

Flipping the Annual Faculty Review: Designing a Faculty-Centered Process

Mark Urtel

In the eyes of many faculty and department chairs, the annual faculty review is a task that is impossible to do right. There are many reasons for this opinion. The appearance of subjectivity, the lack of clarity on what is being evaluated, the uncertainty of the weight of the evaluated variables, the feeling that evaluations are just lip service to professional development, the distinct possibility of bias, or the simple perception of administrative airs have all been cited as reasons for this discontent (Andrews and Licata 1991; Elmore 2008; Redmon 1999). What makes this even more opaque is that the process used not only varies from institution to institution but also from academic unit to academic unit, even within the same university.

Notwithstanding the above, faculty annual evaluations at the college and university level are necessary and done for a variety of reasons. These typically include merit pay, building a case for promotion and/or tenure, awards, salary adjustments, improving teaching, and -retention/dismissal. Although the crux of the annual faculty review lies within the annual activity report, it typically is followed by an administrative review from within the particular unit. From a generalizable standpoint, it appears that this is where any commonalities end. A quick glance at the literature on the annual faculty review indicates that the focus is either on the perceptions of the review or on the purposes for the review. The logistics or process of the annual faculty review has received very little scholarly attention. In fact, it does not appear that there are a set of easily identified generally accepted practices about this type of review.

The purpose of this article is to reveal the genesis and resulting effect of flipping the annual review away from the traditional administrator-centered procedure toward a more faculty--centered experience. In

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addition, resultant faculty perceptions will be highlighted, along with commentary on the implementation process. Ideally, this will further the dialogue toward a common set of expectations.

Perspective

My academic unit mimicked the traditional model of the annual faculty review process. Early in the spring semester, a faculty member completed an annual activity report reflecting their productivity in the prior academic year. They then submitted it, and unit administrators (the dean, the associate dean, and the respective department chair) would meet to discuss each faculty member's case and determine a summative rating for teaching, research (if applicable), and service. Then, toward the end of this same spring semester, the faculty member was greeted, in their mailbox, with a hard copy of their evaluation with ratings and some commentary, again for each relevant component of their appointment (teaching, research, and/or service). It is important to note that there were appeal procedures built into the faculty bylaws so that the faculty member would have recourse if something came back amiss. Yet, clearly, this was a one-way, top-down process that was focused mostly on merit pay with a nod toward building a case (or not) for promotion and/or tenure.

The faculty accepted this process, as it was steeped in tradition and there were no formal requests to improve anything. Moreover, the process satisfied the intended outcomes; it provided justification to the dean for merit-pay decisions. Although this was an efficient process, it was far from perfect. In fact, there were reports that the administrative ratings and summaries were incorrect at worst and unhelpful at best. Again, faculty complied with this process and understood the tradition, but there was a palpable undercurrent of discontent. In fact, it is safe to say that no faculty attributed their thriving, improving, or developing to this review. It was viewed as a compulsory event that was a checkbox and a condition of employment. In sum, it was dreaded as it approached and quickly forgotten when it was completed.

With a recent and substantive change in both the school structure and the deanship, there was an opportunity to rethink traditions and procedures, particularly as a department chair. Hence, I took advantage of this opportunity and fully recast the annual faculty review process.

I also was intentional that faculty be the leading term in this new review process. Therefore, I referred to the upcoming faculty-chair reviews ad nauseam in various communications with faculty. In addition, I followed this branding effort with four other substantial additions. As the chair, I sent out the scoring tool early in the process, asked faculty to rate themselves using the tool, sent out my annual report for everyone to see and rated my own performance using this tool, and committed to an in-person meeting, held in their office, to talk through each of our evaluations on their submitted annual activity report.

Evidence

The scoring tool is a checkbric that is illustrative of teaching, research, and service expectations. The checkbric was developed and aligned with school-level promotion and tenure guidelines and used the same rating language. The first method I used to look at the success of this new approach was the alignment and agreement between their self-evaluation rating and mine of them.

The next thing I noted was the discussion within our one-on-one, in-person meeting. Many direct and related conversations ensued that provided rich content for the faculty perception of this new process. Clear themes and consistent feedback emerged that proved insightful, meaningful, and powerful. I will report some of these here, and they will be addressed with high fidelity when planning for the next year's annual faculty review process.

Results

I formally reviewed and engaged with twenty full-time faculty in this process. This equated to forty-eight categories or domains to be evaluated, again comprised of teaching, research, and service. Collectively, at the beginning of our meetings, it was found that we were in agreement regarding thirty of the forty-eight

categories, meaning a 62.5 percent agreement rate. Then discussions ensued to both verify and acknowledge the areas of agreement and to debate discrepancies in the hope of finding common ground. The flow and tone of the meeting varied among each faculty member. What resulted from these deliberations is important to note. I determined that I was wrong and in error for three of the eighteen disagreed-upon domains, a 6 percent error rate overall, considering the original forty-eight ratings. I corrected those errors on the spot. In addition, these three errors occurred across three separate faculty, as this limited any perception of bias or discrimination toward any one faculty member.

Within the remaining fifteen discrepancies, on four occasions I rated the faculty member higher than they rated themselves. Unsurprisingly, there was little faculty resistance when I shared why I rated them the way that I did or when I argued for my position. Therefore, for the remaining eleven incongruities, the faculty rated themselves higher than I had rated them. However, after the in-person dialogue, we were able to come to a consensus on my original rating for all eleven accounts. Certainly, the tenor of these various meetings differed, but the key is that collegial consensus occurred.

In retrospect, I realized that each of the in-person meetings was appreciated, meaningful, and, although not always easy or natural, viewed as purposeful by the faculty member. Some of the meetings were more focused on mentorship, others on feedback and affirmations, and others on a more instructive and corrective tone. Yet they all ended amicably and respectfully. I would even go so far as to state that faculty were generally appreciative of the time and effort that was committed to this new process.

In addition to the talks on the rating classifications as noted earlier, I received the following comments toward the conclusion of the meetings, in no particular order:

- “Of the institutions I have been at, this is the first time a chair has talked me through an annual evaluation.”
- “I appreciated seeing an administrator admit a mistake, but more importantly change it on the spot.”
- “This is the first time in nineteen years that I have been able to talk in real time about my evaluation.”

- “This is the first time ever a chair has sat down with me and discussed my productivity.”
- “This was really helpful as now I am more confident in what I need to do for next year.”
- “Knowing how to better document my work is really helpful, thanks!”

The Scholarly Significance of the Work

This first look at the flipping of the annual faculty review process may serve both to demystify the process and to reveal a potential set of best practices. Although it is far from perfect, it is a large stride forward in creating a clear and meaningful annual faculty evaluation process. Importantly, this method of creating a faculty-centered approach, though time consuming, is not daunting and may have a positive influence on department culture. It is clear that faculty like some level of ownership in a process that affects them, and they appreciate transparent leaders. Although any of the previously noted changes, individually, would be seen as an improvement to the traditional process, taken together, all four truly recast how our department values a faculty-centered annual review process.

References

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