

Advisory Committee Guidelines for Classroom Observation *(approved January 14, 2010)*

Well-documented peer observation of a candidate's teaching is an important part of any tenure or promotion file. Teaching excellence is the primary criterion in these decisions, but it can be harder to see in a file than research success or service contributions. Professors who teach in or near a candidate's field are especially well-qualified to judge the quality of his or her pedagogy, and their comments provide a helpful balance to student evaluations and descriptive documents generated by the candidate.

All the members of a candidate's tenure or promotion committee, therefore, should have first-hand knowledge of what happens in the candidate's classrooms. They should describe their observations in letters or memos to be included in the tenure or promotion file. As a group, these letters should document the full range of the candidate's teaching—large introductory courses, special seminars, labs, and other offerings.

Further, because too many classroom observations during a short period of time can be disruptive, we recommend spacing these visits over the full range of the probationary period. Ideally, candidates for tenure should be observed by the tenured members of their department on a regular basis from the first year of employment onward. If such observations occur at least twice a year over the probationary period, senior professors will have many opportunities to mentor their junior colleagues and address problems early, and completed files will present a much richer picture of candidates' professional development.

I. RECOMMENDED PROCEDURE FOR PEER OBSERVATION

The department head should devise a plan for what classes will be observed in what term and by whom. The candidate should provide the relevant syllabus to each observer, and both parties should discuss what sessions might be observed most usefully (no unannounced visits). Every effort should be made to space out these observations and limit the distraction caused by multiple visitors in any one class.

The process of observing a class involves interactions with the observed professor outside of class, sitting in on the session, and then documenting the experience in a letter.

The **observer** should:

- Determine the professor's goals for the session and course before the observation.
- Take notes during the session but not participate in the class.
- Write a letter or memo describing the visit, give a copy to the candidate, debrief with him or her, and amend inaccuracies if necessary. This should occur within two weeks of the visit, before memories fade.

The **letter or memo** should:

- Describe the professor's goals for the session and evaluate how well they were met.
- Evaluate the appropriateness of the goals.

These letters have two audiences: the candidate and the committee evaluating the candidate. Letters should therefore be constructive, praising success and offering advice when relevant. They must also be very clear and specific about any problems and their relative urgency. They serve a double purpose in both judging achievement and nurturing a teacher's continuing development.

II. CONTENTS OF THE EVALUATION LETTER

1. *Basic data*

- the course title, class subject and date, length of the session, and number of students in the class
- assignments due that day
- what proportion of the period was spent in various activities
- how the class was staged: the arrangement of desks and position of the teacher
- if that class involved discussion or other student-centered work, what proportion of the students participated
- what media the class employed and how: blackboard, document camera, handouts, etc.

It is helpful to describe the place of the session in the syllabus. In English, for instance, the first class on a novel would work differently than the second or third, when students should have read the entire text. A September class might devote more time to terms and skills, while a December meeting should show students' sophistication with materials and approaches.

2. *Description and evaluation of teaching effectiveness*

An observation letter should also comment on at least some of the following points. Remarks should both note accomplishments and suggest specific ways to cultivate greater effectiveness.

- The content. Comment on the teacher's preparation. Are lectures helpful, insightful? Does the professor frame effective discussion questions at an appropriate level of difficulty? Do group work, presentations, and other activities advance the students' understanding of the material or development of key skills? What strategies does the teacher use to elicit student engagement and/or to hold students accountable for the work?
- The methodology. What approaches does the professor bring to the material? Does he or she explain terms and techniques clearly?
- The teacher's manner. Does interaction with students occur before bell and as the class disperses? Does the professor convey organization, enthusiasm? Does he or she listen to student comments and questions and respond appropriately? Does the professor shift gears when the students prove more or less proficient at a task than expected? Does he or she have any habits or mannerisms that detract from his or her effectiveness?
- The students' behavior. Do students appear to be engaged and prepared? Do they offer comments and ask questions?
- The mechanics of the class. Does the professor handle roll and collect or return assignments efficiently?
- The assignments. Has the teacher assigned an appropriate amount of work? Does the teacher explain requirements clearly and efficiently?