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Safety as a Criterion for Faculty Evaluation

Emily K. Faulconer

Faculty evaluations, whether for annual review, promotion, contract renewal, tenure, or other purposes, commonly cover three broad areas—teaching, scholarship, and service—with weighting that can vary based on the institution, college, department, and individual. Many faculty, especially in STEM fields, have teaching, research, and service roles that come with chemical, physical, or biological hazards. These faculty members would not likely deny safety as a responsibility. In these roles, faculty may be asked to teach safety concepts, supervise or perform work with instrumentation, manage chemical wastes, or prepare paperwork required under OSHA’s Laboratory standard (e.g., standard operating procedures).

Despite these responsibilities, it is very seldom that safety performance is evaluated or recognized by administration. Many valid reasons for this exist. Department chairs may understandably have knowledge gaps due to the diverse range of hazardous work that can take place within an academic department. Teaching and research laboratories have unique and distinct safety considerations. Teaching laboratories typically present lower hazards but serve as a training ground for students to develop laboratory skills and actionable safety knowledge. Research laboratories may have more significant hazards, though there tend to be fewer workers and with higher training. Furthermore, there may be a perception problem when including safety as an evaluation criterion, especially if safety is viewed punitively. Including safety in evaluations already exists within many settings (e.g., medical, nuclear, and aviation fields). Despite these limitations, establishing recognition and reward systems for faculty safety performance and integrating these into performance review, hiring, and promotion is touted as a best practice.

Faculty tend to want safety-related feedback. In a safety culture survey administered across multiple organizations and industries, an overwhelming majority of respondents, 90 percent, felt that employees should speak up when they witness unsafe actions or conditions, though only 60 percent reported actually giving this sort of feedback to peers (Williams and Geller 2008). Although three-quarters of respondents welcomed safety feedback, only 28 percent felt that their peers would (Williams and Geller 2008). Importantly, employees want positive feedback, too, though they do not often receive it (Williams 2003).

Even though department chairs may not be safety experts, they can communicate safety expectations of the institution and responsibilities of various roles within the department. A strong partnership with the institution’s environmental health and safety (EHS) personnel can support the efforts to communicate safety responsibilities to faculty. Because negative attitudes sometimes exist toward EHS personnel, the chair can provide a mechanism to develop a more collaborative relationship between faculty and EHS.

In 2017, Dr. Lucian Leape testified before Congress, stating, “The single greatest impediment to error prevention in the medical industry is that we punish people for making mistakes.” This resonates within academia. Critical feedback tends to make people defensive. Incorporating this feedback into regular faculty evaluations makes the conversation expected *and* wraps it up in other expected critical feedback. This approach may be less likely to cause confrontation than

evaluating safety separately. This approach also moves safety oversight from a reactive, punitive activity to a proactive, supportive activity. Leadership can also consider cementing these responsibilities by including safety in job descriptions. These responsibilities are then reinforced through evaluation, with organization decisions ensuring that safety within academic labs is a supported priority. Some strategies to help implement safety evaluation as a criterion in faculty performance include the following:

- Build and maintain a strong partnership with environmental health and safety personnel.
- Establish safety expectations in writing at the start of the evaluation period (e.g., performance plan), including appropriate training, inspections, and certifications.
- Customize safety expectations for each faculty member based on the hazards in their work.
- Require documentation (e.g., inspection reports, training logs).
- Ensure confidentiality through one-on-one feedback (as is typical for other evaluation criteria).
- Employ empathetic communication strategies.
- Include performance-gap and positive feedback.
- Discuss safety-related stretch goals with faculty.

Institutions establish expectations in teaching, scholarship, and service to align with their core mission and vision. Faculty members align their efforts with these criteria because annual and career decisions are based on performance in these areas. With many faculty engaging in or supervising work with hazards, and with many safety responsibilities being detailed in federal safety regulations, safety should be clearly defined in faculty expectations. Given an institutional expectation for safety performance, faculty can align their efforts with these criteria. By embedding safety within faculty performance evaluations, the safety culture is strengthened. Many accidents in academic laboratories could have been prevented through a stronger safety culture. Studies have shown academia to demonstrate weak laboratory safety attitudes and practices (Gosavi, Schaufele, and Blayney 2018; Schröder et al. 2016). By providing and receiving safety-related feedback (both corrective and positive), the academic workplace can be safer. We can change the system to create an open, fair, and just culture that is proactively focused on learning, designing safe systems, and managing behavioral choices.

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