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DOC 2004-08 Use of Student Evaluations in Judging Teaching Effectiveness

University of Dayton. Faculty Affairs Committee

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PROPOSAL TO THE ACADEMIC SENATE

TITLE: Use of Student Evaluations in Judging Teaching Effectiveness
SUBMITTED BY: Faculty Affairs Committee
DATE: December 3, 2004
ACTION: Legislative
REFERENCE: Faculty Handbook §IV(M)(H)

Proposal:

The following language shall be added to §IV(M) (H)[Faculty Policies/University Policy on Faculty Evaluation/Student Evaluation System] and designated as subsection 9

9. While, student evaluations can play a useful role in evaluating the teaching abilities of faculty members, those evaluations are subject to limitations as evaluative tools. Therefore, for purposes of promotion, tenure, or merit pay adjustments, student evaluations of faculty shall not be used as the sole criterion for judging a faculty member's teaching effectiveness.

Rationale:

The University, as part of its quest for academic excellence has made a commitment to academic rigor. While a precise definition of "academic rigor" has not been enunciated, a commitment to holding students to high standards, challenging students in the classroom and expecting student engagement in their courses is a necessary component of that concept. Over the years, a significant number of faculty have expressed fears that if they hold students to tougher standards in grading, assign students more work, or generally expect more student engagement in the classroom, they will receive lower student evaluations. They fear that lower student evaluations will diminish their prospects for promotion, tenure, and merit pay increases. These fears are particularly felt by non-tenured members of the faculty, who believe themselves to be particularly vulnerable. Many of these same faculty members have expressed concern that teaching evaluations are being used as the sole measure of their teaching effectiveness. The proposal before the Senate is meant to allay those fears and to help prevent student evaluation of teaching from being used as a sole measure of teaching abilities, a practice which the Committee believes to be both unjustifiable and pernicious.

Not using student evaluations as a sole measure of a faculty member's teaching would seem to be beyond cavil. Student evaluations of teaching were never designed to be a summative measure of teaching. Indeed, in the Committee has been dealing with this issue for several years, and over those years, not a single person has tried to argue that this practice has any intellectual justification. A search of the literature on teaching evaluations also reveals no one who argues in favor of their being used as a summative measure. Nonetheless, a number of persons have put forth arguments that a ban on the use of teaching evaluations as a sole yardstick of teaching is unnecessary because, (a) the practice is already proscribed by University policy, and (b) no one is really using student evaluations in that way. Alternatively, they argue that even if student evaluations are being used in that manner, no harm is done to the pursuit of academic rigor because grading and course work load do not significantly affect a student's evaluation of his or her teacher. All of these arguments are mistaken.

Doesn't University Policy Already Bar the Use of Student Evaluations as a Sole Measure of Teaching?

The simple answer to the above question is no. Currently no University wide policy bars the use of student evaluations as a sole measure of teaching effectiveness. Hence, the need to create a new University wide policy.

Does Anyone Really Use Student Evaluations as a Sole Measure of Teaching?

One argument against instituting the proposed policy is that its promulgation would be a bit like telling children "not to stick beans up their nose," a practice which would not be followed absent the admonition not to do so. The Faculty Development Committee is currently conducting an empirical study of how student evaluations are utilized in various units and departments. That study is based on "self reporting" by unit heads and department chairs. Regardless of how that study comes out, the Committee believes that over the years it has accumulated enough credible first hand testimony, both in its own deliberations and in other forums such as the Faculty Board and Faculty Exchange Series, to support the conclusion that the practice of utilizing student evaluations as a sole measure of teaching effectiveness for purposes of promotion, tenure, and merit pay adjustments is followed more than just occasionally.

Is the Use of Student Evaluations as a Sole Measure of Teaching Inimical to Academic Rigor?

As at least some of the senators remember, the issue of whether grades and high expectations of students are linked with lower student evaluations of teachers is not a new subject. At least two of our Associate Provosts conducted studies of the literature on the topic. Their conclusion was that the research showed that no significant correlation exists between lower grades and higher expectations of students and less favorable student evaluations of teaching. While that perhaps was true at the time the studies were undertaken, subsequent research has shown that faculty grades and student work load do affect the scores faculty members receive on their student evaluations.

The most comprehensive review of available studies was undertaken by Valen E.

Johnson, Professor of Biostatistics, University of Michigan. Professor Johnson reviewed several dozen studies, including the 1998-99 DUET (Duke Undergraduates Evaluating Teaching) study which he helped lead when he was Professor of Statistics at Duke University. Among Professor Johnson's conclusions were the following:

1. Differences in grading practices between instructors cause biases in student evaluations of teaching.
2. Student evaluations of teaching are not reliable indicators of teaching effectiveness and account for only a small proportion of the variance in student learning from student to student and course to course.
3. High grade distributions cannot be associated with higher levels of student achievement.^{1[1]}

Perhaps even more disturbing was a 1998 survey of 208 faculty members and 142 students at California State University, Fullerton, by Michael H. Birnbaum, Professor of Psychology at that institution.^{2[2]} Of the faculty members surveyed 136 responded that if they were to give lower grades, it would lower their student evaluations. 65.9% of the faculty members surveyed believed that increasing the content of their courses would result in lower student evaluations.

The survey of students indicates that the views expressed by the faculty members were realistic. Of the 142 students surveyed 131 gave higher ratings to a class with "light content (less than 100 pages to read per semester and nothing else to do out of class) than a course with "heavy content" (800 pages to read and homework assignments). 139 of the 142 students gave higher ratings to a course with "very easy standards" ("this instructor gives most students As and Bs, even to those who are struggling with the material or who have not been diligent in attendance and study. Only the most clueless student will get a C in the class. If a person has half a brain and attends some of the time, they will pass with an A or a B") than to courses with a "very hard standard" ("a course in which 7% of the students get As, 13% Bs, 50 Cs, 25% D's and 15% fail.").^{3[3]}

Putting the Proposed Amendment in Context

The proposed amendment does not bar the use of student evaluations in judging a faculty member's teaching abilities. As the first sentence notes, student evaluations can provide valuable information. However, as Professor Caruth McGehee, President of the Academic

^{1[1]}Valen E. Johnson, *Grade Inflation—Crisis in Higher Education*, 237 (2003)

^{2[2]}The survey is available at <http://faculty.fullerton.edu/senatenews/page3.html>.

^{3[3]}Both the content and standards issues had intermediate choices which garnered little support from the students. On content, only 24 rated a medium level content course higher than a light content course, and only 14 rated courses with "medium easy" or "medium hard" standards higher than the course with easy standards. *Id.*

Senate at Louisiana State University has noted, they must be used “with restraint and good judgment,” and in tandem with “other indicators of teaching quality.”^{4[4]} Using student evaluations as the sole measure of a faculty member’s teaching abilities fulfills none of those criteria.

The Committee also recognizes that those evaluating faculty members need to be apprised of the current best practices in evaluating faculty teaching. The Faculty Development Committee is working on creating a document which accomplishes this goal. The Faculty Affairs Committee of the Academic Senate also believes, however, that using student evaluations as the sole measure of a faculty member’s teaching abilities is such a bad practice that its prohibition should not await a cataloging of best practices.

The Faculty Affairs Committee is cognizant that neither it nor the Senate can “enforce” the policy should it be approved. Nonetheless, it is our hope that approval can have a number of salutary effects. First, it can “educate” those who must evaluate the teaching of faculty members that if they are relying solely on student evaluations, they are not doing their job properly. Second, it can embolden faculty members, particularly untenured ones, to increase the rigor and standards of their courses without fear of adverse consequences from diminished student evaluations. Third, it can lead those who must review peer evaluations of a faculty member’s teaching, e.g., Department Chairs, Deans, unit wide Promotion and Tenure Committees, and the Provost, to insist on the presentation of evidence of teaching quality other than student evaluations, and if such evidence is not presented, return the review to the appropriate body with instructions that such evidence must be presented.

^{4[4]}The statement is available at <http://www.endgradeinflation.org>.