

SENATE COMMITTEES ON FACULTY AFFAIRS, EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT, AND INTRA-UNIVERSITY RELATIONS

Developing a Faculty Teaching Assessment Framework

(Informational)

Background/Introduction

In June of 2020, University Faculty Senate Chair Seymour charged the Faculty Affairs, Intra-University Relations, and Educational Equity and Campus Environment committees to review the current faculty teaching assessment process and consider any necessary changes to provide a more developmental assessment with triangulation of data rather than one data point (current SRTEs). Each committee chose two members, in addition to the committee chairs) to participate in a sub-committee that guided the review: Felecia Davis, Paul Frisch, C. Libby, Rosemarie Petrilla, Nicholas Pyeatt, Mary Vollero. Nicholas Rowland chaired the sub-committee on student feedback survey questions. In an effort to improve teaching and address issues of bias, the committees were charged with providing a set of recommendations of alternative assessments of teaching at Penn State.

The objectives of a revised faculty teaching assessment framework are two-fold:

1. To provide faculty with feedback (student and peer) to improve and hone course development and teaching
2. To provide administrators with a more robust and equitable opportunity to evaluate how faculty use feedback to inform pedagogy.

Ultimately, the objective of developing a new teaching assessment framework is to improve teaching at Penn State University without excessively burdening students, faculty, or administrators.

Development of a Faculty Teaching Assessment Framework: Data Gathering

Our goal from the start was to engage stakeholders in a feedback loop throughout the process in an effort to consider a wide array of inputs. In order to hear from as many stakeholders as possible, we took a unique, multi-step approach, consisting of surveys and listening sessions: with students, faculty, and academic leadership at multiple steps in the development process.

We are thankful for faculty from across the Commonwealth, teaching a wide range of courses, and in various roles for their participation on the sub-committee in addition to the general membership of Faculty Affairs, Inter-University Relations, and Educational Equity and Campus Environment who all participated in the process from the start. Additionally, all faculty (full-time, adjunct) were asked (through their Senate representatives) to provide feedback at multiple points in the process. The sub-committee represented the following disciplines and campus locations:

- Arts & Architecture
- Science

- Health and Human Development
- Humanities
- Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
- Allied Health
- Political Science
- Psychology
- Education

Campus Representation: Penn State Abington, Penn State Altoona, Penn State Brandywine, Penn State Dubois, Penn State Hazleton, Penn State Harrisburg, University Park (HHD, Arts & Architecture, Liberal Arts), Penn State Scranton

Phase One: Current Best Practices – September and October 2020

Survey on Best Practices

A survey (Appendix A) was created to collect best practices across the University, current Penn State practices considered successful and new ideas. Surveys were sent to student and faculty Senators who were encouraged to share with their units, and all members of the Academic Leadership Council (Vice-Provosts, Deans, Chancellors, and DAAs). Some majors, colleges, and campuses have successful faculty assessment feedback processes in place. The survey provides faculty, students, and academic leaders with direct access to this subcommittee to share their successes.

Student Feedback: The Committee evaluated assessment models from the University of Colorado at Boulder, University of Kansas, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Principia College, and the Quality Matter Rubrics to help shape how the student feedback could be constructed to better serve faculty at Penn State.

Listening Sessions on Developing the Framework

It was key to hear from faculty, students, and administrators on the type of framework that would help us improve teaching at Penn State. We held three, 90-minute sessions. Invitations and multiple reminders were sent to each group. We provide a guided feedback session to gain a “wish list” for developing the framework including questions around best practices and current barriers. Notes from each session (Student Government/ Student Senators, Faculty Senators, and Academic Leadership Council) were incorporated into the framework as appropriate.

Common Themes

Several themes were consistent across the three groups of respondents. A theme was created when it appeared more than five times across the feedback sources:

Improve the data gathered in order to assess how well a course meets its learning objectives.

1. Enhance the reflective process for the faculty. Specifically, both faculty and administrators noted the lack of a reflection process for faculty that would formalize the regular and on-going self-assessment that many have always done. It also provides a method to give context for student and peer assessments.

2. Deemphasize numbers and/or move away from the two-number model as sometimes administrators ignore the full survey. The two numbers do not fully describe the faculty's expertise and the narrow focus on the two numbers may disproportionately harm many faculty during evaluations, either for FAR or promotions.
3. Move to a more transformative process that is informed by multiple inputs rather than relying heavily on just one form of assessment from a single source (current SRTEs).

Focus Student Feedback on Course Objectives.

Most survey respondents and listening session participants found student input to be very informative for reflecting on the relationship between teaching and the course learning objectives, their efforts to meet the course objectives, and the process of learning. There were six main takeaways:

1. Student feedback should be formative and not summative. Students lack the education and subject matter expertise to determine the most effective teaching methods, course design, or course materials/activities.
2. Student feedback questions should be global, focus on the course objectives.
3. Questions should include closed and open-ended questions. Open-ended questions seem to be the most useful for faculty since they allow students to respond to points for which the set questions do not allow.
4. Merge student feedback with their own assessments of how the course was delivered and objectives met.
5. Bias is a known issue and can never be eliminated from these types of assessments.¹ However, faculty are often assessed without consideration of bias. With this in mind, it is critical that student feedback must not be the only input and must not be given more weight than other forms of feedback. Crafting questions for student feedback that focus on course content, not the instructor, is one method to reduce bias. Studies have shown that including a very short statement about bias for students to read before they answer the questions is sometimes helpful.

Timing and Delivery

1. Many respondents found that the evaluation period (last week of the semester) has a few unintended consequences, including faculty holding final assessment grades until SRTEs are completed and adjusting types of assignments at the end to avoid angry or negative responses.
2. Uniform set of student evaluations for all campuses and depts.
3. Create a system that would still allow some flexibility for adding questions when they are subject-specific.
4. Faculty should have more than one opportunity during the semester to receive feedback from students in order to make changes (if appropriate): mid-semester feedback available only to the faculty member and again before the end of the semester.
5. Richer information is available post-course and/ or post-graduation - and provides better insight for the courses being evaluated.

Phase Two: Proposed Framework Feedback – February 2021

After months of analyzing the Phase One feedback, gathering additional best practices, and working with a small taskforce on student feedback, we held two additional listening sessions to share a draft framework and gain additional input. Faculty Senators were asked to seek input from their colleagues and bring it to the session. The Academic Leadership Council was invited to a session as well.

Themes

1. Must include a statement on bias, to help continually highlight this issue and how it can affect facultyⁱⁱ.
2. Student education at the start of the feedback survey to expand their understanding of the role of their feedback, the opportunity to help improve the course, and that the focus should be solely on course objectives.
3. Courses where faculty do not control the content and/or design: There should also be a statement emphasizing that many faculty do not have full control of how the course is designed or delivered. In this case, it may be possible for such feedback to be directed to course developers to help structure future courses based, partially, on this feedback.
4. The student feedback should focus more on content and the ability of students to learn the materials that are being presented within the timeframe of the course.
5. The number of questions that were proposed by the working group might be excessive, and perhaps limiting these to a smaller number would help with student response rates.
6. Consider moving feedback to the 12-week mark in the semester (for 15-week courses) Others suggested 13 weeks to eliminate issues with student late drops.
7. We must have a better process to prevent students with academic integrity violations from evaluating the affected course.

Phase Three: Student Feedback Focus – March 2021

Student feedback received the most input and interest during Phase Two. After adjusting the proposed student feedback questions, the committee felt it prudent to seek another round of input in this area. The feedback was two-fold: A listening session devoted entirely to the proposed questions for the Student Assessment to include all Faculty Senators and a survey with the proposed student feedback questions was sent to Senators to be shared with all faculty.

We understood that the Faculty Assessment Framework, including the student feedback questions, needs to serve all faculty, all courses, and all Penn State locations. We felt it was necessary to hold this additional session and also ask for specific consultation from faculty and administrators who are experts in the area of student feedback.

Next Steps

The committee will continue to develop the framework over the next few months. An advisory and consultative report will be presented to EECE, FA, and IRC for a vote. The final proposal will then be forwarded to Senate Council with a request for inclusion at the first Senate meeting of Fall 2021.

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i Peterson DAM, Biederman LA, Andersen D, Ditonto TM, Roe K (2019) Mitigating gender bias in student evaluations of teaching. PLoS ONE 14(5): e0216241. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0216241>

ii We adapted language from Peterson et al. “Student evaluations of teaching play an important role in the review of faculty. Your opinions influence the review of instructors that takes place every year. Iowa State University recognizes that student evaluations of teaching are often influenced by students’ **unconscious** and **unintentional** biases about the race and gender of the instructor. Women and instructors of color are systematically rated lower in their teaching evaluations than white men, even when there are no actual differences in the instruction or in what students have learned. As you fill out the course evaluation please keep this in mind and make an effort to resist stereotypes about professors. Focus on your opinions about the content of the course (the assignments, the textbook, the in-class material) and not unrelated matters (the instructor’s appearance).”