

# PEER REVIEW OF TEACHING

*A Sourcebook*

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## *Chapter 2*

# Setting Up a System for Peer Review

In order to be effective, peer review of teaching must be situated within a system that emphasizes the value of teaching to the institution and articulates a thoughtful and comprehensive approach to the evaluation of teaching. Developing and implementing such a system requires leadership at each administrative level: institution, college, and department.

### **INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP**

A major study of faculty and administrator perceptions on the value placed on teaching at major universities found that faculty think that administrators place less value on teaching than the faculty do (Gray, Diamond, & Adam, 1996). Interestingly, individual faculty members surveyed in this study also think that they place more value on teaching than their colleagues do. In the same survey, administrators said that they place more value on teaching than faculty perceive them to do. So the picture that emerges is of contrasting perceptions and confused expectations all around. Faculty have a hard time believing administrative pronouncements about the value placed on teaching, and administrators think that faculty themselves are pressuring their colleagues to place less value on teaching than on research. The first step to implementing a peer review of teaching system is clarifying this value question, not only with pronouncements, but with actions. In the case of peer review, actions center on requiring documentation of positive peer review for personnel decisions and consistently making judgments based on the total evidence, including peer review.

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Since teaching is situational, leadership at the institutional level must provide broad guidelines to allow for adaptation at the department level. Among the principles that can be enunciated are:

- Evaluation of teaching must be done in a systematic, thoughtful manner.
- Provisions must be made for both formative evaluation (for improvement) and summative evaluation (for personnel decisions).
- Evaluation of teaching for personnel decisions must be multidimensional and include evidence from multiple sources (the faculty member, students, peers, and relevant others), multiple kinds of evidence (ratings, reflective statements, narrative appraisals, artifacts of teaching such as syllabi), and be done over an extended period of time. The submitted evidence must indicate the context of the teaching and comparative information on expectations for faculty teaching in the field.
- Evaluation of teaching must be appropriate to the teaching context, and clear guidelines must be accessible to all. Departments must invest time in developing and announcing their approach to evaluation of teaching and the place of peer review within that system. A written document describing that system should be on file at the institutional level as well as at the college and departmental levels.

Richlin and Manning (1995a) note that systems must also be 1) safe, in that they must ensure that outcomes will not be arbitrary; 2) manageable, given the resources of the unit; and 3) compliant with environmental demands for accountability and quality as well as internal unit needs.

At the institutional level, oversight should be exercised, focused on ensuring that departments develop and document systems for the evaluation of teaching that are in keeping with these principles.

Resources, such as expert help for departments developing a system, should also be provided from the institutional level.

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### **COLLEGE LEADERSHIP**

In situations in which there is a college structure under the institutional level, it is incumbent upon the college administration to reinforce the principles and help departments to adapt them to their particular teaching situations. It is also important that when personnel reviews are conducted at the college level, the reviewers operate within a framework that is consistent with announced values and principles for evaluation. Colleges can also provide leadership for formative activities, including mentoring programs, classroom feedback services, and various kinds of teaching discussions.

### **DEPARTMENTAL LEADERSHIP**

Much of the work supporting the development of an evaluation of teaching system that includes peer review needs to occur at the departmental level. The articulated institutional value on teaching is operationalized within the department. If resources and rewards are not allocated in appropriate proportion to the value on teaching, the discrepancy will undermine any pronouncements and documentation. It may help to appoint a strong teaching committee to help ensure that decision-making remains consistent with principles.

### **Developing a Statement**

In developing a system for the evaluation of teaching, particularly one that includes provisions for peer review, the ideal starting place is an extended and serious departmental conversation that addresses the following questions (sets of questions are also contained in AAHE, 1995, and Richlin & Manning, 1995b):

1. Who can benefit from evaluation of teaching in this department?  
(Should it be restricted to pretenure faculty, or should senior faculty be included as well?)
  2. How do we view the relation between the two purposes of evaluation?  
(Improvement purposes versus documentation for personnel decisions such as merit increases, promotion and tenure?) Should we set up separate systems or blend them?
  3. What areas of teaching will we assess?
  4. How specific can we be in articulating our standards in such areas as:
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- Effective course design
  - Effective classroom performance
  - Effective course materials (syllabi, handouts, tests, coursepacks)
  - Effective contributions to teaching within the department
  - Effective contributions to teaching in the discipline
5. What recommendations will we make on procedures for collecting evidence for those areas of teaching performance that we want to assess?
  6. How will we provide resources to accomplish systematic evaluation of teaching?
  7. How will we document and communicate our plan?
  8. How will we monitor our plan?
  9. How often should we revise our plan?

Such a conversation cannot take place in one sitting. Depending on the departmental situation, the chair might appoint a committee to hold preliminary discussions and bring recommendations to others, or small task groups can be assigned responsibility for exploring certain questions and making recommendations for those areas. Eventually, however, a discussion involving all members of the department should be held, not only to seek input but also to build ownership. Since evaluation of teaching is a sensitive issue, help from a facilitator from another department or someone outside the department structure might be useful. The discussions have the potential for initiating critical reflections on teaching that are developmental in themselves and will help to establish the idea of "teaching as community property."

Although he notes that there is often resistance, Arreola (1995) observes that the time committed to initial planning will reap results in the efficiency and effectiveness of the process later. He points out that if a major, thoughtful discussion results in clear, accepted standards, applying those standards to particular cases later is not a daunting or mysterious task. The raw materials upon which the review is based will not need to be reviewed again at subsequent levels, when the first-level peer review results can be used instead, with considerable reduction in amount of documentation.

The resources that follow in this sourcebook might be a helpful starting point for the discussion of standards. They should be adapted and modified as the faculty sees fit in order to reflect its notions of the standards appropriate for the field and the methods of evaluation that are most useful in assessing teaching. If the resources provoke

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considerable dissension, however, it might be best to start with a blank slate and generate standards from the group.

The main goal of the process is to develop a clear statement of how teaching will be evaluated within the department both formatively and summatively. (An example of such a statement is at the end of this chapter.) Such a system should not be so perfunctory that it does not reflect the complexity of teaching, but it must be realistic in the amount of effort and expertise that its use demands. It must be consistent with the principles articulated at the institutional and college levels.

The statement should be practical. It should be accompanied by resources, such as checklists or examples of a good narrative statement evaluating course materials and the like. It should contain "how to" advice as well as principles. Particularly in the area of peer review, few resources have been developed in the past, and the process has remained mysterious and idiosyncratic.

If the faculty has been involved in developing the departmental approach to the evaluation of teaching, obtaining consensus on the final plan should not be difficult. If the large size of a department or the process used to arrive at a plan has precluded broad involvement, a final step in arriving at a plan is to make sure that faculty understand the plan and support it. An additional stage of dissemination, discussion, and modification might be necessary.

Finally, the statement and accompanying resources should be disseminated within the department and placed on file at the college and institutional levels.

### Implementing the System

Once the plan has been communicated and has the support of the faculty, it is important to think about how to support its accomplishment, monitor progress and problems, and revise it as necessary. In small departments, the chairperson might be able to assume these responsibilities and achieve them informally. In larger departments, an oversight committee might be assigned responsibility to assess implementation.

*Preparing colleagues.* One of the most overlooked aspects of incorporating peer review into the evaluation of teaching is preparing colleagues to assess each other's teaching.

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Paying explicit attention to this at the start will reap rewards as the process unfolds. Organizing sessions to practice with checklists or “calibrate” by discussing how each would rate a given course material will help faculty to raise questions and understand how to approach this kind of assessment. Practicing giving formative feedback to colleagues in helpful ways can enhance its effectiveness. Reviewing sample materials or videotapes of classroom teaching can stimulate discussion among faculty on how to apply the standards that have been developed and how to use the resources that have been designed. Often, such sessions can be facilitated by a teaching consultant, a skilled member of the department, or a faculty member from another department. Making it clear that part of the assessment of teaching is assessing one’s contributions as a peer reviewer will help to reinforce the investment made in developing one’s skills.

*Distributing responsibilities.* In the particular case of peer review, the distribution of responsibilities might be an issue. Assigning colleagues to provide feedback for improvement and to document teaching performance for personnel decisions must be done carefully so that appropriate and helpful assignments are made and time demands are shared equitably. Often a handful of faculty members most skilled in this area are asked to shoulder a disproportionate share of the time commitment. These individuals might be asked to help other faculty learn to become skilled developers of other faculty talent as well. Inevitably, the question of conflict of responsibilities between a peer who is assigned both formative and summative functions occurs. In the best of circumstances, the formative and summative information should flow together: Information on what improvements are needed can be tracked to show improvement. Most parties, however, prefer to separate these functions so that the mentor is not the judge. Arrangements for accomplishing this division of responsibilities will need to be made, often by using peers outside the department. Muchinsky (1995) and others observe that when content is being judged, it is best to choose peer reviewers based on knowledge of the discipline, but when general teaching performance is being assessed, it is appropriate, perhaps even desirable, that the reviewers be unfamiliar with the subject so that they can make an assessment based on the role of the “naive learner.” Outside peers will have to understand the evaluation system as well.

*Monitoring the process.* Monitoring the thoroughness, timeliness, and fairness of the system will also be important. At the time of annual reviews, it should be clear whether or not the appropriate activities and their documentation are occurring. The chair or oversight committee can monitor the situation and call for change. If the sit-

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uation warrants it, the department can be asked to consider changes or to help troubleshoot the situation. Provisions should be made for periodic reexamination of the evaluation of teaching plan and for its revision.

Additional discussions of the development and implementation of peer review systems for both formative and summative purposes are contained in Hutchings (1996a), Bernstein (1996), and Quinlan (1996). Workbooks for devising systems have been developed by the American Association for Higher Education (1995) and Richlin and Manning (1995b).

### Example of a Statement

In his discussion of the case of one department's experience in developing and implementing a peer review system, Nordstrom (1995) includes the statement that resulted.

#### A Protocol for a Peer Review Program in the Department of Marine and Coastal Sciences at Rutgers University

1. The department should have an established process of peer review for faculty to use in improving their course instruction and enhancing their chances of success in personnel decisions.
  2. Peer review is strongly recommended, but not required, for all courses an instructor teaches.
  3. Peer review should be considered only one of many different ways that teaching effectiveness can be evaluated.
  4. The emphasis on peer review should be on its value to the instructor, the process should be instructor-driven, and the results should be the property of the instructor.
  5. The review should involve using standardized, faculty-approved worksheets: one for review of course materials and one for review of classroom instruction.
  6. The worksheets should be constructed so the reviewers can obtain insight along with the instructor being reviewed.
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7. Prompts may be included in the worksheets to ensure that the instructor and the reviewers consider important aspects of a teaching program.
  8. The worksheets should be updated periodically to reflect changing departmental goals and conceptions of student learning and to make them compatible with new initiatives for improving teaching effectiveness.
  9. The review should be conducted no earlier than midterm if the course is being offered for the first time.
  10. The instructor should provide copies of the syllabus and all handouts, assignments, and exams for the review of course materials. A copy of the documentation used for course approval and the description of the course in the university catalog should also be available.
  11. At least two in-class observations are suggested for review of classroom instruction.
  12. A meeting to discuss teaching issues of mutual interest should be held as part of both the review of course materials and the review of classroom instruction. The meetings also allow the instructor to elaborate on teaching goals and strategies and to rebut negative comments.
  13. If the review is to be used in making a personnel decision, the comments on the reviewers' worksheets should be finalized only after these meetings.
  14. Use of peer review results in making a personnel decision should occur via the instructor to the maximum extent possible (e.g., through incorporation into a teaching portfolio).
  15. Peer reviews for personnel decisions and course improvement should not be conducted simultaneously, but the same reviewer worksheets should be used for both types of review.
  16. An individual conducting a review for a personnel decision should have experience in reviewing other courses, should have taught a course at the same level as the course being reviewed, and should be open to alternative teaching strategies and conceptions of student learning.
  17. The opportunity for remedial action, through subsequent reviews initiated by the instructor, must be made available following negative reviews made for a personnel decision.
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18. Subject to approval by instructors, worksheets may be synthesized to identify department-wide teaching and curricular problems needing remediation.
19. A departmental library of teaching resources should be maintained for faculty use.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE PEER REVIEW PROCESS**

In summary, the following are characteristics of an effective peer review process:

1. It provides for both formative feedback and summative decision-making.
  2. Peer reviewers understand their task and are well prepared to accomplish it.
  3. Trust and confidence in the process is exhibited by all parties.
  4. Ongoing departmental efforts are invested in improving the peer review process.
  5. Peer review assignments are made in ways that are likely to result in helpful collaborations.
  6. Peer review is a valued process within the department.
  7. Parties are cooperative and timely in accomplishing peer review tasks.
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