

## **The University of Washington Faculty Council on Instructional Quality**

The Faculty Council on Instructional Quality met Friday, January 10, 2003, at 10:30 a.m. in 36 Gerberding Hall. Chair Jan Carline presided.

**PRESENT:**     *Professors* Carline, Greenwald, Kyes, McGovern, Nichter, Wenderroth  
                  *Ex officio* Bowen, Brooks, Conquest, Croft, Jacobson, Lowell, Trudeau

**ABSENT:**     *Professors* Copland, Coutu, Devasia, Hoffer, Mulligan, Reinhall  
                  *Ex officio* Bridges, Lewis, Clark, Pitre

Carline called the meeting to order at 10:31 a.m.

### **Synopsis**

1. Approve agenda
2. Approve minutes
3. Final consideration of "Use of Student Evaluations"
4. Course Approval Form discussion with Tim Washburn
5. New Business
6. Appendix – Approved version of "Use of Student Evaluations in Merit and Promotion Decisions"

### **Agenda**

The agenda was approved.

### **Minutes**

The minutes of the December meeting were approved.

### **Final Draft, Use of Student Evaluations**

Carline presented the final draft of the Use of Student Evaluations recommendations (see appendix), including revisions from the last meeting, for Council approval.

Wayne Jacobson suggested that a bibliography be added. Carline will add the information, from the books he and Nana Lowell have used as sources for the recommendations. Greenwald said that it should be emphasized that the recommendations are based on both the general literature on student evaluations and extensive examination of evaluations at the UW. Carline agreed, and does have some reports that were done at the UW Office of Educational Assessment.

Carline has still not heard from either Steven Olswang or Debra Friedman regarding the reactions of the Provost's office to the draft recommendations last year – there were concerns about the economic impact of the recommendations, but George Bridges has said he can find the economic support for the changes.

Carline asked the Council how they wished to proceed. Options would include a Class C resolution, or a request that the Senate Executive Committee send the recommendations to all Deans. After discussion, it was decided not to submit the recommendations as a Class C resolution, but to refer them to the Senate Executive Committee and ask that the recommendations be forwarded to everyone on the Deans, Directors and Chairs list.

It was moved, seconded and passed to approve the final draft of the Use of Student Evaluations recommendations, and to direct Jan Carline to submit them to the Senate Executive Council.

### **Course Approval Form - Discussion with Tim Washburn**

This discussion was postponed, since Tim Washburn was called to Olympia to testify about the WASL Test and could not attend the FCIQ meeting.

### **Academic Challenge Discussion**

Carline reported that, in response to the academic challenge concerns voiced by Regent Gates, he met with Faculty Senate Chair Sandra Silberstein, Dean of Undergraduate Education George Bridges, and the Chair of the Faculty Council on Academic Standards, Carolyn Plumb.

In their discussion of academic challenge standards at the UW, it was thought that it might be helpful to be able to give Regent Gates some evidence that when courses are approved there is real attention paid to the level of challenge built into each course. This might be shown by requiring more information on the initial course application form submitted to the University Curriculum Committee.

Even after a new course is approved at the department level, said Michelle Trudeau, the Curriculum Committee does look at academic content and does reject courses if they are found to be lacking in appropriate content. So this might be a good place to begin to improve academic challenge.

Carline has been looking at the Web page that contains UW accreditation plans and they include course rationales. Would this be a good thing to require? Mary Pat Wenderroth said this is already required for every course and instructor. Wenderroth added that she can say whatever she wants to say about a class, however, with no accountability.

Loveday Conquest said that Fisheries is doing lots of work on skill sets – a cluster of knowledge and skills students should be able to demonstrate having acquired as a result of taking a certain course. These objectives can include critical thinking, writing, and many other measurable criteria.

Jacobson expressed this as "What will a test show me that they have learned?" Karen Brooks described these kinds of questions as measuring learning objectives.

Carline wondered if it is actually possible to write academic challenge standards across all courses. Conquest said she would like to be able to say, "Yes, we care about learning and we have documented standards across the entire University." That, she added, is a long term goal.

Wenderroth said it might be that changes to the new course application form would make instructors stop and think more about standards. Maybe FCIQ could talk to someone from the Review Committee and see how they might like to see the form changed.

Greenwald asked whether there has ever been any attempt to make Student Learning Objectives coordinate with the Student Course Evaluations. Wenderroth said the two are not aligned in any way. Lowell said the College of Engineering is beginning to ask students to rate the course objectives. The OEA system could be used this way.

Carline said that all the evaluations in the School of Medicine are different from the ones OEA uses. Many of them objective-based, including one department that has 34 objectives – this is an attempt to monitor whether the students are getting the appropriate kinds of experience they need, in order to meet the objectives of the course. The department gets together every six months to evaluate the results and identify any difficulties that should be corrected.

Looking at the new course application form, Carline asked whether Council members (if they were on the Curriculum Review Committee) would be able – from the data requested - to understand and evaluate the

quality of the course and the course design. Greenwald responded that he would want to see a syllabus, indicating assignments and topics. Jacobson commented that the request for justification should be worded so as to address the quality of the course – it does not now require this. Carline saw the justification question more as an inquiry of how the course fits within the department and in the degree program. Wenderroth said that the answer to the justification question could address quality, but could also skirt the issue.

On the Web, Carline pointed out, the directions for creating the course application address what form to use, who submits it, where it goes, who signs off on it, and some catalogue data. It gets more specific about credits and hours, but there is no place for a description of what ought to be included in the course syllabus that gets attached with the form. In years past when he was on the curriculum review committee in the School of Medicine, Carline said he recalled syllabi coming through with absolutely no course objectives included. Wenderroth observed that only topics, dates, and instructor contact information are required on the syllabus form as it now stands. With only this information, Carline said, he would not be able to make a decision on a course.

Trudeau suggested that course or learning objectives could be added where the form now asks for course syllabus outline and reading list. Carline favored a series of questions that would have to be responded to; perhaps something as direct as "What are your course objectives? How will they be measured?" Wenderroth said we should define what we mean by syllabus.

Jacobson said CIDR uses direct and specific questions for new faculty who are designing courses, such as "What should students be able to do at the end of the course? How will you know they can do it? What activities will you provide for them to get them there?" This seems to be more useful than talking about objectives and measurements, which trigger a whole different set of associations for people, Jacobson added.

Karen Brooks suggested that Section 1 of the online form be the purpose of the request, and Section 2 be the syllabus directions, that would include the kinds of questions Jacobson was talking about. This could perhaps include a link to the CIDR site for more ideas and information.

Greenwald asked whether there is any movement toward developing a database format for syllabus creation, so there could be a standard way of reading syllabus information into the Web site/online form. Carline said there is a simple site set up to do this, on Catalyst. The School of Medicine now has a standard syllabus format for basic science courses that includes objectives and teaching methods.

Greenwald suggested that perhaps FCIQ should make a recommendation for developing and using a standard syllabus format that is database compatible. When submitted in that format, the course application would be ready to immediately go on the Web - this would allow electronic submission of the course request. Trudeau concurred with this, adding that it would be much easier to include requirements such as disability information and other recurring information since they would be part of an existing database.

Jacobson mentioned an online syllabus generator in use at Brown University, which reminds Brown faculty of all the things they need to include. He will see if it is still online, and provide council members with a link. Wenderroth would like to see such a tool developed, especially in view of the fact that instructors are now given a 50-word limit in which to describe the course. That doesn't give students a real sense of the course.

In addition to questions about what the students will be learning and doing, Carline would like to see three or four pre-determined questions added to the course form that ask what the instructor will be doing– "What are the main teaching activities used?", "What are the assignments?" etc.

Wenderroth cautioned that the additions be kept fairly simple, so that faculty don't find the new process daunting or unworkable. Carline said that this could be kept fairly simple if it is standardized in a Web-based application with a database back-end that could generate data to be reviewed in departments.

Trudeau saw this proposed new form as a good tool for accreditations. Greenwald saw it as a good way to move from the current paper forms, and make the applications easier to complete. Wenderroth praised the Catalyst site as a tool for doing this kind of thing, and speculated that acceptance would be good if the form could be used once, and could generate information to all the different places it should go.

Jacobson commented that an online, accessible syllabus would be easy to edit and change – this would be a huge benefit in designing unique assignments and tests, especially where the course content remains essentially the same from year to year. Wenderroth suggested talking to Catalyst to see if the features and questions Council members have been discussing could be added.

Lowell posed a new question: Even if this approach did solve academic challenge issues for new courses, how would it be possible to solve the same kinds of problems for existing courses? Carline said there might be a request to see this same information for all courses for a department at the 10-year Review. If the process is made easy enough to use and works well enough, faculty members may choose to revise and create syllabi for all their existing courses.

A revised new course form could include a template with drop-down lists. It would be a good idea to look at the syllabus generator from Brown, if possible, to get some idea of how it works. Jacobson will look into this.

Within a content area, Carline said, it should be possible to come up with a set of generalized skills that every student should be able to demonstrate, regardless of the instructor. Randy Kyes said the Psychology department did something similar to this for Intro Psych (101 Psych), by coming up with a series of topic areas that everyone should cover even though each instructor approaches things differently.

Carline will try to get a representative from Catalyst, and perhaps a member of the Curriculum Review Committee to come to a Council meeting to discuss these issues and ideas, and see what it would take to implement them. Tim Washburn will be able to address some of these issues at the March meeting.

Greenwald suggested that FCIQ draft a set of Recommendations for Course Improvement, similar to the Recommendations for the Use of Student Evaluations the Council has just completed. Carline asked Greenwald to think about such a draft and perhaps talk with Debra Friedman about it.

### **Revising Faculty Councils**

Carline reported that Steve Buck is writing a proposal for reorganizing existing Faculty Councils into University Committees. The proposal is supposed to be done by the end of February, and is likely to result in a huge University Undergraduate Council, which would include Academic Standards, Instructional Quality, and many other councils and committees. Carline may have a draft of the Buck plan at the next meeting. In any case, there will be two or three new University Committees established on a trial basis in the Fall. Other Senate Councils will continue – not everything will be converted.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:50 a.m. *Minutes by Linda Fullerton, Recorder*

## Appendix:

### Approved version: **Recommendations for Use of Student Evaluations in Merit and Promotion Decisions.**

Preface. These recommendations concern using student evaluations to evaluate individual instructors for merit and promotion decisions. Ratings have other uses as well. Student ratings may provide information that instructors can use on their own to identify possibilities for improvement. Departments and teaching units may effectively use student evaluations in the aggregate to appraise the performance of multi-course and multi-instructor units. Note that comparisons of the same unit over time are more valid than comparisons across units at the same time.

1. Student ratings should not be used alone in making decisions about merit of a faculty member's teaching. Other sources such as peer review of classroom sessions, peer review of curricular materials, and faculty self reflection should be reviewed in addition to student evaluations in order to gain a true sense of the teaching skills of a faculty member.
2. More than one set of evaluations should be used in making any decision about merit. Ratings from one course may be misleading about the overall teaching effectiveness of a faculty member. Trends in improvement in teaching across courses may also be important in assessing teaching. When possible, ratings from at least five classes over several quarters should be included for analysis. Courses should represent the variety of formats, from lecture based to seminar format, taught by the faculty member.
3. Only global ratings of teaching effectiveness, such as "Overall teaching effectiveness," should be used in personnel decisions. Other, more specific items should be used by the faculty member for review of specific skills and areas for improvement.
4. Do not overestimate small differences in individual evaluations. There is a tendency to overestimate the precision of student ratings because they are quantified. Differences between faculty of 0.2 points or smaller on a scale of 0 to 5 are not meaningful. It is better to deal with much broader classifications, such as Excellent or Very Good.
5. Interpretations of ratings should be guided by awareness that, in a university that uses teaching excellence as a hiring criterion, teaching is typically at a high level. The median (or 50th percentile) should not be used as a presumed dividing line between strong and weak teachers. More appropriate would be to assume that at least the top 80% of teachers are strong.
6. Use comparative data, but with caution. Colleges and departments should compile information about evaluations for faculty in their courses over time. Comparisons should be based on more than a narrow population of instructors. Departments with fewer than thirty faculty members should not rely on departmental norms, but use norms calculated for a number of similar departments or for the school as a whole.
7. Consider course characteristics when interpreting results. For example, large lecture courses typically receive lower ratings than smaller courses, new courses being taught for the first time receive lower ratings than well-established courses, introductory courses for non-majors receive lower ratings than higher division courses for majors, and courses in departments that have high student workloads typically receive lower ratings. Adjustments for course type should be made in order to have a fairer sense of the faculty member's teaching skills.
8. Give faculty members an opportunity to respond to evaluation results. Faculty should have an opportunity to discuss the objectives of the course and how the teaching methods were used to meet that objective, and how circumstances in the course might have affected evaluations.
9. In order for evaluations to be valid, a minimum of a third of enrolled students must be included in the results. Results may not be representative of the full class if less than a third respond.

Additional Resources:

The recommendations made in this document are based on research that has been summarized in a number of sources in the educational literature. Three good resources for additional information about student evaluations are listed below.

Lewis KG (editor). Techniques and Strategies for Interpreting Student Evaluations. *New Directions for Teaching And Learning*, Number 87, Fall 2001, Josey-Bass, San Francisco.

Braskamp LA, Ory JC. *Assessing Faculty Work: Enhancing Individual and Institutional Performance*. 1994, Josey-Bass, San Francisco.

National Research Council. *Evaluating and Improving Undergraduate Teaching in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics*. 2003, The National Academies Press, Washington, DC.