

Faculty Welfare Committee Report on Student Evaluations

The Faculty Welfare Committee was charged in May of 2006 by Faculty Senate to evaluate student evaluations. We were charged to:

1. Investigate the present practice of the use of student course evaluations for evaluation of faculty teaching at Salisbury University;
2. Evaluate the literature regarding the validity of student course evaluations for assessing the academic quality of faculty teaching and regarding potential hazards in their use such as their possible contribution to “grade inflation”;
3. Articulate possible alternatives to evaluation that would exclude or minimize the use of such evaluations as they apply to applications for merit, tenure and promotion;
4. Make recommendations regarding policy to the Senate as the Committee sees fit. This could include recommendations for change or a recommendation in favor of the status quo.

Below we respond to each of the four tasks.

Present use of student evaluations at SU

We asked all departmental chairs and the University Promotions committee to give us a brief explanation of the role student evaluations play in the evaluation of faculty. We also collected student evaluation forms from all departments. We received feedback from all 24 departmental chairs across campus as well as the University Promotions committee. We found that most departments used student evaluations as one tool for evaluating faculty teaching. However, student evaluations were not the only tool for evaluation or the most important tool. The University Promotions committee stated, “Following the Faculty Handbook, the University Promotions Committee considers student evaluations as one element among many as an indicator of excellence in teaching. The UPC looks for patterns and trends in student evaluations and does not look to evaluate a candidate's teaching based on a small number of negative student evaluations.” This was also the general sentiment of most departments. A couple departments had strict criteria for analyzing student evaluations and directly tied faculty annual evaluation performance to the ratings received on student evaluations. For example in one department, a faculty member must receive a rating of 3 or higher (with 5 indicating excellence) from at least 70% of the students to be considered as “meeting expectations” for teaching.

We have compiled a binder of all evaluation forms from all departments across campus and given a copy to each school and the library. Departments can use this information as a resource for comparison when reviewing their existing evaluation forms.

Literature on student evaluations

Our general findings from evaluating the literature on student evaluations were:

- 1) Student evaluations are a useful tool for measuring teaching effectiveness, but should not be the only method used. Multiple sources of data should be used. (For example, another possible method would be to have faculty sit in on each other's classes and provide feedback). Also, the evaluations should allow for written feedback from the students beyond simply filling in numbers along a continuum from 1-5.
- 2) If evaluations are to be used, the best strategy is to use both **formative** evaluations (at mid-semester), followed up by **summative** evaluations (at the end of the semester). In addition, it is suggested that the teacher meet with a faculty mentor to go over the evaluations and to identify areas that may need to be addressed.
- 3) Although most studies show that student evaluations are generally reliable and valid measures, there are variables which can skew the findings. The most powerful of these is personality; the evaluation scores for a professor who is more outgoing and entertaining in the classroom are likely to be inflated.

In one famous example, as part of a research project an actor was hired to portray a scholarly expert who was invited to give a series of talks before a group of college professors. The audience members were asked to evaluate the speaker at the end of the series, and the speaker received very high marks on questions related to his knowledge of the subject matter, despite the fact that, in reality, he knew virtually nothing about the subject matter.

- 4) Evaluations should not be the sole (even primary) method for determining tenure or promotion decisions. One obvious impact of such an arrangement is that it may motivate teachers to "take it easy" on the students in order to push their evaluation scores up. In one instance, a professor who had been told by his dean that his chances for tenure were not good because of poor student evaluations deliberately set out to "win the hearts and minds" of his students by pandering to them. He gave out easy A's, allowed students to come and go as they pleased during the middle of class, etc. As the professor in question reported in his book, *Generation X Goes to College*, the strategy worked and he was awarded tenure.

Michigan State University has an excellent web site listing many articles that examine student evaluation reliability. We based our findings above on articles from this web site. <http://www1.provost.msu.edu/facdev/instructionalresources/Documenting/ratings.asp>

Alternatives to student evaluations

Another useful tool for evaluating faculty teaching is peer review. We believe it would be valuable to receive feedback from peers both within and outside of the faculty member's department. Faculty in the same department can speak to the content while faculty in unrelated disciplines can speak to the clarity and presentation style of the subject matter.

Additionally faculty can compile portfolios of teaching material including syllabi, exams, written assignments, Powerpoint slides, etc. to demonstrate thoughtful and effective teaching.

Recommendations

From our discussions and review of the literature, the FWC makes the following recommendations to the Senate:

1. End of semester evaluations by students are useful, but should not be used as the only tool to assess faculty teaching.
2. The addition of mid-semester student evaluations would be useful. Faculty could respond to student feedback and have a chance to alter and improve the course for the remainder of the semester. These mid-semester evaluations should be for the private use of the individual faculty member only, except for first and second year tenure-track faculty.
3. Given the vast differences in course evaluation forms across campus, we propose a new end of semester student evaluation form. This form would have two parts. Part A would be a universal form with identical questions across campus. These questions would be applicable to all types of courses. Part B would be a department-specific form. We suggest the Faculty Development Committee as an appropriate committee for developing the universal Part A evaluation form.
4. Questions on student evaluation forms should be reviewed to make sure the questions do not simply assess faculty personalities.
5. Not all questions apply to all students. In addition to the rating scale, Not Applicable should be an option for students to select.
6. FWC strongly discourages the practice employed by a few departments of using student evaluations of faculty to determine the chair's annual evaluation of faculty. This may give faculty incentive to pander to the students for good ratings.
7. All faculty, including tenured faculty and non-tenure track fulltime faculty, should be regularly evaluated by departmental peers. Many chairs only evaluate untenured tenure track faculty and tenured faculty up for promotion or five year review. Peer review should be taken seriously and all faculty should be evaluated annually.
8. FWC believes the addition of peer review from outside departments would be beneficial for both the observer and the observed. Being observed by peers from different disciplines removes the anxiety of being evaluated based on content and frees the observer to focus on teaching style and clarity. We hope that open and honest dialogue after these observations could produce a cultural shift among faculty. We might become more excited about our craft of teaching and how to hone our teaching style through these conversations.