



**GUIDELINES FOR THE EXTERNAL REVIEW
OF POLITICAL SCIENCE DEPARTMENTS**

**Revised Edition
2023**

**Committee on Departmental Services
American Political Science Association
1527 New Hampshire Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: 202.483.2512 F: 202.483.2657
www.apsanet.org**

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1. Introduction¹

These *Guidelines for the External Review of Political Science Departments* are provided by the American Political Science Association (APSA) as an introduction to the fundamentals of the external review. External reviews can be self-initiated or initiated by the college or university as part of a formal academic program review, and each review can vary in the procedural specifics. The following pages provide information, ideas, and resources to enable a political science department to plan and conduct a successful external review with the goal of building an even stronger department for the future.

Whether the review is mandated from above or self-initiated, the external review is a means by which a department assesses its current state and effectiveness, and develops goals and strategies to guide its future. Because a department exists in the context of a college or university, it also is an opportunity for the department to consider its mission and how it relates to the larger institution, as well as how it utilizes the resources that the institution provides. Finally, perhaps the most important aspect of the external review is that it provides a unique opportunity to gain the perspective of academics from peer institutions. External reviewers act as outside consultants, and as such, they can offer observations and suggestions, and sometimes can facilitate conversations between departments and those at upper administrative levels.

An essential dimension of the external review is the development of a set of goals and strategies to guide the department for the coming five- to ten-year period. Undertaking an external review helps to ensure that a department is engaged in an inclusive conversation about where it stands, how it relates to the larger institution, what it can learn from the success of departments at similar institutions, and what new goals and strategies should guide its future. A successful external review also produces widely supported specific goals and action items, articulated in ways that help to produce results. In short, although mandated external reviews often generate anxiety (or even dread) due to the amount of work they entail, departments can make the most of their review by approaching them as stock-taking opportunities that lead to tangible and positive outcomes. The guidelines in this handbook offer some suggestions on how to do this, drawing on the experiences of colleagues in departments of all sizes, and in all types of institutions.

2. Timeline for the External Review

A departmental external review generally extends over at least 12 months. There are three phases: first, *a preparation phase*; second, *an external review that includes a campus visit (or virtual visit)*; and third, *an institutional follow-up phase that includes the development and approval of a departmental response and action plan*.

Academic institutions usually provide departments with timelines and guidelines for preparing documents. What follows is a sample timeline to give a general sense of how these tend to be organized.

¹ These Guidelines update a document originally published by APSA in 2012. This Revised Edition has been prepared by members of the 2021-2023 APSA Departmental Services Committees, including Susan E. Scarrow (chair), Kathleen Bruhn, Cyril Ghosh, Craig Parsons, Cammy Shay, Scott Straus, Jonathan Woon. The document has benefitted from input from current, past and future APSA presidents Lisa Martin, John Ishiyama and Mark Warren, from APSA staff member Casey Harrigan, and from members of the APSA council.

Stage 1: Preparation (Starting at least one semester prior to the reviewers' visit)

- Department, College or University formally initiates the review
- Selection of the steering committee for the external review.
- Development and approval of goals for the external review.
- Identification and enlistment of the external review team.
- Review and updating of the departmental mission statement.
- Development and approval of agenda of topics and questions.
- Completion of the Self-Assessment Document for the External Review.
- Compilation of other departmental supporting documents.
- Designation of a departmental liaison with the visiting team.
- Scheduling of the external review campus visit.
- Distribution of materials to the external review team.

Stage 2: External Review

- Completion of logistical planning for the campus visit.
- Campus visit by the external review team by mid-semester.
- Receipt of the external reviewers' final report.

Stage 3: Institutional Follow-Up (Generally in the same semester as reviewers' visit)

- Departmental review and discussion of the final report.
- Development of the departmental response and action plan.
- College and/or University accepts outcome and approves completed review.

While the exact timing of these stages may vary, these are the phases and steps that together lead to the completion of a successful departmental external review. The following sections of this guide provide greater detail about the elements of the review process.

3. Initiating the External Review

There are four related components to initiating an external review: actors, goals, timing, and resources.

Actors. The external review may be initiated either by the college or university through the institutionalized program review process, or self-initiated by the department. While the timing of the review may be determined by the university if the process is begun at the top, the department's involvement is crucial and should proceed in much the same way as if the review were self-initiated. In a common scenario, the department chair leads the effort to either address the mandate or introduce the idea for undertaking the review, and the discussion is continued among the faculty through departmental meetings, often over a period of several months.

Depending upon the size of the department, the entire faculty or a committee of the faculty may be involved in articulating the purpose and elements of the review or interpreting the mandate from the university. Ultimately, though, reviews tend to be more successful when they involve the broadest possible number of faculty, to ensure that different points of view are considered

and that there is broad buy-in to the strategic vision.

Goals. The early articulation of the rationale and objectives for the review is an important first step in the review process. These goals should be informed by discussions in faculty meetings and consultations with the dean and other administrators. The goals are often general, relating to curriculum, faculty, students and graduates, and certainly educational outcomes.

The external review provides a unique opportunity to consider the current challenges and future direction of the department, so the department may consider exploring curricular changes, initiating new programs or specializations, implementing innovations in the use of technology and other resources, or new processes for assessment. While there will be time in later stages of preparing the review to develop detailed topics and questions, it can be helpful to know some of the specific goals for the process prior to engaging the external review visiting team.

Timing. When there is a choice, the key consideration in determining when to initiate the external review or self-study is the availability of faculty and the other major responsibilities or events that are simultaneously occurring in the department. As much as possible, the department should schedule the review visit and preparation in ways that permit the whole department to be engaged at all stages of the process, thereby ensuring broad departmental participation and ownership.

Resources. An external review or self-study may require the allocation of certain resources. Not least of these is the time required of the department head and faculty to initiate and complete a comprehensive assessment. Reviews also require other faculty members and staff to invest significant time in preparing the self-study and arranging the on-campus visit. Modest financial resources are also required for hosting the external review team when it visits the department. In the early stages of the review process the department chair should ascertain which resources the department is expected to provide, and which other institutional units will be contributing financial or staff resources to the process.

4. The External Review Visiting Team

There are at least three components for identifying a visiting team and preparing for an external review. Note that a department may have more or less control over these elements, and department chairs should take care to learn how much coordination with other offices is necessary to carry out the review process.

Size. Visiting teams vary in size, depending on the needs of the department and institution conducting the review. In some instances, just one external reviewer is engaged, generally when the department is small and the review has very specific objectives. More common is a team of two or three external reviewers. A team of four may be warranted for a large department, perhaps one with both undergraduate and graduate degree programs, and particularly if the department has several goals and is interested in exploring many new initiatives.

Composition. More important than the size of the team is how it is constituted based on institutional affiliation and specialization. Departments generally find it advantageous to have most, if not all, of the review team from departments of similar size and scope, whether the reviewers be faculty from a liberal arts college, a comprehensive university, or a research and

doctorate granting university. However, it also may be advantageous, for example, for a private institution to include in its review team an individual from a state-supported institution, and vice versa. In addition, departments should seek gender, ethnic, and racial diversity that spans the departments' subfields on their review team, which is consistent with calls from the current and recent leadership of the American Political Science Association. If the goals of the review include giving particular attention to special areas, then it might be appropriate to include one or more members on the team with expertise in the particular areas of interest. Reviewers tend to be full professors, and ideally have experience that gives them insight into program administration, such as having served as graduate director or department chair. Often they are required to be "arm's length" from the department, not having been either a faculty member or student in the department.

For the purpose of identifying potential reviewers, the American Political Science Association maintains for departmental members a list of experienced volunteer faculty from colleges and universities across the country who have indicated their willingness to serve in this capacity. While APSA does not recommend particular individuals, this list can be a valuable resource for the selection of a review team. To request names of potential reviewers, please contact dsp@apsanet.org. If you would like to volunteer as a reviewer, please [submit your information here](#).

Enlisting a review team, or preparing a nomination list for the college or university review coordinators, is best done by the chair of the department together with other faculty members who are coordinating the review. If it is the department's responsibility to engage reviewers, the letters of invitation should clearly describe what work is expected of reviewers, the length and approximate timing of the campus visit, when the post-visit report will be due, and what the institution will provide in terms of honorarium and travel costs.

Once the full review team is engaged, it is appropriate to send a formal acknowledgment letter to the team members that includes the names of each member and the designated team chair. The letter also should include the expected dates of the campus visit.

A campus visit usually lasts two to three days, often beginning the evening of the day that reviewers arrive, and continuing for the next one and a half days, with reviewers returning home on the afternoon of the third day. The logistics of the visit can be complex, so advance planning is crucial. In cases where reviews are institutionally mandated, such logistics may be handled by coordinators at other levels of your institution. Whoever is handling this, details may include travel arrangements, honoraria, hotel accommodations, and local transportation arrangements for each member of the team. Arrangements also must be made for hospitality, which include meals throughout the visit, meeting room accommodations, campus transportation, and perhaps an opening night dinner or reception.

Sometimes external review visits may be conducted "virtually", using on-line meetings. Full-day online meetings are both exhausting and difficult to schedule when multiple time zones are involved. Because no travel is involved, the schedules for such visits can be more flexible and creative. For instance, a full day of meetings could be spread across two half days. Virtual visits have the advantage of requiring no travel by reviewers, which may make it easier to recruit reviewers. They certainly are less expensive. However, they may lack some of the depth of in-person visits because they do not allow for informal conversations, and reviewers are unable to see the department's offices and teaching spaces.

5. Preparing for the External Review and Completing the Self-study

Planning for an external review should be approached as a major agenda item at departmental meetings well in advance of the review itself. The department's preparation is an integral part of a successful review. As part of its preparations, the department may wish to conduct a climate survey that includes both students and faculty. A climate survey can be used to inform the self-study; it also could be shared with reviewers (in whole or summary form) as part of the self-study.

Departments usually prepare a self-study document that provides detailed information about how the department responded to the prior review and other departmental developments since that review, and that addresses current challenges and future goals. Many institutions provide templates for such studies, but in addition, whoever is coordinating the review for your institution may be able to provide you with good examples of self-studies compiled by other departments at your institution. Even if your institution has a very rigid template for these documents, there is probably latitude to shape the document so that it highlights specific issues and opportunities which the department wants to flag for the reviewers and other readers of the self-study.

Often a self-study begins with a statement of the department's mission and goals, including how these relate to institution-wide mission and goals. The ensuing sections often include information on the faculty and their professional activities; curriculum; students, including enrollment and degree data; outcomes assessment; and departmental visibility both on and beyond campus. If your university or college has an active strategic plan, it can be useful for the self-study to comment on how aspects of departmental activities do (or could better) align with these strategic plans.

In writing the self-study, it is worth remembering that the process is designed to help the department identify its strengths, opportunities and challenges, and to come up with some viable solutions to cultivate the opportunities and mitigate the challenges. The self-study will be more likely to elicit helpful suggestions from reviewers if it is not written just as a "brag sheet", and if the review does not attempt to camouflage problems. For most institutions, identifying challenges will include identifying areas that would benefit from more resources. It is appropriate for the self-study to be frank about this. Nevertheless, because most institutions are resource constrained, it is usually unproductive for the department self-study or the response to the review to imply that the only way to improve the department is by adding multiple new faculty lines. Self-studies may also want to identify ways that the department is or could be generating revenues to help solve its own challenges, to see if these resonate with the reviewers or with others in the college or university, or to invite comment on revenue-neutral strategies to address existing challenges.

6. Relating the Assessment of Teaching and Learning to the External Review

Examination of a department's ongoing program for the assessment of teaching and learning is often a key topic for an external review. Especially at a time when state legislatures, accreditation agencies, and higher education institutions themselves are demanding greater accountability, the external review can be an indispensable opportunity for the department to re-

examine—and potentially propose adjustments to – its tools and procedures for assessing teaching and learning.

A number of APSA resources may facilitate this process. Select examples include:

1. E. Fletcher McClellan (2021). Outcomes Assessment in Higher Education as a Scientific/Intellectual Movement: Implications for Political Science, *Journal of Political Science Education*, 17: 1, 717-723, DOI: 10.1080/15512169.2020.1854772
2. [Hamann, K., Pollock, P., Smith, G., & Wilson, B. \(2016\). *Online Teaching and Assessment. PS: Political Science & Politics*, 49\(1\), 107-110. doi:10.1017/S104909651500133X](#)
3. Christi Siver, Seth W. Greenfest & G. Claire Haeg (2016) Are We Teaching them Anything?: A Model for Measuring Methodology Skills in the Political Science Major, *Journal of Political Science Education*, 12:2, 186-199, DOI: [10.1080/15512169.2015.1060890](#)
4. [Michelle D. Deardorff, Kerstin Hamann, and John Ishiyama, eds., 2009. *Assessment in Political Science*. Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.](#)
5. Michelle D. Deardorff & Paul J. Folger (2005) Assessment that Matters: Integrating the “Chore” of Department-Based Assessment with Real Improvements in Political Science Education, *Journal of Political Science Education*, 1:3, 277-287, DOI: [10.1080/15512160500261129](#)
6. Michelle D. Deardorff (2005) Assessment Through the Grassroots: Assessing the Department via Student Peer Evaluation, *Journal of Political Science Education*, 1:1, 109-127, DOI: [10.1080/15512160590907649](#)

7. Budget for the External Review

Conducting an effective and ultimately successful external review does not require extraordinary funding, but there will be some key expenditures related to the logistics of inviting a visiting team. To provide a prototype of a budget, it is assumed that the typical external review visiting team will average three members, and that the typical campus visit will span three days, with two full days of meetings. (In addition to the monetary budget, department chairs should also budget for the faculty and staff time entailed by the review process, which may require shifting or deferring of some tasks.)

The following are among the items to consider including in the monetary budget for an external review:

- Stipends for the external reviewers—in recent years (as of time of writing) institutions have tended to offer an honorarium of \$1,000–\$1,500 to recognize the time of each outside professional engaged in the external review, but this can vary based on the length of the campus visit and the number of degree programs to be evaluated.
- Round-trip travel for the external reviewers.
- Reasonable hotel accommodations for the external reviewers.
- Welcome dinner or reception, which is an opportunity for the visiting external review team to be introduced to the faculty of the political science department, institutional academic leaders, and selected directors from key campus academic services.
- Meals and hospitality for the external review team during the campus visit.

- Miscellaneous costs, such as local transportation expenses.

8. The Campus Visit and External Review Final Report

Campus Visit. After months of conscientious planning and preparation, the review team arrives on campus. Sometimes an opening event—either a meal or a reception—serves both to welcome the visiting team to the campus and to introduce the external reviewers to the departmental faculty and institutional administrators with whom they will be meeting during the visit. Other times the first night dinner is used as an opportunity for the review team to meet separately so that they can organize their work. The more formal side of the visit tends to begin with a meeting in which someone from above the department (dean, etc.) welcomes the team to campus, followed soon thereafter with a meeting with the department chair.

During their visit, the external review visiting team generally meets as a group with:

- The chair of the political science department.
- Senior institutional leaders.
- The full departmental faculty or, in the case of a large department, the external review steering committee of the department. They may meet separately with different faculty groups by rank.
- Undergraduate student representatives.
- Graduate student representatives.

Sometimes teams also meet with:

- Selected faculty of the political science department who hold key departmental responsibilities.
- Alumni representatives arranged by the department.
- Administrators responsible for resources and services essential to the operation of the department, including admissions, the library, technology, study abroad programs, internships, fellowships, career services, and alumni relations, as well as administrators in areas relating to special goals identified for the external review.
- Selected faculty from related departments who have significant collaborations with programs in the department under review.

On-campus visits are highly structured, and the allocated slots may not fit everyone's schedule. Also, some members of a department community may feel uncomfortable expressing their views in a group setting. For both reasons, it may be helpful for the department to share the reviewers' contact information, and for reviewers to encourage participants in group meetings to follow up if they have additional thoughts (but setting a short time deadline for this, so that comments are received before the reviewers write their report). This facilitates communication and can ensure that more people feel included in the process.

Particularly where facilities/equipment are an issue for the department, it may be helpful to arrange a tour, or to hold meetings in departmental spaces that are considered problematic.

It is important that at least an hour be reserved at the end of each day for the external review team to meet to share observations and questions and to discuss the next steps in the process. Additional time should also be allotted to allow the team to prepare prior to the exit interview, and to plan for the writing of its final report.

Some external review visits conclude with an exit meeting, which may involve the review team giving a formal presentation to the Dean or Provost or their representatives. Others who may be present are the chair and sometimes select departmental leaders, such as the graduate director. Such an exit meeting is an opportunity for the review team to offer a preliminary summary of its findings and recommendations, to raise any questions or additional informational needs, and to offer other concluding comments.

Final Report. The culmination of the team's visit and work is the writing of the final report. Ideally, this final report is drafted within a month of the campus visit, or sometimes with a more compressed schedule as dictated by the host institution, with each member of the external review team contributing to (and signing) the final document. Once completed, the review panel chair sends the final report to the chair of the political science department or to the institution's review coordinator, ending the work of the visiting team in the external review process.

9. The Departmental Response and Action Plan

With the final report in hand, the department begins the process of considering the findings and acting upon the recommendations. Because the process is still unfolding, the report should be treated as confidential. The first step is to immediately share the report with the faculty of the political science department and the relevant administrators of the institution, all of whom will have the opportunity to comment and to offer further input and feedback.

Discussion among the full faculty provides the opportunity for individuals to weigh in on the findings and recommendations made in the final report. All faculty members in the department should have the chance to participate.

A smaller working group of departmental faculty may be designated to review the findings and recommendations further, with the specific responsibility of developing and presenting a proposed response and action plan. At that point, a draft of this response and action plan would be reviewed and acted upon at a full departmental meeting at which each of the faculty would have the opportunity to participate. The precise procedure may depend on how much time your institution gives departments to write the formal response. If this report was commissioned by the college or the university, there often will be meetings at this stage between the department chair and the Dean and/or others to discuss the content of the external review and the departmental response; these meetings may involve discussion of additional resources that might be necessary or useful to help the department respond to specific recommendations.

Adoption of the departmental response and action plan by the faculty of the political science department brings the formal external review process to a close, but a productive review effort does not end there. The department should plan on regularly revisiting the items it sets forth in its action plan, monitoring whether these goals have been achieved, and potentially modifying responses as circumstances change. The most successful reviews are those that help inform departmental activities and approaches in coming years.

10. Selected External Review Resources

R. Arnett and P. Arneson. 1997. “[Educational Assessment as an Invitation for Dialogue](#),” *Journal of the Association for Communication Administration* (1): 81–94.

Hanover Research. 2012. *Best Practices in Academic Program Review*.
https://www.asanet.org/wp-content/uploads/hanoverresearch_bestpractices_programreview.pdf

Michelle D. Deardorff, Kerstin Hamann, and John Ishiyama, eds., 2009. [Assessment in Political Science](#). Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.

Jane S. Halonen and Dana S. Dunn. 2017. “Avoiding the Potholes of Program Review,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Feb.17. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/avoiding-the-potholes-of-program-review/>

Elisabeth Israels and Lewis Perry. 2002. *How to Organize an Outside Review*. Washington, DC: American Historical Association. [How to Organize an Outside Review | Perspectives on History | AHA \(historians.org\)](#)

National Communication Association. 2016. *Preparing for an External Program Review: A Handbook for Department Chairs*.
https://www.natcom.org/sites/default/files/pages/Chairs_Corner_Preparing_for_Program_Review_April_2016.pdf

Catherine A. Palomba, Trudy W. Banta, and Associates. 1999. *Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

B. E. Walvoord. 2010. *Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments and General Education*, 2nd edition. , San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons.