

## **External Review of Teaching for Promotion and Tenure**

**A Resource Prepared by the Office of Academic Affairs and Student Success**

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### **General Points about Assessing Faculty Work**

- The key to effective evaluation of faculty is the use of multiple, credible sources of evidence that provide multiple perspectives.
- For evaluation of teaching activities, potential sources of evidence include students, internal peers, external peers, educational experts, and alumni, as well as the instructor's reflections and self-assessment.
- Input from other faculty, both internal and external to the institution, is usually considered the most credible source in high-stakes evaluations of faculty work.
- Evaluation of the quality of teaching can be challenging for reviewers and for promotion and tenure committees traditionally focused on evaluating evidence such as funded grants, peer-reviewed publications, and national reputation.
  - Internal peer review of teaching is often considered weak evidence of teaching quality
  - Teaching efforts are primarily local and rarely distributed regionally or nationally
  - Teaching materials that make significant local impact are not always packaged or submitted for peer review; there are few journals or other places to submit materials
  - Teaching efforts and teaching scholarship are often goal driven rather than hypothesis driven; even quality educational scholarship is foreign to many faculty members

### **Advantages of External Peer Review of Teaching**

- External reviewers are expected to be objective and truthful experts, motivated by the common good of the discipline and the academy.
- Individuals external to the institution are not exposed to the established perceptions of a professor's teaching ability (positive or negative or based on popularity) that might occur within departments.
- External review can be particularly useful in assessing innovative work, especially if there are no other individuals at the candidate's institution familiar with the innovative practice.
- The external review can be valuable for the reviewer as well as the reviewee, by providing evidence of the reviewer's reputation in the field and a means to expand networks or opportunities for collaboration in educational efforts.
- Conscientious and honest external reviews can help the candidate improve performance in the future.
- The practice of external peer review of teaching can raise the bar for teaching performance and raise the perceived value of teaching in the institution.

### **Limitations of External Review of Teaching**

- Personal reviews are inherently subjective. Regardless of attempts to avoid biased individuals, there is usually a selection bias on both the department's and the candidate's part.
- There is also the potential for bias (positive or negative) in the review based on the candidate's training background, institution, and teaching philosophy.
- "Numbers-focused" reviewers may have difficulty reviewing teaching materials or a teaching portfolio
- It can be harder to find reviewers qualified to review teaching efforts.
  - The process is labor intensive for individual reviewers, especially if those with educational backgrounds become overloaded with requests for reviews
  - Peer review of teaching or teaching portfolios is a new concept for many potential reviewers; training is required

### **Best Practices for External Letters of Review of Teaching**

- Ensure probationary faculty members are well aware of the practice and related policies and receive mentoring regarding preparation of materials and selection of external reviewers.
- As with other external review letters, reviewers should be selected from names provided by both the candidate and the department chair or review committee.
- Match candidates with reviewers based on area of expertise to be reviewed; for peer review of teaching the peer should be recognized for his/her own education activities in the discipline. Ideally, include one review by an educational specialist. The reviewer's experience in teaching or developing similar courses or topics should be described in the letter.
- It can be useful to set up a collaborative exchange among several institutions to provide a ready pool of trained reviewers.
- Avoid reviewers with potential bias or conflict of interest: many institutions prohibit former mentors, collaborators, friends, or close associates from serving as reviewers. Reviewers' letters should specifically clarify the relationship with the candidate.
- Solicit sufficient numbers of letters to obtain 2–3 quality, distinct perspectives.
- Use a standardized solicitation letter with clear instructions for the reviewer:
  - Request information about the reviewer's credentials and relationship to candidate
  - Provide reviewers with a clear understanding of the place and importance of teaching activities in the institution and department, including criteria for evaluation and expectations for rank
  - Clarify whether the review is predominantly for quality of teaching at the candidate's institution or for assessment of scholarship in teaching or educational activities
  - Provide information about the individual's effort allocation
  - Provide reviewers with institutional or departmental policies and guidelines, forms, etc. for peer review
  - Provide reviewers with sufficient and consistent documentation provided by the candidate to make an informed judgment (e.g. curriculum vitae with structured teaching

portfolio, course Web site or other specific information). Consider page limits and other restrictions to make sure the materials are not overwhelming to the reviewer.

- Establish a reasonable expected length for the reviewer's response (usually one to two pages) and deadline for return of the letter and a follow up plan (usually 14–45 days)
- Establish a confidential point of contact for questions and for return of the review letter
- Establish acceptable methods for format and delivery (fax, e-mail, etc)
- Ensure that reviewers know their rights (or lack thereof) to confidentiality and in the event of legal challenges (usually based on state law).
- All letters received should be included in the candidate's dossier. Any responses, qualifications, or rebuttals from the candidate should be attached.
- Inform internal committees which reviewers were suggested by the candidate.

### **Special Considerations for Off-Site evaluations (Most common)**

- Teaching materials are sent to the reviewer or made available electronically (Web-based, Blackboard site, etc.). These materials can now easily include recordings of lecture segments or other illustrative video clips of teaching strategies.
- Can be confidential or open.
- Course, teaching, or academic portfolios are ideal communication tools for external review (See resources for portfolio templates and examples).
- The review (and consequently the portfolio format) can focus on teaching in relative isolation or can be designed to review teaching activities in the context of (and how the activities are interrelated with) scholarship and service activities.

### **Special Considerations for On-Site evaluation**

- Teaching review can be enhanced if a site visit can be arranged.
- Obviously, on-site reviews cannot be confidential. As with internal reviews, the instructor and students should be advised about the visitor ahead of time.
- A single reviewer or a team of individuals can be invited.
- Follow typical practices that are used for internal peer reviews. Ideally, the institution has a guide or training materials for peer review of teaching.
  - Provide portfolio or materials ahead of time, as well as a letter of instruction for the reviewer
  - Start the visit with meetings with the department head and the instructor
  - Ideally, arrange opportunities to observe the instructor in several teaching settings
  - Consider setting up focus groups of students or other audiences, as well as interviews with key colleagues, alumni, or other relevant individuals
  - If templates are used on campus for classroom observations or review of materials, they should be used for external reviewers as well
- The reviewer provides verbal feedback, then prepares a written report and returns it to the department head.

## References

### ***General References regarding External Review***

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### ***Preparing and Evaluating Portfolios***

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Seldin P. *The Teaching Portfolio; A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions*. Bolton, MA: Anker, 2004.

### ***Proponents and visions of external review of teaching***

Brawley S. Internationalising peer review in teaching and learning *Int'l J Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, vol. 2(1), 2008. Accessed at [http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/ijstl/v2n1/essays\\_about\\_sotl/Brawley/Essay\\_Brawley.pdf](http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/ijstl/v2n1/essays_about_sotl/Brawley/Essay_Brawley.pdf) 2/20/13

Bernstein D, Edwards, R. We need objective, rigorous peer review of teaching. *Chronicle of Higher Education* January 5, 2001, page B24

Malik DJ. Peer review of teaching: External review of course content. *Innovative Higher Education* 20 (4), 1996, pp 277-286.

## Checklist for Evaluating a Teaching Portfolio

(Adapted from Seldin and Miller, 2009)

### *Portfolio structure*

- Does the portfolio meet requirements for length and format?
- Is the portfolio organized and readable? Date, table of contents, list of appendices, navigation, page numbers, etc?
- If the portfolio includes multiple types of activity (e.g an academic portfolio that includes teaching, service and scholarly work), does the organization and degree of documentation parallel the unit requirements and effort allocation?
- Are all claims, accomplishments, etc supported by evidence in the appendices?
- Is the majority of the evidence current (past 3 – 5 years)?
- Are results of evaluation of work by others included (peers, students, administrators, alumni)?
- Are the student ratings from common core questions included for several courses and the most recent 3 to 5 years?

### *Portfolio content and alignment*

- Does the evidence show the context in which the work was done and how teaching activities interrelate with scholarship and service activities?
- Are the activities and levels of performance consistent with departmental and institutional mission and strategic priorities?
- Does evidence show that institutional goals are being met?
- Are the teaching methods, reflective statements, and course syllabi all consistent with the faculty member's teaching philosophy?

### *Quality of evidence*

- Does the portfolio narrative and evidence demonstrate expertise in the discipline?
- Do the reflections in the portfolio support reasonable plans and choices, adaptable responses to challenges?
- Is there evidence of student learning and do the outcomes reveal successful teaching?
- Does the evidence show the significance of faculty work?
- Is there evidence of new knowledge or new organization of knowledge communicated to others?
- Is there evidence that efforts were made to improve based on student and peer input?
- Is there evidence that efforts to improve led to results?
- Does your assessment of the work give appropriate weight to all the evidence, avoiding too much focus on a single source or data point?

**Nine Potential Criteria for Evaluating a Teaching Portfolio  
(Directly from Brawley, 2008)**

1. Evidence of interest and enthusiasm in undertaking and promoting student learning in the discipline area
2. Evidence of a professional, systematic and reflective approach to teaching improvement informed from feedback from a variety of sources.
3. Evidence of responsiveness and innovation in course design and delivery, including appropriate use of information and communication technologies to achieve improved student learning outcomes.
4. Evidence of ability to organize teaching and curriculum materials so that they arouse curiosity, stimulate independent learning and develop the skills and attitudes of scholarly inquiry.
5. Evidence of keen and sympathetic participation in guiding and advising students and understanding their needs
6. Record of professional, systematic and reflective approach to teaching improvement informed from feedback from a variety of sources
7. Evidence of command of the subject matter and exploitation of recent developments in the field of study
8. Evidence of provision of appropriate assessment that is congruent with course outcomes and the provision of worthwhile feedback to students in their learning
9. Evidence of participation in and/or contribution to professional activities and scholarship related to teaching.

**Checklist for Peer Review of a Course or Course Portfolio**  
(Adapted from the University of Nebraska Lincoln Outline, 2005)

***Evaluate Intellectual Content***

- Is the course material appropriate for the curriculum and institution?
- Are the intellectual goals articulated for learners?
- Are the goals aligned with the course content and mission?
- Are the knowledge and skills covered valuable and relevant?
- Does the course material meet accreditation standards, if applicable?

***Evaluate Teaching Practices***

- Is contact time organized well?
- Are there opportunities for student engagement? For students to practice skills?
- Are there particularly creative methods that should increase student understanding?
- Are there out of class activities or assignments that contribute to student achievement/

***Evaluate Student Understanding/Learning***

- Are performance standards appropriately challenging and do they require conceptual understanding and critical thinking?
- Is student performance appropriate for course level, goals?
- Are the assessment methods and instruments appropriate given the goals of the course
- Are there creative ways to allow students to show understanding
- Are the course assignments and assessments weighted according to the relative importance of the course goals?
- Is there evidence that an appropriate percentage of students are achieving competence in the course, or are there stated reasons why students are not achieving competence?
- Have course revisions been made or considered that could improve student performance?

***Evaluate Reflection and Development***

- Does the portfolio reflect substantive reflection on the course and achievement of the goals of the course?
- Do the reflections identify meaningful relationships between teaching practice and student performance?
- Does course development reflect insight and changed practice in reaction to student understanding or performance?

## Other Resources or Repositories for Peer Review of Teaching Materials

*Syllabus*. Journal devoted to peer reviewed course syllabi. See <http://syllabusjournal.org>

**MERLOT (Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching)**. Repository of peer reviewed online teaching and learning materials in many disciplines. See <http://www.merlot.org/merlot/index.htm>

**Peer review of teaching project, University of Nebraska - Lincoln** Includes opportunities for peer review of course portfolios. See <http://www.unl.edu/peerrev/>

**MedEd Portal**. Repository for peer review of various medical teaching materials including curricula, presentations, multimedia. See <https://www.mededportal.org/>

**Quality Matters Program**. Site for improving K-12 and higher education online education with course standards and evaluation rubrics. Members can access peer review program which includes a three-person peer review process and pool of trained reviewers for online course improvement. See <http://www.qmprogram.org/reviews>.