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HEADS UP

How Not to Evaluate Your Department Head

Go ahead, submit a long, gossipy rant against your chairman, but prepare to be ignored

By [GARY A. OLSON](#)

Summer is the time of year when deans prepare annual-performance evaluations for their department heads. For most of us, the new fiscal year begins on July 1, so in the preceding months we ask professors and staff members to comment on their department chairs.

Many institutions survey employees anonymously, asking them to answer a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions about their supervisors. Deans then analyze the survey data and use it to write the formal evaluations. (Some institutions ask faculty members to evaluate the deans and presidents, too.)

Reading this year's surveys of department chairs and school directors caused me to reflect on how flawed the typical evaluation process is in most institutions. Every year, I am shocked anew by both the statistically low participation rate in the surveys and the high level of vitriol that often characterizes the prose comments that are submitted.

Deans at some universities report that participation in the annual evaluations can be as low as 15 percent of the faculty and staff, and typically hovers around 30 percent. Just about any dean in the country can relate stories of evaluations characterized by a shocking torrent of rage and invective, often in lengthy typed diatribes.

A dean of arts and sciences in New England once told me that she loses sleep over the sheer viciousness of some evaluation remarks. "The unrestrained cruelty and ferocity of the anonymous evaluation narratives would make you think they are about enemy soldiers in some far-off war and not a fellow colleague who just so happens also to be your department chair," she told me. "It's ridiculously over the top."

Another dean told me that he has had faculty members who used the annual-evaluation process to accuse their department heads of serious criminal behavior — always without a shred of evidence.

Here are three comments that are fairly representative of the genre, made about department heads at an institution other than my own. They've been slightly altered to protect anonymity.

- Smith "is a disaster as a chair. He simply doesn't have the intellect or ability to manage the department. Morale is the lowest it's been in years, and several of us are certain he's dipping into department funds for personal use. My 10-year-old could do a better job than this idiot."
- Jones "is a liar and a drunk. He promises to get faculty input on important decisions but then does whatever he wants. You can usually smell the booze on him before noon. The dean should fire this sorry excuse for a human."

- Doe "is the worst chair in the department's history. Her communication skills are nonexistent. Half the time, she can't even produce a grammatical sentence. She's a disgrace to our department."

While those responses are clearly harsh, they aren't the nastiest I've seen. I've read some containing foul language, racial slurs, and other forms of hate speech.

The other issue, of course, is why so many faculty and staff members fail to participate at all in evaluating administrators.

One reason is that the evaluation process occurs at the worst time of the year for professors, who are busy grading final exams, commenting on seminar papers, preparing for commencement, and finalizing summer-travel plans. Completing an evaluation survey is one more task on an already full plate.

Also, much like voting patterns in our national elections, participation seems lowest when things are going well. When people are satisfied with their departments, they tend to direct their attention to more pressing concerns; when they are dissatisfied, they turn out in record numbers. Serious concern about the chair's performance will catapult the evaluation process to priority status for employees, but otherwise, it is likely to remain a low priority.

That dynamic can pervert the evaluation process. Here's a scenario that happens all too frequently: An effective and popular chairwoman has led her department to tranquillity and prosperity but, nonetheless, has angered a small number of faculty members over certain controversial decisions. She receives a statistically damning evaluation because the majority of professors are so content that they choose not to participate in the evaluation survey while the minority seize the initiative to condemn the chair.

By choosing not to participate, faculty members often work against their own best interests, potentially allowing a perspective they do not agree with to carry more weight than it should. What's more, a low turnout helps to erode an important element of shared governance that should be taken seriously by all parties.

Low participation is easy to explain, but it is less apparent why some faculty members feel compelled to submit anonymous narratives so hateful that they keep deans (and, undoubtedly, their department heads) from a restful sleep. An official evaluation process conducted in a professional setting calls for a "professional" response — that is, one that is factual and thoughtfully crafted, not characterized by emotional tirades, inappropriate language, gossip, or ad hominem attacks.

Besides, a long and angry diatribe is a sure way to undermine the credibility of your critique. An over-the-top response suggests (at least to many readers) that the writer has an ax to grind, or — in the most extreme cases — is perhaps unstable.

One dean I know refuses to read evaluation responses that are longer than a few paragraphs. "If there is that much seriously wrong with the chair," he explained to me, "the author should not have waited all year to bring it to my attention and to do so shielded by anonymity."

Inappropriate language also undercuts the credibility of your response and signals that the statement may say more about you than about the supervisor you are evaluating. That is not to deny people's passion — positive or negative — about their department heads; it is to say that the formal-evaluation process is not the most appropriate forum for such displays.

Those of us who rely on surveys in preparing performance evaluations must be especially skilled readers of those texts.

We need to be able to set aside excessive verbiage, emotional displays, recriminations, and rumor in order to extract the specific information that speaks most directly and reliably to the chair's performance. We should never assume that any given version of "the truth" is entirely reliable.

For those of you who take the time to answer open-ended survey questions about your department heads, here are a few suggestions that will ensure we take your response seriously:

- Keep it short. Long-winded statements undermine your credibility.
- Keep it factual. As with an effective letter of recommendation, the facts are what carry the day — not the adjectives, embellishments, and opinions. The dean or other supervisor reading your comments needs precise details illustrating your point, not an interpretation of what the details mean.
- Avoid displays of emotion. They are out of place in a professional setting and lead us to question your motives.
- Avoid recriminations, gossip, and accusations unfounded in any direct observation on your part.
- Above all, participate! Failing to register your opinion about an administrator's performance is a sure way to leave your dean with an incomplete or skewed picture.

To be clear, I am not suggesting you avoid submitting a substantive response, only that you keep it specific and succinct. Nor am I suggesting that you avoid criticism, only that the criticism be precise and factual. Content is important but so are tone and form.

Faculty members like to say they value shared governance. A central element of that is the annual evaluation of administrators, and it behooves us all to take the process seriously.

Gary A. Olson is dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Illinois State University. He welcomes letters from readers (careers@chronicle.com). For an archive of his previous columns, see http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/heads_up.

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