Reviewed by the Tenure, Promotions, and Appointments Committee, May 2, 2018

Guidelines for peer observation of teaching

Evaluation of teaching effectiveness is an important element of all faculty performance reviews. University guidelines recommend multiple modes of assessment for teaching, including the review of teaching materials and student evaluations of teaching, and peer observation of teaching. This memo outlines guidelines and recommends best practices for peer observations that are conducted for the purposes of promotion, tenure, reappointment, or annual review.[1]

Effective teaching involves a number of components, such as content expertise, teaching approaches, and course/assignment design. Peer observation of teaching is a powerful complementary approach to student evaluations of teaching, because faculty offer the best source of information on factors such as content expertise and alignment of course objectives with the curriculum.

1. If a department is using peer observation for review of teaching, the frequency of observations should be, at minimum:

- Assistant Professors and lecturers should be observed at least once every year, ideally to coincide with and be incorporated into their annual review
- Associate Professors should be observed at least twice before submitting for promotion to full
- Senior Lecturers and Distinguished Senior Lecturers should be observed at least twice in a six-year cycle

It's recommended that tenured professors conduct the observations of tenure-track or already tenured faculty, that tenured professors and/or Distinguished Senior Lecturers conduct observations of Senior Lecturers and Distinguished Senior Lecturers, and that Senior Lecturers and/or Distinguished Senior Lecturers conduct observations of Lecturers. If resources allow, it is recommended that at least two faculty members – two faculty in the same department or one within the department and one without – have an opportunity to observe the candidate over the time period under review.

2. An effective peer observation involves three interactions:

- an initial meeting with the observee for the observer(s) to learn more about the instructor's goals and questions, framed by the syllabus
- an unobtrusive classroom visit at a time mutually agreed upon at the initial meeting
- a final discussion where the observee has a chance to discuss, review, and learn from the observer's written report, with focus on both strengths and suggestions.

If, after the final meeting, there are significant differences of interpretation, the observee should be offered the opportunity to append a written response.

3. An effective peer observation report involves the sharing of a written report. Typically, this report is largely descriptive (e.g., what behaviors were observed during the class visit), to offer evidence to anchor any evaluative statements about the quality of instruction. Prior to implementation of a peer observation system, departments should engage in discussion about key criteria that should be used as a lens for the observation and included in a report. Both narrative (e.g., "Peer Observation of Teaching Protocol," http://www.academic.umn.edu/provost/peer_review/) and structured (e.g., Classroom

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[1] Faculty may request a confidential observation by emailing Sheridan_center@brown.edu. This observation would be conducted for formative purposes only and would not be included in a TPAC dossier.

Observation Protocol for Undergraduate STEM, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3846513/) approaches can be effective, as long as the department has endorsed the specific process to be used. Common elements include context (e.g., date, number of students, course) as well as categories such as clarity, classroom climate/environment, content knowledge, level of challenge, organization, pace, and engagement. The Sheridan Center is a resource for offering more examples used at peer universities.

References

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