

Open Forum: Letter From Faculty Members on “Faculty Assessment.”

Faculty Assessment

The request that departments define “excellent,” “very good,” and “good” work for the purpose of Annual Performance Evaluations (APEs) provides an occasion to reconsider the function and frequency of faculty assessment here at Clemson. Current practices of assessment – including APEs for all faculty and annual Promotion and Tenure reviews for those on the tenure-track – are at turns redundant and micro-managerial, poorly timed and undemocratically administered. We would like to offer several proposals designed to bring Clemson’s faculty evaluation processes in line with those of other top universities. These proposals cover a number of variations, each offering a way to address problems within the current system.

(1) *Reduce the number of APE categories from six to three: “Exceeds Expectations,” “Meets Expectations,” and “Unsatisfactory.”* The existence of six categories produces an unfortunate amount of argument and anxiety about precisely how “good” a faculty member must be in any given year. These arguments and anxieties focus especially on the top three categories – “Excellent,” “Very Good,” and “Good” – and are especially unnecessary given how low or nonexistent the financial stakes usually are. The development of rubrics to fine-tune criteria for each category only exacerbates these problems, as no single rubric can take into account all the possible ways in which faculty – including full, associate, assistant, and lecturers – may be deserving. Reducing the categories from six to three will help alleviate these problems.

(2) *Eliminate APEs and replace them with a more democratic evaluative process for use during years in which money is available for merit raises.* Currently, the task of determining APE ratings and, if available, merit raises belongs to the chair alone. This allocation of responsibility often breeds personal resentment among those deemed less than exceptional. In those years where no money is available for merit raises, it is also not clear what immediate purpose APEs serve. We note that during the previous rounds of merit raises, faculty were requested to submit *additional* documentation, apparently to compensate for the insufficiency of APEs and FAS. We propose that department salary committees be formed to distribute merit funds based on faculty summaries of accomplishments since the previous round of raises. We further suggest that this committee prioritize the continued alleviation of compression. With the costs for new hires rising every year, Clemson should expect that compression will remain a top area of concern for faculty. A salary committee will help ensure that the distribution of funds beyond those necessary to alleviate compression will best reflect the will of the department.

(3) *Combine FAS and EPTR.* The current distinction between these systems contributes to a perception that faculty are redundantly evaluated. This perception is especially acute among tenure-track faculty, who must work with both systems each year, entering the same information into each.

(4) *Eliminate FAS.* There are many problems with this system, perhaps chief among them its suggestion that Clemson values quantity over quality. FAS encourages faculty to fast track their work, to publish *more* so as to meet annual goals. This focus on numbers overlooks the fact that quality work often takes time to produce, usually far more than a year. FAS is also a faux accounting system: it forces faculty to engage in the specious task of assigning percentages to individual components of their work, and then dividing the same work life again into four even blocks. Academic life is never so quantitatively precise or cleanly divisible.

(5) *Reserve APEs for tenured faculty members only.* For tenure-track faculty, APEs supplement annual reviews already conducted by promotion and tenure committees. It is not clear why tenure-track faculty need to undergo two separate annual evaluations.

(6) *Stagger promotion and tenure evaluations.* This proposal addresses both the redundancy of faculty evaluation for tenure-track faculty and the fact that a single year is a poor measure of academic success or failure. Academic careers are only measurable over the long term, yet assessment for new faculty currently begins within weeks of their arrival on campus. We propose that two pre-tenure evaluations, during the third and fifth years, should suffice for promotion and tenure review. First, second, and fourth year reviews are unnecessary expenditures of time and effort.

The request regarding performance criteria started a conversation in the English department about how to bring evaluation practices in line with faculty members’ own career goals and Clemson’s current institutional aims. With the recent appointment of a new president and provost, we believe that the time is right for Clemson to revise the evaluation system as to create and sustain a faculty that feels trusted rather than monitored, and supported rather than repeatedly called on to account for itself. Current faculty evaluation practices do not reflect the culture of Clemson as a research-intensive institution. We hope that the higher administration and Faculty Senate will consider these proposals in the spirit in which they are offered – as ways to address a misalignment of time and objectives.

Sincerely,

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