

AN INITIATIVE FOR THE HOLISTIC ASSESSMENT OF TEACHING IN THE COLLEGE

More information:

As you (hopefully) remember, in Spring 2022, Anne, Betsy, and I hosted a set of focus groups and distributed a survey to discuss the College's approach to the assessment of teaching. As we explained when we introduced the project, we had had (and still have) several conversations with various faculty and departments over the past couple of years about the challenges of our current process. We wanted to get a better sense of what was happening and how our colleagues were experiencing and thinking about the topic. Based on the level of participation, it's clear that faculty care about this issue, and we received the substantial, thoughtful feedback that we needed, wanted, and appreciated.

We've spent the past few months making sense of what we've heard (and seen), and we're eager to share those results with you. Assessing teaching is so important to the good work we do here, and we're realizing that we need to make some adjustments to how we do that. We don't have definitive answers, but we know that we, as a College, need to work through the challenges that have been uncovered. Our question now is: how do we do that?

We have some general ideas, but we need more than that. To be direct, we are looking to you for guidance: as leaders and collaborators with ODOC, your insight can point us in the right direction for moving forward. Will you share it with us?

The plan:

ODOC will provide dinner for as many of you (chairs and program directors) who can make it (hopefully all!), and Anne, Betsy, and I will pick your brains for a little bit. We're looking for feedback on three things specifically:

- What problems have you seen/experienced/recognized with our current ways of assessing teaching?
- What would a good solution to that set of issues look like (not what is the answer, but what characteristics or features would a good answer need to have)?
- What is a good way forward--how should we work together with faculty to solve the problem?

We hope you'll join us for this conversation. A calendar invite is forthcoming; please rsvp so that we can make sure to have enough dessert (and dinner, too, of course)! If you have any questions in the meantime, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Challenges

1. **There are disparities across departments.** Departments count different activities as “teaching”, have different standards of effectiveness, use different evidence in different ways, and give differential credit (1,2,3,4) for the same activities. Distinctions between rankings are often subjective and difficult to explain.
2. **Criteria rarely specify substantive standards of teaching effectiveness.** (e.g., “instructor keeps students informed of their progress by providing meaningful feedback on their work”).
 - Almost half are about contributions made outside the classroom (e.g., “directed reading or other independent study,” “led a study abroad semester”)
 - Many are about the administrative work of teaching (e.g., “meets class regularly,” “offers courses needed by the department,” “submits grades on time”)
 - About a quarter are outcomes of an external evaluative process (e.g., “won an award,” “high student evaluations” or “high peer evaluations”).
 - We often allow students, peers, or external award committees to determine what counts as effective teaching—outsourcing a fundamental component of the evaluative process.
 - We sometimes allow students, peers, or external award committees to decide *who* is an effective teacher—outsourcing the evaluative process altogether.
3. **The results of student or peer evaluations are not sufficiently valid measures of teaching effectiveness to play the role they are playing in most rubrics.**
 - Without a common definition of teaching effectiveness, external evaluations will be shaped by idiosyncratic variables unrelated to teaching effectiveness.
 - Even with a common definition of teaching effectiveness, the results of student and peer evaluations are, like all human systems, subject to multiple biases.
 - Students and peers can contribute important evidence to the evaluative process, but they should not—by themselves—determine its outcome.
 - Ideally, evaluators would specify standards and consult multiple sources of evidence to determine whether each standard has been met.
4. **As currently conceived, our assessment processes unfairly disadvantage multiple kinds of faculty groups.**
 - Because many rubrics don’t have substantive standards and rely heavily on the results of unspecified student and peer feedback, results are likely to be inaccurate and biased within a department.
 - When that is combined with procedural differences across departments, the problems with equity are compounded.
 - The ambiguity of criteria leads some groups to distrust whether they will be evaluated fairly.