

PRACTICAL ADVICE

Advice to Deans: Assessing Faculty Work by “Sitting Beside”

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Introduction

One of the most important things for a dean to do, especially if he or she is attempting change, is to make sure that the reward structure for faculty members is consistent with the intended direction of the change. One of the very important items to consider is the difficult task of evaluating teaching. In doing so, it is important to address the societal context, both individual and institutional (hopefully societal) needs, set expectations, emphasize the importance of communication and personal growth, don't be confused about what counts and what is countable, look at process and product. In considering this important topic there are five principles that I will use to elaborate these points.

Context

The first thing to be thought about is the importance of the context of assessment. Assessment must be conceptualized and implemented within the social contract that we in higher education have with our society. Thus we cannot think about evaluating and assessing faculty without thinking about the institutional mission and the roles and responsibilities of our faculty and collectively the academy.

Thus, assessment needs to be designed to bring into account several perspectives—the individual, and the institution, both in terms of the institution's relationship to the larger community and as an academy. In my

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judgement, an effective institution or professional school is one that simultaneously fosters individual faculty development and fulfills the collective goals (mission) of the institution. The mission of the institution is the product of the intersection between the expectations and support of society and the collective goals of the faculty and the administration. Thus, when we think of faculty assessment, we need to keep both the individual and the institutional perspective in mind. At times, these two perspectives are in conflict. Sometimes it is a paradox to accept and try to resolve as best we can. The dimensions of this dilemma are the familiar ones. On the one hand, it is intellectual independence and freedom, and on the other, it is accountability. They reflect the fundamental essence of what constitutes a community of scholars. In fact, it is often that dynamic tension or paradox that is the core of the controversy about assessment.

“To Sit Beside” as an Image

The second principle relates to how to define assessment. We can think about assessment in terms of an image of assessment that is based on the Latin root, *assidere*, which means “To Sit Beside” (and to assist). Assessment as “sitting beside” reinforces the human element. “Sitting Beside” as an image is one that highlights exchanges among faculty. It also is meant to highlight shared responsibility among us in the academy. To “Sit Beside” brings to mind such verbs as to engage, to involve, to interact, to share, to trust. It conjures up team learning, working together, discussing, reflecting, helping, building, collaborating. It makes one think of cooperative learning, community, communication, coaching, caring and consultation.

“Sitting beside” implies dialogue and discourse, with the evaluator and the evaluatee trying to understand the other’s perspective before giving value judgments. The notion of faculty “sitting beside” each other encourages a community in which communication is a key element. Assessment is thus developmental and ongoing. It takes not a snapshot but a moving picture, which takes it away from reliance on classifications and ranking. It means breaking away from the winner-loser mind set, from comparing one person to another to one of mutual and collective responsibility among the faculty.

Assessment means communication, but of a special type. Conversations center on value, quality, performance, contributions, meeting expectations, setting goals and improving. The metaphor of “sitting beside” also stresses learning, that is, viewing assessment as an educative ongoing process. It represents a special type of learning situation because issues of value are at the forefront of the discussion and reflections. Thus, I am not eschewing judging, i.e. determining the quality or influence of one’s work.

Assessment is not a mechanical or routine matter. Instead, assessment is based on judgments of oneself and peers. It represents a very human approach,

recognizes that judging the work of faculty is complex and requires seasoned and reasoned judgments. It also recognizes the importance of uncovering the unique and individual skills and talents of each faculty member but does not stress individualism at the expense of team work or collaboration.

“Sitting Beside” also means that we sit beside several groups and stakeholders. We sit beside students, beside faculty peers, administrators, but also significant stakeholders like boards of trustees, legislators, government agencies, alumni associations, business leaders, advisory boards, and bureaucrats. Understanding and evaluation are often at the core of these exchanges and negotiations.

In sum, we are faculty and staff who “sit beside” many colleagues in our work. We sit beside for different reasons—to foster our own growth and to demonstrate our accountability. We communicate with others about our work to meet the dual goals of private gain and public good.

Setting Expectations

My third point is that setting expectations is critical to the assessment process. It provides the framework in which we assess the work of any faculty member. Setting expectations involves both identifying what work is to be assessed and determining the quality and value of the work. I have found that it is important to distinguish these two aspects of setting expectations. We need to distinguish between what one does and how well one does it, i.e. workload/activities/effort/roles/responsibilities vs. quality/effectiveness/influence/impact/value/merit/worth/excellence. Thus, we first need to define and organize the work of the faculty. In most universities, teaching, research and service is the common triad. My own clarification, however, addresses four parts: teaching, research and creative activities, outreach/practice, and citizenship which is defined as governance and administration. I prefer not to use the word service because we can serve regardless of our type of work.

It is unfortunate, that professional schools have settled on a rather narrow view of faculty work, particularly in our evaluating practices and reward. We have focused on research productivity as the primary means to judge the value and the merit of an individual. This reduction in defining quality, value, and scholarship has severe negative consequences. Society has become more and more demanding of us to use our talents, to be responsive and responsible to our society, but we in academe have become more and more restrictive to ways in which we wish to reward our faculty. As a result, we have not taken advantage of the diverse set of creative talents of our faculty and we have lost some of the trust we in academe need from society in order to fulfill our unique and special role.

Setting goals and expectations can be controversial. Our use of goal setting determines or influences how we define scholarship. Do we only reward the

product and not the process, that is, do we only count contributions rather than evaluate the work itself? We have a history of evaluating and rewarding output, most notably published research articles. Do we only count what is measured or do we give equal credibility to work that is more interpersonal and process oriented like teaching? The practices of assessing research and teaching become clearer since in research we have visible products and thus we do not talk about evaluating research. On the other hand, we do not talk about the products of teaching; instead, we talk about the process. And we historically have kept the act of teaching a private matter, reluctant to have peers observe our classrooms and judge the quality of a course syllabus or rate the amount of student learning in a course.

If we reward only the completion of work, we will limit our assessment and thus redefine scholarship as many of us would like to characterize it. We unwillingly may encourage too much short term projects rather than more complex, controversial endeavors. Faculty may become more concerned with adding lines to their vitae than actually making a contribution to the scholarly community or seeking truth regardless of its outcome or price.

Collecting and Organizing Evidence

The fourth principle relates to collecting and organizing evidence. There are two themes to consider in collecting evidence. First, we must not get too concerned about counting everything; as a matter of fact the mere use of the word implies that the important work of a faculty member can be measured. An overreliance on measurement destroys the essence of what many faculty can do. Our work is too complex to reduce our achievements and contributions to a number.

I also like to think in terms of building a case about one's work, where no one piece of evidence fully determines the value and the worth of the contributions of a faculty member. Thus, I think in terms of “building a case”—constructing a collage of one's work which has patterns and consistencies that, taken as a whole, depict, in some inadequate but hopefully sufficient way, contributions. It stresses uniqueness and a career not a string of activities or a list or catalog of annual achievements.

We can build a case by developing a multiple perspectives approach which means that we should think about collecting evidence from multiple sources using a variety of methods. The major sources are faculty themselves, students, and faculty colleagues. In my view, we too infrequently use ourselves as a source of information. I emphasize self-reports and self-interpretations are analyses as important bits of evidence. Self-assessment forces faculty to think through and to communicate why they teach a certain way, why they conduct the type of research they do, and why they become engaged in certain outreach activities. It is an occasion for reflection, for analyzing strengths and

weaknesses, and building future plans. Self-assessment is not however the same as self-absorption—they are two entirely different processes. Faculty colleagues also need to be more engaged, because they are the ones who can provide the stamp of scholarship on each other's work.

Evidence must be both credible and trustworthy. Establishing credibility is more of a social and political activity. Faculty need to determine what they consider important enough upon which to base decisions. For example, is hearsay among faculty or informal student comments considered to be credible evidence? Trustworthiness is based on the technical characteristics of the evidence such as reliability, validity, fairness and social consequences. I want to emphasize the importance of social consequences of assessment. I want us to keep asking ourselves, "Does this assessment activity positively or negatively influence what I consider to be desired achievements and accomplishments?" For example, do faculty who use student ratings alter their teaching style and behaviors in a desired way? Also, what are the opportunity costs for assessment and to what extent is time taken away from learning, researching, or scholarly work because of a possible overabundance of a needless set of activities which we call assessment?

Finally, a faculty member is responsible for interpreting and communicating her work to others. Given the heavy emphasis on communication in assessment, I encourage faculty to construct a portrayal of their work—a portfolio or extended resume in which faculty do not just list activities but offer their "thinking behind their work." It is a strategy to organize faculty activities and to make sense of them.

Using Evidence

The last and fifth principle deals with using evidence. I take a very pragmatic approach to assessment, "If it's not useful, don't do it." I keep asking myself "what's the use?" I also want to first distinguish between two major uses of assessment—individual and institutional.

Individual use of assessment is to promote self-growth and development of the individual. For individual use, faculty need detailed diagnostic data, frequent and ongoing self-reflection, an atmosphere of trust, and a lack of fear of failure. Faculty ownership of the evidence is essential. Only trusted colleagues are the primary "other person" with whom faculty are to "sit beside". As a practical matter, I encourage individual faculty members to frequently collect evidence about their own teaching and research and to make sure that they know that I do not wish to see their results. Faculty cannot "sit beside" administrators to discuss all of their problems in research and teaching.

The other use is institutional. As a member of a profession, individual faculty members have an obligation to report on their work to others. It is on this basis that they are rewarded and can advance in the organization. How this process is

designed reflects the culture of the department. Ask yourself these questions: Who decides annual salary increases in your department? What are the policies on weighting achievements in teaching, research and outreach in promotion and tenure? And, is salary based solely on merit?

Institutional use also needs to address the issue of the “specialness” of the academy. If we as an academy lose our “specialness,” we will reduce some of our value to society—the larger community, the state legislatures, the alumni, the church demoninations. Thus, we need to recognize this paradox of simultaneously holding on to the autonomy we as faculty desire and need, and our obligation to serve the common good. Since neither public nor private institutions are not nor can be islands to themselves, we need to establish ways to demonstrate our merit and worth and begin to dialogue with others about how we as an institution can best fulfill our special role in society. We cannot ignore the expectations that society has of us, but we do not have to automatically give in to them either. Instead we can think in terms of society leveraging its resources for the common good, and that a good investment of the leveraged resources is the academy. We in higher education need to become engaged in a two-way interaction with others, particularly those outside the institution. If we become clearer about our contributions, both collectively and individually, we can show the unique role we can play in a democratic society—we cannot be the problem solver for all of our social ills. Instead, our role is to enhance society’s learning and understanding of the ills and their amelioration. Our outreach must reinforce our research and instructional programs if faculty are to benefit from participating in outreach. Thus, in the final analysis, we can “sit beside” and discuss our accountability in terms of the return on society’s investment in us.

In summary, the evaluation of teaching is not easy nor quick. It is, none-the-less, important especially to an institution that claims to be concerned about the needs of society and of the education of its graduates. As you can see, this article provides no “cookbook” ways to evaluate teaching. It does, however, give food for thought. Context, “sitting beside”, setting expectations, collecting evidence and using that evidence are all things to consider. The faculties of health professions education can only be viable if the faculty members can develop their talents and if the institutions in which faculty members do their work can gain the trust of the larger society and receive sufficient support to fulfill their special and unique mission. In short, colleges and universities are to serve the common good through the pursuit of truth and its free exposition. Assessment, if viewed in terms of “sitting beside”, can be one way to fulfill societal expectations of the academy and promote faculty development. Both are essential for a healthy and productive academic enterprise.