

Faculty Performance Reviews

By Theodore H. Curry Director of the Graduate School of Labor and Industrial Relations of Michigan State University. *Tomorrow's Professor*, Volume 1, No.2, February, 2006.

Executive Summary

This briefing is intended primarily for department chairs and other unit administrators responsible for regular faculty performance reviews. It offers an overview of faculty performance reviews in the broader context of faculty development at the unit level and provides guidance for academic administrators on conducting reviews and writing appraisals.

The role of the faculty performance review has been elevated in recent years for a number of reasons. Increasingly, colleges and universities award salary increases on the basis of merit or performance, which requires an accurate assessment of performance relative to some standard. In a resource-challenged environment, aligning the efforts of faculty with unit and institutional goals becomes more critical; performing well in important areas becomes more important. Standards for earning tenure and promotion seem to rise constantly. A record of excellent performance is usually necessary for a favorable tenure and/or promotion decision. In the face of public criticism and/or institutional self-examination, many institutions have initiated post-tenure review to ensure that tenured faculty are performing at acceptable levels. The annual faculty performance review, especially when it has a developmental component, helps to ensure that faculty perform at high levels year in and year out.

While a variety of organizations use performance appraisals, the unique culture of higher education must be considered in order to provide effective faculty performance reviews and development systems. Important aspects or underlying assumptions include (1) faculty independence and self-direction in the light of the unit and institution's vision and objectives, (2) faculty expectations of involvement individually and through the governance process, (3) the importance of process and procedural fairness, and (4) the need for the system to be legally defensible.

This briefing provides a framework for the faculty performance review process that includes, ideally, six components: (1) institutional enunciation of goals, vision, and values; (2) unit establishment of equitable workloads, performance criteria, and standards; (3) faculty career development plan with annual update as basis for review; (4) faculty self-appraisal through the annual activity report; (5) appraisal of faculty performance by peer review committee and/or chair; and (6) performance feedback session and written performance review.

This briefing also offers specific guidance on writing the faculty performance review, along with sample reviews for faculty at different performance levels and career stages. It provides strategies for dealing with the "problem" faculty member and for using the

results of the review for faculty development, as well as diversity considerations in the review and development process. Finally, it offers comments on post-tenure review and the role of the dean. ---

Unit Establishment of Equitable Workloads, Performance Criteria, and Standards

There are three prerequisites for effective faculty performance reviews: setting expectations, establishing clear guidelines, and establishing performance criteria and standards.

Setting Expectations

First, ideally the university and unit must enunciate their mission, goals, objectives, and values. This sets the context for faculty performance expectations. Without these, faculty risk performing successfully on low-priority criteria. A unit or institution that values the earning of top rankings for research is more likely to define faculty research excellence as publishing in top tier refereed journals and receiving large external funding grants (depending, of course, on the discipline). Another unit or institution with less research focus might define faculty research excellence as simply publishing in refereed journals with less concern for journal rankings, number of publications, and external funding.

Establishing Clear Guidelines

Second, the unit must establish and enforce clear guidelines concerning fair and equitable faculty workloads. What is the teaching load? What percentage of faculty effort should be devoted to teaching versus research versus service (and in some institutions versus outreach)? Under what circumstances does the workload differ for faculty within the unit? Some institutions/units have employed differential workloads for faculty, in ment include (1) better use of faculty talent, as a faculty member may have greater strength in one dimension- for example, teaching or research, than in others; (2) accommodating the changing interests and strengths of faculty, especially as those evolve over the life cycle of the faculty member; and (3) better resource utilization as some faculty may have funded research that may allow them to "buy out" of some teaching, while others may not have as active a research program. These potential advantages can be especially useful in large institutions and units where a wide mix of initiatives, strategies, and activities are in place (e.g., expectations that faculty and/or units engage in outreach or engagement with the broader community and stakeholders). Disadvantages include (1) the perception that some are not fulfilling the full faculty role and (2) a possible excuse for some who choose not to perform the full faculty role at a time of limited institutional and unit resources. Challenges include determining how merit is determined and how rewards are allocated. If a faculty member's assignment does not include the full mission of teaching, research, and service, can performance be considered fully meritorious?

Establishing Performance Criteria and Standards

Third, and most important, after defining equitable workload, the unit must establish

performance criteria and standards. Performance criteria relate to the relative importance of teaching, research, and service. Some units apply weights as a mechanism for specifying relative importance. While a unit might typically use a 2/2/1 weighting (40% research, 40% teaching, 20% service), a service, or some similar variant. Additionally, such weighting may apply differently to faculty members within a unit, either because the nature of assignments for faculty in that role is different (e.g. an outreach orientation) or because the individual faculty member has been given a different assignment.

Performance standards relate to the determination of excellence on each criterion. How is excellence defined in teaching and how will it be assessed—student evaluations at a certain threshold level, assessment of a teaching portfolio, in-class observations by trained assessors? What is excellent research—articles in top tier journals, books published by elite publishers, research grants received, dollars awarded, presentations made? What is excellent service or outreach and how will it be assessed—service to the unit and institution, service to the profession, alumni activities, development and fund raising, service to the professional community, teaching nontraditional students and/or in off-campus locations? Performance appraisal requires comparing performance to some standard.

Each academic unit must establish faculty performance expectations and standards if it is to appraise faculty performance fairly. If the unit cannot establish and articulate performance criteria and standards for and with faculty, the unit cannot fairly hold faculty accountable for attaining the standards. The absence of such agreed upon criteria and standards leads not only to individual performance appraisal problems, but also to unit and institutional level problems concerning reappointment, promotion, and tenure. Ultimately, the faculty member must be on the which some have greater teaching or research responsibilities relative to others. The advantages of such assign research-oriented institution or unit might use a weighting of 50 percent research, 30 percent teaching, 20 percent same page as the unit (through the chair), college (through the dean), and institution.