

Guidelines for Teaching Observation Letters¹

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April 21, 2010

Effective teaching is an important element of the work of faculty members. Periodic evaluation can provide: a) reinforcement of good teaching, b) data for faculty review committees, c) recommendations for enhancing instruction, and d) assessment and intervention data for teaching improvement plans. The department chair is responsible for ensuring that teaching observations are conducted for faculty at the following times:

- First-year annual evaluation
- Third-year review
- Promotion to associate professor
- Tenure
- Promotion to Professor

Although teaching observations are not required in the *2007-2010 Collective Bargaining Agreement between The Florida State University Board of Trustees and The United Faculty of Florida*, space is included in third-year and promotion and tenure binders for teaching observation letters.

These guidelines are intended to help faculty colleagues and department chairs provide systematic and consistent observations of faculty members' teaching, including observing a class and examining the course syllabus. The following template for teaching observation letters provides *only* a starting point for preparing a letter. While most of the content of the letter should reflect the template, specific content can be added or deleted depending on the nature of the course being taught. Letter writers also need to create the letter in a way that fits their own approach to evaluation.

Introduction

The introduction to the letter confirms the purpose of the letter. One example of an introduction is as follows. A fictitious "Dr. Maria Ortega" is used in this template.

"I am writing this letter to provide an evaluation of _____'s classroom teaching performance as part of his/her annual review/third-year review/application for promotion to _____ professor and tenure at FSU."

"I am writing this letter to provide an evaluation of Dr. Maria Ortega's classroom teaching performance as part of her application for promotion to assistant professor and tenure at FSU."

¹ This paper is intended to be used along with *Guidelines for Writing Annual Evaluation Letters for Faculty Members* and *Guidelines for Writing Promotion and Tenure Letters for Faculty Members*. (The citations for these documents are available in the reference section of this paper.)

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The introduction also briefly describes the nature of the classroom activities that were observed. For example, a statement could read:

“The class I observed was _____ and involved _____.”

“The class I observed was EDF 6938 - Methods of Situational Data Analysis and involved a lecture supported by a PowerPoint, followed by small-group and large-group discussions. The class ended with a review of a homework assignment posted on the course Blackboard site.”

Instruction

The following elements of faculty performance in instruction should be included in the letter. Include specific examples to provide evidence of classroom performance:

- The effectiveness of the instructor in presenting information
- The extent to which the instructor engaged students in discussions and class activities
- The effectiveness of the instructor in using instructional resources, such as Blackboard

Syllabus

The faculty member conducting the observation should also review and comment on the faculty member’s course syllabus:

“I also reviewed the syllabus for _____ and have the following comments.”

“I also reviewed the syllabus for SOC Methods of Situational Data Analysis and have the following comments.”

Course Objectives

“The course objectives were _____.”

“The course objectives were clearly worded and indicated what the student could realistically expect from attending class and completing the course requirements.”

Assignments and Examinations

“The assignments and examinations that are described in the syllabus were _____.”

“The assignments and examinations that are described in the syllabus were clearly related to the course objectives. The format of the examination was clearly described, although it would be important to indicate the course content included in each exam. The instructions for course assignments were very clearly described. The sample completed assignments provided on the course Blackboard site should be very helpful.”

Course Topics/Schedule

The presentation of course topics and schedule was _____.”

The presentation of course topics and schedule was clear, although it would be helpful to indicate the due dates for assignments as well as exams.”

Compliance

“The syllabus was in compliance with university guidelines.”

“The syllabus was in compliance with university guidelines with the exception that _____ . The current wording should be revised.”

“The syllabus was in compliance with university guidelines with the exception that the statement on accommodation of students with a disability was not up-to-date with the current wording. The current wording should be revised.”

Conclusion

The teaching observation letter should close with a summary evaluative statement on the level of accomplishment expected for faculty members annually, at the third year, or being promoted and tenured.

“While I am not able to comment on the extent of students’ learning or the competencies they gained, _____’s performance during the class that I observed was _____ for a faculty member with his/her years experience in teaching.”

“While I am not able to comment on the extent of students’ learning or the competencies they gained, Dr. Ortega’s performance during the class that I observed was above average for a faculty member with her years experience in teaching.”

Student Input

It may be helpful to include student input as a part of the teaching observation. Input could be obtained by asking the instructor to leave for 10 to 15 minutes at the end of class and then conducting a brief discussion. General questions could be asked such as, “What contributes to or hinders the instructor’s effectiveness in this class?” “What about the class should remain the same and what should be changed?” Students could also be invited to comment on specific aspects of the faculty member’s instruction, such as interacting with students, presenting information, leading class discussions and activities, using instructional resources, using the syllabus, quality of assignments and examinations, clarity of feedback on student performance, and the instructor’s responsiveness to questions outside of class.

References

- Sampson, J. P., Jr., Driscoll, M. P., & Carroll, P. S. (2010). *Guidelines for writing annual evaluation letters for faculty members*. Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University, Office of the Dean of the Faculties.
- Sampson, J. P., Jr., Driscoll, M. P., & Carroll, P. S. (2010). *Guidelines for writing promotion and tenure letters for faculty members*. Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University, Office of the Dean of the Faculties.

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