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EVALUATING TEACHING

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KU teachers have new opportunity to demonstrate their effectiveness

In the 15 years since the report Scholarship Reconsidered (Boyer, 1990) was published, many colleges and universities have begun requiring evidence of teaching effectiveness—not only student ratings but also peer-reviewed evidence and artifacts, according to Mary Taylor Huber and Pat Hutchings in The Advancement of Learning: Building the Teaching Commons (2005).

Beginning this fall, teachers at KU will have opportunities to demonstrate their effectiveness in new ways when they submit applications for promotion and tenure. Peer reviewers are asked to take a more comprehensive look at a teacher’s work, rather than only observing a class or two. This new form of peer review is outlined on pages 7 and 8 of this issue of Teaching Matters.


This change also corroborates Huber and Hutchings’ observation that “campuses are complex, living organisms where new developments occur in fits and starts, energetically in one quarter, sluggishly in another. Change is happening all the time, all over the place, but not in a neat, coordinated way …”

The authors further suggest that it makes sense to view higher education as a fleet of small boats: “They don’t all head in exactly the same direction, but increasingly there is a sense of convergence, of being part of something larger, of rowing toward some common destination …”

The new ways that faculty members can illustrate their effectiveness and growth as teachers reflect a deep understanding and appreciation of the complexities of teaching. What occurs in a classroom, lab or studio is certainly an important part of it. But just as what happens with our students outside of class has an impact on their learning, the work we do outside of class has an impact on our teaching, and the new guidelines recognize that fact.

—JE
An optimal evaluation of teaching would include at least three separate threads of discussion. One would be the voice of the teacher describing the goals of courses and reflecting on evidence of the degree of success observed in achieving those goals. Another voice would be that of peers who critically examine the quality and appropriateness of the goals and the evidence that many students are in fact achieving those goals. A third voice would be students’ perceptions of the delivery of the course, along with their own intellectual work done in the course, through which they demonstrate the degree of success of the instruction. The greatest confidence in the evaluation would be had when these three converging streams of analysis are balanced in weight and present a consistent and congruent picture of teaching.

In practice most institutions of higher education rely almost exclusively on the third voice, the students’ account, and then only on a portion of that voice. Students’ perceptions of course delivery get great weight, while their demonstration of understanding course content and skills is typically not considered. There are opportunities for instructors to discuss their intentions about intellectual achievement, but little attention is paid to systematic attempts to improve student understanding across semesters. The only changes in performance that need to be explained are changes in student ratings. In a similar way, the valuable time of peers is spent observing a few class meetings and writing letters that discuss whether or not the observer agrees with students’ perception of class delivery. Rarely do colleagues comment on intellectual goals, choice of methods used, success or failure of students in achieving course goals, and appropriateness of the teacher’s plans to improve student understanding in the future.

When we as faculty members treat our review of teaching with intellectual rigor, then we will be happier with the way evaluations are made.

The general reliance on student perception to evaluate teaching is a matter of much controversy within the KU community. The particular procedures for gathering student perceptions are an immediate source of some unhappiness. Many faculty members feel that the questions asked are not ideal, that some students do not take the task seriously, or that the open-ended comments reveal flaws in relying on student perception. Those faculty members who serve on evaluation committees and use the information provided reply that they take all numerical data in a larger context, including judicious use of comments to interpret the ratings. Interestingly, support for the faculty’s concern can be found in the Regents’ rules for evaluation, which specifically state that no single source of information should be relied upon. It is their clear intent that teaching be evaluated with multiple, converging measures, and there is nothing in their guidelines that would support the current practice of relying largely on numerical ratings and ad hoc student comments.

The latest KU guidelines for promotion and tenure provide a reasonable blueprint for how faculty members and their colleagues can fill in the missing pieces. Each teacher can provide an analysis of course goals and procedures, explaining the decisions made about what to include, how to measure student understanding, and how to spend students’ time in and out of class. There is the opportunity to present student work as evidence of the success of instruction, along with reflection on how that work might be improved in subsequent offerings. More than a general philosophy, this description invites the professor to describe teaching as an ongoing but informal inquiry into the best ways to promote understanding in his or her field. Peer colleagues are similarly invited to examine products of the intellectual work in teaching, allowing them to go beyond a teacher’s class performance. Peers are asked to consider the decisions made about coverage and opportunities needed for students to demonstrate their understanding and

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CTE ProSem groups, departments to co-sponsor spring speakers

Next semester, CTE ProSems are co-sponsoring visits with two nationally-known scholars.

CTE ProSems and the Department of American Studies are co-hosting Sherry Linkon on March 2 and 3, 2006. Linkon is a professor of English and co-director of the Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University. She teaches American studies courses, as well. In addition to working-class studies, her research interests include the scholarship of teaching and learning, teaching and learning with technology, and nineteenth-century American literature and culture. She is featured in Mary Taylor Huber’s book (2004) Balancing Acts: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Academic Careers (see page 6). A copy of this book is available for check-out from the CTE library in 135 Budig Hall.

On April 3 and 4, Steven Pollock’s visit will be co-sponsored by two CTE ProSems: Science Education and Teaching Large Classes, as well as the Department of Physics and Astronomy. Pollock is an associate professor of physics at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He is a leader in the Physics Education Research Group at Colorado; within the group, he focuses on the study of student learning in large classes. He has developed a tutorial program that has resulted in significant gains for students. This work was presented at the 2004 International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning conference. He also specializes in theoretical nuclear physics, with an emphasis on electroweak interactions and the structure of the nucleon.

Watch for registration information for the workshops in January.

A holistic view of evaluating teaching

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skills. They are asked to consider how well students are learning in the course and how broadly learning is achieved. These peers are asked to consider the trajectory of a teacher’s work across semesters, noting how students’ success in learning changes over time.

While there certainly is room for refinement of how students’ perceptions are gathered, the most important thing we as faculty members can do right now is provide meaningful commentary about the intellectual work in teaching that is beyond students’ purview. As long as student comments and ratings are the only significant information in the process, the relative weight on that information will remain inappropriately high. When we as faculty members treat our review of teaching with intellectual rigor, then we will be happier with the way evaluations are made. We participate in research reviews on behalf of journals and funding agencies, providing professional judgment of the quality of the intellectual work. It takes time, but we feel our perspective needs to be in the mix of decision making. The same is true of teaching; we need to give the time necessary to review the intellectual quality of teaching, rather than rely on the student perspective to be the only voice at the table.
Positive changes in representing your teaching

Robert Goldstein, Geology

Procedures on how to evaluate teaching for promotion and tenure files have changed recently to be more meaningful to faculty who are being considered for promotion and for those committee members evaluating their records. Those changes appear to be very helpful. I remember the anxiety I felt years ago as a new faculty member at KU, when I was told that members of the department’s promotion and tenure committee would appear randomly to view my lectures and evaluate them. I could not imagine anything more horrifying, but I soon learned that there could not have been a more useful exercise for my development as a teacher. Expert teachers actually sat down with me after my lectures and discussed what worked well and what didn’t. Not only did they provide peer evaluations for my promotion and tenure file, but also they gave me useful suggestions about how I could improve and pointed out embarrassing habits I seemed to possess. I can honestly say that those letters and sessions really helped me, and eventually, I welcomed the visits.

When I put together my file applying for promotion and tenure, I learned that those peer evaluations would supplement student evaluations of the courses. I also discovered that I was to summarize my teaching philosophy on the blue form. Again, the anxiety set in. Did I have a teaching philosophy that was more than just finding ways to help my students learn what I taught? A teaching philosophy was something that I really had not thought about until that very day when I was forced to sit down with the blue form for the first time.

Years later I served on the University’s committee on promotion and tenure and learned much more about how teaching was represented by others on campus. Many of our colleagues writing those peer evaluations of teaching sat in on only one or two lectures and just included positive comments without any of the constructive criticisms that I found so useful as a new teacher. I also found that statements about teaching philosophy were most useful to me as a committee member when they took the form of a narrative about teaching as opposed to the deeply philosophical statements similar to the one that I had written.

Current expectations for peer evaluations have changed so that they are more useful to the instructor and to the committees evaluating promotion and tenure files. Peer evaluations should contain the constructive criticism as well as the positive comments, and they should evaluate more than a single lecture. A series of lectures in various courses can be evaluated as well as objectives, methods used to attain them, and success in attaining them; syllabi, PowerPoints, and examinations; and examples of student work.

In addition to changes in peer evaluations, the old “teaching philosophy” statement on the blue form has evolved. It now asks for the nominee’s narrative of major teaching interests, teaching philosophy, and approaches to teaching. Specifically, it states this: “Describe the topics you teach and give one or two examples of the intellectual goals you have for students. How do you help students achieve course goals? How do you know that students are achieving these goals? How have your teaching experiences shaped your ongoing goals and practices as a teacher?” Now candidates for promotion can provide details that relate more closely to their activities as teachers, their goals for having students learn, and their trajectory for improving as teachers. They can include anything they have done that is special or innovative, a sense of future directions, a presentation of teaching philosophy linked to student learning, a consideration of a focus on assessing and improving teaching, what has been done to deal with problems, and an idea of how far they have come and where they are going.

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Representing your teaching: The pre-tenure perspective

Holly Storkel, Speech-Language-Hearing

I agree with Professor Goldstein that the changes in how teaching is evaluated at KU are positive. Dr. Goldstein points out the value of teaching portfolios for departmental, college and university promotion and tenure committees. A few years ago when I prepared my teaching statement for my third-year review, I searched the web for examples of what needed to go into this document. In reading these statements, I was struck by how difficult it was to distinguish fact from fiction. In most cases, it was impossible to determine how lofty statements of philosophy might translate into actual teaching practices. I wondered how the P&T committee could accurately identify and reward quality teaching. The concrete examples now asked for at KU are a step in the right direction in helping the committee effectively evaluate teaching.

Moreover, by strengthening the teaching statement, the faculty voice also is strengthened. Prior to these changes, only the student voice was robustly represented through course surveys. The voice of faculty colleagues was represented to some degree, although there were some weaknesses as Dr. Goldstein describes. The new teaching statement encourages candidates to clearly enumerate learning goals for a course, detail teaching methods used to achieve those goals, and provide a self-evaluation of success in promoting student learning. This allows candidates to demonstrate that students learn in their courses, even if students themselves may not enjoy the process or may not realize how much they learned from the instructor.

This may sound like extra work for faculty, but in reality we are only being asked to make more visible the careful thought and planning that we already put into our teaching. In fact, having just submitted my application for tenure, I can attest that these changes facilitate completion of the teaching section of the blue form because the teaching statement is now an outgrowth of the iterative cycle of teaching preparation, implementation, self-evaluation and self-reflection.

This is a positive change for the University as a whole because it focuses teaching on student learning. Colleagues in K-12 education are already being forced to use this outcome oriented model with minimal power in determining goals. In higher education, we have the freedom of determining what constitutes important learning in our classrooms, and we should embrace the complementary responsibility of documenting that this learning is occurring.

Positive changes in representing your teaching

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Documentation of effective teaching in the form of a teaching portfolio is expected for promotion and tenure files, so it makes sense for faculty to keep track of their teaching and add to these portfolios as they go, rather than wait until the year in which they are considered for promotion. These portfolios could include documentation of all courses taught, course syllabi and outlines, examples of homework assignments and student work on those assignments, laboratory assignments and tests, peer evaluations of teaching, summary documents from the Curriculum and Instruction or other surveys, all completed student questionnaires from surveys, documentation of supervision of students, testimonials from students, and any evidence of student learning.

Our procedures for evaluating and representing teaching clearly are improving. As a University community, we can look forward to the advances these changes can bring in teaching and student learning, and the evaluation of excellence in both.
Work that matters should be work that counts

Mary Taylor Huber and Rebecca Cox

The hallmark of academic freedom is the opportunity it affords faculty members to pursue innovative or unconventional scholarship. But what happens when innovative scholarship is hard to judge by standard metrics of evaluation?

Consider the scholarship of teaching and learning. Over the past decade or so, inquiry into college teaching has become more than just a specialist’s concern. Across the country, teaching initiatives in higher education are gaining visibility, innovation is on the upswing, and mainstream faculty are consulting pedagogical literature, looking critically at education in their subjects, researching the ins and outs of student learning in their classrooms, and using what they are discovering to improve their teaching. Many also make this work public to benefit from peer review and contribute to understanding and better practice in teaching and learning.

Yet these efforts are not always rewarded in tenure, promotion or merit reviews. In part, this is because using the scholarship of teaching and learning for academic advancement is so new. The pioneers are also finding that the standard metrics—despite their apparent objectivity—can make unfamiliar kinds of scholarship look substandard instead. …

Pedagogical and curricular reform projects are often highly collaborative. They may also draw on literature from other fields and involve unusual products, like course portfolios or new media materials. Perhaps most troubling is that successful teaching innovations often circulate without the innovator’s name attached—making it hard to trace and lay claim to the impact of one’s work.

This is not just another case of the teaching vs. research debate. Faculty who bring disciplinary expertise to community development have also had white-knuckle experiences gaining recognition for their work. In many fields, research itself is changing to include more multi-disciplinary, collaborative work oriented to solving real-world problems, and resistant to standard evaluative practices of academe. Clearly, this is all work that matters, and there is a lot at stake in finding ways to ensure that it is work that counts.

For the past few years, we have been studying the careers of four research university faculty who have achieved national prominence in the scholarship of teaching and learning in their fields. Each was warned by caring and responsible mentors that they were taking risks in treating teaching so seriously. But they persisted, were tenured and promoted to associate professor, and so far three have further advanced to full professor. And their stories now circulate in their scholarly communities as signs that the scholarship of teaching and learning can be woven successfully into an academic career. That is good news.

The bad news is what their experiences reveal about faculty evaluation strategies commonly used in American universities. Scholarship may be changing, but evaluation continues to reward most readily work that conforms to older norms. … But there is much to learn from the growing number of scholars who succeed. …

The scholars we have worked with in our study, and many many more, are helping to make teaching and learning in higher education an area that advances through discussion and demonstration. They are showing that faculty who are trained and committed to the standard subject matter and methods of their fields and disciplines can use those same habits of mind to become informed and inquiring college teachers. They are showing that their students are benefiting from such work. And they are showing through the ups and downs of their own lives that it is possible to make the scholarship of teaching and learning a vital, viable part of an academic career.

With good policy, good work and good will, it appears, colleagues who care can make faculty evaluation systems flexible enough to “see” and fairly judge unconventional kinds of scholarly work.

Mary Taylor Huber is a senior scholar at The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Rebecca Cox is an assistant professor of education at Seton Hall Univ. See Balancing Acts: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Academic Careers (2004), Jossey-Bass.

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Enriched peer review in the P&T process

The guidelines for evaluation of teaching at KU include a section for peer review that is intended to complement other sources of data on teaching effectiveness. Faculty peers are encouraged to review class materials, instructors’ statements of course objectives, examples and analysis of student performance, student evaluations, alumni evaluations and classroom observations. Despite these guidelines for peer reviews, most often peer evaluations focus on summaries of student ratings and an occasional visit to a class.

Faculty members often express dissatisfaction with this practice, and last year an ad hoc group met to talk about why student ratings retain that nearly exclusive influence in the evaluation of teaching. This group included department chairs and faculty members who have served on campus level promotion and tenure committees, and they noted an absence of explicit guidelines for optimal additional material. After reviewing many models, this group suggested ways to enrich the peer component of evaluation, providing a valuable complement to the student perspective.

As of Fall 2005 the instructions for the blue form prompt peers to think about the possible components of the evaluation process and the reporting of outcomes. Questions from the guide are shown on page 8 of this issue of Teaching Matters. It is not a required list of activities, but suggestions for conducting peer evaluation that can put numerical ratings into a professional context.

The instructor provides a portfolio of materials from several courses that add to the perspective peers gain from class visits. A course portfolio would likely include an annotated syllabus describing the course context, reasons for decisions about content and goals, elaboration of instructional design, examples of assignments and student work, and some reflection on students’ success in learning and plans for future offerings of the course.

Colleagues who review portfolio materials offer evaluations of the intellectual work in teaching focused on four areas: quality of intellectual content, nature of teaching practices, quality of student understanding, and evidence of reflective development.

To address intellectual content, reviewers could consider decisions made about the material covered, how well it relates to the curriculum, the level and scope of readings, and appropriateness of intellectual goals set for students. This intellectual work is well supported by the instructor’s individual research and knowledge of other research.

To evaluate the quality of teaching practices, reviewers could look for a plan to use students’ time both in and outside of class, indications that instructional methods are chosen intentionally, or examples of appropriate use of contemporary teaching aids, whether technological or interactive. Reviewers would note methods that address challenges, along with evidence of the refinement of teaching methods through interaction with colleagues or other sources of ideas. These features of teaching could be identified from the annotated syllabus or through observation of the instructor.

Reviewers who want to comment on the quality of student learning could examine samples of assignments students use to demonstrate their understanding of key course goals, complete with any feedback provided. The new guidelines give several recommendations on the inclusion of a small archive of student performance.

If the portfolio includes more than one offering of a course, reviewers could evaluate how well the instructor is developing teaching through reflection. A teacher who tracks success of students and continues with methods that promote better learning would be considered more reflective. Continuous growth of methods based on evidence of success is a quality that is as valuable in teaching as it is in research.

The newly articulated options for peer review of teaching provide faculty members with an opportunity that many have repeatedly asked for—a way to add a peer perspective on teaching quality to balance the student perspective. These guidelines generated by KU faculty members offer help and guidance to colleagues who want their teaching judged by the full richness of its quality, not only by students’ perceptions.

For more information about the promotion and tenure process, contact Sandra Gautt in the Provost’s Office or check the Provost’s Office web site.
Four facets of teaching for peer reviewers

Under the Guidelines for Promotion and Tenure Recommendations (2005–2006 Academic Year), faculty members who are completing peer reviews are encouraged to address the following four areas:

1. **Quality of intellectual content**
   - Is the material in this course appropriate for the topic, appropriate for the curriculum and institution?
   - Is the content related to current issues and developments in the field?
   - Is there intellectual coherence to the course content?
   - Are the intellectual goals for students well articulated and congruent with the course content and mission?

2. **Quality of teaching practices**
   - Is the contact time with students well organized and planned, and if so, are the plans carried out?
   - How much of the time are students actively engaged in the material?
   - Are there opportunities (in or out of class) for students to practice the skills embedded in course goals?
   - Are there particularly creative or effective uses of contact time that could improve student understanding?
   - Are there any course structures or procedures that contribute especially to the likely achievement of understanding by students?

3. **Quality of student understanding**
   - Is the performance asked of students appropriate for course goals, level of course, and for the institution?
   - Does the performance requested include challenging levels of conceptual understanding and critical evaluation of the material appropriate to the level of the course and of the students?
   - Are students being asked to demonstrate competence in the stated course goals? If not, is it possible to identify why?
   - Are there obvious changes in the course that could improve performance?
   - Are the forms of evaluation and assessment appropriate to the stated goals of the course?
   - Are they particularly creative or do they provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their understanding using intellectual skills typical of the field?
   - Is the weighting of course assignments in grade calculation coordinated with the relative importance of the course goals?

4. **Summarizing the evidence of reflective consideration and development**
   - Has this faculty member made a sincere effort to insure that students achieve the goals for the course?
   - Has the faculty member identified any meaningful relationship between what (s)he teaches and how students perform?
   - Is there evidence the faculty member has changed teaching practices based on past teaching experiences?
   - Is there evidence of insightful analysis of teaching practice that resulted from consideration of student performance?