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Everything Is Evaluated

Given the magnitude and intensity of evaluation in an academic career, it's a wonder that anyone without a titanic ego survives the process — but most do

[By FEMALE SCIENCE PROFESSOR](#)

As I write in late March, it is still too early for me to work on my taxes, but I have started filling out my annual Faculty Activity Report, due in April. This is the season when professors are asked to reflect on the 2008-9 academic year, and the various things accomplished and not accomplished. My report lists my publications, grants, conference presentations, awards, teaching and advising activities, and service activities to the department, college, university, profession, and the rest of the known world.

It's been a good year for me as a tenured professor in the physical sciences, and I feel positive about my annual report. I am aware, however, that my high morale is influenced by my department's philosophy regarding faculty productivity. I know from conversations with colleagues at peer institutions that there is a wide range of possibilities for the intradepartmental definition of "productivity," even among nominally similar universities.

For example, the number of publications and grants on my annual report places me near, but certainly not at, the top of my department on that particular quantitative measure. So I am above average in my department and considered productive. However, if I were in a certain friend's department at a peer institution, I might be considered mediocre at best. In that department, the research standard is set at a level corresponding to the highest-performing faculty members — the ones bringing in many millions of dollars in grants and running the biggest labs that produce a deluge of papers. Anyone else is underperforming. My morale (and salary) might well be substantially lower if I were evaluated in such a system.

I have other friends who are in departments with more modest expectations of research productivity. In some ways it might feel good to be a big fish in a small pond, but there are challenges to that situation as well. Earlier in my career I faced a decision about whether to move to a different university with a higher productivity standard. I was not a big fish, but I wanted to be one, and one of the reasons I migrated was so that I could have more opportunities to build a larger research program. Every year at annual-report time I am faced with the consequences of that decision: Did I publish enough? Did I bring in enough grant money? Did I recruit and advise enough students and postdocs?

In an ideal world, papers, grants, and advising flow naturally in the course of happily pursuing one's intellectual interests as a researcher and educator, but the definition of what is "enough" varies from place to place.

Being evaluated is a constant of academic life. Every once in a while I encounter doctoral students who imagine that, after graduate school, they will be free at last of the critical scrutiny that is a pervasive part of the graduate-school experience, most notably in exams. And every once in a while I encounter an assistant professor who imagines that attaining tenure will bring an end to the pressure that comes with endless evaluation.

Well, it certainly does get better — or, at least, the anxiety level decreases dramatically as the consequences become less dire. But the evaluation itself never ends. The good news is that it need not be oppressive and can even be very useful.

Professors of all ranks are evaluated, and often. Every year I write my annual report so that a committee of administrators and faculty members can review my overall job performance in terms of research, teaching, and service. There are some real consequences of that evaluation in terms of salary, teaching load, service load, and eligibility for awards (some of which are prestigious and/or lucrative).

And the evaluating doesn't stop there. My manuscripts and grant proposals are, of course, assessed, and, based on those reviews, either accepted or rejected. At the end of every academic term, my teaching is evaluated by students and by my department. I give presentations at meetings and people ask critical questions and form opinions about my research and about me. And if any academic wants even more evaluation, writing a blog is a good way to get an endless supply of criticism.

Being the subject of constant review can be exhausting and, at times, painful. But over all, I appreciate the critical input. An annual report is a good road check for seeing what I have achieved in the past year. Most papers and some proposals are greatly improved by review comments. And even some student evaluations of teaching have been known to contain useful criticisms that can be used to improve your teaching methods.

There will always be some cruel and unreasonable comments but, over the years, the review system has made me a better researcher and teacher, even if there have been times when a particular review or evaluation has left me enraged. Considering the magnitude and intensity of all the evaluation, it's amazing that anyone without a titanic ego survives the process, but most people do. In my own case, as long as the negative comments are balanced over time by positive ones, my self-esteem is temporarily dented — but not destroyed — by an occasional bludgeoning.

Some of my graduate students, however, find the review process unexpectedly traumatic. Perhaps that's because there is not always a direct correlation between the amount of effort that goes into the work under review and the response it receives. As students, we are used to getting a good evaluation (e.g., a grade) if we put a lot of work and thought into something. But with a manuscript, you can put in a huge amount of work, get interesting results, write a paper, submit it to a journal that seems appropriate, and get savaged in the review process. When you are farther along in your career, you realize that some reviews are positive, some are not, and life goes on. Early on, though, the effect of a highly critical review can be magnified. I find myself increasingly having to help my students and some colleagues navigate the psychic effects of critical reviews.

It can be hard to calibrate the difference between a positive-but-critical review and one that is simple savagery. On several occasions, one of my students or postdocs has been devastated by a critical review. Then I look at the comments and think, "That's a great review. These are really nice comments."

Keep in mind: Not all criticism is negative. You can't expect reviewers to tell you that you are brilliant and that your paper is perfect. Reviews are intrinsically critical, and if the system works as it is intended,

that criticism will improve your work and your writing.

If you get a harsh review, what are your options?

- You could refuse to ever submit another manuscript for review, thereby voluntarily or involuntarily leaving academe for a different career in which no one will ever be mean to you. (And that would be ... what?)
- You could stay in academe but descend into paranoid bitterness, occasionally hurling a manuscript into the savage maw but all the while expecting that no one will appreciate your brilliance.
- You could ignore the reviews completely and resubmit the same manuscript to another journal, perhaps one further down the food chain.

I personally wouldn't do any of those things. When I get a negative review, I am usually angry for a few (hundred) hours. Some bad reviews have nothing of value in them, but many contain constructive criticism. Eventually, I try to reread the reviews in a calm, dissociated way and mine them for any useful ideas. And then, whether I'm going to resubmit the manuscript to the same journal or a different one, I revise and resubmit it.

Not every paper can or should be published. But if the paper is (or will be) good, any disappointment with critical or mixed reviews should be short-lived as you dive back into the manuscript to fix it up so that you can eventually have the thrill of seeing it published and then have it appear on your annual review report as proof that you have had a busy and interesting year.

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