

Joint Committee:
The California State University
California Faculty Association
Academic Senate CSU

Report on Student Evaluations of Teaching

March 12, 2008

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INTRODUCTION

This committee was formed in response to provision 15.19 of the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) of May 15, 2007 between the California Faculty Association (CFA) and the California State University (CSU). In recognition of unresolved concerns regarding student evaluation practices, the parties agreed to form a joint committee to study “the best and most effective practices for the student evaluation of faculty teaching effectiveness.” The article further stipulated that the committee’s work should include a review of instruments used for student evaluation as well as on-line evaluation, and that possible bias factors would also be considered. Given the central role of shared governance in establishing policies regarding student evaluations of teaching on the campuses, the parties further agreed that the committee would include representation from the Academic Senate of the CSU. The recommendations included in this report reflect the work of the joint committee and are not intended to alter the established roles of the Academic Senate, the CSU, or the CFA in any way.

The CBA establishes a small number of ground rules for student evaluations of teaching. First, such evaluations are required. According to Article 15.15, “Written student questionnaire evaluations shall be required for all faculty unit employees who teach. A minimum of two (2) classes annually for each faculty unit employee shall have such written student evaluations. Student evaluations shall be conducted in classes representative of the faculty unit employee's teaching assignment. The results of these evaluations shall be placed in the faculty unit employee's Personnel Action File.”

The CBA further stipulates that these evaluations shall be anonymous, and must be either quantitative (meaning survey data that can be expressed numerically) or a combination of quantitative and qualitative (normally implemented either through the use of open-ended questions, or through the provision of opportunity for students to write comments.) The mechanism for non-anonymous input by students into the evaluation process for faculty members is described in detail in Article 15.2 of the CBA; this form of input is outside the scope of the committee’s work.

The CBA permits the appropriate “academic unit” to develop the evaluation instrument and determine the extent of its use. While the CBA only requires that two classes per year be evaluated, some departments and colleges have developed policies requiring more evaluations, either of specific groups (*e.g.* requiring all sections taught by probationary faculty members to be evaluated until tenure is awarded) or of all faculty members in the academic unit.

Student evaluations of teaching are frequently given substantial weight in performance reviews for retention, tenure, and promotion of tenure-track faculty members as well as for reappointment of lecturers. In its discussions, the committee focused on several questions:

- What do student evaluations measure?
- What factors influence the results of student evaluations?
- What are the characteristics of well-designed teaching evaluations?
- How can student evaluations be used most effectively?

The following section presents research findings based on the literature that address these questions, as well as practices within the CSU.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Current practices in the CSU

The 23 CSU campuses were surveyed as to current practices. Twenty-two campuses provided responses. These responses are compiled in Appendix One. Each campus was asked to report whether it used a common survey instrument or allowed individual units to develop their own forms. Campuses also reported whether the forms had been developed on the campus (“home grown”) or were provided by an outside vendor, and if so, which vendor. Campuses were also asked to report whether on-line evaluations were in use. Finally, campuses were asked whether students were given the opportunity to provide narrative comments (characterized as “qualitative”). In addition, each campus was asked to provide a copy of its evaluation instrument (or representative instruments, if multiple instruments were in use).

The most common type of student evaluation instrument used across the CSU is “home-grown.” These forms have often been developed by faculty committees. Only three campuses are currently using a form developed by an outside vendor (and one of those is currently working on a new internally-developed form). These professionally-developed forms have usually been subjected to reliability and validity studies, but may also be relatively costly for the campus to administer. In contrast, campus-developed questionnaires may or may not have undergone analysis for validity or reliability. The most common model is for the campus to have agreed upon a common set of questions that can be supplemented at the department or college level. In six cases, the campus does not have a common form; each unit (department or college) is free to develop its own.

Nearly all campuses allow students to attach comments to the survey; some provide specific prompts to elicit feedback. The majority of campuses have begun to experiment with on-line evaluations, most commonly for on-line courses. One campus has moved entirely to on-line evaluations, and some others indicate they are poised to follow.

The results of student evaluations are used by the campuses for both formative and summative purposes. In order to use student evaluations for summative purposes in retention, tenure, and promotion cases, the results must be placed into the faculty member's official personnel action file prior to the beginning of the performance review. When students are allowed to add narrative comments to the evaluation, these comments may or may not be placed in the Personnel Action File, depending on campus practice; in some cases, only the faculty member receives the comments. One campus prohibits the use of comments in performance reviews. If they are to be used for evaluations, all the narrative comments must be placed into the personnel action file, or procedures need to be developed for consolidating the themes of the written comments. As a result, narrative comments are not always used in performance evaluations.

CSU evaluation instruments: What do student evaluations attempt to measure?

Members of the committee reviewed the sample instruments provided by the campuses and provided the following observations.

Common themes present themselves in campus evaluation documents. Forms generally include one or more “global satisfaction” questions. Questions tend to cluster into four areas of “faculty quality”:

- Communication/clarity of expression
- Teacher skills such as time management, content management, structure of exams
- Instructor motivation, energy, enthusiasm
- Content knowledge

Some questions are poorly designed. One common pitfall is double- or triple-loading, in which the student is asked to rate the instructor on multiple areas in a single question. Other questions ask students to make subjective judgments about the internal state of the instructor (*e.g.*, the instructor has a “serious desire to help students learn”). There are also examples of better-designed questions that ask the student about specific relevant instructor behaviors, that students would be better able to answer objectively (*e.g.* “the instructor returned graded material promptly”).

Research on Student Evaluations and Teaching Effectiveness

Evaluations are not a simple measure of teaching effectiveness and have multiple uses

Edward B. Nuhfer, Director of Faculty Development at CSUCI, recently reviewed the research literature on student evaluations; the full article is available at <http://www.isu.edu/ctl/facultydev/extras/student-evals.html>. Nuhfer highlights the challenge of using student evaluations in faculty evaluation processes when he states that student evaluations are “ratings derived from students’ overall *feelings* that arise from an *inseparable* mix of learning, pedagogical approaches, communication skills, and affective factors that may or may not be important to student learning.” He makes a distinction between summative evaluations (whose purpose is purely to evaluate the faculty member for some personnel action) and formative evaluations (whose primary intent is to assist the instructor in becoming a more effective teacher). Often summative evaluations ask “global” questions such as, “Overall how do you rate this instructor’s teaching ability?” “Overall, how do you rate this course compared to other college courses?” These questions provide information on student satisfaction, not student learning.

Formative evaluation questions, by contrast, will often focus on specific effective teaching practices. Students might use a Likert scale to designate “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” to topics such as “is well prepared,” “uses examples and illustrations,” “encourages class discussion”. One of Nuhfer’s recommendations is that evaluators use formative questions to determine the efforts the instructor is making to incorporate effective teaching practices.

What factors influence the results of student evaluations?

The evaluation literature identifies student variables that can influence the outcome of evaluations, including student motivation, anticipated grades, and the perceived difficulty of the course. Weaker correlations exist with class level and size (larger classes are more negatively rated). The strongest correlation to instructor behavior is for expressiveness and content delivery. Interestingly, what students see as the most important instructor behaviors may differ according to discipline.

Nuhfer references two cautionary examples regarding how evaluation results can either be misleading or manipulated. The first, the “Dr. Fox experiment” described by Naftulin in 1973, used an actor to lecture to groups of faculty and educational administrators, who rated the content of the lectures as satisfactory even though they were deliberately low in content. His second example is of Peter Sacks, the author of “Generation X Goes to College” (1996). Sacks describes how he deliberately set out to manipulate his own ratings by pandering to the students, an effort which was successful and led to his tenure.

A further cautionary note by Nuhfer is that most of the published research comes from heavily Caucasian classrooms, typically representing selective universities. Not much research has come from highly diverse, relatively non-selective institutions such as the CSU. While the influence of instructor’s gender on evaluations has been studied to some extent, much less research exists on the influence of race and ethnicity.

The committee also surveyed the Faculty Development Council of the CSU, composed of the campus directors of centers for teaching and learning. While many of the directors stated that there was no single definition of teaching effectiveness, the directors identified common characteristics and practices associated with effective teachers (operationally defined as those that promote student learning). The directors generally see student satisfaction, as measured by student evaluations, as just one component that should be included in attempting to measure teaching effectiveness. As Dr. Mark Stoner of CSU Sacramento notes, “Taken together, the more variety of measures and the more perspectives we have on the process of teaching, the more confident we may be in saying that any particular instructor or group of instructors are “effective teachers.”

On-line student evaluations of teaching

The committee looked at a sampling of recent literature on the use of on-line student evaluations of teaching. It is clear that this is an area where the available research is limited, given the relatively recent emergence of on-line evaluation as an alternative to paper-and-pencil evaluation. Many of the available reports represent pilot studies or small and/or specialized applications. Some of the interesting findings to date include some evidence that on-line evaluations yield longer and more substantive open-ended responses (when that option is available) (Laubsch, 2006) and that question-to-question differences may increase; the authors speculate that there simply may be a greater tendency to bubble in the same response to a series of questions when they are lined up on a piece of paper than when they appear one at a time on a screen (Gamliel and Davidovitz, 2005). While some studies have reported lower student ratings with on-line administration, other studies have found no significant differences in student rating means or have observed a slightly positive effect (for example, see Loveland, 2007; Gamliel and Davidovitz, 2005; Carini *et al*, 2003). A common concern is response rate. McGourty *et al* (2002) analyzed the experience at two large universities and observed dramatic differences in response rate that they attributed to campus culture and climate, but also significant improvement in response rates as both campuses gained experience.

One concern of the committee’s in the use of on-line evaluations is that the greater apparent anonymity (because the students are not in a controlled environment) may lead to less inhibition

against students using offensive or defamatory speech that attacks the instructor for who he or she is, not what he or she does. This has already manifested itself as a problem in the uncontrolled and unregulated environment of the various independent rating sites that have proliferated recently. One member of the committee found a particularly ugly example (from someone purporting to rate “AAburntheniggers”) accessible through a CSU campus’s web site. Beyond their tendency to attract such extremes, these sites have such blatant methodological flaws that they obviously and unequivocally have no place in any legitimate personnel procedure. However, campuses must also take responsibility for monitoring their own in-house processes, whether on-line or paper-and-pencil, and to take steps to prevent such attacks, if they occur, from polluting evaluations.

RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF WELL-DESIGNED TEACHING EVALUATIONS?

This section includes a consensus of recommendations from the committee for campuses to consider as they develop their own procedures for student evaluation of teaching.

Administering evaluations

- The respondents should identify their level (freshman, sophomore, etc.)
- Respondents should identify whether the course is required or elective.
- For in-person evaluations, a proctor (a student from the class or an individual not involved with the class) should administer the evaluation; the faculty member should not be present.
- Completed evaluations should be returned by the proctor directly to the department designee to protect the integrity of the process; provisions should be made for the evaluations to be returned after hours if necessary (*e.g.*, through use of a locked drop box).
- The proctor should read a script that explains the purpose of the evaluation and instructs students to complete their evaluations independently without discussion among themselves. (A script should also be provided to accompany on-line evaluations.)
- Students should be given sufficient time to complete the evaluation; ideally, it should be administered at the beginning of the class period rather than the end.
- The campus should establish a window of time prior to final exams when all official evaluations must be administered.
- Evaluations should be anonymous. Students should be reassured that results of the evaluation will not be provided to the instructor of record until after final grades have been submitted. If campuses wish to collect additional student characteristics that could potentially influence student ratings, students’ anonymity should be protected.

Reporting results

- Results pertaining to the instructor should be differentiated from results pertaining to the course and student demographics.
- In reporting results, campuses should take care not to make inappropriate comparisons. For example, there is some evidence that students in different disciplines may value different aspects of teaching (and even that some disciplines may inherently generate

lower ratings). Thus, comparison to a global campus average is not likely to be informative.

- Campuses are encouraged to periodically engage in norming of the campus evaluation instrument(s), and to communicate the results to faculty members and administrators who will be involved in reviewing the teaching effectiveness of other faculty members. (For an excellent example of how this process can be implemented, see San Jose State's *Interpretation Guide for Student Opinions of Teaching Effectiveness*. In fall 2003, SJSU administered its new form across all class sections (achieving a 93% response rate) to establish means, medians, and standard deviations by departments and colleges, to be used in making comparisons. In this process, the campus also collected extensive student demographic information and looked for factors that might influence student ratings. The results of this study were made available to faculty and administrators as a guide to interpreting the numbers.)
- Campuses should also provide guidance to users in how to interpret any statistics provided with the evaluation report. Extreme caution should be used in interpreting means and standard deviations based on fewer than 10 student responses. The campus may wish to report the median response in classes with low enrollment, and set a threshold below which no statistics will be reported.

Which courses to evaluate

- The choice of courses evaluated should be representative of the courses taught by the faculty member.
- Academic units may develop policies in which more than two classes per year per faculty member are evaluated, up to and including requiring that all classes be evaluated. Regardless of the number of courses to be evaluated, faculty members should have advance notice regarding when and how courses will be selected for evaluation. Any department policy should be applied consistently.
- Campuses should consider whether some types of classes should not undergo the standard evaluation (for example, extremely small sections; supervision classes). We note that some campuses have developed several variant evaluation forms designed to be used in classes with specific modes of instruction (laboratories, fieldwork, *etc.*).

Content and design of evaluation

- The faculty on each individual campus have the right, through their governance processes, to develop the campus-based program of student evaluations of teaching.
- Items on student evaluations should, as much as possible, attempt to measure aspects of instructor performance that students can objectively evaluate.
- Items on student evaluations should directly relate to faculty instructional responsibilities
- Items on student evaluations should ask about effective teaching practices.
- Avoid compound questions or references.
- Consider adding questions about the students' own effort and engagement in the course.
- Consider including questions regarding whether course learning objectives have been met.
- Do include opportunities for students to provide written comments.
- Encourage students to provide written comments to explain ratings that are either very positive or very negative.

- Consider building in one or more validity-checking questions.
- Ensure form is laid out to prevent confusion as to questions on the course itself, vs. questions on the faculty member.
- Evaluation instruments can legitimately have both summative and formative purposes. In constructing student evaluation instruments, campuses should consider how the instrument will be used. (For example, a task force at CSU San Marcos recommended that evaluations contain summative questions that would be used in personnel decisions as well as formative questions that would be reported only to the faculty member. However, a campus may also wish to include questions in personnel decisions that have a formative component, such as those that ask about whether the faculty member uses specific teaching practices that also offer evidence of the faculty member's effectiveness.)
- The inclusion of written comments may or may not be a required component of personnel evaluation processes. Some campuses have developed effective and efficient ways to consolidate these comments in reporting results.

On-line student evaluations

The committee discussed the merits of on-line student evaluations at length. While the group remains somewhat divided on this issue, we are in consensus that any campus that adopts on-line evaluations must be attentive to the issues identified below. Given a relatively thin research base in this area, those CSU campuses that are converting their systems to on-line evaluations have an opportunity to expand the academic community's knowledge in this area through well-constructed research projects.

- On-line evaluation systems must be designed to provide maximum security, to ensure that only the enrolled students participate and that each student can respond only once.
- The same principles of confidentiality and anonymity that apply to paper-and-pencil evaluations must be applied to on-line evaluations. Students should be assured that the faculty member will not have access to the results prior to the assignment of final grades.
- Campuses that move to on-line evaluations should do so with eyes open. This includes norming the instrument in the on-line format, taking steps to ensure good response rates, and educating students as to the importance of the process. Further, campuses should monitor demographic differences in response rates to ensure that no groups of students are underrepresented in the process.
- Campuses should not assume that on-line evaluations and in-person evaluations are directly comparable, even if the questions are the same.
- Campuses should establish windows of time for completing on-line evaluations that are comparable to those used for in-person evaluations (*e.g.*, completion before the final examination period).
- Campuses should continue to monitor the on-line evaluation process following implementation and be ready to correct problems that may arise.
- Students should always have the option of opting out of the evaluation process.
- Faculty members should be able to use existing procedures for challenging the inclusion of materials in the PAF to exclude defamatory responses.

How can student evaluations be used most effectively?

Our final set of recommendations address the uses of student evaluations of teaching as part of the larger task of evaluating faculty teaching effectiveness.

- Campuses have a responsibility to educate those who will be using evaluation results as part of the personnel process as to their strengths and limitations. This includes:
 - a) Acknowledging that most such instruments *primarily* measure student satisfaction;
 - b) Noting the statistical limitations, including cautions against reading too much into small differences in means;
 - c) Understanding the differences between questions that are directed toward global satisfaction (*e. g.* “rate the overall effectiveness of the instructor in this course”), and questions that are directed to specific behaviors or practices associated with effective teaching;
 - d) Awareness of factors such as the level of the class, whether it is required or elective, and even the level and background of the students enrolled, that can influence student satisfaction;
 - e) Recognizing that evaluation results cannot be used in a linear manner to rank faculty or to place them in categories (“excellent”, “below average”).
- Student evaluations should never be the sole basis for evaluation of teaching effectiveness
- Student evaluations must be recognized as only one component of an evaluation of teaching effectiveness. Evaluation policies for all faculty (lecturers as well as tenure-track) should require that reviewers use multiple measures of teaching effectiveness. High student ratings in isolation do not necessarily mean that an individual is an effective teacher, nor do lower ratings necessarily mean that an individual is an ineffective teacher.
- Faculty members should be encouraged (if not already required by policy) to provide a narrative document that comments on and analyzes student evaluations in the context of the faculty member’s growth as a teacher and efforts to improve his/her instruction. This narrative would also provide the faculty member with an opportunity to interpret anomalous evaluations. For example, when a faculty member tries out a new teaching practice, the first attempt in particular may produce lower evaluations – but ultimately may prove to improve student learning.
- Campuses should monitor the student evaluation process and be particularly sensitive to the potential for bias in evaluations. The available research on whether the race, gender, and ethnicity of the instructor influences the results of student evaluations is limited; however, campuses should be aware of the possibility of such impacts, especially in those classes where students may be asked to confront ideas and topics that take them out of their comfort zones.
- Campuses should use a well-designed student evaluation instrument (with demonstrable validity and reliability) in providing diagnostic information and feedback to faculty, and those involved in evaluations should have an understanding of their formative as well as summative uses.
- Faculty members should be encouraged to seek student feedback outside of the formal evaluation process for the purpose of improving their instruction. For example, during the course, faculty could invite small groups of students to provide feedback on how the course is going, or could administer informal mid-term surveys. Since such activities are

not formal evaluations, the results could only be included in materials submitted for personnel evaluations at the request of the faculty member.

- Campuses should periodically review, reevaluate, and re-norm their instruments for student evaluation of teaching effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO SPECIFIC GROUPS

Recommendation to Chancellor's Office

The committee discovered gaps in the research literature in one of the areas that drove the formation of this group – the question of whether race, gender, and/or ethnicity of the instructor can significantly bias student evaluation results. The CSU has a unique opportunity to seek answers to this question, given both the (relative) diversity of its faculty and the large and diverse student population served. We recommend that the CSU sponsor system-wide research on the significance of “differentness” in student evaluations of faculty. This might be implemented as a Request for Proposals from CSU faculty.

Recommendation to Academic Senate CSU

We recommend that the Academic Senate generate and adopt a set of “best practices” for evaluation of teaching effectiveness and disseminate these to the campuses. The Senate should review its recommendations in light of changes in the CBA with each new agreement.

Recommendations to CFA

We recommend that the California Faculty Association take this report, as well as any subsequent resolutions or reports from the Academic Senate, into account as it develops its sunshine proposals for the next contract negotiation, to determine whether modifications to Article 15 are appropriate.

Recommendations to Provosts

We recommend that Provosts/Vice Presidents for Academic Affairs review current practices on their campuses in light of these recommendations and any subsequent resolutions or reports from the Academic Senate CSU, and work with campus faculty and administrators to implement changes, as appropriate.

Recommendations to campus Academic Senates and campus faculty

We recommend that appropriate campus groups (such as Faculty Affairs Committees) review the literature on student evaluations and critically evaluate the instruments and evaluation practices used on their respective campuses. We further recommend, based on this review and our report, as well as any subsequent resolutions or reports from the Academic Senate CSU, that the campuses adopt policies and practices that incorporate the findings from these sources, as appropriate. The senates should review their policies and practices in light of changes in the CBA with each new agreement.

Given that most campuses are now experimenting with on-line evaluations, we strongly recommend that campuses carry out research to assess the validity and reliability of this newer mode of evaluation as well as factors that contribute to successful implementation, and that campuses share their findings with the CSU community.

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Appendix One. Campus Practices Regarding Student Evaluations of Teaching.

Campus	Common form/many	Instrument type	Vendor	Online Evaluations?	Free Response/ Qualitative part?
Bakersfield	Common	Home-grown		Some (for online courses, not much experience)	Yes. Use "agree/disagree" with six questions plus comments
Channel Islands	Common	Vendor	U of Washington SETE	No (not even for online courses)	Yes.
Chico	Common available, depts can develop own	Home grown influenced by vendor	Based on SIRII from ETS	For WebCT courses	Common instrument is both, dept instruments can be qual, quant, or both
Dominguez Hills	Common (depts. can add questions)	Home-grown		Some now, possibly all by fall 2008	Yes
East Bay	Common (depts. can add questions)	Home-grown		Only for MA in Online Teaching	Yes (room for comments)
Fresno	Many (by dept or college)	Homegrown, considering vendor		For online courses or by dept preference	Yes (but may move away from comments)
Fullerton	By dept	Home-grown		For online courses or by dept preference	Yes (open-ended questions)
Humboldt	Common (depts. can add questions)	Home-grown		Only for online courses	Yes
Long Beach	Common (depts. can add questions)	Home-grown		Only for some online courses	Yes
Los Angeles	Common	Home-grown		No (surveys mailed in distance classes)	Yes (qualitative data goes directly to the faculty)
Maritime	Mostly common, some specialized instruments	Vendor plus some home-grown	SUMMA Information Systems	Beginning to	Yes (less so on SUMMA forms)
Monterey Bay	Common (narrative questions may be added by dept.)	Home-grown		For online courses and by opt-in for others	Yes

Northridge	By dept	Home-grown		For online courses or by dept preference	Yes (faculty may opt to put comments in PAF)
Pomona	Common (depts. can add questions)	Home-grown		No (considering it)	Yes, but comments not allowed in RTP
Sacramento	Many -- one for Business, others by dept	Home-grown		Possibly in Nursing	Yes
San Bernardino	Common (a couple of exceptions)	Home-grown		Only on pilot basis	Yes
San Diego	Many (by dept or college)	Home-grown		Entirely online	Yes
San Francisco	Common (depts. can add questions)	Home-grown		Testing in College of Business	Yes
San Jose	Common	Home-grown		Piloted spring 07	Yes
San Luis Obispo	Many (by college or dept)	Home-grown		No	Varies (some are qual only)
San Marcos	Common (variants by class type)	Home-grown		Being tested	Yes
Stanislaus	Common	Vendor	IDEA Center	Piloting	Yes