New England Resource Center for Higher
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New England Resource Center for Higher
Education (NERCHE)

6-1-2005

Brief 19: The Dean's Role in Faculty Evaluation

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Recommended Citation

New England Resource Center for Higher Education, University of Massachusetts Boston, "Brief 19: The
Dean's Role in Faculty Evaluation" (2005). *New England Resource Center for Higher Education
Publications*. 43.
https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nerche_pubs/43

NERCHE BRIEF

New England Resource Center for Higher Education
June 2005

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The Deans' Role in Faculty Evaluation and Development

Faculty work continues to change in response to the increased emphases on diversity requirements in undergraduate education, partnerships between academic and student affairs, and computer technology (O'Meara, et al, 2003). As even more is learned about strategies for the educational success of their students, faculty will be counted on to tailor their skills and pedagogies to new populations of students. At the same time, colleges and universities must keep pace with these changes by ensuring that expectations about faculty work are clearly defined and are reflected in evaluation and reward structures—and that faculty are *supported* in their efforts. The quality of the experience of teaching and learning is one important measure of institutional success; without faculty who are invigorated by their work and able to be successful, the teaching and learning experience for students may be compromised.

The role of academic deans with respect to faculty work varies depending on the institution. Some evaluate faculty directly, while others are involved through reporting relationships with department chairs. Deans are in a position to allocate resources and

shape institutional policies and structures that create conditions for productive evaluation processes supported by meaningful faculty development opportunities.

In recent meetings of NERCHE's Deans Think Tank, members discussed the role of the dean with regard to faculty evaluation and development.

Recommendations

Hiring

- The most important decision a department will make is who to hire as a colleague. Rather than relying on lengthy tenure processes to determine the future of potential faculty, many colleges and universities are emphasizing the importance of making appropriate matches at the point of hire. Much can be accomplished through clearly delineating expectations in job descriptions and in introductory materials sent to candidates prior to campus visits. Such materials also provide prospective faculty with a sense of place and an appreciation of what it means to work for a given institution. Similarly initial interviews with candidates provide opportunities to impart institutional expectations. Deans can often bring their broad institutional perspectives and deep understanding of departmental cultures to bear in interviews or post-visit candidate debriefings. Candidate responses to institutionally oriented questions posed by deans can help search committees ascertain how thoroughly candidates have grasped the institutional mission and environment.

- Because of multiple retirements, more and more campuses are hiring cohorts of faculty for whom deans can conduct seminars regarding cultural expectations of the institution.

Policies and procedures for evaluation

- The criteria on and the process by which faculty are evaluated will depend on a number of factors that characterize the institution where they work, such as its

type and size, mission, and whether it grants tenure or engages in collective bargaining. Meaningful evaluation systems should reflect the complexity of faculty work and foster individual uniqueness, collegiality, and career development. Academic deans can help shape policies that serve institutional needs while fostering faculty investment in their own growth.

- Deans can see that performance expectations—such as how, when, and on what faculty will be assessed—are clear to all faculty at the beginning of and throughout their careers. Further they can alert faculty to and/or provide them with adequate professional development opportunities to help them successfully meet these expectations. Well-structured documents, such as evaluation guidebooks that spell out processes, procedures, and expectations and the kinds of evidence to meet them, can prepare faculty to be proactive in their evaluations. These documents should emphasize the importance of self-evaluation as a means for assisting faculty in understanding their strengths and weaknesses as well as to prepare them for a useful evaluation experience aimed at fostering improvement and growth. It is important to stress many data points during faculty evaluations and have individual faculty contribute their own measures to the process.

- To encourage faculty input into evaluation processes, deans can convene a committee of faculty and chairs to develop a list of criteria attached to measurement categories such as "poor," "good," and "excellent," along with an accompanying point system. In addition, deans can constitute a faculty development committee that can allocate funds for such things as conferences and faculty/student research.

- Traditional evaluation and reward structures may not be constructive for faculty who are experimenting with course design or pedagogy. Instead, deans can substitute formative evaluations for those aspects of faculty work that involve innovation. Deans can encourage faculty whose courses need revision and fine-

tuning to engage with other faculty in a kind of post mortem exercise designed to assess areas in need of change and capitalize on peer input. In a similar vein, deans and chairs may want to consider providing new faculty with feedback about their performance during their first year and assessing them in their second.

<u>Mentoring faculty</u>

- Once hired, faculty on tenure tracks sometimes need guidance about institutional expectations regarding scholarship, beyond consulting written documents. For example, faculty at institutions with mission-based commitments to teaching a diverse population of students may be intellectually stimulated by pursuing the scholarship of teaching. Deans can also help faculty construct portfolios that are analytically reflective representations of their best work, rather than inclusive compendiums. They can counsel faculty to include only those materials that contribute to the mission as part of their evidence for tenure decisions.

- Senior faculty are a valuable resources to those on the tenure track. Deans can allocate money for them to informally mentor junior faculty over lunch—a modest investment that can help foster junior faculty success.

- At many institutions, deans or chairs evaluate faculty annually based on goals for the year. For tenure-track faculty, however, yearly evaluations can interfere with the continuity of preparing for the tenure process. Deans can help these faculty stay on track by setting up annual meetings geared toward helping faculty maintain a steady pace en route to tenure.

<u>Mentoring chairs</u>

- Working with chairs on issues of faculty evaluation and development is essential to ensuring that evaluation is consistently implemented across the college. Deans can hold periodic meetings to discuss ways to use evaluations so that they yield meaningful data. For example, while no form of evaluation is without

controversy, student evaluations tend to inspire skepticism among many faculty, yet they can offer important information about teaching, especially data derived from thoughtfully analyzed comments. It is more useful to judge student evaluations on trend lines rather than on averages, or to look at patterns of student evaluations over time. If faculty members receive low student ratings, allow them to assess the evaluations themselves.

Creating a multiple opportunities for faculty development

- Deans can create space and time for faculty to meet the expectations of the evaluation system by providing workshops on topics such as assessment. They can also make workload adjustments, such as temporarily suspending advising responsibilities, to free faculty up to devote time to make improvements in other areas. At the same time deans can direct faculty to development opportunities or mentor them individually on skills such as time management.

- Informal venues for faculty interaction around scholarly work provide opportunities for less structured faculty development to take place. Friday afternoon wine and cheese parties with weekly themes such as peer research offer a relaxed interdisciplinary setting in which faculty can learn about each other's work, exchange ideas, and pursue collaborations.

- Deans can see that resources such as course reductions are distributed equitably among both senior and junior faculty.

Post-tenure Review

- The twofold purpose of post-tenure review is to hold senior faculty accountable to contribute to the educational mission of their institution and to assist them in further developing their careers. Deans can develop ways for faculty near retirement to revitalize their careers or rekindle interests that may have been set aside at an earlier stage in their professional lives and can notify them about

funding opportunities. Under the appropriate circumstances, senior faculty in need of assistance with such issues as technology can be paired with knowledgeable junior faculty to boost faculty expertise while generating dialogue and fostering relationships across generational divides.

Conclusion

Deans' highly relational work finds them playing a critical role in interpreting the institutional culture and communicating standards for both new and seasoned faculty. They can raise the bar for faculty work by conveying unambiguous expectations and providing appropriate support through both policies and the power of personal relationships. By fostering faculty success, deans enrich our greatest institutional assets.

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