

**Professional Affairs Committee
Community, Collaboration & Cooperation
Roundtable Discussion
April 30, 2012**

What is the Meaning of Professional Excellence in a University Setting

David Sabiston, Moderator

Questions

1. What is Professional Excellence/ what is professional Competence?
 - o We assume excellence is above competence
 - o Annual Report system is a little suspect: Deans do not hear all they need to
2. How do we measure it?
3. Is it a series of actions or is it an attitude?
4. Are there components for measuring excellence in Teaching/Scholarship /Service?
5. Who gets to decide what is excellent for whom?
6. The role of the individual's character in fostering professional excellence?
7. Tension between applied role and teaching role.
8. What is professionalism within disciplines and departments, what part of professionalism is global at the University level / Department level?
9. How do we (financially) reward the excellence: full professor/ merit?
10. What is the meaning of the word excellence: different connotations for different people?
11. How do you relate MRU goals to faculty excellence?

What is Professional Excellence? What is professional Competence? And, who is going to decide?

We have to have some idea of what competence is to determine what qualifies as excellence

- TPC review determines competence for new faculty
 - o All the material reviewed by TPC: SEIs, Peer evaluations &c.
- Students play a role in deciding whether faculty are competent / excellent
 - o The individual also plays a role in this
- Getting hired in the first place: hiring committee determines competence. Perhaps we need to reflect on this initial process.
 - o These are very sensitive issues in relation to the part-time community
- Individual assessment – we come from different places with different standards and it takes time to understand what may or may not have been enough at other places may or may not be enough at MRU

Professional Excellence

- Excellence in relation to annual reports: if faculty only put forward what they consider to be excellent and chairs/deans only notice that which they think is excellent there seems to be a lack of controls in place to ensure that all activities are recognized.
- Measuring Professional Excellence/Competence at MRU:
 - o Hiring committee→TPC→Annual Reports→UTPC
- Freedom from coercion and freedom to do what should be done may be considered, and would foster, professional excellence.

Related Considerations

- Dual assessment: peer review and administrative level of review.
- Varying faculty roles cannot be assessed in the same way

Should we have our professional conduct evaluated formally?

- Should we have annual reports?
 - This is a way of keeping us accountable for our professional conduct
 - Portfolios would be a good way to account for oneself
 - The annual report is very static and does not fully reflect our professional roles
- What is meant by professional conduct?
 - The faculty role outside the classroom which can include academic governance, parliamentary procedure, faculty leadership, conflict resolution and mediation, labour relations
- It can be difficult to accommodate both academic freedom and professional conduct/ethical conduct
 - Academic freedom does not give the right to be disrespectful
- Who decides that someone does/does not exhibit professional conduct?
 - It seems to be the chair of the department
 - Primarily it should be oneself but students colleagues etc. play a role
- Situational determination of professional conduct: must conduct ourselves differently in different situations (i.e. GFC-Roberts Rules)
- Does professional conduct mean abiding by the rules?
 - We have rules governing teaching. Other than that, is it a function of external determination by rules imposed or is it an internal determination of what we know we should do in terms of Service, Scholarship, and relations with our Students and Peers.
 - There are obvious rules and other areas in which the rules are less clear and faculty are more vulnerable
 - There are expectations to be civil and engage in appropriate behavior
- The effect of unprofessional conduct in some can affect a faculty member's ability to use his/her voice in participation in the larger community: there are sometimes perceived consequences of using that voice.

Ethical behaviour

- Interactions among faculty and administration.
- The faculty has a code of ethics
- There should be an institutional code of ethics so we can have a standard across the university
 - Mentorship could assist in making faculty aware of the guidelines in place

Professional Conduct and Excellence, Considerations for New Faculty at MRU

- Proper professional conduct depends on modeling and communication (direct and indirect). Unfortunately, when we make statements, people think it is black and white. And, we do not always get the answers to the questions we ask. Moreover, with cross-cultural matters a professional person may make a cultural faux pas. There are a lot of covert things at play and it would be useful to have a faculty mentor program. We are hiring from various contexts and this would assist in acculturating new members.
 - There is no clear way to get the information you need
 - The culture in the institution evolves: new members do not have to simply adapt to what is here. People can get to know about the culture but there should be a process enabling the evolution of that culture.
- Five year tenure process provides opportunity to learn what professional conduct at MRU involves.
 - Learn the rules in these five years
 - Allows us to perceive in our colleagues what professional conduct means: both in behaviors to emulate/avoid.
 - Once through this process we can become models for our colleagues.

Further Questions:

- How do we merge the various perspectives so that new faculty members are aware of our culture while we enable them to bring new ideas to it?
- What are the good traditions and what are the things that need to be revised?
- Assertiveness can be mistaken for being aggressive/disrespectful: some people have problems with any kind of conflict. How much of communication is perception?
 - We need to be respectful but we need to be aware of the impact we have on others. Communication is a complicated thing.

Professional Excellence, and its rewards, in relation to all faculty roles: Teaching, Service, and Scholarship.

- It is difficult to separate these things when evaluating one's professional excellence. Being aware of the impact of the ideas we share is an awareness of diversity and results in ethical relations with one another. Without this awareness professional conduct towards each other is difficult.
 - In some Universities the individual and chair determine key performance indicators for the year. At the end of the year it is decided whether the individual has exceeded the goals by whatever percentage and there are proportionate financial rewards.
 - The ability to maintain respectful relations with colleagues in an open forum on 'conflictual' topics: as faculty we need to be able to have these discussions without management involved and bring the faculty voice forward.
 - A lot of what is being said comes down to voice. There are some people here now who are not speaking out and it would be useful to know if all present have a voice here or feel they cannot weigh in on the topic.
 - Definition of professional Excellence: coming in when you do not have to.
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Challenges in Assessing Students

Stefan Sikora, Moderator

Opening Comments:

- Assessment is totally subjective: there is no such thing as objective assessment.
- There is no basis for assessment without our subjective perspectives.
- There are challenges in conducting fair and accurate assessment of students subjectively.
- Assessment is an ongoing process: there are always conscious and subconscious types of assessment.
- As long as we are consistent with all students we assess we are being as fair and objective as possible.

Fair Assessment of Students

- What is fairness in assessment: is it contextual? If I assess someone in one way and another person in the same way is it consistent in itself or is there something else required. Is quantification of consistency required to be fair?
- Criteria established in the beginning and all students have the potential to succeed. There are shifts throughout the term in each student in terms of their relative chances of success in the course.
- It is unfair to a student to give a grade that is undeserved. Students continue on in their lives/to other institutions and they will have expectations based on the assessments they received here.

- The student is responsible for the acquisition of knowledge and the faculty members' responsibility to make the knowledge available to them. If they cannot take the step to acquire the knowledge we cannot move them forward from here.
- Grading scale in assessment: letter/percentage scales
 - Is it fair to convert a percentage to an arbitrary letter grade?
 - Overall GPA is indicative of student success and fairness of assessment
 - It is a student's right to get a grade
 - We need to ensure consistency in this process.
- Challenges in assessing true knowledge not a student's success ('A') in a course.
 - What are we privileging in assessment: good writers, student effort, good ideas?
- We need to ensure that all students are treated the same: this needs to include those students who do not express their difficulties/ask for help
- Faculty need to assess students in the same equitable way: the same level of assessment/requirements should be evident from class to class
- There are ways we can assess that we can feel good about (e.g. real world case study testing)

In order to assess you have to first decide what you want students to learn: objectives must be determined and the achievement of those objectives evaluated.

What is the purpose of assessment?

- If we can agree on the answer to this question it may answer some of the other concerns being raised
- Formative versus summative assessment: what is the balance and/or how do we find this balance?
- Assessments matching the requirements for positions that students need to have on the job beyond university.
 - Assessment can be simple in some cases: performance in accordance with industry standards.
 - The opportunity to provide students with feedback is more important than providing a grade.
 - Standardized exams: do we reward students for the ability to express the answer or for providing the right answer?
 - Need to take into account the course in question in order to answer this question.
 - Assessment needs to go along with the things students need to find in the material they are learning.
 - Need to consider audience in the development of assessment tools.
- Need to position ourselves in the shoes of our students to acknowledge why they were unable to complete certain elements of a task due to missing one small thing. If we recognize the student's ability, despite a small mistake, we will be being fair. Fairness is not something that is expressed in a quantitative manner: fairness is contextual. It depends on many things.
- We have been students we know what it is like: students seem to feel that some faculty here will assess student's understanding in relation to the faculty member's understanding. We should be assessing students' understanding at the end of a course in relation to their understanding at the outset.
 - Students cannot be held to the same standard of knowledge as faculty have.
 - The faculty role is to bring students to the same level of understanding (required level).
 - Faculty have different ways of presenting material and students respond differently to different modes of teaching.
 - We cannot pigeonhole assessment around the learner only: it is also dependent on the instructor: student performance in the classroom is a reflection on teaching.

- When you have students unwilling to meet the requirements of a course or a student who cannot do well on multiple choice exams is there a responsibility we have to treat such students differently?
- How many different ways do we have, as educators, to assess students to ensure they have the required knowledge to move into their professions?
- Multiple choice exams: the world outside of school is about choices. If students cannot make a choice here (out of 4) how are they going to make choices in the real world? This is an important skill they need to have as they go into their professions.
- There is nothing wrong with being a hard marker: we need to ensure that students are prepared for what they will face when we leave here.
 - No such thing as “hard” marker: it is “fair” to mark accurately

What are we assessing?

- Need to look at the depth of student submissions.
 - Do our expectations impact our assessment of students?
 - It depends on the course: some areas require very extensive knowledge of the facts (e.g. nursing). While, also, nursing students need to be assessed in clinical settings: this not as clear cut.
 - Parents, in raising kids, need to determine one of two things: supportive or adversarial relationship with them. Teachers have the same decision to make in how they will relate to their students.
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***The Paradox of Research:
Challenges to Teach and Research in the MRU Model***

Moderator: Deborah Smillie

This particular question has been circulating at MRU for the last several years. There is a high level of curiosity and some great ideas on this topic.

“What does research and scholarship mean for us now?”

Some related concerns that have been identified are:

- Time
- Financial Resources
- How do we create / improve the infrastructure to support research
- How do we account for the diversity of programs offered at MRU.
- Does the transition increase workload for those who are not in the TSS stream: what sort of implications are there on TS faculty members?

Financial Resources

- Why are we mandated to be hired to a TSS stream when there is insufficient support for this?
- Where does research fall in the vision of MRU: have we moved away from the vision we stated a few years ago?

Infrastructure/Community to support research (and teaching/service)

- How do we look at interdisciplinary research in the MRU context?
 - MRU is a different model and the research process is engaged in primarily in non-teaching terms.
- How people view the purpose of research and its wider application?
 - Teaching intensive universities still value scholarship. Boyer’s Model: scholarship of discovery has a higher premium than the other three.

SoTL is given the least value in scholarship even in teaching intensive Universities.

- How do I reconcile what MRU says is enough and what my discipline demands as appropriate?
 - If we seek promotion to professor eventually how is that to be achieved with only one peer review per year.
 - Need to maintain currency in our disciplines
 - Are the criteria for promotion here the same as at other Universities? If it is there will not be many faculty promoted here.
 - We need to remember what MRU is about and need to ensure that the resources are available to support faculty.
 - MRU is one of the last institutions that has almost four months for PD time: this does not exist at other Universities. This time is a means to support faculty roles (i.e. scholarship)
- As we try to involve more students in our research how are we going to balance the ability of students and the academic rigor required to be published in peer reviewed journals?
- Respect and collegiality is important in this as well. If someone is not doing research but is doing service they deserve as much respect as a faculty member doing research. We need to communicate effectively and support each other.
 - We should not negatively evaluate each other when there are extenuating circumstances preventing us from performing excellently in all roles (new faculty should not need to do extensive service)
- Requirement to be excellent at each and every facet of the faculty role. The annual report asks, “what are your awards and distinctions in ...[teaching research & scholarship]”
 - This is not very realistic: it is success to have done / participated in each of these things
 - Not all faculty can do as good a job at something as any other faculty member.

Faculty roles: conflicting priorities (time)

- The service load here seems extreme relative to other universities.
- Research occurs all the time: it is not just one day a week. It happens after class in the evening and on the weekend. Service is taking too much time for faculty and we all, especially tenure track faculty, need to ensure they are careful of which committees they get on.
 - Research days are very important and faculty should insist on maintaining them.
 - Meeting days need to be separate from research days within departments.
 - This is something faculty need to ensure for themselves.
- If anyone has been caught in the service thing it can be made to work. We need to learn how to say no to certain things when needed. We do shape the work that we do: this is not always the experience at universities.
 - Most universities are research focused and there is a half and half split between teaching and research. Here it is $\frac{3}{4}$ teaching. We, therefore, do not have the same time to devote to research and, also, do not have the same requirements for research.
 - If your plan is to go on to another institution where research is the priority then you are disadvantaged being at MRU but it is your responsibility to ensure that you meet the requirements expected of you at MRU (in addition to those you expect of yourself based on future aspirations)

Looking Forward

- There are people who have been here at MRU a long time and they know what MRU was, yet things change and MRU will evolve but it falls to those who follow to hold onto the important aspects of MRU that make it what it is. We are incredibly privileged at MRU.
 - We do need to learn to say no to some things as needed but we need to recognize what is great in what we have and preserve it for the years to come
- We are a collective we make the decisions: if you want things to change or stay the same then say that.
- TS/TSS: does anyone feel that the shift to more traditional university is occurring though we wanted to be a university with a difference?
 - Yes we are moving toward that
 - If faculty do not ensure we maintain the emphasis on teaching then we will lose it
 - It is the hiring committee decision whether to hire to TS or TSS
 - This shift seems inevitable but we need to work to curb it
 - The MRFA has a role in this: to be diligent and ensure faculty members know their rights
 - This shift is happening: it can be curbed by first looking at candidates' teaching skills (e.g. having candidates do teaching demonstrations to students is very effective in ensuring we hire good teachers: all departments should consider doing this)
- We asked to become a university: there are things that necessarily go along with being a university. We do value teaching still: we value scholarship and research in so far as it can inform teaching. Yet, we have asked to join the 'club' of Universities and we need to meet the standards associated with membership in this 'club'/classification as a university.
- How does research inform your teaching?
 - This is evident in many ways but manifests itself differently in different disciplines
 - We need to ensure that what we believe in goes forward
 - There is value in research that does not directly relate to our roles as teachers.
- Are we setting up TS to fail if we ask them to do scholarship of teaching?
 - TS is harder to evaluate than TSS as it is unclear as to how their teaching is to be informed by scholarship.
- Do TPCs evaluate TS faculty the same across the institution
 - There are documents that speak to this and we need to ensure that they are universally and consistently applies

Closing remarks

- The document on tenure and promotion was well written: this document seemed to give a sense of direction and define the MRU context and environment. We need to refine this document a bit to ensure its clarity.
- Is it possible to develop a program of research here that will be recognized internationally though the topics may change over the years based on the dynamic needs of students in the courses we are teaching?
- We are moving in the right direction we just need to refine some of our definitions.
- MRU is one of the best universities in Canada even in terms of providing the best opportunities for faculty.
- The highest standards were used when considering promotions to full professors. The criteria was not vague; rather, there was some room left for the selection committee members to determine the best candidates.