

Message from the Chair

Teaching evaluations are often a cause for anxiety for untenured faculty and for those going for promotion and are more so because of what we have experienced in recent years. We all struggled with the unanticipated move to online or remote instruction forced by COVID-19. Students can be harsh and peer evaluators sometimes criticize unfairly or get some facts wrong.

This issue of *Collectively Speaking* poses questions the Association often receives from members about teaching evaluations and offers information and advice in response to those questions.

Geraldine

Teaching Evaluations

We have two forms of teaching evaluations, or course evaluations, student and peer.

What does the Collective Agreement say?

The Collective Agreement references course evaluations in the context of anonymous material being kept in a personal file. Article 12.1.1 states:

No anonymous material, except approved course evaluations, shall be kept by the Employer concerning any employee. Approved course evaluations are those which (a) are approved for use by the faculty of a department (or College in the case of a non-departmentalized College) in committee within guidelines

established by the College, and (b) are properly validated instruments of performance evaluation. Information from such course evaluations included in an employee's file shall be aggregated or summarized and shall exclude any anonymous remarks made by students

As you can see, the agreement defines approved course evaluations as those approved by faculty in the academic unit that are also properly validated instruments of performance evaluation.

While it is optional, most academic units use [SLEQ \(Student Learning Experience Questionnaire\)](#). SLEQ responses may be treated as teaching evaluations, although the questionnaires are

largely concerned with students' learning experience. SLEQ responses are not anonymous. Respondents are identifiable by Administration.

What should our standards say about teaching evaluations?

There is much debate about whether student evaluations of teaching should be part of tenure and promotion standards. There is an increasing amount of literature regarding the danger of using student evaluations for career decisions and some universities are changing tenure and promotion standards by removing the need for student evaluations of teaching.

A February 2019 [investigation report](#) from the Ontario Confeder-

ation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) recommended unequivocally that student evaluations of teaching are only suitable for informing faculty about *students' understanding* of their learning experience. They are not equitable and not appropriate for determining pay, renewal, tenure, permanency or promotion. If they are used at all in teaching evaluation, they should be used as one tool in a bigger toolkit. The report points out that many factors figure in students' responses, some of which have nothing to do with quality of teaching: class size, time of day, subject, whether the class is core or elective, and so on. Their statistics also reveal obvious equity and human rights implications. Along with faculty organizations abroad, faculty associations in Ontario have reported a rise in the incidence of harassing comments that coincide with the use of online evaluations.

Here, tenure and promotion standards are set by the collegium. Standards in an academic unit (department or non-departmentalized college) are the most stringent. Currently, university standards require a series of student and peer evaluations of teaching. It is possible for academic units to propose changes to their standards.

What about evaluations that took place when we switched to online teaching during the pan-

demie?

In April of 2020, a Letter of Understanding was signed specifying that for renewal of probation, tenure, and promotions decisions, student and peer feedback on teaching in the 2020 Winter or Spring and Summer terms shall be included in case files for consideration only at the request of the candidate.

Keep in mind that we all struggled with teaching to some extent, and that the 2020-21 evaluations will be assessed with an understanding of the difficult situation everyone faced. If you are going for renewal of probation, for tenure or for promotion be sure to address COVID-19 pandemic conditions in your self-assessment.

Will poor teaching evaluations hamper renewal, tenure and promotion success?

This is a question asked by every faculty member. The answer is they might. However, members of Renewal and Tenure Committees, and Promotion Committees know how to read teaching evaluations. They can see when outliers are being cranky, they can see improvement over years, and they can see in the self-assessment where individuals are taking steps to improve. Usually where poor teaching evaluations are a problem, it is because the individual has not provided a thoughtful self-assessment in the case file or has not attempted to make improvements over time. If you are not sure how to address negative teaching evalua-

tions, reach out to a mentor for advice, or contact the Association.

What can I do about inappropriate comments from students?

You can and should bring inappropriate comments to the attention of your Department Head and/or Dean, or the Vice-Provost Teaching, Learning and Student Experience, and request they be removed. While the Student Learning Experience Questionnaire (SLEQ) responses are anonymous to you, student identities are traceable.

What do I do when the response rate is very low?

To ensure confidentiality, [procedures for SLEQ](#) state reports are not released when there are fewer than five responses, unless students agree to have their qualitative/open-ended responses included in reports. In addition, to support proper interpretation of results, no closed-ended question results are released with fewer than five questionnaire responses. When there are fewer than 10 responses, reports include a qualifier cautioning interpretation of results, "particularly in relation to aggregate and comparative statistics" due to the low response rate.

To help increase response rates, you can devote some time during your class to let students complete the course evaluation forms. Students will be grateful they don't have to spend their own time at the end of the term on an activity not related to completing an assignment or studying for the final exam.

Who sees evaluations?

Only you, your department head or dean, and members of collegial committees, including those for renewal of probation, tenure and promotion, see the results of student evaluations of teaching. University standards require a series of student evaluations of teaching as part of illustrating how you have met standards in the category of teaching.

In addition to collegial processes, departments, colleges and the university in support of the principles of improving program quality and the quality of student experience may also use aggregate SLEQ data, and restrictions apply. For example, only aggregated any-

mized data may be used and the aggregate data must involve a minimum of three class offerings and three individual “[educators](#).”

How do I know if a peer will be reviewing my teaching?

Ideally, Department Heads or Deans of non-departmentalized colleges assign peer reviews of teaching, and many do. You should know who has been assigned to review your courses. If you don’t know, ask. If you learn that no one has been assigned, ask for that to happen. You should be able to discuss whether the peer assigned to review your teaching is appropriate and request a change if you feel the assigned person will not be able to properly, or objectively, carry out

the review. It is not the best practice to arrange for your own reviewers.

Last June, the University instituted a [Peer Review of Teaching Practices Policy](#). University standards require a series of peer evaluations of teaching as part of illustrating how you have met standards in the category of teaching. The suggested process for peer reviews that accompanied the new policy is comprehensive. However, it is also time consuming and increases the amount of work faculty are required to complete. Departments and non-departmentalized colleges determine their own peer review processes. Your unit’s peer review process can align with the new policy without significantly adding to your workload.