Chapter II
Peer Review Process

The *Standards for Conduct and Evaluation of Activities Carried Out by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) for Evaluation of Recipients of Grants, Cooperative Agreements, and Contracts* mandate that the Regional Educational Laboratories (and other programs funded by OERI) be evaluated through a peer review process. The *Standards* provide specific guidance for the selection of peer review panels, including the knowledge and expertise needed to serve as a peer reviewer.

This chapter describes the peer review process that was implemented as part of the Interim Evaluation of the Regional Educational Laboratories. The peer review process was developed through three initial stages: (1) recruitment, (2) panel assignment, and (3) training. Each of these activities will be discussed in further detail in the sections that follow. The actual review process conducted by the panelists, and the resulting evaluation reports, is discussed in Chapter III (Implementation of the Evaluation).

A.   Recruitment of Peer Reviewers

According to the *Standards*, each peer reviewer must have the necessary knowledge and expertise in the area of the project being reviewed to evaluate the performance of a recipient. This experience may include:

- *Expert knowledge of subject matter in the area of the activities to be reviewed*
- *Expert knowledge of theory or methods or both in the area of the activities to be reviewed*
- *Practical experience in the area of the activities or type of institution or both to be reviewed*
- *Knowledge of a broad range of educational policies and practices*
- *Experience in managing complex organizations*
- *Expertise and experience in evaluation theory and practice*

In addition to these characteristics, peer reviewers must also be free of any conflict of interest.

In an effort to attract a broad pool of qualified peer review candidates, DIR used a multi-pronged approach to recruitment. First, nominations were solicited from a number of sources, including the Lab Directors, the U.S. Department of Education (PES, OERI, NERPP Board), and DIR's Technical Work Group. Additionally, "snowball" approach was implemented by asking candidates to recommend others who may be interested in serving as a peer reviewer. DIR also made direct contact with specific individuals representing a broad variety of educational, business and professional organizations (e.g., The Business Roundtable, the Prichard Committee, the National PTA) requesting the nomination of qualified candidates.

To ensure broad representation among the candidate pool, DIR posted a call for peer reviewers with various professional educational and evaluation organizations (see Table II.1).

Members of these associations were invited to submit a resume or vitae to nominate themselves as a peer review candidate.

Table II.1
Selected Educational and Evaluation Associations
Who Posted a Call for Peer Reviewers

- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
- National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST)
- National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
- American Evaluation Association (AEA)
- American Education Research Association (AERA)
- American Association of School Administrators (AASA)
- National Education Association (NEA)
- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)

Close to 300 peer reviewer nominations were received. A resume or vitae was obtained from each potential candidate and reviewed for relevant experience and expertise. A standard interview protocol (Appendix II) was also completed with each candidate (via telephone) to gather additional information on the individual's areas of expertise, screen for any real or perceived conflicts of interest, and discuss the responsibilities of serving as a peer reviewer in this Interim Evaluation. Reference checks were also conducted, particularly on individuals who had self-nominated.
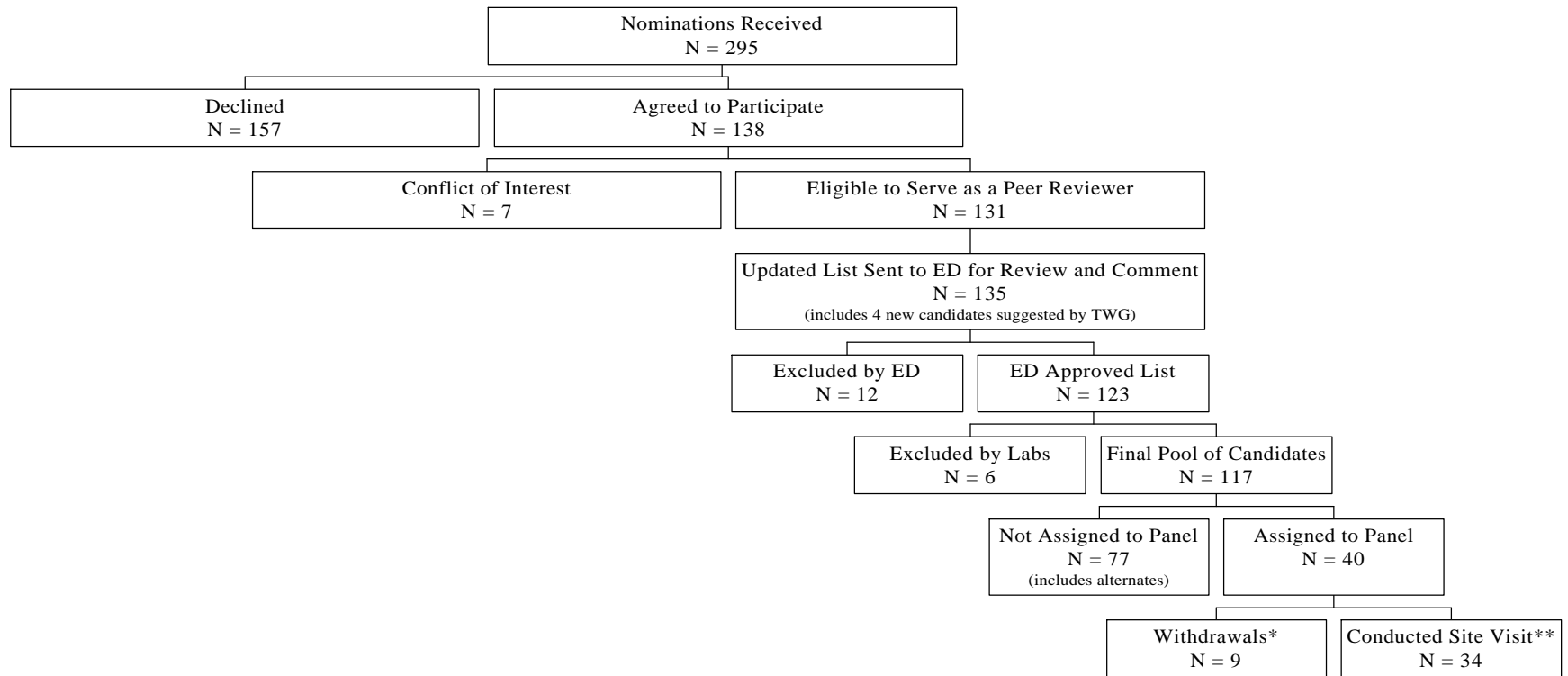
Over the course of the recruitment and screening process, 160 individuals declined an invitation to participate in the Interim Evaluation (Figure II.1). In most cases, schedule conflicts during the anticipated time frame for the on-site visits or the inability to commit 10 days of time (five in preparation and five on-site) were cited as reasons. In a limited number of cases, individuals declined to participate due to the level of financial remuneration.[1] A small number of individuals were eliminated from further consideration due to real or perceived conflicts of interest.

After adding a few new nominees recommended by the DIR Technical Work Group, a list of qualified peer review candidates (n=135) was sent to the Department of Education for review and comment. Specifically, ED was asked to identify:

- Individuals known to ED who were particularly well qualified to serve as a peer review panelist in general

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[1] Peer reviewers were offered honoraria of $2500. Panel chairs were offered slightly more, $3600, to compensate for the additional time required to serve in that capacity.

Figure II.1
Overview of Peer Review Recruitment and Panel Assignment

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                        │   Nominations Received   │
                        │         N = 295          │
                        └─────────────────────────┘
          ┌──────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────────┐
          │      Declined        │   │   Agreed to Participate   │
          │      N = 157         │   │         N = 138           │
          └──────────────────────┘   └──────────────────────────┘
              ┌──────────────────────┐   ┌────────────────────────────────┐
              │  Conflict of Interest │   │ Eligible to Serve as a Peer Reviewer │
              │        N = 7          │   │            N = 131             │
              └──────────────────────┘   └────────────────────────────────┘
                              ┌────────────────────────────────────────────┐
                              │ Updated List Sent to ED for Review and Comment │
                              │                  N = 135                    │
                              │  (includes 4 new candidates suggested by TWG)  │
                              └────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                          ┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────┐
                          │  Excluded by ED  │   │ ED Approved List │
                          │     N = 12       │   │     N = 123      │
                          └──────────────────┘   └──────────────────┘
                              ┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────────┐
                              │ Excluded by Labs │   │ Final Pool of Candidates │
                              │      N = 6       │   │        N = 117           │
                              └──────────────────┘   └──────────────────────────┘
                                  ┌──────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────┐
                                  │ Not Assigned to Panel │   │ Assigned to Panel │
                                  │        N = 77         │   │      N = 40       │
                                  │   (includes alternates)  │   └──────────────────┘
                                  └──────────────────────┘
                                      ┌──────────────────┐   ┌────────────────────────┐
                                      │  Withdrawals*    │   │ Conducted Site Visit** │
                                      │     N = 9        │   │        N = 34          │
                                      └──────────────────┘   └────────────────────────┘
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*   Due to family emergencies, illness, death, or time constraints

- Individuals known to ED who were particularly qualified to serve as a peer reviewer in a specific capacity, or for a specific Laboratory
- Individuals known to ED who would not be appropriate to participate as a peer reviewer due to previous difficulties, conflict with a specific Laboratory, etc.

DIR revised the list of candidates based on this feedback and submitted it to the Assistant Secretary of OERI for approval. Supporting materials provided with the slate of reviewers included a matrix of qualifications, a table with brief biographical sketches, and each individual's full curriculum vitae or resume. Upon receipt of approval from ED, initial notification letters were sent to individuals who were still under consideration. Those candidates who were no longer being considered were also notified of their status at that time.

The approved list of peer review candidates (N=123) was subsequently forwarded to the Labs for comment. Specifically, each Lab was asked to identify:

- Individuals who had a potential conflict of interest evaluating their site
- Individuals who had a potential conflict of interest affecting their ability to evaluate any Laboratory
- Individuals whom they considered to be highly qualified to serve as a peer review panelist, as well as those who would be a good panel chair

Justification was required for all requested modifications to the peer review candidate list. As shown in Figure II.1, the final pool of candidates included 117 individuals. It was from this group of highly qualified individuals that the actual reviewers were selected and assigned to specific Lab review panels.

B.   Panel Assignment

Because the *Standards* call for independent evaluations to be prepared by each peer reviewer, DIR felt that it was important that a broad range of perspectives and expertise be represented on each Lab review panel. While the panels were tailored to match the unique characteristics of each Laboratory, each panel was configured to contain, at a minimum, one or more individuals with the following characteristics:

- Research Expertise
- Evaluation Methodology Expertise
- Practical Experience (e.g., educational practitioner)
- Specialty Area Expertise (in the specialty area of the Laboratory)[2]
- Knowledge of the Labs or Lab-like activities
- Experience managing complex organizations
- Educational Policy & Practice Expertise
- Knowledge in content areas of Lab focus in addition to that of the specialty area

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[2] Specialty areas of the Laboratories include: Language and Cultural Diversity; Rural Education; Urban Education; Curriculum, Learning & Instruction; Technology; School Change Processes; Early Childhood Education; and Assessment and Accountability.

In most cases, individual panel members possessed multiple areas of competence with a particular strength in one area. The ultimate goal was to configure a panel with a complementary balance of skills that collectively embodied the necessary knowledge and expertise to evaluate the assigned Lab.

When making the initial panel assignments, DIR attempted to include at least one individual on each panel with knowledge of the region in which the Lab was located. Diversity among panel members (with respect to gender, race, and ethnicity) was also considered. Preference was given to peer review candidates that were highly recommended by ED or by the Labs, those who had been rated by DIR to have particularly strong skills or expertise, and to those who were able to serve on two panels.[3]

DIR originally proposed to configure each Lab review panel with five members and retain a pool of alternates from which to fill any position that was vacated prior to the site visit. Upon the recommendation of the TWG, DIR increased the membership of each panel to six reviewers to allow for attrition.[4] By starting with six panelists, DIR was fairly well assured that a trained panel, who had had the opportunity to review advance materials pertaining to the Lab prior to arriving on-site, would indeed be able to complete the evaluation for each site, even in the event of a panelist needing to withdraw for an unforeseen reason.

The first step in assigning reviewers to Lab-specific panels was to determine when each site visit would take place. DIR contacted the Labs and requested that they submit their availability to host a week-long site visit during the same ten-week time frame that the peer review candidates were asked about their availability. Site visit dates were set for the Interim Evaluation of each Laboratory based on feedback received from the Labs. Once these dates were established, DIR configured draft panels for each Laboratory evaluation based on the desired mix of skills and expertise and the availability of peer reviewers. Care was taken to not have panelists performing back to back evaluations (i.e., one week after the other) in order to allow sufficient time for the reviewer to complete the first evaluation before preparing for the second.

Draft panel assignments were submitted to ED for review and comment. Each Lab was also given an opportunity to review the list of panelists assigned to evaluate their Lab. Since ED and the Labs had already been asked to identify peer review candidates who had a conflict with a particular Lab, DIR did not anticipate major revisions based on this review process. In fact, only minor adjustments were made and the revised panel assignments were submitted to ED for approval.

After final approval of the panel assignments was received from ED, DIR proposed a chair for each panel. In addition to preparing an individual evaluation report, panel chairs were asked to facilitate the on-site data collection process and panel discussion sessions, conduct an exit interview at the end of the site visit, and prepare a synthesis report highlighting the major

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[3] DIR determined that the inclusion of panelists who could perform more than one evaluation was important to provide consistency across evaluations.

[4] It was agreed that a review could proceed with either a five- or six-member panel. Replacements would be necessary only when the panel membership dropped below five.

findings of the panelists. In consultation with the TWG, DIR determined that in considering nominees for panel chair, the candidate(s) should possess skills and have demonstrated experience in the following areas:

- Peer Review and/or Program Evaluation
- Leadership
- Group facilitation
- Report writing
- Broad knowledge of educational policies and practice
- Familiarity with the work of the Laboratories

Overall, 40 peer reviewers were assigned to fill the 60 panel slots (i.e., six panelists at each of 10 Labs). During the course of the training and evaluation process, nine peer reviewers withdrew from the evaluation due to family emergencies, illness, death, or scheduling conflicts. Three of these individuals were replaced with new reviewers while some of the remaining open slots were filled by reviewers who were willing to take on a second Lab assignment. Some of the vacancies were left open, with five of the Labs being evaluated by a five-member panel instead of six. In the end, 34 individuals conducted evaluation site visits. Selected demographic characteristics of this group are provided in Table II.2. A final roster of peer reviewers with brief biographical sketches is provided in Appendix III.

Table II.2
Final Panel Member Characteristics

- Gender composition
    - 50% male
    - 50% female

- Racial/Ethnic composition
    - 73% white
    - 18% black
    - 6% Asian or Pacific Islander
    - 3% Native American

- Professional affiliation
    - 38% higher education
    - 32% private research consultants
    - 24% K-12 practitioners
    - 6% community representatives

C.   Training

The training provided to review panelists was designed to ensure a common base of understanding of the evaluation framework, the peer review process and reporting

responsibilities. The peer reviewer training was conducted through a series of three teleconferences, with a total of five hours of training provided. Each peer reviewer was given a training manual containing detailed outlines for each of the training sessions, along with the evaluation framework, a list of peer reviewer responsibilities, the Phase III *Standards*, brief summaries of each of the Labs, review worksheets, the evaluation report format and other materials to support the training and evaluation process.

Each training session was focused on a different aspect of peer reviewer preparation. The objectives for each of the sessions are provided in Table II.3. Training Sessions #1 and #3 were designed to be Lab-specific, while Training Session #2 was a general session on the evaluation framework. DIR offered Session #2 six times over a 10-day period, during which panelists had the option of participating in whatever session best fit their schedule. Training Session #3 was held approximately two weeks prior to the scheduled site visit. During this session, the Lab was invited to make a brief (20 minute) presentation to provide whatever contextual information they felt was important for the panelists to have as they began to review the advance materials for the evaluation.

Table II.3
Objectives of the Peer Reviewer Training Sessions

Session #1
- Introduce DIR staff and panel members
- Provide background on the REL program and the Interim Evaluation
- Review the roles and responsibilities of panelists and panel chairs
- Provide an overview of the remaining training sessions
- Schedule Training Session #3 (Lab-specific training)

Session #2
- Provide reviewers with a working understanding of the evaluation framework, including evaluation questions, evaluation indicators, and possible data sources
- Introduce panel members to the review worksheets and the reporting format

Session #3
- Provide detailed contextual and factual information on assigned Laboratories
- Resolve questions related to evaluation indicators and data sources
- Review worksheets and other forms including panelists' final report format
- Review the advance materials received

In addition to the basic training provided to all peer reviewers, panel chairs were provided with an additional one-hour session to review the roles and responsibilities of panel chairs, including facilitation of Training Session #3, and to clarify any procedural issues. DIR staff also met with the panel chair on-site before the evaluation visit began to answer any last-minute questions and to review expectations.