

Evaluating Sally

The Cranky Professor

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Sally, the Saint Mary's professor we met last week, faced four major evaluations during her career, in addition to the evaluation she underwent before she was hired. Four times she compiled a dossier and made that dossier available to her department, to her Dean, to a committee, to the Vice-President Academic, and to the President of Saint Mary's.

The criteria by which departments, committees, and officers of the university evaluate professors who apply for tenure or promotion are quality of research, quality of teaching, and quality of service. Sally sought in each dossier she submitted to make the case that she meets at least minimal standards in all three areas and that she really shines in at least one of the first two.

So what, then, makes for good research, good teaching, and good service? How do evaluations in these three areas contribute to the determination that the professor merits or doesn't merit tenure or promotion?

Good research is investigation or thought that expands our understanding of the world or some aspect of it. Has the intellectual work of the candidate advanced our understanding? Has the candidate proposed interesting ideas and theses, and shown them to be plausible? To answer these questions, evaluators examine the papers or books the candidate has written to discover the depth, breadth, and rigour of the professor's contribution to the search for truth.

The quality of the research is what matters most, but both quantity and availability are also relevant, at least a little bit. Quantity matters only because the university wants its professors to continue to do good research, to continue to contribute to understanding. It's not enough that the candidate once did interesting work. Availability has to do with whether the world is hearing about the candidate's research, whether that research is being published or, at least, whether the candidate is presenting it to his or her peers at conferences or in other ways. Good work should be out for all to see, not sequestered in an office computer.

Quality is what most matters, but quantity and availability are easier to track. A practical problem all universities face is making sure the evaluation of a professor's research does not deteriorate into counting her publications or gauging the prestige of the journals in which they appeared. As with many problems intrinsic to an endeavour, rules cannot succeed in keeping evaluators on track when good will and commitment to quality for its own sake are lacking.

Good university teaching is teaching that enables students to become good researchers themselves. It is teaching that brings students into the community of intellectuals by developing in them the skills and attitudes characteristic of intellectuals. Good teaching comes in all shapes, colours, and flavours. Now certainly often enough we can tell good bananas from bad bananas and good apples from bad apples. But we ought to have room for both apples and bananas—for

good ones of both, that is. I would like Saint Mary's to be a fruit basket of teaching, not an apple cart, but the tendency here, and elsewhere, is toward standard methods and outcomes.

To evaluate a professor's teaching properly, one needs to discover whether that teacher's students are indeed becoming good researchers themselves. Evidence of this can be hard to find or interpret. Moreover, some professors will do a great job with a mere few students, those attuned to her style and concerns, and a bad job with all the rest, while other professors will do a fair job with most students. (It's a rare teacher who does well with all her charges.) We should be pleased to rate good a teacher who leads just a few students to insight, and not to prefer another simply on the ground that he appeals to students widely.

There's little reason to think that the course and teaching evaluation forms students complete at the end of their courses tell us much we can use to evaluate teaching as teaching. Happily, the Collective Agreement here at Saint Mary's instructs evaluators to use student evaluations as only one piece of evidence. (Some forms, our own ICE form, for instance, are especially pernicious in that they press toward standardization in teaching.)

Service includes service to the university, to the discipline, to intellectual life generally, and to the community. A professor serves the university when she sits on a Senate committee, say, or acts as the graduate coordinator in her department. A professor serves the discipline when she helps to organize a conference or referees a paper. She serves intellectual life generally when she assists a parliamentary committee examining tuition fees or explains research in her field to a general audience. She serves the community when she advises an interest group or sits on the board of a museum.

Sally, the recently hired Saint Mary's professor who will go on to have a successful, fulfilling career, did well on her four major evaluations mainly on the strength of her research. Sally was a good teacher, though sometimes one or another evaluator would wrongly take the so-so averages on her teaching evaluations to indicate otherwise. Sally dutifully took her turn as chair of her department, though no one would praise her as an effective administrator, and she was notorious for begging off on committee work. It was, overall, her research that gained her her success.

That is as it should be, I think. Research, teaching, and service is each important, but important in that order—though, I hasten to add, the nature of university teaching makes it hard to imagine either a good teacher who neglects research or a good researcher who is a bad teacher.