

# **Performance Reviews for Faculty: Steering the Course Towards a Learning Community**

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**Presented at:**

**The Chair Academy Annual Conference  
March 7 – 10, 2007  
Jacksonville, Florida**



## **Performance Reviews for Faculty: Steering the Course Toward a Learning Community**

### Introduction

George Brown College engaged in a cross-college consultation process in 2004 to refresh and renew its academic strategy for the next five years. The extensive community building and learning process resulted in one key academic strategic priority: “Make excellence in teaching and learning the hallmark of a George Brown College education”. The College then went on to identify nine key recommendations that were seen as critical to achieve our academic strategy. One of these recommendations was: “Implement (faculty) performance review that supports “dual professionals”. For further information regarding George Brown College’s Academic Strategy visit: [www.georgebrown.ca](http://www.georgebrown.ca).

Prior to 2004, the College had attempted a number of times to implement a faculty performance review process, but for very good and varied reasons the implementation of any such process was not sustained. In 2004, the primary feedback to post- probationary faculty regarding their teaching came either through what the faculty initiated in the class or elsewhere themselves, through student feedback questionnaires or through a provincially administered overall student satisfaction questionnaire. This survey, referred to as the Key Performance Indicator (KPI) survey, primarily measures the students’ satisfaction with a program and not with an individual teacher’s effectiveness. Consequently, the College lacked a robust environment in which teachers’ excellence in teaching was a subject of focus or discussion. In fact, the teachers themselves expressed that apparently the College had shifted away from focusing on the role of the teacher in creating a positive learning environment as primary to the success of our students to focusing on other secondary priorities.

The College stressed the importance of ensuring this recommendation was carried through to successful implementation. Building upon the strengths of our faculty and recognizing the impact of excellence in teaching and learning on students' lives is believed to be a critical transformational requirement for the College to achieve its key strategic objective.

The College in rolling out this initiative noted that all other employee groups within the College are provided with performance feedback; the process of focusing on teaching and learning to build improvement and excellence requires that the College make time and pay attention to this key activity; the research reveals that feedback and acknowledgement to faculty are critical for renewal, engagement, retention and excellence. How could the College aspire to make excellence in teaching and learning a hallmark of a George Brown College education if the College was not defining excellence in teaching and learning, was not measuring our progress against this strategic objective and did not have a process in place to recognize and reward this critically important activity?

### The Process

In order to move this recommendation of the Academic Strategy forward, the College established a small working group. This group reviewed previous faculty performance review programs at the College, what other Colleges were using for faculty performance review, conducted research on the various models and best practices, and conducted a series of interviews to determine what type of model could be successfully implemented and sustained at George Brown College. The group established some key principles and values that were embedded into the performance review process:

1. A process that will build a strong community of teachers/learners focused on creating a positive learning environment for students;
2. A process that fosters engagement and self-reflection;
3. A process that is manageable, operational and sustainable;
4. A process that will allow us to differentiate between different teaching and learning styles and that recognizes teachers bring both varied teaching skills and the application of their industry experiences to the learning environment.
5. A process that would be seen as valuable and meaningful towards achieving our strategic goal.

This group then used a number of regular standing College committees as a sounding board through the development of the proposed model.

#### The Proposed Model

The working group established a proposed faculty performance review model incorporating the following activities:

1. The Development of a Teaching Portfolio or Dossier
2. Peer observation and support within a classroom setting
3. Chair (Academic Leader) observation and support within a classroom setting
4. Summary meeting between the Chair and the faculty member with a memo outlining completion of the process, the key findings and a plan.

The College invited approximately 30 faculty and 20 academic leaders to engage voluntarily in a pilot project over the period from September 2006 until December

2007. Their feedback on the model will inform the College regarding any changes required to the model and how to ensure an effective operational, sustainable implementation of the final agreed-upon process.

### Components of the Model

The following outlines some details on each of the components.

#### 1. Teaching Portfolio/Dossier Development

The development of a faculty portfolio fosters self-reflection and analysis by the teacher of his/her own professional practice. The faculty member starts by creating a personal philosophy of teaching and discussing this philosophy with other colleagues. Through the development and discussion of the philosophy, the faculty begin to identify how their own philosophy shapes their practice. Other components included in the portfolio are: copies of student feedback questionnaires, curriculum activities, course outlines, evaluation rubrics, professional development activities, et cetera. The intent of the portfolio is that it will be developed, added to, and amended over the years and will serve as a constant touch point for faculty members as they progress in their teaching career.

The development of the Portfolio/Dossier occurs in several ways: on-line support is provided by the Institute for the Advancement of Teaching in Higher Education, faculty work independently on the Portfolio creation, and faculty meet in small groups each four to six weeks. The feedback from the faculty has been positive; small group discussions have provided an opportunity for faculty to talk with one another in a focused manner about the teaching and learning

environment which has resulted in a sense of community developing among those engaged in the project.

## 2. Peer Observation

The College started by calling this “peer evaluation”. This concept progressed as we further reflected on what outcomes we hoped to achieve through peer evaluation. It was clear many were uncomfortable with the concept of being evaluated by their peers who might lack the appropriate personal or professional skills or sensitivities to provide effective evaluation. The concept evolved to one of “peer feedback” to “peer coaching” to “peer support” to finally “strength-based feedback”. All faculty members in the pilot receive very specific training in how to provide and give support; how to recognize and build on a colleague’s strength and how to outline constructive information that could help the faculty member manage things in the learning environment that obstruct successful teaching and/or students’ learning. The only formal documentation resulting from this peer observation is a one page memo documenting the time, participants and dates of the peer observation. This memo will form part of the teacher’s portfolio. This part of the pilot is currently unfolding and we are anxiously awaiting the feedback.

## 3. Chair (and/or Academic Leader) Observation

It is important to the College that faculty believe their academic leader is interested in and supportive of their teaching activity. The College aims to have a reputation for excellence in teaching and to foster superior teaching performance. The College also wants to foster a learning community. Therefore, the academic leadership must also demonstrate active engagement in this process. The working group then ensured one component of the model is a Chairperson's observation of a faculty member's class. The academic leaders undergo the same training in "Strength Based Feedback" as the faculty. The Chair initiates a classroom observation by arranging a mutually convenient time to attend a class with the faculty member. An important aspect of the model is a pre-observation conversation that takes place between the Chairperson and the faculty member. During this meeting, the Chairperson and faculty member discuss: what is the faculty's teaching philosophy, and what kinds of things can the Chair expect to see in the class as a manifestation of that philosophy; what does the faculty member see as her/his strengths and what might the Chair see in the class that demonstrates that strength; what are the outcomes for the class; is the faculty attempting something new, innovative or different in this class; are there specific things the faculty would like feedback on; are there specific challenges in this particular class; and finally, how would the faculty like to receive the feedback? (This is the same set of questions used in the peer support sessions)

Following the class observation, the Chair will meet with the faculty member privately and reflect on the experience continuing to use the strength based approach.

#### 4. Summary Meeting and Plan

The final component of the model is a summary meeting between the Chair/academic leader and the faculty member. At that meeting, the faculty member will show his/her portfolio and discuss the observations gained through the reflective process, the class observations, and the peer support. The Chair and faculty will discuss the faculty member's strengths and areas for future development, exploration and/or professional growth. The Chair will develop a summary memo indicating that the process has been completed, the meeting was held and outlining the key items discussed at the meeting. This memorandum will be placed on the faculty member's human resources file.

#### The Issues

The working group has faced a number of challenges in bringing forward a model and for any performance review process to be successful, the group had to understand why certain topics or issues were challenges and what options could be considered to continue to move the project along towards full implementation. Some of these issues faced include:

1. Developing a process that would focus on building strengths, be vibrant and engage both Chairs and faculty – not be seen as just a required documentation process;
2. Ensuring the process tended more toward encouragement of reflection and critical analysis rather than to excessive documentation;

3. Ensuring that any program would be sustainable in this environment;
4. Dealing with faculty and Faculty Union concerns that the goal of any performance review process is “to weed out the poor performers”;
5. Dealing with the faculty and Faculty Union concerns that “peer evaluation” is inappropriate in a collegial environment; and finally,
6. Ensuring that the Chairs and peers had the right training and approach to provide strength-based feedback in a confidential, discrete and professional way.

The College believes that focusing and building on the strengths of our faculty, by initiating professional development opportunities that encourage discussion about and engagement in the teaching profession will foster deeper understanding of a supportive learning approach and will ultimately lead to transformation of the teaching and learning environment at George Brown College. The College is still very much in the midst of this journey but we are all excited by the knowledge that others will soon say that we have achieved our goal of “making excellence in teaching and learning a hallmark of a George Brown College education.”