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New Faculty and Navigating the Contract Renewal Process

Abstract

At new faculty orientation sessions discussion of the peer review and contract renewal process (such as a tenure process) always generates immediate interest and attention. Of key importance are the details of how and when a review takes place, and what needs to be done to be successful at it. While the topics of teaching methods, student learning styles, and classroom techniques are of interest and importance to new faculty, maintaining employment is also a significant practical concern.

With our University's contract review process, it was initially assumed that everyone involved saw it the same way. After all, they read the same set of rules and follow the same process. But do they have any differences in viewpoint or understanding? This paper examines the different views that faculty members have and how they came to arrive at them. The views of four professors will be compared, two of which are new faculty. The other two have decades of experience, one being the Chief Academic Officer, the other a senior faculty member who was also a multi-year chair of the review committee.

A process that appears straightforward to one group can seem daunting to another. For a new faculty member to navigate the process requires that all involved understand their viewpoint. Similarly, they need to understand the needs of the university and of their own peers. This paper examines these traits and discusses ways to make the process a better one for the new faculty member.

The Task

New faculty members are faced with many early-career challenges including how to effectively teach, establish a rapport with (but still be respected by) students, critique and grade assignments, relate to the department chair and colleagues, establish or continue research, and maintain employment at the university. All except the last item are skills that can evolve, and be mastered, over time. But the "maintain employment" task often involves a clear hurdle that must be jumped on a single well-defined date. To say that it weighs heavily on the mind of a new faculty member is an understatement.

Given the gravity of such a task and our expertise as problem solvers, we would normally define the problem and determine the solution. That is, we would read the documentation describing the contract-renewal process and follow the steps outlined, in the exact order, giving detailed answers to the questions. While this approach is necessary, it may not be sufficient. The task is not a linear engineering one, but is much broader. The key reasons have to do with people.

Our Review Process

At the Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE) we have a long-term contract review process[1] rather than a tenure system. Every four, six, or eight years, depending on rank, a faculty

member's peers, both in the home department and university-wide, conduct an evaluation of the person's work. This results in a recommendation to the Chief Academic Officer (CAO) who, in consultation with others, decides if the contract will be renewed for the next appointment period.

It is a process that is detailed in written form, has been honed over decades, and is explained to new faculty members in their first week on campus. As each faculty member comes up for review, it is again explained prior to their compiling their documentation. Faculty documentation consists of a self-analysis of teaching methods and an explanation of contributions at the department, university, and professional levels during the previous appointment period, as well as an analysis of growth (if other than the first review). Appended are student evaluations with the faculty member's analysis, graded student assignments, and the previous review letter. The most important area of evaluation is in "Effective Classroom Instruction," which is the primary focus at our university.

The documentation is reviewed by department peers and then by a five-person university-wide committee. These recommendations, along with a department chair's review, are forwarded to the CAO who is key in the renewal decision.

An Important Part of the Process – the People

In discussing the review process it became clear that the written rules form the foundation of the process, but that the same words can have different impact depending on a person's role at the university. That is, the view of the CAO might include concerns of staffing and funding, whereas a new faculty member might look at it much differently. To investigate this, four professors, believed to be representative of others at their stage in their careers, were asked to answer a set of five questions regarding the process.

Professor A is the Chief Academic Officer and Vice President of Academics. The "CAO" receives the results of the evaluation process and is key in determining if a contract is renewed. He has 41 years of experience including many years of teaching and serving as a department chair. He reports to the President of the University.

Professor B has 35 years of teaching experience (25 years at our University) and has been on the five-person university-level peer review committee for a total of 16 years ("Senior Faculty"). For three of those years, he was chair of this College Faculty Appointment Review Committee (CFARC). He has conducted evaluations of approximately 200 faculty members and has been, himself, evaluated by the process several times. However, his primary responsibility is teaching.

Professor C has two years teaching experience, and came to the position directly from graduate school. He has recently undergone the review process for the first time ("Early Faculty"). He is becoming exposed to the workings of the review process through his involvement in the University's Faculty Senate.

Professor D comes from three years as a researcher at a major institution, in which a different review process existed. He began teaching at our University this year and because reviews take

place in the year prior to the last year of the contract (new faculty members usually have a three-year contract), he has not yet been evaluated by the process ("New Faculty").

Therefore, our group includes professors having a variety of experiences both "being evaluated by" and as "evaluators in" the review process.

While the peer review and contract renewal process is (one hopes) clearly defined, the professors all see it through different eyes. A series of questions posed to them (and answered without consultation) reveals these different views, possibly influenced by experience level, background, responsibilities, generation and age differences, and its impact on their lives.

The Questions and People's Views

The four faculty members were asked to answer the following questions without consultation with anyone or with the review process documentation.

1. "What is the purpose of the CFARC Process?"
2. "How is the University affected by the Process?"
3. "How is the faculty member affected by the Process?"
4. "Who are the stakeholders in the Process?"
5. "How should a new faculty member prepare for the Process?"

The questions were intentionally open-ended, eliciting candid responses from the group members.

Question 1 – The Purpose

The CAO's responses included both broad analyses and detailed facts. He cited the purpose as including "faculty accountability," "faculty growth," "positive reinforcement," "constructive criticism," and "sharing of best practices." That is, the purpose is to ensure that the University has quality people who are growing, with the added benefits of them feeling appreciated and being able to share their good ideas.

The Senior Faculty's responses were somewhat specific, stating that it provides a "critique of performance" and "encourages people to improve." These are in line with, but not as broad as, the CAO's responses.

The Early Faculty member cited the determination of "whether a faculty member is teaching effectively."

The New Faculty member noted that it ensures "that all faculty members are contributing to the goals of the institution."

All four members see the Process providing accountability. The main difference is that the CAO and the Senior Faculty, both of whom have served as evaluators in the Process, also see its role in encouraging the faculty member – a somewhat more positive interpretation. The members

being evaluated understand the necessity of the Process perhaps without a broader view involving growth.

Question 2 – How is the University Affected?

The CAO believes the University becomes a "better educational facility" as a result, and that faculty members will "be ever-mindful of their primary responsibilities." Also, the Process encourages faculty to "examine what they are currently doing and to plan for future behavior." The responses are philosophical and relate to a broad improvement in the faculty benefitting the University.

The Senior Faculty has a very literal interpretation and answer to the question – sounding somewhat like a "manager" stating some cold, hard facts. The nature of the response is undoubtedly due to the Senior Faculty's various roles as both a member and Chair of the CFARC committee. He says that the impact on the University is that the "members get paid" extra, and that the Process "commits the university to providing employment." Underlying these comments is the feeling of responsibility and seriousness that the Senior Faculty takes on with the role of not only a teacher but also as an evaluator in the Process. This factual and literal perspective of the review may be something new to the Early and New Faculty Members.

The Early Faculty member says that the Process "gives the University recourse" in case the need exists to terminate (actually "non-renew") a contract.

The New Faculty member says the University is affected in that the Process ensures "that all faculty members meet expectations."

The four views could not be more distinct. The effect on the University is something that may not always be considered or obvious, especially by the newer faculty members. The more senior faculty members (CAO and "Senior Faculty") have a somewhat wider view of the effects.

Question 3 – How is the Faculty Member Affected?

All four members noted the task of collecting and documenting accomplishments.

The CAO states "the notion of peer review is powerful." He describes the situation where one's peers are scrutinizing the work and accomplishments, and how this is a strong driver to improve and stay vital: "acceptability and respect from colleagues are powerful forces."

The Senior Faculty says the faculty member may be affected "positively or negatively by the wording of the review and its message." He says that time is required to prepare for the review and that the faculty member "may learn from" the student evaluations. The faculty will be addressing his/her work and "may use this information to improve."

The Early Faculty member says it allows an evaluation of how they have "aligned themselves with the teaching mission" of the University and a critical self-evaluation of whether the member is "worthy of promotion."

The New Faculty member believes it requires faculty to "strive to maintain a level of performance."

Again, the members being evaluated see the process as one where the faculty needs to live up to expectations. The members who have served as evaluators see this as well, but also have other concerns. For example, the Senior Faculty is concerned about the specific wording of any critique and how it may affect performance. That is, the wrong level or tone of comment can send an unfortunate message and either unduly encourage or discourage someone. The CAO notes, rightly, that peer review implies all that it carries with it – acceptance or rejection by peers. This is indeed a powerful force, perhaps more so at the department level than above it.

Question 4 – Who Are the Stakeholders?

The answer to this depends on one's interpretation of the term "stakeholders," but the following were cited (in the order shown, which may not have significance):

CAO: Faculty member, university, students, department
Senior Faculty: Students, parents, colleagues, administration, faculty member
Early Faculty: All who participate
New Faculty: Faculty, administration, students

There is general agreement that there are many stakeholders spanning all who are involved, with students being a key stakeholder.

Question 5 – How Should New Faculty Prepare?

The CAO believes the faculty member should seek out a mentor and approach the Process in a positive fashion, highlighting their successes.

The Senior Faculty believes the faculty member should "continually (over the contract period) consider how your activities will benefit the students, yourself and the University." This is partly a reaction to having performed 200 reviews, noting that those people who keep these ideas in mind not only have the best reviews, but also grow over the appointment period.

The Early Faculty member believes the faculty member should "document important items," "be able to explain … teaching methods," and "be responsive to students' suggestions."

The New Faculty member states that the faculty member must "understand what is expected," "develop skills," and develop the "ability to analyze student feedback." "Other practical ways … include looking for opportunities to contribute."

Here we see that both the CAO and Senior Faculty member are slightly leaning more toward a bigger picture, one where the goal is to improve, with the resulting positive review coming as a natural outcome of that effort. However, it is important to note that the Early Faculty member and New Faculty member also see the review preparation as an ongoing process.

In reviewing and analyzing the responses to each question, a set of characteristics emerged that allowed a classification of each person's viewpoint. The characteristics themselves are an indicator of the broad range of viewpoints held by the individuals. The answers to the questions are presented in Table 1 below.

Questions and Faculty Responses	CAO	Senior	Early	New
1. What is the purpose of the CFARC Process?				
growth and improvement	x	x		
sharing of ideas	x			
accountability, required performance	x	x	x	x
2. How is the University affected by the Process?				
broad advantages	x			
employment (university commitment)		x		
employment (possibility of termination)			x	x
3. How is the faculty member affected by the Process?				
peer pressure	x			
positive/negative message		x		
level of performance required			x	x
4. Who are the stakeholders in the Process?				
recognition of students, faculty, university	x	x	x	x
5. How should a new faculty member prepare?				
mentor	x			
continual process		x		x
utilize student feedback			x	x

Table 1. Summary of answers to the five questions.

The data presented in Table 1 suggests that the faculty members who were part of this study fell into two broad classes. That is, note that the Early and New Faculty responded in a similar way to almost every question. Some similarity in the responses (and characteristics of those responses) of the CAO and the Senior Faculty is also observed. However, perhaps more importantly, note that the responses given by both the CAO and the Senior Faculty tend to differ from those given by the Early and New Faculty members by having a broader view. We believe that an underlying reason for the difference in responses is the various roles in which the member has participated in the process. Both the CAO and the Senior Faculty member have had extensive experience teaching at the University. However, they additionally have had roles as "evaluators" in the process whereas the Early and New Faculty members are being "evaluated" by the process.

The most interesting answers are those where the more senior and less senior faculty (and evaluators and those being evaluated) differ the most (shaded in the table). Question 5, regarding how faculty should prepare, indicates something very positive – that those being evaluated realize that responding to student evaluation comments is very important. At our university, faculty members are required to use student evaluation forms for every student, in every class, in every term. These are examined by the department chair and numerical results are

tabulated. The CAO is made aware of anyone not using the forms. The answers reflect a concern for the details of the documentation required. The CAO and Senior Faculty responses tended to be at this level of detail as well.

The answers to questions 1, 2 and 3 are more interesting. Here is demonstrated most clearly the difference in how the evaluator and the person being evaluated view the Process. Those being evaluated see it more as a method for ensuring that faculty members "measure up," whereas the evaluators additionally see it as a process that assists in growth and improvement. Those being evaluated are taking a pragmatic approach – in order to safely navigate the Process, they take it seriously and understand the consequences. Those doing the evaluation certainly do see that, but also believe there is something beyond the "accountability" aspect. They believe that the Process, whether overtly or covertly, raises the level of the faculty – something that is good for not only the University, but for the faculty member as well. The evaluators tend to see more dimensions to the Process, viewing it somewhat more positively, or at least less fearfully.

Summary

It has been found that experienced faculty members involved in evaluating their colleagues see the contract review process differently than newer faculty members undergoing reviews. The group consulted for this paper consisted of the Chief Academic Officer of the University (a former teaching faculty member and department chair), a senior faculty member (and one who has extensive experience on the peer review committee, including as chair, but who is primarily a teacher), an early faculty member, and a new faculty member. While other faculty members in these categories were not formally surveyed, it is believed that the results are representative. Each of us believes that our own view reasonably reflects many others in our particular peer groups.

Initially, we were unsure whether the result of our questioning would yield any differences. We thought that we all viewed the process in a similar way because the "rules" of the process were known by all. After the responses to the questions were compared, significant differences were revealed. While our initial belief may appear naïve, it was an honestly-held view.

Why are there differences in view? We believe it's because the participants represent faculty at different stages in their careers and with different responsibilities. But those changes occur very slowly, taking years to develop, and thus may explain why one's views were assumed to be constant over the years. The gradual changes that we all undergo yield different views that may not be obvious at first. And these changes affect how we view colleagues as "peers."

At the risk of oversimplifying the results from above, it can be said that those being evaluated understand the mechanics of the Process and a portion of the rationale. That portion ties in with their own pragmatic approach to it, which is a safe approach and one which recognizes the important consequences. While safe, it may lack awareness of some positive aspects of the Process; in particular that it encourages growth. A better understanding of the views of others will help them to navigate the Process.

For those doing the evaluation, it is important to consider that the newer faculty members simply may not understand the larger view. Those who are senior, and those who are the evaluators, "used to be" newer faculty members. However, experiences at the University alter their initial views, in ways that apparently were not obvious. As they proceed through their careers, a wider view of the significance of the peer review process is developed. This needs to be communicated to the newer faculty members.

For those being evaluated there is a caution: a pragmatic approach may be safe, but may not address the larger concerns of the University. Those concerns focus on not only satisfying a set of requirements but also on growth and an overall benefit to the University. To be more comfortable with the Process may mean having a more detailed understanding of its purpose. Newer faculty members need to realize that the Process is in place for many reasons, only a few of which appear to be, to them, in the forefront.

In explaining and describing the Process to newer faculty members, it in incumbent upon those doing the explaining to describe more than just the mechanics. It is necessary to impart a sense of a larger mission. While additional documentation on the philosophy may help, a more direct and personal approach may be necessary. One possible mechanism would be for the CAO and/or a senior faculty member involved in the Process to address the group of reviewees, explaining not only the basics, but the broader scope as well. It should attempt to communicate the benefits to the University and the reason why more senior faculty view the process somewhat differently. A second mechanism would be a mentor program where each new faculty member is paired with a senior faculty member who would share this broader view based on their own experience in the process.

In addition, for new faculty members to communicate with others having just a few years more experience than them may help. That group will be able to communicate their experiences and relate to their concerns. Even faculty members recently evaluated are still mostly pragmatic about the Process, but their successful navigation of it should provide reassurance to others.

Bibliography

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