

University Council on Teaching
Report to the Provost on
Peer Review of Teaching
May 2011

Introduction:

The University Council on Teaching views peer mentoring and peer evaluation of teaching as important elements in promoting the best teaching possible at Boston College among all ranks of our faculty. Junior faculty members should have their teaching formally evaluated by faculty peers on a regular basis, not just at the time of promotion proceedings, and should be routinely mentored by more experienced teachers. The UCT also feels that mentoring and peer evaluation of teaching should be expanded to non-tenure track faculty. Tenured faculty also need to be encouraged to apply innovative methods to enhance their teaching and to utilize student-learning outcomes for assessment of their courses. Across the campus, more needs to be done to promote good teaching and to recognize and celebrate the craft of excellent teaching.

The Council noted there are many different elements to a discussion of peer review of teaching that need to be integrated, including differences between pre-tenure and post-tenure, mentoring vs. evaluation, and resources both internal and external to BC. There are currently varying degrees of review and mentoring of teaching throughout the University. Some departments do it very well, others essentially not at all. It is noted that commonly there are large differences between mentoring and evaluation done for full-time faculty in pre-tenure years versus that done post tenure, and there seems to be little organized support for, or evaluation of, teaching by non-tenure track faculty. The UCT sees that there is a clear need for a University-wide policy to establish a standard set of general elements needed for peer mentoring and review of teaching in all departments at all levels. As a minimum, a consistent policy on peer evaluation of teaching needs to be established to standardize information across the University for promotion proceedings. We believe that a combination of peer evaluation and peer mentoring would help to create better teaching at Boston College. Good peer review of teaching and the mentoring of teachers takes time and effort, but if done correctly, the results will be worth it.

Why is Peer Review of Teaching Needed?

- To promote the best teaching possible at Boston College in all ranks of the faculty.
- To actively involve as many faculty as possible in discussions of teaching.
- To give faculty members, along with Chairs and Administrators, more information on a faculty member's teaching than that presented just by the student course evaluations.
- To help promote an awareness of the importance of good teaching across the faculty.

- To have faculty realize that becoming a better teacher is a process that continues throughout a career.

Peer Review and Mentoring of Teaching Includes:

- Review of all aspects of a course, including the objectives, the syllabus and organization, homework, exams, papers, grading practices, etc., in order to fully understand the nature and goals of the course and the student-learning outcomes.
- Classroom visits or joint viewing of videotapes of the class, but on more than one occasion.
- Discussion of all aspects of the course.

Pre-tenure:

Mentoring and evaluation of teaching needs to be done on a regular and continuing basis in the pre-tenure years.

- Minimally, helpful mentoring needs start upon the arrival of a new faculty member. One way to do this might be for a department to establish a small committee (2-3) of willing faculty members to help and support the new faculty member. Mentoring needs to be a continuing and informal process whereby a non-tenured faculty member does not feel threatened to ask questions of and have an open dialogue with senior faculty members or review with them all aspects of the course including the student evaluations. Mentoring committees might also include other non-tenured faculty members as well as senior faculty and faculty from outside the department. A lot can be learned from the mutual exchange of ideas at all levels. Some departments essentially establish a “buddy” system that seems to work quite well.
- Minimally, formal review and evaluation of teaching for pre-tenured faculty members needs to be done on a regular basis, at least every two years. This should also be done by a small committee of faculty with written feedback to the Chair (and Dean) and the faculty member. The evaluation committee needs to review all aspects of teaching by the pre-tenure faculty member, not just do a one-time “pop-in” visit in each of the classes. Reviewed faculty members should be given the opportunity to respond to the written feedback before the report is submitted to the Dean. The written reviews should become part of the materials submitted by a department at the time of promotion proceedings, along with a thorough review and summary statement on the candidate’s teaching at the time the applicant is put forward for tenure. Student input should be sought, at the very least, during this last pre-tenure review.
- Junior faculty members need to be made more aware of the teaching resource help and support available at BC outside of their own department. (Currently aside from technology, this support is often not well advertised to faculty and Chairs.)

- Ideally, junior faculty members should be encouraged to attend classes by senior peers in their own department. Chairs might also arrange for them to teach a joint course with senior faculty, if possible. They should also be encouraged to attend classes of some of BC's acknowledged best teachers (see below), even outside their own department.

Post-tenure:

The UCT recognizes that formal post-tenure review and evaluation of teaching is likely a sensitive issue in many, if not most, departments except at the time of promotion to full professor. However, tenured faculty need to be continually encouraged to think about ways to improve their teaching and to recognize that becoming a better teacher is a life-long learning experience.

- There are many models for post-tenure teaching enhancement, but at a minimum senior faculty need to be given incentives to improve their teaching and positive feedback when they take steps to do this.
- At a minimum it needs to be made clear to senior faculty that excellence in teaching is important, is a criterion for promotion to full professor and is considered in yearly increment decisions. As an important corollary, Deans and Chairs need to actually make teaching a significant consideration in promotion and increment evaluations and make this known to faculty. Too many faculty feel, many perhaps correctly, that they are evaluated only on their research as long as their teaching is "acceptable."
- Promotion documents for full professorship need to include a formal written peer review of a candidate's teaching as part of the departmental submission.
- Ideally, all tenured faculty should have their teaching formally reviewed and evaluated by their peers in a fashion similar to that of the non-tenured faculty (as above) on a regular 3 or 4-year basis. The UCT realizes that this may be challenging to carry out in some smaller departments, but believes that it can be instituted if proper guidelines are developed and implemented in the University.
- Departments should schedule meetings regularly to discuss teaching and teaching development as a group. The University might make available to departments either outside experts or prominent teachers from BC to assist in this regard. Such meetings should include assessment of departmental student-learning outcomes. It is also suggested that the Provost's Office and/or Deans make funds available to departments to hold one-day "teaching retreats" at the Dover or Brighton Campus meeting facilities.
- Ideally, a mutual mentoring relationship would be established among a group of senior faculty who meet at least semi-annually to discuss each other's courses. Some Departments have informal teaching workshops whereby a group that includes both senior and junior faculty sit in on each others' courses and then meet to discuss the pedagogy, with all departmental faculty being involved in at least one of these groups.
- Senior faculty, like junior faculty, need to be made aware of the teaching resource help and support available at BC outside of their own department.

Non-tenure Track Faculty:

The UCT found that support for and/or evaluation of teaching by non-tenure track faculty is not being done on a regular basis within the University.

- A system for mentoring and review of teaching by non-tenure track faculty needs to be established, particularly for adjunct faculty teaching over many semesters. Currently, the University Statutes require that full-time adjunct faculty be reviewed by the tenured faculty of a department before their reappointment; however, it is not clear that many departments include peer review of teaching as part of this process. There are currently no review requirements for other adjunct faculty. The UCT feels that peer review of teaching for all faculty should be initiated.
- As a minimum, a program of support for adjunct faculty needs to be established at departmental and college levels. To the knowledge of the UCT, there is not now even a ½ day orientation session offering an introduction to teaching at BC for new adjunct faculty. Such a program should be given yearly in each of the Schools, possibly coordinated through the Connors Family Learning Center.

Resources:

- The UCT recognizes that some resources are currently available at BC to assist faculty become better teachers. However, these are not widely known by faculty and Chairs. We recommend more advertising to faculty, particularly junior faculty, of the resources currently available to assist them with their teaching. Faculty need to know that this help is totally independent of any reporting or evaluation. Advertisement of teaching support needs to be done on a yearly and continuing basis to all faculty, Chairs and Deans. Make it easy for faculty to find the help that they need.
- Many Universities have teaching centers to help faculty with all aspects of their teaching, not just technology issues. BC lacks such support. As a first step that the UCT believes would be relatively easy to initiate, it is recommended that one or two prominent teachers from BC be appointed to serve terms as “Distinguished Professors in Residence.” They would be charged with initiating and coordinating teaching assistance and awareness of teaching across the University, organizing seminars on teaching for the faculty and helping to mentor faculty as appropriate. This person or persons might work out of the Connors Center or the Provost’s Office.
- Make available an outside educational teaching consultant to visit with faculty who request such assistance to review their courses, visit classes and/or mutually view videotaped classes. Make this experience entirely non-threatening with no report to the Chair except that such a meeting has taken place. If appropriate experts exist within Boston College, they could perhaps be utilized in this manner.

Other suggestions discussed:

- Establish a “Master Teachers” at BC program whereby some of our noted teachers, perhaps nominated by their Deans or students, would be willing to have other faculty visit their classes and discuss aspects of teaching with them.
- Support a lecture series/discussion by some of our “Master Teachers” and/or outside experts on teaching in various disciplines or in different course styles. Perhaps these could be followed by informal panel discussions and question and answer sessions. More discussion of teaching should be promoted at BC.
- Have Deans mandate that all departments hold one-day sessions at the end of each academic year to discuss teaching in the department and reevaluate academic programs in light of an assessment of student-learning outcomes.
- Reinvigorate the Dover conferences on teaching. Perhaps use this facility to focus on departments rather than trying to hold sessions with faculty from across the University. For instance, host one-day departmental teaching “retreats” supported by the Administration.
- Have distinguished awards for teaching within the University.
- Use the faculty annual review forms to promote thinking about teaching. Add questions that will make each faculty member reflect on what they do in the classroom, how their teaching might be improved and the importance of good teaching. Such questions on the annual review form would help to promote the idea that good teaching is also important in increment and promotion decisions.