Rumblings of discontent frequent campuses of higher education when the mention of faculty evaluation occurs. In fact, a 1997 study published by the Richardson Foundation found that only 30% to 35% of provosts and deans are happy with the university evaluation system and less than 20% of the faculty are supportive of these systems. This article chronicles the journey taken by four departments at a Midwestern university in an attempt to shift focus from a rank and sorting system of evaluation, so prevalent in colleges and universities today, to a professional development model.

FOUNDATION FOR CHANGE

It is important to understand the climate at this particular university when this development project was initiated. A culture of quality (Hubbard, 1987) had been established on campus, whereby continuous quality improvement was the vehicle driving all functions of the institution. The philosophy underpinning these quality systems is one of belief in individuals and their ability to maximize potential through collaboration. Cross-disciplinary teams were created throughout the campus in an attempt to unify efforts toward meeting the institutional vision and mission. Faculty and administration jointly planned for success and the faculty felt empowered by having a voice in institutional direction and decision making. As a result of the changing campus climate, a Professional Development Pilot Project was undertaken by four departments as a systematic effort to bring focus to the mission, goals, and objectives of the university, college, and department. Additionally, the pilot project was designed to maximize each individual faculty member’s contribution through team collaboration.

One of the primary forces of change in the evaluation process was the development and implementation of a faculty governance document accepted by the board of regents in 1994. A key section of the document sparked a shift in thinking: “faculty teams at the department level must be empowered to make the following decisions: selection of team members and internal evaluation of team effectiveness, and development and cultivation of team (department) mission and objectives” (Board of Regents, 1994).
Each of these provisions required department members to work in concert as a team. Implementation of the provisions was difficult, as a team perspective was just gaining momentum on campus and individuals were still being evaluated on individual performance. In order to accomplish the shift from individual evaluation to individual professional growth and team performance, the focus of the process required a shift to a true team perspective.

A second driving force of the professional development pilot was acceptance of a broad definition of scholarly work espoused by Ernest Boyer (1990). Boyer’s model identifies four types of scholarly activities: teaching, discovery, integration, and application. He suggests that knowledge is acquired through research, synthesis, practice, and teaching. Acceptance of this model allowed a broader range of research and research-related activities. This allows people to leverage their own research strengths and interests.

**BASIC TENETS OF THE PILOT PROJECT**

In accordance with an agreement written by the four participating departments, each department designed professional development processes and instruments which addressed three basic tenets: Boyer’s work on scholarship, the team concept of governance, and continuous quality improvement. Through consensus building activities, the departments developed the following supportive infrastructure for each of the professional development plans. Each department’s professional development plan must:

- Embrace the professional development of faculty.
- Recognize and support the scholarship of all areas of faculty endeavors.
- Enhance departmental teaming.
- Build trust based upon cooperation rather than competition.
- Use a collaborative approach for empowered faculty and departments.
- Build on the strengths of individuals within teams.
- Be simple and flexible.
- Ensure that departmental goals are better aligned with those of other departments, colleges, and the university.
- Implement another dimension of quality on the campus.
DEPARTMENTAL DEVELOPMENT PLANS

Each of the teams realized that some provision must be made within the system to allow for the developmental growth of faculty during their professional career. When one starts as a new instructor, time must be given for the development and refinement of teaching skills and strategies. An instructor new to the system must not be bombarded with committee work, service projects, student advisement, etc. As one grows professionally, an expectation for scholarly research and reflection is appropriate. Continuing the developmental progression, the experienced faculty member should be expected to fulfill leadership and mentor roles for the department. As a faculty member matures within this process, care must be taken to assure that a balance of teaching, scholarship, and service be maintained and show continuous improvement.

The desire to move away from the assignment of numbers to evaluate faculty performance was a common theme among the four departments. Evaluation was a notable component of the process, but professional development was the driving concept. To accomplish this end, one department initiated a “plan, do, check, act” cycle (Deming, 1986). At the beginning of the academic year, each faculty member met with the chair of the department to determine individual development plans. The chair’s responsibility is to assure that the faculty members address the departmental team, college, and university mission and goals, as well as move along the development continuum at a satisfactory pace.

Two of the departments focused on assignment of individual responsibilities necessary to meet departmental goals. A matrix was then developed where each faculty member could list his/her activities that would complement the goals. The faculty members then agreed to assume primary responsibility for initiating, evaluating, and tracking the progress of the goal.

The fourth department designed a process whereby individual contributions and growth was maximized through the teaming process. The department reports annual progress made by the team, rather than individual evaluations, to the dean. Emphasis is placed on departmental growth and development and not on individual accomplishments.

CONCERNS RAISED BY THE PILOT PROJECT

At the time the pilot was proposed, many faculty members and administrators raised several concerns regarding the feasibility of the pilot project. These concerns stemmed primarily from the fact that the pilot constituted a new system of evaluation linked to promotion and tenure that would be in place...
simultaneously with an existing system of evaluation. Thus, a dual system of evaluation would be in operation. Many individuals were concerned over issues of fairness and potential risk to participants, as well as the specifics of how to evaluate a faculty member under the new system. This problem was compounded by the fact that the pilot project would run for only two years. As a result, participants in the project would be subject to two systems of evaluation that applied to different periods of their academic career.

After considerable discussion and review of the proposed project by the faculty senate, the university attorney, the university president, and the board of regents, the pilot project was initiated for a two-year period. Participants waived their rights under the present evaluation system and members of the review board were instructed to use the pilot criteria when evaluating those participants for tenure and/or promotion. (The two participants who applied for tenure and promotion during the pilot were successfully tenured and promoted.)

Another major concern that was raised pertained to the greater authority and autonomy granted to departments under the “team” concept. Some feared this would lead to erosion of academic rigor and individual accountability. This concern was heightened by the fact that, under the pilot system, departmental recommendations for tenure and promotion would, ostensibly, carry more weight than they had under the existing system. However, because the purpose of the pilot was to promote team cooperation and to enhance both departmental performance and individual development, these concerns did not prevent the pilot from being implemented. Most importantly, at the conclusion of the pilot, there was no evidence that academic rigor and accountability had been diminished. Furthermore, the pilot seemed to have a very positive effect on morale, which presumably enhances efforts to do well.

**EVALUATION OF THE PILOT PROJECT**

A survey of 16 questions was administered to the pilot participants near the end of the first two years of implementation. It assessed participants’ opinions regarding the degree to which the pilot represented an improvement over the existing system of professional evaluation and departmental operation. In all areas examined in the survey, including such things as the method of assigning responsibilities within the department, efficiency of departmental operations, reward for one’s work, mentoring, evaluation instruments, and the perceived confidence and fairness in the tenure and review process, participants overwhelmingly agreed that the pilot was an improvement. When asked their overall perception of the
pilot, the rating of this summative question was 4.6 on a 5-point scale, with five being the highest possible score. Clearly, participants preferred the pilot system of cooperation and team support to the existing system in which individuals work more or less independently and, often, competitively.

In addition to the survey, a steering committee examined other possible methods of evaluating the project, such as examining measures of “faculty output” and “departmental performance,” as well as student evaluations of teaching. However, because so many variables affect these things (e.g., changing workloads, changes in departmental membership, time required for completion of research projects, etc.), and because the pilot ran for only two years, the steering committee did not feel that the other measures were appropriate or meaningfully quantifiable. Thus, the simple and straightforward survey was used as the means of assessing faculty perceptions of the pilot. Although the perceptions measured by the survey are subjective, the pilot was dealing with subjective issues that affect morale and, presumably, commitment and performance. The overwhelming support of the pilot, as well as the desire of participants to adopt the pilot system on a permanent basis if given the option, demonstrate conclusively that it was a success.

CONCLUSION

It seems clear that traditional models of evaluation do not always accurately measure an individual’s contribution nor do they help faculty members develop professionally. Following Deming’s line of thinking that most problems are system related, the real issue focuses on how we can use the system to enhance people’s skills and abilities and facilitate their growth as professionals.

If we are to move away from faculty working and teaching autonomously, a system must be designed to facilitate a collaborative environment. Considering departmental and college performance, in addition to an individual faculty member’s performance, facilitates a change in thinking by faculty. This type of system facilitates a greater level of communication among faculty.

Focusing attention on professional development places a positive spin on the entire evaluation process. Too often evaluations are perceived as punitive/negative. While individuals are still accountable for their performance, the team approach fosters collaboration and cooperation that motivates and encourages people to meet not only team goals but to improve professionally.
REFERENCES


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