

Annual Report to the Faculty Senate from  
**The Effective Teaching Committee of George Mason University**

*Revised April 19, 2017*

### **Charge of the Committee**

The Effective Teaching Committee is charged with developing and helping implement procedures that encourage and reward effective teaching, enabling faculty to improve their teaching effectiveness independent of any evaluation procedures, and implementing procedures for evaluation of effective teaching.

The Committee is charged with recommending policy to the Faculty Senate and monitoring the use of such policy for the evaluation of teachers and courses, including the following:

- A. Review, improve, and provide guidance to Institutional Research and Reporting on the course evaluation form and related procedures at least once every three years;
- B. Review existing policies relating to the faculty evaluation process, identify alternatives to these policies and recommend changes to the Faculty Senate;
- C. Work closely with the Center for Teaching Excellence to support the use of formative and self-assessment techniques and materials for promoting faculty professional growth and teaching effectiveness, including strategies for robust student feedback.

### **Background**

From its three-pronged charge, during AY 2016-17, the Effective Teaching Committee focused on the Course Evaluation Form, since this form has not undergone any kind of significant review or revision for over a decade. This Committee aims not only to recommend ways to revise the form to make it more research-based, useful to faculty for making improvements in teaching, and more fair when used for faculty evaluation but also to validate the form for the dual purposes for which it is currently used – faculty evaluation and improvement of teaching.

We decided to follow a rigorous development process to include: (1) determining elements of effective teaching; (2) obtaining feedback from the Mason community on those elements; (3) drafting a policy for use of Course Evaluation Form data; (4) obtaining feedback

from the Mason community on that policy; (5) revising course items; (6) pilot testing and revising the items again; (7) finalizing and using the revised Course Evaluation Form.

We chose to undertake this process for two main reasons: (1) to ensure that the inferences made about teaching and the subsequent decisions based on those inferences are valid and can be supported by an instrument that adheres to measurement development principles, and (2) to protect all parties involved in a high-stakes evaluation process. We will recommend revisions to items on the form based on a review of the literature on the validity and reliability of using university student evaluations of teaching (SETs), as well as on faculty and student input for what they consider to be indicators of effective teaching.

In an effort to establish the construct validity of categories and items on the form, we reviewed a variety of sources on teaching effectiveness and identified eighteen potential categories that we ultimately collapsed into thirteen for ease of response on a survey. Some of the categories were overlapping, and that became evident in the data results and on feedback from faculty. We identified categories of effective teaching by reviewing the criteria for teaching excellence set by the Center for Teaching and Faculty Excellence, the Provost's criteria for genuine excellence in teaching, and databases for course evaluation form categories and items used by other universities.

During Fall 2016 and Spring 2017, we sought to determine the relative importance of the identified categories on effective teaching to four distinct stakeholder groups:

(1) all faculty, (2) faculty evaluation committees from every school, (3) academic deans and administrators, and (4) a stratified random sample of students.

## **Methods**

We conducted a survey to determine those aspects of teaching effectiveness each stakeholder group perceived to be the most important. Most surveys were online, but the initial surveys in Fall 2016 were on paper distributed at one of two meetings – the Provost's Academic Council and a forum of Faculty Evaluation Committee (FEC) Chairs. Surveys administered to Deans and FEC members included questions aimed at perceived purpose of the Course Evaluation Form and how they actually used the data generated by the form; their responses will inform our policy recommendations to the Faculty Senate.

## **November 2016**

We made brief presentations at meetings with the Provost's Academic Council (Deans and Directors) to familiarize them with the Committee's charge and to ask them to take the survey. We also met with Faculty Evaluation Committee (FEC) Chairs to ask for their input on the survey, and they asked that we conduct the survey with all of their committee members (annual evaluation, contract renewal, promotion & tenure), which we did online. Although the total number of FEC members has not yet been confirmed, we did receive surveys from 25 respondents, some of whom may also have responded to the all-faculty survey conducted in January, as well.

## **January 2017**

We conducted two online surveys, one for all instructional faculty and another for a stratified random sample (25%) of the entire student population. The Faculty Senate distributed the all-faculty survey and the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) distributed the survey to the student sample. In each of these surveys we asked respondents to rate each of thirteen categories on teaching effectiveness in order of importance to them.

Surveys conducted with faculty also allowed for open-ended responses on what they would suggest adding to the current Course Evaluation Form.

Surveys conducted with Deans and Directors, as well as with Faculty Evaluation Committee members, had additional open-ended responses on what they saw as the purpose of the form, how they defined effective teaching, and how they used the results of Course Evaluation Forms. Their responses will guide our policy recommendations for how results are to be used for valid and fair evaluation of faculty (see below on PURPOSE).

Surveys conducted with students only contained the thirteen categories associated with effective teaching.

## **Results**

We obtained a 30% response rate from Deans & Directors (N=9), a 19% response rate from faculty (N=505), and an 11% response rate (N=866) from the student sample.

The highest number of respondents to the all-faculty survey came from the College of Humanities & Social Sciences (33.5%), the College of Education & Human Development

(13.7%), the College of Science (11.1%), the Volgenau School of Engineering (10.9%), and the College of Health and Human Services (10.5%).

Instructional faculty, faculty evaluation committees, administrators, and students all tended to agree on the most important aspects of effective teaching. Across all schools, faculty and students identified the following five categories as the most relevant for measuring effective teaching: *Communication, Commitment to Teaching, Respect for Students, Preparation & Organization, and Passion for Teaching*. Some differences across faculty role (adjunct/term/tenure-line) were evident but not significant.

In addition to the indicators of teaching effectiveness selected by survey respondents during AY 2016 – 17, findings from a previous survey of faculty conducted in Spring 2014 by this Committee on the usefulness of the Course Evaluation Form are as follows:

- 1) Fewer than half (40%) of all respondents were satisfied with the current course evaluation form, and almost one-third expressed dissatisfaction;
- 2) Almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents indicated some level of usefulness of evaluation results for improving course design and teaching;
- 3) Almost half (47%) of respondents indicated that free or open-ended responses were of most use to them;
- 4) Almost three-fourths (73%) of respondents said the course evaluation results were used for improving teaching;
- 5) More than half (55%) of all respondents indicated that course evaluations work in their favor;
- 6) Suggestions for making course evaluation forms more useful included putting the forms online, using fewer questions, using more open-ended questions, and adding new categories of questions;
- 7) Suggestions for eliciting more responses to open-ended items included using different types of questions, more open-ended questions, and more instructor-generated and course-specific questions;
- 8) Additional categories recommended for the course evaluation form were questions on use of Blackboard and technology by the instructor and using a different evaluation form for online courses and distance education. Respondents also suggested questions on student opinions on usefulness of course materials.

## **Purpose of the Course Evaluation Form**

Over time, the Committee's understanding has changed with regard to our charge and its various components. Based on our survey data, Deans and other administrators don't necessarily agree on the purpose of the form. Faculty do not agree that the form is useful for evaluating teaching effectiveness. A number of instructional faculty, faculty evaluation committee members, and administrators commented either on the survey itself, in a separate email, or by personal communication that the Course Evaluation Form should not be used to determine teaching effectiveness because it lacks reliability and/or validity for that purpose. The perception is that it is a measure of student satisfaction based on an anticipated course grade or of how the instructor interacted with each student, and our preliminary review of the research appears to support this perception. The literature does not appear to support the validity of using the form for evaluating teaching effectiveness.

It appears that the Course Evaluation Form suffers from trying to serve two masters without having been validated for either: both formative and summative assessment of teaching performance. This is a critical consideration, because in order to revise the items on the Course Evaluation Form, we need to first establish its purpose, then validate the items for that purpose. Based on the data, we see a need for a broader discussion on the purposes of the form, whether two separate forms are needed for two distinct purposes, and alternative approaches to faculty evaluation that are supported by the research. We plan to engage the Faculty Senate in this discussion over the coming year.

## **Recommended Next Steps**

The Committee plans to work on the following tasks during AY 2017 – 18:

1. To use responses from FEC members and administrators based on their actual use of results from Course Evaluation Forms to draft policies for using such data for faculty evaluation;
2. To review the literature for how to evaluate effective teaching in higher education settings, for policy considerations in using student ratings of teaching, and to determine the extent to which the same five categories identified as being most important by Mason stakeholders have also been associated with teaching effectiveness elsewhere and how they have been operationalized;
3. To identify items on the current Course Evaluation Form and on those used at other universities that may accurately represent the five categories identified as being most important to all stakeholders;

4. To incorporate findings from our Spring 2014 survey in drafting revised items to be piloted as part of a new student form; and
5. To obtain stakeholder feedback on the revised items and use it to revise them and to pilot a new student form.

### Appreciation

The Committee wishes to express its appreciation to the following individuals for their assistance in moving forward with our work: *Drs. Thulasi Ku Raghuraman and Zhicheng Zhang* of the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA), *Keith Renshaw*, Chair, Faculty Senate, and *Judy Collazo*, Ph.D. candidate, Graduate School of Education.

April 19, 2017

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