

Faculty Dimension Report
Lawrence Technological University

Foundations Institutions make the first college year a high priority for the faculty. These institutions are characterized by a culture of faculty responsibility for the first year that is realized through high-quality instruction in first-year classes and substantial interaction between faculty and first-year students both inside and outside the classroom. This culture of responsibility is nurtured by chief academic officers, deans, and department chairs and supported by the institutions'™ reward systems.

FACULTY DIMENSION REPORT

Turning to the central role of the faculty in first-year studies, the Learning/Faculty Committee drew directly on its own experience as well as the existing avenues of university communication. The specific programs designed for first-year students reflect years of effort to improve the transition into college. At the same time, some aspects of teaching and, particularly, advising may call for more attention and resources. We suggest some specific steps toward the goal of providing the best education *and* the best student service.

CURRENT SITUATION

Role of Teaching

The University has maintained for many years that good teaching is the top priority in selecting, evaluating, and promoting faculty. The message about good teaching is unmistakable and frequently repeated, figuring in every performance evaluation, tenure application, and promotion decision. This emphasis is shown in the Faculty Handbook, the Center for Teaching and Learning, an annual Assessment Day, workshops on teaching practices, and various department-level initiatives such as training for new adjunct instructors. For example, the College of Management has three workshops a year for all faculty to discuss a variety of teaching issues and techniques.

The emphasis on teaching is reinforced by some outside groups such as discipline-specific and overall accrediting agencies. There is a clear new University-wide focus on scholarly activity, but even this is carefully presented as accompanying and reinforcing, never replacing, good teaching.

There may, however, be problems in applying the emphasis on good teaching to the particular environment of the first year, where there are special considerations with respect to teaching, expectations, advising, teaching evaluation, and class assignment.

Preparation for First-Year Teaching

The University conducts orientation for all new faculty, but specific attention to first-year issues is normally left to departments. For example, department training is conducted for mathematics, English, and University Seminar instructors, with clear statements of appropriate outlines and coverage. New full-time faculty receive advising training within Colleges, which have varying systems. These programs, although desirable with respect to teaching, give much less attention to advising skills, a point we will consider shortly.

Evaluation of Teaching

The process of evaluating teaching is by no means a highly-developed art with widely-accepted principles. The strong tendency is to rely heavily on student evaluation forms, which are scanned and tabulated conscientiously when used (students regularly say that there are some courses in which evaluations are not taken). The validity of student evaluations is hotly debated, although they seem useful at the low end of the scale - students can spot a really dreadful teacher, but may have trouble distinguishing passable from excellent teachers.

Class visitation is another evaluation method, also controversial. It has often been resisted on grounds of academic freedom, privacy, professional courtesy, time demands, and specialization ("only someone who truly understands my field can evaluate my teaching"). At the first-year level, with few specialized courses, these objections lose some of their force. An experienced teacher in any field can normally see signs of student engagement, alertness, and preparation.

The combination of vague measurement and stated high standards can have a corrosive effect, similar to a graduate program requiring B's, or even A's, in all courses and then bragging about high standards - but actually having grade inflation. No

evaluator wants to be the one to damage a career without clear evidence, and the evidence is rarely clear. Therefore, over time, teaching may escape regular scrutiny even when it is officially very important. Also, to the extent that teaching is evaluated, it tends to be considered as a whole, with little differentiation of first-year courses. Accordingly, the Committee offers some suggestions under "Action Items" below.

Teaching Assignments

One other evolving change is occurring in the pattern of teaching assignments. First-year courses are increasingly assigned to full-time faculty, altering a former practice assigning adjunct faculty to beginning courses and full-time members to the advanced ones. Since the University specifically takes pride in its combination of full-time and adjunct faculty, it is appropriate to offer this variety of perspectives to students from the outset.

Outside the Classroom

With respect to faculty interaction with first-year students outside the classroom, the Committee recognizes some remarkable work supervising student projects and organizations. Some take groups of students to theatrical productions, others to pizza places, and still others open their homes for student gatherings. University expectations in this area are not clearly stated, although like all work with students it is properly considered in an annual evaluation.

Most faculty, however, consider their main out-of-class responsibilities to be office hours and advising. Advising, in particular, has received considerable emphasis, and is especially highly-developed in the ASUD program, but faces persistent problems.

The most important of these may be continuity of advising. Students typically come in June for Orientation and Registration, where they may or may not meet one of the advisers then on duty. Returning in August, they meet a "regular" adviser, but in some cases will transfer to still another adviser in a year or so. Assigning advisers by student numbers, and reassigning every term to take faculty arrivals and departures into account, destroys continuity. Not surprisingly, errors in advising can happen, and are very difficult to trace.

Effective advising depends on training the advisers. We have mentioned preparation for first-year teaching, but preparation for advising gets much less attention. Full-time faculty report little or no advising training in their orientation, and adjunct faculty virtually none. First-year advisers may not know the students are first-year until meeting them or seeing their messages signing up for advising appointments.

University Communication and Encouragement

The University administration has made it clear that first-year programs are an essential part of what we offer, playing a critical role in helping the student feel a part of the institution, and in providing the best possible education. High performance in this area should certainly be reflected in merit raises, in a way clearly visible and communicated to the faculty.

At the same time, the administration is putting forward other initiatives, such as increasing emphasis on scholarly production for promotion and tenure. Therefore an able and ambitious faculty member, early in a career, faces demands with respect to teaching, advising, committee work, mentoring, first-year issues, and, of course, research and scholarly work.

The various jobs of faculty members compete incessantly for time and attention, and adding one new task makes it almost inevitable that some other task must be given less attention. Every one of these tasks can be done better with more time devoted to it, so it is meaningless to say faculty members should do "their best" at all of them, just as it is meaningless to try to find simultaneous maximum points for multiple variables in one function (Jeremy Bentham's¹ "greatest good for the greatest number" is inspiring rhetoric but a mathematical contradiction). There is serious confusion and vagueness over both the priorities for faculty and the standards expected.

¹ Not all readers may be fully familiar with the work of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), whose advocacy of "utilitarianism" and other ideas make him a prominent figure in the history of both economics and political philosophy.

Recommended Grade: B+

Recommended Action Items:

- A. Communicate University Priorities (*High priority*)

The University administration can provide university-wide guidance not only on the absolute, but also the relative, importance of first-year programs. That is, simply saying "This is important" does not give much useful guidance on how it should be balanced with other responsibilities. Full-time faculty, especially, are rational decision-makers who work hard to maximize their value to the institution, and will readily join in efforts they believe represent genuine, recognized ways to contribute.

- B. Tell Faculty More About First-Year Students (*High priority*)

Faculty receive relatively little information specifically about entering students. Knowing something about the variety of high schools, AP tests, ACT scores, intended majors, home towns, and career ideas of the entering class would give a valuable demographic perspective, illuminate generational issues, and help make expectations realistic on both sides.

We realize that faculty are bombarded with information in meetings, Blackboard sites, and e-mails with long attachments. We suggest a brief, clear written summary of descriptive statistics and qualities of the first-year class combined with a Blackboard site, which the Library is well-equipped to administer, with data on both national and University first-year students. A separate teaching award, exclusively for first-year teaching, would certainly get attention.

- C. Require Class Visitation in First-year Courses (*High priority*)

The number of sections of first-year courses is comparable to the number of full-time faculty at the University. Sitting in on one or two meetings a year and writing a brief note is not an impossible burden, even taking into account the unusual juxtapositions which would come with a random draw. Presumably every faculty member was once a first-year student and took a variety of courses then, and an "outside" perspective of a well-educated visitor might be a valuable source of ideas for teaching.

- D. Inventory Student Evaluations and Make Them Available. (*High priority*)

There is no evidence that administrators are careless about providing for student evaluations, but repeated reports from students about courses in which evaluations are not taken suggests that from time to time an inventory should be taken to be sure that all courses have been evaluated, or at least to find what may interfere with the process.

The Faculty Handbook specifies that evaluations, or at least the statistical summaries of them, be available in the Library. This does not appear to happen consistently.

- E. Minimize Changes of Academic Adviser (*High priority*)

Continuity of advising should be developed as a specific goal. Students who build trusting relationships with individual advisers feel more closely connected to the University and more confident they can get help with their problems.

More immediately, it might be useful to turn to a classic tool of accountability - requiring the adviser's signature for registration, with the idea that advisers who approve surprising transactions, along with students who try to change the courses agreed on, would be quickly identified and have the opportunity to explain.

- F. Institute Formal Adviser Training (*High priority*)

Training of advisers has not been systematic beyond the Faculty Advisor Handbook, helpful as that is. It should be substantially increased. The advising process guides the students in allocating years of their lives and tens of thousands of dollars, and should have the same standards of skill, continuity, and good faith as advice from a physician or lawyer.

- G. Consider Professional Advisers (*High priority*)

It is well known that faculty vary widely in their approach to advising. Proposals to turn the job over to full-time nonfaculty specialists are regularly heard. The idea merits at least a brief cost-benefit approximation if it shows promise of making advising smooth and encouraging in large programs, although in smaller ones the program director often benefits greatly from the direct contact with each student's situation.