

## **Strengths and Weaknesses of Peer Evaluation of Teaching in University of Florida's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences: A Five-Year Review**

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### **Abstract**

This five-year follow up study was conducted to assess the peer evaluation process in the University of Florida College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. The long-interview process was used with faculty who were peer evaluated, faculty who chaired peer evaluation committees, and administrators who interpreted the results of the peer evaluations. Content analysis was used to interpret the interviews. Results of the interviews were triangulated to identify common themes among the groups involved in the process. The interviewees cited the time necessary to complete the peer review process and the reluctance of peer evaluation committee members to include less than positive feedback in the final report as shortcomings of the process. However, the three groups agreed that peer evaluation has improved teaching, and recommended that peer evaluation be continued in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida.

### **Introduction**

Land grant institutions in the United States have included teaching as a component of their tripartite mission (research, teaching, and extension) since their inception. Until recent years, however, excellence in teaching has seldom been rewarded. Due to public perceptions of poor teaching and pressure from state and federal government leaders, the teaching role at universities has been magnified (Rudd, Baker, & Hoover, 1996). Universities are struggling to identify and reward good teaching.

Although student evaluations of teaching are both praised and criticized, assessing teaching effectiveness is largely accomplished through this means (Keig & Waggoner, 1994). Soderberg (1986) stated that when evaluating teachers at the delivery phase of instruction, students are the most qualified to accomplish this task (1986). On the other hand, students may not be qualified to assess teaching during revision and pre-interactive phases (Keig & Waggoner, 1994). Therefore, student evaluations, while they do contribute information on teacher effectiveness, may not provide a complete portrait of all aspects of teacher performance.

Kronk & Shipka (1980) define evaluation as "appraising the quality, worth, or effectiveness of an individual's work" (p.7). Peers, students, administrators, or the faculty members themselves may conduct the evaluation. Willerman, McNeely, & Koffman (1991)

refer to a process of peer observation and assistance as a method of one teacher helping another teacher to improve his or her classroom performance. Keig & Waggoner (1994), define peer evaluation as “a process in which faculty work collaboratively to assess each others’ teaching and to assist one another in efforts to strengthen teaching” (p. iii). According to Lieberman (1998), peer evaluation is understood to include all procedures used by teachers to improve teacher performance and to terminate teachers who are not performing adequately after receiving this assistance.

Teacher evaluations are important, because they are a major consideration for promotion and tenure decisions (Osborne, 1998). Although student evaluations are still the main data source for evaluating teaching, the use of peer evaluations is growing (Osborne, 1998). More universities are incorporating peer evaluation as evidence in faculty evaluation. Centra (1979) stressed the importance of peer evaluation in assessing teaching, because it provides a different perspective than that of the student or supervisor for evaluation. “Faculty can evaluate their colleagues’ performance at three stages of instruction: pre-interaction, delivery, and post-interaction” (Keig & Waggoner, 1994). They can also define relationships among these stages and the following processes: goals and objectives, methods and materials, and feedback. (Soderberg, 1986).

Keig & Waggoner (1994) argue that faculty evaluations are an important part of improving teaching. Successful teaching requires more than just a knowledge of the subject matter; it requires knowledge of learning theories and teaching strategies, dedication to students’ advancement, awareness of the environment in which teaching and learning occurs, and concern about their teaching as well as their colleagues’ (Keig & Waggoner, 1994). Gould (1991) concluded that peer evaluation, student evaluations, and self-evaluations are all valid forms of assessment and all have strengths and weaknesses.

### **Peer Evaluation at Other Institutions**

The University of Kentucky Community College System (UKCCS) implemented a Teacher Consultation Program (TCP) in 1977 (Kerwin & Rhoads, 1996). A study conducted over three semesters within the UKCCS system, showed that faculty who participated in the TCP raised their student evaluations significantly when compared to the control group of faculty who did not participate in the program (Kerwin & Rhoads, 1996). One semester after participation, those instructors still had higher ratings on student evaluations. In addition, participating instructors applauded the program as being helpful to them as instructors (Kerwin & Rhoads, 1996).

The peer review committee at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, made the comment in its 1987 final report that peer evaluation should be used to evaluate the faculty member’s knowledge of the subject, course objectives, assignments, examinations, and contribution to the departmental teaching efforts (Bell & McClam, 1992). The University of Tennessee peer evaluation process included the participation of the instructor being evaluated

by collecting a variety of course material including syllabi, assignments, tests, and written materials. The review team (consisting of a three-member group of tenured faculty) evaluated the portfolio and provided a written summary of the evaluation to the instructor. Other types of evaluation (such as classroom visitation) were optional and each department decided what would be appropriate for faculty within the unit (Bell & McClam, 1992).

### **Peer Evaluation at the University of Florida**

In 1993, the University of Florida Teaching Improvement Committee recommended to President John Lombardi that colleges and departments within the university develop mechanisms for extensive documentation of instructional quality by adopting the use of teaching portfolios. Once implemented, this system would provide a diversity of information for teaching quality evaluation for the purposes of teaching recognition, improvement, and tenure and promotion decisions (Connor, 1994).

In July 1994, the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences faculty voted to include peer evaluation as a required and essential component for tenure and promotion. The original purpose of peer evaluation was to improve teaching and to provide input about the quality of teaching. The College of Agricultural and Life Sciences called on the UF/IFAS Teaching Resource Center (TRC), located in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication to develop a suggested plan for conducting peer evaluations. The suggested plan was based upon models from the University of Nebraska - Lincoln, the University of Kentucky, and the University of Tennessee - Knoxville. Based on the review of peer evaluation policies from other institutions of higher education, Rudd, Baker and Hoover (1994) identified three areas of concentration for review in the peer evaluation process. The areas reviewed were classroom instruction, curriculum development and improvement, and course development and improvement. Although the TRC developed suggested guidelines for the College, each department developed their own peer evaluation policies. Departments were encouraged but not required to use the TRC format. The College of Agricultural and Life Sciences made further revisions to the process in 1997 by reducing the number of peer evaluations for promotion and tenure decisions.

In general, the peer evaluation process in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida is structured as follows. When a faculty member desires to be peer evaluated, the peer evaluation is scheduled through the department chair. The faculty member decides the course to be evaluated. The peer evaluation is scheduled to allow committee members to observe the course for one semester. The committee is usually composed of three faculty members. It is recommended that one member be selected by the faculty member being evaluated, one by the department chair, and one jointly. Typically, one member of the committee comes from another department. The department chair selects the peer evaluation committee chair from among the members of the committee.

Faculty members in line for promotion and /or tenure are required to be peer reviewed, at least once before the promotion and/or tenure decision. A faculty member may elect to be peer reviewed more than once. In addition to promotion and tenure decisions, teaching awards in the college require a peer evaluation of the faculty member in order to be considered for recognition. The teaching awards range from teacher of the year recognition to the Teaching Incentive Program (TIP) awards that add \$5,000 to a faculty members' base salary.

### **Problem**

The use of peer evaluation has grown in popularity and it is widely used to help administrators assess faculty teaching. This evaluation method has been widely employed to make promotion and tenure decisions as well as to decide faculty merit in teaching programs. Although the use of this methodology is increasing, little has been done to assess the effectiveness of peer evaluation.

The purpose of this study was to critically examine the peer evaluation process in the University of Florida's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences and to determine the effectiveness of peer evaluation over the last five years in the opinions of the department chairs, peer evaluation committee chairs, and the faculty who were peer evaluated. The following objectives guided this study:

1. Determine the perceptions of department chairs toward the peer evaluation process
2. Determine the perceptions of peer evaluation committee chairs toward the peer evaluation process
3. Determine the perceptions of faculty who were peer evaluated toward the peer evaluation process
4. Determine common themes among department chairs, peer evaluation committee chairs, and peer evaluated faculty in their assessment of the peer evaluation process.

### **Methodology**

This study was descriptive and qualitative in nature, utilizing the structured long interview process (McCracken, 1988). The final interview questionnaire consisted of 8 questions. Faculty in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication reviewed the instrument for trustworthiness. The interview questionnaire was pilot tested with a group of faculty representing those who were peer evaluated, those who chaired peer evaluation committees, and department chairs. As a result of the pilot test the interview questionnaire was slightly modified. The interviews were completed by the researchers. To ensure consistency in the interview process, the interviewers were trained by the lead researcher.

The goal of this qualitative study was not to produce a standardized set of results but rather to produce a coherent description of the status of peer evaluation in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida.

The target population was all University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) College of Agricultural and Life Sciences Departments (17). Interviews were conducted with Department Chairs from each department in the College, a chair of a peer evaluation committee from each Department, and a faculty member who was peer evaluated in each Department. A total of 45 out of the 51 selected chose to participate in the interview. Content analysis and triangulation were the methods to interpret the interviews.

## **Results**

### **Perceptions of department chairs toward the peer evaluation process.**

According to one chair, “Peer evaluations are conducted to achieve and maintain excellence in teaching in academic programs, and for TIP awards, promotion and tenure,” a sentiment echoed by many of the chairs. In fact, almost all of the department chairs interviewed indicated that peer evaluation is used primarily for promotion, tenure, and awards. Although not as prevalent, an additional theme suggested that the purpose of peer evaluation is to improve and maintain the quality and excellence of teaching. The chairs believed that teaching has improved in the college as a result of peer evaluation. The chairs cited that an unexpected side-benefit of peer evaluation was the peer evaluation committee learned from those being evaluated.

When questioned about key concepts that should be used as criteria in peer evaluation, department chairs generated a substantial list. Most chairs agreed that organization and preparedness were the most important criteria. The chairs stated that subject matter knowledge, current/appropriate curriculum, and course content are also important considerations for peer evaluation. Rapport with students, using a variety of teaching methods and clear/effective delivery were also viewed as components of good teaching. College department chairs cited student interest, and clear/fair expectations as factors that influence teaching.

Department Chairs believed that peer evaluation within IFAS is responsible for positive results including: instilling pride in teaching and increasing emphasis on teaching. As one chair stated, “You cannot attribute it all to peer evaluation, but in the last ten years teaching at the University of Florida has become very important.” Another chair stated that, “There has been a change in culture, teaching has become more important and peer review is a part of the return of pride and attention to teaching.” Yet another chair echoed “. . . there is an emphasis on teaching, which we haven’t seen in years (which) is reinforced through peer evaluation. ”

Department chairs indicated that the time required to complete the peer evaluation process was the greatest barrier to conducting the evaluations. The department chairs also felt that committees were reluctant to share negative feedback for fear of damaging colleagues' case for promotion, tenure and teaching awards. While some department chairs felt that peer evaluators may be too critical in their assessment of faculty this was not a major theme.

Several department chairs concurred with a colleague who suggested "the poorest teachers have not been evaluated". There was a concern that the teaching faculty that needed the peer evaluation process the most were not being evaluated. In fact, department chairs believed that peer evaluation should be mandatory for all faculty members.

Department chairs indicated that the peer evaluation is but one evaluation tool they use in assessing faculty teaching. Student evaluations, teaching assistants, graduate and undergraduate coordinators are all considered additional sources of information to evaluate teaching.

### **Perceptions of peer evaluation committee chairs toward the peer evaluation process**

The prevailing theme derived from those who chaired a peer evaluation committee suggested the main purpose for conducting peer evaluations was to provide evidence for promotion, tenure and awards. The committee chairs felt as if their job was to simply provide evidence for the promotion and tenure decision or teaching awards. "How can we improve the learning environment and (student) learning? This is not the ultimate goal of the process." One committee chair said "Accountability" was the main role of the committee.

A smaller proportion of committee chairs indicated that the purpose for peer evaluation was to improve and maintain the quality and excellence in teaching. A major theme from this group was that the committees not only benefited by learning new techniques but also from exposure to unique ideas from those being evaluated. Committee chairs shared statements such as, "It is very unusual to see other faculty/your peers teach. This has improved my teaching;" "Committee participation makes you think about your own teaching;" and "peer evaluation forces folks to look at what they are doing." Although teaching improvement was not considered the main purpose of peer evaluation among committee chairs, teaching improvement was thought to be the major benefit of the process.

The committee chairs identified five key concepts as important for evaluating teaching. The concepts identified were interaction with students, course content, course materials, clear/effective delivery, and clarity of presentation.

Committee chairs identified both the amount of time it takes to conduct a peer evaluation, and the reluctance to use negative feedback as major weaknesses of the peer evaluation process. One committee chair asked, "If they (evaluations) all come back glowing, is the process any good?" Another committee chair said, "Everyone does a great job in the

classroom - the way they (evaluations) are used is not beneficial. Most of the constructive (negative) feedback is verbal.” Still another chair stated, “ There is a reluctance to put down negative comments on paper--you don’t get an honest report.”

A minor theme from the peer evaluation chairs was that peer evaluation committees feel that faculty do not know the science of teaching, and are not trained as teachers. Committee chairs believed that more pedagogical skill improvement was needed. One committee chair stated that, “Most faculty haven’t been educated and trained as teachers.”

One positive quality of peer evaluation identified by the chairs was that the process gave them the opportunity to provide feedback (both positive and negative). The committee chairs interviewed felt that teaching has improved and that teaching will continue to improve as a result of peer evaluation in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. One committee chair said that “There are a combination of things happening in the college-change of funding, renewed emphasis of the value of education and instruction, Professorial Excellence Program (PEP) and the Teaching Incentive Program (TIP) awards (both awards come with a substantial raise in the faculty members base salary): suddenly people see the value in teaching.”

### **Perceptions of faculty who were peer evaluated toward the peer evaluation process**

Participants in the peer evaluation process believed that the feedback from peers was valuable. In particular, the faculty who were evaluated appreciated feedback from experienced members of the peer evaluation committee that helped them to improve teaching. A benefit, according to one individual was that the evaluation included input by someone who has been recognized as a TIP award winner. As a whole, the faculty who were evaluated made changes to improve their teaching. Faculty shared comments such as, “(Peer evaluation) allowed me to see what the class looks like from another perspective,” and “Peer evaluation serves to enhance the learning environment for students.” Those evaluated viewed the purpose of peer evaluation as two-fold. First it provided input to improve and maintain the quality and excellence of teaching. Second, it provided evidence for promotion, tenure, and awards.

Faculty members who were evaluated believed the peer evaluation process has improved teaching in the college. One faculty member that was peer evaluated said peer evaluation, “gets people talking, gets dialogue and interaction going, and allows for faculty to see what others are doing. The process is a benefit.” Another faculty member mentioned there is “not a lot of talk about teaching - (peer evaluation allows you to) interact with folks with teaching themes.”

Individuals that were peer evaluated hope that committee members will look for key concepts such as organization, clear/fair expectations, communication of what is expected, and communication of concepts when evaluating their teaching.

Negative aspects of peer evaluation, according to those that were peer evaluated, include the reluctance to use negative feedback due to promotion, tenure and awards. One individual said, "If (peer evaluation is) used for TIP, it is not a true reflection of teaching." One individual interviewed felt there were no benefits, no changes as a result, and that peer evaluation "confirmed my belief that the system does not work. We are not enforcing the true meaning of what the institution is intended for. We are encouraging mediocrity, and promoting a non-productive system."

Two suggestions for making changes in peer evaluation were made by those who were peer evaluated. The first suggested change was to separate peer evaluation from promotion and tenure. The second suggestion was to use an outside evaluation team, including professional teachers and/or blind reviewers. As one individual stated, "The reviewers themselves are not professional teachers trained in pedagogy." Another teacher said we are basic scientists, with little or no formal training, and many have a lack of respect for this." Still, another person who was peer evaluated felt that, "Changes are needed in assessment and the reporting system, we are receiving college wide evaluation inflation – people are reluctant to provide criticism because of promotion and tenure."

The faculty who were peer evaluated suggested that the long-term impact affecting their respective departments will be that peer evaluation will improve the quality of teaching. Those who were evaluated also felt that teaching is more widely recognized as a valuable effort in the institution. One faculty member stated that, "It (peer evaluation) has created a college-wide awareness that teaching IS important and not just a chore." Other faculty member's comments include, "We are far better off with peer evaluation, for the students, the improvement of teaching" and "Peer evaluation is part of an overall emphasis of improving teaching."

### **Common themes among department chairs, peer evaluation committee chairs, and peer evaluated faculty in their assessment of the peer evaluation process.**

The researchers utilized triangulation to analyze the data. The following common themes were identified among the three groups. The participants believed that the primary purpose of peer evaluation is to provide evidence for promotion, tenure, and teaching awards. The feeling that the peer evaluation process has improved teaching in the college was a major theme in each group. In addition, each group believed that the continued use of peer evaluation in the college would improve teaching. These improvements occur not only in the faculty being evaluated but also in the faculty conducting the evaluation.

All three participant groups stressed two major negative aspects of peer evaluation. First, time was considered to be a major constraint. Although the participants agreed that the peer evaluation process held major benefits, the amount of time required to complete the evaluations is a deterrent. All groups cited the reluctance of committees to use negative feedback because of promotion and tenure, and award implications. The groups felt that this is a major problem and that the peer evaluation results were clouded as a result of this practice.

## Discussion

All groups involved with the peer evaluation process agreed that peer evaluation improves the quality of teaching. The use of peer evaluation should be continued and enhanced in UF/IFAS College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. The overriding perception that peer evaluation is used primarily for promotion, tenure, and awards needs to be addressed. Why does this perception exist? What are the perceptions of those outside of the peer evaluation process?

All groups agreed that teaching improved as a result of peer evaluation. They agreed that teaching improved not only for the faculty being evaluated, but also for the faculty serving on the evaluation committee.

The amount of time spent for peer evaluations is a major concern. The most qualified teaching faculty are being taxed by serving on too many peer evaluation committees. Perhaps faculty that are not the best teachers could be utilized on committees where they could work with committee members who are “master teachers.” This would serve not only the person being evaluated but also faculty who are a part of the evaluation process. Departmental policies need to be evaluated for efficiency. Faculty and administration need to determine if the benefits outweigh the time costs.

All groups were concerned that the faculty who could benefit most from peer evaluation are not being evaluated. Currently, faculty are evaluated once before being promoted to associate and full professor and if they apply for a faculty teaching award. Given the benefits of peer evaluation cited in this study, perhaps the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences should explore options that would encourage (or even require) all teaching faculty to be peer evaluated.

The reluctance of committees to use negative feedback weakens the peer evaluation process. Non-punitive peer evaluations may be in order. Perhaps other, less invasive tools for improvement of teaching should be used before being peer evaluated.

Discrepancies existed between the department chairs, committee chairs and faculty who were peer evaluated as to the criteria for evaluating teaching. More preparation in pedagogy is needed for peer evaluation committees. Better communication of expectations between the department chairs, committee chairs, and the faculty member being evaluated is needed. Peer evaluation policies need to be examined for clarity and validity.

As a result of this study the researchers recommend that the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida continues to utilize peer evaluation for the purpose of improving instruction and as a tool for evaluating faculty teaching. Further study is recommended in the area of peer evaluation to determine the impact of peer evaluation on the teaching and learning process.

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