

Assessment Scope, Approaches, and Categories Relating to the Organizational Ombuds

Assessment Working Group Report to the Research and Assessment Committee

October 2025 Sub-Committee Review Draft Ver. 2.0

I. HISTORY AND TASKING

The Assessment Working Group [AWG] was created by the full IOA Research and Assessment Committee [RAC] on May 21, 2025 and tasked with reviewing options and developing recommendations for the RAC to assist it in developing a clear set of options and recommendations to the IOA regarding assessment tools, types of activities that could be assessed, and the particular goals and applications for various assessment tools and approaches. Bruce MacAllister was identified as the AWG lead with active support from:

- Hector Escalante,
- Lisa PytlikZillig, and
- Mary Rowe

The full committee chartered the working group with a number of possible taskings, including:

1. Discussing the full range of assessment options and possible applications within the organizational ombuds context and developing a manageable scope relating to what the group determines is most relevant and applicable to the ombuds community.
2. Developing a set of discussion priorities.
3. Identifying and selecting aspects of assessment that are relevant to the ombuds community.
4. Developing an action plan with a goal of producing assessment resources and guidance for the ombuds community.
5. Developing a sequence, action plan, and schedule for developing the/each resource.
6. Refining assessment resources for sharing with the full Research and Assessment Committee.
7. Seeking input from the whole committee.
8. Finalizing resources
9. Determining sharing and distribution of resources

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II. METHODOLOGY

Initial efforts to meet and review the tasks and to set priorities with the participation of all working group members failed due to repeated calendar conflicts among the group. Therefore the group decided that MacAllister and Rowe would develop an initial document, which would be circulated for each member to add their individual contributions.

MacAllister and Rowe met telephonically on June 19, 2025 and this dialogue resulted in developing the fundamental approach, scope, and design rubric for this report. Both Rowe and MacAllister have extensive experience with various aspects of program assessment. Additional inputs were received from Tim Hedeem and from Ellen Miller.

This document will be edited, expanded, and adjusted based on the additional input received. Additional information, such as terms and some additional graphics are included in the Appendix to this draft Report.

III. CATEGORIES OF ASSESSABLE ACTIVITIES:

(NOTE: This is a working list. The goal for the working group is to review, expand, clarify, and/or discuss items for final list.)

There are a variety of ways that ombuds programs may be assessed. Possibly among others, the larger categories include:

1. **What Ombuds Do** — Ombuds seem to have variations in their services portfolio. The objective of developing instruments and metrics here is to continue to help define what the service components are of the typical mainstream ombuds program.
2. **Return on Investment [ROI] at the Organizational Level and Organizational value added** - What value do ombuds add to an organization? How does having an ombuds program reduce demand and expense within the organization and other units? (Data here might fall into several categories, including:
 - a. Trends and phenomenon that point to the overall value of a program. (An example here might be reduction in internal grievances, reduction in harassment claims, etc.
 - b. Examples of risk resolved or mitigated with the assistance of the ombuds, such as a major law suit avoided.
 - c. Organizational impact, such as examples of working group optimization due to conflict resolution or other ombuds assistance.
3. **Ombuds Program Design (similar to standard audit review of “system design”)** – This measures the design of the ombuds program relative to available benchmarks and metrics such as best practices. Metrics such as scope of services, program design parameters relative to

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IOA Standards and other benchmarks, etc. Is the program structured to be adequately independent, impartial, confidential, and informal? Different metrics may apply depending on the program approach, viz., is the program a “brick and mortar” in-house program, a virtual distance-based program, a contractor provided service, or other approach.

4. **Ombuds Program Performance (e.g. “system performance” in standards audit parlance)-** How well the particular ombuds program (and individual ombuds) perform(s) within the system. Is confidentiality well protected? Is the ombuds truly independent in actual practice? How well is the ombuds program “embedded” within its organization? If a virtual program, how well do its systems perform.
5. **ROI relating to Risk Avoidance and Larger Organizational impact -** Has the Ombuds Program demonstrated significant risk reduction, for example by helping avoid litigation and other costly claims? To what degree do ombuds contribute to the larger system of conflict resolution (litigation, mediation, arbitration, etc.). What are the metrics that apply to determine whether the program adds significant cost savings, risk management value, public relations value, staff morale, and other similar metrics. Metrics relating to organizational value added may tend to relate more closely to case-specific outcomes, often for higher profile situations. Metrics associated with organizational impact relate to the program’s contribution to the larger system of issue resolution.

IV. POTENTIAL TOOLS AND METRICS RELEVANT TO THE CATEGORIES:

(NOTE: Again, this is a working list. The goal for the working group is to review, expand, clarify, and/or discuss items for final list.)

Among many others, sources of information and metrics for these would include:

1.) What Ombuds do:

- IOA Survey
- IOA Certification standards and metrics

2.) Value added:

- Mary Rowe and Tim Hedeem survey
- Input from organization leaders
- Training and outreach metrics
- Leader coaching
- More metrics and survey approaches are necessary here.

3.) Ombuds Program Design:

- IOA certification standards
- MacAllister/Lopez scored Program Design Assessment instrument
- Metrics derived from Ombuds Service Triangle [MacAllister 2020]

4.) Ombuds Program Performance:

- MacAllister/Lopez scoreable Performance Assessment instrument
- Ombuds visitor surveys
- Ombuds performance evaluations
- MacAllister “Embeddedness Assessment Instrument” [MacAllister 2025]

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- Organizational improvements and feedback
- Leader coaching and development

5.) Impact/Contribution to larger system:

- "Issues" ultimately resolved by visitor using ombuds approaches and assistance. (With visitor consent, ombuds may facilitate awareness and resolution at various stages with various levels of visitor's further involvement.)
- Reduction in external claims (EEOC/ Human Rights Tribunals/legal, etc.)
- Increased utilization of referral resources (e.g., at Los Alamos, formal sexual harassment filings increased by 32% in the first year that the ombuds program existed and referral mapping showed Ombuds was the nearly exclusive source.)
- decreased burdens on other systems that are required to dilute focus and address issues not completely within their scope.
- Comparative effectiveness of ombuds approach even when compared to traditional, structured mediation.
- Gaps that the ombuds role fills that were previously left unaddressed.

V. ADDITIONAL METRICS THAT MAY APPLY TO VARIOUS CATEGORIES:

1. THINGS AN OMBUDS CAN MEASURE:

- Risks avoided
- Performance barriers removed
- Performance enhanced through coaching
- Assistance to leadership resolving productivity barriers and conflict
- Leadership development
- Barriers to productivity identified and solutions collaboratively developed
- Policy improvements
- Enhancing performance of partner organizations (e.g., Fraud, Ethics, EEO, etc.)
- Sources of issues and identified opportunities for response and improvement
- Embeddedness

Note: Each of these metric areas could have its own assessment tools and approaches.

2. ASSESSMENT TOOLS COULD INCLUDE:

- Visitor surveys
- Leadership surveys
- Ombuds self-review of cases: risks mitigated or avoided and benefits achieved

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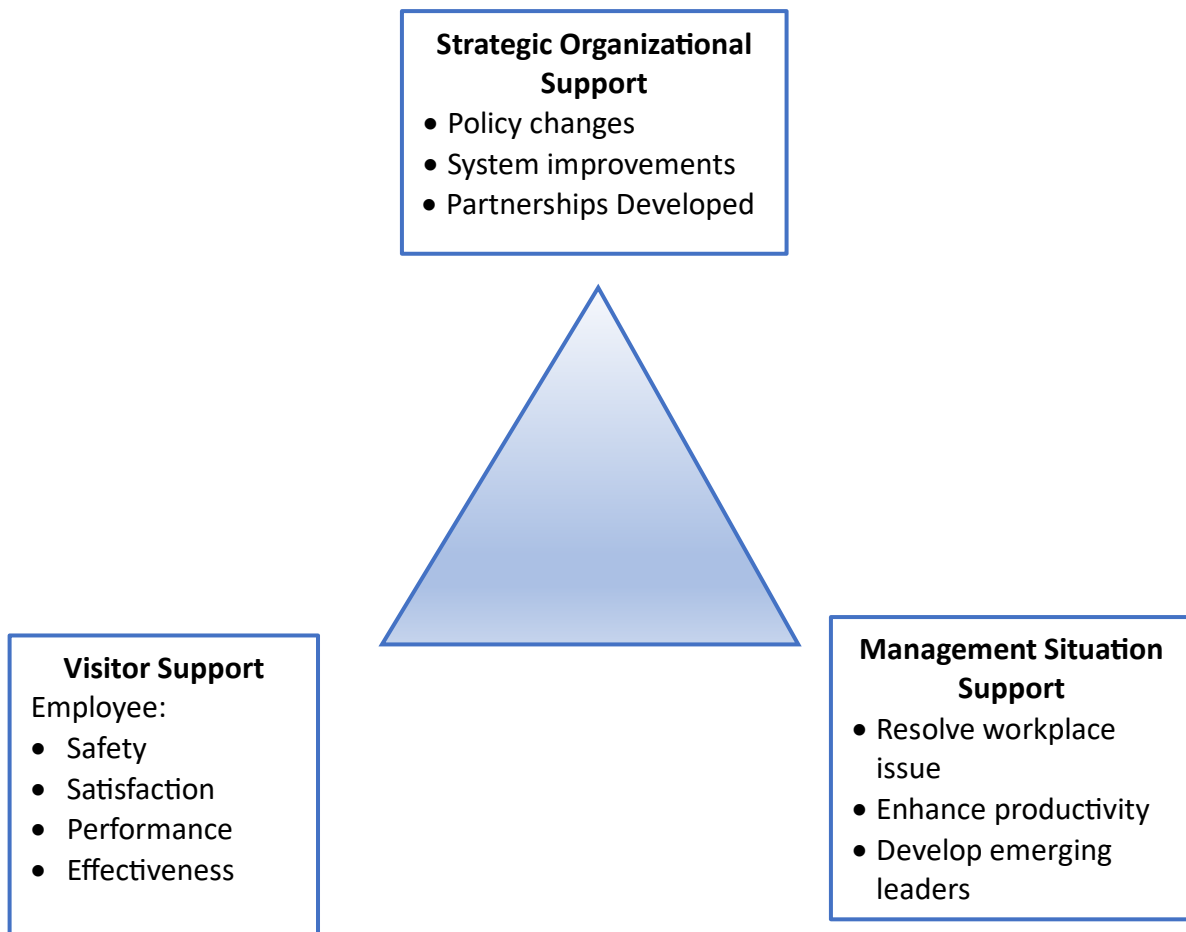
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VI. DEVELOPING A CONSISTENT APPROACH FOR OMBUDS CATEGORIZATION OF RISK

- Numbers benefited or who avoided negative impacts
- Shared understanding of evaluating potential consequences of error”
 - Operational
 - Financial
 - Reputational

VII. UNDERSTANDING AND DEVELOPING METRICS FOR THE OMBUDS SUPPORT TRIANGLE:

[MacAllister 2024]



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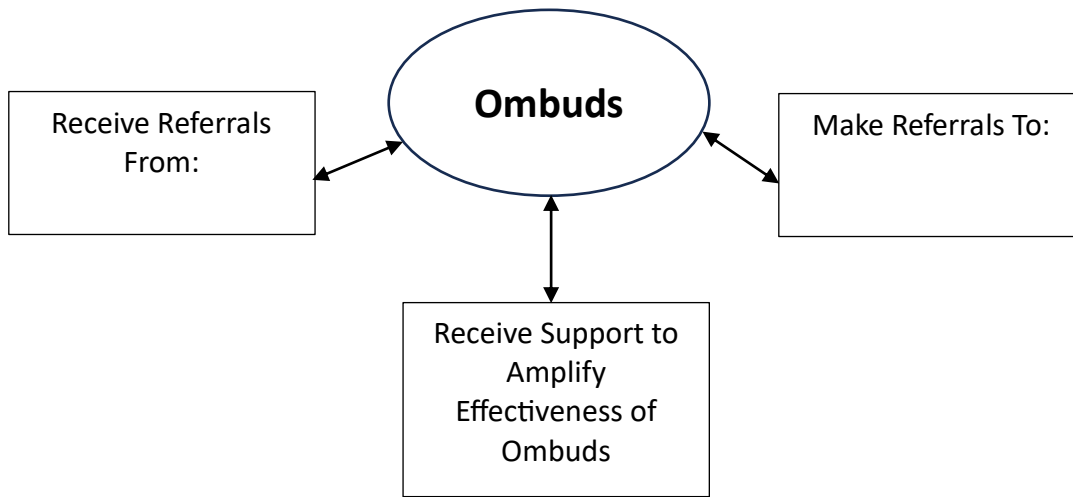
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VIII. MEASURING EMBEDDEDNES

[See MacAllister 2025 Article]

Embeddedness is fundamental to ombuds effectiveness. Developing a community of mutual support and a matrix of key relationships and understanding how each partner mutually enhances performance of the other enables the ombuds to be fully effective.

Examples include: MIT Portia, LANL Services Council, UO Ombuds-generated Services Guide



IX. POSSIBLE DATA FOR OMBUDS TO TRACK TO LATER MEASURE

- Visitor demographics
(Highly dependent on available data and not that important in some settings)
 - Job or Student category,
 - gender,
 - race,
 - age,
 - Ethnicity etc.

Note: *Collecting demographics may be difficult or impossible, absent reliable, accessible resources within the particular organization. Speculating about demographics is typically not useful or reliable. However, assuming a reliable data source, visitor demographics can be useful in situations where the data illustrate inappropriate or illegal disparities, such as adverse patterns relating to race or gender. An addition important risk factor to using demographic data is that disclosing demographics can create a risk of compromising visitor identity, if the demographics can be used to draw correlations to individuals within a work unit.*

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- Visitor concern or issue:
 - Seeking information
 - Interpersonal Concerns
 - -With whom
 - -About what
 - Evaluative issues
 - Performance appraisal
 - Promotion, etc.
 - Group Conflict
 - Executive/Manager coaching
 - Etc.

- Type of Ombuds Service provided
 - Information
 - Coaching
 - Facilitated dialogue
 - Informal inquiry
 - Forwarding concern or “notice”
 - Etc.

- Follow up or Custom initiatives
 - Training
 - Group Intervention or Organizational Development-like support
 - Trend Reporting
 - Etc.

- Referral Information
 - Received referral from:
 - Referred individual to:

- Assistance/Intervention Metrics
 - Engagement timeframes and length
 - # of encounters
 - # of individuals involved
 - Phone contacts
 - Contact hours
 - Etc.

- Special high-risk matters
 - Standout interventions
 - Cases deemed important by the organization or by the ombuds
 - E.g., National security issues
 - Sexual Assault situations,
 - Etc.

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X. APPENDIX: TERMS, GRAPHICS AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The experience-base and exposure to theory and application is different among the contributors to this document. Therefore, I have included a list of terms with some discussion with the goal that all contributors to the final version of this document will be aligned in terminology and the widely accepted approaches used in the various contexts of program review and assessment. The group gratefully acknowledges the input received from Tim Hedeem to help flesh out many of the terms. Additional terms were incorporated based on MacAllister's scored program review audit instruments and projects.

A. Ombuds Role Definition Terms¹:

Each of the categories defined below can be subject to assessment, but may require different tools and approaches to measure.

- Ombuds Role Conception** – refers to what a particular individual ombuds interprets and understands their ombuds roles and responsibilities to be, including the scope of services the ombuds understands that they provide, and the limits to those services. It also refers to how the individual ombuds interprets their professional responsibilities to be while undertaking their roles and responsibilities.
- Ombuds Role Expectations** – refers to what the wider stakeholder community perceives and understands the ombuds role to be within the particular setting.
- Ombuds Role Acceptance** - refers to the roles and responsibilities that the individual ombuds considers acceptable, including any additional roles and responsibilities that the ombuds performs, even those activities may involve actions and activities that are beyond the roles and responsibilities initially conceived of by the ombuds.
- Ombuds Role Behavior** - refers to those activities and roles that the ombuds actually consistently performs while performing the tasks associated with their position.
- Ombuds Role Efficacy** - refers to the effectiveness of the role performed when measured against quantitative and qualitative metrics.

Additional Terms Relating to Metrics and Assessment Tools and Approaches

- Social and emotional learning ("SEL")** - refers to a broad array of concepts and skills intended to support abilities to understand and regulate one's emotions, to consider how others may perceive one's communications, and to recognize dynamics such as inclusion/exclusion, stereotyping/generalizing, and bullying. Whenever ombuds engage in

¹ From *MacAllister, Roles and Responsibilities Workbook*, ©2021, all rights reserved, used with permission for purposes of this document.

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careful listening, express empathy, or engage in conflict coaching, they're both using and modeling SEL learnings--and when they support or encourage a visitor to consider another's perspective, or they role-play a difficult conversation, or they suggest a visitor write a letter that may never be sent, they're doing a little SEL education. [Hedeen, 2025]

Phenomenology - is an approach to understanding the world through a person's empirical observations of the world. Often the basis for qualitative sociological studies, it emphasizes the person's experience of reality, their consciousness of the world; as such it doesn't compare one's experience to anyone else's nor to any "objective" reality.

Standpoint epistemology - refers to accepting the individual's personal experience as valid and real to them and that each person is entitled to hold their own "truth."

Prescribed Review Approach - refers to the steps identified and agreed to between a program and its staff, for conducting a program review. Typically, these steps may include, among other actions:

- Pre-review negotiation and agreement on the scope of the review and the metrics to be used.
- Pre-review self-review and study conducted internally by the organization.
- Sharing and review of the self-study with the external review team.
- External review conducted using the agreed metrics and approaches.
- External Review Team Draft Comment Report
- Additions, corrections, any additional review activities based on input from organization.
- Final Report, Recommendations and, depending on agreed scope and approach, any identified remediation measures. [MacAllister 2019]

Ombuds Program Review - A process through which an ombuds program can be reviewed through an independent resource. Typically a program review involves a number of steps, which may include, among other steps:'

- Agreement between the reviewer and the program regarding review steps and applicable metrics.
- Agreement on assessment instrument, scoring approach (if any) and ownership of material developed and authority or lack thereof to suggest or impose remediation measures by external reviewer.
- Initial self-review by program staff.

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- Independent program review and preparation of preliminary report.
- Opportunity to comment and suggest oversights or corrections.
- Final report, which may include suggested remediation
- Remediation plan
- Follow up review

[MacAllister 2019]

Systems Assessment – Is an assessment approach that looks to the existing design requirements including those required by recognized standards of practice, codes of ethics, any existing best practices documentation, chartering documents, benchmarks and other standards as may be agreed to between the assessors and the entity under review. A system assessment typically reviews the *design components* of the system to assess whether the system, as designed and implemented, meets all design requirements for the system and also determines if those requirements are, indeed, adequate to meet the anticipated needs and purposes of the system. Assessors review the existing system to determine whether all the required components are in place and whether the overall design and architecture of the system meets applicable requirements and anticipated demands. √[MacAllister 2019]

Performance or Program Efficacy Assessment – uses metrics to assess how well the system performs within its existing design parameters. While a system may be well-designed, it may be poorly operated. A performance assessment uses metrics to examine how well those using the system operate it. Among others, typical review metrics may include, staffing depth, turn-over rates, adequacy of training and incumbent skills, program documentation and on-boarding, processing times, outcomes, program user feedback, program beneficiary feedback, and other metrics applied to assess how well the system has been operated. [MacAllister 2019]

Assessment Review Instruments – refers to instruments used by an independent review resource. Typically, the instruments identify the metrics used in the review, and may include ratings or scoring systems relative to the metrics. [MacAllister 2019]

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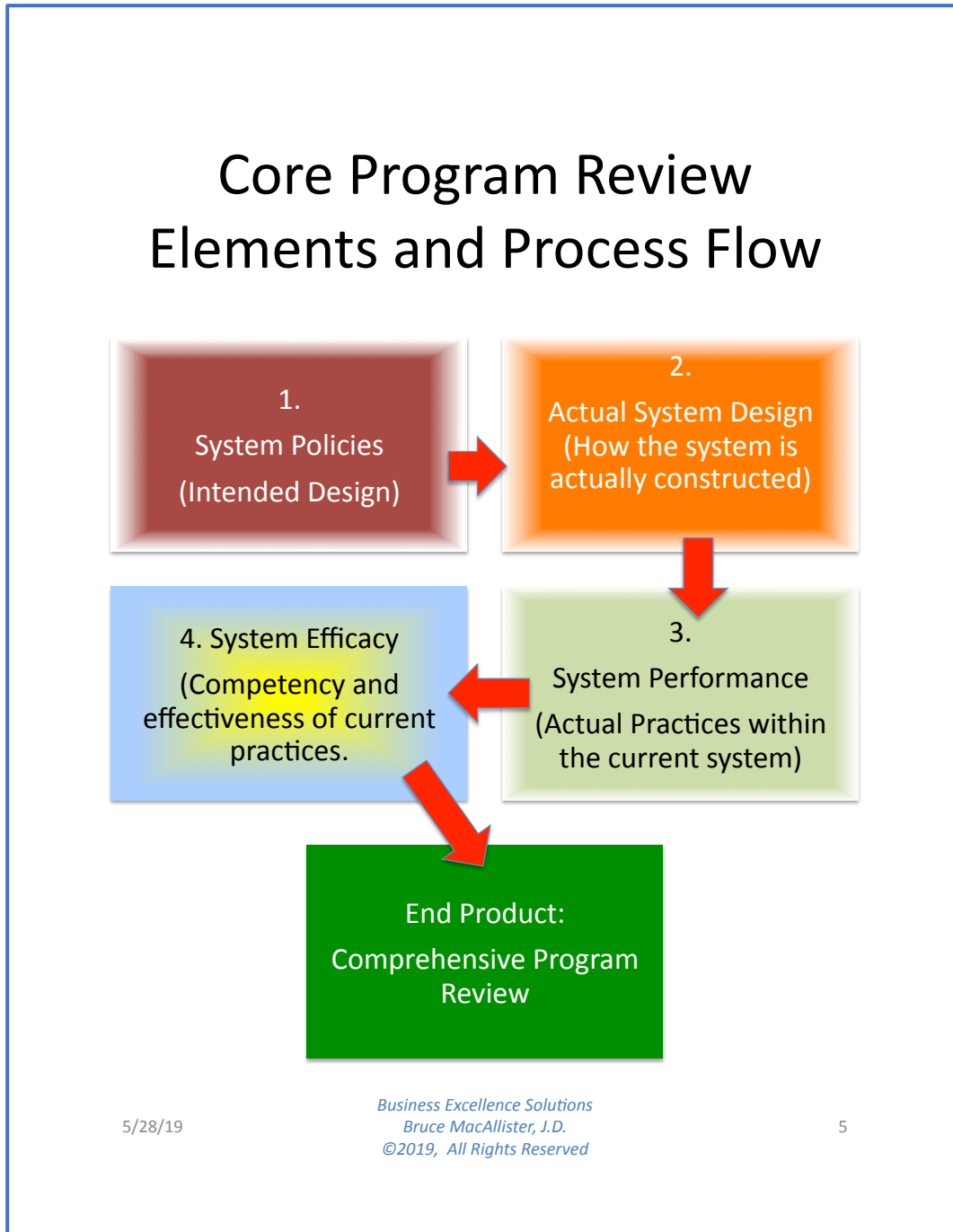
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B. Schematic of Program Assessment Approach

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