

Report on the On-Line Evaluation System
from the Teaching and Advising Committee

November 16, 2006

This committee is charged with reviewing the On-Line Evaluation system every three years. These observations and recommendations constitute our report.

In the opinion of this committee, it appears that the on-line evaluation system has several sometimes conflicting purposes:

- ◇ To provide feedback from students to individual faculty members so that the faculty member might improve his or her teaching. This constitutes the formative function of the evaluation system.
- ◇ To provide data for department administrators, to assist them in annual evaluations of faculty. This constitutes a summative function of the system.
- ◇ To provide data that can be used in tenure and promotion decisions. This is also a summative function of this system.
- ◇ To carry out all these functions as efficiently as possible, without excessive inconvenience to students and waste of paper or other resources.

The committee feels that partially because of these conflicting purpose, the current on-line evaluation system is falling short of what should be the university's goal in this area: to create a culture across the university that encourages thoughtful evaluation in order that faculty may be evaluated fairly in a manner that uses student opinion appropriately.

The current system suffers from the following problems:

- ◇ Students often do not treat these evaluations seriously. The response rate is lower than it should be. However, the committee has learned that the overall response rate, while low, is actually fairly similar to what the response rate was in the days of paper evaluations. According to a report prepared by Ray Wallace and Leonard Johnson in 2003, the "paper" response rate in spring of 2002 was only 57.2%. Switching to on-line evaluations the following semester actually increased the response rate—but only by 3.2% for fall 2002 and 0.7% for spring 2003.

Nevertheless, the response rate is still lower than we would like. Students sometimes appear to be offering their evaluations in a hurried and

haphazard manner, which may very well be caused by the informal setting in which they fill out the evaluations. Occasionally, students appear to be doing these evaluations in groups. Unfortunately, the answers that students give in these settings can have serious negative effects on the faculty member involved.

- ◇ There is a fundamental lack of enthusiasm among faculty for the current evaluation system. On the one hand, these data are overemphasized in evaluating performance of faculty members, instead of employing other measures (class visits, for example). At the same time, the evaluations are underutilized: faculty are not investing the time necessary to customize their evaluations in a way that is appropriate to the specific course.
- ◇ There is a perception that the tenure and promotion process over relies on the statistical data from these evaluations instead of looking at other possible evidence of a faculty member's teaching, such as the thoughtful review of syllabi by senior faculty in the same field, class visits by department administrators, descriptions from the faculty member about his or her own teaching, and so forth. In other words, the on-line evaluations are not incorporated into any kind of comprehensive system of faculty development.

The faculty of the university, rather than the administration, is ultimately responsible for determining the standards by which courses are evaluated. This means that the committee can only make recommendations that will affect the environment in which these evaluations take place, such as the sort of tools that will be available for such evaluations.

With this consideration in mind, the committee offers the following recommendations:

- ◇ That the on-line evaluation system be retained with some modifications because of its efficiency.
- ◇ That the university make an effort to incorporate these evaluations into a comprehensive faculty development program. Recommendations:
 - The university could begin an effort to create a comprehensive faculty development program

along the lines recommended by Nancy Wannamaker and Ding Johnson, as a result of a two-day seminar they attended this past March under the auspices of the Center for Educational Development and Assessment.

- The university could distinguish between two functions of student evaluations: (1) formative, designed to give feedback to the faculty member toward self-improvement and (2) summative, designed to provide data for personnel decisions.
 - The option of formative evaluations could be provided to faculty so that they could conduct their own midterm evaluations. The results from these evaluations would be made available only to the faculty member and his or her mentor.
 - All of these steps would be toward seeing student evaluations as part of a larger system of faculty development. The results from student evaluations cannot by themselves determine the quality of a faculty member's teaching; administrators and tenure and promotion committees need to include additional measures. (Wannamaker and Johnson point out some other possibilities: peer assessment of course content or syllabus design, structured interviews to assess student learning, class visits, and so forth.)
- ◇ That steps be taken to make students take the process more seriously:
- That the hours at which students are permitted to fill out an evaluation be restricted to the daytime hours. (The committee was concerned that students occasionally fill out evaluations in groups late at night in what appears to be a raucous atmosphere.)
 - That students be allowed the option to electronically sign their evaluations in order that they might carry more weight.
 - That the university engage in efforts to educate students about the purpose of the the evaluations and their use in how faculty members design their teaching and in how they are evaluated. In general it should be the goal of the university to create a culture of thoughtful evaluation.
 - That the practice of counting blank evaluations as evidence that a student participated be discontinued.
- That the university solicit student opinion on other possible incentives might encourage more student participation.
- ◇ That steps be taken to encourage more participation by faculty:
- That faculty be allowed the option of designing their own open-ended question. This would be particularly useful for the formative evaluations.
 - That department administrators use a variety of methods to assess teaching and encourage their faculty to evaluate their own teaching.
- ◇ That the evaluations not be used for any other purpose besides assessing the faculty member's performance and as a means of improving the faculty member's teaching. The committee does not feel that the on-line student evaluations should be used to assess general learning outcomes, for example. There already is student opinion data from other types of surveys. Most important, the on-line student evaluations need to retained their primary purpose of improving the faculty member's teaching. Any changes made to the evaluations beyond this would decrease their effectiveness in this area.
- We carefully considered whether it was possible to assess learning outcomes with the on-line student evaluations. The university learning outcomes apply to programs, nto individual courses.
 - It may be possible to totally revise the on-line evaluation system so that the evaluations have a completely different purpose, but we see this as a separate set of issues.
 - The danger is that a hybrid system will not satisfy anyone.