

Examining Faculty Perceptions of Distance Course Quality Review Feedback

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Abstract

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed methods study was to examine faculty perceptions of distance course quality review feedback at a small healthcare-focused college in the United States. The Examining the Evaluator Feedback Survey tool was adapted and used to determine faculty perceptions (N=16) of five key aspects of reviewer feedback (usefulness, accuracy, credibility, access to resources, and responsiveness) and the importance of feedback characteristics. Follow-up interviews (N=3) were conducted for in-depth exploration of survey results. Results indicated that faculty perceived feedback to be useful and accurate and reviewers to be credible. However, faculty would like to have more involvement both to explain their teaching context and to clarify and prioritize results. While receiving feedback was initially unpleasant and the amount of feedback may be overwhelming, faculty responded by using it to make course improvements. The study adds to limited faculty perception research amongst extensive research on quality tools and institutional review processes.

Keywords: Feedback, quality assurance, course review cycle

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Distance course quality tools are an accepted standard for evaluating and promoting course-level quality and for providing feedback (Baldwin et al., 2018; Baldwin & Ching, 2019; Nworie & Charles, 2021). Given the central role of faculty in designing and delivering courses, faculty perceptions of course quality review feedback are a vital component to meaningful institutional review processes; yet their experiences of receiving feedback from review tools has been given minimal research attention. By gaining insight into how feedback is received, institutions can refine review feedback and processes, provide greater support to faculty, and increase the likelihood that faculty will act upon the review feedback.

Literature Review

Much research has been done to determine the characteristics of a quality distance course. For example, Baldwin et al., (2018) established consensus around quality standards by comparing six online course design evaluation instruments with national and statewide influence. Reviewed instruments also have their own bodies of research that establish and validate the criteria upon which they were built (OSCQR, n.d.; QM, n.d.). Though the characteristics of distance course quality have been studied extensively, more research is needed to determine the perceived value and effectiveness of course quality instruments because the purpose of using these instruments is to provide instructors with support and guidance regarding standards of best practice. (Baldwin et al., 2018; Baldwin & Ching, 2019).

Some of the barriers to acceptance and utilization of course quality tools have been established. For example, faculty have described instruments as rigid, complex, long, and time-consuming (Gregory et al., 2020; McGahan, 2015; McNeal & Gray, 2019). Faculty may also perceive course reviews as evaluating the person who created the course rather than the course itself, despite evidence to the contrary in the criteria (Aminy et al., 2022). In an effort to create more buy-in for using course quality tools, some institutions have customized instruments or processes to fit their needs through a participatory approach (McGahan, 2015; Samuel et al., 2020). Instrument developers have also recognized the need for flexibility, which is why open-source rubrics have been created and why large college/university systems have allowed member institutions to establish their own implementation processes (Aminy et al., 2022). Due in part to faculty resistance to the idea of being evaluated, instruments have also been modified or reframed. For example, rubrics have become checklists and rating scales have moved from performance-based descriptors to measures of how much revision time is needed or to determinations of whether or not an element is present (Baldwin et al., 2018; Baldwin & Ching, 2019; McGahan, 2015). Some quality standards systems have also attended to how feedback is constructed. For example, Quality Matters emphasizes that feedback should be constructive, specific, measurable, sensitive, and balanced in order to be helpful (Ash & Oberlin, 2019).

Institutional review processes have also been studied to determine effective practices in conducting reviews. The literature supported taking a long-term, developmental view and establishing processes in order to catalyze systemic, transformational change (Altman et al., 2020; Bazluki et al., 2018; McNeal & Gray, 2019; Wargo, 2021). For institutions in which instructional designers or other staff complete quality reviews (such as at the study site) a supportive, relational approach was reinforced (Bazluki et al., 2018; Chen & Carliner, 2021). Specifically, Chen and Carliner (2021) summarized factors that facilitated (e.g., communication,

trust, and flexibility) and factors that hindered (e.g., lack of clarity, workload, and ambiguity of status) faculty-designer relationships. Employing a relational approach shifted the focus from an isolated course review, which can seem like surveillance, to a long-term collaboration resulting in both enhanced course quality and faculty learning (McNeal & Gray, 2019). Course review participants were also reminded to engage through reflective practice and a philosophical orientation toward valuing feedback, remembering that students are the ultimate beneficiaries of successful quality efforts (Ouahada, 2019; Wargo, 2021).

While it is helpful to know how faculty perceive review tools and processes, there is still a lack of understanding about how faculty perceive the feedback itself. The lack of faculty feedback perception findings in higher education stands in contrast to available research about feedback perceptions of elementary and secondary (K-12) educators conducted as K-12 teacher evaluation systems have become more robust and high stakes. In K-12 settings, studies have affirmed that evaluator credibility and perceived usefulness were the most influential feedback characteristics affecting teachers' responses to feedback (Cherasaro et al., 2016). Researchers have also identified that the following teacher-reported evaluation practices are associated with teaching improvement: scoring methods reflective of teacher performance, post-observation conferences that encourage self-reflection, and access/time to engage with professional development and in-school experts (Hunter, 2024). Meanwhile, feedback specificity (particularly high amounts of critical feedback) had low associations to teacher performance (Hunter, 2024; Hunter & Springer, 2022). Researchers speculated that specific critical feedback may decrease self-efficacy and motivation and called for more investigation of this finding (Hunter, 2024). Higher education institutions and faculty may benefit from building on K-12 inquiries into faculty feedback perceptions.

The foremost reason to invest time and effort in course quality review is to continuously improve teaching and learning. However, it's not clear that consistent pathways have been established for faculty to fully realize the benefits of course review efforts in practice. One reason pathways may have been obscured is that there has been a lack of understanding of the faculty experience of receiving feedback from course quality reviews. To that end, four research questions were developed to frame the study. The first three questions examined how faculty perceive and use feedback. The last question focuses on integration data from the study's mixed methods approach.

1. What distance course quality review feedback characteristics are important to faculty?
2. What are faculty perceptions of distance course quality review feedback?
3. What efforts do faculty make to integrate distance course quality review feedback?
4. In what ways do themes identified in faculty interviews contextualize the faculty experience with distance course quality review feedback?

Methods

The population for this study was purposefully small. The researchers desired to gain an understanding of faculty perceptions at one institution: A small healthcare-focused college in the United States. The chosen site had 109 distance courses at the time of the study. The site uses a customized version of the Open SUNY (State University of New York) Course Quality Rubric (OSCQR) developed through a shared governance model. Focusing on faculty perceptions of feedback at this site allowed the researchers to understand the results situationally and limit the number of intervening variables. An explanatory sequential mixed method was chosen as a way to triangulate multiple data sources and to answer research questions that using a qualitative or quantitative method alone could not answer (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Dawadi et al., 2021; Shorten & Smith, 2017). The study occurred in two phases: a quantitative survey followed by qualitative interviews.

In Phase 1, quantitative data was collected from faculty who received distance course review feedback in the past three years. Administrators teaching distance courses were excluded. The researchers adapted the Examining the Evaluator Feedback Survey, a tool developed through the Educator Effectiveness Research Alliance to gather elementary and secondary teachers' perceptions of received feedback (Cherasaro et al., 2015). This evidence-based tool was used to evaluate five key aspects of reviewer feedback: usefulness, accuracy, credibility, access to resources, and responsiveness (Cherasaro et al., 2015). Permission was not required as the tool is in the public domain (Cherasaro et al., 2015). The original tool was modified for this study so that it was more applicable to higher education, distance education, and the study site context.

After survey results were analyzed, Phase 2 qualitative interview questions were formulated to assist researchers in interpreting the survey results (Dawadi et al., 2021; Shorten & Smith, 2017). Interviews were conducted via a video conferencing platform with a convenience sample of Phase 1 participants who were willing to be interviewed. Following the iterative phases of thematic analysis as described by Creswell and Creswell (2023) and Norwell et al., (2017), all three researchers on the team read the de-identified transcripts to become familiar with the data. Then two researchers coded data in segments, using category labels to represent emerging codes and cross-checking for intercoder agreement. The full team reconvened to analyze the generated codes and explore interrelationships in the data, resulting in the emergence and definition of themes reflective of participant experiences with distance course quality review feedback. Through member checking, participants reviewed the resulting themes as a validation strategy (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Norwell et al., 2017).

As mentioned, the researchers used an integrated approach to data collection and analysis. The quantitative findings informed the semi-structured interview questions in the qualitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Dawadi et al., 2021). For example, participants were asked to elaborate on faculty ratings of survey items or to explain why some items were rated higher or lower than others. The participants also had the opportunity to bring forward

aspects of course quality reviews that were not addressed on the survey tool. Additionally, the qualitative data was used to inform the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Dawadi et al., 2021). Interview data explained the survey results, especially results that were surprising to the research team. Interviewees also helped the researchers interpret both wide and narrow gaps between levels of importance and levels of agreement for given survey items. Finally, interviewees illuminated associations between survey findings, such as why some survey items were perceived as more or less important or present in review feedback than others.

The composition of the research team was intentional. Because two research team members deliver course quality reviews as a job requirement, a third member was added as the Research Coordinator. The coordinator was a faculty member who handled all participant correspondence, conducted interviews, and de-identified the transcripts. These team roles were selected to ensure representation of a range of perspectives and as a strategy to mitigate bias in the data collection and interpretation processes.

Results

The Phase 1 survey invitation was sent to 27 faculty who had received distance course reviews in the past three years. This included 13 full-time and 14 adjunct faculty. There were 18 respondents (response rate=66.67%), but two did not recall receiving feedback so they were directed to the end of the survey. This resulted in 16 completed surveys (completion rate=59.26%). All participants had more than five years of experience and half had 15 or more years of experience. A majority of participants (62.5%) stated that they had also taught elsewhere in the past three years.

Survey Results

The level of importance and the level of agreement with key aspects of review feedback are listed in Table 1 and depicted in Figure 1. Items are listed in order from most important to least important.

Table 1

Importance and Level of Agreement for Feedback Characteristics

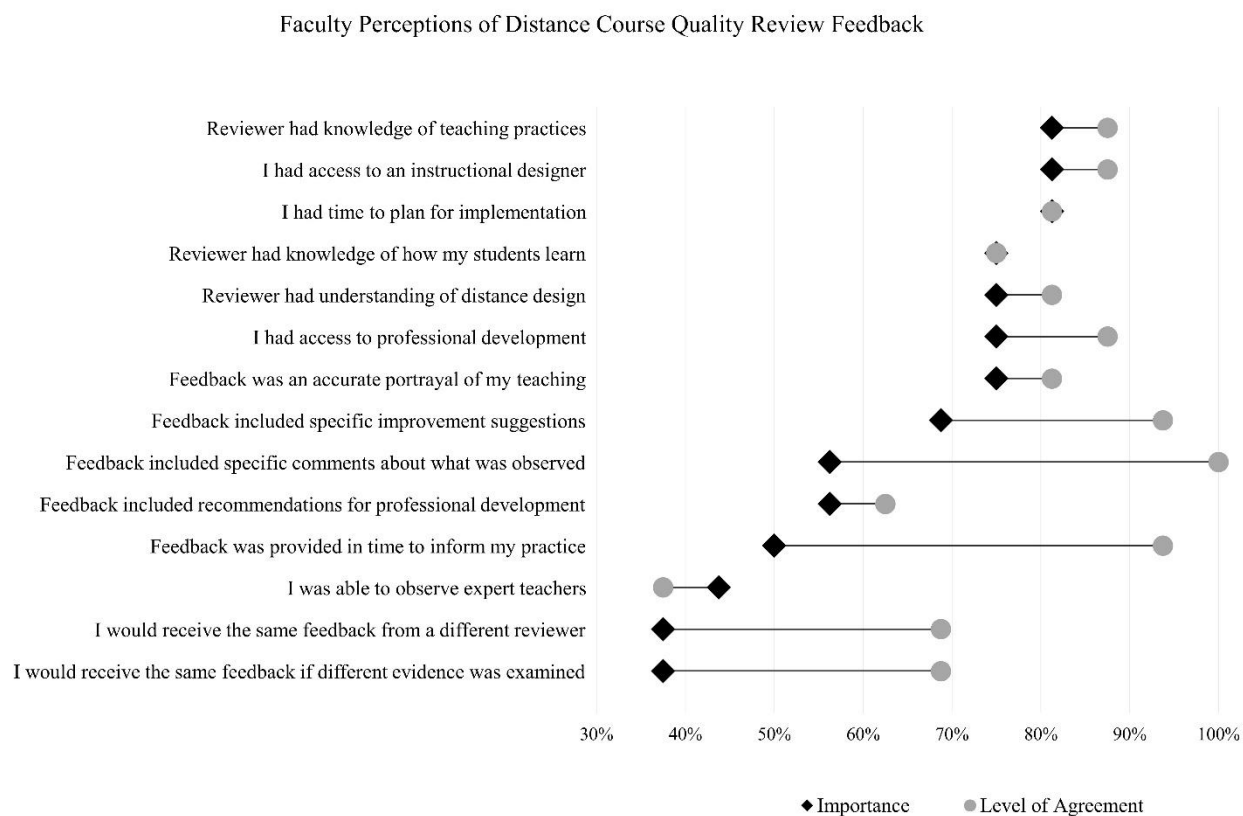
Feedback Characteristic	Importance	Level of Agreement
Reviewer had knowledge of teaching practices	81.25%	87.50%
I had access to an instructional designer	81.25%	87.50%
I had time to plan for implementation	81.25%	81.25%
Reviewer had knowledge of how my students learn	75.00%	75.00%
Reviewer had understanding of distance design	75.00%	81.25%
I had access to professional development	75.00%	87.50%

Feedback was an accurate portrayal of my teaching	75.00%	81.25%
Feedback included specific improvement suggestions	68.75%	93.75%
Feedback included specific comments about what was observed	56.25%	100.00%
Feedback included recommendations for professional development	56.25%	62.50%
Feedback was provided in time to inform my practice	50.00%	93.75%
I was able to observe expert teachers	43.75%	37.50%
I would receive the same feedback from a different reviewer	37.50%	68.75%
I would receive the same feedback if different evidence was examined	37.50%	68.75%

Note. Importance was determined by the percentage of agree/strongly agree ratings. Level of agreement was determined by the percentage of very important/critical ratings.

Figure 1

Faculty Perceptions of Distance Course Quality Review Feedback



Participant agreement was higher than the importance rating for a majority of the measured items. The largest difference between importance and agreement was for the items: “Feedback included specific comments about what was observed” and “Feedback was provided in time to inform my teaching” with agreement exceeding importance by 43.75%. For two items: “I had time to plan for implementation” and “Reviewer had knowledge of how my students learn,” the level of agreement equaled the importance. For one item: “I was able to observe expert teachers,” the level of agreement was lower than the importance.

After the tool was adapted, there were two items for which there wasn’t a corresponding importance or agreement rating. The importance for “Receiving instructional strategies that you could use in your course” was 68.75%. The level of agreement for “The observations noted on the OSCQR Action Plan I received represented a typical lesson or activity in my course” was 93.75%. The lack of a corresponding item for these findings was a study limitation.

A final element of the survey instrument focused on faculty responsiveness to feedback, providing faculty with options for actions they have taken in response to feedback. The results are depicted in Figure 2, with the most common response being to seek professional development, followed by trying new interaction strategies, trying new instructional strategies, and changing the way instruction is planned.

Figure 2

Faculty Responsiveness to Review Feedback



Phase 2 qualitative interview questions were created after Phase 1 survey results were analyzed. Participants who were willing to be interviewed (N=3) were asked general, open-ended questions to elicit responses about how they would describe the feedback they received to another faculty member, how they reacted to the feedback, how and where they received support for implementing feedback, and specific actions they took. Then interviewees were shown a visual aid of the OSCQR action plan and asked to describe how they used the elements in the plan. Interviewees were asked to reflect on the finding that survey participants had rated reviewer knowledge items as more important than consistency items. They were also asked to elaborate on levels of confidence in the reviewer’s work and to discuss the professional

development survey results. Finally, they were asked about satisfaction with their level of involvement in the process as well as the benefits and drawbacks of receiving review feedback.

Interview Results

Three explanatory themes emerged from the interviews as outlined in Table 2. All three participants had codes for all three themes in their interviews. The first theme, “‘Involve me’ in the process,” described a desire to communicate with the reviewer before and/or after the review. Prior to the review, the participants expressed that they wanted an opportunity to provide context so that the reviewer could better understand and account for the nature of the course, the student needs, and the placement of the course within the curriculum in the review feedback. After the review, participants wanted more than a written action plan. All participants proposed an after-review conversation opportunity, indicating that the conversation should focus on clarifying the feedback, providing guidance on how to implement the feedback, and helping to prioritize course revisions. Two of the respondents reported that they self-initiated post-review outreach conversations, noting that if they would not have chosen to connect, it would have led to dissatisfaction with the review process based on the feedback initially provided.

“Feedback is valuable but overwhelming” illustrated that participants saw benefit from the reviews but also stated that sometimes there was too much feedback to implement. The interviewees affirmed receiving valuable feedback, using words like *rigor*, *quality*, *honest*, *detailed*, and *thorough* to describe their perceptions. They articulated that the purpose of course review is to assure quality student learning experiences. However, they also stated that the feedback is overwhelming, expressing this both in terms of the high quantity of feedback and in terms of the time required to make changes based upon the feedback, with time limits being the primary reason that faculty are unable to implement course changes.

Finally, the theme “Initially feedback is unpleasant, but once processed leads to action” indicated initial stress responses. However, after processing the feedback all interviewed faculty acted upon it. This theme captured the socio-emotional experience of receiving feedback. Participants used phrases such as “your feathers ruffle” (Participant 2), “I...just shut down” (Participant 3) to describe initial responses. They also perceived imbalance between positive and negative feedback, indicating that receiving several improvement suggestions with few positive comments was an unpleasant experience. After the initial reaction, participants processed the feedback, often by recalling the student-centered purpose of course review. Some also reached out to their supervisor for support and consultation or contacted the reviewer for clarification. Finally, they took actions in response to feedback with each interviewee describing specific improvements that they made to their course after processing the information.

Table 2

Qualitative Themes with Illustrative Quotations

Theme	Illustrative Quotations
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1: “Involve me” in the process	Pre-review: “if you could provide maybe some feedback before they get started on it about what the purpose of the class and those type of things are, I wonder if, I wonder if that would make a difference in how they would review the course” (Participant 2). Post review: “They just give it to you, and then you’re expected to figure it out” (Participant 3).
2: Feedback is valuable but overwhelming	Valuable: “I do appreciate the quality and the rigor of the feedback that’s provided” (Participant 1). Overwhelming: “There’s so much feedback you’re getting...that there’s, there’s times when it’s just we’re in survival mode as faculty, and it’s very difficult” (Participant 2).
3: Initially feedback is unpleasant, but once processed leads to action	Initially unpleasant: “It felt like it lambasted me, like I was blindsided by it” (Participant 3). Then processing: “You’re like, “Wait a minute. It is feedback. And again, the purpose of it is to ensure, again, that you have a quality course that you’re presenting to the students” (Participant 2). Resulting in action: “I have re-evaluated the materials I’m providing,... And then, one other piece is I was asked to put a little bit more detail into my rubric” (Participant 1).

Discussion

The quantitative findings that agreement was higher than importance for most items was unexpected given faculty barriers to acceptance and utilization of review tools identified in the literature review (e.g., Gregory et al., 2020; McGahan, 2015; McNeal & Gray, 2019). However, the qualitative findings confirmed that feedback was perceived as useful and accurate. In the coded data associated with Themes 2 and 3, faculty acknowledged that reviews valuably benefitted students and were important for demonstrating quality to accreditors, and this was important in their processing of the feedback.

Though staff course reviewers were perceived as credible, especially in knowledge of teaching and distance education practices, survey respondents rated the importance and agreement with “Reviewer had knowledge of how my students learn” as the same. The interviewees elaborated, stating that it would be helpful for reviewers to involve faculty and gain a greater appreciation for their course contexts during the review process (Theme 1).

Regarding resources, survey respondents had low levels of agreement with their ability to observe expert teachers. This finding was expected as this was not a formally provided resource at the study site. In terms of other resources, as faculty described their desire for post-review involvement (Theme 1) they wanted feedback to be delivered via conversation. This was consistent with recommendations that review processes be relational and supportive (Bazluki et al., 2018; Chen & Carliner, 2021).

Concurrently, faculty perceived the amount of feedback to be overwhelming (Theme 2), and the interviewees reflected an underlying perception that they needed to address everything. This might mean substantially redesigning the course in order to meet the standards. Receiving more feedback than they had time to address may explain why surveyed faculty agreed with the statement “Feedback included specific comments about what was observed” at a much higher percentage than they rated its importance (43.75% difference). This may also explain the quantitative finding that there was more agreement with the statement, “Feedback was provided in time to inform practice” (93.75%) than with the statement, “I had time to plan for implementation” (81.25%). In describing resources that were or would be most helpful to them as a way to either be involved (Theme 1) or reduce the overwhelming nature of the feedback (Theme 2), interviewees mentioned that help with prioritization and clarification of feedback would be valued.

Finally, as they discussed their feedback responsiveness, interviewees described psychological components of receiving feedback in Theme 3. Two referenced an initial fight-or-flight type of response with metaphorical language such as getting one’s feathers ruffled or shutting down, and the other said that “some people might take it personally” (Participant 1). This was not necessarily represented in the quantitative findings, but revealing phenomena such as this is one reason why a mixed method design was selected. Respondents’ recommendations of post-review consultations and their reports of processing feedback before taking action reflect Hunter’s (2024) finding that post-observation conferences that encourage self-reflection are a high-leverage practice for teaching improvement in K-12 settings. After processing the information, all interviewees took actions to improve their courses, which is consistent with the majority of survey respondents who reported taking actions (see Figure 2).

Limitations

The primary limitation of the study was the small population size. Though the population was intentionally small in order to focus on how faculty at this particular site perceived feedback, it also means the results are not generalizable. However, the study does provide an example of how larger studies could be conducted using the Examining the Evaluator Feedback Survey at the postsecondary level. A second limitation, mentioned earlier, was that two of the adapted survey items did not have a corresponding importance or agreement rating. The research team would rectify that if deploying the tool again.

Conclusions

Distance course quality reviews have been conducted at the site institution for more than 10 years, and the site has an established review process. When the institution first adopted

review tools and was forming review processes, faculty support and buy-in had to be gained, especially around the idea that instructional design staff were qualified to conduct the reviews.

The study results affirmed that faculty now perceive review feedback to be useful, accurate, and valuable with benefits that extend to stakeholders such as students and accreditors. Faculty also indicated that they perceived the reviewers to be credible. These findings are congruent with conclusions from Altman et al., (2020) that adopting a long-term, institution-wide approach can result in increased faculty acceptance over time. Although the study was designed to investigate faculty perceptions of feedback rather than their perceptions of tools or processes, interviewed faculty consistently stated that a consultative feedback process would improve the experience, with one even going so far as to say that it would help close the feedback loop. Given that some faculty also consulted with their supervisor, it is important to ensure administrators are familiar with the course review feedback process so they can adequately support faculty.

Study participants clearly indicated that feedback was specific. However, they reported that too much critical feedback resulted in an unpleasant and stressful experience, which is consistent with research in other settings that feedback specificity has low associations to teacher performance (Hunter, 2024; Hunter & Springer, 2022). These findings affirm that reviewers should provide feedback that is also constructive, sensitive, and balanced (Ash & Oberlin, 2019). Faculty demonstrated that improvement actions are taken after the feedback is processed. Participants noted that reviewers can support course changes by providing clarification of how criteria can be met and indicating priority improvement areas.

This study yielded multiple insights and practical applications for continuous improvement in providing distance course quality feedback. It also established pathways for future research. For example, the Examining the Evaluator Feedback Survey instrument, though developed in elementary and secondary (K-12) settings, proved to be a useful tool for focusing on faculty perceptions of feedback in higher education. The researchers recommend that the tool be used with a larger population and sample so that the results can be generalized. This will add a new dimension to an already robust knowledge base focusing on quality assurance standards and review processes. Another potential area of research would be to implement the findings of this study and then determine the resulting impacts, particularly of a more consultative approach.

Distance course quality review processes are important for assuring quality and prompting continuous improvement. Given that the ultimate goal of reviews is to catalyze course improvements that benefit learners, departments conducting reviews should be mindful of how faculty perceive and use the feedback. As the research site discovered, investigating faculty perceptions can help institutions support faculty and refine review processes.

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