

Best practices for end-of-year conversations

The end-of-year conversations between junior faculty and their chairs are designed to be mentoring experiences, not a part of the formal evaluation process. However, these meetings provide essential feedback and opportunity for improvement before the formal third year and tenure reviews. Junior faculty and senior faculty have noted that these end-of-year conversations don't always work well, and the quality of the mentoring junior faculty get through these conversations varies immensely. Thoughtful organization of these meetings is one step towards facilitating the development of a community of mentors for junior faculty. Based on conversations with current and former chairs and untenured and recently tenured faculty members, here are some suggested best practices for end-of-year conversations.

In advance of the meeting:

Suggestion: The department chair should ask the the junior faculty member to submit a list of topics/questions/concerns that they want to discuss at the end-of-year meeting.

***Rationale:** This encourages the junior faculty member to reflect on their trajectory (perhaps in consultation with mentors or other trusted colleagues) in advance of the meeting, and it allows the chair to get input on these topics/questions/concerns from other senior colleagues prior to the meeting.*

Suggestion: The senior faculty in the department (and the special review committee members, if relevant) should meet before the end-of-year conversation and discuss the progress of the junior faculty member, identify strengths and areas for improvement, consider ways to provide support, and review the topics/questions/concerns brought forward by the junior faculty member.

***Rationale:** This provides a way for the end-of-year conversation to represent the perspectives of all senior colleagues (and special review committee members), not just the chair. In addition, having such a meeting encourages senior colleagues to be aware of each other's perspectives and speak with "one voice" so that they don't confuse junior colleagues with markedly different advice. By triangulating their perspectives, sometimes the senior colleagues can identify a small issue before it becomes a bigger problem.*

Scheduling the meeting:

Suggestion: Schedule the end-of-year conversation as a meeting with a clear agenda that is built from the input of the junior faculty member, seniors colleagues, and the chair. Make sure there is sufficient time for uninterrupted conversation.

***Rationale:** When chairs have the end-of-year conversation without an agenda over a cup of coffee, it is not always clear to the junior faculty member whether it is a substantive end-of-year meeting or just another collegial conversation.*

During the meeting:

Suggestion: The conversation should be both reflective (looking back over the past year) and prospective (looking ahead to the coming year and beyond) considering teaching, research, and service.

***Rationale:** If the conversation gets bogged down in a single topic area (e.g. course evaluations in a particular course in the past year or plans for an upcoming research project), other topics might be overlooked or be interpreted by the junior faculty member as being unimportant.*

Suggestion: The chair should ask the junior faculty member how they are soliciting feedback on their teaching (e.g., ask for samples of blank course evaluations used and with whom they have discussed this feedback, ask whether a trusted senior colleague or LTC student observer sat in on a class, etc.) as well as asking about the major strengths and weaknesses that have been identified in the feedback that has been received. The chair should strategize with the junior faculty member about ways to respond to the feedback and how mentors, LTC resources, and the department can help.

***Rationale:** Chairs cannot require junior faculty to share course evaluations, but it is important that the chair get a sense of how the junior colleague is working to assess and improve their teaching. The chair should help the junior faculty develop an approach to addressing teaching concerns.*

Suggestion: The chair should identify strengths and accomplishments, and the chair should also clearly discuss potential problem areas with an eye towards helping the junior faculty member think through ways to address the issues.

***Rationale:** Junior faculty need to be aware of potential concerns in advance of the formal review process. At the same time, the junior faculty member should not be expected to find ways to address the issues completely on their own.*

Suggestion: Both the chair and the junior faculty member should leave the meeting with a shared understanding of next steps -- priorities for the junior faculty member in the coming year and support that the chair and department will provide. These next steps should be shared with senior departmental colleagues (and special review committee members).

***Rationale:** Both the junior faculty member and the senior colleagues need to take responsibility for the professional development of the junior faculty member. Articulating a shared understanding of the priorities and responsibilities of the junior faculty member and the department for the coming year can be helpful, particularly if the chair rotates or the composition of the department changes.*

Topics that junior faculty have identified as helpful to discuss:

- Review the teaching schedule for the coming year and beyond so that junior faculty members are not swept to the side when senior colleagues jockey for courses they want to teach.
- Strategize together about new teaching assignments and review the cumulative number of new preps for junior faculty members.
- Discuss the balance of conference presentations, publications, grant writing, creative work, and other activities as part of the scholarly agenda.
- Invite junior faculty members to share long term goals (beyond immediate teaching assignments or current research projects) and identify what support they need to achieve those goals.
- Reflect on the sustainability of the teaching workload, research project plans, etc.
- Consider the role of junior faculty members in the department and in service to the college. Are they doing too much? Are they doing too little?
- Ask junior faculty members who they turn to for mentoring outside the department. Do they have mentors in their discipline outside of Carleton who can provide guidance about scholarship? Are they using their assigned mentor at Carleton, or have they found someone else at Carleton outside of the department? (Ideally, junior faculty members would have multiple people to mentor them in different domains. Help encourage the development of a network of mentors.)