



Faculty Forum

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The Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness

Teaching effectiveness has received an increasing degree of attention in recent years at WCU. However, there seems to have been little notice paid to its corollary, the *evaluation* of teaching effectiveness.

Institutional rewards are tied to the evaluation of teaching effectiveness, but I am not convinced that teaching is highly valued in personnel decisions here at Western, even though, of the three areas of faculty performance, teaching is the stated priority. Often teaching makes a difference in personnel decisions only if the faculty member in question is at either end of the scale, being either inadequate or excellent. For faculty who fall somewhere in between, teaching is a "given" and the areas of scholarship and service are more the deciding factors.

This state of affairs makes sense given its context: we have not operationally defined that which we say we are evaluating, we do not have a system for weighing any AFE/TPR criteria, and we have no systematic way of determining levels of quality (to which to tie corresponding rewards). However, blame for the inadequacies of the system cannot be simply placed at the feet of department heads and deans. On the contrary, they are in the unenviable position of having to evaluate faculty with an inadequate system. Faculty have a major role in determining evaluation procedure, and I am afraid we have not been very thorough with our share of the responsibility. However, we can take that opportunity if we choose to.

A number of issues beg for discussion. For example, consider the assumption that teaching effectiveness is totally quantifiable. The use of numbers carries a certain respectability and an air of authority. However, there is no necessary relationship between the use of numbers and the quantification of anything. Additionally, we assume that all we need for purely objective decision making is reliable data, but there are sources of personal bias even when reliable and valid instruments are used to collect excellent data. Furthermore, we tend to assume that once we have a summation of our data, the data takes on validity by its mere rock-like reality. However, the single score for a course evaluation obtained from the use of the Purdue instrument is meaningless unless it is known how that score was derived and how it is being interpreted. The question becomes, "What do the numbers really mean?"

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I believe teaching effectiveness is not totally quantifiable and that the best evaluation systems include both qualitative and quantitative data. However, in order to avoid randomness and/or subjectivity in an evaluation system using both kinds of data, it is essential to have clearly stated standards as well as the development of a systematic procedure. If qualitative data are not collected according to a systematic procedure, the data are subject to selectivity and bias. The same is true, on the other hand, of quantitative data, even with valid data, particularly if there is an over-reliance on a single data source. For example, if student evaluations of faculty are the only data source identified in the evaluation process, it is likely that other data will also influence the outcome. For example, the other data might be general impressions or selected comments of students. The critical point is that we cannot afford random or subjective evaluation procedures nor can we afford our major career decisions being based on inadequate data.

For the sake of discussion, an initial list of questions related to the evaluation of teaching effectiveness might include the following:

- How will we define teaching effectiveness?
- How can we develop systematic standards for determining levels of teaching quality?
- What kinds of data need to be collected, who should collect them, and how does the data need to be interpreted and weighed?
- Should developmental data be kept separate from evaluative data?
- How can effective teaching be appropriately rewarded?
- Are the stated AFE/TPR criteria the ones which are actually used in evaluating teaching?
- How can we develop a procedure which would be more systematic yet allow for individual creativity and diversity?

I believe that it is possible to have an effective, systematic, and humane process for the evaluation of teaching at WCU. It is possible to have a system which does not curtail creativity or diversity and which does not cost too much in terms of resources or human relationships. In order to get there, we have to take the issues out of the closet. First we have to talk.

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