University Council on Teaching (UCT)

Minutes, December 13, 2011

9-10:30 am, Waul House

Present: Chris Hepburn, Chair (A&S, Earth and Environmental Sciences); Sue Barrett (Connors Family Learning Center), Sarah Beckjord (A&S, Romance Languages and Literatures), Jeffrey Cohen (Carroll School of Management, Accounting Department), Pat DeLeeuw (Office of the Provost), Don Hafner (Office of the Provost), Dorothy Jones (School of Nursing), Michael Martin (A&S Dean’s Office and Honors Program), Bob Murphy (A& S, International Studies and Economics), Jonathan Laurence (A&S, Political Science)

Guests: Samuel Graves and Steven Lacey, CSOM

Minutes of the Nov. 18 meeting were approved.

A presentation by Samuel Graves and Steven Lacey focused on CSOM’s teaching reports, instituted in 2010.

The Statistical software package being used by CSOM relies on “R” language, which is a free version of S+ and a good software environment for data analysis. There is a helpful online support community. To apply this software university-wide, the part-time services of a data manager and a computer programmer would be required. The pre-processing of data described below takes approximately one day. The acquisition/merging of data by hand is time-consuming, but report production is very rapid.

CSOM currently requests student-level and course-level data from Student Services and Institutional Research. The faculty-level data comes from CSOM internally. Data requests are made at the end of Fall and Spring terms. The data are provided in .xls (excel) and easily converted to .csv (comma separated values) for use by the statistical package.

Using an algorithm, the data manager parses data by course code and course title and merge in faculty Eagle IDs to avoid name mix-ups. Next, the data are benchmarked against student services data again to remove duplicates and erroneous courses. Then student-level grade data is added and a check for errors is conducted.

The faculty data is introduced and converted to PDF, and the computer then “auto-generates” reports, taking only seconds per report. Each report is 2-20pp in length, depending on class history for each course, whether data from previous years are included, etc.

A council member asked whether it is possible to match the course grade received by a student to his/her course evaluation, and the answer was negative since confidentiality is protected by stripping identifying characteristics from the initial dataset.

Another question was asked whether average and median course grade could be added and the answer was affirmative.

The data could be used to transmit useful information to faculty, with an eye towards grade inflation; could also be useful in assessing the senior experience.

A CSOM faculty member noted that the teaching reports generated a great deal of interest at meetings with new faculty. It is still too early to tell whether the program’s implementation has led to improved teaching outcomes. The time series data is potentially a very useful tool, in particular, and the ability to spot outliers using the software’s graphical representation is also valuable.

The university might consider phasing the software program in, school by school, with the cooperation of institutional research and student services; Julie Zupan at SS should be asked to coordinate specifics with new course survey vendor. If the new vendor for university-wide course surveys is asked to parse certain fields in advance, it would make the manual steps for implementation of teaching reports more efficient.

Faculty expressed support for balancing any use of new teaching reports with classic means of evaluation such as classroom visits, student interviews, etc.

The chair asked the council whether the UCT should sponsor a spring lecture on teaching. This may be easily done with a single session in each of the professional schools, but perhaps would need to be broken down by discipline (social sciences/ humanities/sciences) to be useful to participants. The UCT will consider proposing a fund to invite proposals on interdisciplinary ideas to support a talk or panel on teaching. There was interest in organizing the next event for March/April 2012, with planning beginning in January 2012.

Jonathan Laurence recorder.