

## PEER OBSERVATION REPORTS AND STUDENT EVALUATIONS OF TEACHING: WHO ARE THE EXPERTS?

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### ABSTRACT

Teaching, research, and service constitute the three primary factors considered in retention, tenure, and promotion (RTP) decisions. Teaching is typically assessed using student evaluations of teaching (SET), sometimes accompanied by embedded learning measures and/or teaching portfolios, and increasingly, by classroom observations by faculty peers resulting in peer observation reports (POR). This is a qualitative study to examine faculty views on both SET and POR. We also look at who are perceived to be the experts in evaluating teaching.

Many instructors have concerns about SET, largely centering around two factors. The first is the validity of SET. As educational institutions increasingly view students as consumers of education, they are more influenced by student satisfaction (Share 1997). The second is faculty members are apprehensive about the emphasis given SET in the RTP process. SET often reflect perceptions and impressions based on instructor likeability and on course workload and difficulty, more than on actual learning (Marks 2000). Some view SET as little more than measures of popularity based on personality, or even as an opportunity for students to exact revenge on rigorous instructors.

For these and other reasons, a growing number of institutions now require peer observation of teaching. Seldin (1999) reported that the use of faculty peer evaluation nearly tripled between 1978 and 1998. This increase is partially in response to legislative action and/or the requirements of accrediting agencies demanding accountability for academic performance. POR offer the advantage of including another perspective to complement SET.

This study is an exploratory inquiry into the perceptions of faculty regarding SET versus POR. Depth interviews were conducted with eight marketing and other business professors. Informants include both junior and senior faculty, and instructors teaching in both undergraduate and graduate programs. The informants have held positions at both research- and teaching-oriented institutions, at large public and private universities, and at smaller private colleges.

Our study indicates against reliance on a single source of information as evidence of teaching effectiveness. In essence, SET and POR provide complementary information. The responses of our informants suggest that POR might best provide feedback for faculty development and for assessing course content. On the other hand, most felt that SET provides the best assessment of what actually goes on in the classroom. Those interviewed for this study clearly thought that faculty peers are the experts, especially for content. On the other hand, it was also suggested that the number of observers and quantity of observations offset the disadvantages of individual student evaluations.

### REFERENCES

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