

Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences (DSAS) Teaching Assessment Plan

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Sample rubrics and supporting documents can be found in the appendix.

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Overview

DSAS is committed to highly effective teaching. Teaching evaluation is a central pillar of effective teaching because it serves both the summative purpose of verifying that teachers are effective as well as the formative purpose of helping teachers improve. In keeping with the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA)'s new requirements on teaching assessment (Article 23.1.a), DSAS here provides a framework by which teaching at the school will be assessed. We see this as an opportunity to consider our teaching evaluation philosophy, needs, practices, and supports more broadly, with the goals of: (1) making both teaching and teaching evaluation in DSAS more effective, (2) fostering a culture in which instructors feel comfortable pursuing pedagogical innovations without fear that any setbacks will threaten their chances of promotion, and (3) broadening and deepening the evidence regarding each instructor's teaching, to provide a holistic perspective and make any single piece of evidence less important.

Effective teaching provides all students strong opportunities to acquire important content, skills, and attitudes that will support them in future education (e.g., next courses, next degrees), careers, and life. Effective teaching creates a climate in which all students learn and are engaged; it uses high-quality teaching practices; and it is continually improving, based on reflection, evidence, and feedback. Assessment of teaching involves evaluating teaching goals, learning outcomes, teaching practices, student engagement, classroom climate, inclusiveness, and use of reflection and feedback to improve teaching.

DSAS recognizes that departments and programs foster and hone cultures of teaching excellence within a particular discipline. At the same time, cross-unit collaboration enriches teaching. Teaching takes many forms in DSAS, including lecture courses of over 400 students, seminars of under 20 students, graduate seminars, laboratories, on-line classes, art studios, music rehearsals, theatre classes in design and performance, etc. Classes can be basic or advanced, for majors or non-majors, required or optional; some occur at unpopular times or in ill-suited classrooms; some have never been taught before, whereas others have been taught for decades. Some instructors have complete control over their curricula; others have very little. It is therefore critical that evaluation be flexible and take the full context into account to be fair. To this end, this plan is designed to present a framework of general guidelines that units can adapt to suit their individual needs.

Note that when materials are described as "recommended" in the current document, these are suggestions for clearest possible documentation of excellence in teaching and may in some cases strengthen a promotion case. "Recommendations" exceed requirements, which are the threshold that candidates must meet in each relevant section.

Teaching Evaluation Processes and Products

Multiple kinds of evidence can support teaching evaluation. DSAS places particular emphasis on peer evaluations (including class observations), but teaching materials (e.g., syllabi and methods of student assessment), student surveys, and statements of teaching philosophy/portfolios are also carefully considered. Observations can benefit everyone; observers benefit from being exposed to alternative ways of teaching and instructors benefit from feedback. For this reason, faculty are expected both to be observed and to observe others. (Part-time instructors are not required to write peer letters unless as part of a service role they hold.) DSAS's goal is that the exchange of ideas and problem solving that happens during interactions around observations will create a strong community dedicated to mutual support and effective teaching.

Multiple kinds of products can be generated from a teaching evaluation. DSAS encourages the use of formative products like discussions, informal write-ups, self-assessments, and checklists because they drive pedagogical development. But DSAS prioritizes summative peer letters in this plan because they are required for major faculty review processes like first renewal, tenure, and promotion (see “Documents Required for Faculty Processes” for how many letters are required when). It is important to be aware that evaluators often bring bias to the process of teaching evaluation in the form of preconceived notions, e.g., about what good teachers look like and what good teaching looks like. Bias is a well-known issue in student evaluations, but it can happen in any kind of evaluation. To minimize bias, evaluators should strive to understand as much of the context as possible and focus on directly observable evidence. In addition, the collection of evaluations from a wide variety of sources reduces the power of any single evaluation.

Observations and Peer Letters

Best practices for peer teaching observations and assessments

Class visits often form the core of a peer teaching evaluation, but visits are not always possible (e.g., in asynchronous on-line courses) or adequate (e.g., in some flipped classes). For classes with on-line components, observers can use the course management system (e.g., Canvas) to assess the quality and organization of course materials, the timeliness and depth of feedback to student assignments and assessments, as well as the degree of instructor presence and engagement with students via discussion board activities, group work support, reminders and announcements, Q&A sessions, virtual office hours, and direct outreach via email.

All observations should take into account the local context of an instructor’s course design, objectives, assignments, and assessments, as well as broader context regarding what might be out of the instructor’s control. Before a class visit, observers should request a syllabus, the day’s reading (or assignment), and any other relevant course materials, and they should ask about the instructional context. During any observation, it is good practice to use a rubric to guide attention (see the materials in the appendix for examples, including one specifically designed for online teaching). After every observation, the observer and instructor should have a discussion. Discussions can be powerful mechanisms for sharing and generating ideas and often result in pedagogical improvement for both the instructor and the observer. They also give the instructor the opportunity to rebut aspects of the review or to provide critical context the observer missed. And an instructor’s reaction to feedback can be a key piece of a teaching evaluation, in that it can show depth of thought about pedagogy and enthusiasm for continued learning.

When observing and assessing an instructor of a co-taught course, it is especially important to consider the co-teaching context and what is in versus out of that instructor’s control. Because co-teaching delivery and interactions might be more likely to vary across classes, evaluators should consider observing the class dynamic more than once. Co-teaching can be a catalyst for pedagogical development and co-instructors can have unusual insight into each other’s teaching. This can make it useful for them to write letters for each other. But it is still best practice to have an external observation as well.

Best practices for peer letters

DSAS encourages periodic letters generated by a diverse set of evaluators. Evaluators need not be from the instructor’s home unit. Because peer teaching letters are required as early as the first semester for some positions and periodically from then on, unit heads and faculty should discuss how best to

procure letters early in a faculty member's appointment. In some units, teaching evaluation is organized centrally, while in others, faculty are responsible for soliciting visits and letters. Units may wish to consider a "buddy system" in which two faculty pair up and discuss their teaching and observe one or more sessions of each other's classes during an academic year; at the end of the year, each one can write a peer letter for the other that documents substantial interaction over time. Peer letters can be from faculty of any rank; letters for a tenure file, for instance, do not all have to be from tenured evaluators. However, in all streams, a majority of the required letters should normally be from faculty who are at associate or higher rank. Likewise, letters may come from any stream: teaching professors' pedagogical expertise can make them highly valuable evaluators.

Most letters in a review or promotion file should include insights from a class observation. Strong peer letters will go beyond commentary on single class visits, e.g., by assessing course design and teaching materials, by including material from post-observation discussions, or even by incorporating multiple observations over time or across classes. Letters should *help readers connect specific observations to larger pedagogical principles*, such as the use of evidence-based techniques, modeling of problem-solving strategies, steering of discussions, and establishing norms of respect and engagement. Evaluators can include a completed rubric with a narrative cover letter if desired. Letters should not exhaustively recount all details of a class, nor should they make assertions without providing supporting evidence.

Note that the Center for Teaching and Learning offers formative observations, but per its policy the reports generated from these observations cannot be included as evaluations in promotion files. The Center also offers those conducting peer evaluations training on peer review, mitigating bias, and providing constructive feedback.

If a faculty member has significant responsibilities that replace teaching (e.g., advising), evaluation letters may also address those duties.

OMET Student Surveys

Student surveys administered by the Office of Measurement and Evaluation of Teaching ("OMETs") are a useful tool for gathering anonymous feedback from students and therefore instructors must have every course they teach surveyed through the OMET system at the end of term. However, in no case should OMETs be the sole or primary mode of teaching evaluation (see CBA 23.1.f). The Center for Teaching and Learning provides resources supporting the design, administration, reading and interpretation of OMETs: <https://teaching.pitt.edu/omet/>

Best practices for using OMETs

It is good practice to customize OMETs by adding items specific to an instructor's teaching. Carefully choosing questions that target observable aspects of instruction can reduce bias and maximize utility. The OMET system offers a comprehensive question bank; if instructors choose to provide their own questions, they should seek to minimize feedback bias by designing specific, narrowly targeted prompts that students are qualified to answer.

Beyond required end-of-term surveys, OMET pre- and mid-semester surveys allow instructors to identify and fix issues early, lead to higher participation and more meaningful feedback in end-of-term surveys, and are especially helpful in the online classroom, where instructors cannot see the students' reactions in real time.

Instructors should aim to achieve [response rates](#) over 50% in all courses. Effective ways to increase response rates include dedicating in-class time for OMET completion, explaining that OMET surveys are important and how they are used, and offering a small bonus to the entire class if the response rate reaches a given threshold. Nevertheless, students may decide to opt out of participating, in spite of faculty member efforts, so no specific response rate is required.

Best practices for evaluating OMETs

The most useful data from OMETs are areas of consensus among students that form patterns and trends both within and across semesters. It can be worthwhile to track outliers across different classes and multiple semesters to determine whether a certain feedback point represents an emerging trend or an isolated instance. But note that bias is a [well-documented problem in student evaluations](#) and can be present in both open-ended and numerical responses.

Self-assessment / Responding to feedback from peers and students

Self-assessment and reflection are essential to pedagogical development and thus teaching evaluation. Peer and student feedback can provide guidance regarding a particular day or semester's execution of teaching practice, but most instructors feel most strongly driven by internally generated long-term goals. It is critical to encourage instructors to reflect on the match between their goals and their practice; this can be done through self-assessments and/or through responses to peer evaluations and OMETs. Annual reports are an excellent opportunity for this reflection. Each academic year, instructors should engage in some form of self-assessment informed by external evaluation data that they have (peer evaluation discussions, OMETs, assessments of student learning, etc.) and comment on their teaching successes, matches and mismatches between their goals and practice, and specific plans for improvement. Self-assessment tools and checklists with specific prompts and clear criteria can help focus instructors' attention, reduce reticence, and encourage balanced reflection on both strengths and areas needing improvement (see Materials appendix for examples). These annual products can become the foundation of future statements of teaching philosophy.

Other Evidence of Teaching Effectiveness / Investment

Instructors are encouraged to continuously document their investment and success in teaching over the course of their careers. Here are a few possible sources of such evidence: professional development related to teaching (e.g., workshops, classes, working groups, conferences); engaging in education materials development and/or research (e.g., via Innovation in Education Awards, Open Educational Resource Grants, or dB-SERC Course Transformation Awards); publishing educational work; demonstrating student learning via validated tools like concept inventories or even informal end-of-semester surveys asking about the most important and/or useful things learned in the course; and documenting the use of evidence-based practices. This material is often spread across CVs, teaching statements, and annual reviews; it should be consolidated into a teaching portfolio for promotion.

Teaching Portfolios

Faculty who will be up for non-presumptive renewal, tenure, or promotion should assemble a teaching portfolio that consolidates evidence across time and contexts. Teaching portfolios are an opportunity for an instructor to distill an argument/narrative about their teaching journey (e.g., What are

their goals? How have they used feedback, reflection, and professional development over time to drive improvement towards attaining those goals?) and support it with evidence. The teaching statement expresses the argument/narrative, and the rest of the portfolio serves as evidence. Portfolios should focus on the period under review: e.g., the portfolio of someone going up for promotion to professor should not include material from the candidate's time as an assistant professor. A guide to the typical components of a teaching portfolio is available in the Materials appendix.

The evaluator should consider: (1) how the goals in a candidate's teaching statement align with the goals of effective teaching, (2) how the evidence from the portfolio supports the claims in the teaching statement, and (3) how evidence from the portfolio relates to larger pedagogical principles of effective teaching. A sample rubric for evaluating teaching portfolios is available in the Materials appendix.

Documents Required for Faculty Processes—Grouped by Evaluation Product

The teaching evaluation documentation required differs for faculty according to rank, process, and time since hire. This section is organized by evaluation product to make it easier to identify, e.g., everyone who would need a peer letter. The next section includes a subset of this same information organized by faculty process to make it easier to see what is needed for a specific review/renewal/promotion. Anticipated deviations from these guidelines should be discussed with the Dean's Office.

Peer Letters

Both minimum and suggested numbers of letters are provided in the following sections. The assumption is that additional letters beyond the minimum will strengthen the file by adding to the documentation of breadth, growth, or innovation, or by providing a substantially different viewpoint. If additional letters will not do this, or the file is already exceptionally strong in these areas, the minimum will be adequate.

For annual review

One peer letter per academic year can enhance an annual review and is therefore suggested for all instructors periodically. Specific suggestions about timing are noted below.

For part-time instructors in their first two semesters of teaching at the University of Pittsburgh

At least one letter should be generated by the end of the second semester of teaching.

For renewal of visiting faculty

Visiting faculty in their first year of an appointment should have at least one letter generated.

For consideration for reappointment (appointment stream faculty with a two-year, probationary first contract)

A minimum of one letter per academic year is required for a reappointment file, one letter from the first year and one letter from the fall semester of the second year. Letters must be from two different courses (if possible), from two different people, and should each include an observation as well as materials review. A total of three peer letters is strongly recommended by the time of review.

For contract renewal for faculty covered by presumptive renewal

No peer letter is required.

For third-year reviews (assistant professors in the tenure stream)

A minimum of two peer letters is required, but three is strongly suggested. Letters must be from at least two different people, and (if possible) at least two different courses and written in different academic years. At least one of the two required letters must include an observation.

For promotion cases for all ranks (including endowed chairs and professorships)

For all promotions, letters should be generated during the period under review and within the past six years, with at least one letter generated within 18 months of dossier submission.

If the candidate was hired from an external institution, letters from the previous institution may be included, but at least one letter must be from a University of Pittsburgh evaluator assessing a course taught at the University of Pittsburgh.

For promotion cases in the instructor ranks, a minimum of two letters is required. Both letters must include an observation. Letters must be from at least two different courses (if possible) and should be written in different academic years.

For all other promotion and tenure cases, a minimum of three peer letters is required. However, four to five letters are suggested. Letters must be from at least two different courses (if possible) and should be written in different academic years and by at least two different people. Optimally, teaching should be evaluated across a variety of types of courses (as applicable: low-level courses, mid-level courses, advanced courses for majors, graduate courses, on-line courses). At least two of the three required letters must include an observation.

After final promotion

It is recommended that faculty at the rank of Professor, Teaching Professor, and Senior Instructor have a peer letter generated at least every five years.

OMET End-of-Term Student Evaluations

For annual reviews, non-presumptive contract renewals, third-year reviews (assistant professors in the tenure stream), and considerations of tenure and promotion at all ranks (including distinguished professorships and endowed chairs), all OMETs must be submitted for all courses in the period under review. In the case of a faculty member being considered for promotion who has been in rank more than ten years, OMETs can be limited to the most recent ten years in rank. If the candidate was hired from an external institution, student evaluations of teaching from the previous institution may be included.

Teaching Statements, Course Materials, and Portfolios

For annual review

At a minimum, a reflection on teaching is required. Such reflections should be much more concise than teaching statements used for tenure and promotion files. They may include a review of teaching accomplishments for the year; goals for the following year, such as new courses; a response to peer and student feedback and evidence of student learning; and/or planned revisions to course materials. Instructors may use these reflections to assess innovations in their pedagogy, whether or not they went as

planned, and how to develop in response. Units may use targeted questions to solicit this information (see example in the Materials appendix). It is important to remember that OMETs cannot be the sole or primary mode of evaluation of teaching for an annual letter.

For considerations for reappointment (appointment stream faculty in their initial, probationary appointment), third-year review (assistant professors in the tenure stream), appointment stream promotion in the teaching track, and promotion in the tenure stream (including endowed chairs and professorships)

Course materials and a teaching statement (including a response to peer and student feedback) are minimally required, but a teaching portfolio is recommended. For faculty in the instructor track, these documents may be submitted but are not required.

Documents Required for Faculty Processes—Grouped by Faculty Process

For consideration for reappointment (appointment stream faculty with a two-year, probationary first contract)

A minimum of one letter per academic year is required for a reappointment file. This normally means one letter from the first year and one letter from the fall semester of the second year. Letters must be from two different courses (if possible), from two different people, and should each include an observation as well as materials review. A total of three peer letters is strongly recommended by the time of review. All OMETs must be submitted for all courses in the period under review. Course materials and a teaching statement (including a response to peer and student feedback) are minimally required, but a teaching portfolio is recommended.

For contract renewal for faculty covered by presumptive renewal

No peer letters, OMETs, or teaching statements are required.

For third-year reviews (assistant professors in the tenure stream)

A minimum of two peer letters is required, but three is strongly suggested. Letters must be from at least two different people, and, if possible, at least two different courses and written in different academic years. At least one of the two required letters must include an observation. All OMETs must be submitted for all courses in the period under review. Course materials and a teaching statement (including a response to peer and student feedback) are minimally required, but a teaching portfolio is recommended.

For promotion and tenure cases (including endowed chairs and professorships)

For all promotions, letters should be generated during the period under review and within the past six years, with at least one letter generated within 18 months of dossier submission.

If the candidate was hired from an external institution, letters from the previous institution may be included, but at least one letter must be from a University of Pittsburgh evaluator assessing a course taught at the University of Pittsburgh.

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