Chapter Eleven:
Board of Institutional Review Member Skills and Competencies

Introduction

This chapter describes the knowledge and skills of members of the Board of Institutional Review (BIR). BIR members complete activities that are central to the quality and success of the educator preparation accreditation system in California. The BIR is a large group of K-12 and higher education educators, administrators and policy setters who were trained and are assigned to work in pairs or small groups to review documents, interview stakeholders, and develop consensus decisions on the quality of educator preparation programs. This chapter would be of interest to individuals who are interested in joining the BIR, previously trained BIR members who wish to refresh their skills, and other individuals interested in the accreditation process.

I. Selection of Team Members

Team members are selected for membership in the BIR based on the recommendation of a colleague, the team members' knowledge of the *Accreditation Framework*, and demonstration of the skills necessary for a successful accreditation visit. During the BIR training, prospective members participate in activities designed to develop the skills required during a site visit and to provide feedback to CTC staff on the skill level of the prospective members. BIR members assigned to a site visit are expected to utilize the following skills during the visit and, if necessary, to request assistance or guidance from the team lead and/or the CTC consultant. Qualifications of a prospective BIR member include**:**

- At least three years of professional experience in education;
- Experience with qualitative evaluations;
- Experience with multiple levels and different sets of education related standards;
- Personal characteristics including integrity, objectivity, empathy, ability to work under pressure, organizational ability, time management, and being a team player;
- Experience with collaboration in writing and problem solving;
- Good communication skills (both oral and written);
- Experience with data collection and analysis;
- Familiarity with technology, including the use of both MAC and PC platforms; and
- Ability to access electronic information, search for pertinent information, and appropriately cite the source for inclusion in the team report.

II. BIR Member Responsibilities

BIR members' primary responsibilities are to review and analyze written documentation developed by educator preparation institutions, examine source documents referenced in the written documentation, interview stakeholders who are knowledgeable about specific educator preparation programs at institutions under review, and determine the extent to which an education unit or its programs are aligned to adopted state standards. With regard to document reviews, BIR members may be assigned to work in pairs to complete an initial program review (please see Chapter Three) or a Program Assessment review

(Chapter Six). Alternatively, a BIR member may be assigned as part of a three to eight member team to complete an accreditation site visit. (Chapter Ten describes the logistics and organizational requirements of an accreditation site visit.) Site visits utilize the full array of BIR member skills, including document review, analyses of reference documents, interview skills, and the capacity to participate in team meetings during which every member contributes their concerns, shares new information, and cooperates to develop a set of consensus decisions reflecting the teams' best professional judgment.

Initial Program Review (IPR)
This kind of review occurs throughout the year with a schedule posted on the Commission's accreditation webpage. The outcome of the initial review of the program proposal is a set of responses for each program standard. The reviewers must agree whether there is sufficient evidence contained in the documents to find that each program standard is met. If not, the reviewers must identify the nature of the information that is not addressed or is not documented. Institutions then revise the program proposal and resubmit with additional documentation. The same pair of readers reviews the revisions and determine whether each standard has been satisfied. This process repeats until all adopted program standards are met. This process results in an agenda item for the Committee on Accreditation (COA) seeking approval for the proposed program. For more information on the initial approval of programs, please see Chapter Three.

Program Assessment Reviews
BIR members are also instrumental in the Program Assessment process (Chapter Six) which occurs in the 4th year of the accreditation cycle. These reviews occur periodically throughout the year and are performed at the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) office, and provide valuable information to an institution about whether any of its programs might not be aligned to standards. Performing this review requires reading and analyzing program narratives, course syllabi, and other supporting documentation. When the assigned member pairs have completed their independent reviews, they discuss their findings and agree whether each program standard is preliminary aligned or, if not, where additional information is needed. The pair will develop the *Program Assessment Preliminary Report of Findings (PRF)* that reflects the result of their deliberations. The *PRF* is sent to the institution, which revises its documents and resubmits them for another review. Once all program standards are preliminary aligned, or the accreditation site visit is within 3-6 months, the Program Assessment process ends.

Accreditation Site Visits
BIR members participate in accreditation site visits that usually occur in the spring and that generally run for four days (traditionally Sunday through Wednesday or Monday through Thursday). These visits are the heart of the accreditation system and require highly trained, ethical, and experienced professionals to function as members of the site visit team. Prior to the visits, the team members will receive (and must review) the Site Visit Documentation (SVD) which is composed of eight items:
1. Common Standards Narrative
2. Documentation linked from the Common Standards Narrative
3. Program Summary for each approved educator preparation program
4. Program Narratives* addressing all adopted program standards for each

Commission-
approved educator preparation program
5. Documentation linked from each of the Program narratives.
6. Program Assessment Feedback for each of the Commission-approved educator preparation programs
7. Biennial Reports submitted since the last site visit (Section A, for each approved program
and Section B, institutional summary)
8. Feedback from CTC for each Biennial Report

The purpose of the site visit is for the team of educators to make decisions on standards: each of the Common Standards and for all approved programs, the Program Standards. Soon after the team convenes at the site, team members will share their understandings and any concerns they have of each program at the institution and about the institution's education unit. Throughout the site visit, every team member will be utilizing document review, interview, writing, analytical, and communication skills to ensure that the institution receives a fair, impartial, and thorough review of its programs and its overall functioning.

III. BIR Member Tasks and Skills

In order to effectively and efficiently complete the responsibilities identified above, every BIR member must be skilled to complete a variety of critical functions. Each of the core tasks and necessary skills is identified and defined in the section below. The table identifies which of the tasks are utilized by each of the Commission's accreditation activities.

BIR Member Tasks	**Initial Program Review**	**Program Assessment**	**Site Visit**
Reading and Analyzing Documents	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interviewing Stakeholders			Yes
Decision Making	Yes	Yes	Yes
Writing the Reports			Yes

Reading and Analyzing Documents

The initial data collection task that faces BIR members in all of the assignments is reading and analyzing documents. Below are some techniques that may assist in this critical task.

Identify How an Institution Responds to each Standard

To determine whether the institution or program meets the relevant standards, it is important to identify how the institution responds to the standard, or what it does to satisfy the standard. The response should include the key people who initiate, complete, or verify activities that are required by the standards.

Note Generalizations and Other Vague Language
Responses to the standards should be clear and concise. The response should address "how" an institution meets a standard. It is important to follow up on language that is unclear or statements that make claims that don't have supporting documentation. It may merely be unclear language; it can also point to possible areas of weakness.

Determine Relationships
It can be helpful to use an organizational chart or graph of the program or institution. The chart can be helpful in learning how the institution or program is organized and operated and to identify key reporting relationships that may clarify how critical functions are completed.

Note Key Forms
Most programs operate using a system of forms or documents that show candidate progress through the program or institution, verify a candidate's demonstration of knowledge or skills, and record that other legal or required steps are completed (e.g., Certificate of Clearance). Reviewing these forms can tell readers the type and quality of information collected by the program.

Look for Formulas
Many institutions operate under formulas, which determine such things as class size, supervisory and support provider ratios, admissions, and other standard operations. Site visit team members may find this information useful for determining whether resources are appropriately allocated to each program.

Respect Institutional Mission and Goals
Institutions and their programs are permitted to meet adopted standards in their own ways. There is no one best way of preparing educators. The team's task is to ensure that the institution or program is meeting the standards it claims it is meeting and that the institution or program is providing a quality educational experience. The exact means to this common end will, and should, vary. It may not be to team members' taste, but such variances are perfectly permissible.

Review Documents Thoroughly
Sometimes, documents look well prepared because they are professionally compiled or reflect high quality presentation skills. The reviewer's task is to look beyond the presentation and examine the content. High quality presentation does not always reflect high quality content. Likewise, documents that are poorly presented may not accurately reflect the quality of the work going on at the institution. While the CTC encourages institutions to prepare high quality documents, when presented with a weak document, the reviewer may need to communicate more frequently with the state consultant and (at a site visit) with the team lead to ensure the reviewer has sufficient information to make an informed decision about how well the standards are being addressed.

Investigate Omissions

In some cases, omissions in a report can reveal a great deal about the institution or program. As documents are being reviewed, reviewers should ask themselves, "What is not being presented?" "What is in the background?" Familiarity with the credential area can be a great help here. Noted omissions should not lead to assumptions about institutional or program quality, but they may help focus further examination and help pose some questions.

Follow the Candidate

Try to understand what the program looks like from the perspective of a candidate entering it. What activities, what documents, what experiences are provided to the candidate or asked of the candidate? Once evidence is gathered, the reviewer should put it all together to see whether the entire process makes sense - from admission, through coursework and fieldwork, to program completion - for a hypothetical candidate. This process might help identify gaps in the information presented, or it may help rectify or confirm contrary pieces of information gathered from other sources.

Verify Claims

If an institution makes a claim in its documents, the institution must be able to verify that claim through documentation and/or interviews. This is the kind of information a program assessment reviewer can alert a site team member to verify. For example, if an institution claims that it has established a close working relationship with three local school districts but hasn't provided documentation that supports the claim, a program assessment reviewer should include a note on the *PRF* document alerting the site visit team that one of its members should verify this relationship by interviewing administrators from the districts or reviewing MOUs or advisory board records. During the site visit, evidence cited in any of the reports should be available for the team to review. If the team members conclude that claims are made without supporting documentation, the team lead and consultant should be informed so they can include that information in the mid-visit report. Many reports make reference to specific documents and forms; it is critical that reviewers, whether during program assessment or the site visit, look for these supporting documents to ensure that these claims are accurate.

In Program Assessment Only:

Describe What Documentation Must be Reviewed at the Site Visit

If the program documents provide an adequate description of how the institution responds to a standard and is supported by documentation available to the program assessment reviewer, the reviewer will indicate on the *PRF* that the standard is preliminarily aligned. That will inform the site visit reviewer that the institution's alignment to the standard can be verified through "sampling" interviews (which are described below). However, if the program documents describe a response that appears to be aligned with the standards but no supporting documents were included with the program documents, the reviewer must provide a clear description in the *PRF* of what the site visit reviewer needs to review at the site visit.

Interviewing Stakeholders

A critical method of obtaining sufficient data to make a determination of institutional and program quality and effectiveness is through interviewing many people with direct knowledge of the institution or program. The number of people who need to be interviewed from a particular program depends, in large part, on the *PRF*. If program assessment reviewers have found that the program continues to be not aligned with significant parts of standards, or whole standards, despite resubmissions by the program, the accreditation administrator may add a member to the site visit team to focus exclusively on that program. In that event, it is important that a sufficient number of people from all the major constituencies related to that program (faculty and administration from the institution, candidates, cooperating master teachers and school administrators, graduates of the programs and their employers, and advisory groups to the programs) be interviewed carefully about their experiences with the institution and the program in relation to the standards.

For programs with standards that are all preliminarily aligned, or that have small parts of standards "not aligned," each team member will be assigned three to four programs to review. To maximize valuable interview time, these team members will interview groups of stakeholders from multiple programs at the same time (e.g., advisory board members from the multiple subject, single subject, reading, and clear programs.) This process is called "sampling" and allows the team to gather information from "samples" of stakeholders rather than from multiple members of a particular stakeholder type for each program. Some interviews will continue to be scheduled with single individuals (e.g., department chairperson). The team lead and state consultant will be able to clarify the interview responsibilities of any particular team member.

Accreditation review interviews are usually semi-structured. There is not sufficient time for a true, open-ended interview and the groups will vary enough in background and knowledge level that a structured interview is not appropriate. Reviewers should have some prepared questions in mind based on team discussions and the constituency of the person/people being interviewed. Depending on the initial responses to a question, follow-up questions may vary significantly. The information that follows is intended to help team members improve their interviewing skills and complete the review task effectively. Remember, an interview is simply a "purposeful conversation with two or more people directed by one in order to get information."

Introductory Comments and Setting the Tone

The interview begins with introductions that include the team member's name and identifies the team member as a member of the Accreditation Team for the CTC. Depending on who is being interviewed (particularly for candidates), it may be necessary to provide a brief explanation of accreditation. Make sure not to make it sound like a punitive or a "gotcha" process, but rather a regular review process to ensure quality and to make recommendations for improvement, if necessary.

BIR Members Represent the CTC

During the site visit, team members are not representing their own institutions, nor are they using experiences at their own institutions as standards for the review. Identifying as a member of the accreditation team is important in two respects. First, when reviewers introduce themselves during interviews, they need to explicitly state that they are representing the CTC because their role as interviewers is performed on behalf of the CTC. It is not appropriate for a team member to identify their own institutional affiliation even though some stakeholders may inquire about it. Second, while it might be tempting for a team member to compare the host institution with their own, reviewers must analyze all information gained from the visit in relation to the standards. Whether the host institution's practices are similar to, or different from, their own institution is immaterial. Team members must listen carefully to the content of stakeholders' comments in relation to the standards and to ask follow-up questions that shed greater light on how the institution responds to the standards.

Explain Why Each Person Is Being Interviewed
Explain the purpose of the interview and the types of questions that will be asked (the questions may vary somewhat depending on the constituency being interviewed). For instance, when interviewing master teachers, the explanation might be, "I am here to ask you some questions about the preparation of student teachers you have worked with from _______ Institution."

Reduce Anxiety
Some individuals will be anxious and a few may be reluctant to say much. Team members should be gracious and ease into the questions by asking some general questions. It might also reduce the interviewees' anxiety to know that their comments will be kept confidential and that findings will be reported in the aggregate so that no particular comment can be traced back to an individual.

Assure Confidentiality
Team members must be certain to inform interviewees that any information shared will be kept strictly confidential and that only aggregate data will be reported to the institution. This is particularly important with candidates in the program and, often, with program faculty.

Maintain a Professional Perspective
Team members must use their skills and experiences to focus directly on gathering and analyzing data to determine how well the program meets the particular standards or guidelines. They must be as objective as possible at all times and should avoid making comparisons between their institutions and the institution under review as such comments may be interpreted as demonstrating bias, even if unintended.

Confirm Understanding
It is important that reviewers confirm that they have heard and correctly understood comments made by interviewees. The interviewer can do this by paraphrasing back to the interviewee the main idea contained in the interviewee's comment. This practice encourages the interviewees to clarify something the interviewer had not understood correctly and to elaborate on their previous response.

Take Notes
Team members must make careful notes. This becomes particularly important when conflicting responses are received by several team members. Reviewers frequently consult their notes during the deliberations because by then, the reviewer has conducted numerous interviews and met numerous people over the course of several days at the institution, and they need to make sure they are reporting their findings accurately and completely. Document the number of responses on a specific item to identify patterns of evidence on a particular standard.

Ask Questions Related to Standards
It is important to ask questions that will help the team determine whether specific standards are "Met." Team members may use program planning prompts of the standards as a basis for their questions. They should focus their questions on standards the interviewee is likely to know about. For example, questions about candidate competence are most appropriate for supervising teachers or graduates of the program and their employers, while the program administrator should be a primary respondent to questions on program design.

Avoid Questions That Can Be Answered "Yes" or "No"
Some simple factual questions may need to be asked. However, Yes/No type questions generally receive a one-word response. To the extent possible, word questions in a way that invites respondents to describe their experience with the issue being reviewed. For example, an interviewer could ask candidates, "How did you arrange for a field/clinical placement?" rather than "Did you make the arrangements for your field/clinical placement?"

Pursue Questions Until They Are Answered
Reviewers must listen to the answer and decide whether they gained the information they are seeking. If not, they must pursue the matter further. Some answers will require an elaboration or need clarification. Reviewers should ask for specific examples of incidents or situations. Follow-up questions should focus on clarifying, amplifying, or verifying initial responses. Remember that not all interviews will yield the same amount of information. Some people have more knowledge of an institution or its programs than others.

Do Not Accept Unsupported Conclusions
Be sure that sufficient information is gathered to substantiate any conclusions. Sources of evidence are critical and should be referenced and substantiated in the team report.

Follow Hunches and Look for Evidence to Confirm
Most site team members have a great deal of experience with educational institutions and have excellent insight about how institutions function. While these perceptions alone are not evidence, site teams should not ignore them during the data collection phase or even when making judgments. Insights can lead to confirming interviews and can help to sharpen the entire process.

Be Aware of Time - Adhere to a Time Schedule

It is up to each team member to control the time allotted for interviews. Interviews with individuals are generally scheduled for 20 minutes while those with groups are generally scheduled for 45 minutes. Try to keep the interviews within the allotted time frame. It is important that all team members honor the schedule prepared by the institution. It usually represents many hours of work and many individuals have made special arrangements to be present and interviewed. If there is a need to eliminate or rearrange some interviews, be sure to discuss this with the team lead and state consultant. Under no circumstances may a team member unilaterally cancel an interview. In all cases, the cancellation of interviews needs to be done with caution and after discussion with the team lead and state consultant who will then inform the institution, if appropriate.

Ask a Wrap-up Question

Most interviewees will have thought about this interview in advance and may have issues they want to mention. Invite them to do so at the end of the interview to ensure they have provided all the information they can.

Cross-Check Information

It is necessary to get information from a variety of sources, such as candidates or participants, master teachers, public school administrators, student teaching supervisors, support providers, student teachers and program completers, and employers of completers and then cross-check the validity of the information. This is part of the triangulation strategy discussed below.

Relate Non-Specific Comments to Specific Standards

Answers are sometimes general and experiential rather than factual. Verify that the answer relates to specific program standards. Avoid accepting hearsay statements or comments that are overly vague. Remember that some interviewees will have "axes to grind." Do not allow individuals with personal issues to consume valuable reviewer time. While it might be difficult during a site visit to distinguish between those with “axes to grind” and those with legitimate concerns about a program, a reviewer must consider individual comments during an interview session in context with the totality of the evidence he or she is reviewing and with information reported by other team members.

Use Stimulated Recall

A good technique for improving responses is to provide a context within a program that interviewees are familiar with and ask questions related to that context. For example, use the program’s handbook with interviewees and ask questions related to its contents. Another example is to ask the person to remember a particular time in the program (e.g., beginning clinical practice) to sharpen their responses and enable them to be specific about how the program works.

Ensure Adequate Representation from All Programs

Interviewing groups can present particular challenges not found in interviews with individuals. One challenge is ensuring that representatives from every program have the opportunity to respond to questions on every issue of importance. One method for dealing with interviewees who are dominating the group interview is to acknowledge their contribution and invite others to respond to the same prompt. For example: “I just heard about some single subject candidates’ experiences in finding student teaching positions. What is the experience like for candidates in other programs?” Another method is to invite quiet individuals to speak. The interviewer might say: “I’ve heard from field supervisors in education administration and school nursing but haven’t heard anything from field supervisors in counseling. Can you please tell me what your experiences have been like working with school counseling candidates?”

Decision Making Considerations
No one individual is expected to collect and analyze data for every piece of the puzzle. Members should ask each other what they saw, heard, and read. Are they hearing the same general things? Did someone obtain information that is valuable to another member’s area of responsibility? In most cases, team members can either confirm they are seeing and hearing similar things about a program or they can provide information to fill in the blanks where other members are lacking information.

Look for Patterns/Themes
By the mid-point of the site visit, team members will have listened to numerous interviews, reviewed many documents, and talked with other team members about their interviews and document notes. They will probably have identified some possible patterns or themes. The team lead will provide opportunities for members to describe what they’re thinking. Other members can provide supporting or disconfirming evidence. Questions like these can help identify patterns: "What were the most common problems mentioned?" "What phrases or words were used across most interviews?"

Organize Responses by Constituency or by Standard.
As team members review information obtained from each constituency, the reviewers should ask whether common concerns, strengths, or weaknesses were identified. The reviewer might rank the concerns, strengths, or weaknesses by the frequency of responses to get a measure of the "weight" of such issues. Alternatively, they might want to look at each standard to see how responses cluster.

Use Metaphorical/Analogical Thinking
Some people find creating metaphors to be a useful way to bring general impressions into focus. This should be done only when most of the evidence has been reviewed so as not to cloud later data collection. A possible example is:

"If I had two words to describe this institution's attention to Standards 2 and 9, they would be ____________ and ___________."

Talking about metaphors that describe an institution’s program can help team members’ thoughts coalesce. Although all metaphors are false at some level of analysis, their use can help crystallize team members’ sense of a program or standard.

Build a Logical Chain of Evidence

Team members often find that individuals from different programs independently report similar concerns or problems. The challenge to the team is to determine whether the issues reflect program findings or whether they reflect an institution-wide problem that should be registered as a Common Standard finding.

For example, at one institution, candidates, program completers, and master teachers representing multiple programs reported during interviews that candidates were often confused about what should be happening during field experiences and clinical practice. One team member verified those claims through a review of the course syllabi, which failed to reveal any evidence that field experiences were organized into a planned sequence of experiences to help candidates develop and demonstrate knowledge and skills (Common Standard 7). In talking with other team members, the members acknowledged that some candidates and program completers had indicated that they felt supported during field experiences and were confident about their abilities to function effectively in a classroom (an example of disconfirming evidence). The *SVD* indicated that these experiences were incorporated into several courses, but it was difficult to find clear evidence that sufficient planning had been done to ensure the field experiences were appropriately sequenced and that candidates were able to incorporate material from courses into their field experiences. Faculty interviews revealed that each faculty member thought others were focusing on this topic.

Here is a logical, verifiable relationship. If field experience and clinical practice turned up in interviews as a weakness across multiple programs, one would expect to find little attention paid to it in the formal curriculum. In the above example, this appears to be the case. Therefore, the preponderance of evidence indicates that Common Standard Seven is either “Met with Concerns” or “Not Met.” If these concerns arise only in one program, the decision for the common standards would likely be “Met,” and the program cluster team members would need to determine how to report their findings on that standard.

Triangulate and Avoid Bias

When the team has similar information from different sources about how an institution is implementing a standard, it is easier to come to consensus about the findings. Repeated evidence from believable sources helps the team make its decisions. Avoid over-emphasizing testimony from a small number of articulate, informed, or high status respondents. Avoid campus politics – something that is inevitable even in the most positive work environment. Team members must be diligent not to impose their own values and beliefs about how educator preparation “should” be done on the data collection and analysis performed for the accreditation site visit. It can be helpful to look carefully at extreme cases where people with the most at stake reveal contrary data. This can be powerful information if it is not tainted by ulterior motives. Finally, not all data are equal. Volunteered information collected from people with low bias but high knowledge about the program can be weighted more heavily than can information from respondents with high bias but little familiarity with the program.

Writing the Team Report

The report must be written to inform the COA about the extent to which an institution and its educator preparation programs satisfy applicable standards and to support the COA in rendering an accreditation decision. The site visit report includes examples from the site visit and the team's rationale for its decisions and recommendation—this is why the site visit is held.

Basic declarative prose utilizing simple sentences, active verbs, and clearly defined subjects will result in a valuable report. Findings should be supported by evidence collected by the team during the visit. The report should also contain examples of practices at the institution. The team lead will edit the final draft of all report sections for clarity, smoothness, and uniformity.