

Notes and Comments

Notes et Commentaires

A TEACHING AWARDS SCHEME IN THE ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES UN PROJET DE RÉCOMPENSES DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT DANS LES UNIVERSITÉS ONTARIENNES

In 1973, the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, at the urging of Professor Jim Stevens of the Dept. of Physics, University of Guelph, instituted a scheme of annual awards for outstanding teachers in the 15 universities and several related institutions in Ontario. It was agreed that the reward structures in universities had a natural tendency to favour those who were effective in administrative activity and those who excelled in research and scholarship. To lend more weight to the lip service often paid to recognizing and rewarding good teaching, and to encourage the development of methods of evaluating teaching, it was agreed to set up what it was hoped would become prestigious awards.

The award scheme has now operated for six years, and is an established part of the university scene in Ontario. This paper outlines some of the procedures and experience of this multi-university scheme.

Awards may be made to anyone holding a full-time or a continuing part-time appointment to teach in an Ontario institution other than a College of Applied Arts and Technology (community college). Past recipients have included distinguished scholars in the traditional pattern, but also a career demonstrator in anatomy and an instructor in English as a second language. Although the sponsoring body represents faculty associations, some unionized and some not, award recipients have included persons who are outspoken critics of their local faculty unions, and persons who teach at institutions currently in conflict with the sponsoring body. Every effort is made to exclude internal political influences from the awarding process.

The brochure soliciting nominations outlines the activities considered:

Teaching, in the context of the OCUFA Awards embraces virtually all levels of instruction – graduate and undergraduate teaching, continuing education and faculty development. Similarly, proficiency in teaching may extend well beyond the classroom, the laboratory or the faculty member's office. Activities such as course design, curriculum development, organization of teaching programs and other significant forms of leadership are often important contributions to the instructional process. Those who excel in any of these are eligible for the OCUFA Teaching Awards.

Posthumous awards are considered only if the nominee has died subsequent to being nominated.

In the first four years of the scheme, 20 awards were authorized, but this number was then reduced to 10 each year. Fewer awards may be (and on occasion have been) made by the committee.

The awards scheme is operated by a committee of six faculty members from various universities. There is no restriction on more than one person from any one institution serving simultaneously. Members serve for two to four years as required by the need for both continuity and fresh viewpoints, and the committee chooses its own chairman and is self-perpetuating. Members meet one or more of these criteria:

- (a) strong personal interest in teaching and evaluation
- (b) previous winner of a teaching award
- (c) duties related to improvement of teaching and learning
- (d) scholarly interest in a related field (e.g. psychology of learning)

Expenses, but not stipends, are paid to members of the committee.

Nominations are solicited by distribution of brochures throughout the universities and by advertising and story coverage in student and administrative newspapers and alumni bulletins.

Nominations have been initiated by students individually or collectively, by former students and alumni, by colleagues and chairmen, and by salary and promotion review committees at faculty and university levels. A detailed set of guidelines for nominators is supplied on request, or if substantial modification of an initial submission seems to be needed. These guidelines were formalized from experience with the early years of the scheme, and are designed to keep the supporting dossier for each nomination brief manageable in size while representative of the range of evidence available. Specific advice on reporting the results of computerized course evaluations is offered. There is no official form for nominations, and nominators are urged to work within the guidelines to develop a brief and a supporting package which suits the attainments of their nominee.

On receipt of a nomination, the committee's secretary verifies its completeness, acknowledging receipt, requesting supplementary information, and supplying a copy of the guidelines if appropriate. The nomination is then assigned a number, photocopied, and sent to each committee member for rating.

With the aid of a rating sheet (Figure 1) the nominations are assessed by identifying the claims for excellence and the sources of evidence for each on the axes of the grid, and letter-coding the relevant intersections. The nomination is then given an overall rating on a 5-point scale.

Each committee member then transfers the 5-point rating to a summary sheet and returns this to the secretary, who compiles these returns to give a preliminary rank-ordering of nominees.

At the decision-making meeting, a short-list is compiled by review of the rank-ordering, with special attention to cases with a lack of general agreement whether in the form of a high or a low outlier.

From this agreed short-list, award recipients are selected by discussion based on the rating sheets but with frequent reference to details from the nomination files. The decisions are usually taken in two or three hours of discussion.

The award winners, their nominators, and the presidents of their universities are notified of the awards, and suitable press releases are sent to the media. The awards, in the form of a certificate and an original work of art by a Canadian artist, are presented at a formal dinner by a senior public official such as the government's Minister of Colleges and Universities. In some cases, award winners' universities further recognize or reward them.

After four years' operation, a separate committee was struck to review the award scheme. Among other things, in reaching its conclusion that the scheme should become permanent at a level of ten awards each year, the review committee surveyed all previous winners with a short questionnaire. Table I shows some of the response to that survey. This is based on key phrases in the replies, and sometimes more than one of these originates from the same response, so numerical totals are irregular. The survey did not ask for identification of the respondent, but 19 signed their replies and 6 others identified themselves otherwise in their responses. Fifty out of 75 award winners responded to the survey, which may have failed to reach some on leave or otherwise absent.

It must be recognized that these distributions do not simply show loci of teaching excellence, but also reflect attitudes toward such awards and diligence or lack of it in making nominations. Table II shows the distribution of awards by general disciplinary areas. It includes for the two most recent years the distribution of nominations as well.

Table III shows the distribution of awards by institutions over the years. This shows no discernable pattern which can be related to institutional size or nature. The very high number of awards to York University reflects a large number of nominations from a rapidly-growing school which has established an evening college for adult education and a bilingual college, displaying a strong administrative support of instructional as well as scholarly objectives.

It may be asked how similar or different are the rating practices of the committee members. Some information is collected in Table IV for one year in which 10 awards were made from 56 nominees. Two raters were from physical sciences departments, two from professional schools, one from humanities, and one from social science. Each of the pairs (A and C, B and F) displayed a divergence of performance. No outstanding trends or possible interpretations of rating behaviour appear.

In support of its objective of stimulating the identification of good teaching and its recognition, the awards committee has conducted a survey of local award schemes in the Ontario universities. This revealed three alumni awards, two carrying cash values; one presidential award, also in cash, and one scheme providing recognition in university publications and a discretionary account to support teaching activities. Other schemes were at a faculty or departmental level. There were two of these.

The committee also sponsored a *Guide to Teaching Evaluation*, written by Professor Harry Murray, University of Western Ontario* and is underwriting a second guide by the same author, now in production.

This scheme of awards for teaching has been found practical to operate across a collection of diverse universities and similar institutions. It has stood up to an external review of its operations, and appears to be an established part of the Ontario university scene. It is believed to be effective in making a broad range of academics who initiate or support nominations think more clearly about the nature of good teaching and the problems of documenting it. There is increasing recognition of the validity of the judging process, and thus of the significance of the awards, by academic administrators. Some colleagues remain unconvinced, especially those who regard teaching as an unfortunate intrusion into the fundamental nature of the university as a place for research and scholarship. Overall, however, the award scheme is seen to be a success.

G.F. Atkinson
Department of Chemistry
University of Waterloo