

Grinnell College Protocol for Effective Peer Observations

Grinnell College highly values peer observations of teaching as a form of continuing professional development and peer mentorship. The three forms of peer observation are formative, evaluative, and collaborative. We want to particularly encourage more collaborative forms via either teaching circles or mutual peer observation, where two or more faculty members agree to observe each other's classes and provide feedback. All three types of peer observation can strengthen faculty relationships as well as reinvigorate teaching throughout one's career.

The College has endorsed a definition of teaching excellence, which informs the assessment criteria that observers should use.

While teaching methods vary by discipline and instructor, broadly speaking, excellent teachers do the following:	Expertise	They build, maintain, and effectively apply expertise for the courses they teach;
	Inclusive Teaching	They foster inclusive and engaging learning environments;
	Learning Goals	They clearly and effectively communicate to students learning goals and expectations that align with relevant departmental, disciplinary, or institutional learning outcomes;
	Pedagogy	They use pedagogies that are appropriate for the learning goals and context;
	Feedback to Students	They respond to student work in a substantive, timely, and individualized way for the purposes of informing and improving the learning experiences of students; and
	Reflection	They engage in a reflective process to enhance their teaching practices.

Based on scholarship, we advocate for a three-step model of peer observation. A classroom observation involves not only the class sessions themselves but also conversations before and after the session that contextualize it for the instructor and for the observer. Scholarship supports this model for all disciplines.



Step 1: Preparatory Conversation

Before the first observation, the instructor and observer should meet to confirm the time and place of the class, where the observer should sit, and what level of participation, if any, is expected by the observer, and any other details. The instructor should provide relevant course materials such as a syllabus, readings, and assignments. The observer should communicate to the instructor the purpose of the observation, and what to expect after the observation occurs.

Additionally, to begin to evaluate the instructor's *learning goals, pedagogy, and reflection*, engage in a brief (15 minutes or so) dialogue about the course. The following questions, directed towards the instructor, may aid your discussion.¹

1. What are the goals for this class (these classes) and how do these goals fit into the arc of the course?
2. What are your plans for achieving these goals?
3. What have students been asked to do in preparation for this class (these classes)?
4. Is this class a typical example of your teaching style? Are you trying new approaches? Explain if needed.
5. In what aspects of the class are you interested in hearing feedback?
6. How can I (the observer) make this peer observation more comfortable for you?

If you want more resources for conversations for a pre-meeting, you may find the following useful: [guidelines from Smith College](#), [conversation starters from KU](#), Appendix C from [this University of Toronto guide to Peer Observation](#) which covers types of questions to ask and avoid.

Step 2: In-Class Observation

Grinnell College guidelines say that an effective observation will involve at least three hours of teaching, which may require multiple class visits. During observation, using the Definition of Teaching Excellence, an observer may be able to specifically make notes about *expertise, inclusive teaching, learning goals, pedagogy, and feedback to students*. Keep in mind that while one person is playing the role of observer, this participant also has the opportunity to gain ideas and insights into other methods of teaching.

Take notes during the class observation (optional [Note-Taking Guide](#)).

For the observer, according to literature on best practices, we suggest that the observer primarily focus on the overall instructional experience and quality of student learning. Below are a few suggestions of what the observer should avoid during a peer observation:²

- The observer should avoid participating in classroom discussion or activities unless agreed upon in advance of the class.
- The observer should avoid asking the students about the class or treat their visit as an interview or focus group.

¹ These questions are adapted from the *Peer Review of Teaching: A Sourcebook* by Anker (2007).

² Taken from the Yale-NUS College Centre for Teaching and Learning's *Peer Observation of Teaching Guidelines: A Sourcebook for the International Liberal Arts Context*.

- The observer should avoid mapping their own teaching style and cultural expectations onto the faculty member being observed.

Step 3: Post-Observation Conversation

A meeting after a peer observation is crucial for the development of the instructor and for trust in the observation process. It also is an opportunity to learn more about how a faculty engages in *reflection* on their teaching. A post-observation meeting should occur in a timely manner, ideally within one week after the conclusion of the classroom observation. The following questions and points may aid this conversation:

1. To the instructor: How do you think the class(es) went? What went how you expected, what went particularly well, and what do you wish had gone differently?
2. How will the instructor make adjustments to the class, if needed?
3. The observer should be sure to acknowledge and highlight aspects of the class that went well.
4. The observer should provide specific feedback, especially on elements requested in the pre-observation conversation.
5. The observer should provide feedback on other aspects of the class(es) that may not have been top of mind to the instructor but speak to Grinnell's definition of teaching excellence.
6. Finally, in pointing out concerns or weaknesses, strategies for improvement should be provided or collaboratively identified.

Peer Observation Review Document

For evaluative reviews only, please prepare a document that summarizes the peer review by reflecting on your conversations with the course instructor and your observations. Your document should include the class(es) observed, the days and times the classes were scheduled, and how many students were in attendance. It also is helpful to have a brief summary of the learning goals or activities for the class on a particular day. Use the above questions and Grinnell's Definition of Teaching Excellence to guide your report. Refer to the evidence and examples reviewed and discussed in your conversations and observations to support comments about each dimension.

Additional Resources

Associated Colleges of the South. 2025. "Toolkit for Conversations and Considerations about Faculty Evaluation." <https://www.acsouth.edu/faculty-evaluation/fe-toolkit/>

Kocur, R. D. 2021. "Collaborative Peer Observation of Teaching in Higher Education: Best Practices Review and Recommendations." *Christian Business Academy Review* 16(1).

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Grinnell College Peer Observation of Teaching Note-Taking Guide (Optional)

When you observe a colleague's teaching, use the College's definition of teaching excellence to guide what you focus on during the observation. An observer may be able to specifically make notes about *expertise*, *inclusive teaching*, *learning goals*, *pedagogy*, and *feedback to students*, though depending on the events of a class, insight may not be gained into all of these. The following note-taking guide provides an optional support for focusing the observer's attention on these aspects of teaching excellence.

Observed faculty:

Reviewer:

Course:

Date:

No. of Students in Attendance:

The instructor effectively applies expertise for this course

How does the instructor bring new or relevant content into the course? How does the course content apply to their area of expertise? Are the content and assignments appropriately aligned with the instructor's expertise?

The instructor fosters an inclusive and engaging learning environment

How does the instructor demonstrate respect for and inclusion of all students? For example, using student names, inviting students to participate, or creating a variety of opportunities to participate? Does the instructor demonstrate openness to divergent ideas or points of view? Are students enthusiastically focused on the content?

The instructor clearly and effectively communicates learning goals and expectations to students

Does the instructor address the session topics and goals? Are the session goals relevant to the overall course learning goals? Are the students aware of the instructor's expectations?

The instructor uses pedagogies appropriate for the learning goals and context

What pedagogical methods does the instructor use to present and reinforce the content? How effective were the chosen methods? For example, did some methods encourage more participation or strike you as innovative? If you observe pedagogical methods that are novel, please identify them here.

The instructor provides feedback to students to inform and improve their learning

How does the instructor elicit and respond to students' ideas and questions? For example, does the instructor provide direct feedback about accuracy, explain why answers are correct vs. incorrect, provide suggestions for improvement, or provide encouragement? Do they use a variety of question types like recall, synthesis, and application?

Peer Observation of Teaching

Presidential Task Force on Evaluating Teaching Excellence

Grinnell College

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