Evaluation of Teaching Intensive Faculty

What does ‘evaluate’ mean?

An effective evaluation system for teaching-intensive faculty members promotes quality teaching and learning, and a culture of sharing of best practices throughout the department. Departments with evaluation systems in place have discovered that it is easier to engage part-time and full-time teaching-intensive faculty members with the mission of the department while at the same time enhancing the quality of education at UAlbany. A regular review of teaching helps all faculty members to evaluate what works and what doesn’t in the classroom and in course design, and leads to better outcomes.

Our teaching-intensive faculty members express broad support for evaluation of their teaching. As one part-time faculty member commented: “I’m looking forward to having someone in the department sit in on my class to evaluate my teaching so that I can receive feedback from my peers that will help me to improve as an educator.”

The most critical elements to evaluate are whether the faculty member:

✓ Has high academic standards and learning goals
✓ Establishes fair and consistent grading and evaluation schemes
✓ Aligns the course with the curriculum goals and the departmental mission
✓ Pays attention to the specific needs of students in the course(s) taught

The University at Albany has already developed an Addendum on Evaluation of Part-Time Faculty which can be found at http://www.albany.edu/academics/part-time.faculty.appointment.guidelines.shtml. One of the key passages states:

Supervisors are expected to exercise reasonable oversight over each instructor’s performance to insure that it meets the high standards expected for all members of the faculty. The University requires all academic units to establish procedures for the evaluation of teaching faculty, including part-time faculty. Insofar as possible, the procedures should parallel those used for full-time faculty members, and at a minimum should include provision for student course evaluations and review of course syllabi and related materials. Such documentation is highly useful for the professional development of the part-time faculty member and is also helpful in making renewal, advancement and compensation decisions. Classroom visits may also be useful, to both the faculty member and the program. The performance aspects to be evaluated should relate to the criteria for selection and renewal.
This chapter supplements the official guidelines noted above by describing more specifically ways that any department can ensure evaluation without placing undue burden on existing faculty.

Departments that have experimented with evaluation of teaching-intensive faculty have learned that choosing just a few critical aspects of teaching is most effective. They don’t try to evaluate everything all at once. Choosing only the most critical elements allows the department and faculty members to document excellent teaching as they expand their discussion of what other elements of teaching might be important to the success of students in their discipline.

**Focus on the following criteria first:**

- High academic standards and learning goals
- Fair and consistent grading and evaluation schemes
- Alignment of the course with curriculum goals and departmental mission
- Attention to the specific needs of students in the course

There are two simple ways to focus on these criteria: review syllabi and teaching materials, and classroom observations. You can learn a lot by reviewing materials, and then using classroom observations as supplemental feedback.

**Review syllabi and teaching materials**

The easiest way to get started is to regularly schedule a review of syllabi and other teaching materials such as tests and assignments. It’s useful to offer feedback after the review in the form of a discussion with or a written letter to the instructor. Departments have found that scheduling such reviews after the first semester of teaching, and thereafter once every 3 semesters that the faculty member teaches is most successful.

It’s helpful to keep a limited set of questions in mind when teaching materials are being reviewed: this ensures more efficient work for the reviewer, and more focused feedback for the instructor being evaluated.
Questions to ask yourself during this review might include:

Syllabus

✓ Does the syllabus include clear statements of high level learning goals (not just “know” or “understand”)?
✓ Do the goals outlined in the syllabus align with the goals of the curriculum?
✓ Are the goals appropriate for the course’s place in the curriculum?
✓ Does the syllabus have clear and fair policies and appropriate accommodations for emergencies or student disabilities?

Feedback

✓ Is there a calendar of assignments and tests?
✓ Are clear criteria and standards in place that help students see how their work is evaluated?
✓ Are criteria and standards for grading applied equitably to all students in the class?

Assignments

✓ Do assignments and tests allow students to practice disciplinary thinking?
✓ Are assignments, tests and other activities varied enough to take into account, promote and measure different ways of learning?
✓ Are homework assignments designed to help students master course content?

Interaction

✓ Are students being asked to work together to answer questions or solve challenging problems?
✓ Is the instructor available, has he or she offered ample opportunities for discussion with students outside of class time?

Derived from the Principles of Effective Teaching in Higher Education (see Appendix)

Classroom observations

An additional way to evaluate a faculty member’s performance is to schedule classroom observations. This method represents a significant investment of time on the part of both observer and observee, but it is particularly useful as a way to learn more about how
students are actively engaged in the classroom; how students are responding to the design of the instructor’s lessons; how the instructor uses time in the classroom; and how effectively the instructor responds to student questions and concerns. As one part-time faculty member observed: “Having a written evaluation by a colleague who was both inspiring and helpful, made a tremendous difference in my approach to the classroom.”

Because this approach represents a greater investment of time, departments with experience in this area set up a schedule of observations that is: a) fair to the instructors being evaluated and b) takes into account the time it will take from the assigned observers of part-time faculty.

### Important for any formal classroom observation intended for summative evaluation of an instructor is to use a four-part process:

1. *Meet briefly with the instructor to be observed before the scheduled observation to discuss the goals of the particular class period to be observed and how the class has been progressing thus far*
2. *Observe the class using agreed-upon criteria for evaluation of an in-class performance*
3. *Meet with the instructor to discuss what the observer saw during the class period*
4. *Write a summary of observations that can be shared with the instructor and the department chair*

For more information about effective peer observations of the classroom, check out the UAlbany Peer Observation Handbook at [http://www.itlal.org/index.php?q=node/90](http://www.itlal.org/index.php?q=node/90). It is a short document, framed as an extended FAQ, and it has very good information about how peer observations to maximize effectiveness and avoid problems.