Faculty Evaluation DTF
c/o Pris Bowerman
Campus

Dear friends,

Please consider the following thoughts about faculty evaluation. 1) In your deliberations, you will be considering various criteria for an evaluation system. I would not try to outguess you and list them all. But certainly one criterion must be encouragement of diversity. One thing that makes us valuable and interesting is that we aren't carbon copies of one another. Not only do we know different things, we are good at different things and we have different styles. And this must be encouraged. Academics are independent, unusual people--the best of them are often known as "characters." Therefore, an evaluation system must reward and encourage diversity. Major universities encourage individuality by rewarding scholarship. Although we ought to do the same, our principal concern is teaching ability. But all of us may not be excellent lecturers, or excellent seminar leaders. Some of us may have styles that nurture and encourage young students with difficulties; others may be best with relatively mature students who can tolerate--and thrive on--severe criticism. And so it must be possible to demonstrate competence in teaching in various ways. For instance:

-- a collection of student evaluations of the person and/or the program that attest to good teaching.

-- a demonstration that students in a program have learned what they should have learned. This might take the form of collections of papers or other products, students' scores on critical exams, and so on.

-- demonstration of new developments in teaching, such as the Finkel workshops.

-- a public lecture series, or evaluations of one's program lectures by colleagues, attesting to the ability to give coherent, stimulating lectures.

2) We should consider very seriously Barbara Smith's intriguing proposal to link faculty evaluation more closely to program and area evaluation. The concept is quite straightforward: A program is supposed to produce certain outcomes in its students, such as the ability to write well or to analyze literature intelligently or to reason like a molecular geneticist. Then an obvious criterion for competence of the program faculty is that the students can actually do these things when they have completed the program.

3) Development must not be confused with remediation. Development is maintenance and improvement in a person who is already basically competent; remediation is the correction of a person's deficiencies. Our concern for minimum competence is to either correct a person's deficiencies or give a terminal contract. Now, I still maintain that it will be virtually impossible to actually fire, for incompetence, anyone who has been on the faculty for long; instead, there must be a primary emphasis on remediation. Incompetence may be due to deficiencies in teaching technique or to emotional (psychological) problems. I suggest that the former will be

the minority and are relatively easy to correct, in any person who is motivated to become a better teacher. (One can learn to give more coherent lectures, or learn techniques for conducting better seminars.) I put it to you, however (and I urge you to consider this most seriously) that emotional difficulties are at the root of most real incompetence among our faculty members. And they are obviously the most difficult to correct.
Yet I believe that most of the time when a person screws up, is unable to fulfill obligations, runs a disorganized program, or in some other way creates chaos and enrages students, it is because of an emotional problem. Consider faculty member X. (Any similarity to an actual person, living or dead, etc., etc.) X is in trouble because his colleagues report that he is disorganized, gives terrible lectures, is not living up to obligations, and so on. Assume two facts:

(1) X is basically a good person and no one is trying "get" her. Having several years experience here, and a portfolio full of basically good evaluations, X is virtually immune to being fired. And no one really wants to fire her anyway. We want to help her.

(2) X is fundamentally motivated to be a good teacher and a good colleague (or else she wouldn't have been hired in the first place). So if X fails in a number of her duties, it isn't because she doesn't want to do well but because she can't do well: she has emotional problems that get in her way. (We also assume X is not basically stupid.) X has her annual evaluation with her dean and is told she has to shape up or else. But this ultimatum won't help. X probably knows already (at some level of consciousness) that she has to do better. Still, she can't.

I now suggest one rational, humane approach to the problem. The dean, in consultation with appropriate faculty and staff members (such as psychological counselors) appoints a Committee of Friends. (Okay, ”you• think of a better name.) These must be sympathetic, knowledgeable people who can sit down with X, try to assess the problems openly and honestly, and try to work out a plan for action. And, I suggest, much of that plan must entail some counseling, perhaps involving professionals from outside the College. (The existence and membership of this Committee is, of course, known only to X, the dean, and the Provost.) If you like this idea, I would ask you, as a DTF, to set out some criteria for outcomes: X must meet certain goals, within a specified time (such as two years), and so on. It should be up to the Committee of Friends to decide that X has, or hasn't, satisfied these criteria. The Committee would then recommend renewal or nonrenewal of contract to the dean. Final decision, of course, is up to the dean and Provost.

4) Finally, I attach a memo I wrote a year ago. I still think most of what I said is valid. (A fellow at one of the community colleges in Seattle asked for permission to reprint this, because he thought it was so apt. But, then, you know where prophets are honored.) I would be happy to discuss any of these ideas with you at greater length.

Sincerely,

Burt Guttman