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Recognition from Parents: A Variation on Traditional Teaching Awards

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Background

Recognition awards for outstanding teaching have been used for several decades as incentives for faculty. Many instructional or faculty development programs use them as one of the elements in a comprehensive program. In recent literature, Began (1981), Kozma (1979), Chait and Goeths (1981) and others have recognized the teaching award as part of the incentive structure. A study by Fenker (1977) suggested that faculty highly valued the recognition of outstanding teaching. Awards ranked among the highest incentives for individuals, with only sabbaticals or leaves, promotion or tenure, or salary increases being valued more.

These awards vary in title and form, but are alike in that they generally require supportive documentation that goes through a competitive procedure resulting in a small number being selected for the award. Public recognition, and sometimes a cash award, provide reinforcing encouragement to those who receive this award. Unfortunately, those who are not in the professorial ranks may be excluded from eligibility. In large universities, this disqualifies many members of the teaching staffs: instructors, professional advisors, adjuncts, and teaching assistants.

Identification of Need

In the fall of 1988, after a series of budget cuts, the Teaching Council at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln was forced to seek low-cost ways of encouraging good teaching at the University. Because this group was respon-

sible for selection of campus-wide teaching award winners, it was natural for it to be concerned about providing some visible recognition for those who were effective teachers. Coincidentally, a University Parents' Association had been newly organized and was examining possible projects. They, too, had few funds. Under these conditions, the idea for a Parents' Recognition Award was initiated.

Description of the Award

The Parents' Awards for Significant Contributions to Students are made annually to an unlimited number of faculty or staff who work with students. Every parent of an undergraduate University student receives a nomination form on a mail-back postcard. Timing is important. The forms are mailed the week before a holiday break and parents are encouraged to confer with their sons or daughters during this period. Parents are asked to identify individuals who have made a significant contribution to their sons' or daughters' lives as students. Further, they are asked to name the person and his/her department, and to write a few sentences about the contribution that was made. Nominations are compiled, and recipients are notified. Chairs and Deans are also told which faculty in their units will be recognized.

A side benefit accrues to those who review the nominations, because it is a very pleasant task to read the glowing comments. The testimonies of parents and students convey inspirational examples of good teaching. The following quotes are from nominations:

"... most importantly, always acts like the student is the most important part of his job."

"... excellent instructor, caring individual, brings quality to UNL and the State."

"He has the ability to keep the students on the edge of their seats wanting to know more about the subject, thus creating a desire for the student to put more effort into the class."

"He coaxes, cajoles, gently prods and pushes to get the very best from his students."

"Fantastic lecturer. Able to make complex topics manageable. Available outside of the classroom to give help."

"She has helped, guided, and encouraged our daughter to explore her full potential."

"A very enthusiastic, excellent teacher; you could feel she enjoyed her teaching and that made it exciting for the students."

"He encourages and demands his students to think independently and ... to develop a personal philosophy towards theatre and their purpose in it."

“He is a superb teacher. Not only an extraordinary command of his subject, but very knowledgeable, yet understandable; his teaching strategy has worked remarkably well with me.”

Listing these quotes in the campus faculty newsletter also helps make faculty more aware of teaching behaviors that students value.

A reception, followed by an awards ceremony, provides the appropriate setting for public recognition. All who are nominated receive a certificate of recognition. After refreshments are served, the Chancellor, the President of the University Parents’ Association, and the Chair of the Teaching Council make remarks on the value of being an effective teacher and advisor. Each recipient receives the Award certificate from his/her own College Dean and is listed in a souvenir program.

Benefits of the Award

1. Students are encouraged to communicate with parents about the good things that happen to them at the University.
2. Recipients value this Award because they know it came from a student who appreciated their efforts.
3. New faculty members who receive this Award benefit from early positive feedback from students.
4. The Award is not competitive; therefore, an unlimited number can be given and everyone has a chance of receiving it.
5. Individuals who would not be eligible for the few Distinguished Teaching Awards can receive this recognition; therefore, it has broader impact.
6. Faculty receiving this Award more than once can demonstrate patterns of teaching effectiveness.
7. The Teaching Council reaches its goal of encouraging good teaching with this low-cost teaching Award.
8. Parents’ Association members value the opportunity to participate in a campus project that encourages a better learning environment for their daughters and sons.
9. Publicity about the Award communicates to the people in the State that this University significantly affects individual students.

Lessons Learned

Over the past three years, we have identified a variety of problems resulting from the Parents’ Recognition Award Program. During the first year, for example, two of the recipients were not rehired for reasons other

than teaching ineffectiveness, and this resulted in an embarrassing situation. Currently, the Deans review lists of recipients to prevent such problems.

It is important to be sure all interested officials are included in the recognition ceremony. All academic administrators of the University as well as members of the Board of Regents are invited to attend. Not everyone who is invited participates, but all appreciate being notified and included.

Unresolved Issues

In some cases, the title of the Award may communicate more importance than is warranted. Because one nomination is all that is required for someone to receive the Award, it is possible that some poor teachers could also be recognized. The Teaching Council reviewed the awards process and recognized that pressures could be brought to bear on students to make nominations. A faculty member who wished to add this honor to his/her vita might suggest to a student that he/she put forth a nomination. Of course, if no Award was announced, it would be clear that the student had not followed the suggestion. That could put the student in an awkward position. Recipients often request that the nominating paragraph be put in their personnel files. It is not surprising that they want to know who submitted the nomination and the reason. The Teaching Council, after much discussion, concluded that this information should be confidential to avoid any charges of favoritism or manipulation.

Conclusion

While we have not conducted a systematic evaluation of the Parents' Recognition Award Program, informal feedback from faculty, parents, and students has been very positive. The overall impact appears to be broad. A great many people—full professors, new faculty, part-time faculty, teaching assistants, professional advisors—are getting a “pat on the back” for a job well done. This recognition is included in the individual's annual review data, so it has the potential for positively affecting salary and promotion decisions. This encourages a great many individuals to continue attending to student needs. Further, making the nomination requires parents to talk with students about the positive things that have happened in their university experience. In short, it gives parents a greater sense of involvement. The institution, in turn, benefits from comments that dispel the myth that it is a cold and uncaring place. Cost is low, and return is high. It is a winning situation. What more could a faculty developer want in a program?

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