

Minutes of the University Council on Teaching
Tuesday, September 17, 2018
12:00-1:30, CTE

Attendees: Kathleen Bailey, Jeff Cohen, Billy Soo, Shaylonga Barton, Stacy Grooters, Kristen Heyer, Sarah Castricum, Jessica Black, Patricia Tabloski, Danielle Taghian, Sylvia Sellers-Garcia, Julia Devoy, Madeleine McCollough, Bob Bloom

The agenda of the September 17 meeting was the new UCT website and the Course Evaluation Project.

New Structure of the CTE

Stacy Grooters began the meeting by going over this summer's reorganization of the CTE, which resulted in the formation of the new Center for Digital Innovation and Learning, which is being led by Bryan Blakeley. CDIL was established in order to keep up with the demand for new online course and program development, demands that are largely coming from BC's professional schools. CDIL will also be responsible for supporting hybrid course development as well as "back end" support of educational technologies and Canvas administration (CIDL will also house Mediakron support). The CTE will continue its focus on teaching innovation, faculty and graduate student development, and the support of faculty in the effective use of technology in the classroom. For the most part, faculty teaching face-to-face classes will continue to interact with the CTE for most of their teaching questions. About 2/3 of former CTE staff are now working in CDIL with 1/3 remaining in the CTE (five full-time and two temporary staff). For the time being, the two programs are still located together in the O'Neill 250 suite until a separate location for CDIL is identified. The CTE mission statement remains the same, and due to the new structure, it will now be able to concentrate its activities upon faculty and graduate student development.

In addition, the CTE has completed its FY'19 annual report which will be shared with the UCT.

New UCT Website

The UCT discussed the status of the new UCT website, which needs to be approved. Shaylonda Barton updated the committee on the current status of the new website, going over its location, layout, and content. Some possible edits to the website were suggested, such as whether past recipients of TAM grants should be kept listed on the website, and if so, for how long: the addition of too many recipients from previous years could impact the user-friendliness of the website and impede the accessibility of such information. Other improvements to the accessibility of the website were also raised, such as whether the minutes from past meetings could be placed and organized in a more accessible fashion. Kathleen Bailey suggested that current projects should be included on the website, so as to encourage communication with faculty who would be interested in learning and participating in such projects.

Billy Soo suggested that the website could include some mechanism that would allow for the submission of suggestions for new topics. A separate tab might be placed under the News and

Updates section. The addition of an email address to which suggestions for new topics could be sent was also suggested. Bob Bloom suggested that an article be published in the Chronicle that would introduce the CTE and its activities to faculty.

It was also suggested that a photograph from the teaching retreat could be included on the website, in addition to a link to the application for the teaching retreat.

Mission Statement

The mission statement of the UCT was addressed. The mission statement was approved by everyone, with some minor edits. The mission statement will appear on the UCT website

Course Evaluations

Billy Soo updated the UCT on the current status of the course evaluation project. A committee was formed to go over course evaluations at Boston College based on recommendations from the UCT; Billy Soo summarized the key findings of the committee and handed out a document containing the proposed changes and further proposals of the committee. The current questions and proposed questions, in addition to the rationales behind the changes, were tracked in a diagram. In coming up with its assessment, the committee reviewed numerous other course evaluation instruments utilized by other institutions. In crafting its proposals, the committee tried to keep the same number of questions, but with a focus on “low inference” questions. The committee compared the original questions to the proposed questions, and in the end proposed only a net increase of one additional question, raising the total number from 18 to 19.

Due to a common finding in educational research that shows a bias in course evaluations against female faculty and faculty of color, the committee recommended that Boston College conduct a study of bias within its own course evaluation instrument. Billy Soo talked to Institutional Research and Planning at Boston College about looking at data from course evaluations in order to investigate whether there are any biases. While there is no adequate solution that can fully address the problem of bias, it was suggested that an index could be made of the average scores for only female faculty, and similarly faculty of color, in order to account for problems of bias. In regards to the question of bias, Billy Soo mentioned the findings of studies that were conducted at Notre Dame and Wake Forest, which found that there was no gender bias in their respective course evaluations, although there was an age bias against older faculty. Is such data school specific, and to what extent can such findings be generalized? Stacy Grooters raised the suggestion that, in looking for evidence of gender or racial bias, one might examine not only the analytic portion of the evaluations but also the narrative portions. Sylvia Sellers-Garcia raised the question of what would be done with the information on biases in course evaluations at Boston College, should the findings of a study support this conclusion. While there would be no easy solution to solving such a problem, such information would at least be helpful in the context of promotion and tenure committees, reminding these committees of the existence of bias in course evaluations. Having more information on bias in course evaluations at Boston College would at least allow for the contextualization of the information on course evaluations.

The discussion next turned towards the difficulties of talking about race and gender in the classroom, problems of disclosure, and how such issues might also be reflected in course

evaluations by students: is it easier for white males to talk about issues of race and gender in the classroom, and do female faculty or faculty of color that bring up such issues in the classroom receive more critical comments on course evaluations as a result? Moreover, required courses in a field are generally judged worse on course evaluations than higher-level electives in a major, raising another difficulty.

In light of the importance that feedback from such evaluations can have for faculty who wish to improve the course, Billy Soo raised the possibility that there could be a one-hour session during orientation that would acquaint students with how to properly fill out course evaluations and offer constructive feedback. Such a skill, moreover, would readily be transferable and useful in other aspects of students' future professional careers. The difficulties of bringing home to students the importance of the course evaluations were also addressed, in particular, the importance of demonstrating to students that such evaluations can have tangible results.

The addition of questions that would help instructors improve their course and teaching was also suggested.

The question of making the data gathered from course evaluations public was addressed. Billy Soo noted, however, that some professors would not want that data to be made public due to the harshness of some comments; editing or curating the data that would be made public, moreover, would not be helpful.

Billy Soo next turned to the question of the interface used for course evaluations, and whether it should stay the same. The committee was contacted by SmartEvals, a website where students go to fill out course evaluations. The website is very user friendly for both students filling out evaluations and faculty who wish to access the data from evaluations. The interface also includes many helpful features, such as a drop-down of additional questions that ask for specification when a bad number is given on one question by a student. However, when talking to customers of the website, the committee found that feedback was mixed. While responses from faculty were generally better, the generally mixed feedback raised concerns. The committee wants to look at whether some of the features used by SmartEval can be integrated into Blue, Boston College's current course evaluation instrument.

The UCT also discussed the recommendation to allow in-class administration of online course evaluations during the last day of class. Many students do not take the time to fill out the evaluations carefully and rush through the process mindlessly, such that filling out the evaluations during class would allow students the opportunity to do so with greater care and thoughtfulness. Some professors, however, believe that course evaluations should not be filled out before the final exam is administered.

Sylvia Sellers-Garcia suggested that faculty should be educated about the changes that will be made to the course evaluations. It would be beneficial if faculty could be walked through the process that the committee went through in suggesting the changes to the course evaluations, so that the underlying reasoning could be made clear. It would be possible to go to each department separately in order to educate them about the changes. Billy Soo raised the prospect of talking with the deans, and educating the promotion and tenure committees about these issues. Advisory notes could also be written that would go over why the changes were made.

The possibility of including information on student demographics was discussed, and while such information would be helpful in tracking bias, it could also be potentially too specific and thus undermine the anonymity of the course evaluations.

In regards to how much emphasis should be placed on course evaluations, it was emphasized that such evaluations can only be a piece of the puzzle, and that there are also many other important factors that must be considered.

A discussion of the Faculty Retreat was put on the agenda for the next meeting.

The next meeting of the UCT is Tuesday, October 22 in the CTE Seminar Room