

The Challenge of Evaluating Faculty Colleagues

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A key task all department chairs must face is that of evaluating their faculty. A number of factors complicate this task and, if not handled well, it can become one of the most distasteful of any chair's responsibilities. First is the incompatibility of making judgments with the concept of departmental collegiality. Fundamental to the concept of collegiality is the "we're all in this together" credo and its corollary that all players are more or less equal.

The fact is, judging by those who attend American Council on Education workshops, most chairs preside over small departments, units of 10 or fewer faculty members. A slightly larger proportion have departments with no more than 20 full-time faculty, which hardly makes for an anonymous mass. The daily contact and the proximity in which everyone in a department works adds to a situation in which relationships are apt to be intense and personal.

Also complicating the situation is the common practice for chairs to serve for a set term—usually for three years. With about two-thirds of them returning to faculty ranks of their department after no more than two terms of service, there is an understandable reluctance to damage relationships irreparably.

Another phenomenon also may augment a chair's reluctance to make negative decisions or offer critical observations. More and more departments are experiencing turnover among their leadership. For personal and institutional reasons, younger faculty members are taking on the task of leading their departments. That means that an associate professor may be presiding over a department in which there are still full professors who have spent their entire professional careers in that department. More alarming is to find untenured assistant professors holding that chair responsibility! While not common, it does happen surprisingly frequently. Some of these younger leaders have been recruited from outside the institution. Thus, they assume their leadership role without knowing the history of the group they are appointed to lead.

As part of this turnover in leadership, we also see women heading departments more frequently, as well as foreign-born and minority faculty members. In these cases, there can be differences in cultural experience and expectations, which can create an uneasy relationship between chair and department faculty. A younger female chair leading a department in which all her colleagues are male, and many are from an older generation, can feel pressured. The same can be true for minority chairs in a

department dominated by nonminority faculty members or a foreign-born chair in a department of U.S. faculty members.

A final added discomfort is the obligation to carry out post-tenure evaluation. If this process has acquired a punitive odor of making sure that tenured faculty do not rest on their oars, a chair will be faced with a thoroughly unpleasant responsibility.

When facing such unsettling factors, how does a chair carry out the requirement of evaluating faculty? The following observations may offer some assistance.

Evaluation needs to be an ongoing process. If you only sit down to review a person's progress once a year, the atmosphere at that time is likely to be charged. That formal (and necessary) annual meeting will be easier to carry off effectively if you have previously talked with the faculty member about his or her work. Fall is a good time to meet informally to talk about goals for the term. Take the time to find out what pedagogical objectives each faculty member has set. Corridor chats to check on progress during the term are a good way to follow up. Once student evaluations are returned, offer to sit down and discuss what the faculty member has learned from the evaluations. It is also a good opportunity to look for general feedback for the department.

This approach is as important with tenured faculty as it is with adjunct or pre-tenure faculty. A chair needs to find ways to evidence interest in the professional development of all faculty members. In so doing, a chair increases the linkage between individual development and departmental evolution. By knowing what each faculty member is working on, it becomes possible to keep the goals of the department and those of the individual appropriately linked. The hazard of permitting seasoned faculty members to pursue personal scholarly goals that take them further from the departmental and institutional missions will be greatly reduced.

With new faculty members, it is especially important to have a number of low-key meetings about their professional progress. It is also vital to have at least one formal session to review tenure standards and make sure that the faculty member understands departmental and institutional expectations. It will help the faculty member if, at the end of the term, the chair reviews the evaluation results from the first term because the chair can give feedback on what needs to change as well as compliment the person on what has been accomplished.

By ensuring ongoing feedback throughout the year, the year-end formal review will be much less charged for both the chair and the faculty member. Rather than a meeting in which the chair doles out good or bad news, it can be a moment when both parties review the year's

results. If there have been problems, both parties will already be aware of them.

Be honest and straightforward about problems. If there have been problems, the faculty member is more than likely already aware of them. If there is bad news, be sure it is delivered as descriptive of behaviors or results rather than in terms of personal traits. Rather than telling someone, "You do not seem to be capable of getting the main points about general chemistry across to your students," state that student results in general chemistry quizzes and major examinations have not been satisfactory. That tactic is more likely to offer a foundation from which to probe and discuss the teaching techniques the instructor is using—which do not seem to be working—and is more likely either to foster pedagogical improvement or provide impetus for the person to realize that this is not his or her forte and suggest that perhaps it is time to find another occupation.

Be sure written and oral feedback is consistent. If you have had to offer criticism or raise questions about whether a novice faculty member may have problems gaining tenure, be sure that the written summary of your conversation records those facts. In particular, the written record of the meeting needs to accurately reflect the content of the personal meeting. Do not use the written summary to gloss over tough points. Nor should the written summary be used to deliver a stern negative message if the same message was not delivered in the face-to-face meeting. However difficult it may be to write negative comments, nothing will do more to destroy your credibility than to have speech and writing diverge.

Any written summary of the formal evaluation meeting should be sent to the faculty member. The copy needs to be signed by the faculty member and returned to you to keep in your files. The signature need only acknowledge that the faculty member has read the material. If the person disagrees with any points, he or she should return the summary with his or her comments attached. These steps are important, should the awarding of tenure become questionable.

Know when to make a negative employment decision. The purpose of annual evaluations is both to encourage the successful development of new faculty and to guide those who are not succeeding to either improve or perhaps leave before they would be denied tenure. Before that, the institution can decide not to renew a contract. It is, therefore, very important that chairs take their review responsibilities seriously and carry them out courageously. If the chair, in consultation with tenured

department members, sees that a particular faculty member is not of the quality that the department wishes to retain, it is important to make that decision during the time the institution can opt not to renew a contract and *before* that highly fraught moment when a decision on tenure must be made.

Write a clear evaluation letter. If there is anything a dean most dreads in personnel evaluations, it is the "yes/but" letter from a department chair. Honesty does not require anyone to be personally insulting. However, it does require someone to describe behaviors accurately and to make clear what conclusions you draw from those observations. It is the job of a dean to review and either support or reject the recommendation of a chair. It is *not* the job of the dean to puzzle out whether a department thinks a particular instructor is someone the department wants to keep or is subtly asking the dean to reject—leaving chair and department to say, "Oh, we didn't make that (terrible) decision." A good test is to read your letter of recommendation and ask yourself, "What outcome do I wish to see and am I telling the dean clearly what I think the decision should be?" If that is not the case, it is time to go back to the computer and edit the letter appropriately.