funding and NIFA staff member time may, in part, determine availability of the service.

Depending on the size and complexity of the review, three to five days should be scheduled for the on-site activity. This allows time for presentations, interviews, scheduled specific visits, work during which the review team is sequestered, drafting the written report, and preparing and presenting the oral exit reports to administrators and faculty. The institution should make all on-site arrangements including identification of team lodging and rooms for presentation and sequestered team meetings.

## D. IDENTIFYING A REVIEW TEAM

NIFA may have two distinct and different roles as: 1) the leader of the review or 2) a review team member. The Agency gives both roles the same programmatic priority commitment. This document is developed primarily for use where a NIFA person serves as the team leader.

**NIFA Staff Person Is The Review Leader**
When a NIFA staff person is the review leader**,** a senior staff member, usually a National Program Leader (NPL), is named as the team leader, although other arrangements may be negotiated in advance. A NIFA Assistant Director will confer with institutional administration on the naming of a team leader. Identification of a review team is the joint responsibility of the institution's designated representative and the NIFA review team leader. Attention should be given to identifying a team that has the breadth and the experience to address the various aspects of the program and the goals and objectives identified for the review. The NIFA team leader will confer with the designated institutional representative in identifying a review team. The institution takes the lead and presents recommendations for the team, consults with NIFA on proposed membership, and arrives at a mutually agreed team. It may be desirable for the institution to name an institutional representative to the team. The purpose would be to provide a contact for information during the review team deliberations. This individual should have general knowledge of the university and the entity being reviewed but not be a participant in the entity being reviewed.

Generally NIFA will contact the suggested review team members. Team identification should occur within a month after scheduling a review. Contacting potential review team members very early in the process of developing a review is critical in order to enhance potential of obtaining the services of selected individuals.

*Review funding:* When a NIFA employee is the team leader, the Agency will pay for the travel and per diem expenses of the NIFA individual plus the travel and per diem expenses of two additional team members (for a team of five or more).

**NIFA Staff Person Is A Review Team Member**
When a NIFA staff person is a review team member (but not the review team leader)**,** a senior staff member, usually an NPL is named as a member of a team, although other arrangements may be negotiated in advance. A NIFA Assistant Director will confer with institutional administration on the naming of a team member.

This document is developed primarily for use where a NIFA person serves as the team leader; it is expected that, as a team member, the NIFA person will follow the guidance provided for the team as appropriate.

*Review funding:* When NIFA serves as a review team member but is not in a lead role, the Agency will pay for only the Agency participant.

## E. REVIEW PREPARATION

Reviews are most helpful if they are developed in conjunction with the strategic planning process of the institution and the entity to be reviewed. Generally, reviews are conducted to assist entities as they plan for the future and adjust to changes occurring locally, regionally or nationally as compared with a review of the past work. Understanding the impact of previous research and educational programs is important as the foundation which may form the basis for future focus.

It is expected that entities to be reviewed will prepare a self-study, planning document(s) and have the document available to the review team members at least *three weeks prior to the*

*review*. The purpose of the document is to acquaint the team with the programs, personnel, accomplishments, future plans, and the areas on which to focus the review. It is essential that team members have the document three weeks in advance of the review to allow for adequate time to study these materials in prior preparation for the on-site review.

The team leader should consult previous review report(s) for the entity involved in the review. This can help the review team put current plans into context through some understanding of how the entity has responded to previous recommendations.

## *III. THE ON-SITE REVIEW*

### A. ELEMENTS OF THE REVIEW SCHEDULE

1. **Formal Presentations** with up to 50% allocated to post-presentation dialogue. It is important that each presentation allow adequate time for dialogue.

2. **Dialogue** between the review team and individuals or groups from the reviewed entity. Also, based on the goals and objectives of a review, it would be relevant to have an opportunity for dialogue with, for example, student groups, classified and professional staff, stakeholders, collaborators, and administrators.

3. T**ime for sequestered review team meetings**. Critical times include: a) a two to three hour time prior to the start of the review, usually the evening preceding the review; b) during the review presentation time, for example after major components of the review it may be important the review team to be sequestered for a few minutes to focus on a time critical matter; c) each evening, the review team should be sequestered to discuss what was heard and develop draft points for the oral and written reports, and d) three to five hours after review presentations to draft a written report and to prepare an oral report for previously agreed upon audiences.

4. **Opening and closing sessions** with the appropriate institutional administrators (e.g., College/Station Administration, Department Head/Chair, leader of the entity). The identification of an appropriate group of administrators is the responsibility of the institution. The major objective of an opening meeting with the administrators is to review objectives and clarify expectations. Administrators should be as specific as possible in identifying issues they consider of highest priority for the review team to address. Sensitive issues that may affect the review should be shared with the review team during this opening session. Institutional administrators should provide a written statement of objectives and expectations at the time the review is scheduled. Additional details may be provided at the initial meeting.

### B. CONDUCTING THE REVIEW

The development of a clear statement of purpose and objectives for the review is key to a successful review. This should be done early in the process, i.e., at the time of or shortly after requesting a review. The purpose and objectives for the review should guide the preparation and planning process by the entity being reviewed and assist in selecting a review team. The objectives are important for the review team in identifying an organizing theme and division of labor.

In presentations and sessions during the review, institutions are encouraged to focus on broad program areas rather than on individual/specific projects. The amount of time needed to view facilities and equipment varies, depending on the objectives of the review. Generally,

a minimal amount of time should be spent on viewing facilities and equipment unless they are critical to implementation of the broader plan.

Review team members, faculty and administrators share responsibility for the review's success. It is most important that team members elicit additional information that will be essential in the team's understanding and analyses. Indeed, soliciting additional information not included in the review document is one of the most crucial functions of the review team at the on-site meeting. In carrying out their responsibility, team members often need to ask pointed questions. This must be done in a tactful manner and be accepted as a necessary and useful part of the review process. A friendly and helpful approach by the team members will contribute to a positive atmosphere for information exchange that is essential to the review process.

The role or the review team is to evaluate, analyze and, through constructive critique, make recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of programs and plans. The review team should not play an advocacy role with reference to resources or staffing but rather focus on identifying gaps in expertise/areas of competency required to address the entities' programmatic goals and objectives. Recommendations should be realistic yet innovative in relation to exigencies and future potential resources.

Review team members should be alert to the possibility that long-time colleagues or friends may ask them to promote special interests. Review teams should avoid an advocacy role for special interests or programs. During the review, the university should not ask nor should team members agree to participate in special seminars or social events other than those scheduled for the entire review team.

## C. REVIEW TEAM ACTIVITY

The team leader will designate a time for an on-site organizational meeting. This is usually the evening before the start of the review. Team members should schedule their travel accordingly. The team leader should establish the tone, set expectations and identify processes that will be used during the review and report preparation. Team members are encouraged to bring their own laptop computer and a flash drive to the review. It may be desirable to request that the university provide an LCD projector and a printer. Secretarial assistance is occasionally sought by the review team.

At the organizational meeting, the team discusses the agenda and plans the review, checks the review documents, determines if additional information is needed (some of this may be communicated prior to arrival at the site review via teleconference call), clarifies issues, and identifies questions that should be raised with the unit administrator, faculty and institutional administrators.

Also the organizational meeting is the time to develop an initial conceptual framework for the report. There are numerous potential methods to organize a report (for example, by the objectives given for the review, by functional lines of research, extension and teaching, or by related groups of programmatic and administrative/managerial issues, or by a combination thereof). Framing a report is based on developing consensus and, therefore, is a continuously evolving scenario that will likely be modified and tailored as the review presentations and dialogue progress. Although it's generally useful to have a conceptual framework at the start, the team should not hesitate to change the framework if a more logical approach emerges as the review progresses. Being flexible is the key to developing a final report.

Generally, each member of the team will have responsibility for giving special attention to specific areas/issues. Individuals may also be assigned a responsibility to lead the team's

analysis of a section within the review and in preparing that component of the write-up for the final report. These responsibilities are coordinated through the NIFA team leader.

The team discusses and concurs on recommendations and then a team member (based on the expertise he/she contributes to the team) is assigned to provide details within specific recommendations. Writing assignments are usually finalized during and at the conclusion of the review to take advantage of individual team member's expertise.

The team must have time sequestered for work sessions to plan, discuss, digest and analyze the information it has received to build consensus on findings, identify conclusions and formulate recommendations. It is suggested that each evening be set aside for closed sessions, as well as brief times at the end of major components of the review. Open give-and-take by all team members during the deliberations is essential to come to a consensus. Drafts should be consensus statements incorporating the assessments, suggestions, and recommendations of the entire team. Each team member should receive a draft copy of each section for review and additional input toward developing a team consensus. If consensus cannot be reached on significant points, a minority view may be identified but should be avoided if at all possible.

Information from drafts is presented orally to the administrators and faculty at the respective closing sessions. Two models for reporting orally may be utilized. First, a single individual, generally the team leader, presents the final report, with additions, as necessary and appropriate, by other team members. Second, individual team members present information based on their area of expertise.

A copy of the draft summary recommendations should be given to the relevant university administrator at the conclusion of the review. This should be given with the caveat that minor, but not substantive changes may follow in the final written report submitted to the relevant LGU administrator.

The review team should leave the review site with a draft report in hand. The team leader should identify deadlines for follow up writing, editing and reviewing assignments.

### D. CLOSING SESSION(S)

Generally, oral reporting sessions involving appropriate institutional administrators and the members of the entity being reviewed are held on the last day of the review. Sessions may vary by institution and these are scheduled at the discretion of the institution. The verbal report should be succinct and take approximately half the time allocated for the session in order to allow time for questions. The team should agree upon the model to be used for the oral reporting sessions. It is critical that the content of the verbal report be consistent to all the groups.

## *IV. POST REVIEW*

### A. COMPLETE FINAL REPORT

The final report is the responsibility of the team leader and, as such, the individual should solicit edits, evaluate them and make the final decision on the content of the report.

A review report should be concise and focused. Usually, the report should not exceed 20 pages, double spaced. A one page executive summary, presenting the primary points of the assessment/recommendations, should be included. References to specific individuals should

not be in the report. Also, thanks to the institution for arrangements, etc., should be separated from the report (for example, in a cover letter).

Considerable variation is possible in style and format of the final report. A report is more likely to be read and used if it is brief and focused on the points identified in the purpose and objectives for the review. One of the best ways to present the findings of a review is by structuring the final report around a set of recommendations. Additionally, uniqueness and significant areas of strength might be identified. Review teams are not expected to offer comments on every subgroup or every program component. The final report should address the original review objectives.

A generalized report outline:

1. Title of review. Date of review. List of review team members.

2. Purpose and objectives of the review.

3. One page executive summary.

4. State the recommendation(s) (bold type). Provide a basis for recommendation(s) [Situation/problem/issue; analysis (strengths/weaknesses); and logic for the recommendation(s)]. Recommendations must be clearly stated and useful in an action mode.

5. Appendix: Review schedule.

A final report should be submitted to the responsible institutional administrator no more than 45 calendar days post-review. The report should be sent only to the relevant institutional administrator. It is the responsibility of the administrator to distribute the report according to institutional policies. The report is a confidential document commissioned by the institution and team members may not share the document with colleagues without the permission of the institutional administrator.

**B. FOLLOW UP**

Usually institutions will take some action(s) based on the review team document and recommendations. It would be most useful for NIFA to receive feedback in 12 months post-review with a commentary on the institutions post review activity and recommendations on the review process and activity. A request for feedback should be directed to the relevant institutional administrator. This purpose for a follow up is to assist the Agency as it continues to offer and enhance the review service and advocate for the institutional partners.