

that department chairs can invoke in the future to support hiring requests.

But although the panel thought that external reviews were usually valuable and beneficial for departments, it also had some warnings and advice.

First, chairs need to involve all the faculty and staff in the process. This is partly because otherwise the work of preparing for and handling the review will be overwhelming. It is also because it is essential to get a positive “buy in” to the process from the entire department. Indeed, this buy in should include students as well. One panel member noted that it is inevitable that dissatisfied students will turn up to meet the external review committee and it is important to make sure that the satisfied (we hope!) majority are also represented.

Second, departments need to make sure that the self-study they prepare as part of the review process is thorough and honest. Several panelists who had conducted external reviews reported that their committees had become very hostile to departments when key problems or issues had been ignored in the self-study or when a department makes an argument that doesn't seem consistent with the facts: “The department had a clear agenda that they kept pushing and that we did not buy. So we were hit over the head with an argument we didn't buy and that we didn't see the data and didn't accept. It left us with a very bad taste.”

Third, chairs need to have a clear headed view themselves of where the department stands. How does the dean see the department and the contribution it makes? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

Fourth, it is counterproductive for chairs to try to manipulate what their colleagues say to the external review committee. Panelists told amusing stories of chairs who had made themselves (and their departments) look ridiculous as they tried to coach colleagues for presentations to the committee. However, it is important for the chair to talk with the review committee before its conclusions crystallize into the interim—usually verbal—report the committee makes to the dean or provost before leaving town and writing the official report. External review committees usually size up departments pretty accurately but as in all processes errors can be made or unrepresentative views given too much credence.

The panelists also had some advice for reviewers. One suggestion was not to destroy credibility with the university by making

predictable and unrealistic demands for more resources: “If you write a report that says give them seven new FTEs when the university has told you that there aren't any new resources, you won't have an impact. The senior administrators will not take that advice or the rest of the report seriously.” One panelist thought they had achieved more for a department by writing a report with different sets of recommendations, one assuming no new resources, one assuming modest new resources, and the third assuming significant new resources. This should not stop reviewers from pointing to areas in which the department is weak and thereby laying the groundwork for the department to argue its case for resources—as noted earlier. However, the review committee needs to be careful not to destroy its own credibility.

Another panelists emphasized that an external review is a review, not an evaluation, and in particular not an evaluation of individual faculty.

The most commonly emphasized recommendation to all sides was to keep a positive attitude to the review. People who serve on external review committees are usually intent on helping. Reviewers “tend to be problem solvers.” They are nearly always successful and busy people “who don't have the time or inclination to serve as hit men for administrators.” Approached positively, the external review is an opportunity for useful reflection and laying the groundwork for future growth. ■

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