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Effectiveness of evaluations questioned

By Thomas Ruggiero
Emerald Contributor

Deciding who are the most knowledgeable professors, who should receive tenure and who should be put to pasture are decisions many students tend to defer to others.

With the cluster system, overcrowded classes and time pressure, many students believe there are more immediate problems that require their attention.

However, University students may be holding enormous power in their hands and not even know it.

Students have significant influence over faculty promotion, merit raises, salary, tenure and dismissal, according to Del Hawkins, University marketing department director.

Hawkins is talking about those seemingly innocuous faculty-evaluation forms filled out by students at the end of each term.

What's more, Hawkins said, University instructors take the evaluations "serious as hell" because major pay raises may hinge on "good grades" students give teachers.

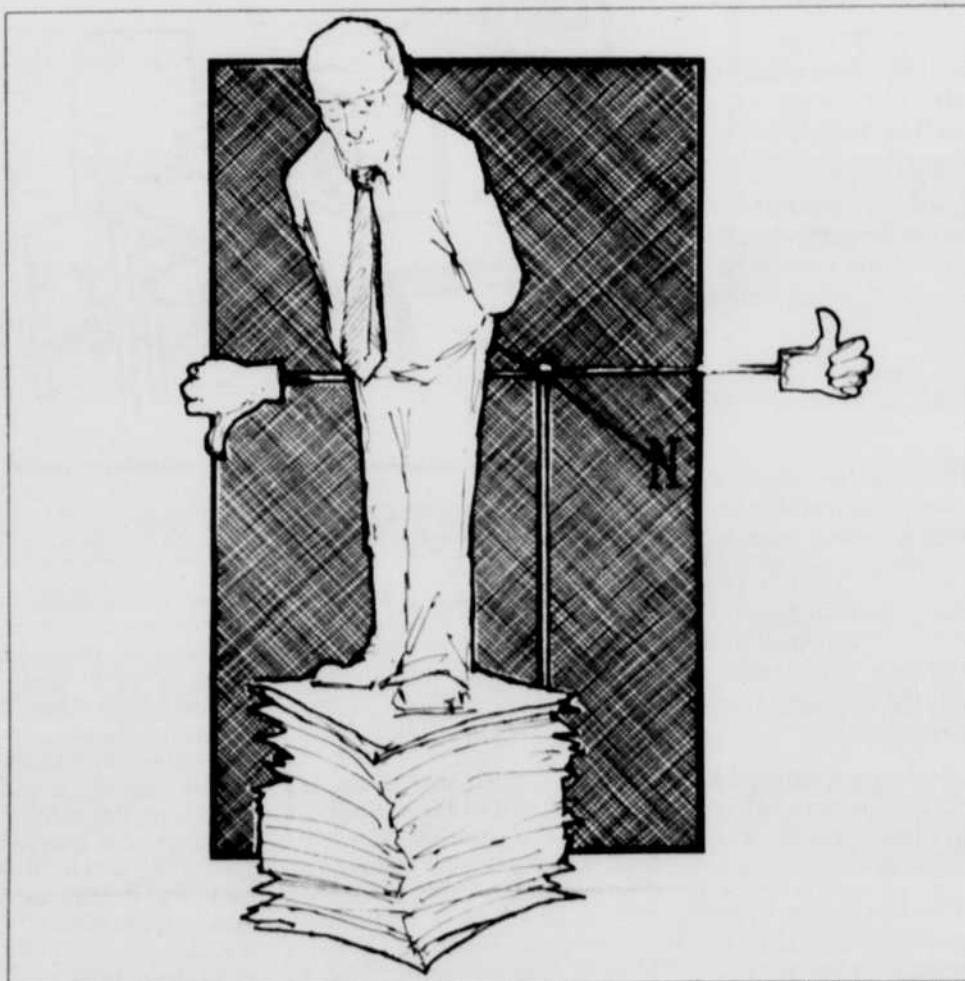
Hawkins would not comment on specific names but suggested University faculty in the past have been denied tenure or were fired after receiving "unfavorable marks" from students.

Unfortunately, the discrepancy between Hawkins' claims and student skepticism of Hawkins' claims is vast.

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A case in point is the dubious role students play in the tenure process.

Tenure may be the most important administrative decision in a professor's career after he or she is hired at the University.

After teaching six years at the University, an instructor must either be approved for tenure or dismissed.



Graphic by Lorraine Rath

However, once a professor has tenure (in essence, job security) the only basis for his or her removal is incompetent performance, medical inability, criminal liability, or moral turpitude, according to Joseph Hynes, vice-provost for academic personnel.

Yet University students routinely are not informed which faculty are being considered for tenure, Hynes said.

Instructors already are under enormous pressure at this time without the added

stress from students, Hynes said.

But, some students argue that "tenure-time" is precisely the catalyst that might energize normally lethargic students to use evaluations as a vehicle to influence administrators in retaining or firing a professor.

Last winter term, after a "consensus" of masters of business administration students evaluated one accounting professor "very poorly," many were startled this year to hear he had been awarded

tenure at the University, said Sandra Thompson, a second-year MBA candidate.

"The professor came to class consistently unprepared, his balance sheets didn't balance and his formulas for projects were inaccurate," Thompson said.

What's worse, the professor's past reputation as an inadequate instructor was well known in the MBA program, she said. Unfortunately, graduate students never were told the professor was up for tenure, she said.

"Many of us have the feeling of being totally ignored," Thompson said.

Thompson is not a lone voice crying in the wilderness; other MBA candidates interviewed agreed with her but expressed fears of specific or subtle retribution from professors should they become known as "troublemakers."

The University School of Law may be more sensitive to student advocacy and student evaluation. Names of instructors coming up for tenure are made available to all faculty via memo and notices put on student bulletin boards throughout the school, said Law School Dean Maurice Holland.

Both student evaluations and peer evaluations are taken into account in University procedures, Holland said.

"But although student evaluations carry significant weight, they do not carry controlling weight," Holland said.

In other University departments, faculty opinions differ as to the importance students play or even should play in administrative personnel decisions.

Students who spend only four or five years at the University have a "short-term view," said Dan McMillen, an associate professor of economics.

"Those people (tenured professors) who have a long-term view should have the most say in promotion and tenure decisions," McMillen said.

Turn to Evaluations, Page 3

Student access to evaluations confusing

By Thomas Ruggiero
Emerald Contributor

On Dec. 6, 1978, the University Assembly approved student involvement in the evaluation process for faculty tenure and promotion.

What emerged at the University was a two part-system:

1) A tabulated questionnaire comparing an instructor's performance with other instructors at the University to be used in the evaluation for promotions, raises, tenure and dismissal. Students have access to this information.

2) An optionally signed form for the student to make personal comments about the instructor and course without fear of retribution if any negative comments are made. If signed, the form becomes the personal property of the instructor.

Each University department is responsible for writing, administering and paying for its own faculty-course evaluations, according to Nancie Fadeley, assistant to the provost for academic affairs.

The statistical results of the evaluations are available to students in the reserve reading room of the main library, in the Office of Academic Advising and in the office of the department the course is taught.

It is the ASUO's job to update these evaluations in their permanent binders each fall and spring, Fadeley said.

However, in the past, faculty-course evaluation binders have not always been kept properly updated by the ASUO, she said.

This was the situation Tim Corrigan found when he took over the responsibility of updating the evaluations last year.

Corrigan, ASUO Course Guide editor in 1986-87, said he became increasingly frustrated in his attempts to make the evaluations more legible to students.

"We made no monumental changes in the process last year," Corrigan said, adding, "The evaluations are just not useful at this time."

Dave Rist, present assistant ASUO Publications director, also finds the job frustrating.

Trying to bring some order into the evaluations takes an "incredible amount of time," he said.

The ASUO will try to improve the process this year by securing the binders that hold the forms so sheets cannot be removed as they have been in the past, Rist said.

But the bindings may be the least serious aspect of the problem, according to Sharon Surret, front desk coordinator at the Office of Student Services.

"You have to be a computer whiz to read these evaluations," she said. "I can count on one hand the number of students who have gotten some use out of

them," she said.

Surret said she is convinced the evaluations should be a very important reference source to students, but adds very few students can interpret the "computerese" of the printouts.

Joseph Wade, Academic Advising and Student Services director, suggested that the ASUO Course Guide be expanded and the computerized faculty-course evaluations be discontinued.

Wade contends the evaluations deal with student satisfaction with the instructor and the course, but do not deal with the questions students really want to know about a class.

"How many research papers, how many exams, and how many text books are required are more realistic questions students have about prospective courses," he said. "The course guide would be a much better medium."

Peer advice also seems to be the predominant method used by most American students in choosing one professor from another, according to Troy Biddle, a senior marketing major.

When asked about the validity of the evaluation process, one student at the law school's Student Bar Association summed it up succinctly: "When it comes to students evaluating faculty, all students are essentially cynics."