

Getting Your Arms Around GIM: The Value of an ACGIM Site Visit

At most medical schools and teaching hospitals, divisions of general internal medicine (GIM) often possess large numbers of faculty in both inpatient and outpatient settings, are responsible for resident ambulatory clinics, and have major commitments to teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels of medical education. In addition, many institutions have large numbers of faculty dedicated to research. Running such a tripartite mission is a great undertaking, particularly as these activities often have varying degrees of financial support.

Adding to this responsibility are recent developments that have greatly impacted departments of internal medicine and GIM divisions, such as the growth of hospital medicine. For example, challenges of integrating colleagues in hospital medicine into divisions and ensuring successful and sustainable academic careers for hospitalists are on the minds of many department and division leaders.

The Association of Chiefs of General Internal Medicine (ACGIM) was founded in 1999 to support leadership development and advocate on behalf of GIM. As part of this mission, ACGIM supports an external review program of GIM divisions at the request of either the department chair or the division chief. The ACGIM Site Visit Program has conducted reviews at eight institutions since 2003.

Although external reviews have a long history in academic settings as a way of evaluating course content or as part of the promotion process, they are not consistently performed in most departments of internal medicine (1). The purpose of an external review is to garner additional perspective on strengths and weaknesses from experts in the same discipline at a different institution; external reviewers should be well-respected peers in the same or a closely-related field (2). A well-structured review includes both an introspective process on the part of the institution, requesting the visit and developing a written document that outlines the focus of the visit, and resolution following the visit, including a written report on the visit outcomes.

The goals of the site visit vary depending on the needs of the institution. At one division, a chief three years into her tenure requested that an external team evaluate her strategic plan for content, feasibility, and implementation recommendations. This chief shared the suggestions of the site visit team with both her chair and her faculty. In the wake of the visit, the division was able to better prioritize its strategic goals. At another institution, the department chair asked the site visit team to assist in selecting the first chief of a new GIM division. The team participated in ranking two candidates and provided external justification of the skills and qualifications likely to contribute to success in the chair's vision of growing a research oriented academic division.

At a third institution, the focus of the visit was to develop a plan to advance the scholarship of the GIM division, which resulted in several positive outcomes. The division chief was able to develop strategies that built on existing divisional strengths and capabilities and focused on growing scholarship in clinician educators. Outcomes thus far have included increased attendance and presentations at national meetings and the beginning of a research program in hospital medicine. The **Table** lists the aims of the external reviews completed to date.

TABLE: Aims of Completed ACGIM External Reviews

- Integrating hospitalist programs into academic divisions.
- Growing research programs and scholarship in GIM.
- Evaluating and selecting a new GIM division chief.
- Assistance in strategic planning process.
- Starting a new division of general internal medicine.

Typically, the agenda for the visit is set by the person requesting the visit. Two to three members of ACGIM and the Society of General Internal Medicine (SGIM) constitute the site visit team. The hosting institution articulates the purpose for the visit and can suggest division chiefs or senior faculty they would like to participate in the evaluation. The visit usually lasts for two days during which time the team meets with the department chair, the division chief, key department faculty, and key administrators or physicians in the institution. At the conclusion of the visit, a verbal evaluation session takes place during which immediate feedback is given to the requestor of the visit. Within 10 days, a confidential report of the findings is provided.

The cost of the visit depends on several factors, including the pre-visit preparatory work, the length of the visit, and the number of site visitors. A detailed cost proposal is drawn up after a phone consultation. The site visit program is housed in the ACGIM administrative offices. Site visits can be arranged by contacting Kay Ovington, ACGIM/SGIM Chief Operating Officer, at (800) 822-3060 or ovingtonk@sgim.org.

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