



The University of Vermont

To: Brian Reed, Associate Provost  
From: Nancy E. Mathews, Dean, Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources  
Date: 4 December 2014  
Re: RSENR teaching evaluations

The Rubenstein School currently uses a relatively simple 25-question evaluation instrument that is given to students at the end of the semester. The survey output assesses faculty performance across eight metrics. There is an additional opportunity for open ended comments. Through spring 2014 this survey was given to students in class “on paper” ensuring a high response rate. This year, we have gone to electronic evaluations. We are sending the link to students in class, and providing time in class for students to complete the evaluation. However, this also allows students to complete the survey outside of class if they desire. Results with respect to response rate and faculty satisfaction with the process will be evaluated early in the spring semester.

To date, we have not done any peer evaluation of teaching. Numerous faculty in RSENR have suggested this would provide beneficial feedback around teaching, so we feel that there is buy-in from the faculty to develop a peer-review process. In the spring semester, we will charge our Faculty Standards Committee with developing such a process. The key variables to be addressed will be who must be evaluated (all faculty, pre-tenure faculty, faculty up for reappointment, etc.), what the evaluation will encompass (pedagogy, syllabi, learning outcomes, etc.), and who will be evaluating (program directors, senior faculty mentoring committee, outside evaluators, etc.). Our goal is to have a draft plan for faculty to review in the spring semester.

This semester, we have established an expectation that all junior faculty will have a mentoring committee. The Faculty Standards Committee will review the process in January 2015 and committees will be established shortly thereafter. Although there has been informal mentoring within RSENR, we have not developed a more formal framework for junior faculty to receive guidance during the pre-tenure/promotion process. Given what we expect to be radical turnover in our faculty in the coming years, we believe this will provide a way to help faculty maximize their potential for promotion, address issues around work-life balance, and set a foundation for success throughout what we hope will be long careers in RSENR. We hope that peer-review of faculty teaching will be complementary to this new mentoring process.

Starting next spring, each of our programs will have written learning outcomes. Throughout the course of FY16 we will develop an assessment plan for each program. This will include a plan to periodically assess student learning in each program. Results will be used for continual instructional assessment and improvement. We believe that program evaluation through the use of learning outcome assessment is an essential complement to individual instructor evaluations. Together, they will better reveal the quality of the instructional program. Teaching evaluations, alone, are imperfect indicators of student learning, our ultimate goal.