

Evaluating Teaching at Notre Dame

Report of the

Teaching Evaluation Subcommittee of the Undergraduate Studies Committee of the Academic Council

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Context and Background

During 1997 and 1998, as part of ongoing efforts to enhance teaching and student learning, the Academic Council undertook a review of the evaluation of teaching at Notre Dame. The first step was to revise the Teacher Course Evaluations (TCEs) and the TCE reports to faculty and department heads. Initial changes to the TCE have been implemented, and work on revising the reporting procedures is ongoing. The second step, and the purpose of the recommendations contained herein, is to begin a conversation about establishing a broader set of recommendations for evaluating teaching at Notre Dame—a process in which TCEs are only one source of data.

To prepare this document, the TCE subcommittee has reviewed the literature on evaluating teaching. Further, our work with TCEs over the past year has yielded information about practices and attitudes toward evaluating teaching at Notre Dame. Particularly, we have benefited from: (1) discussions at a January, 1997 Kaneb Center workshop about effective teaching; (2) individual consultations with faculty who came to the Kaneb Center or to members of our subcommittee for help with their teaching; (3) discussions about teaching evaluation conducted by the College Councils and other groups; and (4) our subcommittee's discussions with focus groups of department heads about TCE reports.

This report suggests some basic principles to guide the discussion on teaching evaluation.

Basic Principles

1. Teaching and concern for student learning have always played a central role in academic life at Notre Dame.
2. Teaching must be evaluated, in order to value and reward it.
3. Teaching can be evaluated, as other complex processes can be evaluated, not with absolute precision but with reasonable accuracy. Teaching may be viewed as similar to other forms of scholarship: that is, good teaching, like good research in one's discipline, must have significant outcomes, which are evaluated by responsible methods. Teaching can be improved by bringing to it the problem-solving capabilities of the scholar – defining a goal or problem, gathering systematic data, responsibly interpreting those data, using them to address the problem, and then asking whether the new modes are enhancing student learning. Teaching is a public act, open to use and critique by one's peers in the discipline and by one's students who are participants in the learning process.
4. The characteristics of good teaching and the methods used to evaluate it will differ to some extent by discipline and even by individual.
5. Evaluation for improvement (formative evaluation) requires somewhat different instruments and processes than evaluation for hiring, promotion, and tenure (summative evaluation).
6. An evaluation system must be part of a supportive climate for teaching and learning, including clear and consistent signals about the importance of teaching and learning, a departmental and university climate that values teaching and learning, early guidance for new faculty, and resources for all faculty to develop as teachers.

Three Basic Questions for Evaluating Teaching

Various instruments have been used to evaluate teaching, but whatever means are employed they should seek to answer:

- .Are the learning objectives of the course being met? Are students being inspired and motivated to think analytically and creatively, and to develop habits of mind appropriate to the discipline?
- .Are the course material, concepts, and activities rigorous, current, relevant for students' needs, and consonant with the announced course description?
- .Do students perceive themselves to be well taught?

Each of the three basic questions can best be answered by a different type of instrument:

Three basic Questions for Evaluating Teaching	Instruments of Evaluation
1. Are the learning objectives of the course being met? Are students being inspired and motivated to think analytically and creatively, and to develop habits of mind appropriate to the discipline?	Measures of student learning based on students' in-course papers, projects, or exams evaluated by the faculty member's explicit standards and criteria; students' performance on standardized tests; and/or students' performance in subsequent courses or situations
2. Are the course material, concepts, and activities rigorous, current, relevant for students' needs, and consonant with the announced course description?	Colleague examination of course syllabus, exams, and other material.
3. Do students perceive themselves to be well taught?	TCEs

Considerations Regarding Instruments of Evaluation

- A. If the purpose of teaching is to facilitate student learning, then evidence of student learning is the best measure of teaching quality. Such evidence may be difficult to gather and to interpret, but some methods and indicators do exist. The Kaneb Center has material on these methods (request handout on "Evaluating Student Learning." This will eventually be included on the Kaneb web site at www.nd.edu/~kaneb/). Aspects such as students' performance in subsequent courses, their job success, and their report of their own learning (the TCE contains a question that asks students to report their own learning) may be helpful, but are generally considered less reliable than evaluating actual student work. Four components are needed:

- 1) a definition of the learning that is to be measured;
 - 2) student course-work such as a test, exam, paper, action, or project which demonstrates the learning, habits of mind, or involvement which are to be measured (standardized tests might be useful in some disciplines);
 - 3) a set of criteria against which the student work is evaluated; and
 - 4) a research design which includes the points at which student learning will be measured, and procedures for gathering and interpreting the data. For example, students might be given the same exam or assignment at the beginning of the course and at the end, to determine how their performance improved, when measured against a specific set of criteria established by the teacher. Alternately, the teacher might present evidence only of the level of performance students reached by the end of the course, without trying to compare that level with students' entering performance.
- B. Peer evaluation of syllabi, exams, and other materials can assess whether course material is current, well chosen, and consistent with the announced course title. It is not reliable for evaluating whether that material was well taught or whether it was learned.
- C. TCEs should be an integral and important component of evaluation. Student evaluations have been extensively studied. They are generally accepted as the single most reliable measure of whether, in students' perception, the teacher is well organized, clear, fair, conducts effective examinations, stimulates analytical/creative thinking, and is helpful and available. In a study of TCE data at Notre Dame, student evaluations of these teacher behaviors were found to account for 74% of the global question (Q.17). These findings suggest that, though other factors such as students' enthusiasm for the subject matter may account for a small amount of the variation, TCE question 17 largely reflects students' perception of the teaching qualities listed.
- D. Students' narrative responses on the TCE can be valuable to understand students' responses to the course and to shape teaching strategies.
- E. In the national literature, students' narrative responses on the evaluations (TCEs) exhibit some correlation with student learning as measured by external tests. One analysis of multiple studies puts the correlation at .45 (Cohen, 1981, 1986, cited in Cashin, 1988, IDEA #20, available from Kaneb Center).
- F. Self-examination by the teacher does not correlate strongly with other measures of teaching effectiveness. It is therefore unreliable for hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions. Self-improvement, however, relies on the teacher's ability to reflect on his or her practice and to interpret data about that practice. Faculty should be offered help in developing their capacities for self-reflection.

- G. Classroom visitation by another faculty member does not correlate strongly with other measures of teaching effectiveness. Visitation can be improved if the observer is trained and guided to observe specific behaviors. However, for self-improvement, mutual peer support and discussion have been shown to be valuable. For self-evaluation, faculty should be offered the opportunity for class visitation by someone trained in what to look for, and they should be offered the opportunity to participate in mutual peer observation.
- H. Alumni, according to the national literature, do not substantially change their original evaluations of teaching quality (although they may change their opinion of the utility of the course material). Thus alumni surveys for evaluation of teaching quality may not be worth the time and effort of collecting data.

Recommendations

That deans report to the provost, by February 15, 2000, the strategies to be employed in their college to evaluate teaching and learning, including

- how they will establish criteria and gather data to address the three questions.
- how they will help faculty to understand ND's expectations for teaching, to improve their teaching, and to prepare appropriate materials for promotion, tenure, reappointment, and hiring.