

Rethinking the Measurement of Faculty Excellence

An NAAE perspective on contemporary issues in accreditation.

Executive Summary

The assessment of faculty excellence plays a crucial role in maintaining high standards in higher education. However, current institutional evaluation practices often emphasize administrative benchmarks, compliance metrics, and procedural requirements over a genuine evaluation of scholarly contributions, pedagogical innovation, and real-world impact. This white paper argues that existing frameworks for evaluating faculty performance fall short of capturing faculty's true influence on education and society. It provides recommendations for reforming the system to better align with academic and societal needs.

Introduction

Faculty members are central to the mission of higher education institutions. Their contributions extend beyond classroom instruction to include mentorship, research, and community engagement. However, the mechanisms used to assess their impact frequently rely on proxies such as credentials, student evaluations, and participation in professional development. These methods often fail to capture the depth, breadth, and transformative potential of faculty efforts in education and scholarship.

Rather than fostering a culture of excellence, institutional evaluation processes tend to prioritize compliance and rigid benchmarks. This emphasis shifts attention away from assessing the actual impact of faculty on students and society and instead focuses on procedural adherence. The result is an environment where metrics become an end in themselves, rather than a means to improve academic quality.

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The difficulty of translating the qualitative richness of academic contributions into measurable outcomes remains a significant challenge. Faculty often find themselves working within a system that undervalues intangible but essential aspects of their work—such as fostering intellectual curiosity,

encouraging critical thinking, and preparing students for complex real-world challenges. These dimensions of academic excellence, though central to higher education's purpose, are frequently overlooked in institutional evaluations.

The Disconnect Between Institutional Evaluation and Faculty Excellence

Faculty excellence is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be simply reduced to checkboxes and standardized metrics. Yet, current evaluation practices often overemphasize credentials and procedural compliance. For instance, institutions may assess faculty based on whether they hold terminal degrees, but this does little to determine a faculty member's effectiveness in the classroom or the real impact of their research. Similarly, evaluations of faculty by students—often prone to biases and inconsistencies—provide an incomplete picture of faculty performance. Such evaluations may reflect external factors, such as grading policies or instructor identity, rather than teaching effectiveness.

Another critical issue lies in how evaluation systems overlook scholarly contributions and pedagogical innovation. Faculty who take risks by exploring interdisciplinary research or adopting new teaching methods often find their efforts unrecognized. Institutions frequently rely on traditional performance indicators, such as publication counts and grant funding, which may not fully reflect the societal value of research. Additionally, faculty roles as mentors and contributors to institutional culture are often sidelined, despite their importance in shaping student experiences.

This emphasis on procedural adherence over substantive contributions can create a culture of risk aversion. Faculty members may hesitate to pursue innovative research or experiment with new teaching strategies due to concerns about how these efforts will be evaluated. This environment discourages the very creativity and intellectual curiosity that higher education should cultivate.

Examples

At a mid-sized public university, faculty members expressed frustration over the rigidity of institutional reviews, which prioritized standardized syllabi and uniform learning outcomes. Professors who sought to adapt their teaching to diverse student needs often encountered administrative resistance, limiting opportunities for instructional creativity and student engagement.

At a private liberal arts college, female faculty members consistently received lower teaching evaluation scores than their male counterparts, despite evidence of higher student success rates. The evaluation system failed to account for such biases, allowing flawed metrics to perpetuate systemic inequities.

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Similarly, at a large research university, faculty conducting groundbreaking work in emerging fields found their contributions undervalued because they did not align with traditional measures of academic productivity, such as journal impact factors. These examples highlight the shortcomings of conventional evaluation frameworks in recognizing the complexity of faculty excellence.

The rigidity of these systems fosters a climate where faculty members are discouraged from pursuing innovative teaching methods or transformative research. The result is stagnation, which ultimately undermines the role of higher education as a driver of knowledge, discovery, and societal progress.

A Path Forward

To create a system that genuinely measures and promotes faculty excellence, institutional evaluation processes must adopt a more holistic and forward-thinking approach. This begins with recognizing that faculty excellence is multifaceted, encompassing teaching effectiveness, research impact, mentorship, and service.

Alternative assessment methods should replace outdated reliance on credentials and student evaluations. Peer reviews of teaching, qualitative assessments of research influence, and evidence of student success could provide more meaningful insights into faculty contributions. Encouraging faculty to compile comprehensive portfolios that highlight their innovations and achievements could also serve as a richer evaluative tool.

Institutions must also encourage risk-taking and innovation. Faculty who explore interdisciplinary research or experiment with novel teaching methods should be supported rather than discouraged. Evaluation systems should move beyond traditional performance metrics to emphasize real-world impact—whether through community engagement, curriculum development, or other transformative contributions. Additionally, biases in student evaluations must be systematically addressed, with more equitable measures of teaching effectiveness replacing flawed scoring methods.

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Collaboration is essential in reforming faculty assessment processes. Institutions should actively involve faculty in the development of new evaluation criteria, ensuring that assessment systems reflect the complexities of academic excellence and the evolving needs of society. Faculty insights are invaluable in creating a framework that

balances rigor with flexibility, fostering an environment where innovation and quality can thrive.

Conclusion

Current evaluation practices in higher education risk becoming bureaucratic exercises disconnected from their original mission of fostering academic excellence. By prioritizing procedural adherence over meaningful assessment, these systems fail to recognize the transformative potential of faculty contributions.

A reimagined evaluation framework—one that values holistic assessment, innovation, and real-world impact—is essential to realigning higher education with its ultimate purpose: preparing students and society for the challenges of the future. Through meaningful reform, institutional

evaluation can become a true driver of excellence, ensuring that faculty are empowered to lead the way in shaping the next generation of learners and leaders.

In this reimagined future, faculty assessment serves as a tool for growth rather than an obstacle—one that not only measures but also inspires excellence. It recognizes the unique contributions of faculty, values their dedication to student success, and encourages bold steps toward innovation. By realigning institutional evaluation with the true mission of higher education, institutions can remain dynamic, impactful, and prepared to address the complexities of a rapidly changing world.

