

ADDRESSING ISSUES OF COLLEGIALITY IN FACULTY EVALUATIONS

Two concerns are often raised when department chairs attempt to address breaches of collegiality through the faculty evaluation process. The first is whether they're permitted to do so at all, since very few faculty handbooks list collegiality as a criterion for reviews. The second is whether evaluation is an effective means of dealing with these challenges, since collegiality is often regarded as something highly subjective and not measurable or verifiable in any consistent way. The first of these concerns can be dealt with rather quickly, while the second will require a much more extended discussion.



In the United States, courts have ruled consistently that it is appropriate to consider collegiality in personnel decisions, even when an institution's policies do not specifically list it as a criterion. See, for example, Cipriano (2011) 153–163. So deans and chairs are at liberty to take collegiality into account whenever they regard its presence as a positive factor in a faculty member's performance or its absence as a detriment. But since it's relatively uncommon for colleges and universities to describe collegiality in their policies and procedures, the second concern can actually become more difficult. After all, how do you

evaluate something that is undefined, apparently nebulous in nature, and not even referred to on most forms used as part of a faculty evaluation?

Identify specific behaviors, not opinions or personality traits

Perhaps the best way of dealing with this challenge is to identify the specific behaviors that, in the professional setting where you work, may be regarded as contributing to or diminishing collegiality. In other words, it's not enough to say that a person is irritable or argumentative. People are entitled to their own personalities, even when those personalities annoy us or are far different from our own. However, people are not entitled to engage in behavior that makes the work of your program more difficult. Everyone can be in a bad mood occasionally; they can even be in a bad mood every single day. But if their mood causes them to engage in activities that affect the quality of your program, you not only have the right, you have the duty to address it. What you're trying to change is not the person's mood, attitude, or personality itself, but rather specific behaviors that are resulting from that mood, attitude, or personality.

If you're in doubt about how to tell the difference, ask yourself the following three questions:

1. What is the specific problem that I am observing?
2. What are the specific actions or behaviors of the faculty member that are causing those problems?
3. What are the specific steps I need the faculty member to take in order to eliminate or reduce those problems?

Let's explore how these questions might function in an actual situation. Imagine that you're responsible for evaluating faculty members in a program that includes Dr. Curmudgeon, a professor who always seems to be irritable and treats colleagues and students with contempt. You've received a lot of complaints about Dr. Curmudgeon, and you yourself have been on the receiving end of this faculty member's foul temper. So you decide to do something about it the next time you're evaluating Dr. Curmudgeon. Near the end of your written review, you include the following paragraph:

Finally, I feel that I must address the issue of your frequent irritability. It's getting to the point where I dread your presence at meetings, and a number of your colleagues have mentioned that they feel they must "walk on eggshells" whenever you're around. If you continue in this manner, it seems unlikely that many of those in your department will vote in your favor the next time you undergo post-tenure review, and I find myself reluctant to assign you junior faculty members to mentor because your temperament is so consistently unpleasant.

You dispatch this evaluation to Dr. Curmudgeon, a grievance is filed against you, and you're shocked to find that the appeals committee rules that your evaluation was completely inappropriate. What you did wrong was to base your evaluation, not on any specific actions that caused a documented harm to your program, but on Dr. Curmudgeon's personality and how it made you and others in the department feel. Your feelings of annoyance matter neither more nor less than do Dr. Curmudgeon's feelings of irritability. What you've done is confuse a pet peeve with a valid indication of a faculty member's performance, and that mistake could invalidate your entire evaluation.

What you should have done instead is to focus on those three questions raised earlier.

- 1. What is the specific problem that I am observing?** Are students dropping Dr. Curmudgeon's courses at a significantly higher rate than those of his peers and indicating to you that the professor's behavior is the cause? Has the advising load of other members of the department increased disproportionately because Dr. Curmudgeon does not believe that any student is good enough to work with him? Have committees failed to meet deadlines because they can't obtain a quorum when they know that Dr. Curmudgeon is likely to attend?
- 2. What are the specific actions or behaviors of the faculty member that are causing those problems?** Do students report when they drop the class that Dr. Curmudgeon called their questions "stupid" and made demeaning remarks to them? Have advisees reported that Dr. Curmudgeon belittled them because of the way they dressed or the books they read in their own time? Do members of Dr. Curmudgeon's department say that there has been a chilling effect on discussions because no one is willing to be the next person publicly ridiculed?
- 3. What are the specific steps I need the faculty member to take in order to eliminate or reduce those problems?** Can you establish guidelines for what Dr. Curmudgeon needs to do as a result of the problems you've documented? You may need to say something like, "Look. It doesn't matter to me at all

how you feel about me, your colleagues, and your students. But it does matter to me how you treat us. In order for our program to grow and receive increased funding, I need every member of the department to treat every other member with professionalism and respect. From now on, when you disagree with someone, I'll expect you to direct your objections to the issue, not the person who supports that issue. You'll treat your students like the future colleagues that some of them will develop to be, not as the objects of your scorn and humiliation. Those actions are hindering your pedagogical effectiveness.”

Use the evaluation process to begin a continued dialogue

In order to make the evaluation process more constructive and forward-looking, reviewers should spend more time talking about what the faculty member should do than about what he or she should not do. Even in the case of Dr. Curmudgeon, it's not particularly effective to end the conversation by talking only about what went wrong. But it's far easier to accentuate the positive if you've already held a unit-wide conversation about what collegiality is and come to a consensus about the type of behavior you expect of one another. See Buller (2012) 218–219, 237–238.

Of course, the danger with setting behavioral guidelines that are too specific is that passive-aggressive faculty members may attempt to use those statements against us. “Our departmental code says we have to restrict our disagreements to the issues instead of the person,” someone might claim. “Show me where it says that we can't

roll our eyes when we do so.” In these cases, you may find it valuable to review with the faculty member what the intent of the code was and how benefits accrue from a collegial work environment. It's impossible to develop a statement of principles so comprehensive that it addresses every possible contingency, so it may be necessary at times to discuss what the principles are designed to achieve, rather than the specific phrasing of the principles themselves.

While matters of collegiality can never be addressed solely through the process of faculty evaluation, periodic reviews do provide administrators with an opportunity to deal with clear breaches of professional conduct, recommend alternative behaviors for the future, and underscore the significance of treating one another with respect and mutual support. Since the fundamental mission of a program is to provide a high level of instruction, scholarship, and service, it becomes difficult or impossible to achieve that goal when faculty members indulge in noncollegial behavior. It's for that reason that unprofessional actions may appropriately be addressed as part of a faculty evaluation.

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References

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