Reconsidering FCQ’s, an event hosted by the Minority Affairs Committee (MAC) of University of Colorado Denver Faculty Assembly

Background

MAC is charged with making recommendations on the hiring, support, and retention of a diverse faculty at CU Denver. In 2012-13, MAC held a series of Diversity Dialogues to gather impressions on the environment at CU Denver with respect to inclusiveness. These Dialogues were conducted in three sessions with students, faculty/staff, and administrators, respectively.

In 2013-14, MAC followed this series with a goal of tackling the issue of retention more directly. The first step was to partner with the Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness (OIRE) to gather and analyze FCQ data to determine if bias exists with respect to faculty members from underrepresented ethnic/racial groups. OIRE gathered and analyzed the data and reported findings to MAC.

Attendees

Seventeen people in total attended the session on March 14, 2014 from 11:00-12:15 in the Auraria Library from a wide variety of departments including Auraria Library, Sociology, Business School, Women’s and Gender Studies, English, Anthropology, Political Science, Integrative Biology, CLAS, OIRE, CU Online/OIT. Attendees rank/titles:

- Lecturer = 2
- Sr. Instructor = 1
- Asst. Professor = 5
- Assoc. Professor = 3
- Professor = 1
- Assoc. Dean = 1
- Vice Chancellor = 1
- Director = 1
- Sr. Business Professional = 1
- Research Analyst = 1

The forum was moderated by a MAC co-chair and was an open question/answer session. The campus RTP committee had a conflicting meeting and was unable to send a representative, but asked that the session be taped instead.
Questions and Responses

First, audience members were given a brief overview of some research in the area as well as findings for CU Denver. For example, minority faculty are rated lower on student evaluations\(^1\), there are preconceptions of warmth capability and political bias reflected in questionnaires\(^2\), Latino faculty are rated lower in general, and strict Latino faculty are rated even lower\(^3\).

Next, the findings from OIRE were then summarized. In short, controlling for as many factors known to affect FCQ’s (course level, instructional method, enrollment, term, percentage female, average student age, average student GPA, average course GPA, instructor rank, instructor gender), minority instructors were scored approximately 0.25 points lower on both the instructor and course questions on FCQ’s, on average. This effect was moderated but not eliminated for the interaction of female and minority faculty members.

The moderator invited participants to join in the discussion by asking the following questions:

**Do assumptions about gender, race, sexual orientation, national origin and language shape FCQ student responses?**

- Associate Professor: Would also be interesting to know how you change your teaching based on knowledge that assumptions about gender, race, sexual orientation, national origin and language shape FCQ student responses?
- Yes (comment from lecturer): It can be uncomfortable, and I struggle with feelings pertaining to job security. I also pay attention to how information on the dominant group is presented, being careful not to appear biased.
- Yes (Associate Professor): I often need to reorient my teaching toward the subset of class that will react negatively; this affects the other students that are there to learn.
- Vice Chancellor: Students can look for “agendas” of minority faculty. During PTR, it is necessary to ensure that the faculty under review can assist with going through the comments to understand the context of the FCQ scores.
- Strict Latino professor – try to be more communicative.
- Latina instructor – careful about how she is teaching information about dominant groups. She does not want to be accused of tearing down dominant groups. Impacts the books/readings she selects. Does not feel like she has job security.
- Teaches human evolution – student comment “I did not come from monkeys, but maybe you did.” Yes, students perceptions do have an impact.
- Forum is an important opportunity to share experience.
- If a faculty member is teaching a topic that is already challenging to the students and the instructor is from racial-ethnic group, this combination causes more tensions.
- Stereotype threat matters.

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What is the potential impact of FCQs on the underrepresented racial-ethnic faculty of CU Denver?

- Associate Professor: I have heard from junior faculty that they don’t think they could be here another year. There are other environments that may be more welcoming.
- Assistant Professor: In tenure considerations, it can be hard to prove excellence in teaching. This is even more difficult for non-majority faculty given the biases leading to lower than average FCQ scores.
- Lecturer: TAs and lecturers may need to especially “teach” towards the FCQs since future jobs are affected by it – to the point of buying donuts, pizza, etc. near FCQ time.
- Associate Professor: It is important to move emphasis away from FCQs to other indicators of effective teaching.
- Associate Professor: There are other factors looked at rather than FCQs; however, it is hard to resist the temptation to put emphasis on something that is a numeric score.
- Current FCQs build on what students already know. This can be tough since it is hard to build off of students with particularly poor backgrounds.
- Vice Chancellor: There is often useful information in the FCQs that can be used to improve a faculty member’s teaching; however, if the faculty member believes they are biased, that may limit the use of FCQs towards improvement.
- Vice Chancellor: FCQs can have more of an effect on lecturers since they don’t have multiple means of teaching evaluation to the extent that tenured faculty members do through the PTR processes.
- Associate Professor: I have found it helpful to look back at comments over the last 5 years for patterns, especially in the written comments. I use these to demonstrate how they have changed the way I teach.
- Have heard from minority faculty who do not intend to stay after 1 year because not feeling welcome or supported.
- Advice received by racial-ethnic faculty. Excellence in teaching and research. Teaching is too hard, so focus on research.
- MAC wants to move the conversations away from student satisfaction, and towards student learning.
- Tenure committees are looking at more than FCQs. How is teaching improving?
- Students may not remember everything that occurred during the class. Only administered at one time. How reliable are the scores? How students are evaluating is like a roller coaster.
- Less flexibility for instructors and TAs for evaluations. They rely heavily on FCQs. How can we be supportive of all faculty?
- Advice to faculty. In dossier, acknowledge that you are “rigorous” in the narrative. But also describe how you are “fair.” Be reflective. If receiving the same comments, then it’s not an outlier.
- At comp review, 1 member of the primary unit committee looked through all my FCQs and found 1 negative comment and included it in the letter. Received 1 negative vote.
Are there other limitations/hurdles in the tenure and promotion process for underrepresented racial-ethnic faculty?

- Vice Chancellor: Often different expectations exist for non-majority faculty members, often related to service, which then eats away at time for research and teaching. This is particularly true when the faculty member is being chosen to “represent” their group (cultural taxation).
- Lecturer: On positive side, universities are looking for minority faculty. Perhaps that is hopeful.
- Recruiting practices are often good for increasing the number of entering minority faculty members; however, afterwards institutions often do little for retention and adopt a “you are on your own” attitude.
- Students are often unaware of the biases they bring to the process as are administrators and other faculty members.
- Vice Chancellor: Often minority faculty use different approaches in their scholarship compared to majority faculty or main stream research. They often publish in other outlets. During evaluation this can be a detriment. Education is needed to explain these differences during evaluation and demonstrate contribution.

What are the alternative methods of evaluating teaching?

- Find a way to connect teaching, service and research activities to society and societal problems.
- Associate Professor: I teach a summer field school, often without pay. These types of classes aren’t given much credit despite the immense contribution to learning.
- Vice Chancellor to MAC: We should be thoughtful in terms of not only what we as individuals can do to address these biases but also think about systemic change, raising the consciousness of those making decisions in administration. Consider policies and practices along these lines. What are other institutions doing? What systematic changes can be suggested?
- Vice Chancellor: I suggest faculty members conduct a thoughtful mid-semester evaluation to look at feedback and make changes as needed. What is going well? What is not going well?
- Responding to the needs of society. Beyond me and I. What is the impact? Service learning.
- We need systemic change. Looking at policies. Need to raise consciousness of these issues. If we really want to have under-represented faculty, we need to have look at everything.
- CU Online has midterm survey that mirrors FCQs.
- Ask mid-term questions in the middle of class.
- Students are hesitant to hand write their comments. Afraid that the instructor will recognize their handwriting. Suggest using google docs, which can be completely anonymous.
How can we support faculty in the tenure and promotion process?

- When I first arrived, there was a mentoring program run by Brenda Allen. It made a huge difference to me, e.g., helped with feelings of isolation. I now try to provide this to others, e.g., sit in their classes to provide feedback.
- Regarding peer feedback on teaching: Should be done more than just at the last semester before it is needed. When receiving peer feedback, have an initial meeting (explain teaching philosophy etc.) and then again post meeting. It is helpful to provide a form or suggested questions for evaluation. These things ensure the peer evaluation will be more likely useful.
- Associate Dean: Faculty should be proactive in the creation of the dossier. Be familiar with departmental criteria.
- Creating community
  - Having faculty willing to sit in on my teaching – peer evaluation. Not consistent evaluators. Better to go through Center for Faculty Development. Using a template. Should happen at different times. Problem some departments have rotating process – Jr faculty evaluating a Sr. faculty. Power dynamics matters.
- RTP looks at who are giving the peer-evaluations. Independent evaluators are more meaningful.
- Can modify tenure criteria through department actions.
- FCQs have less value these days on FTP cases. Looking for outliers. Multiple layers of decision makers.
- Chairs also need more training on mentoring Jr faculty. They need to know how to document evidence for their dossier.

How can we educate students on providing constructive feedback?

- Encourage students to think about providing comments that would be helpful for future offerings. Ask them to be reflective and take the time needed to provide helpful critique.
- CU Online: They do mid semester evaluation with questions geared towards final FCQ questions. This allows faculty a chance to make necessary changes.
- Have evaluations done using google docs so comments are typed and clearly anonymous.

How can MAC help you?

- Seek funding to do focus groups and find out how people are feeling. Make the university aware of the climate.
- Provide information to evaluation committees so that they are aware of the biases that do exist in FCQ responses as well as the implicit biases in students, departments and faculty.
- Provide training for faculty on how to conduct evaluations. Often training is focused on what you shouldn’t do rather than on what you should do. Also, teach faculty and students how to provide useful critiques.
- Perhaps consider creating and providing a best practices document.
- Help educate the problem with unintentional bias from student, faculty colleagues, and administrators.
- Brenda is doing a diversity workshop for search committees. Should we do something similar for faculty?
Summary and Conclusion

As the population of students on the CU Denver campus continues to diversify, it is apparent that conversations like these need to continue and turn into actionable items to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for both faculty/staff as well as students. Several takeaways from this conversation make it apparent that we are not where we need to be, yet. Many faculty members voiced concerns about “teaching to the FCQ’s” by altering their normal methods in an attempt to please everyone as well as shying away from topics germane to the course to not offend anyone. The general feeling among the audience implied that this environment with so much emphasis on the FCQ is restrictive and possibly even unhealthy for the instructors as well as the students. General sentiment was that faculty members must take it upon themselves to prove excellence via multiple means of evaluation. There was also some discussion about guidance on this being located somewhere in the Regents’ documents. However, it is not apparent what resources are available to faculty in this regard or where to go for help. Coupled with this extra burden for finding and documenting teaching excellence are two factors that can harm minority faculty even more in the tenure and promotion process. First, on the research side some of the topics that are of interest to minority faculty may be considered “fringe” research and thus more difficult to achieve publication in the premier outlets. Second, on the service side many minority faculty feel a sense of “cultural taxation” by being asked/expected to serve in multiple service capacities to help these committees feel diverse. This can result in a self-fulfilling negative effect on tenure and promotion as faculty are burdened with more work, marginalized in research, and restrained in teaching. Creating an environment that welcomes diverse faculty as well as helps them to be successful should be of the highest priority. The next level of conversation should be shifted toward the actionable items in this regard.