

TEACHING EXCELLENCE AT THE SCHOOL OF INFORMATION UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Introduction

This document aims to outline some of the underlying principles for what constitutes excellence in teaching at the School of Information (iSchool) and to identify some of the ways that those who teach within the iSchool, especially tenure-track faculty members and lecturers, can achieve excellence. The document is to help faculty members, administrators, and others at the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin) and beyond to understand and assess the teaching philosophy and performance of the iSchool faculty. It will be successful to the extent it helps faculty members reflect on, improve, share, and explain their instructional activities and to the extent it helps others understand those activities. This document supplements the iSchool's research excellence statement of January 2010 and will support discussion about service excellence by faculty members.

Fundamental Assumptions

This document identifies several of the most commonly recognized activities to enhance a faculty member's teaching activities in the iSchool in order to achieve both competence (required) and excellence in teaching (recommended). We expect faculty members at the iSchool to be nationally recognized leaders in the pursuit of new knowledge, in the research enterprise, and in other facets of professional work. Scholars at the iSchool are also expected to reach the highest level of performance they can in their teaching while recognizing that their first goal should be to accomplish excellence in research as reflected in the faculty annual review guidelines.

Purpose of a Document on Teaching Excellence

The purpose is to provide additional guidance for iSchool faculty about achieving excellence in teaching and will also be used in evaluating faculty members as teachers.

Of the seven areas described below, the first two (1. Instruction and 2. Instructional Design and Assessment) specify expectations for faculty members at all levels in achieving competence in their teaching. The final five are potential paths that iSchool faculty members can take in their pursuit of excellence in their teaching.

1. Instruction

Within the iSchool, faculty members need to explicitly share in teaching in both the master's and doctoral core classes as well as in heavily subscribed electives.

In addition, they often teach electives in areas of their research expertise as well as in areas they wish to explore further. They support the undergraduate iSchool minor through such activities as helping doctoral students develop as teachers.

The following statements reflect the behaviors, actions, and principles that faculty follow in striving for not only competence but excellence in their roles as educators. These actions can be incorporated in a variety of educational settings, whether they are classrooms, individual studies and Capstones (including the Professional Experience and Project, school library practica, master's theses, and master's reports), and doctoral qualifying research papers, written and oral examinations, dissertation proposals, and dissertations. Faculty should:

1. demonstrate and model listening while communicating with their students to help share and create knowledge;
2. invite open discussion of important ideas;
3. be available to students by responding promptly to students' inquiries and working with students to negotiate needed face-to-face meetings;
4. explore a variety of approaches to engage students, balancing course organization with needed flexibility;
5. provide individual and group learning experiences that support group and individual achievement;
6. create and maintain invigorating and respectful learning environments;
7. introduce students to the classic and latest literature and research in the field while they also may share their own experiences and opinions;
8. select the pedagogic approach(es) they believe are the most appropriate in a given situation.

2. Instructional Design and Assessment

Excellent teaching is also reflected in the design of courses and in the criteria used to assess students' achievement. The most tangible expression of instructional design and assessment is the course syllabus. In efforts to attain competence and move to excellence, faculty should make their complete course syllabi available to students for the first class day if not before. While the syllabus provides structure and consistency, faculty members also recognize the need to be flexible to achieve both instructional rigor and fairness. The syllabi should identify:

1. the goals and objectives for the course;
2. a schedule of course topics;
3. reading assignments;
4. a listing of written and other course assignments with descriptions, evaluation criteria, and grading scheme(s).

Excellent instructors employ appropriate means to measure students' learning. The iSchool expects that all instructors provide students with directions for assignments based on the instructor's expected mode(s) of evaluation before work is submitted and

communicate their assignment evaluations with sufficient detail and promptness to enable students to understand how their work is evaluated and to improve subsequent assignments. Faculty share the evaluation metrics they will follow to:

1. assess students' writing and oral presentations;
2. evaluate students' preparation for and participation in class interactions;
3. grade examinations; and
4. evaluate students' group work for content, creativity, and achievement of results.

Instructors should continuously evaluate not only their students' achievements but also their own. In addition to conducting formalized end of course evaluation, good teachers incorporate students' and others' sound advice and suggestions from course evaluations into continual improvement of course material and instruction.

The iSchool encourages faculty to welcome and solicit regular peer evaluation of teaching, activities that are especially important for new faculty members, whether junior or senior. Faculty members in the iSchool will especially aim to maximize and celebrate the interdisciplinarity of the school and the field in their teaching, and such efforts will be an important element of peer observation of teaching. Further details on peer observation of teaching are in Appendix A.

Annual, third-year, tenure and promotion, and post-tenure reviews are mandated by the university. They provide faculty members the opportunity to submit evidence of their pursuit of teaching excellence. This evidence can be in the form of formative as well as summative evaluation, descriptions of instructors' future plans, and reflections on their teaching roles. Reflections on teaching are means to demonstrate development—and improvement—in teaching over time. Appendix B is a list of unweighted metrics against which faculty may measure their progress in attaining excellence in instructional design and assessment.

In addition to these first two required areas of pursuit of teaching excellence, Instruction and Instructional Design and Assessment, the iSchool faculty recognizes that there are multiple other areas in which teaching excellence might be pursued and achieved. What follows are examples of five such areas.

3. Professional Development

Faculty should continue to learn and advance their knowledge about the areas in which they teach as well as keep abreast of the pedagogical developments with a view to integrating these in their courses. They can demonstrate their professional involvement as it relates to teaching through a number of activities. These include:

1. contributing to curricular evaluation and change in the iSchool;
2. engaging in teaching cooperation across the university;
3. continuing to learn about teaching;

4. taking advantage of the teaching support services available at UT-Austin such as those available from the Center for Teaching and Learning (<http://ctl.utexas.edu/>);
5. taking advantage of teaching training offered by their professional societies; and
6. participating in other pedagogic activities such as accreditation and curricular reviews in other educational institutions.

4. Presentations

Faculty should share their skills and knowledge through modalities that enable them to build community within and beyond the academy and the courses they teach. Among these activities are developing and delivering continuing education programs including workshops, tutorials, continuing education sessions, and webinars. These opportunities enhance the reputation of the iSchool and place the instructor in contact with others who might serve as future research team partners and/or as field hosts for students' research, Capstones, or other work.

5. Leadership and Providing Opportunities for Teaching Excellence to Others

Faculty members who have attained excellence in teaching also may help others—fellow faculty members, doctoral students, master's students, and undergraduate students—become better teachers. In order to guide others toward excellence in teaching, faculty may:

1. serve explicitly as teaching mentors for students;
2. advise students with enthusiasm and help students make the best decisions possible about their programs of studies and professional goals;
3. teach about pedagogy and instruction in formal classes such as, INF 398T Supervised Teaching in Information Studies and in individual studies;
4. help Ph.D. and master's students alike to develop teaching statements and create professional development plans with important instructional elements;
5. integrate students into professional life by providing them with information about professional organizations and advocating for students' involvement in those organizations; and
6. prepare master's and doctoral students for positions with faculty status by conducting research and publishing with these students and recognizing their contributions through co-authorship or formal acknowledgements.

6. Civic Engagement

Some educators bring knowledge to bear in the world to make a difference, whether at the undergraduate, master's, or doctoral level. They do this through:

1. seeking opportunities for students to engage with audiences similar to those whom the students will serve as entry-level professionals;
2. connecting students with service communities using approaches that allow them to reflect on their own experiences while contributing to those communities' success.

7. Integrating Research and Teaching

Very often, educators will successfully bring their research to the classroom and other venues where they teach. They can accomplish this in many ways, including:

1. conducting research and publishing with students;
2. engaging students in their most recent research findings, publications, grant proposals, new research programs, considerations of research methods, and the like;
3. considering research related to pedagogy under the approval of the Institutional Review Board.

Conclusion

While there are many ways for iSchool instructors to pursue and demonstrate excellence in their teaching, there are two elements of the current document that might be uppermost in their minds in terms of guiding their behavior:

- Excellent teaching is the best scaffolding for students' academic achievement. As such, excellent teaching is an explicit goal of the iSchool and of all the members of its faculty.
- While there are seven potential areas of teaching excellence outlined above, the first two are the most important and are used to evaluate the performance of every faculty member in every rank: (1) Instruction and (2) Instructional Design and Assessment.

The iSchool's Annual Review of Faculty document refers to the four standard evaluation categories employed by UT-Austin: exceeds expectations; meets expectations; does not meet expectations; and unsatisfactory. In this vein, iSchool faculty should meet or exceed expectation in the first two areas identified in this Teaching Excellence document. Faculty are invited to report in their review documents their progress in the other five areas.

APPENDIX A: UT'S CRITERIA AND DIRECTIONS FOR PEER OBSERVATION OF TEACHING

The University of Texas at Austin's Center for Teaching and Learning has explicit directions to the budget council that help faculty members prepare for observing their peers' teaching (http://ctl.utexas.edu/teaching/professional_development/instructor_feedback). While there are many other resources that the Center makes available to teachers for planning and executing their teaching well, this set of directions is especially valuable to those being observed as well as the observers.

While the Center discusses many elements of peer observation of teaching, an important thing to recall is that the current norm at the iSchool is to use written analyses as the kind of instrument to direct and summarize peer observations. Other instruments can be used, e.g., checklists and rating scales, and the Center provides direction in their development and deployment. The iSchool, however, ordinarily uses written analyses.

Two additional parts of the Center's discussion of peer observations of teaching merit mention here. The first is that peer observation can be formative as well as summative, and the Center discusses how observations can play both kinds of roles. Junior faculty members, in particular, may be interested in having multiple and ongoing peer observation of their teaching for formative purposes.

The second observation to make about the Center's materials involves the spirit of peer observation. Faculty members observe their peers' teaching primarily to improve instruction at the university, and, as is common, all methods, instruments, and processes to do so are limited and need to be developed with care. The instructor being observed is often best served by having multiple peers do multiple observations over many semesters and in many kinds of courses to help overcome the limitations involved in observing others teach.

APPENDIX B: METRICS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN AND ASSESSMENT

The following list of metrics serves as a checklist that faculty members can refer to in personally assessing their progress toward achieving teaching excellence in instructional design and assessment.

iSchool instructors will to the extent possible and as appropriate:

- Prepare for courses, incorporating content that advances students' knowledge;
- Foster class environments built on respect and reciprocity;
- Develop organized, informative, and updated syllabi that provide students with specific information about the course goals and objectives, policies, assignments, deadlines, course schedule, and grading rubrics;
- Share complete course syllabi by the first class day if not before;
- Integrate empirical findings about effective teaching;
- Adapt and present course content and assignments in recognition of varying learning styles.
- Consider technologies that help advance students' learning and contribute to innovation in pedagogy;
- Maintain high expectations of students' performance;
- Integrate research and teaching by involving students in research initiatives;
- Provide evidence that teaching contributes to the educational experience of iSchool students through sufficient student enrollment figures, number and variety of course taught, contribution to master's and doctoral core course and essential elective course offerings, revision of courses, and involvement in informal teaching through supervising individual studies and Capstones of various kinds;
- Employ continuous evaluation to analyze their teaching effectiveness using methods such as self-evaluations, students' course evaluations, and material from the UT-Austin Center for Teaching and Learning;
- Document their course development and teaching achievement;
- Demonstrate that teaching led to students' learning through outcomes including formation of professional identities, acquisition of knowledge, and socialization and identification within the information professions;
- Participate in formal and informal peer evaluation.