Peer Review of Teaching: External Review of Course Content

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ABSTRACT: External peer review of course content is described. Content is an important component of courses that most peer review models exclude. General suggestions on the development of models are provided to assist in creating a local model. A detailed content review model developed at the author's institution is included.

Why Peer Review?

With national attention on the AAHE peer review initiative, colleges and universities are launching substantive new efforts to develop realistic options for peer review of teaching. These efforts, including experiments with novel approaches and refinements of previous approaches, are expanding the alternatives for assessing teaching effectiveness (McKeachie, 1994). Students have long been the primary arbiters of teaching, but they have not provided either the breadth or depth necessary to evaluate the broader spectrum of teaching effectiveness. Students are largely unable to evaluate other dimensions of teaching excellence such as disciplinary competence, contemporaneity of materials, or relevance to related disciplines. Faculty have often been critical of student evaluations, dismissing negative or harsh student evaluations and their role in summative decision-making.

Many faculty, however, believe that peer input provides broader evaluation of classroom interpretation, yielding a more complete knowledge base for evaluating material and its appropriateness for a given course. Peer evaluation may also now enjoy a greater accep-
tance among faculty as a legitimate tool for summative evaluation of teaching.

The School of Science at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI) released a major multi-year study in 1990 on teaching evaluation, “Final Report of the ad hoc Teaching Evaluation Committee” (Kremer, Gersting, Malik, Meiere, McCracken, Ockerse, Tam & Witzmann, 1990 and 1994). This report addressed a wide range of issues on teaching evaluation including several focused measures, methods for teaching improvement, and formal methods for recognition of teaching excellence. The report described how diverse techniques could be used to address the issues surrounding evaluation that might more effectively provide accurate, summative measures of effectiveness. Last year, the School released an update on further progress, new measures for laboratory/recitation evaluation, use of measures in the School, and other conclusions surrounding these issues.

In designing an evaluation process, support and input from faculty is an extraordinarily important factor in its ultimate success. Consideration must also be given to the purpose of the review. While faculty find formative models less confrontational and less threatening, the success of peer evaluation in publication, grants, and personnel decisions clearly results from the summative aspect. Faculty inclusion in the development of models to assess teaching effectiveness is necessary to ensure that concerns and fears are minimized. This article addresses several general considerations for the construction of models for external peer review of course content. An example of a specific detailed model of peer evaluation is provided in the appendix. It has been adopted in the School of Science at our institution. This is a single example offered for consideration and illustrative of the detail required.

**Why Course Content?**

Peer evaluation of teaching conjures up images of colleagues sitting in a lecture and making notes on such attributes as classroom performance, speaking style, communication skills, and student rapport. Such evaluations are strongly based on generic presentation skills and lecture hall or classroom presence, which are already assessed through student evaluations. While these attributes are important in determining the effectiveness of teaching, they miss an essential