

Peer Observation Practice to Enhance Inclusive Teaching: An Exploratory Approach to Evaluate Faculty Perceptions

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Abstract:

This study describes an exploratory approach to evaluate faculty perception of the peer observation practice aimed to enhance inclusive teaching.

The quality of teaching is a part of the evaluation criteria for Promotion, Tenure and Reappointment (PTR) process for university faculty. The student-based evaluation of teaching is known to have several limitations and hence cannot be the sole basis for instructor evaluation. Peer observation, self-reflection, and assessment of teaching portfolios can be employed as holistic evaluation practices. The Civil and Environmental Engineering (CEE) department at the University of Connecticut (UConn) adopted a calibrated peer observation method with dual objectives of improving the quality of teaching across the department and using the peer observation report for the PTR review process.

Peer observation committee members and the committee chair are appointed by the Department Head and typically serve for three-year terms. In a calibrated peer observation method, all members receive training by the UConn Center for Teaching and Learning. The goal is to minimize the bias by ensuring that the observation process is uniform and is based on pedagogical principles. The observation procedures were reformed to promote inclusive teaching best practices as a part of redesigning courses in the frame of a *Revolutionizing Engineering Departments* (RED) grant. Peer observers evaluate the syllabus, course materials & in-class activities and provide a set of recommendations to the instructors with the goal of enhancing accessibility, flexibility, and engagement of students with diverse learning preferences. The committee members foster an environment of trust and collegiality when completing the observation process.

Fourteen out of twenty-six CEE faculty went through the peer observation process twice or more over the last four years. This paper explores faculty perceptions about the effectiveness of peer observation process in enhancing course quality in terms of inclusivity and improving students' learning experience. Details of the peer-observation procedures for faculty, including how the observation questions were targeted in addressing the need of diverse learners will be discussed. Observed faculty members were asked to answer a series of questions in an anonymous survey about their experience at each step of the observation process (pre-observation, class observation, post-observation, and report), perception about the department culture, and a self-reported question about improvement in Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) scores. A separate survey was conducted to assess the perception of the committee members in terms of the process effectiveness and the impact on their own teaching practices. The results of these surveys will be presented, and the significance will be discussed.

Introduction

Peer observation, also known as peer evaluation or peer review, is a process in which colleagues assess each other's teaching performance and provide feedback for improvement. It is widely used in higher education as a form of professional development and quality assurance. Research has shown that it can have a positive impact on teaching and learning outcomes, but it is also important to address the challenges related to the lack of a standardized approach, privacy and confidentiality, and the accuracy of feedback provided [1]. A study by Daniels et al. [2] found that peer observation led to significant improvements in teaching effectiveness, as well as increased satisfaction among both the observer and the observed. Similarly, a study by Boud and Falchikov [3] found that peer observation led to increased reflection on teaching practice and improved teaching strategies.

The standard way to evaluate teaching has been to collect course-end student rating forms and compile the results into specific scores that are used for promotion and tenure. The essence of Promotion, Tenure and Reappointment (PTR) is about furthering the development of faculty members through the expert input based on knowledge and understanding, although it can be used as part of performance appraisal and tenure portfolios [4]. While student ratings have considerable validity, they also have many limitations. Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) have been found to be biased in a number of ways. One major source of bias is the "halo effect," in which a teacher's overall likability or personality influences the student's ratings of their teaching effectiveness. This bias has been well-documented in the literature ([5], [6], [7]). Among other things, students are not qualified to evaluate an instructor's understanding of the course subject, the appropriateness of the level of difficulty of the course and of the teaching, and assessment methods used in its delivery. Recognizing these limitations of student ratings, growing numbers of institutions and departments have begun to include peer review in their faculty performance evaluations. For example, a recently approved collective bargaining agreement between University of Connecticut and the faculty union states that *"...SETs are not to be used as the sole criterion of teaching for disciplinary measures, promotion, tenure or reappointment, or for non-reappointment with respect to full-time faculty and adjunct faculty who have been employed by the University for at least five semesters over a five year calendar year period, including summer sessions."*

The Department of Civil and Environmental engineering in this university adopted a peer observation practice in 2018. The peer observation policy and procedures were revised in 2021 to incorporate principles and approaches within a Revolutionizing Engineering Departments project of the National Science Foundation that aims create an inclusive learning environment that empowers neurodiverse learners [8]. Meaningful inclusion of neurodiverse students in engineering is pursued by moving beyond a focus on accommodations and accessibility and embracing a strengths-based approach toward neurodiversity [9]. To create inclusive courses for neurodivergent students, instructors underwent professional development to adopt Universal Design for Learning (UDL) standards and facilitate opportunities in which students can identify and use their strengths in an engineering context [8]. For this purpose, some of the UDL concepts were adopted in the course evaluation process and provided in the report of the peer observation process. This study presents faculty perceptions of the process efficiency on improving the teaching quality and the effects on departmental culture around teaching.

Departmental Policy for Teaching Observation

The goals of the peer observation process were to improve teaching quality and provide an alternative means of assessment for the PTR review process. It provided a great mentorship opportunity for faculty to enhance their teaching skills, foster a culture of teaching excellence, and promote sharing through collegial dialogue. The outcomes of the faculty peer observation process were a reflective summary describing any steps taken or changes made towards the enhancement of teaching and improvement of student learning.

The peer observation committee members are faculty, appointed by the department head. The policy prevents faculty with less than three years of teaching experience from serving and rating someone else's teaching. All peer-observers attend training from the university Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). Training involves the different steps involved in peer observation, an overview of the best teaching practices (such as UDL principles), and communication techniques for providing meaningful feedback. Participants watch recorded videos of varying teaching styles, review and evaluate these individually, and then compare their evaluations to develop a standardized (calibrated) process. CETL training for all committee members is repeated every three years to incorporate new knowledge and tools to enhance the effectiveness of the observation procedure.

To mitigate bias in the observation process, two peer observers are assigned to review the course materials and observe the teaching practice of each faculty member. Ideally, one undergraduate and one graduate class are observed by different committee members. However, if the faculty member only teaches undergraduate courses, two peer-observers observe at different dates. The faculty member is notified prior to the class visit. Additional observations can be requested by the faculty member, as long as it is possible for the committee to accommodate.

New faculty members joining the department, whether tenure track or non-tenure-track teaching faculty, are observed for two consecutive years. Tenure-track faculty have the option to opt out of teaching observation for the following two years and use their previous reports for the annual Promotion, Tenure and Reappointment. The peer observation is conducted again during the year prior to applying for promotion. For non-tenure track teaching faculty, peer observation is conducted every year for which a contract renewal is required, and/or the faculty applies for promotion.

Peer Observation Procedures with Inclusive Approach

Developed in collaboration and consultation with CETL, the peer observation procedure follows a four-step process - pre-observation, class observation, post-observation, and report submission - with the intention of minimizing bias and ensuring that the observation is conducted uniformly and based on pedagogical principles. The observation procedures were reformed in recent years to promote inclusive teaching best practices as a part of redesigning courses in the frame of the *Revolutionizing Engineering Departments* (RED) grant. A set of inclusive teaching standards (I-standards) was developed collaboratively within the department, incorporating principles from the UDL framework, best practices for inclusive teaching from the literature, and the strength based approach on neurodiversity [8]. Peer observers use the I-standards to evaluate the syllabus,

course materials and teaching performance and provide a set of recommendations to the instructors with the goal of enhancing accessibility, flexibility, and engagement of students with diverse learning preferences. The observation process includes the following aspects: a) students' interaction; b) use of media/whiteboard; c) student-faculty engagement, d) achievement of learning objectives. The committee members foster an environment of trust and collegiality when completing the observation process.

The peer observation committee consists of five to six members who meet monthly throughout the semester. Each year, the committee observes six to eight faculty members, with each member responsible for completing the peer observation procedures for three to four assigned faculty. This section details the objectives and activities for each step of the process.

Pre-observation: this is the first meeting between the peer-observer and the faculty member. The observer asks a series of questions regarding the course contents, syllabus, teaching philosophy, and experience of the instructor. Access to the course syllabus and course site is requested to assess the level of accessibility, flexibility, and strength-based teaching approach in the course design. A pre-observation form with guiding questions is used to ensure that peer-observers follow a standardized process. The instructor is invited to inquire about the peer observation process, state their objectives and is advised to inform their students of the class visit by the committee member. Finally, a mutually agreed date for the class observation is scheduled. The pre-observation meeting is held before the fifth week of the semester.

Class observation: On the scheduled date, the committee members visit the class for the entire duration and take notes in a standardized form commenting on the various aspects assessed. Additionally, any special circumstances, such as poor acoustics, room size, temperature, or a glaring blackboard, that could interfere with teaching and learning, are noted. The class observation is completed before the end of the tenth week of the semester.

Post Observation: This meeting is essential to share the observation outcomes. A post-observation form with guiding questions ensures that peer-observers follow a standardized process. Faculty members also ask their own questions to the peer-observer(s). The discussion involves sharing notes and comments with the instructor, highlighting the positive aspects of the instructions, and providing suggestions to further improve the quality of teaching. Either the committee member or the instructor may bring up any issue that needs clarification. The committee member may also recommend adopting inclusive teaching practices, if not already in place. The post-observation meeting should take place within a week of the observation to ensure timely feedback and discussion.

Committee Discussion and Report: The two peer-observers meet with the rest of the committee to discuss and consolidate their observations and their recommendations for further improvement into one report. Following the schedule, each member prepares a draft report and shares it with the rest of the committee members for their comments and approval. Once the draft report is approved by all committee members, a final report is prepared and issued to the faculty member and the head of the department and includes the signature of all committee members to indicate their approval. The final report should be submitted by the last day of the semester.

The instructor may include the final report in their dossier for the annual review process and adopt the suggestions provided by the committee to improve their teaching practice in the future. The faculty member provides to the committee a written reflection report on the peer observations including how they plan to make use of the suggestions/recommendations. The committee members review them for the next class visit and verify if the committee recommendations are adopted by the instructor.

Assessment Objectives and Methodology

This work seeks to assess faculty perceptions of the efficacy of peer observation procedures in elevating teaching quality in their practice, with a focus on inclusive teaching. Additionally, this study will investigate faculty perceptions with respect to the process itself and with respect to departmental culture and collegiality. Because the evaluation activities used in this paper are limited to “systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the program (or processes, products, systems, organizations, personnel, or policies), improve effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future program development,” [10] the authors did not seek Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

Two anonymous surveys were implemented using Qualtrics (see Appendix) and shared with **a)** faculty members whose classes were observed in the past four years (14 faculty members), and **b)** committee members who have served with an observer role (nine faculty members). Four faculty responded to both surveys as they fulfilled both roles. The department includes 23 tenure track and five teaching faculty, so that 50% of the population has participated in the peer observation procedure. 100% (14 out of 14) and 66% (6 out of 9) responded to the two surveys, respectively. All faculty members had participated over five times in the process, either as observer or observed.

Results and Discussion

The results are presented by grouping the questions along three themes: process, impact and culture. Process-related questions probe faculty perceptions on the efficiency and suitability of the peer observation process itself; impact-related questions inquire about the effect of the process on the quality and outcomes of the teaching practice; and culture-related questions are related to the overall perceptions of the impact of the peer observation process on the departmental culture around teaching and faculty relationships. Finally, a set of questions is related to the project objective of promoting inclusive teaching practices, evaluated separately. Table 1 shows the questions related to each theme from the committee member survey (CMS) and observed faculty survey (OFS).

Table 1: Grouping of survey questions across the three themes

Theme	Process	Impact	Culture	I-standards
CMS	Q2-Q6, Q10, Q11	Q7, Q8	Q9, Q11	Q4
OFS	Q3, Q4, Q6-Q10, Q17	Q11-15, 18, 19	Q16, 20, 21	Q5, Q18

Process Theme

The distribution responses to the process theme related questions are shown in Tables 2 and 3 for committee members (observers) and observed faculty, respectively.

Table 2: Committee member responses to process-related questions

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Q2 - CETL training was helpful	83%	17%	0%	0%	0%
Q3 - The pre-observation meeting was sufficient to prepare me	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Q5 - I felt comfortable observing my colleagues teaching during class observation	83%	17%	0%	0%	0%
Q6 - The post-observation meeting and the committee discussion were effective	83%	17%	0%	0%	0%

Table 3: Observed faculty responses to process related questions

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Q4 - The information I received in the pre-observation meeting was sufficient to prepare me for the peer observation process.	86%	14%	0%	0%	0%
Q6 - I felt comfortable being observed during my class.	71%	29%	0%	0%	0%
Q7 - The presence of the observer was distracting to my students.	0%	7%	14%	7%	71%
Q8 - I would prefer for my class to be observed by CETL staff	7%	7%	43%	14%	29%
Q9 - I would prefer for my class to be observed by someone familiar with the content.	7%	29%	43%	14%	7%
Q10 - The post-observation meeting was valuable	64%	29%	0%	7%	0%

All of the observed faculty (100%) strongly agreed or agreed that the information received in the pre-observation meeting was sufficient to prepare them for the peer observation process. Similarly, 100% of committee members strongly agreed that the information provided during the pre-observation meeting was sufficient to prepare the observed faculty for the peer observation process. A majority of the observed faculty (71%) strongly agreed that they were comfortable being observed by the committee members during their class, whereas 83% of the committee

members strongly agreed that they were comfortable observing their colleague’s teaching in class. All of the observed faculty as well as the committee members strongly or somewhat agreed that they were comfortable with the class observation process. However, a minority of faculty members stated a preference for CETL staff to conduct the observation instead of their own colleagues, and a similar percentage declared a preference for someone who is not necessarily familiar with the content.

A majority of the respondents (93%) from the observed faculty and all of the committee members (100%) strongly agreed or agreed that the post-observation meeting was valuable in ensuring the effectiveness of the peer observation process. All of the committee members (100%) strongly agreed or agreed that the post-observation meeting and the committee discussion were valuable in ensuring the effectiveness of the peer observation process.

To help the committee in making future policy regarding the frequency of the peer observation process, both the observed faculty and the committee members were asked to provide feedback, shown in Figure 1. 43% of the observed faculty and 50% of the committee members thought that the Department Chair/PTR committee and the Teaching Observation committee should make a joint decision on the desired frequency for the particular faculty.

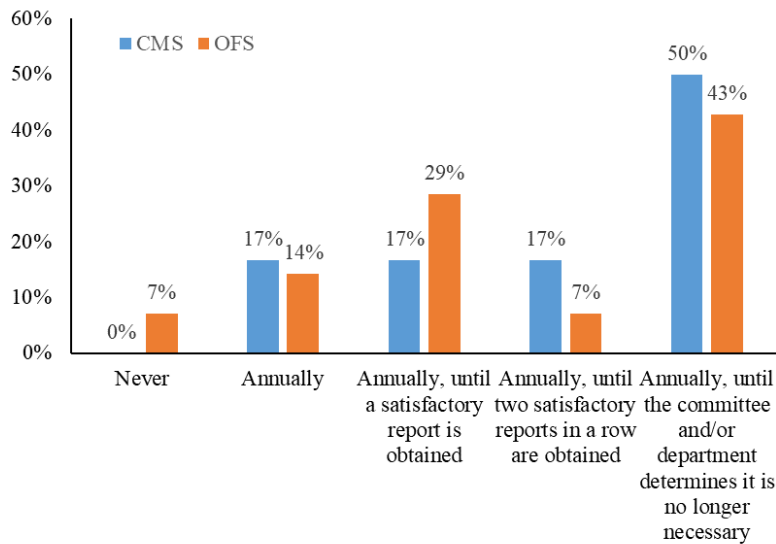


Figure 1: Faculty responses to the desired frequency of observations

In addition, 46% of committee members expressed that serving in the teaching observation committee requires more work compared to other service assignments in the department. Only 50% of committee members recommend serving in the committee. However, more than 85% of the observed faculty are extremely or somewhat likely to recommend other faculty to participate in the teaching observation process.

Impact Theme

This theme was examined by asking questions to observed faculty members and committee members regarding the impact of peer observation on improving the pedagogy across the

department, enhancing students' engagement, and the impact on the observer's teaching quality. Figure 2 and Table 4 show the summary of responses.

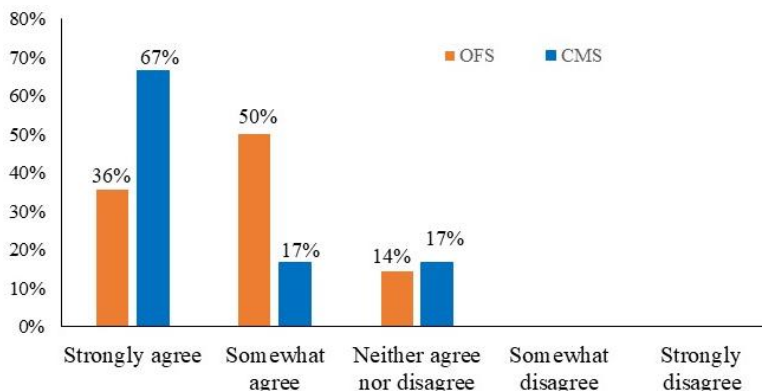


Figure 2: Observer Faculty and Committee Members' Feedback on Effectiveness of the Peer Observation Process in Improving Pedagogy

A majority of the responders (86% of observed faculty and 84% of observers) strongly or somewhat agreed that the peer observation practice helped in improving the pedagogy across the department. Table 4 displays that a majority of observed faculty (64%) strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that their students were more engaged after adopting the suggestions provided by the teaching observation committee. All committee members (100%) strongly agreed that the peer observation process had a positive impact on their own teaching (Table 4).

Table 4: Feedback on Improvement on Teaching Pedagogy

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
OFS - Q12 - My students are more engaged in class after adopting the suggestions provided by the Teaching Observation Committee	29%	36%	29%	7%	0%
CMS - Q8 - The observation process has had a positive impact on my own teaching.	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%

As the peer observation report is used for the PTR review process, observed faculty were asked to share their perception about the impact of this report on their dossier. Table 5 indicates that a majority of the observed faculty (93%) strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that the Peer observation report will make their PTR dossier stronger. However, authors do not have access to PTR review documents to evaluate the impact of reports on the PTR process. The same percentage (93%) of observed faculty members also strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that the committee report can address the bias or deficiencies of SET data. However, only 35% of the observed faculty strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that the SET scores have improved after adopting the suggestions provided by the committee in their reports. It should be noted that in the CEE department, teaching effectiveness is evaluated using both SET data and teaching observation reports in conjunction with each other.

Table 5: Feedback from the Observed Faculty on Effect of Peer Observation on their Annual Review Process

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Q13 - The results of my student teaching evaluations (SET) have improved after adopting suggestions provided by the Teaching Observation Committee' report.	14%	21%	50%	14%	0%
Q14 - The excellence in teaching section of my PTR file will be stronger as a result of including the committees report.	43%	50%	7%	0%	0%
Q15 - I believe that the committee report on my teaching can address the deficiencies of SET data	50%	43%	7%	0%	0%

Culture Theme

As shown in Figure 3, both committee members (66%) and observed faculty (71%) strongly or somewhat agreed that the process improved relationships with their colleagues, while the remaining responders had a neutral perception.

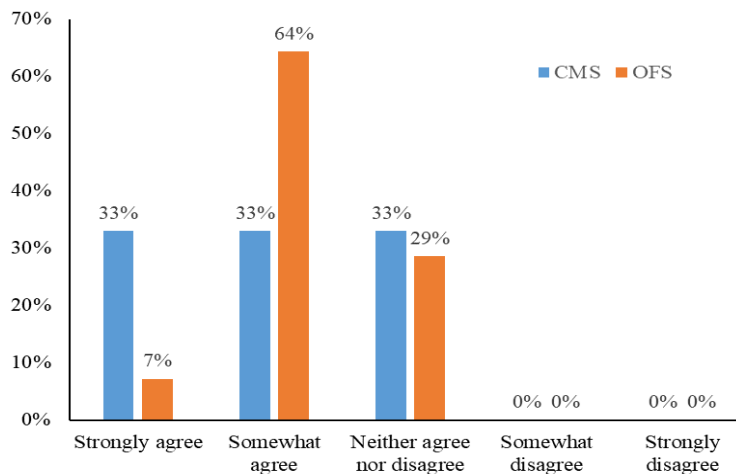


Figure 3: Faculty perception of whether participating in the process improved relationships with colleagues

The majority of observed faculty (79%) also expressed that they were likely to reach out to committee members to ask question about teaching outside the process, and, as previously mentioned, 85% recommend participating in the process.

I-standards

As shown in Figure 4, feedback was less positive in terms of the incorporation of the I-standards in the peer observation process. Only half of the committee members expressed that sharing the I-standards during the pre-observation process was useful, and less than half of the observed faculty agreed. One member of the committee and two observed faculty strongly disagreed that this information was useful. However, in a subsequent question more than 76% of the observed faculty expressed that they are extremely likely or somewhat likely willing to adopt the I-standards. The peer observation process is currently not the only approach to expose faculty members to inclusive teaching practices; the main approach is a faculty learning community called I-team that works on course redesign to promote inclusive practices. However, integration of the two processes of course redesign and the observation committee will be a more efficient and sustainable approach moving forward.

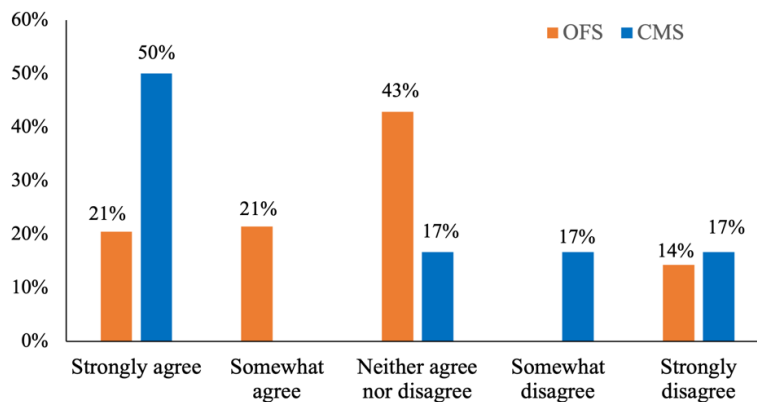


Figure 4: Distribution of responses on the usefulness of learning about I-standards during the pre-observation meeting

Conclusions

The following conclusions are derived from this study:

- Most of the responders (86% of observed faculty and 84% of observers) strongly or somewhat agreed that the peer observation practice helped in improving the pedagogy across the department.
- Overall, all three components of the peer observation process (pre-observation, class observation, and post-observation) are found to be informative and effective as well as comfortable.
- 76% of the observed faculty expressed that they are extremely likely or somewhat likely willing to adopt the I-standards. Alternative approaches should be taken by the committee to better educate faculty members about the inclusive teaching best practices as only 42%

of the responders confirmed that they have learned useful information about I-standards (INCLUDE) during the pre-observation meeting.

- More than 90% of the observed faculty confirmed that the peer observation report will make their PTR dossier stronger, and the report can address the bias or deficiencies of SET data.
- More than 90% of observed faculty and committee members reported that the peer observation process was beneficial in improving their relationships with colleagues.
- The majority of the participants agreed that the peer observation procedure should be repeated as often as deemed necessary by the committee and the department chair.
- It was observed that repeated peer observation process has significantly improved the quality of teaching of the observed faculty over time.

Future Work

The department's key strategic goal is to promote inclusive teaching through improved education of faculty on best practices and strength-based approaches to student learning. To further this goal, the committee will explore different methods of incorporating inclusivity into the peer observation process such as offering workshops on inclusive teaching practices to observed faculty. By increasing the number of observers, the committee can reduce the burden placed on individual members. Moreover, allowing junior faculty members to observe their senior colleagues can help them to hone their teaching skills.

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Appendix – Survey Questions

Committee Member Survey (CMS)

Questions 2 through 9 were rated on a 5-point Likert Scale (Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

Q1 How many times you have served as an observer?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more

Q2. CETL training was helpful to learn the peer observation best practices.

Q3. The information I received in the pre-observation meeting was sufficient to prepare me for the peer observation process.

Q4. I learned useful information about I-standards during the pre-observation meeting.

Q5. I felt comfortable observing my colleague's teaching during class observation:

Q6. The post-observation meeting was valuable in ensuring the effectiveness of the peer observation process.

Q7. Overall, the teaching observation process has been effective in improving pedagogy across my department?

Q8. The observation process has had a positive impact on my own teaching.

Q9. The teaching observation process helped me improve my relations with other colleagues within the department.

Q10. How often do you think faculty should be observed?

- Never (1)
- Annually (2)
- Annually, until a satisfactory report is obtained (3)
- Annually, until two satisfactory reports in a row are obtained (4)
- Annually, until the teaching observation committee and Department Chair/PTR committee determines it is no longer necessary (5)

Q11. How likely are you to recommend serving on this committee to your colleagues?

- Extremely likely (1)
- Somewhat likely (2)
- Neither likely nor unlikely (3)

- Somewhat unlikely (4)
- Extremely unlikely (5)

Q12. What do you suggest to make the teaching observation committee's service better?

Q13. what is the greatest benefit for you from serving on the committee?

Observed Faculty Survey (OFS)

Questions 2 through 16 were rated on a 5-point Likert Scale (Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

Questions 18 through 21 were rated on a 5-point Likert Scale (Very Likely, Somewhat Likely, Neither Likely or Unlikely, Somewhat Unlikely, Extremely Unlikely)

Q1. How many times has your teaching been observed by members of the Teaching Observation Committee?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more

Q2. How many times has your teaching been observed by staff from the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning?

- 0 (1)
- 1 (2)
- 2 (3)
- 3 (4)
- 4 (5)
- 5 or more (6)

Q3. I believe that the results of the teaching observation report are less biased than the results of student teaching evaluations (SET).

Q4. The information I received in the pre-observation meeting was sufficient to prepare me for the peer observation process.

Q5. I learned useful information about I-standards during the pre-observation meeting.

Q6. I felt comfortable being observed by the members of the Teaching Observation Committee during my class.

Q7. The presence of the members of the Teaching Observation Committee during the class observation was distracting to my students.

Q8. I would prefer for my class to be observed by CETL's staff rather than Teaching Observation Committee members:

Q9. I would prefer for my class to be observed by someone familiar with the course content:

Q10. The post-observation meeting was valuable in ensuring the effectiveness of the peer observation process.

Q11. Overall, participating in the teaching observation process was helpful in improving my pedagogy.

Q12. My students are more engaged in class after adopting the suggestions provided by the Teaching Observation Committee's report

Q13. The results of my Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) have improved after adopting suggestions provided by the Teaching Observation Committee's report.

Q14. The excellence in teaching section of my PTR file will be stronger as a result of including the committee's report.

Q15. I believe that the committee report on my teaching can address the deficiencies of SET data (SET cannot reflect teaching effectiveness)

Q16. The teaching observation process helped me improve my relations with other colleagues within the department.

Q17. How often do you think faculty should be observed?

- Never
- Annually
- Annually, until a satisfactory report is obtained
- Annually, until two satisfactory reports in a row are obtained
- Annually, until the teaching observation committee and Department Chair/PTR committee determines it is no longer necessary

Q18. How likely are you to adopt the I-standards that were discussed during the pre-observation meeting in your future teaching?

Q19. How likely are you to implement suggestions by the committee in your future classes?

Q20. How likely are you to recommend participating in the teaching observation process to colleagues?

Q21. How likely are you to reach out to teaching observation committee members in the future with questions relevant to excellence in teaching?

Q22. What do you suggest to make the teaching observation committee's service better?