

## Report of Academic Affairs committee to the Faculty Senate

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**Date:** March 29, 2011

**Charge:** Prepare a statement addressing ways that faculty may encourage students to participate in online evaluations; recommend ways that faculty and administrators can make online evaluations a more productive process; and suggest other means by which faculty may be evaluated for inclusion in tenure and promotion applications.

**History:** Before researching ways faculty might develop more substantive teaching portfolios for tenure and promotion applications, the committee wanted to understand the history behind the move to online course evaluations.

The reasoning behind this move to online evaluations was rooted in recommendations made by the Teaching Evaluation Committee in the year 2000 to assess the course evaluation tool. Margaret Morgan, Director of the Instructional Development Center, reports that these recommendations were developed in conjunction with Mike Theall, a well-respected consultant on course evaluation methodology.

Another committee was formed in 2004 to determine how to implement the recommendations of the former committee and consultant. With regard to formatting the final evaluation results, the proposal offered the following:

Reporting on current items 1–3 (which will remain at the beginning of the revised instrument) should include (a) the item, abbreviated if necessary; (b) distribution of responses—i.e., number of responses A, B, C, etc.; (c) instructor mean; and (d) contextual information, including the information communicated by the box-and-whiskers graph recommended by the TEC. The contextual information should be filtered by level (upper-division context for upper-division courses; lower-division context for lower-division courses). The group asked that two graphs (or a compound graph of some sort) be provided—one to communicate department context, one to communicate college context—if both department and college context is given; whether to provide both contexts remains a matter of contention, some arguing that the department context is often not large enough to be meaningful.

These requirements for formatting the results required extensive data analysis and formatting that was not supported by existing software or scanning devices. As such, Jonathan Glenn was charged by Gabriel Esteban to “hand” implement these changes. Dr. Glenn had to take the markedly unusual step to develop Excel macros that would collate and report the data as required and deliver the results to all faculty. The quarterly activity of processing, analyzing, and formatting the evaluation data became incredibly manpower intensive and time consuming, taking up to 50 hours each time for Dr. Glenn alone.

The present committee wishes to emphasize the unusual nature of an Associate Provost collating, programming macros, and delivering course evaluation reports by hand and sans a group of assistants. Universities traditionally employ more sophisticated scanning technology to perform these operations. It should be noted here that even the scanning technology and supporting software that was used to capture the initial data from the paper-based scantron forms is no longer in operation.

Unsurprisingly, Dr. Glenn was in favor of moving to the online course evaluation system which would delete the laborious manual manipulation of course evaluation data crunching and delivery. After viewing the research the Academic Planning and Assessment Committee (APAC) (2009) used to make their decision about recommending the move to online course evaluations and talking to Dr. Glenn, the present committee concluded that the overriding catalysts for shifting to the online system were efficiency and cost-savings. The research presented to us showed that the response rate for the universities implementing online systems dropped significantly, and no one reported returns greater than 50%.

Indeed efficiency and cost savings are the reasons many universities have moved to online course evaluations, so UCA is certainly not alone in this decision. Norris and Conn (2005), in an article in *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, wrote: "... many colleges and universities are also considering or already implementing course evaluations via an online format for face-to-face courses, in order to lower costs, increase timeliness of feedback, and facilitate record-keeping and data analysis (p. 13). Supporting that statement is UCA's APAC committee research. The committee contacted people at several universities which had implemented online course evaluations to see how it worked. In reading the statements, it is clear that these universities did not move to online course evaluations due to potential greater quantity or quality of evaluation feedback. For example, Saint Louis University received a student response rate of 47% in 2008. Faculty at Belmont University reported around 40% response rate. The contact person at Vincennes University said they had moved to online evaluations, but he did not say what the response rate was. Miami University in Ohio reported between 40% and 50% response rates. A 2008 article by Nulty in *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, stated:

There are many advantages associated with the use of information technology to support approaches to evaluation (Dommeyer et al., 2004; Salmon et al. 2004; Watt et al. 2002). As examples, Watt et al. (2002) note that 'using web-based evaluation questionnaires can bypass many of the bottlenecks in the evaluation system (e.g. data entry and administration) [**and the present committee notes a significant bottleneck in Dr. Glenn processing course evaluation data by hand**] and move to a more "just in time" evaluation model' (327). Another advantage is avoiding the need to administer surveys in class (Dommeyer et al. 2004). Unsurprisingly, there is increasing growth in the use of web-based surveying for course and teaching evaluation (Hastie & Palmer 1997; Seal & Przasnyski 2001). This growth is happening despite concerns from students (e.g. regarding confidentiality and ease of use) (Dommeyer, Baum & Hanna 2002), and concerns from staff (e.g. about the adequacy of response rates) (Dommeyer, Baum et al. 2002). (p. 301)

*The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported in 2010 on a *Boston Globe* article about the problems universities are having getting student feedback through online course evaluations:

Colleges thought they were enhancing efficiency when they moved their course evaluations online, but an unintended consequence of the shift to evaluations not filled out in class is that students started skipping them altogether, *The Boston Globe* reported today. According to the *Globe*, some institutions concerned about the dropoff in participation are offering incentives to students, such as lotteries for iPods or meal vouchers at Northeastern University and pizza for the class with the highest return rate in some MIT departments. The *Globe* says other institutions are considering withholding students' grades until they submit the evaluations.

The reality is, though, that the severe constraints of our university's budget make the administrative efficiency and cost savings provided by online course evaluation systems almost irresistible, especially when it is clear that this university has not done all it can to promote the process to students, and there is evidence, presented in the next section, that there are professors who are very successful at getting their students to fill out their online surveys.

An interview with the Provost yielded more insights about the historical and cultural factors in the long course evaluation conversation at this university, and they bear on the debate about the implementation of online course evaluations. The Provost first pointed to page 20 of the *Faculty Handbook* and the section about teaching effectiveness:

## **VII. Criteria for Tenure, Promotion, and Advancement**

### **A. Effectiveness in Teaching**

The University of Central Arkansas is committed to offering the highest possible level of instruction to its students. Effectiveness in teaching is, therefore, of primary importance in evaluating faculty members for both tenure and promotion. Although no definition of effective teaching can be completely adequate, the university expects its faculty to bring knowledge, scholarship, dedication, and energy to the classroom and to present the various disciplines offered by the university in a manner that assists students to understand, to acquire intellectual discipline, and to develop as thinking human beings.

He explained that the way UCA has interpreted this passage is that the only item that will count as evidence of teaching effectiveness is the teaching evaluations.

However, he says that a university that values teaching should not rely solely on student evaluations to provide the entire picture of a teacher. He would like to see departments develop discipline-appropriate ways to provide evidence of effective teaching. However, some additional methods could apply to all departments, such as the chair course observation and evaluation of a teacher, which would provide context and explanation to the Provost about the strengths of a teacher in terms of his/her discipline and the discipline's approved teaching methods and goals.

He also recommended cultivating a culture of effective peer evaluation that would serve many of the same purposes as outlined above regarding the chair's teaching observation and evaluation by providing even more context/description/evidence in support of a teacher.

Thus as the present Faculty Senate charge and the Provost have indicated, we have a bigger problem than merely figuring out how to get a higher response rate on our online course evaluations. Departments must figure out what other measures/evidence could fill in the story of a teacher's effectiveness for tenure and promotion decisions.

The move to online evaluations makes this necessity even more urgent, however. Indeed, Nulty (2008), from the article in *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* cited above, argues after an analysis of the low returns universities receive from online evaluation surveys, that the results are simply not going to be representative of the student population in each class. Therefore, he writes that professors must gather multiple kinds of evidence to show teaching effectiveness or risk imparting a misleading picture:

Given the anonymity of responses and the impossibility of using demographic data to predict attitudinal variables in students (and therefore there being no viable way to systematically target surveys at a minimal sample of students that would be representative of the whole group), appropriate paths of action that remain are to:

- (1) use multiple methods to boost survey response rates as high as possible (regardless of whether on-paper or online surveys are used—but *especially* when online surveys are used);
- (2) consider the probable effect that use of a particular survey design and method might have on the make-up of the respondents and take this into account when interpreting the feedback obtained;
- (3) use multiple methods of evaluation to elucidate findings—so as to construct a better informed understanding of what the true picture is. Without these actions being taken, relying heavily on student evaluations of courses and teaching is likely to be, at best, inadequate, at worst, misleading. (312)

**Ways to Encourage Participation in Online Evaluations.** Amidst the realism about the financial and human resources constraints that make online course evaluations attractive and the ways online course evaluations are actually working en masse across universities are indications that some professors are quite successful at getting their students to fill them out. Thus, it is important for all faculty to learn how these professors are successful and emulate their techniques.

To begin, though, there are some actions we *cannot take legally*. Tom Courtway says: “1. Legally, the faculty cannot require/force students to participate in the evaluation process. 2. Withholding grades for a short period may or may not be legal, but not a good idea because the fact would become public and make for negative publicity.”

But there are some legal strategies effective for increasing student participation in online evaluations. I quote at length below because the lists provided by Nulty (2008) repeat and summarize the research from Norris and Conn (2005), an article in *The Chronicle of Higher*

*Education* by Benton (2008), and the very informative blog posts by faculty under *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2010) report concerning *The Boston Globe* article on poor online course evaluation returns. In fact, the research studies conducted by Norris and Conn (2005) showed that implementing the suggestions below increased returns by 32%. Nulty (2008, pp. 304-305) writes:

Two websites offer particularly succinct, credible and partly overlapping advice regarding practices that can boost response rates. These are Zúñiga (2004) from the US Teaching and Learning with Technology/Flashlight Group, and Quinn (2002) from the University of South Australia. Zúñiga offered a set of seven ‘best practices for increasing response rates to online surveys’. These are:

(1) *Push the survey*. This basically means making it easy for students to access the survey by, for example, providing them with the survey URL in an email sent directly to them.

(2) *Provide frequent reminders*. Zúñiga advocated ‘At least three reminders’. Others, however, point to the inevitable diminishing return on this investment coupled with the possibility of irritating the survey population (Kittleson 1995; Cook et al. 2000). In the context of surveying multiple lecturers in any one course, and multiple courses in any one semester, respondents are likely to have several surveys to complete. The potential for a barrage of reminders—and commensurately higher levels of irritation—is evident.

(3) *Involve academics*. Zúñiga contended that ‘Nothing helps more than regular reminders to students from faculty.’ This assertion does not appear to be entirely supported by the literature. As shown earlier in this paper, institutions that did not use direct email reminders to students—implicitly relying on academics to promote participation—achieved much lower response rates than those that did. The combination of direct reminders backed up by encouragement from academics, however, was certainly better than either method alone. It may be particularly so if the academics also take the opportunity to demonstrate and/or convince students that their feedback has been, or will be, used to good effect (see no. 4 below).

(4) *Persuade respondents that their responses will be used*. The issue here is whether students believe that the academics will take the feedback seriously (Nulty 1992). There is a range of ways to achieve this but all involve some active demonstration to students that feedback is valued and acted upon.

(5) *Provide rewards*. Zúñiga stated that ‘Many institutions have found that a drawing for a prize of general interest ... [helps]’. He went on: ‘even one point earned for the course also works well even though it is not enough to change any individual student’s grade. Sometimes this reward is given to individuals, and sometimes to the whole class if more than a certain percentage of students responds.’ However, he echoed a warning made more clearly by Ehrmann (2004) that thoughtful participation is best achieved by ensuring the survey is worth students’ time, and that using extrinsic motivators may bias the sample to include more responses from those who need that form of encouragement.

(6) *Help students understand how to give constructive criticism*. When such help is given it seems likely that there will be at least two benefits. First, students will improve their ability to make points of value in ways that are unlikely to bruise academics’ egos. Second, providing this kind of help to students will help convince them that their responses will be used (point no. 4).

(7) *Create surveys that seek constructive criticism.* If a survey does not demand constructive criticism—for example if all the items require a simple numerical rating—then there will probably be less engagement with the survey because the survey itself sends a message that conflicts with attempts made under no. 4.

Quinn (2002) specified eight strategies that have been used by people who have achieved high response rates to online surveys. Some of these overlapped with those already detailed above, but the following five did not:

(1) *Extend the duration of a survey's availability.* The longer it is there the higher the chance students will respond.

(2) *Involve students in the choice of optional questions.* Aside from making the survey intrinsically more interesting to students, this also addresses Zúñiga's #4.

(3) *Assure students of the anonymity of their responses.* Dommeyer, Baum & Hanna (2002) indicated that this was a concern for students, so anonymity seems likely to boost responses if it is managed effectively.

(4) *Familiarize students with online environments by using online teaching aids/methods.* Related to this point, Richardson (2005) gave the following advice:

It would be sensible to administer feedback surveys by the same mode as that used for delivering the curriculum (classroom administration for face-to-face teaching, postal surveys for correspondence courses and electronic surveys for online courses). (406)

In the context of online surveying, it seems reasonable that the more familiar students are with the medium to be used for the survey, the more likely they will use it. Consistency of mode is likely to help achieve this outcome.

(5) *Keep questionnaires brief.* The proposition here is that the less time it takes for a student to complete a survey, the more likely it is they will do so.

In addition to the above suggestions, blog posts by faculty under *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2010) report concerning *The Boston Globe* article on poor online course evaluation returns discuss a successful university-wide effort to take face-to-face classes to computer labs to complete online evaluations. Someone could do a study to see if such an undertaking is feasible at this university. Many students do have laptops or iPads, though, and it seems to make sense to ask students who regularly bring them to class to fill out the online course evaluations during a designated class period, just like they would have filled out the paper-based forms.

Lee Stevens, Associate Director of Information Technology at UCA, reports that the same vendor that has created our online course evaluation survey has made noises about developing a front-end mobile application that would allow students to send in their online course evaluation data using their cell phones. He doesn't know how far away such a development is, however. Stevens says that we could contract this vendor to develop an application just for us, but it would likely cost between \$30,000 and \$60,000. He is hoping that the vendor decides to develop the application on its own, and then it wouldn't cost the university much to implement it.

**General Suggestions for Additional Evidence of Teaching Excellence.** Regardless of whether or not we keep the online system for course evaluation, it is important for departments to develop additional means to assess the effectiveness of their teachers. Student feedback should not be the

only measure of teaching excellence for tenure and promotion decisions. Such feedback simply cannot provide a complete picture of one's teaching abilities.

Departments know best what measures should be used to evaluate their faculty members. What may be appropriate for a faculty member specializing in music instruction may not be appropriate for a faculty member teaching psychology. Thus, differences in methods across departments are expected. That said, whatever methods are decided upon by a given department should be standardized across that department. Teachers cannot, for example, design their own course evaluation survey different from other surveys given in the department and have it count in tenure and promotion decisions. Teachers can design their own instruments for formative information, however. For example, many teachers design and disseminate questionnaires at mid-term to gather data about how methods are working in the class to see what they need to change to better meet student needs. Although information from these sorts of instruments could be included as part of a teaching narrative in a tenure packet to contextualize professional attributes like attention to student needs, results from such surveys would not count as the kind of summative, standardized data faculty members are expected to show for tenure and promotion decisions.

As mentioned in the section above, however, there are some strategies for gathering usable information that would work for all departments, namely, chair and peer observations of faculty teaching written up as evaluations of instructional effectiveness. According to the Provost, these evaluations would count in decisions about tenure and promotion.

While typical materials found in teaching portfolios do not count as summative data for tenure and promotion decisions, they do help provide context for the summative data that is provided, especially when they are explained well in a teaching narrative. Thus, a well-rounded teaching portfolio is important in a tenure and promotion packet. Items in such a portfolio might include the following:

- teaching philosophy,
- sample syllabi,
- samples of instructor comments on student work,
- recordings of the instructor teaching,
- sample assignment descriptions and tests, and
- evidence of professional development (as a teacher): workshops, publications, conferences, etc. that helped promote growth as a teacher.

The Instructional Development Center (IDC) can help faculty develop all of the items listed above. Indeed, Patty Phelps holds a workshop on constructing the teaching portfolio every semester. In addition to that help, the IDC provides course redesign workshops, discussion groups on teaching matters, online pedagogical resources, grant money to attend workshops to improve teaching effectiveness, and a service that provides course taping and consultation.

## References

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