

# **focus**

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## **Improving Teaching: Priorities for Dalhousie University**

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Surveys undertaken by the Office of Instructional Development and Technology show that university faculty, deans, department heads, and instructional developers generally agree about what it takes to improve university teaching. In an earlier FOCUS, we reported on the first phase of this research in which instructional or faculty development officers in 331 universities in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australasia responded to a questionnaire on a variety of teaching improvement practices. Respondents were asked to rate on a 10-point scale each of 36 items according to "the confidence you have in its potential to improve the quality of teaching in your university." Item responses were rank ordered according to their mean ratings. The respondents' practical experience and professional expertise, coupled with their important roles institu-

tionally and nationally, make their views valuable to those planning ways to improve the quality of university teaching

Members of the Dalhousie academic community participated in the second phase of the research in which the same questionnaire was distributed to faculty, deans, and department heads in several universities (6 in Atlantic Canada and 1 in each of Quebec and the United States). Their responses (about one third of which were from Dalhousie) were then compared to those of the instructional developers.\*

### **MOST PREFERRED PRACTICES**

The table below lists the Dalhousie respondents' "top ten" teaching improvement practices (ranked by mean from highest to lowest

\* This Focus is based on an earlier report on this research, written by Alan Wright and focusing on Canadian faculty developers, which appeared as "Teaching Improvement Practices in Canadian Universities" in *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, No. 18, May 1996, pp. 5-8, Toronto: Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

confidence levels). These are compared with the entire respondent group of faculty, heads, and deans and with the faculty developer group. The results from Dalhousie respondents are reported here both separately and as part of the "Faculty, Deans, & Heads" respondent group. Their written comments are included throughout.

**Rewarding Teaching.** For all groups, "Recognition of teaching in tenure and promotion decisions" was the top item. Sixty-seven per cent of Dalhousie respondents rated this item 8 or over on the 10-point scale. Other employment practices (assessing teaching for hiring purposes or for regular, post-appointment review) also received strong support. Clearly, respondents from each group believe that placing more emphasis on the ability to teach effectively, particularly as the faculty member climbs the ranks of the professoriate, is fundamental to improving teaching in higher education. This result points to widespread agreement that the reward system must value effective teaching if the quality of instruction in universities is to improve. Many respondents from Dalhousie commented unequivocally on this subject:

*"Teaching is not considered nearly important enough. I believe overall quality and quantity of teaching declines with tenure and promotions. Should be the other way around." (Recreation, Physical, & Health Education)*

*"Bread is for eating. Wine is for drinking. . . . University is for learning. . . . My impression is that recognition of good teachers at Dalhousie is asymmetric, i.e., students do it more than Heads, Deans, etc. . . . Incentives drive work effort, especially if the rewards are palpable and spendable." (Medicine)*

*"The main barrier to excellent teaching is the pressure to excel at research. We work hard, >50 hours/week, but prioritize our time as 1) research,*

*2) teaching, 3) administration." (Oceanography)*

*"Exhortation, talk, conferences, committees, meetings don't help. The University must put money or (equivalently) faculty time into making improvements. Also that time and effort must be rewarded with promotion, money, recognition of some form. . . ." (Mathematics, Statistics, & Computing Science)*

*"I have attempted to rate the potential of these items under the current 'climate.' [Recognition in tenure & promotion], in my opinion, would increase the effectiveness of the other items on this list." (Biology)*

*"We don't need administration to point out the importance of teaching—we are already dedicated, but squeezed for time and not rewarded for teaching vis-à-vis other demands, especially research and writing." (History)*

*"It is my perception that, so far (in teaching at Dalhousie), anything goes, whereas success in research has rewards (grants, promotion, recognition). If new and not-so-new faculty perceive that teaching counts, they are intelligent enough to make it good. But the University must reward this effort with merit pay, promotion, and proper recognition." (Earth Sciences)*

*"Consider hiring faculty mainly on their ability to teach with less responsibility for administration and research. In other words, hire people to do what they do well and let it be clear that teaching is of equivalent value (\$ and promotions, etc.) as research." (Medicine)*

**The Role of Deans and Heads.** There is also clear agreement that deans and heads have a crucial role to play in improving the quality of university teaching. Highly rated were three of four items concerning ways in which deans and heads could support teaching.

*This is one of Dalhousie's management failures."*  
(Biology)

*"The largest hurdle to being more involved in teaching is the time factor. We are doing more clinical work with less staff. The finding of time to do more teaching is much more difficult."*  
(Medicine)

*"Main problems I see are due to chronically overworked faculty and low morale. More 'assessment' won't help much except to increase work for all. Better staff-student ratios would be significant."* (Sociology & Social Anthropology)

*"One of my main constraints when it comes to teaching is time. In a system which still values research more than teaching, your professors cannot put 100% into teaching. My teaching would be better if I had more time. I feel a great deal of lip service is paid to the value of good teaching, but when it comes to tenure, decisions on one's research record is what counts. I don't think this is right. I just think it is reality. Therefore, a change in the attitude of the senior faculty administrators is needed."* (Biology)

*"My view is that emphasis be placed on making time available to do a good job and rewarding that job - emphasis should not be placed on more committee work, more seminars, and more paperwork. This, more quickly than anything else, will alienate the faculty and torpedo the process."*  
(Medicine)

**Getting Feedback.** Another strategy for teacher development ranked 8th for the Dalhousie group and involves colleague assessment, for improvement purposes only, of materials such as course outlines, readings, assignments, and methods of evaluating student work. This practice may have been rated more highly than other developmental evaluation practices because it is relatively unthreatening, relying on the scrutiny of

materials which have been carefully developed and for which there is a common academic tradition. Respondents from all groups seem to prefer the familiar territory of print over the more intimidating classroom observation and review, even when the visitation is meant strictly to support the instructor's growth (ranked 21st by Dalhousie).

## LEAST PREFERRED PRACTICES

Generally, respondents from all groups shared similar views about what practices have the least potential to improve teaching. The most intriguing finding is that many of these practices involve the evaluation of teaching performance for personnel decisions or other administrative purposes ("summative evaluation"). The campus groups responded that it is important to value and reward teaching if we are to improve instruction in our universities. Yet they have little faith in the improvement potential of many of the standard teaching evaluation techniques listed in the questionnaire. Classroom observation and annual reports on teaching accomplishments, both for summative purposes, were among the lowest ranked items for all groups. One important exception was "end-of-term student feedback for summative purposes" which was rated higher by Dalhousie respondents than any other respondent group (rank 14, compared to 23 for the larger faculty, deans, and heads group and 34 for the instructional developers).

Two interpretations of the resistance to evaluation of teaching are possible. A rather 'hard-nosed' outlook would suggest that members of the academic community are dreaming in technicolour if they think that teaching can get the recognition and reward it deserves without being subject to summative evaluation devices designed to scrutinize performance. But surely academics are not so unreal-

istic as to think that teaching accomplishment will bring rewards without being subject to assessment. A more generous view would interpret these results as normal, given the thrust of the survey exercise. That is to say, respondents could not be expected to declare faith in essentially summative procedures, policies, and programmes for their impact on improvement. A classroom observation report for summative purposes is meant for your file, not as a part of a diagnostic process of growth and development. The problem with the 'generous view', of course, is that even when evaluative procedures are undertaken for summative purposes, one would hope that the long-term impact would be to improve teaching in the university classroom. In the short term a judgment on teaching effectiveness is made, but one hopes that these procedures would serve, in the end, as incentives to address improvement issues.

## SUMMARY COMMENTS

Many respondents commented on the linkages among the various policies and practices, noting the importance of a comprehensive and cohesive plan to enhance and support teaching at Dalhousie.

*"I feel that the most essential points are the creation of an atmosphere in which teaching effectiveness is valued, can be identified, and where there are opportunities for its improvement."*  
(Pharmacy)

*"Instill a sense of pride in teaching accomplishment through peer recognition, student recognition, and career reward."* (Medicine)

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## Teaching Improvement Practices

*(Ranked by confidence in potential to improve the quality of university teaching)*

Preferred Practices ("Top Ten" of 36 items on the survey questionnaire)	Faculty, Deans, & Heads				Instructional Developers	
	Dalhousie Only (N=295)		All (incl. Dalhousie) (N=906)		(N=331)	
	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean
Recognition of teaching in tenure and promotion decisions.	1	8.02	1	7.94	1	8.24
Deans/Heads foster teaching as an as an important aspect of academic responsibility.	2	7.80	2	7.65	2	7.94
Deans/Heads praise & reward good teaching.	3	7.33	6	7.11	8	7.29
Workshops on teaching methods for targeted groups.	4	7.08	3	7.15	7	7.30
Mentoring programmes & support for new professors.	5*	6.90	7	6.92	5	7.38
Temporary workload reduction for course development or revision.	5*	6.90	5	7.12	12	7.13
Hiring practices require a demonstration of teaching ability.	7	6.83	4	7.14	9	7.21
Consultation on course materials with faculty peers.	8	6.54	8	6.84	10	7.20
Deans/Heads promote a climate of trust which supports classroom observation for teaching improvement purposes.	9	6.51	15	6.41	4	7.47
Regular (non tenure & promotion) review of teaching effectiveness.	10	6.48	13	6.50	15	6.86

\* denotes tie.

Overall, the strongest confidence was in Deans and Heads fostering teaching "as an important aspect of academic responsibility," (64% of Dalhousie respondents rated this 8 or higher); "praising and rewarding good teaching"; and "creating a climate of trust which supports classroom observation for teaching improvement purposes."

*"I don't think rhetoric by senior administration will help faculty who need to see rewards of good teaching or consequences of poor teaching. Those who need to emphasize [the] importance of teaching are directors/unit heads who have regular contact with faculty."* (Pharmacy)

*"The single most important way to enhance teaching is for it to be seen to be valued at the department, tenure or promotion level. Heads, Deans, senior [Administrators] . . . must stop paying lip service to statements and union statements that promote teaching but do not necessarily see that the 'problem' is translated to reality."* (Medicine)

**Developmental Opportunities.** Remaining items seen to have high potential to improve teaching at Dalhousie and at universities elsewhere include two teacher support strategies often organized by an instructional development centre and/or a school or department: workshops on teaching methods for targeted groups (Dalhousie rank 4) and mentoring and support programs for new professors (5). Support for these and other developmental practices was often qualified by a reiteration of the primary importance of an appropriate reward system:

*"I have tended to rank reward and recognition highly in terms of the development of good teaching. This is based on the conviction that the incentive to use workshops, libraries, and other resources is driven by the perception that teaching is a valued and important activity, and that the*

*attainment of a high level of competence as a teacher will be 'rewarded' in one way or another."* (Medicine)

*"[Questions related to a] professional library, teaching awards, recognition in tenure & promotion, regular review of teaching, work-load reductions, and Deans & Heads provide funding for classroom research represent a package. As long as it is clear that published research is almost the only thing that advances one's career, adjustments to anything not in this package will have only minor effects. If it becomes clear that teaching ability has a significant effect on career progress, faculty will demand things represented by the other questions, e.g. collective agreement."* (Economics)

*"The most important factor that will improve teaching is a general recognition of its value within the University by the senior administration—as opposed to the present empty rhetoric. The second is the availability of useful resources such as the OIDT that will facilitate the initiatives of individual teachers. Any attempt to 'govern' teaching by imposing a rigid renewal system, or requiring reports, will simply act as a wet blanket and dampen whatever motivation and vigor there is."*

**The Problem of Time.** Tied for the fifth-place ranking is the "temporary workload reduction for course improvement or innovation." Indeed, many Dalhousie respondents commented on the lack of time to devote to teaching concerns:

*"For me, the main barrier to improving teaching is lack of time—there are just too many demands these days to do a list of other things on the campus."* (Earth Sciences)

*"Dalhousie does not have defined workloads, so "workload reduction" is impossible to assess.*