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# Analysis of academic administrators' attitudes: annual evaluations and factors that improve teaching

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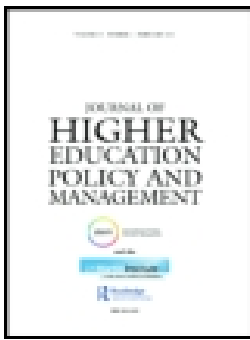


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## Analysis of academic administrators' attitudes: annual evaluations and factors that improve teaching

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### ABSTRACT



This article examines academic administrators' attitudes towards the academic evaluation process in the US and those factors that are utilised to improve teaching. We use path regressions to examine satisfaction with evaluation procedures, as well as the direct and indirect effects of these factors on perceptions of whether the evaluation process facilitates quality instruction. With increased pressure for accountability being placed on higher education, it is important to ensure that we are meeting both public and academic expectations. The evaluation process is an important tool to ensure the university's goals and values are articulated and that academics can be successful in their individual career paths. The problem is most research finds flaws with the current method of evaluation, and academics and academic administrators are sceptical about the process and results. We find there are environmental factors that influence academic administrators' perceptions of academic evaluations and the ability to improve classroom instruction.

### KEYWORDS

Academic administrator; academic evaluation; deans; department head/chair; instruction; policy

### Introduction

The debate about appropriate methods for evaluating teaching is not new, but an increased call for accountability is forcing institutions to examine how they value, measure and improve what happens in the classroom. In 2005, US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings formed the Commission on the Future of Higher Education to examine a national strategy for reforming higher education. The report was critical of higher education and made several suggestions to address concerns; one of the recommendations was a call for increased accountability which included measuring student learning outcomes (Department of Education, 2006). Even prior to this report, some states established policies that focused on academic productivity especially when it came to undergraduate teaching (Colbeck, 2002). The result of these external pressures has caused an increased focus on evaluating academics, placing an emphasis on outcomes and accountability.

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While universities regularly use teaching as a focal point for recruiting students, historically the tenure and promotion process tends to emphasise scholarship, especially at large research schools (Shapiro, 2006). To further complicate the issue, there appears to be a disconnect between universities who believe it is their obligation to provide a traditional liberal arts education and external constituents who view higher education as a piece of the economic engine tasked to produce entrepreneurs and skilled workers (Brint, Riddle, Turk-Bicakci, Levy, 2005; Goldstein, 2010). In addition, the rising cost of higher education coupled with the increased amount of student debt has raised concerns at the state and federal levels of government about both the value and outcomes of higher education. In 2013, students borrowed \$106 billion from federal loan programmes with increasing default rates (Webber & Sharon, 2014). This increase in debt is forcing graduates to put off major purchases like homes and automobiles, having a negative impact on the economy (Daniels, 2015).

In an effort to curb costs, states like Louisiana, Illinois and Wisconsin have drastically reduced higher education budgets in recent years (Woodhouse, 2015). President Obama made a pitch to provide free community college education nationally which would further impact traditional four-year colleges and universities (Mangan, 2015). In Michigan, the legislature has developed a formula for funding higher education. The performance measures in this formula include undergraduate degree completion in critical skills area, research and development expenditures, six-year graduation rates, total degree completions, institutional support expenditures as a percentage of total core expenditures and percentage of students receiving Pell grants (Peterson & Bowerman, 2015). Pell grants are need-based grants for low-income students, and unlike student loans, they do not need to be paid back. These changes will force academic administrators (deans and department heads/chairs) to examine how they hire, develop and evaluate academics in an attempt to accommodate this evolution of higher education. Understanding factors that foster an effective evaluation process and improve outcomes will be essential to achieving these goals.

## Academic evaluations and teaching

The changing nature of higher education coupled with the desire to have transparent expectations for promotion and tenure has complicated the evaluation process (Bana e Costa & Oliveira, 2012). Traditionally, academics have been evaluated based on three criteria: teaching, scholarship and service, with different emphasis being placed on one of the individual criteria depending on the type of institution (Fairweather, 2002). Research universities tend to place more emphasis on traditional scholarship while regional campuses may place more value on teaching and service.

As stated earlier, external forces are now requiring public universities to meet broader societal goals and be more accountable. This does not take away from the fact that effective teaching is key to the student experience. If the academic evaluation process cannot ensure quality instruction, or that improvement is taking place, how can we be sure that the process will be successful in evaluating other outcomes?

Historically, research on the academic evaluation process has examined the impact of student and peer evaluations as measures of teaching effectiveness. The common theme throughout most of the research on evaluations is that the process is flawed and more

research needs to be done. There has been very little research that examines the perceptions and role of the academic administrator in the evaluation process, especially on what factors of the academic evaluation tend to impact classroom instruction and learning outcomes.

One of the more researched areas in the evaluation process is the effectiveness of the student evaluation as a method for evaluating effective teaching. Previous research does indicate there is a relationship between student perceptions of their learning environment and learning outcomes (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). But, for the most part, academics believe student evaluations of teaching are flawed for various reasons, which include bias of the material being taught, level of rigour by individual academic members and/or popularity of the instructor. In addition, there are concerns with the validity and reliability of student opinions when it comes to evaluating effective teaching (Spooren, Brock, & Mortelmans, 2013). There are also concerns that student evaluations have very little, if any, relationship to the amount of learning taking place in the classroom. Clayson (2009) found in a meta-analysis of the literature there is less of a relationship to student evaluations when learning outcomes are measured more objectively. There are also questions about the evaluation tools being used in student evaluations. One study concluded there is a gap between what the students consider as the most important traits of an effective instructor compared to the developers of the teaching evaluation forms (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007). Galbraith, Merrill, and Kline (2011) indicate academics who score in the middle range of student evaluations may have higher student learning taking place compared to those academics scoring higher or lower. To further complicate the issue, with the growth of online education, there are concerns with even getting the students to complete the online evaluation forms (Reisenwitz, 2016). While student evaluations will continue to be used as a method of evaluating teaching, their usefulness as a method to improve teaching or other outcomes will remain questionable. This is problematic since most universities use these evaluations to some extent to make personnel decisions, including promotion and tenure.

In addition to student evaluations, peer evaluations are another method of evaluating teaching effectiveness. Ernest L. Boyer made a strong case for the scholarship of teaching in his work with the Carnegie Foundation (Glassick, Huber, & Maeroff, 1997). An essential component of any scholarship activity is the peer review process. Over time, peer evaluations have become a common practice of evaluating teaching. This can be done by evaluating material presented by the academic member as part of a portfolio and/or done by classroom observation. Peer evaluations used with student evaluations provide a more comprehensive overview of an individual academic member's teaching effectiveness (Berk, 2005).

The peer review process, just like student evaluations, is not without sceptics. This process can be time consuming and those performing the evaluations may lack the training needed to make the evaluations meaningful and consistent (Ponte, 2013). Academic evaluations tend to be an annual occurrence and most peers participating in the peer review process must fit these additional duties in with the many other responsibilities of the normal academic semester. In addition, peer evaluations unlike the evaluation of scholarship are not anonymous, and there could be concerns with departmental politics and the impact on academic freedom (Sullivan, 1995). The peer

review process can be improved by training and increasing the number of reviewers involved in the process (Paulsen, 2002).

In addition to improving teaching, the evaluation process should ensure new members are successful in achieving tenure and promotion. It is critical that institutions have clarity of expectations for promotion and tenure. In 2000, the American Council on Education, American Association of University Professors, and United Educators Insurance Risk Retention Group (2000) put out a report that called for clarity in standards, consistency in tenure decisions, candour in the evaluation of tenure-track academics and caring for unsuccessful candidates. Clarity of standards is especially important when establishing criteria for teaching and service responsibilities. These activities may not be seen by some members of the academic community as important as more traditional scholarship activities. Ambiguity in how teaching and service will be valued in the evaluation process can cause undue stress on academic members seeking promotion and tenure. This can be especially harmful as institutions try to increase diversity in their academic ranks (O'Meara, 2002). Research has shown that mentoring by a senior academic member may allow new academic members to feel more connected with their work environment (Schrodt, Stringer-Cawyer, & Sanders, 2003).

This research examines factors that influence academic administrator's attitudes towards academic evaluations and how that process is used as a method for improving classroom instruction. Academic administrators play a vital role as the conduit between university policy-makers (board, president and provost) and the academy. They are also key to hiring and developing new academics to be successful in their profession and meeting university standards for promotion and tenure. The academic evaluation process should be viewed as a communication tool that ensures both administration and academics are trying to achieve the same goals and shared values. Aligning of the academic evaluation process and the university's goals and values for academic development is essential for both satisfaction and the ability to address the increased level of scrutiny and demands facing higher education. We believe that understanding the impact of the obvious organisational values (teaching, service and scholarship) of the evaluations is important, but we also want to examine the effects of environmental characteristics and/or processes that may have an impact on the effectiveness of the evaluation, especially aspects of the evaluation process that improve classroom instruction from the academic administrator's perspective. These environmental characteristics and processes include the existence of a collective bargaining agreement, training of those involved in the evaluation process, clarity of the evaluation process, chair/department head involvement and type of organisation. In other words, which environmental characteristics do academic administrators believe improve the evaluation process and have a positive impact on ensuring students receive quality instruction? To address these issues, we posed the following two research questions:

- Q1.** What factors influence academic administrators' perceptions towards an effective academic evaluation process?
- Q2.** What factors influence academic administrators' perception of the evaluation process, ensuring that the university provides quality instruction?

## Methodology and data findings

The data for this research comes from a survey conducted in the autumn of 2015 from all 15 public institutions of higher education in Michigan, ranging from undergraduate to doctoral level. Michigan is an interesting place to research higher education issues because of the diversity of the institutions. The 15 public institutions range from top-ranked large research 1 universities like the Michigan State University with more than 50,000 students to smaller liberal arts schools like Lake Superior State University with just over 2000 students. There are also significant differences in geographic location, urban areas like Detroit with Wayne State University to rural communities in the Upper Peninsula with Michigan Technological University and Northern Michigan University. While Michigan does not have a state system for higher education, both the University of Michigan at Flint and the University of Michigan at Dearborn are in a system with the University of Michigan.

Within these institutions, surveys were sent to all department heads, department chairs and deans for a total sample population of 598. We received responses from 224 individuals for an overall response rate of 37.5%. Of the 224 respondents, 60.6% ( $N = 136$ ) came from PhD-granting universities, 29.1% ( $N = 65$ ) from master's-degree-granting universities and 10.3% ( $N = 23$ ) from Bachelor-degree-granting universities. For purposes of this survey, we defined department chairs as members of the bargaining unit (if applicable) and department heads as not in the bargaining unit. Some respondents indicated their title was department chair but not in the bargaining unit; we made adjustments to reflect these responses. We believe that members of the bargaining unit may identify more with the academics and less with the administration. Of the 224 respondents, 34 (15.4%) were deans, 109 (48.7%) were department heads and 81 (36.2%) were department chairs.

We asked these administrators questions regarding their attitude towards academic evaluations and about certain environmental factors. For example, we asked if academics were covered by a collective bargaining agreement. This could be a complicated issue with regard to academic evaluations for academic administrators. On one hand, a collective bargaining agreement could provide clarity of the process and help with the evaluation. Or, because collective bargaining agreements tend to place limitations on administrative options to handle personnel issues, administrators could see them as a hindrance in meeting organisational objectives and as a tool to improve classroom performance. Of the academic administrators who responded, we had 52.2% ( $N = 117$ ) indicate that their academic personnel did have a collective bargaining agreement and 47.8% ( $N = 107$ ) that were not part of a collective bargaining agreement.

We asked the academic administrators to rank order the most important characteristics they were looking for when they were hiring new tenure track academic members with (1) being the most important characteristic and (5) being the least important characteristic. See [Table 1](#) for the results. We then asked them to rank the most important characteristics when granting promotion and/or tenure using the same scale. See [Table 2](#) for results.

According to the results shown in [Table 1](#), the potential to be a quality instructor ranks as the most important characteristic with the potential to produce quality publications coming in second when hiring for a new tenure track academic members.

**Table 1.** Characteristics for hiring new academics.

	Ranked 1	%	Mean
Potential to produce quality publications	70	34.1	2.30
Potential to be a quality instructor	93	45.4	1.81
Overall fit within the department	37	18.0	2.57
Adds to the diversity of the department or university	3	1.5	3.72
Potential to provide leadership	2	1.0	4.60

**Table 2.** Characteristics for promotion and tenure.

	Ranked 1	%	Mean
Service	8	3.8	3.11
Scholarship	113	53.1	1.66
Teaching	91	42.7	1.67
Collegiality	1	.5	3.98
Leadership ability	2	.9	2.43

Interesting to note, adds diversity to the departments and potential to provide leadership in the department are a distant fourth and fifth, with overall fit within the department coming in third place. This is especially problematic since there has been a push for increased diversity within the academic ranks at most universities, and all of the respondents are in positions of leadership.

It is obvious from the results in [Table 2](#) that there is a shift from hiring a new academic member to the tenure and promotion process where scholarship becomes a more important factor. It should be noted that the means are virtually identical. This supports the research that indicates there may be a lack of clarity with evaluation standards for promotion and tenure when it comes to what the institution values (Gardner & Blackstone, 2013). In addition, the fact service was only ranked first by eight respondents and had a mean of 3.11 may impact minority academics with regard to promotion and tenure more than non-minority academic members (Baez, 2000).

To explore the relationship between teaching and scholarship more, we asked if academics were regularly turned down for promotion and tenure due to deficiencies in teaching. We also asked if academics were regularly turned down for promotion and tenure due to deficiencies in scholarship. We used a five-point scale to evaluate their response from strongly disagree to strongly agree, as shown in [Table 3](#).

With a mean of 3.47 compared to a mean of 2.54, it is obvious that academics with deficiencies in scholarship are more likely to be turned down for tenure and promotion compared to academics with deficiencies in teaching. Only 17.9% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed academics are regularly turned down for tenure and promotion for deficiencies in teaching, while 59.7% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed academics are regularly turned down for tenure and promotion for deficiencies in scholarship. This supports the research which indicates scholarship has increased in importance over time compared to teaching and service (Green, 2008; Youn & Price, 2009).

**Table 3.** Turned down for promotion and tenure.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
Teaching	31	80	68	37	2	2.54
Scholarship	13	35	41	99	33	3.47



Table 4 shows the rank order of importance academic administrators assign to the methods for evaluating teaching. Student evaluations were ranked first by 39.9% ( $N = 83$ ) of the respondents, peer evaluations come in second with 27.4% ( $N = 57$ ) and department head/chair evaluations are third with 26.6% ( $N = 47$ ). This supports the literature that student evaluations play a significant role in evaluating performance in the classroom even though there are concerns with their validity.

### Evaluations and factors for improving teaching

Given the aforementioned data and previous research done in this area, it is essential we identify the factors that could improve the evaluation process and have a positive impact on teaching. We believe by identifying these factors we can better align process and values to achieve improved outcomes. The following models rely on path regressions to examine the direct effects of our explanatory variables on respondents' satisfaction with evaluation procedures, as well as the direct and indirect effects of these factors on perceptions of whether evaluation facilitates quality instruction. We can therefore address connections between individual variations, institutional differences, the evaluation procedures utilised and respondents' attitudes towards the process and its utility. Overall, the models fit the data well, with all modification indices below 3.84, RMSEA  $<.95$ , and CFI and TLI  $>.95$ .

When asked about satisfaction with the evaluation process, 20.1% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed they were satisfied, while 26.6% were neutral and 53.2% agreed or strongly agreed with a mean score of 3.35. When it comes to satisfaction, the evaluation process ensures this university has good quality instruction, 28.1% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed they were satisfied, while 29.9% were neutral and 42.1% agreed or strongly agreed with a mean score of 3.15.

In addition to the type of institution and collective bargaining, which are detailed earlier, we asked academic administrators if student evaluations play a significant role in evaluating teaching, if peer evaluations play a significant role in the evaluation process, if those involved in the academic evaluations receive adequate and regular training on the evaluation process, if the academic evaluation process at this university is very clear and easy to use, and if the department chair/heads plays a significant role in the academic evaluation process. We used a five-point scale to evaluate their response from strongly disagree to strongly agree, as shown in Table 5.

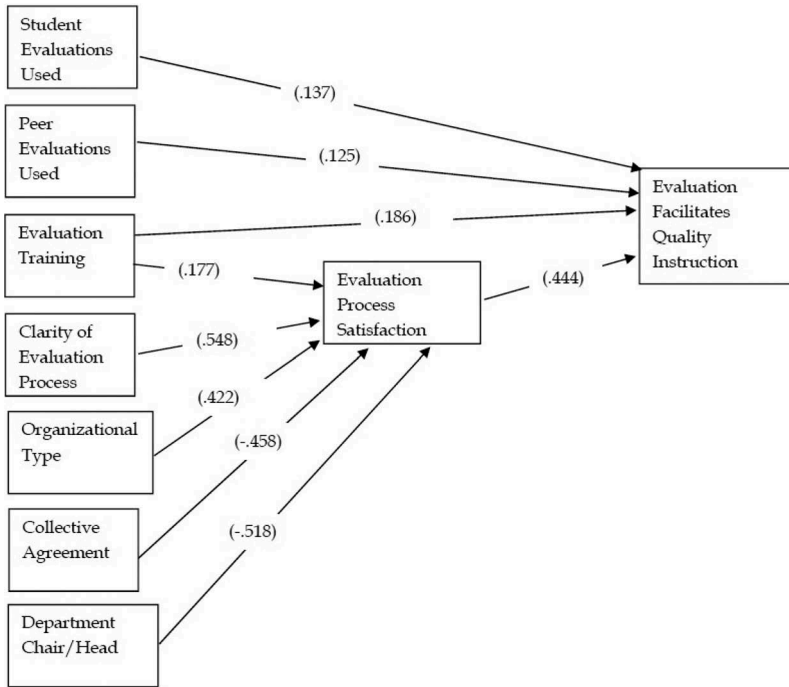
Figure 1 includes all the significant path coefficients in our model. These coefficients (standardised) reveal significant associations between the mechanisms of evaluation and individual satisfaction with evaluation processes, with the presence of training positively associated with satisfaction (.177) and the clarity of the process (.548) having positive associations with satisfaction. These findings suggest the nature of evaluation has the potential to condition respondent's experiences during the evaluation process, and suggesting that training and information provision may be critical to academic

**Table 4.** Method for evaluating teaching.

	Ranked 1	%	Mean
Student evaluation	83	39.9	2.11
Peer evaluation	57	27.4	2.45
Head/chair evaluation	47	22.6	2.44
Self-evaluation	14	6.7	3.23
Other	7	3.4	4.77

**Table 5.** Evaluation factors.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
Student evaluations	2	14	21	137	47	3.96
Peer evaluations	18	40	29	105	30	3.40
Evaluation training	25	85	52	48	9	2.68
Clarity of process	8	27	45	107	34	3.99
Chair/head involvement	6	16	23	102	71	3.60



**Figure 1.** Path regression.

evaluation. This supports findings that departmental feedback for those in the probationary period is key to avoiding problems for those academics seeking promotion and tenure (Lawrence, Celis, & Ott, 2014).

We also find associations between institutional factors (the type of university and the presence of a collective agreement) and the individual’s position within that institution. Each of these variables is associated with less satisfaction with the evaluation process. For example, the positive association between our university type variable indicates that moving from an undergraduate-degree-granting institution to a PhD-granting institution makes it less likely that respondents will be satisfied with evaluation (-.422). This could be because of the increased pressure for scholarship at PhD-granting institutions while there are still pressures to be an effective instructor and provide service to the department, university and community.

Respondents working in institutions with collective agreements were also less likely to be satisfied with evaluation procedures (-.458). The coefficient for department head/chair indicates that individuals most likely to be directly involved in evaluation are less likely to be satisfied with the process (-.518). Examining the connections between our exogenous

variables and perceptions that evaluation facilitates quality instruction, we find evidence for direct associations between some components of the evaluation process and this perception. For example, reliance on both student evaluations (.137) and peer evaluations (.125) is positively associated with perceptions that evaluation facilitates quality instruction, as is evaluation training (.186). Evaluation training has a total effect of (.265), combining the direct and indirect effects of training on these perceptions [ $.186 + (.177 \times .444)$ ]. Clarity too has important indirect effects on perceptions of effectiveness ( $.243 = .548 \times .444$ ). This supports the recommendations in report from the American Council on Education, American Association of University Professors, and United Educators Insurance Risk Retention Group (2000).

Although not a primary focus of this study, the indirect effect of collective bargaining on evaluation satisfaction may also highlight a critical conditioning effect of environmental factors, although we cannot identify whether this is due to potential insulating effects of collective agreements, or if the self-monitoring mechanisms sometimes present in collective agreements might limit variability among these institutions (Williamson, 1979). Although a *t*-test revealed a significant difference of means for the variable evaluation satisfaction between respondents in institutions working under a collective agreement (3.07,  $N = 115$ ) and respondents who were not (3.64,  $N = 105$ ), academic administrators could see the collective bargaining agreement as a barrier to addressing specific concerns with individual academic members that are outside of the norm and not addressed by the agreement. Or, they may perceive the collective bargaining agreement as a barrier to achieving specific goals through the evaluation process.

With regard to increased involvement of the department head/chair in the process and impact on satisfaction, the evaluation process can be very time consuming and is usually added on to other responsibilities during a busy semester. Department heads/chairs are unable to stop other day-to-day activities to devote the time to the evaluation process. And for most departments, there could be multiple academics being evaluated in any one given year. In other words, the more time spent on evaluation and less time on normal duties impacts the level of satisfaction. Altogether, we see that institutional factors, the evaluation process and position all influence individual's perceptions of evaluation effectiveness (either directly or indirectly), highlighting the need for the use of elaborated multivariate models when trying to assess employee's attitudes towards evaluation.

## Conclusions

The academic evaluation process will always be met with some level of scepticism. But increasing external pressures for improved performance and transparency appears to be the new normal for higher education. This includes improving student learning outcomes. While we recognise limitations with both student evaluations and peer evaluations when it comes to improving teaching, this research suggests we can minimise those effects by providing training and clarity of expectations for those involved in the process. In addition, universities should be clear and consistent from the time they hire new academics through the process of promotion and tenure on expectations for teaching, scholarship and service. Especially at research institutions, this will reduce angst and confusion.

Also, if a collective bargaining agreement exists, it should give administrators enough leeway to ensure they can address individual situations that occur during the evaluation process without stepping on academic rights. If academic administrators feel the collective bargaining agreement prohibits them from doing an effective evaluation, it could keep the process from meeting individual and organisational goals. In addition to being a frustration for the academic administrator, it could impact the individual academic member's success.

Finally, training all parties involved in the evaluation process and identifying both institutional values and performance expectations will ensure outcomes are consistent and fair. Academic evaluations should also become part of the culture of the organisation and not an annual event. Time to mentor and evaluate new academic members should be built into schedules and recognised as a vital service to the organisation, this will pay off dividends in the long run.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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