

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

Attendees: Kathleen Bailey, John Rakestraw, Jeff Cohen, Billy Soo, Shaylonda Barton, Stacy Grooters.

Guests: Sarah Ross (Chair, History), Amy Boesky (Chair, English), Ethan Baxter (Chair, Earth & Environmental Science) Judy Gordon (CSOM), Tom Wesner (CSOM), Franck Salameh (Chair, Slavic & Eastern Languages and Literatures)

The agenda of the March 14 meeting was course evaluations.

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### **Course Evaluations**

There was a brief recap of the previous meeting with student representatives of UGBC. We have found so far that course evaluations are used for three purposes with different levels of success:

- for the individual instructor, to improve teaching;
- for chairs and committees, to aid in tenure and promotion decisions;
- for students, to find information about courses (readings, assignments, content, lecture vs. seminar, cost of materials, field trips, etc.), and learning outcomes.

The guest attendees were asked what they thought of course evaluations, what they use them for, and how they might be improved.

The consensus was that course evaluations have been useful in tenure and promotion decisions in getting a broad view of an instructor's teaching profile. But departments have also had anxious conversations about the way in which they do and do not measure well. The Chronicle of Higher Education has had several articles on biases that come into evaluations (i.e., women and minorities are evaluated differently), especially in the two questions that are most used for promotion (Questions 7--how would you rate this course overall; Questions 14--how would you rate this instructor overall).

The English Department looks very closely at course evaluations for tenure and promotion, and also for assessment for Professors of the Practice, for anyone who is teaching in the department. The department looks at them in relation to each other, e.g., whether a junior faculty member improves over time, from year one to three to five, etc. Questions 7 and 14 are most carefully reviewed, with #14 having the most weight. There is a lack of clarity when students respond to Question 7. Are they saying that they don't like the course itself (i.e., the course as a core requirement) or how the course is actually taught? Perhaps certain questions need clarification. The same is somewhat true for Question 14. We are putting a lot of weight on these questions but we are not really sure what the students mean in answering them.

Departments also put a lot of weight on Question 13 (intellectual challenge).

The Carroll School uses the evaluations extensively and consistently across all seven departments. In addition to tenure and promotion, they are utilized for development and diagnostic reasons. Every faculty member is assessed and meetings to discuss their teaching are set up to evaluate the instructor, the course, course workload, and intellectual challenge. But even looking at those areas, the evaluations don't give good diagnostic information for the sake of helping faculty improve teaching. Students are answering a lot of items, but they don't actually put too much weight on a lot of them. CSOM in general thinks the course evaluations in their present form have outlived their usefulness.

In the Slavic and Eastern Languages and Literatures, there are two facets: language courses and content courses. The results are markedly different. Consistently the language faculty get the highest evaluations. They've become skeptical to the validity of this exercise. The scores are lower for the content courses and the comments are more valid and thoughtful.

It was suggested that in the third year review, if the faculty member isn't doing a well, if there are red flags in the evaluations, this could be a tool to suggest, or require(?), a consultation with the CTE.

A study was done in the Carroll School by the teaching committee that shows there is very little variability in terms of the global rating. Therefore, when instructors receive the results of the evaluations, there is not a whole lot of actionable information. BC's questions were compared with other peer institutions. They found that some of our questions are high inference. For example, peer universities include statements such as "The instructor was skillful in helping students understand difficult concepts." That is more illuminating than simply choosing "clear or unclear." CSOM produced an internal memo that can be made available if anyone is interested in reading it.

When it comes to convincing a faculty member that they do in fact need help, evaluation results are often dismissed as unreliable, biased, skewed, large classes are rated more harshly than seminars, natural science courses are rated more strictly than humanities. A better evaluation tool will alleviate these issues and faculty can put more trust in the results.

It would also interesting to see how students evaluate instructors based on their class year. Do freshmen and seniors, for example, have different expectations? Institutional Research can help with this data.

Is it necessary to have a shortened instrument with fewer questions to make sure the students actually fill them out for the sake of expediency? Would students spend more time on the evaluations if the questions were more thoughtful and better designed? How to ensure that all students take the time to fill out the forms thoughtfully, rather

than only those who love or loathe the course?

Should departments be able to add questions specific to their needs? Can course evaluations help with learning assessments and outcomes? Should the UCT be communicating and collaborating with the University Committee on Learning Outcomes?

Are junior faculty pressured into giving higher grades to get better course evaluations for tenure?

### **Questions to Consider**

Should the UCT recommend a completely new course evaluation or modify the existing questions? The Carroll School's recommendation is to start over: there are many questions that are now better designed that were not available when the BC form was first devised (also, the questions were designed to be completed in class, not online). What is the best delivery system? Should evaluations, or at least a brief version, be done in mid semester?

Should BC subscribe to a service such as IDEA?

<http://www.ideaedu.org/Services/Services-to-Improve-Teaching-and-Learning/Student-Ratings-of-Instruction>

### **TAM Update**

Eighteen TAM applications requesting \$190,660 have been received, and applications are being reviewed. The total to be awarded is \$62,000.

### **ATAB Request**

The ATAB committee requested that the UCT website be updated to include committee membership, mission, grants supported by the UCT, and any other relevant information, as well as meeting minutes. The UCT will discuss this request at its next meeting.

### **The Teaching Retreat Update**

23 faculty members were invited. 21 have committed. 2 are in the process of confirming. 2 have not yet responded.

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Next Meetings:

April 11, 12:00-1:15, CTE. Our guests are Tom Walsh, Stephanie Berzin (Social Work);

Rebekah Levine Cole (LSOE)

May 2, 12:00-1:15, CTE. Our guest is Kelli Armstrong, VP for Planning & Assessment

TAM recipient lunch: May 9 at noon in Waul House Presentation Room