

The University of Washington Faculty Council on Instructional Quality

The Faculty Council on Instructional Quality met Thursday, October 16, 2003 at 8:30 a.m. in 26 Gerberding Hall. Chair Jan Carline presided.

PRESENT: *Professors* Carline, Coe, Copland, Devasia, Greenwald, McGovern
Ex officio Castic, Conquest, Jacobson, Lewis, Lowell, Holmes, Pitre, Brooks

ABSENT: *Professors* Cooper, Kemp
Ex officio Bridges, Bowen, Trudeau/Clark

Synopsis

1. Introductions
2. Approve agenda/approve minutes/voting rights for ex officios
3. Discussion of potential topics for consideration this year, including
Grade Inflation (Tony Greenwald)
Teaching Portfolios (Carline, Jacobson)
4. Status of:
Curriculum Information System
Student Learning Objective system

Carline called the meeting to order at 8:32 a.m. and invited Council members to introduce themselves.

Agenda/Minutes/Voting Rights

The agenda was approved. The minutes were approved. It was moved, seconded and unanimously passed to grant voting rights to eligible ex officio members J. Ray Bowen (emeritus faculty), Karen Brooks (GPSS rep), Sam Castic (ASUW rep), John Holmes (ALUW rep), and Michelle Trudeau/JudiClark (PSO rep/alternate).

Discussion of potential topics for consideration this year

The purpose of the Council, Carline said, is to look into issues surrounding policy-making for instructional quality at the University. This is a broad charge, with issues coming to the Council from the faculty members, from the Faculty Senate, from Council members themselves, and from various other sources.

Grade Inflation:

Tony Greenwald provided Council members with a handout on grade inflation, a topic that was briefly discussed in Council last year. Data from the UW and virtually all other schools indicate that there has been a steady rise in average grades over the past 30 years. It's difficult to use grades as a measure of quality if all grades are so close together. Greenwald suggested that an "index of challenge" might be constructed, using information from the Office of Educational Assessment course evaluation form, specifically items 23-28, and item 30, as follows:

Relative to other college courses you have taken

23. Do you expect your grade in this course to be:
24. The intellectual challenge presented was:
25. The amount of effort you put into this course was:
26. The amount of effort to succeed in this course was:
27. Your involvement in this course (doing assignments, attending classes, etc.) was:
28. On average, how many hours per week have you spent on this course, including attending classes, doing readings, reviewing notes, writing papers, and any other course work?
30. What grade do you expect in this course?

Generally, the higher the course challenge, the lower the expected grade. The same holds true for actual grades,

Greenwald said. Harder courses tend to give lower grades, since instructors make course requirements more difficult in order to get students to work harder.

A course challenge index, if constructed, could be reported to faculty on Course Summary reports, and to departments as an indication of course challenge for the entire department.

Questions to be answered on the issue of grade inflation include how students are being evaluated, and what the quality of instruction is. Both of these issues can affect perceived grade inflation. The fact remains, however, that nationwide data show that the most common undergraduate grade is 4.0.

If course challenge is reported, and if there is a department mandate to increase academic challenge, instructors might start doing the things that would increase the evaluation numbers and the challenge. This could be measured by students beginning to report more hours per week spent on course work. The best possible effect of this would be to reverse grade inflation.

ASUW student rep Sam Castic said that grade inflation is an issue – he has had 3.4 grades he felt were better earned than some 4.0 grades, as well as 3.4 grade classes he learned a lot more in than 4.0 classes. There should be ways to make courses more challenging – not by adding busywork, but by making the courses more intellectually engaging. Castic also felt the evaluations might be a little off – they are given at the end of the quarter when students just want to get out of the class. It's hard to accurately sort out how many hours were spent on each class, looking back over an entire quarter during the course of one evaluation.

Michael Copland would like to do some more information-gathering, but suggested that the Council focus on a theory of action that would actually improve the quality of teaching, rather than focusing on making courses harder for students. This might include measuring how useful assignments are, not just the quantity or rigor of assignments. It might be worth exploring the correlation between challenge and grading, using a high-, middle- and low-grading department and studying their methods.

Consensus was reached that this issue should be added to the FCIQ agenda. Tony Greenwald, Nana Lowell, Gerry Gilmore, and Kathy Beyer will work on this subcommittee.

Teaching Portfolios:

Council has taken up teaching portfolios in the past, and has developed a set of guidelines for developing teaching portfolios. These guidelines, which are on the CIDR Website, are as good as anything that has ever been produced on the topic, Wayne Jacobsen said. CIDR is using teaching portfolios with grad students entering the job market, and occasionally uses them with faculty who are on tenure track. The way teaching portfolios are used varies widely – some include a strong teaching statement, some do not.

Carline wondered whether the teaching portfolios page need the same kind of touch-up work that the Council did for student evaluations last year. Jacobsen said there would be value in getting portfolios recognized – they can be a very helpful way to demonstrate the quality of teaching, in promotion and tenure cases. This would differ from what would be used for a job application. There may be some examples of portfolios that the Council can see.

It might be useful if various College Council members could visit FCIQ and talk about how they use portfolios. This would give the Council some basis for determining how much effort to put into encouraging the use of portfolios. Council members are encouraged to go to their home departments and ask how portfolios are used, and what goes into them.

Curriculum Information System

This system was proposed last year as one response to Regent Gates' academic challenge. It was envisioned to be a more public document that would make course objectives and evaluations more readily available.

Another factor was a general dismay about the Student Learning Objective System, coupled with the under-use of the course description system and the fact that students spend a lot of time trying to find appropriate courses but don't know how to get the information. Paul LePore proposed a keyword system to help with all these problems, and a subcommittee met to consider possibilities. They are conceptualizing an electronic syllabus that would allow faculty to meet several of these objectives at once, instead of having to fill out the same information three times as is now the case. The syllabus information in Catalyst would populate throughout all systems.

This would require support staff handling the initial input – after that, new courses that were put on the Web would update everything. The Council will continue to work on this system this year.

Student Learning Objectives

Nana Lowell described the Student Learning Objectives, a meta-level series of criteria that are meant to serve as a yardstick by which to measure the quality of educational outcomes at the UW. Because these objectives are very broad, some faculty do not find them very useful. However, the administration is committed to their use, at least in a modified form. Lowell is working on modifying the objectives so that they will provide a more meaningful assessment of improvements in teaching and learning at the University. This is an accreditation issue, so it is not going to go away.

Since the time limits of the meeting were reached, the meeting was adjourned at 10:03. This topic will be continued at the next meeting, November 13. *Minutes by Linda Fullerton, Recorder.*