UTeach Observation Protocol

Dr. Marder introduced the UTeach Observation Protocol (UTOP) which was designed to help guide classroom observations of math and science classes at any level from middle school to college.

Discussion of the UTOP

- In high school particularly there is much disagreement about what makes a good teacher and a good classroom environment so observations must be very structured and with much detail so observer can support his or her “rating” of the class.
- Past observation tools often assume the observer has no knowledge of the subject matter and is only observing style not content. The UTOP is designed to have people observe in their own field so they can evaluate both style and content.
- Past observation tools often focus on a single teaching style (often inquiry based instruction) but the UTOP is designed to look for several different teaching styles. “If one of Feynman’s classes was observed he should not receive a poor grade just because he lectured.”
- The UTOP always uses two independent observers and finds fairly good agreement between each observer’s overall rating for the class.
- Training for the observer is very important. For UTOP this often involves 1 day of video training. A new observer does an observation of a video of a class and then discusses the observation with a seasoned observer.
- At UT they have found that having a small group of undergraduates talk about what they want to look for and what kinds of questions to ask themselves before doing an observation makes them very skilled observers who can offer very precise suggestions and recommendations to hiring committees (they are observing faculty candidates).

Discussion of UT Graduate Physics Courses

- Why is a yearly observation not mandatory for professors in our department?
- How do class assignments get made? Are course evaluations taken into consideration at all or is it just seniority?
- Why does the department not pay any attention to course evaluations? By the time students get to graduate school they know the difference between a hard class and a bad class and can make very accurate evaluations.
- Over the last 8 semesters core courses have an average student rating of about 3.4 out of 5 (a high satisfactory grade)
- Faculty decisions are based largely on research because research is what makes a university well known. How can we get the outside community to value teaching more so that in response the department will see the value of good teaching not just good research.