Assessing Academic Staff Performance

ALF 2015-2016

24 February 2016
Objectives

1. Identifying applicable University regulations and policies that are relevant to academic staff performance

2. Assessing under-performance by academic staff

3. Understanding the relationship between performance assessment and merit-based salary adjustment

4. Identifying some best practices and sources of support for academic leaders in relation to assessing academic staff performance
1. Applicable University Rules & Policies

What University regulations and policies govern performance by academic staff?
1. Applicable University Rules & Policies

*Regulations Relating to the Employment of Tenure Track and Tenured Academic Staff*

4.1 “Academic Duties” include:
(i) teaching (such as graduate and undergraduate courses, supervision of individual students and assessment of student work);
(ii) research and other original scholarly activities, and professional activities; and
(iii) other contributions to the University and scholarly communities.
1. Applicable University Rules & Policies

*Regulations Relating to the Employment of Tenure Track and Tenured Academic Staff*

**7.36** A member of the academic staff who is granted tenure shall maintain the high standards for which tenure is granted.
1. Applicable University Rules & Policies

*Regulations Relating to the Employment of Academic Staff*

**9.1** If a dean considers that there is cause, the dean may send a letter of reprimand to a staff member, recommend other disciplinary measures such as suspension, or recommend dismissal.
1. Applicable University Rules & Policies

Regulations Relating to the Employment of Academic Staff

9.4 “Cause” shall include:

c) persistent failure to maintain reasonable performance of the overall academic duties as set out in Sections 1.3.2., 3.1, and 5.59, including: i) teaching; ii) research and other original scholarly activities, and professional activities; and iii) other contributions to the University and scholarly communities, taking into account the pattern of such activities obtained within the department and faculty and the stage of the staff member’s academic career.
Case Study

You are the recently appointed Department Chair who has become aware that several tenured associate professors in your department are not performing adequately. One of your mid-career colleagues has an especially poor teaching record in terms of student evaluations and overall volume of teaching responsibilities. He’s published very little in the last 5 years, and has not supervised graduate students in 4 years. This colleague applied for a few grants at your predecessor’s urging, but these were unsuccessful. He has been a McGill Senator for the last 2 years.

This colleague received no merit-based salary adjustment for 3 years in a row, but last year was awarded a Category 3 merit-based increase. He acknowledges that he had difficult conversations concerning his performance with your predecessor, but the file contains very little documentation concerning the matter. When you inquire about these issues, your predecessor tells you that the colleague was allocated a Category 3 merit increase last year to deplete the unit’s allocation for annual salary adjustments even though performance had not improved and continued to fall considerably below expectations.
2. Assessing Under-Performance by Academic Staff

What approaches do academic leaders take to assess under-performance by academic colleagues, and what are the most significant challenges they encounter in this respect?
2. Assessing Under-Performance by Academic Staff

“There are no particular steps taken when colleagues receive consistently low ratings because the University does not allow me any tools with which to put pressure on people, apart from assigning them additional teaching, which would in some extreme cases simply mean giving more teaching to people who do a bad job of it, to the detriment of our students. It is therefore necessary in my opinion that the University institute formal procedures for review when people have persistent, long-term low performance in merit exercises.”
2. Assessing Under-Performance by Academic Staff

“Level 5 merit may generate [a] staff member complaint to MAUT. It should have Faculty-level review and consequences.”

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“One colleague has consistently been assigned a 4 or 5 on merit for the past 25 years. The colleague has not had a research program or graduate student over that period, but serves the [unit] in other capacities.”
2. Assessing Under-Performance by Academic Staff

“I understand that a professor may be terminated for a trend of low merit but I have no personal experience of it happening. I believe the process would be fraught with difficulty. Even our least meritorious professors arguably have some merit.”
3. Relationship between Performance Assessment & Merit Allocation

Merit-based salary allocations are meant to reflect the annual performance assessment of academic staff. In what instances might there be difficulty lining up performance assessment and merit allocation?
“In one way, I’m lucky because only one colleague received 4 twice. [...] In another way, I’m in trouble: since most colleagues are strong performers, I don’t always have the money necessary to adequately recognize their performance. This is one of the problems with the way money is distributed across departments. Controlling for size, a poorly functioning department receives the same amount as a striving one. [Emphasis in original response.]”
3. Relationship between Performance Assessment & Merit Allocation

“I accept that the merit exercise is a zero-sum process; not everyone can be at the top level. I take that very seriously and make sure I have a reasonable distribution. However, I am adamant in making sure that my recommendations reflect reality and not the need to balance out the levels. No one is rated low simply to balance out highly rated colleagues.”
4. Best Practices and Sources of Support

What are some best practices and sources of support for academic leaders in relation to assessing and guiding academic staff performance?
4. Best Practices and Sources of Support

COMPARE:

“[Communication is] [o]nly by a hard copy letter stating the $ amount allocated to the individual staff member. No overall statistics, no reasons or motivations, no feedback on what would have made a difference or what is expected for the coming year are given.”

“If I would have a 'bad' [Category 5] I would remind the colleague that 2 consecutive 'bad' will lead to dismissal, even with tenure, as it indicates that the job was not performed. I also point this out in the communication section (question above) that in [the] past few years at least one department I am aware of followed through and that I have every intention to do so if someone had this rating. Fortunately our department does not have any deadwood so I have never had to follow through on this threat. But I would, otherwise I think a) I would lose all credibility and b) not be doing my job.”
4. Best Practices and Sources of Support

Performance assessment is crucial to guiding and mentoring academic colleagues. It should involve:

• Transparent communication as to criteria for evaluating performance and the weight distribution allocated to different academic duties.

• Meetings with academic staff members following the evaluation process to (a) review performance over the reference period and (b) set goals for the forthcoming reference period.
4. Best Practices and Sources of Support

For colleagues struggling with performance, a (written) action plan should be established by the chair, dean and colleague, setting out:

• where shortcomings in performance lie;
• what must be achieved to reach performance expectations in the forthcoming reference period; and
• measures that will be put in place to support efforts to reach performance expectations, which may include:
  (a) periodic meetings of the faculty member, chair and dean to review progress;
  (b) assigning a mentor to provide support in areas requiring improvement; and
  (c) identifying other sources of support (e.g., TLS, OSR).
4. Best Practices and Sources of Support

Questions or requests for assistance can be directed to:

**Angela Campbell** (Associate Provost, Policies, Procedures & Equity) & **Line Thibault** (General Counsel) – on matters related to the application of regulations and policies

**Ghyslaine McClure** (Associate Provost, Budget & Resources) – on budgetary matters related to merit-based salary adjustments tied to performance assessment