

**Notes from “Talking About Teaching” session: *Writing Evaluations*
April 15, 2009 ***

Note: The comments here are meant to capture key points of discussion and presentation plus the general tenor of the exchanges.

Discussants: Jackie Hayden, Jim Wald, Laura Wenk.

Jackie Hayden

Jackie focused on writing Division III evaluations and emphasized the unique qualities of these evaluations. They can be used for graduate school admission and jobs, which is of course very serious. Jackie opens with a descriptive paragraph of the project, then analysis, and ends with a conclusion. She mentions the influences of the work and where they were derived from, saying we are all “gleaners.” She uses the student’s artist statement, in her own words. She usually uses quotes from the member as well.

Jackie also noted that for her, the best students are the hardest to write about. She attempts to write one Division III evaluation per day.

Jim Wald

Jim started with some general issues: what do students want from these evaluations? What does Hampshire want the evaluations to say? In his opinion, the statement on the Hampshire website about course evaluations is not crafted well.

Jim emphasized 10 aspects of evaluation writing at Hampshire:

1. Do them. It is our job
2. Do them on time. Late feedback is of little use—and extremely frustrating to students and parents.
3. In order to mean something, an evaluation must be earned, not given. Dogs show resentment when non-performers and those who carry out commands receive the same reward. Why should we expect students to be any different?
4. Make them useful to all intended audiences. This does not mean, as in school textbooks, assiduously avoiding controversy and writing to the lowest common denominator.
5. Students and committees rely on truly diagnostic evaluations for guidance.
6. In order to be diagnostic, evaluations must:
 - pay equal attention to strengths and weaknesses. Honesty is more important than kindness. As in the case of a letter of evaluation, a balanced assessment is the most persuasive.
 - address both individual progress and progress toward broader mastery of content and skills.
7. Consistency matters: Be aware that a paper rather than the permanent record may be the more appropriate place for specific harsh criticism—but that there is a

real problem if there is a discrepancy between the overall tenor of comments on individual papers or classes and that of the course or divisional evaluation.

8. Evaluations must be both honest and clear: An outsider to the Hampshire system should be able to read an evaluation and clearly tell where the student would fit on some universal as well as individual scale of performance.

9. Remember that evaluations—rather than admissions and promotional material—are the real public face of the College’s standards.

10. Most important - make them personal. The student should be able to tell that you have a real understanding of his/her interests and progress. An outside reader should likewise sense this intimate knowledge. We ask students to develop their own programs of study, and in exchange, we promise them individual attention. This is where we demonstrate that we have upheld our end of the bargain.

Chris Jarvis added that faculty need to make an evaluation of “F.” The eval/no eval choice does not say enough. Faculty need to write something about why the student is not doing well. “No eval” should not be an option. Put on the syllabus: “everyone will receive an eval.” An evaluation should explain why the performance was “bad.”

Laura Wenk

Laura first spoke about the different types of evaluations faculty write at the college. For Division I and II there are college-wide objectives. Division II is very much about the student’s own goals. Students put together their portfolios. For the Division II evaluation, Laura first describes the work. She then “talks across the evaluations” to capture the process and the product. In their retrospective Laura asks students to reflect on the strategies that help them do their best work. What are they poised to do? Laura prefers not to use quotes but thinks that it is better to summarize with some new analysis.

For Division I, the evaluation should cover distractions, explorations, strengths and weaknesses. Where is this going? What are the patterns?

Cyndy Gill: There is one set of criteria and students either meet it or they do not. Sometimes there are different skill levels. Faculty need to consider where a student begins, and ends. Feedback should be adjusted to address this progress.

Tom Haxo: Individuals are very different and thus standardizing the language is confusing. The evaluation communicates to the student, to others, and to the future. Some students work very hard, and do not have a good result.

Laura Sizer: Evaluations are analogous to grades – with grades, Fs and Ds don’t count.

Charlene D’Avanzo: When asked about evaluations, students say they want to hear more of the negative aspects. They also want to hear about what they need to work on.

Aaron Berman: Why don't the Div III evals appear first a students' transcript?

Neil Stillings: Courses are listed for the 5 colleges on the Hub – with grades! Where does this go? Who sees it? Does the system really work?

Bob Rakoff: There is wide variation among evaluations. Some are very long, some are short, some include excerpts. Excerpts are over used. Do they serve a purpose in Division II?

Laura Wenk: If students think they don't need to come to class but only turn in the final paper, is that OK? What you do in a class *follows you*.

Since the Hub has been in place, some faculty have gone to the second paragraph, done analysis and added excerpts. *The 900 character rule is confining*. Who developed this anyway?

Tom Haxo: Playing Devil's advocate, it is easier for faculty to write less than more. Think about what is gained and what is lost by writing a long piece. Better to be clear, to the point, neat.

Neil Stillings: Write 900 characters and that should be sufficient!

Laura Sizer: She writes a first paragraph description, then a second short paragraph to give a sense of the work, and the third paragraph is aimed at graduate schools.

Cyndy Gill: Students have the feeling that others are getting the same evaluation. There is also a culture of the squeaky wheel – "I don't do any work" is a common remark from students. The Division III students are often invisible because they are in labs, working hard. Who are the Division Is hearing from? They are often disconnected. In their first year, students are not exposed to Division III students working.

Jackie Hayden: There is a social need and culture which is absent if there is no special space for students, like a building. Those who enjoy a home base have a good place to connect and learn about what other students in the school are doing.

Tom Haxo: Students should see 3rd year students, understand the culture, see work across levels.

Charlene D'Avanzo: When she writes a Division III evaluation, she thinks carefully about the audience. Often it is graduate school, and she writes as if to a colleague in her review.

Tom Haxo: Someone reviewing the Division III will first look at the work, and then at the evaluation.

Laura Sizer: It is important to couch criticisms. They should not be mean or rude, but stick to facts. Let's read the evaluations together!

Charles Ross: Should the Division III evaluation represent the whole career?

Jackie Hayden: No, it speaks only to the last year.

Neil Stillings: In a letter to graduate school, the paragraph about Division II needs to address research skills etc. It should be very precise – often he knows the faculty member he is writing to.

Jackie Hayden: Has imposed a limit of letters of recommendation to seven schools!

* The Resources section of the CTL website contains several handouts concerning Division I and II (<http://www.hampshire.edu/ctl/11243.htm>)