Prepare for Peer Observation

Share |

Jump to recommended peer observation templates

Each Spring in a memorandum the President of the University of Texas at Austin asked deans and department chairs for their recommendations for all changes in academic rank/status for the current academic year. The General Guidelines for Promotion and Tenure of All Faculty Ranks is available from the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost's Office Web.

Included in these Guidelines is the following information on page eleven:

C.3 TEACHING:

a. Budget Council Statement. The budget council must provide a separate document assessing teaching performance that includes both the signatures and typed names of those responsible for preparing it. The statement is required for all tenured, tenure-track, lecturer, clinical and adjunct faculty, as well as research professor series faculty that have been assigned a teaching role. The document is to provide an explanation of the evaluation procedures and measures used and the assessment should:

- discuss both student course/instructor evaluations and peer observation reports
- discuss the candidate's willingness to teach courses for which there is strong student demand
- describe the balance between undergraduate and graduate teaching, as applicable
- discuss relevant evidence of merit or recognition for teaching excellence
- describe and provide documentation of organized service learning instruction, as applicable
- reflect familiarity with the teaching portfolio
- describe participation on graduate committees
- describe supervision of postdoctoral students, as applicable
- consider any special circumstances concerning the faculty member's teaching performance, including any innovative contributions described (e.g., innovative teaching methods, use of instructional technology, interdisciplinary teaching, innovative curriculum development activities, supervision of undergraduate special project courses)

In addition to the budget council assessment, the teaching section of each candidate's dossier must contain the following supporting documentation:

b. Peer Classroom Observation Reports. These reports are broad observations of the candidate's effectiveness as a teacher at the graduate and/or undergraduate levels by those faculty members conducting the in-class observations. The reports should cover such elements as presentation, course content, organization, clarity of written materials, rigor and fairness of written examinations, appropriateness of methodology and student outcomes.

Peer observations of classes should be conducted periodically for all faculty members. Include in the dossier all reports of in-class observations conducted while in rank. Do not consider observation reports for the fall semester during which the candidate for promotion is expected to be reviewed (i.e. Fall 2012). The budget council is to consider the peer observations in their assessment of the candidate's teaching service record. Each peer observation report is to include:

- number and title of course observed
- date of report

- date of classroom observation
- description of methods by which instructor engages students in learning
- date on which the observation was discussed with the candidate
- name and signature of observer(s)

Peer evaluation of teaching is therefore an essential part of a faculty member's promotion and tenure file according to the University of Texas at Austin. Peer observation is one part of the evaluation of teaching for improvement or for personnel decisions for merit, promotion, and/or tenure.

What aspects of teaching are faculty peers most qualified to evaluate?

Cohen and McKeachie (1980) identified ten aspects that peers are most competent to evaluate about teaching. Articles on peer evaluation of teaching suggest that all of these aspects can be used during the peer review process:

- Mastery of course content
- Selection of course content
- Course organization
- Appropriateness of course objectives
- Appropriateness of instructional materials (i.e., readings, media)
- Appropriateness of evaluation devices (i.e., exams, written assignments)
- Appropriateness of methodology used to teach specific content areas
- Commitment to teaching and concern for student learning
- Student achievement, based on performance on exams and projects
- Support of departmental instructional efforts

A review of these aspects is facilitated by a teaching portfolio prepared by the instructor and made available to the peer observers. In addition, peer evaluation to improve teaching (formative process) or a summative peer evaluation process can include a series of classroom observations of one instructor by faculty peers and/or administrators.

What is peer observation?

The process of peer observation involves faculty peers who review an instructor's performance through classroom observation and examination of instructional materials including course design. Observations of classroom behavior are intended for reviewing the teaching process and its possible relationship to learning. The focus is on verbal and nonverbal behaviors of both the instructor and the students in the classroom. Peer observation can produce the following evidence:

- Comments on the relationship between instructor acts and student behaviors
- Comparison with methods peers consider to be good
- Specific suggestions for instructors to improve teaching
- Dialogue with peer about teaching strategies and best practices

The process of observation and evaluation require a very high degree of professional ethics and objectivity. Effective peer observation requires training in observational and analytical skills. Less subjective peer observations require time for multiple reviews.

The major strengths of peer observations are:

- Peers are familiar with college goals, priorities, values, faculty problems
- Peer observation helps faculty upgrade their own profession
- Peer observers can be chosen from instructor's content area
- Both the observer and the observed may learn some new teaching strategies and open a dialogue about teaching and learning

The major weaknesses of peer observation are:

- Data is often biased due to previous data, personal relationships, peer pressure
- Peer relationships may suffer
- Possible bias due to observer's preference for own teaching methods
- An untrained observer may not be able to focus on specific skills or strategies that might enhance the peer's teaching

All things considered, key authors on peer observation agree that peer observation of classroom teaching is one useful part of a peer evaluation process.

What are two purposes of peer observation?

Peer observations may be used for both formative feedback, for the improvement of instruction, and summative assessment for making personnel decisions. Braskamp and Ory (1994, p .202) stated in *Assessing Faculty Work* that:

> Peer observations are particularly useful in a program of faculty self-assessment and improvement. Instructors who wish to analyze their own teaching and student learning can benefit from a colleague's observation. Such classroom observations can be flexible and informal. In contrast, observations for personnel decision making need to be more formalized and standardized to ensure fairness, reliability, and credibility. Several trained colleagues making independent visits provide more credible summative information than does one untrained colleague making a single visit.

Formative peer observation is the process of faculty members attending and observing peers in the classroom to assist with the **improvement of teaching**. This process may be specified by the department as a part of faculty development activities or entered into by individual faculty members who want to improve their teaching by being reviewed by peers.

The formative peer observation process is most important for junior faculty as part of the teaching improvement process in the years before tenure and promotion review. This process can prepare junior faculty early for their career teaching demands. Longitudinal studies of junior faculty stress that early teaching demands often become overwhelming and can prevent the expected devotion to quality research and service. Early intervention provides junior faculty with the tools for success in teaching as well as research and service.

Summative peer observation involves the **evaluation** of peer classroom behaviors to provide teaching effectiveness information used for merit, promotion, and/or tenure decisions. Typically, Ad Hoc Committees on Teaching consisting of senior faculty members, junior faculty members, graduate and/or upper lever undergraduates meet individually with the instructor to be observed. The instructor and committee members review all teaching materials, i.e., course materials, syllabi, exams, teachings aides, student evaluations, student advising records, and even face-to-face talks with students to obtain a complete picture of teaching **before** entering the classroom for an observation.

As indicated above, the committee approach to the observation process is somewhat different for formative and summative peer observation. Despite the differences in the processes and the objectives in the two processes, key authors believe that the development and use of an effective formative peer observation process leads naturally to a fair, objective summative peer observation process. Certainly the observation instruments developed for formative peer observation can be used for summative review in many cases. Observer skills developed in formative observation will be directly applicable to a summative peer evaluation process.

Although outcomes of formative and summative observations are different, effective formative peer observation serves as a vehicle for effective summative peer observation and evaluation at the departmental level. Most authors believe that the two processes are compatible and mutually supportive of faculty involvement in either formative or summative peer observation.

How do you choose or design a peer observation instrument?

Following guidelines established by the department or school will ease many feelings of misgiving about the peer observation process. An organizational plan that includes both a set of departmental observation forms and a departmental or division Ad Hoc Committee on Teaching helps validate the peer observation process with all faculty. The three most common ways to document or guide formative or summative peer observations are: checklists, rating scales, and written analyses.

Types of Instruments:

Peer evaluations of a faculty member's classroom behavior can be based on checklists, rating scales, and/or written analyses. Each type of document has its strong and weak points as a format for peer observation.

- **Checklists** focus the observer's attention during the observation. In addition, the instructor reviews the checklist before the classroom visit to understand observation expectations. Checklists are often viewed as too restrictive by both observers and those observed. Checklists also only indicate that a behavior has been observed with no feedback about the effectiveness or lack of effectiveness of a specific behavior. Checklists are similar to rating scales with no scoring involved. A checklist can be created from a rating scale form by deleting the scale and asking the observers to record observed behaviors.
- **Rating scales** also focus the attention of the observer and the instructor but add the dimension of indicating relative effectiveness of a given behavior. All rating sheets need to include behavior descriptors and an explanation of the scale points. All instruments must be clearly relevant to the classroom teaching situation. Checklists and rating sheets include specific language for instructors to react to or take action on.
- **Written analyses** format an open-ended opportunity for a peer not only to select what to observe, but also, how to interpret the information and structure the evaluation. The down side to written appraisals is that peers can comment on very limited behaviors, focus only on one criterion, or reflect only the observer's personal approach to teaching.

It is suggested that a combination of checklist, rating sheet, and written analysis formats be adopted and used for formative and summative observations. All observation forms should yield accurate insights into the classroom environment and obtain data typical of classroom behavior.

One checklist, rating sheet, or written analysis form is not likely to cover all teaching demands in any one department. For example, one form is not likely to address teaching in a large lecture class, teaching a special projects class, and teaching a laboratory class. Some of the same variables may appear in all three teaching situations, but each environment has specific teaching demands that the others do not.

After investigating the literature and practices at institutions across the country, the Center for Teaching and Learning developed these templates to help guide your experience of peer observation. They are designed to stimulate a healthy, positive, and productive discussion among colleagues.

- Recommended Process for Conducting Peer Reviews of Teaching
- Peer Review of Syllabus
- Peer Review of Class Assignments and Assessments
- Peer Observation of Teaching
- Peer Observation of Teaching Conversation Synopsis

- Self-Evaluation of Teaching

Formative Peer Observation Process

Some basic types of formative peer observation are: a master faculty program, mentor-mentee pairs, peer development triads, graduate student feedback, small group instructional diagnosis, and the appraisal interview.

Master Faculty Program - Katz and Henry (1988) promoted a Master Faculty Program that paired a successful senior professor with a junior faculty member to collaborate on teaching; to observe each other's classes to learn; to compare and improve teaching methodologies; and to foster weekly discussions about effective teaching. These "buddy system" collaborations provide many rewards for both faculty members involved. With information gathered in the observations, faculty pairs meet once a week or so to discuss how student learning has been fostered or hindered in the learning methodologies and to share insights about improving teaching. This program is being used in many colleges and universities today.

Mentor-Mentee Relationships - Roles played by mentors include friendship for emotional and personal support, career guidance for increased professional visibility, information source for discussing departmental and university expectations, and/or intellectual guidance to provide research and writing reviews. More departments are arranging mentor-mentee pairing thereby giving new faculty the greatest opportunity to prove their worth and fulfill institutional expectations. Mentors are generally selected from the same discipline but Boice suggests that effective mentoring does not have to be discipline bound. Boice (1992) found that:

- Only a handful or new hires found useful mentoring on their own. They also tended to teach cautiously by emphasizing facts and principles over active student involvement.
- It was not necessary to pair new faculty only with senior faculty members from the same department. The pairing of junior faculty members and mentors from other departments was equally effective.
- Useful mentoring did not depend on pairs picking each other. Assigning mentors was equally effective. It was often necessary, however, to prompt pairs to meet regularly until meeting became habitual.
- Although mentoring was generally beneficial, many mentors were reluctant to give advice to new faculty on teaching, scholarly productivity, and time management. Thus, mentoring was not without its deficiencies.

Master Faculty and mentor-mentee programs are very similar in organization, but mentors are not necessarily designated as "master teachers" and may be chosen directly by the mentees for reasons other than teaching expertise.

Peer Development Triads - Peer development triads extend the "pair concept" and offer additional opportunities to share and compare teaching/learning strategies with two peers.

Graduate Student Feedback - An example of a graduate student feedback mechanism can be found in The University of Chicago's Graduate School of Business. They designed a one hour MBA course for graduate students to provide feedback to instructors by auditing a professor's classes, videotaping selected presentations, and gathering suggestions from enrolled students for mid-semester course changes.

Small Group Instructional Discussion - The Small Group Instructional Discussion (SGID) is another method used to improve instruction with the aid of a peer or faculty development consultant. The process, which can be easily learned by peers, is described by Bennett (1987) as follows:

- With a half an hour or so left in a class period, the instructor introduces a facilitator (peer) as a friend who will gather ideas about the students' learning experiences. The word evaluation is not used because of its pejorative connotation to students. Before leaving the room, the instructor informs the class that he or she has voluntarily requested this SGID and hopes to learn about how the course is going.
- The facilitator assures the students that the group results are confidential and will be shared only with the teacher. Groups of four or so students are formed to discuss learning experiences and a note-taker for each group is designated by the facilitator. The facilitator also lists three questions on the board/PPt for each groups to discuss:

1. *Which aspects of instruction help you learn?*
2. *Which do not help?*
3. *What do you suggest to improve your learning?*

- After ten minutes of discussion, the facilitator records the students' responses using appropriate quantifiers ("most said," "a few said," "25% said"). The facilitator summarizes the major ideas and shares the summary with the students for additions or corrections.
- The facilitator then shares student responses with the teacher as soon as possible, using the students' own words whenever possible. If serious problems have emerged, the facilitator highlights solutions suggested by the students.
- During the next class period, if possible, the instructor replies to the students' analysis. Instructors should try to implement at least one of the suggestions made by the students; suggestions that are inconsistent with course goals or a teacher's style do not need to be given serious consideration.

Appraisal Interview - The appraisal interview is used by chairs who want to discuss a teaching problem with an instructor. First the chair needs to create a supportive environment for the interview and begins with questions about how things are going in general. The chair may share some insights from her/his classroom observations to offer encouraging comments about the instructor's practices. Then the chair asks whether the instructor is having any difficulties, the chair then can refer to information taken in from their own classroom observations or problems raised by students. Finally, the chair asks how she/he or the department can help the instructor solve the problem. The appraisal interview must be handled carefully and more than one meeting may be required to bring about the necessary modifications. The primary objective of any type of formative observation process is improvement of teaching.

Summative Peer Observation Process

The three person committee, faculty, student, and/or administrator, or the Ad Hoc Committee on Teaching, is the most frequently used arrangement for summative peer observation. A larger committee becomes too cumbersome and a smaller committee does not provide enough data. The Ad Hoc Committee on Teaching can be composed of nominations made by instructor and the chair/dean; this selection process is particularly helpful for promotion and tenure decisions. Shared nominations provide the instructor the opportunity to recommend one or more observers for the committee. Preferably, the committee members will remain anonymous to each other and the general departmental faculty, in order to avoid contamination of observations. A summary of the three faculty/administrator/student observations should be provided by the committee chair.

Summary reports based on checklists, rating forms, and/or written analysis should include the following information. (Centra, 1993, p. 130):

- Classroom performance observation forms
- Instructional materials review
- Advising activity review
- Participation on graduate committees and graduate teaching
- Special recognition for teaching
- Overall recommendation

Protocol for Summative Peer Observation Committee Members

It is suggested that each Ad Hoc Committee member follow this protocol for summative peer observations (Braskamp & Ory, 1994; Millis, 1987).

- Observers must respect the observed instructor or ask to be removed from the committee. A faculty member with a strong difference of opinion or personal dislike for a peer has difficulty being a fair observer.
- Each observer meets privately with the instructor before the classroom observations to discuss the

instructor's objectives for their classes and to review course materials. The observed instructor is allowed to ask questions about the process.

- Each committee member makes arrangements to observe the equivalent of three or four class sessions. If the observed faculty member is teaching in two or more venues (i.e., large lecture section, graduate courses, performance class) the observer should arrange to attend classes in more than one course. Fewer classes will not produce a balance of exposure for the observer or the observed instructor.
- The summary report provides overall information that clearly represents all the observation results. Recommendations should be accompanied by specific examples or observation particulars.

What are some of the key issues to remember about formative or summative peer observation?

There are key issues to remember as you enter a formative or summative peer observation process:

- Any observation system chosen by a department must be well-understood by observers and those observed. Actual classroom practice with the observation instrument is mandatory for its' effective use. The observer must practice with the peer observation form/s before classroom visits. The observation is defined by the instrument and the observer must be able to record behavior in the categories on the form. Training for observers is required in order to help them see what is happening in the classroom. Simple or elaborate systems require extensive training to prepare observers. The turnover of administrators and faculty in all departments indicate that a cyclical pattern peer observation training program is needed.
- All observation data are representative of overall teacher performance in the classroom. Observers must be aware that some classes are atypical so that they will devote enough time to secure typical data about the instructor activity. Observers are aware of the content of the class, time of day, length of class, and other temporal factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, general appearance of the instructor, etc., and the possible effect of these factors on observation results.
- Observers and the observed instructors are aware of the institutional and departmental context for the importance of teaching. Deans and chairs need to make a general announcement about the role of peer observation, the observation instruments to be used, committee assignments, and the intrinsic value of formative and summative peer observation and evaluation.
- Each individual faculty observer meets face-to-face with the individual instructors being observed, remembering that some faculty have tremendous fears about being observed, and that the act of observation will effect the overall teaching/ learning environment to some degree or another.
- Observers and instructors are aware that observations do not take place in isolation and therefore produce evidence with possible legal implications. Ad Hoc Committee members need to be aware of the sensitivity of observation reports and recommendations made for summative peer evaluations. As Centra (1993, p. 160) stated "Faculty members and administrators should have a general awareness of their legal rights and responsibilities, as stated in federal or state laws and interpreted in court cases; faculty members are both employees, about whom decisions are made, and peers who sit in judgment."

It is recommended that peer classroom observations be used as one part of the larger picture with regard to evaluation of teaching effectiveness. Do not give peer observations undue weight in summative evaluations for the following reasons:

- Limited amount of time observed
- Different views of teaching among committee members
- Supplementary to other sources about teaching
- Peers do not observe systematically
- Peer observations often tainted by reputation of instructor
- Colleagues tend to be generous in ratings
- Low correlation of ratings between different colleagues
- Peers generally have limited experiences observing teaching

- Historically faculty not trained to observe teaching
- Colleagues better at judging research than service or teaching

What are some recommendations for instructional use of peer observations?

Braskamp and Ory (1994, p. 205-206) list the following suggestions for adopting peer observation:

- Training observers is highly recommended; training helps observers focus on desired criteria and learn how to observe correctly. The Center for Teaching & Learning (CLT) can provide such training.
- Departments may wish to rotate annually the responsibilities of peer observation among eligible faculty; however small departments will have difficulty in this regard. Alternatively, academic officers can select several observers from the list of potential observers nominated by the instructor. Observations by more than one colleague are recommended, since all faculty, quite naturally, rely on their own experiences, values, and definitions of effective teaching in making assessments.
- All faulty should be informed of the observation process before implementation in order to ensure that all observations are conducted in a similar fashion. At least three classroom observations for a given class over a single semester or quarter are recommended to ensure adequate representation; observation evidence often is suspect if only one class visit is made.
- Classroom visits can be both announced and unannounced, depending on local practice and policy. Unannounced visits can result in the evaluator showing up on the day of a film, exam, or field trip. One strategy is to have the instructor select six class periods for which evaluation visits would be most appropriate.
- Peer observations can be completed annually, every other year, prior to application for promotion and tenure, or on a regular, ongoing basis. Departments must consider faculty availability and willingness to observe in determining an observation policy.
- Each observer can highlight similarities and differences by writing summary reports. Descriptive reports, focusing on agreed-upon tools and behaviors and including specific examples of instructor and student behaviors are recommended. The summary is more balanced and fair if it contains both positive and negative observations. Judgments of effectiveness, as well as descriptions of the work, provide the most complete portrayal of the instructor's effectiveness.

If your department wants to develop peer observation as a part of peer evaluation, what should you do?

Suggestions for developing a peer observation process as part of the peer evaluation process in your department are:

- Poll departmental faculty to ascertain their expertise with peer observation; general attitudes toward peer observation, mentoring, and improvement of teaching; desire to participate
- Confer with in-house instructional experts (e.g., CTL staff) and/or master teachers
- Establish a departmental Ad Hoc Committee on Teaching to begin research into peer observation for formative and summative purposes
- Talk with consultants in the Center for Teaching & Learning (CTL) about form and process development and training for peer observers
- Inquire into peer observation activities of other departments/colleges on campus
- Inquire into peer observation activities of other departments/colleges on other campuses nationwide
- Review this document and resources listed
- Check discipline specific educational journals and texts for peer observation articles
- Develop departmental peer observation forms and a process for formative and summative observation
- Establish a departmental policy for formative and summative peer observation and evaluation
- Train faculty members prior to classroom visits

- Review the peer observation forms after preliminary trial observation, make changes, and retest the improved forms
- Establish a training schedule for peer observers on a one or two year cycle so that new or incoming faculty or administrators receive observation training

References:

Bennett, W.E. (1987) “Small Group Instructional Diagnosis: A Dialogic Approach to Instructional Improvement for Tenured Faculty.” The Journal of Staff Program, and Organization Development, 5(3), 100-104.

Boice, Robert (1992) The New Faculty Member. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Braskamp, Larry A., Brandenburg, Dale C., and Ory, John C. (1984) Evaluating Teaching Effectiveness: A Practical Guide. Beverly Hills; Sage Publications, Inc.

Chism, N., Chism, G., McKeachie, W.J. (2007) Peer Review of Teaching: A sourcebook (2nd ed.) Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.

Cohen, P.S. and McKeachie, W.J. (1980) “The Role of Colleagues in the Evaluation if College Teaching.” Improving College and University Teaching, 28,147-154.

Centra, John A. (1993) Reflective Faculty Evaluation. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Katz, J. and Henry, M. (1988) Turning Professors into Teachers: A New Approach to Faculty Development and Student Learning. New York: Macmillan.

Millis, Barbara J. (1987) “Colleagues Helping Colleagues: A Peer Observation Program Model.” The Journal of Staff, Program, and Organization Development, 7(1), 15-21.

Seldin, Peter (1999) Changing Practices in Evaluating Teaching: A practical guide to improved faculty performance and promotion/tenure decisions. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.