

Tech Snacks: Effective Peer Reviews

MSU-Northern's faculty CBA states that three peer evaluations are required for **“(1) probationary faculty in each probationary year after their first (1st) year; (2) all faculty when applying for promotion or tenure; and (3) all post-tenure reviews in accordance with 7.7” (CBA 7.4)**. But what does an effective peer review look like? What can you do to ensure an effective peer review, as the reviewer and as the reviewee?

Requesting Peer Reviews

Requests for peer review should be done in writing. CBA guidance states, **“To the extent possible, peers selected by the faculty member should include persons with similar teaching assignments, similar academic preparation, equal or higher rank and equal or higher degrees.”**

A good general rule of thumb is to include:

- At least one faculty peer reviewer from your content area (or a closely related area)
- At least one faculty peer reviewer who is already tenured.
- If at all possible, peer reviewers should not be junior to you.
- Tip: Cross-college reviews are generally viewed positively; look also to peers who serve on committees with you and can attest to your service contributions

You must have three peer reviews from appropriately qualified MSU-Northern faculty. You can include more than the three official peer reviews in a yearly portfolio. In some cases, additional reviews from professional staff, industry, or faculty from other campuses may be warranted.

Scheduling a teaching observation and review

Teaching observations **must be completed by November 15**, but it's smart to schedule them far in advance (even in spring semester in some cases) to prevent scheduling issues.

It's a good practice for you and the peer reviewer to schedule a preliminary conversation prior to the observation to give the reviewer contextual information.

Course context: How often does the course meet? Is it upper or lower division? How does it fit into the program's curriculum? Is it a required course or elective? What are the learner characteristics (class rank, typical career goals, interests, etc.)?

Lesson context: What is the learning goal for the day? How does the topic of the class period fit within the course? Is there relevant context from previous class periods? How do the day's activities or assessments fit within the rest of the course?

Teacher context: Is there a particular teaching strategy or challenge that you have been working on improving? Is there any aspect in particular that you would like the reviewer to pay attention to or provide feedback on?

It is helpful for the reviewer if you provide a syllabus, a 15-week plan, or even a lesson plan to help clarify some of these questions. If scheduling issues prevent a reviewer from physically observing your class, OTLE can make a video recording.

It's also customary to send the reviewer your resume for the non-teaching part of the review.

Scheduling an online course review

A similar pre-observation conversation can be useful when reviewing an online course. The instructor will need to email OTLE and request that the reviewer be given guest access to the course. Note: Please remember to have them unenrolled once the review is complete.

Incorporating the letter's observations

Try to use the letter's findings when writing your continuation letter to demonstrate improvement and reflection in your teaching practice. If the review provided any actionable suggestions, talk about how you integrated (or plan to integrate) those suggestions.

Writing Peer Review Letters

Peer review letters generally provide an evaluation of the instructor's teaching as well as any scholarship and/or service achievements that the reviewer is familiar with.

Example components of a review letter

Address

"Dear Provost _____,"

Introduction

"I am writing this letter in support of X's application for continuation of probationary status // application for promotion and tenure // post-tenure review."

You might briefly address why you are qualified or well-suited to evaluate this person.

Headings and/or clear language that correspond to the professional evaluation criteria laid out in CBA article 7.2 (i.e., effective teaching, scholarship, service)

Date of classroom visit, the specific class that was visited

Concrete observations about the visit and the broader skills & strengths that these observations represent, from your perspective

Reviewers typically use their own criteria to organize their observations and evaluation. Specific, concrete observations and examples are the most effective.

For instance, rather than simply stating "[Instructor] has a great rapport with his students," it is often more effective to describe the situation you observed that led you to make that conclusion: "[Instructor] made a deliberate effort to connect with the students personally by incorporating the students' own vehicle models as examples in his explanations. The fact that he recalled their vehicles and used that knowledge to engage them was clearly appreciated by the students and it demonstrated his positive rapport with them."

The service and/or scholarship contributions they've made (to your knowledge)

A closing statement that clearly sums up your recommendation

"I reaffirm that I am in full support of X person's application for ..."

What is helpful for readers to see?

- Specific observations; examples of interaction (or non-interaction) with students
- If constructive criticism is warranted, recommendations for improvement are included
- Specific areas where you've witnessed the impact of their service or scholarship
- Focus on the most pertinent traits and qualifications
- Bold headings that help the reader understand your argument quickly

What should be avoided?

- Verbatim recycling of letters from year to year and person to person (it is noticed!)
- Fluffy, vague letters with no actual substance or concrete observations
- Long or unfocused letters – pick a few key traits to highlight, with concise examples
- Double spacing or any format that makes the letter tedious for busy readers
- The use of observations/examples from previous years, unless it is needed to create a narrative of improvement (Year 6 review letters are an exception to this because a tenure application is more about cumulative development)
- Note: Don't commit to writing a review letter for someone if you aren't sure you'll get it done or don't feel you can provide a constructive letter.