

Report on Teaching Assessment Practices at the University of Virginia, 2010-11

**Sponsored by
The Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education
(CASTL-HE)**



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Executive Summary

This report compiles foundational information collected by the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (CASTL→HE), a new research center in the Curry School of Education, about teaching assessment practices currently being used across the university.

The results of this study have been culled from a brief quantitative survey completed by department chairs/area coordinators/program directors across grounds, as well as a series of qualitative interviews with representatives from each college/school of the university.

With regard to specific teaching assessment practices, this study found that:

- While most units across grounds use the Provost's online student evaluation form (or another similar instrument), it is uncommon for departments/areas/programs or faculty to tailor the form to their specific needs, and few units use supplemental paper course evaluations.
- With respect to the promotion and tenure process, student course evaluations and peer observations are the most common mechanisms for the evaluation of teaching; observations of tenured faculty's teaching, however, are not typically required for either formative or evaluative purposes.
- Mentoring of teaching often takes place as part of routine practice to assist junior faculty in their classroom pedagogy; on the other hand, pedagogical mentoring for graduate student teaching assistants is somewhat minimal.
- The most common forms of recognition for teaching excellence are teaching awards and possible salary increases.
- Discipline- and program-specific accreditation procedures sometimes influence the evaluation of teaching.

- The Teaching Resource Center helps to inspire and support the continuous improvement of teaching across grounds.

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Purpose

The purpose of this report is to compile foundational information collected by the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (CASTL→HE) about teaching assessment practices currently being used across the university. CASTL→HE seeks to improve undergraduate, graduate, and professional student experiences at UVA and beyond by applying the principles of evidence-based assessment to the relationship between college teaching and pedagogy and student learning outcomes. This report, written for administrators, faculty, and the university community more generally, provides a “snapshot” of teaching assessment practices at UVA.

Methods

The results of this report are guided by a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data represent responses to a short online survey we developed using Question Pro, an online tool, targeted at department chairs/area coordinators/program directors across the university. Survey question categories included student evaluations, promotion and tenure, pedagogical mentoring, and rewarding teaching excellence. After vetting the survey internally, we requested and received feedback from representatives from several schools across the university, then launched it in December 2010 and closed it in April 2011.

We invited representatives from all colleges/schools (123 individuals), who in most cases were department chairs/area coordinators/program directors, to participate in the survey. In total, 55 people completed it, for a return rate of just under 45%. Because of wide variation in the size of administrative units queried, the results of this survey are somewhat uneven. The following table presents the response numbers by college/school, expressed as number of respondents and number of invitees:

Table 1: Survey Respondents by College/School

College/School	Number Responded	Number Invited
Architecture	2	4
Arts and Sciences	18	28
Business	4	9
Commerce	2	5
Continuing and Professional Studies	11	34
Education	2	4
Engineering and Applied Sciences	5	9
Law	1	1
Leadership and Public Policy	2	1
Medicine	5	29
Nursing	3	2

A level of under-participation in some colleges/schools and over-participation in others is apparent from this table. While it is difficult to ascertain the exact impact of these numbers on the results, they should be kept in mind when interpreting the data.

The qualitative data represent responses to questions posed in interviews we conducted with representatives from each college/school, as selected by the deans of all units across grounds at the request of Robert Pianta, Dean of the Curry School of Education. In total, we conducted thirteen interviews. Intended to elicit descriptions of current practices, interviews with representatives from each college/school were structured around a single, open-ended question: “How is teaching assessed in your college/school?” Whenever necessary, we posed specific questions regarding the structure of teaching in a given unit and how that teaching is assessed; such questions included the following:

1. How is teaching structured in your college/school?
2. What types of student course evaluations does your college/school use?
3. How is teaching assessed with regard to promotion and tenure in your college/school?

4. What types of pedagogical mentoring take place in your college/school?
5. What roles does accreditation play in teaching assessment in your college/school?
6. How is teaching excellence rewarded in your college/school?

We posed similar questions to designees from the Office of Institutional Assessment, the Office of the Vice Provost for Academic Programs, and the Teaching Resource Center. These included:

1. How is teaching assessed at UVA?
2. How is this office involved in the assessment of teaching at UVA?

During each of these interviews, we took paper-and-pen notes, then rewrote them as electronic documents immediately afterward. In addition, we requested and collected various documents from interviewees, including student course evaluation questions, promotion and tenure policy documents, and accreditation rubrics for teaching, among others.

Findings

Both the qualitative and quantitative elements of this study on teaching assessment practices at UVA suggest the diversity of practice in teaching assessment in the various colleges/schools and departments/areas/programs across the university. In this section, we present the findings of our study: the quantitative survey data in visual form to provide an overview, followed by highlights from the qualitative interviews of specific noteworthy teaching assessment practices currently used in various units across the university.

Student Course Evaluations

Three survey questions dealt with various aspects of formal, end-of-semester student course evaluations. Findings suggest that, while often handled in very different ways, these evaluations are a crucial aspect of teaching assessment across grounds. Details of participants' responses are below.

Supplemental paper course evaluations.

Figure 1: Does your department use supplemental paper course evaluations in addition to the Provost's online student evaluation form?

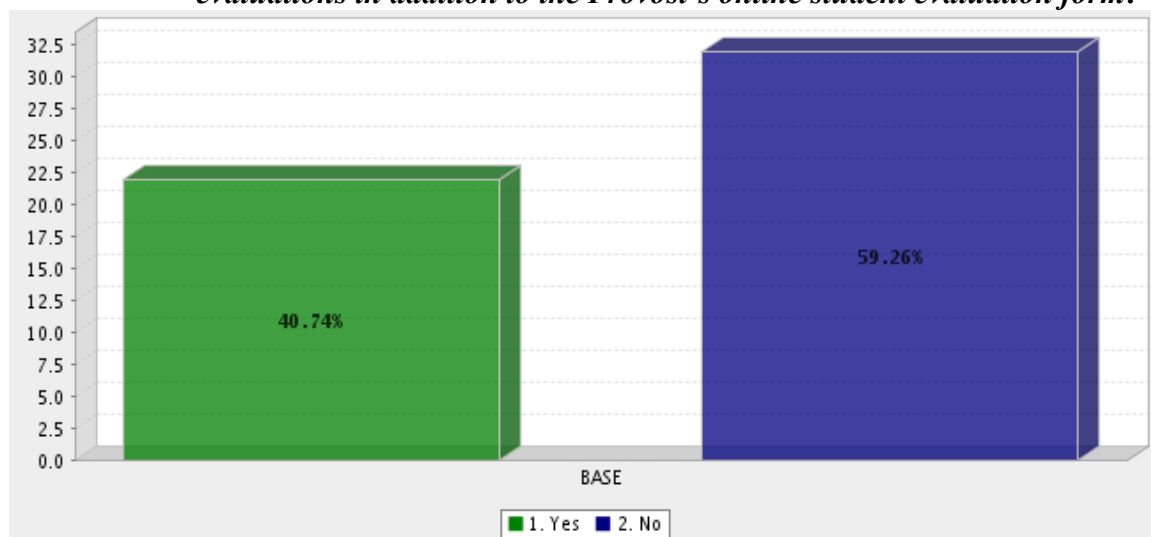
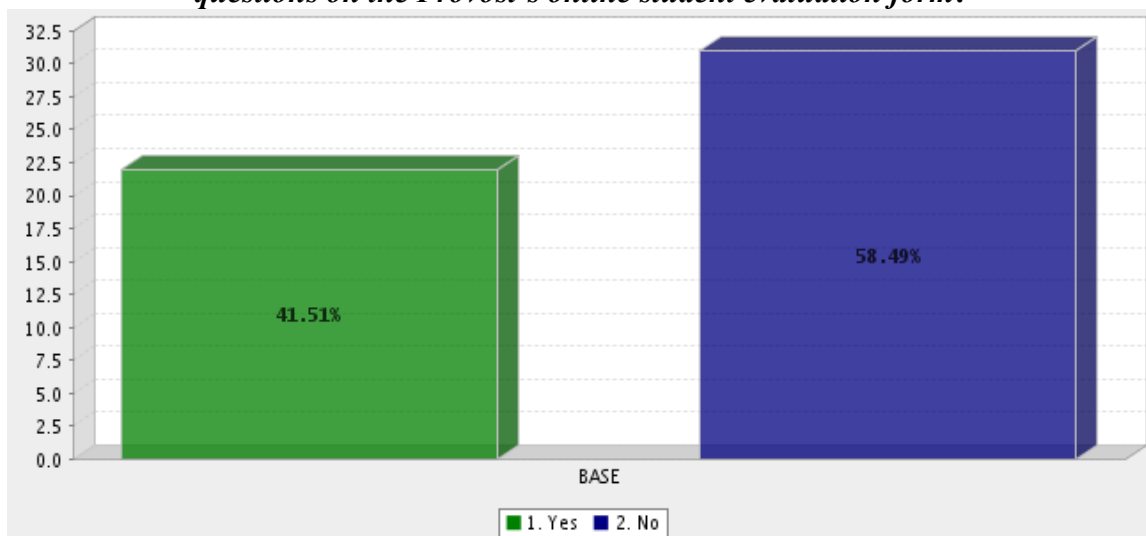


Figure 1 shows that just over 40% of departments/areas/programs use paper course evaluations in addition to the Provost's online student evaluation form. Qualitative data seem to corroborate this finding, as a minority of interviewees described using such supplementary evaluations in their college/school.

Department-specific questions.

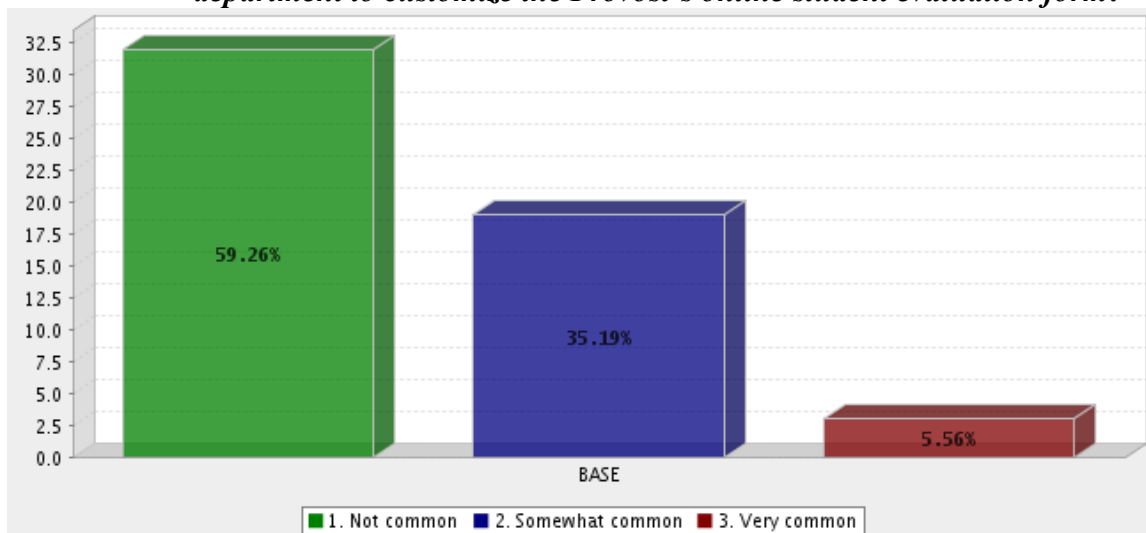
Figure 2: Does your department include a set of department-specific questions on the Provost's online student evaluation form?



It is clear from Figure 2 that almost two-thirds of the departments/areas/programs whose representatives completed the survey do not include a set of department-specific questions on the Provost's online student evaluation form. Again, the interview data confirm this finding, as almost no one interviewed indicated the practice of including such questions to be routine.

Customizing the Provost's online student evaluation form.

Figure 3: How common do you think it is for faculty in your department to customize the Provost's online student evaluation form?



As indicated in Figure 3, almost 60% of respondents believe it is not common for faculty in their departments to customize the Provost's online student evaluation form. Just over 35% believe it is common, while more than 5% believe this practice is very common. None of the college/school representatives interviewed indicated such customizing was a common practice.

In addition, interviews suggest that student course evaluations are central to the assessment of teaching throughout the university, and many units boast high rates of return. Highlights from the qualitative interviews regarding student course evaluations include the following:

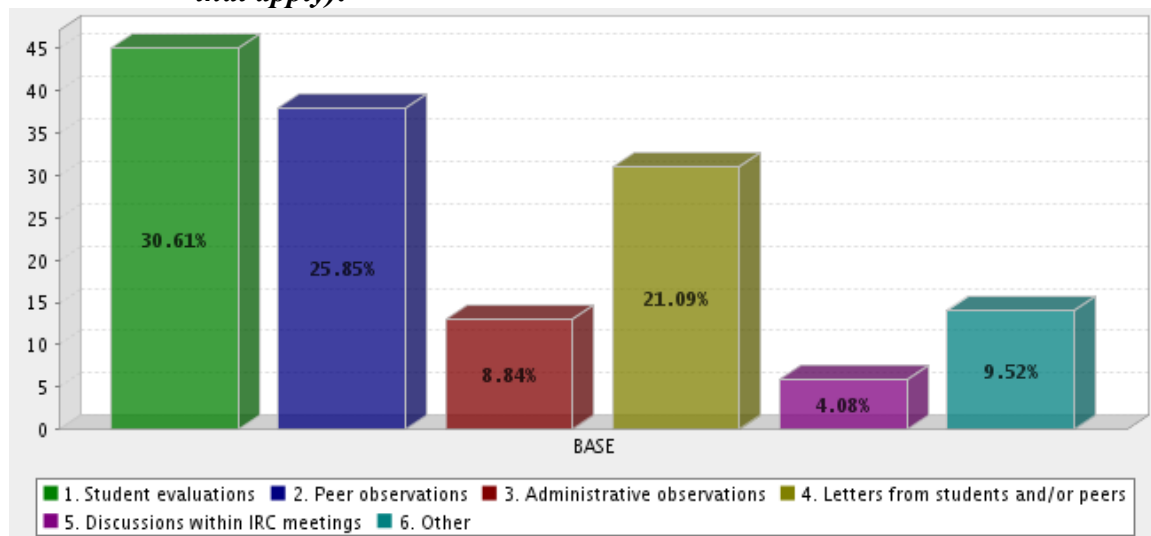
- Most units across the university use the Provost's online student course evaluation form; this includes the School of Continuing and Professional Studies.
- Some units, such as the Darden School of Business, use their own online student course evaluation form.
- Some units conduct supplementary, paper-based student course evaluations: for example, the English Department in the College of Arts and Sciences uses such supplementary evaluations for every class, and the questions are tailored for the particular type of course—literature, theory, writing, etc.
- In 2007-08, the year the Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy opened, 100% of students submitted online course evaluations, and students also participated in one-on-one interviews with school faculty and administrators regarding teaching effectiveness in the school.
- The average rate of return of online student course evaluations in the McIntire School of Commerce during academic year 2009-10 was 70%.
- The estimated average return rate of online student course evaluations each semester tops 60% in the School of Law.

Promotion and Tenure

Two survey questions addressed issues related to teaching assessment and the promotion and tenure process. Findings suggest that student course evaluations and peer observations are the most frequently used mechanisms for teaching assessment with regard to the promotion and tenure process, and classroom observation of tenured faculty is uncommon. Details of participants' responses are below.

Formal mechanisms for evaluation of teaching.

Figure 4: In my department, formal mechanisms for evaluation of teaching as part of the promotion and tenure process include (check all that apply):

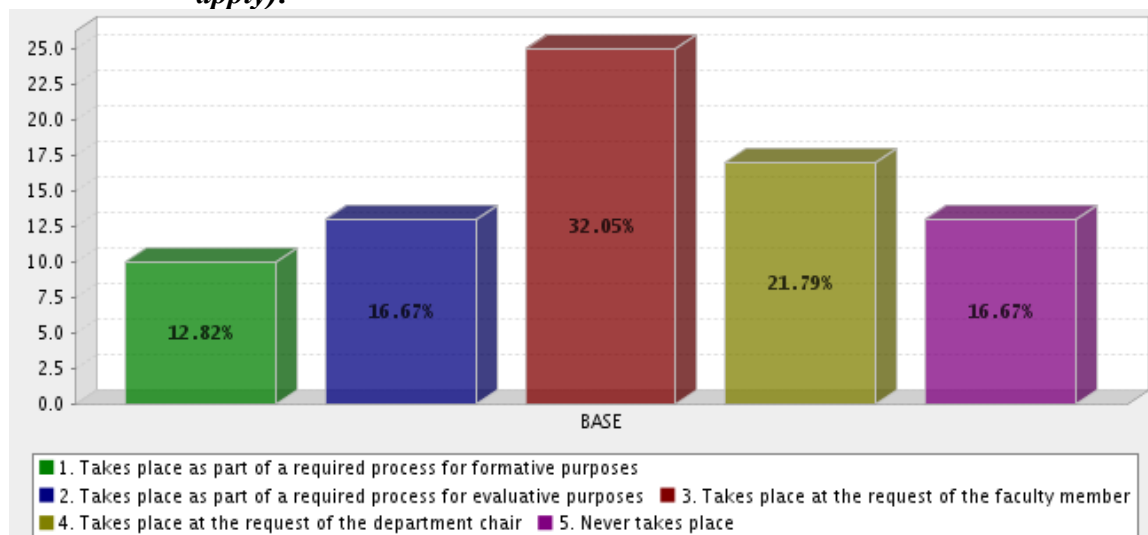


Respondents report a range of formal mechanisms for evaluation of teaching as part of the promotion and tenure process (see Figure 4). More than 30% of respondents indicated that student course evaluations are used in this process. Additional mechanisms for evaluation include peer observations (25.85%), letters from students and/or peers (21.09%), administrative observations (8.84%), and discussions within IRC meetings (4.08%). Almost 10% of respondents indicated that their departments/areas/programs use “other” mechanisms of evaluation, which include: review of course materials, outside letters regarding teaching materials and course designs, consultation with the Teaching Resource Center, and occasional syllabi review. Several respondents, particularly those from the School of Continuing and Professional Studies, indicated that the question was not applicable, as they are general faculty and therefore not involved in the conventional

promotion and tenure review process. These data are largely consistent with those gleaned in interviews, as most respondents emphasized the primacy—and, in some cases, singularity—of student course evaluations in the process of promotion and tenure.

Classroom observation of tenured faculty.

Figure 5: Classroom observation of tenured faculty (select all that apply):



As Figure 5 makes clear, just over 32% of survey respondents said that classroom observation of tenured faculty takes place at the request of the faculty member, while almost 22% responded that such observation takes place at the request of the department chair. Just under 13% reported that classroom observation of tenured faculty takes place as part of a required process for formative purposes. Interestingly, 16.67% of chairs/coordinators/directors who completed the survey indicated that tenured faculty are observed as part of a required process for evaluative purposes, while the same percentage of respondents said tenured faculty are never observed. These data are somewhat surprising, as the majority of interviewees suggested that tenured faculty's classroom teaching is never observed.

Highlights from the qualitative interviews regarding teaching assessment and the promotion and tenure process include the following:

- The promotion and tenure committee in the Curry School of Education revises tenure procedures on an annual basis.

- In the School of Architecture, student feedback constitutes a crucial component of the promotion and tenure process. Student course evaluations are weighed heavily, and during the tenure review process, several current and former students are asked to write letters regarding the impact of an instructor's teaching on their academic experience.
- Faculty in the School of Nursing are currently developing an assessment rubric for promotion and tenure peer observations based on a model in Nancy Van Note Chism's *Peer Review of Teaching: A Sourcebook* (1998).
- According to the Senior Associate Dean for Faculty, junior faculty in the Darden School of Business "cannot get tenure without being a good teacher. No amount of research can make up for that."

Mentoring

Two survey questions dealt with issues related to pedagogical mentoring. Findings suggest that mentoring of teaching for junior faculty is common, while such mentoring for graduate student teaching assistants is not. Details of participants' responses are below.

Mentoring of teaching.

Figure 6: In my department, mentoring of teaching:

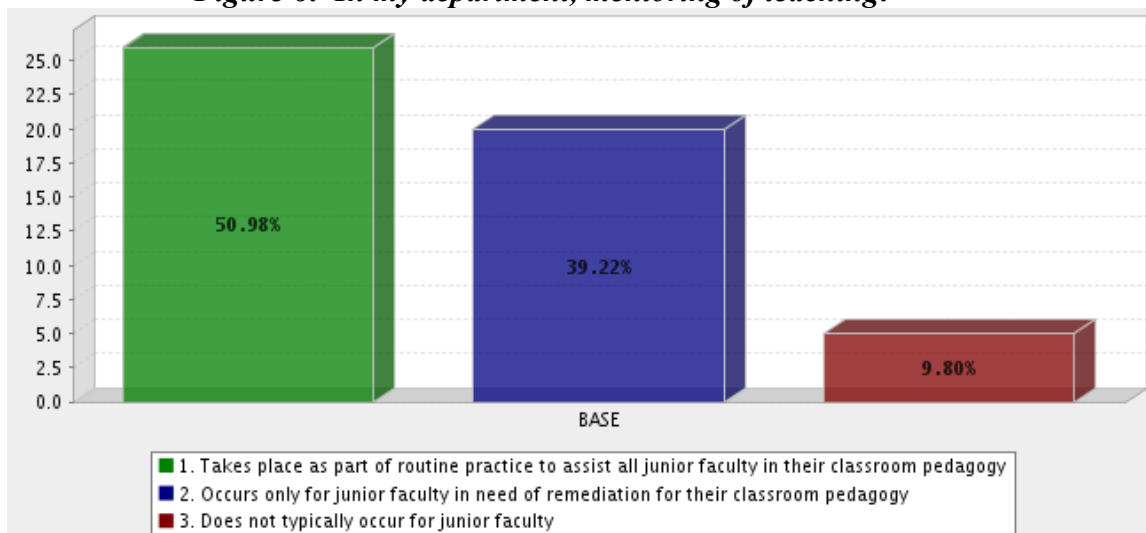
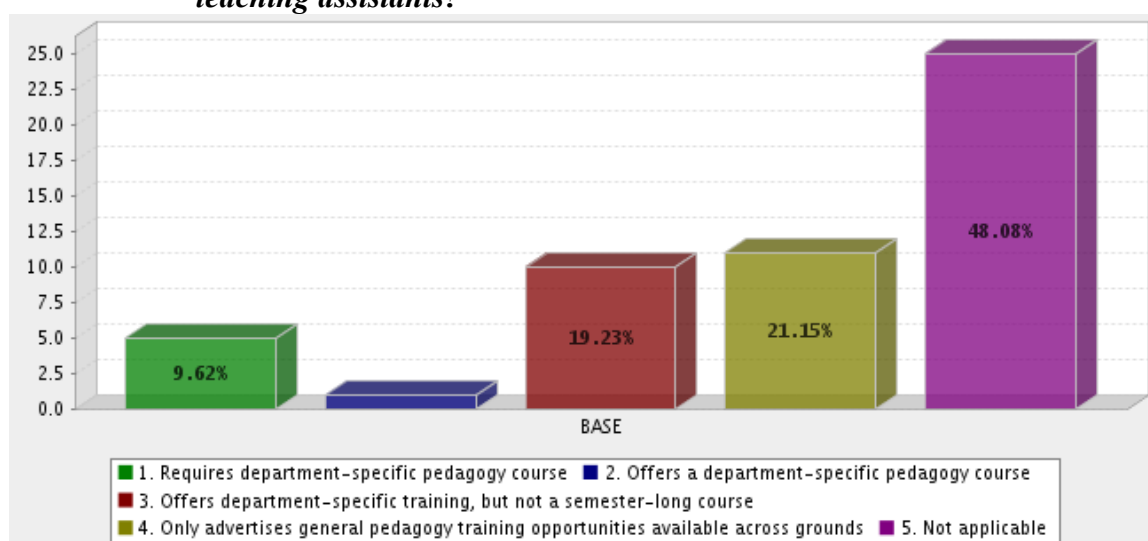


Figure 6 shows that in almost 51% of the departments/areas/programs responding, mentoring of teaching takes place as part of routine practice to assist all junior faculty in their classroom pedagogy. Just over 39% reported that such mentoring occurs only for junior faculty in need of remediation for their classroom pedagogy, and almost 10% indicated that mentoring of teaching does not typically occur for junior faculty. Qualitative interview data largely corroborate these findings.

Training of graduate assistants.

Figure 7: How does your department approach training of graduate teaching assistants?



As Figure 7 reveals, with respect to the training of graduate teaching assistants, more than 21% of respondents said their department/area/program only advertises general pedagogy training opportunities available across grounds. A little more than 19% offer department-specific training, but not a semester-long course, while nearly 10% require a department-specific pedagogy course and under 2% offer, but do not require, such a course. For just over 48% of respondents, however, this question was not applicable. These data are somewhat surprising, as few interviewees described the training of graduate student teaching assistants in any detail.

Highlights from the qualitative interviews regarding mentoring of teaching include the following:

- The School of Law maintains a standing committee focused on pedagogical mentoring of junior faculty, which offers multiple teaching

workshops each semester, helps faculty analyze their student course evaluations, and conducts peer class observations.

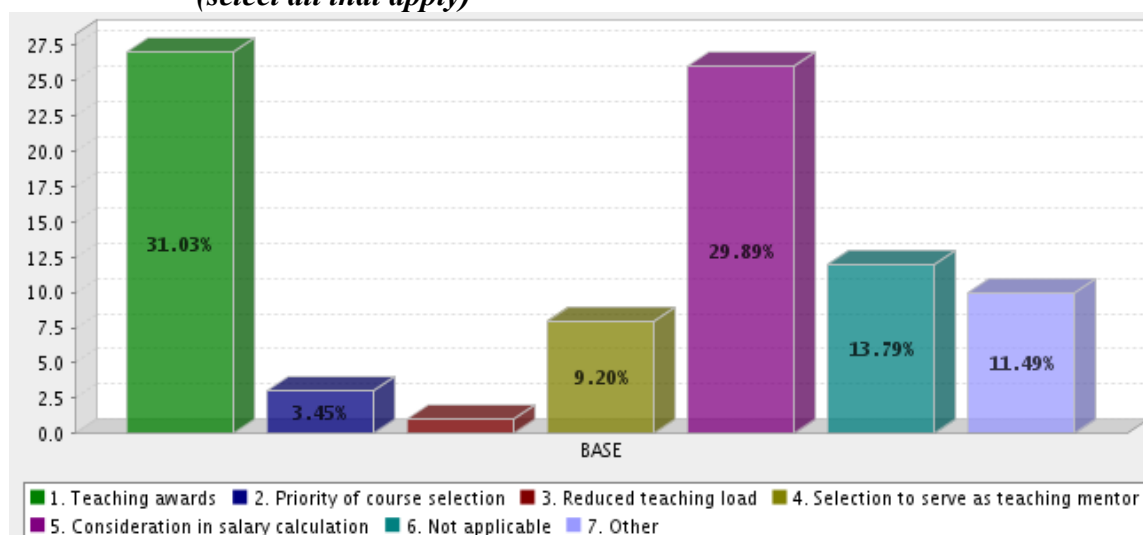
- Faculty from many units across the university, including the Schools of Architecture, Education, Engineering, and Medicine, regularly pair junior faculty with senior colleagues who are successful teachers.
- In the School of Nursing, clinical faculty, all of whom are expert nurses, receive substantial pedagogical mentoring.
- The Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese in the College of Arts and Sciences provides doctoral students with extensive, formalized pedagogical training.
- Faculty in the Curry School of Education share a strong belief in the importance of pedagogical mentoring for graduate students, regularly modeling best practices and co-teaching with their advisees.

Rewarding Teaching Excellence

One question addressed rewarding teaching excellence. Findings suggest that teaching awards are the most common way in which teaching excellence is recognized across the university. Details of participants' responses are below.

Rewarding teaching excellence.

Figure 8: How does your department reward teaching excellence? (select all that apply)



Most survey respondents reported that teaching excellence is recognized by teaching awards (just over 31%) and possible salary increases (almost 30%). More than 9% said excellent teachers are selected to serve as teaching mentors, while just over 3% indicated excellence in teaching gave instructors priority of course selection, and about 1% said it earned a reduced teaching load. This question was not applicable to almost 14% of respondents. More than 11% selected “other,” and their responses included additional rewards for teaching excellence, such as nomination for university-wide teaching awards and assistance in the promotion process. “Other” responses also included such phrases as “In no way” and “It doesn’t,” suggesting that some departments/areas/programs do not reward teaching excellence at all. Several of these responses also duplicated other possible answers, including “consideration in salary calculation.” Again, these data are somewhat surprising, as few interviewees commented about rewards for teaching excellence in any detail, if at all.

Highlights from these interviews regarding teaching excellence include the following:

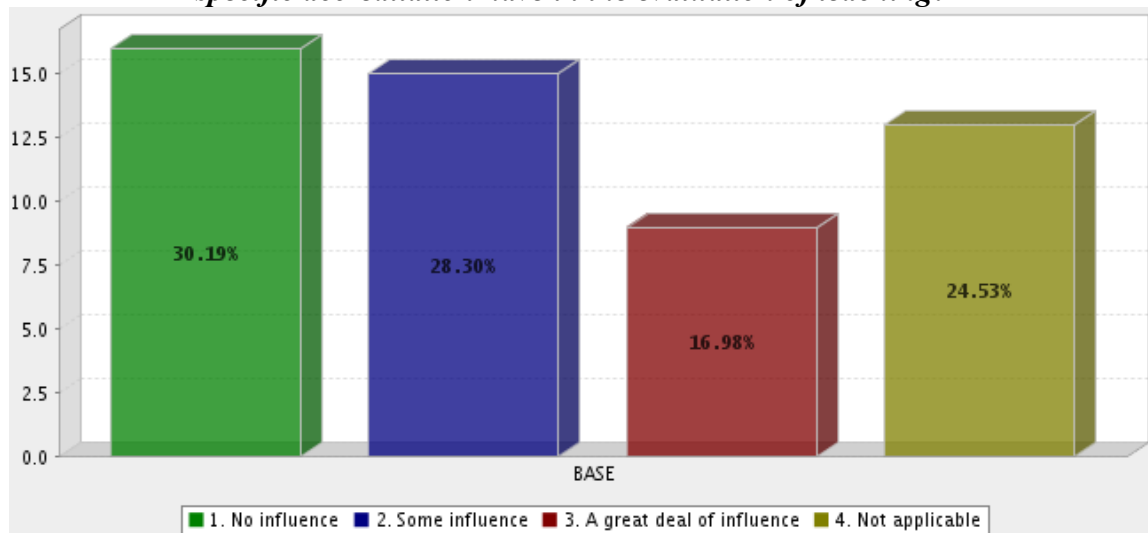
- Most units across the university participate in all university teaching awards.
- The Alumni Association in the School of Nursing offers annual teaching awards and small grants for teaching innovation.

Accreditation

Two questions addressed accreditation and teaching assessment. Findings suggest that both discipline- and program-specific accreditation influences the evaluation of teaching. Details of participants’ responses are below.

Discipline-specific accreditation.

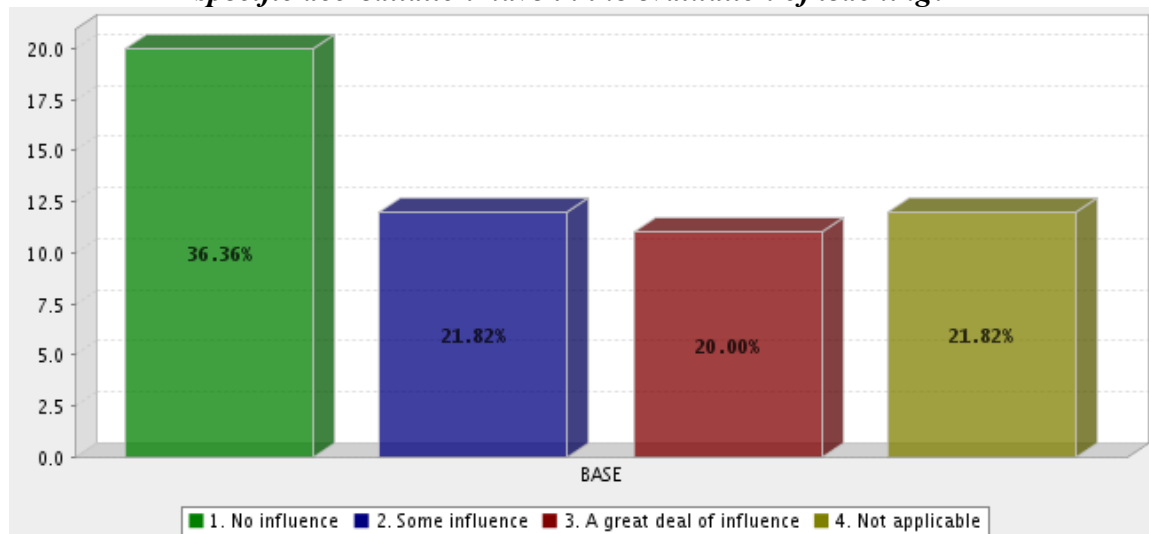
Figure 9: For your department, how much influence does discipline-specific accreditation have in the evaluation of teaching?



As revealed in Figure 9, more than 30% of respondents reported that discipline-specific accreditation has no influence in the evaluation of teaching, while over 28% indicated it has some influence, and almost 17% said it has a great deal of influence. This question was not applicable for more than 24% of respondents. Qualitative interview data confirm the “No influence” and “Not applicable” responses, as interviewees had little to say about the influence of accreditation in the evaluation of teaching. Therefore, the influence of discipline-specific accreditation on teaching evaluation for more than 45% of survey respondents is surprising.

Program-specific accreditation.

Figure 10: For your department, how much influence does program-specific accreditation have in the evaluation of teaching?



It is clear from Figure 10 that program-specific accreditation has no influence in the evaluation of teaching for the plurality of respondents, more than 36%. An almost equal number reported it has some influence (21.82%) and a great deal of influence (20%). For almost 22% of respondents, the question was not applicable. Again, qualitative interview data confirm the “No influence” and “Not applicable” responses, as interviewees had little to say about the influence of accreditation on the evaluation of teaching. The influence of program-specific accreditation in teaching evaluation for almost 42% of survey respondents is surprising.

Highlights from the qualitative interviews regarding accreditation and the evaluation of teaching include the following:

- Approximately ten years ago, the accrediting body for the School of Engineering and Applied Science began requiring evidence of continuous improvement of undergraduate teaching.
- Accreditation has almost no influence on teaching in the Darden School of Business, as they consider their own standards for teaching much more demanding than those of their accrediting body.

Continuous Teaching Improvement

While no survey question specifically addressed the continuous improvement of teaching, the topic emerged in numerous interviews. Highlights from these interviews include the following:

- Faculty from many units across the university, including the Schools of Commerce, Education, Engineering, Medicine, and Nursing, regularly participate in a wide variety of confidential consultations about teaching offered by the Teaching Resource Center.
- Beginning in August 2010, the School of Medicine began implementing an innovative new curriculum, which horizontally and vertically integrates the teaching of science and its medical application, emphasizing critical thinking required for clinicians, especially analysis and synthesis.

Conclusions

The foregoing report should be read as compilation of foundational information regarding teaching assessment practices employed at UVA. The quantitative survey data provide a useful overview of the kinds of practices used across grounds in the assessment of teaching, while the qualitative interview data suggest some of the unique practices individual colleges/schools and departments/areas/programs have adopted. In addition to providing a “snapshot” of how various units across grounds measure teaching effectiveness, this information points to examples of promising practices individual schools and departments might consider as they strive to improve teaching across the university. In particular, we suggest that units across the university should:

- incentivize excellent teaching in the promotion and tenure process;
- use a wider variety of teaching assessments in this process;
- provide more extensive pedagogical mentoring for all junior faculty and graduate teaching assistants;
- offer consistent and substantive recognition for excellent teaching.

In addition, many of the practices uncovered in this study merit further investigation by CASTL→HE and others to determine their effects on teaching and learning at UVA.