

Faculty evaluation: towards a happy balance between competing values

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ABSTRACT: With newly emerging world standards and benchmarks, and as institutional challenges and demand for increased accountability (in light of increased competition) continue into the new millennium for colleges and universities, faculty evaluation programmes, which form a major part of this reassurance exercise, need re-examining to see how they fit with institutional purposes of evaluation. The issue is a contentious one and it has been stated that *faculty evaluation systems often have two contradictory purposes: to enhance faculty development efforts by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of individual instructors and to determine whether the employment of a faculty member should be continued or terminated*. Reviewing available literature and reported experiences on this critical matter provides an important source of information and learned knowledge. The article aims to put forward general conclusions and suggestions for implementing a practical and efficient faculty evaluation system that can address the various shortcomings reviewed and discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Providing academic excellence is an objective for all respectable academic institutions and organisations. Academic excellence is measured by the quality of the research, scholarship and the calibre of the graduates produced, along with their collective impact on the larger society. The prevailing culture must demand excellence in all endeavours. This excellence can only be achieved when all parts of the university – administration, faculty, staff, students, and alumni – are committed to the highest standards of performance.

Achieving excellence in higher education is a rigorous challenge. The path to excellence must begin with a candid acknowledgement of the current position. While academic programmes need to continuously improve in many areas, dramatic enhancements to the reality and perception of the teaching, learning, research and scholarship must be pursued continuously.

To this end, it becomes evident that a major part of achieving the set goals and objectives relies upon the academic faculty, whose interaction with the student body delivers the required education and, therefore, the expected long-term results, which can affect an institution's reputation in one way or another. As such, faculty evaluation programmes have had a long history at universities and colleges.

Reviewing the available literature and reported experiences on this critical matter provides an important source of information and learned knowledge. This article aims to put forward general conclusions and suggestions for the implementation of a practical and efficient faculty evaluation system that can address the various shortcomings reviewed and discussed.

WHAT IS FACULTY EVALUATION?

Faculty evaluation has been defined as either of the following:

- A process designed to improve faculty performance (a development process);
- A procedure that assists in making personnel decisions (a reviewing process) [1].

Regarding this particular area, Palmer has stated that:

... faculty evaluation systems often have two contradictory purposes: to enhance faculty development efforts by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of individual instructors and to determine whether the employment of a faculty member should be continued or terminated [2].

It must be agreed that *one faculty evaluation scheme cannot both judge and assist*. The procedure that gathers evidence for dismissal is different from that which reflects a climate of support, communication and growth inducement. The contentious issue has always been how these two goals of evaluation can be separated. While there seems to be a clear bias towards an outcome that is focused more on judgement than assistance in most of the systems reviewed, no alternative appears to address this conflict.

In the absence of evaluation programmes that can separate these two goals, this has meant that available systems continue to be supported. However, even when faculty improvement is considered to be the primary purpose for such evaluations, which always seems to be the case, it must be noted that the overall success of such systems is hindered by perceptions of how the results are used [3].

WHY FACULTY EVALUATION?

Faculty evaluations are used as a tool to address concerns about faculty quality, institutional accountability and educational improvement, which continue to be of utmost importance to universities and colleges all over the world. Nevertheless, using faculty evaluations to assess the performance of full-time faculty can be a difficult issue because university administrators and faculty members often have different perceptions about why an appraisal process is being implemented [2].

THE PERCEPTION OF FACULTY EVALUATION

It is accepted that there are two distinct perceptions for the process of faculty evaluation, namely:

- An administrative perception;
- A faculty perception.

Research has found that most faculty members perceived evaluation in different terms than administrators [4]. While most administrators considered evaluation to be primarily a faculty development process, faculty saw evaluation as primarily in the service of making personnel decisions. This is mainly due to the lack of clarity in setting out and identifying the purposes and objectives of the process. This often results in problems in communication and cooperation.

In trying to understand the impact that competing values of administrators and faculty members have on faculty evaluation, it is important to try and understand the issues involved from both perspectives, as the mechanism involves both sides and cannot be achieved by one without the other.

The difference in perception, or the *competing values* issue, is not difficult to understand. Existing faculty evaluation systems do have a dual purpose in that when used to improve teaching performance, the information is given to teachers, regardless of its source (eg students, colleagues, etc) and is meant to bring about positive changes, as well as support faculty development, growth and self-improvement [2][5][6]. In contrast, faculty evaluation is used by administrators to make personnel decisions with regard to tenure, promotion, reappointment and salary [7]. These dual purposes served by faculty evaluations are the source of controversy.

University administrators believe that their institutions should be reputable, stable, efficient, predictable, accountable and in control of their faculty and staff. Faculty members, on the other hand, generally share a belief that they should not be excluded from the decision process and that resources and power, in this respect, should be shared with administrators. Creative growth and development in teaching and the nurturing and support of professional growth should also be emphasised.

These fundamental differences are referred to as *competing values* [8]. Redmon has reported the following items:

- *We want our organisations to be adaptable and flexible, but we also want them to be stable and controlled.*
- *We want growth, resource acquisition, and external support, but we also want tight information management and formal communication.*

- *We want an emphasis on the value of human resources, but we also want an emphasis on planning and goal setting [2].*

The question that poses itself is whether a single evaluation programme can serve both: improve performance and help in personnel decisions?

The two main camps on this issue are split between supporters of the existing dual system who, nevertheless, acknowledge that limitations of time, money and personnel render it impractical for most institutions. But even so, they say, institutions should not consider substituting one programme that tries to combine both functions.

Opponents of this dual system argue that, while both purposes are vital, they cannot be served by one system and must, therefore, be kept separate. A different approach is required.

HOW EFFECTIVE ARE FACULTY EVALUATION SYSTEMS?

The effectiveness referred to in the question, *how effective are faculty evaluation systems?*, is that which is related to improved faculty productivity and output. Here, too, are some differing opinions and schools of thought.

Seldin has asserted that evaluation systems aimed at faculty development, which provide constructive feedback to professors, often create a kind of dissatisfaction that motivates a professor to improve [4]. The chances for faculty improvement increase when:

- Immediate feedback is given;
- The professor wants to improve;
- The professor knows how to bring about the required improvement.

Another view is that, although most institutions identify faculty improvement as their primary goal, Moomaw believes that most evaluation systems do not stimulate and support faculty development effectively [9]. He has cited the lack of connection between evaluation and development activities, as well as the absence of faculty involvement in the process of evaluation, as the chief reasons for the uneven, or poor, effectiveness of programmes at most institutions [10].

The claim that instructional evaluation alone improves teaching is not supported by available literature. It is suggested that faculty members often must be provided with an understanding of teaching and learning theories, as well as opportunities to develop and practice teaching skills in a non-threatening environment. To be helpful in improving faculty performance, instructional evaluation must identify specific difficulties, not just assess the general quality of instruction.

GOOD PRACTICE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Procedural evaluation elements tend to vary from one institution to another. However, there are main elements that are shared among all with slight variations on some. The applied approach is one that has resulted from the *competing values* of faculty and administrators.

This procedural approach developed comes from the desire of administrations and stakeholders to exercise institutional control in order to assure quality teaching, student satisfaction, excellence and accountability. This approach gives faculty members more input and say in the process. Under this approach, self-evaluations, together with peer, student and administrator appraisals on an ongoing basis, are taken into account for both purposes of a dual evaluation. This approach is characterised by input from faculty members, as well as administrators, with an emphasis on teaching. A self-report prepared by the faculty member carries its weight among student feedback and colleague appraisals.

While the guidelines for such a procedure vary from college to college, and even from department to department (as is the case at the University of Sharjah (UOS), Sharjah, United Arab Emirates), the basic procedure in all involves the following steps:

- A pre-evaluation meeting between the faculty member and the department chair or dean to discuss the goals, objectives and items to be evaluated.
- A classroom visit is made during the evaluation period by the department chairperson or dean to observe the faculty member's teaching style.
- The faculty member compiles a self-evaluation, student evaluation rating forms and a list of professional development activities.
- A performance review conference is set up at the end of the evaluation period between the faculty member and the department chair or dean.
- The department chair or dean renders a judgement based on the collected data.
- As a final step, the faculty member can appeal if the appraisal is not satisfactory [11][12].

There is little doubt, if any, that a common objective between faculty members and administrators is the establishment of a successful evaluation programme. The success of such a programme would deliver to each party its objectives and ensures that the academic accountability issue is properly addressed at all levels. However, this requires a level of balance that cannot be very simply achieved.

The literature review on this matter seems to converge on some general rules and guidelines that may assist in developing more successful programmes than what currently exists. These can be summarised as follows:

- Clarity in defining the purpose of the evaluation.
- Compatibility of process and purpose.
- Faculty involvement in all aspects.
- Administrative commitment to the evaluation process must go hand in hand with commitment to due process, including written and published criteria for evaluation and appeal.
- As much as possible, institutional needs must be balanced with individual faculty needs.
- Evaluation should be linked to faculty development and incentives.
- All evaluation procedures must be applied consistently and fairly.
- Multiple sources of faculty data must be included in the evaluation.

- The customisation of successfully used evaluation programmes at other institutions before using them.
- Introduction of several levels of review and appeal.

When using these guidelines in the evaluation process, a number of positive outcomes can be accomplished, as follows:

- Improve faculty perception and minimise their resistance to evaluation.
- Establish lines of communication between faculty and administration on faculty effectiveness.
- Allow an integration of evaluation into the decision-making and development processes on campus.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Newly emerging world standards and benchmarks, along with institutional challenges and growing demand for increased accountability (due primarily to increased competition), continue into the new millennium for universities and colleges. Faculty evaluation programmes, which form a major part of this reassurance exercise, need to be re-examined in order to determine how they fit with an institution's objectives with regard to evaluation.

Faculty evaluation is no doubt a key element in improving the performance and effectiveness of academic institutions. If developed and applied properly, they can contribute to the institution's mission in achieving excellence and a positive reputation for others to benchmark against. However, the intrinsic conflict in purpose and perceptions needs to be dealt with in a manner that can satisfy both objectives without a clear bias towards one over the other.

An assessment of practices of evaluation is also necessary in order to determine a programme's effectiveness with regard to the promotion of faculty development and productivity. Adequate and unbiased evaluation programmes can only be achieved when administrators involve faculty members in the process of determining the evaluation's purpose, its scope, as well as the sources of data, participants and the assessment of effectiveness.

The backbone of any evaluation must be its purpose. The purpose of evaluation dictates the questions asked, influences the sources of data utilised, the depth of analysis and the dissemination of findings. Professional development and the growth of faculty members need to be addressed adequately within the scope of the evaluation. A continually developing and improving faculty member plays an important part in the collective pursuit of institutional development and excellence.

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