Creating Effective Faculty Improvement Plans[1]

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Occasionally faculty members experience problems in satisfactorily completing their faculty assignments. This paper is intended to help department chairs and their faculty members create plans for guiding improvements in their teaching, research and original creative work, and service. A written faculty improvement plan provides a structure for planning, evaluating, and monitoring improvement.

During the annual faculty evaluation by the department chair (or equivalent), the faculty member is rated as "Satisfactory," "Official Concern," or "Inadequate" in seven areas, including teaching, spoken English competency, research and other creative activity, service to the university and the community, service to the public schools (where appropriate), other university duties (specify), and overall performance.

> If an annual evaluation rating is either "Official Concern" or "Inadequate," the evaluator must provide the faculty member specific recommendations in writing to assist the faculty member in achieving a "Satisfactory." When the overall performance is "Inadequate," a copy of the Annual Faculty Evaluation Summary form with appropriate recommendations for improvement must be forwarded to the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs and the President through the Dean of the Faculties.[4]

Problems with the Current Design and Use of Faculty Improvement Plans

Considerable variability exists in the quality of faculty improvement plans. Some plans for improving teaching, research and original creative work, and service are too brief and provide little guidance for the faculty member on how to improve. The lack of specificity also makes it difficult for the department chair to monitor faculty progress in completing the plan and to know the criteria indicating when adequate improvement has occurred. In some cases, even when the plan is specific, the connection in the plan between problems and strategies for improvement, improvement objectives, and interventions is unclear, again making it difficult to implement. In sum, the lack of well-designed improvement plans can leave faculty members unsure of how to improve their performance and what resources might be available to help them in completing their plan.

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[1] This paper is intended to be used along with *Successful Faculty Performance in Teaching, Research and Original Creative Work, and Service* and *Guidelines for Writing Annual Evaluation Letters for Faculty Members.* (The citations for these documents are available in the reference section of this paper.)

[2] Author information is provided before the sample faculty improvement plan at the end of this document.

[3] 314 Westcott Building, 222 S. Copeland Avenue, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1480, (850) 644-6876, http://dof.fsu.edu/

[4] Memorandum on the "Annual Evaluation of Faculty" from the Dean of the Faculties and Deputy Provost (http://dof.fsu.edu/forms/Evaluation_form_2008.pdf; January 21, 2010).

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Roles and Responsibilities in Creating and Using Faculty Improvement Plans

The faculty member has the responsibility for improving performance in teaching, research and original creative work, and service (including the completion of a plan for improvement). The department chair ensures that the faculty member has access to the resources needed to improve performance problems noted in an annual evaluation, including the creation and use of a faculty improvement plan. As opposed to approving the plan, the department chair accepts the plan, comments on its use, and notes any outcomes in the subsequent year's annual evaluation letter. The only exception to this is the required improvement plan resulting from an unsatisfactory rating on a sustained performance review. In this case, the faculty member develops the plan with input from the department chair that is then approved by the president or his or her representative. The department chair then monitors the faculty member's progress in completing the performance targets included in the plan. Resources necessary for the completion of the plan are provided as appropriate.[5]

Characteristics of Successful Faculty Improvement Plans

Successful improvement plans are most amenable to problems that involve one or more learning events (sometimes in sequence), along with appropriate feedback on the faculty member's progress. An example would be a plan to help a faculty member submit competitive grant applications. The plan would involve attending workshops on grant writing; learning about the characteristics of a successful proposal, the steps in preparing a proposal, and specific requirements for grant submission at the university; and receiving mentoring and feedback on draft proposals from another faculty member who has been successful in obtaining external funding. Successful plans also involve the faculty member's input in creating the plan, as opposed to executing a generic plan. The faculty member is responsible for submitting the plan that is then accepted by the department chair. The department chair may make recommendations on revising the plan.

Elements of Faculty Improvement Plans

Some design elements for performance improvement plans are common to teaching, research and original creative work, and service, while other elements are unique. Common elements deal with the process and unique elements deal with the content.

Common Elements of Faculty Improvement Plans

Designing plans with common elements organized in a similar format has several advantages: (a) making it easier for department chairs and mentors to review each plan; (b) allowing a comparative analysis of plans developed in departments, colleges, and the university; and (c) making it easier to evaluate the effectiveness of plans. Common elements of improvement plans could include a brief description of the following:

- Problem that needs resolving
- Strategies for resolving the problem (including learning resources and mentoring)
- Estimated date for completing each strategy

[5] Sections 10.8(b)(2) and 10.8(a)(2) of the *Collective bargaining agreement between the Florida State University Board of Trustees and the United Faculty of Florida 2007-2010*. Also: http://dof.fsu.edu/Faculty-Development

- Resources needed to implement strategies

A faculty improvement plan can address teaching, research and original creative work, service, or some combination of these areas of work.

Unique Elements of Faculty Improvement Plans

Unique elements in an improvement plan relate to content items that follow. Information on some of these unique elements may be found in *Successful Faculty Performance in Teaching, Research and Original Creative Work, and Service*. After each element, potential strategies for resolving the problem are identified. In some cases, Web-based resources are also provided. These strategies and resources are only illustrative, as other options may be more appropriate for a specific problem.

Improvement Plans for Teaching

Performance improvement plans for teaching could be used to address problems related to:

- Instruction in classroom and distance courses
  - Resources from the Center for Teaching and Learning (http://learningforlife.fsu.edu/ctl/)
    - Best practices (http://learningforlife.fsu.edu/ctl/explore/bestPractices/)
    - Online resources (http://learningforlife.fsu.edu/ctl/explore/onlineresources/index.cfm)
    - Modify your teaching approach (http://learningforlife.fsu.edu/ctl/collaborate/modify/; resources address writing a teaching improvement plan, analyzing SPOT scores, and improving your teaching with feedback)
    - Strategies for using student ratings on SUSSAI to improve teaching (http://learningforlife.fsu.edu/ctl/collaborate/modify/docs/InstImprovStrategies.pdf)
    - Creating a teaching improvement plan (This includes a blank and sample plan.) (http://learningforlife.fsu.edu/ctl/collaborate/modify/teachingimprovement.cfm)
    - Instruction at FSU: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Practices (http://learningforlife.fsu.edu/ctl/explore/onlineresources/I@FSU.cfm)
- Instruction in variable credit courses[6]
  - Mentoring on supervising student performance in variable credit courses
- Course content and design
  - Mentoring on creating, evaluating, and revising course content and design
  - Peer review of syllabi
  - Reviewing syllabi from other similar courses

[6] Examples of variable credit courses include directed individual study, supervised research, and supervised teaching.

  - Resources from the Center for Teaching and Learning
    - Effective syllabi (http://learningforlife.fsu.edu/ctl/explore/bestPractices/syllabi.cfm)
    - Writing learning outcomes (http://learningforlife.fsu.edu/ctl/explore/bestPractices/learningoutcomes.cfm)
- Management of multiple course sections[7]
  - Mentoring on (a) selecting and supervising instructors, (b) common syllabus design, and (c) use of instructional technology
- Chairing master's and doctoral degree supervisory committees
  - Mentoring on (a) managing student progress, (b) academic policy and procedures, (c) campus resources to support research, and (d) managing the supervisory committee process
- Academic advising
  - Mentoring on communicating with and relating to students
  - Information on academic programs and regulations

Improvement Plans for Research and Original Creative Work

Performance improvement plans for research and original creative work could be used to address problems related to:

- Quality of research and original creative work
  - Mentoring on factors that contribute to and detract from quality in research and original creative work
- Programmatic approach to research or focus of original creative work[8]
  - Mentoring on the characteristics of a successful program of research or focus of original creative work
  - Assistance from peers in creating a successful program of research or focus of original creative work
- Productivity in research and original creative work
  - Mentoring on planning research and original creative work in a way that maximizes quality

[7] *Management of multiple course sections* involves coordinating the ongoing design, development, and delivery of instruction for a course having several sections that are taught by various faculty members, graduate students, or adjunct faculty. Responsibilities typically include leadership in development and/or selection of course materials, revision of course content based on evaluations, selection of instructors, and arrangement of instructional technology for the course. When the course is taught by graduate students or adjunct faculty members, regular supervision and evaluation of instructors may be involved.

[8] Refer to *Successful Faculty Performance in Teaching, Research and Original Creative Work, and Service* for additional information on establishing and maintaining a program of research or a focus of original creative work.

- Securing and managing contracts and grants
    - Peer review of contract and grant proposals and mentoring on (a) how contract and grant work relates to a program of research or focus original creative work, (b) the process of obtaining grants, and (c) strategies for successfully managing contracts and grants

Improvement Plans for Service

Performance improvement plans for service could be used to address problems related to:

- Program, department, and university committee assignments or administrative tasks
    - Mentoring on strategies and resources for successfully completing committee assignments or administrative tasks
- Successfully collaborating with other faculty, support staff, or administrators
    - Mentoring on successful collaboration with others, with services provided by the FSU Employee Assistance Program as appropriate

Limitations of Faculty Improvement Plans

Not all problems associated with teaching, research and original creative work, and service can be easily formulated into an improvement plan. For example, problems with a faculty member's academic advising stemming from out-of-date information on academic programs and regulations can be resolved with independent learning on the part of the faculty member and consultation with academic affairs staff. However, a faculty member's difficulty in communicating with and relating to students is a more complex problem and difficult to solve. Mentoring and/or services provided by the Employee Assistance Program may be appropriate for dealing with this situation.

Potential Use of Informal and Formal Faculty Improvement Plans

Two types of improvement plans exist: informal and formal. An informal plan provides specific recommendations for improvement that are documented in a faculty member's annual evaluation letter. Improved performance, or a lack of improvement, is noted in the subsequent year annual evaluation letter. A formal written improvement plan is submitted by a faculty member and accepted by a supervisor. The plan includes (a) the problem that needs resolving, (b) strategies for resolving the problem (including learning resources and mentoring), (c) estimated dates for completing each strategy, and (d) resources needed to implement strategies. As with the informal plan, improvement or lack thereof is noted in the following year's annual evaluation letter. Figure 1 depicts the potential use of informal and formal improvement plans. A sample blank form is provided at the end of this paper that can be used for formal improvement plans.

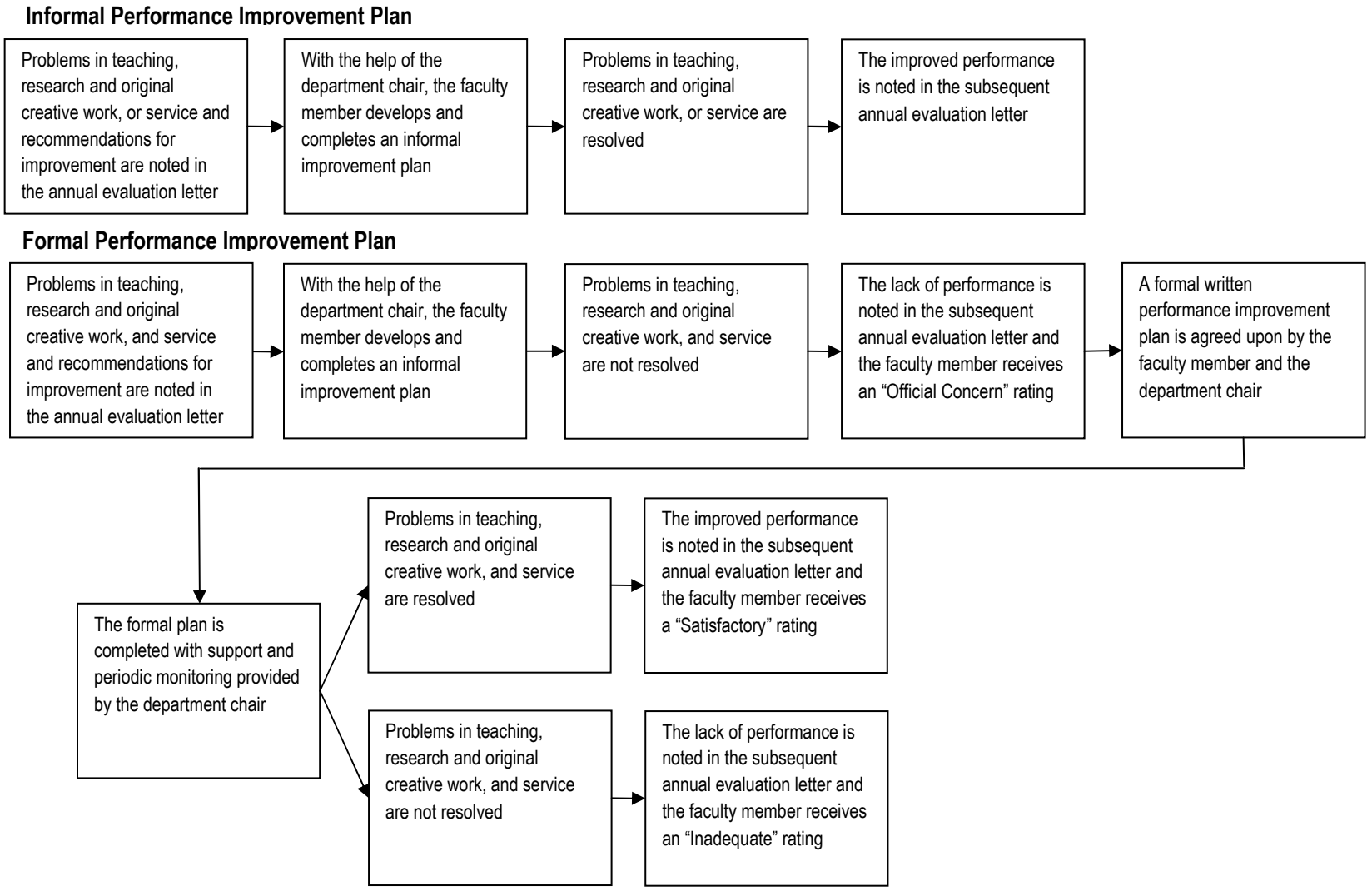

Figure 1. The Use of Formal and Informal Plans for Improving Faculty Performance

Suggested Policies for the Design and Use of Faculty Improvement Plans

Recommended policies for the design and use of faculty improvement plans are as follows:

- Department chairs need to periodically monitor faculty progress in completing their improvement plan. At a minimum, this would occur once a semester.
- Both mentors and department chairs can be involved in helping faculty create, monitor, and evaluate performance improvement plans.
- The recommendations for improvement should be included in the annual evaluation letter.
- The completion of a performance improvement plan and any related change in teaching, research and original creative work, or service performance should be included in the subsequent annual evaluation letter written by the department chair.
- These recommendations should also be included in the faculty member's annual evaluation letter.

References

Florida State University Board of Trustees and the United Faculty of Florida (2008). *Collective bargaining agreement between the Florida State University Board of Trustees and the United Faculty of Florida 2007-2010.* Tallahassee, FL: Author. Retrieved February 17, 2010, from http://dof.fsu.edu/Collective-Bargaining

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Faculty Improvement Plan

Problem that needs resolving:
Strategies for resolving the problem (Estimated completion date):
Resources needed to implement strategies:

Faculty Member		Supervisor	
Faculty Signature	Date	Supervisor Signature	Date