

Minutes of the University Council on Teaching
Wednesday, February 14, 2018
1:30-2:45, CTE

Attendees: Kathleen Bailey, Jackie Lerner, John Rakestraw, Danielle Taghian, Keisha Valdez, Jeff Cohen, Julia Whitcavitch-DeVoy, Billy Soo
Boston College Undergraduates: Madeleine McCullough '20; Reed Piercey '19;
Omolayo Ojurongbe '19

The agenda of the February meeting was teaching/course evaluations; and quick update on Teaching Retreat.

Three Boston College undergraduates were asked about their concerns regarding the teaching/course evaluations.

Here are the students' initial thoughts.

First student: Students liked the previous system, PEPS; it offered more opportunity for more direct student feedback; students could provide explicit, specific comments. Since the update, the focus is narrowly on the course evaluation. It is tough not being able to read directly what students are thinking about the course and teaching style. The direct feedback is missing. It's more numerical now, which is less informative.

Second student: The main issue with PEPS is that now a lot of the evaluations are from 2007. A discussion started in UGBC as to whether it would be possible to integrate the course evaluations we have now with the searchable format of PEPS. There is something helpful about being able to see what a professor has been doing or what his or her impact has been on the students. We want to bring back some sort of interactivity with respect to the students who are looking to take certain classes.

Third student: Again, PEPS is dated at the moment. There are certain professors who are not on PEPS because they are new, so it is hard to gauge some of the professors. If we could change the format, that might affect whether students add/drop classes before or after the deadline. Some students wouldn't sign up for a class based on the review, which would keep a spot open for someone who really wants to take the course.

What do the students see now? The students see the 1-5 ratings, but they do not see the student comment section. The comments are left out of what students see because sometimes comments appear that are totally inappropriate. Some faculty want it to be traceable, but the agreement with the students is that course evaluations are anonymous. There is limited value to simply seeing the ratings, but making the comments public poses several difficulties.

One of the reasons that PEPS fizzled is because it had to be monitored, that is, something that was inappropriately posted had to be deleted.

One of the students raised the possibility of changing the rating system so it can be more informative for students trying to decide on courses

The point was raised that having faculty approve student comments before they are posted is going to yield a very different set of comments. There will be faculty who will not include even constructive criticism, so you'll see nothing but positive comments.

Again, the comments tend to be either very, very negative, or very, very positive. And unless the faculty is mandated to do so, they are unlikely to go through all the comments and edit them for publication.

What questions would the students like to see? What kind of questions would give students useful information?

One student raised the issue of different learning styles. Simply rating how good a course is is not necessarily helpful. Some professors use visuals and active participation, which some students find helpful for learning. Some students want a curriculum and a very strict schedule, very guided discussion. The current questionnaire doesn't capture this aspect of how the professor teaches. So perhaps the questions could be tailored more to the teaching style.

That could pose problems insofar as the evaluations are for many different types of courses. Some of the classes are very large, which can't have an open discussion. It would be difficult to have the same evaluation criterion.

What is the point of the teaching evaluations-- to improve or to evaluate teaching? Or is the point to give insights to students about the course? Should we have questions added or geared towards learning as opposed to how good the professor is? Is it more important to ask how well students are learning as opposed to how good a teacher is. A teacher can be very popular but the students are not really learning anything.

The students' concern seems to be one of usefulness--that they are not getting enough information beforehand to determine whether they want to take a specific course.

A related question is the availability of syllabi before registering for a class. The students felt it would be helpful to see what the course entails before signing-up for courses. A student might want to see the extent to which participation is a key part of their grade, or how many exams the course will administer, whether there are field trips off campus, the price of required reading materials—an issue for low income students, and so on.

There is some confusion as to what extent syllabi are in fact available to the students, and where they are available.

For the students, the base line information should be available to all students before registering. A more centralized system for the syllabi could be very useful. This could help save time and trouble during the add/drop period.

To what extent do students take the evaluations seriously, take their time filling them out, etc.?

The students said it depends on the class. If the student really enjoyed the class, then they are inclined to spend a lot of time filling out the evaluations. Likewise, if the student did not like the class. If the student feels lukewarm about the class, he or she fills out the evaluation very quickly and without much thought.

Some students don't think it is fair that they have to fill out course evaluations in return for early grades.

The suggestion was made that students should come up with questions that would be useful to them; faculty and administration can then consider including them on course evaluations. Students are encouraged to let us know which questions are of no help, and which ones can be worded better. This can be a UGBC led project.

One should keep in mind that evaluations are used for two different purposes: for the sake of instructors to improve their teaching, and for students to help them choose what class they want to take. One is evaluative, the other is descriptive.

The evaluations are also used for tenure and promotion decisions. The UCT will seek out information from department chairs about the utility of course evaluations for these types of decisions.

Update on teaching retreat from John Rakestraw:

There were 21 applications; three of those were from 2-person teams, for a total of 24 faculty. They are from MCAS, Lynch, CSOM, Social Work. The departments represented are Biology, Theology, Music, Philosophy, Sociology, Lynch, Finance, English, Communication, Earth and Environment Science, Political Science. Over 1,000 students will benefit from courses covered in the teaching retreat.

There was quite a range of applications in terms of content. Some are strengthening existing courses; some are new courses about how to explore technologies, and the use of big data. Some applications were for restructuring core courses in English and Philosophy. Several of the applications focused on content development; some requested technology support; others focused on exploring different pedagogical strategies.

Acceptances will be sent out shortly before spring break.

Application Feedback: some faculty thought the application looked intimidating and onerous, with too many questions. Some were afraid they didn't have the language to explain their project properly in pedagogical terms with which they are unfamiliar. Some commented that they would have applied but the timing was too soon after winter break. Others said they hadn't heard about the retreat (despite extensive publicity from the provost's office and CTE).

Suggestions from the UCT: make the application deadline in December before break; utilize department chairs to get the word out; meet to discuss the application after feedback from the first retreat participants.

The next UCT meeting is on March 14 at 1:30-2:45 in the CTE.