



ASA Program Reviewers and Consultants

Best Practices for Virtual Program Reviews

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The COVID-19 pandemic, and resulting moves to online instruction, increase the likelihood that future program reviews in sociology will be conducted without campus site visits, as Virtual Program Reviews (VPR). Sociology departments and programs may find that they need to have program reviews conducted remotely. In a recent meeting, the ASA Program Reviewers and Consultants (PRC) discussed the advantages and disadvantages of these types of reviews.

We agree that in-person, on-site reviews are best practice for evaluating a program or department. Virtual reviews should only take place under extraordinary circumstances. It is more challenging to assess certain aspects of a program from a distance, such as physical space or interpersonal interactions. However, there are some benefits to virtual program reviews:

- Reviewers have more control over their time conducting interviews remotely, thus allowing virtual meetings to be spread out over several days or a week.
- Reviewers may be able to interview more faculty (permanent and adjunct), administrators, and students, since individuals and groups do not have to be physically on campus. Faculty on leave may opt to participate, for example.
- VPRs are an alternative to cancelling or postponing institutional or department mandated reviews. This opportunity may be especially important during a period when some campuses are considering, or have already enacted, budget cuts, by still allowing programs to be reviewed and assessed in a timely fashion.

There are some minimum standards that must be maintained in the virtual program review process, namely:

- 1) Video meetings/calls—that is, virtual meetings—are preferable to telephone meetings, since they allow for greater rapport and some nonverbal communication.
- 2) The logistics of scheduling and arranging virtual meetings between reviewers and all participants is the institution's responsibility, once the reviewer provides their availability during the days selected for the review. It is also important to establish a maximum number of days, and perhaps hours, that a reviewer will be available.

The department should have access to an appropriate virtual meeting platform (e.g., Zoom, WebEx) and send the reviewer meeting links well in advance of the scheduled meetings. Reviewers should be timely in providing their schedule information and minimize last minute changes. If a reviewer prefers to handle their own scheduling and arranging of virtual meetings, however, the department should allow them to do so.

- 3) It remains good practice to have meetings with students during a regularly scheduled class time whenever possible.
- 4) All participants should consider the ethical and privacy issues involved in virtual reviews. Only in rare circumstances should interviews be recorded, and that requires consent of all parties in advance. Since some virtual meeting platform accounts are centrally controlled by the institution, and different meeting platforms promise different levels of data privacy, the platform chosen to host the meetings is relevant and should be part of the discussions prior to signing a contract. In addition, it is possible that some members of the department (e.g., administrative staff) lack access to a computer located in a private space, and reviewers should consider how to best provide confidentiality. PRCs are expected to follow the best practices in our PRC manual and adhere to the same high ethical and professional standards in virtual reviews as in in-person reviews.
- 5) Discussion of any adjustment of honoraria should be held at the beginning of negotiations. There does not appear to be any reason to decrease the typical stipends.