Annual Report of The Effective Teaching Committee

to the Faculty Senate of George Mason University

April 17, 2020

Charge of the Committee

The Effective Teaching Committee, a university standing 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 the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning (OIEP) 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 Stearns Center for Teaching & Learning 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.

The committee met bi-monthly for one hour in person on the Fairfax campus with online web attendance options, and conducted additional business online. After Spring Break and the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the committee met once online in April 2020.

During 2019-2020 the committee was composed of these members: Gabriele Belle (Physics and Astronomy, COS), Jennifer Hathaway (College of Education and Human Development), Esperanza Roman-Mendoza (Modern and Classical Languages, CHSS), Cheryl A Oetjen (School of Nursing), Divya Varier (College of Education and Human Development), Tom Wood (School of Integrative Studies, CHSS), Alexandria Zylstra (School of Business). Tom Wood served as Chair. Divya Varier was on study leave but voluntarily participated remotely.

Angela Detlev (Assistant Provost, OIEP) and Gesele Durham (Associate Provost OIEP) were regular consultants from the Provost’s office

Ava Loudenslager served as student liaison (Executive Secretary of University Academics for the Student Senate)

A discussion of the ETC working relationship with senior administration is included in Appendix 1.

The primary work of the committee this year involved conducting the Pilot Student Evaluation of Teaching Form developed by the committee and approved by the Senate in the Spring of 2019. During the Fall of 2019, the committee worked closely with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning (OIEP) and the Provost to randomly identify test courses, inform faculty and administrators and properly prepare administrators, faculty and students for the Pilot testing. Approximately 350 Spring 2020 courses across online,
hybrid and face to face formats were selected. Courses for the Pilot were full semester, excluding Korea, Wiley, Law School courses and individual sections. Once the spring semester started, some of these courses were dropped for low enrollment. Faculty were assured, with support of the Provost, that experimental SET scores would not be circulated beyond the experiment coordinators and the instructor. Instructors, deans, chairs and program directors were kept informed about the Pilot study through personal letters, various committee meetings and direct communications from the Provost. Students were kept informed through the Student Senate liaison to the committee, Ava Loudenslager. Faculty teaching selected test courses were given the opportunity to opt out of the Pilot study for any reason, and were informed they could use, or not use, the data in annual reviews without penalty.

Ultimately, 307 courses were identified for the Pilot to proceed. By mid-February the Pilot SET was ready for the Spring 2020 term. Information sessions for faculty and students were scheduled for March 31 and April 6 in Merten Hall to provide logistical details and answer any questions. These sessions were to be recorded and were designed to describe the Pilot and explain the need for SET reform to all university audiences. Abruptly, The SARS-Cov-2 pandemic made it impossible to proceed as all courses moved online and course evaluations, including the Pilot were cancelled for the Spring of 2020. The information sessions could not be held. At the time of this report in April 2020, no determination could be made regarding re-scheduling the Pilot for the next academic year.

The committee was also invited to participate in the search for a vendor to deploy all student course evaluations online using a web-based tool. In December 2019, favorable feedback from committee members was provided about the vendor Explorance and the online tool “Blue” that was ultimately selected. Once procurement is completed, the committee will work with OIEP and the vendor to help facilitate the implementation of the new evaluation tool. The Policy Recommendations for Revising Faculty Evaluation Procedures (Appendix 2) developed by the Committee should serve as a guide during the evaluation development process with OIEP and Explorance. These policies were adopted by the Senate in the Spring of 2019 and contains fourteen specific recommendations at three levels: 1) Institutional/University Level Recommendations; 2) Program & College Level Recommendations; and 3) Instructor Level Recommendations. These recommendations are based upon current research in teaching effectiveness and can more readily be incorporated into the versatile “Blue” system than the current SET forms we use. We look forward to creative collaboration with OIEP, the Stearns Center and the “Blue” team next year.

The committee also conducted business via email, both before and after the cancelation of all face-to-face classes and events at Mason, including a productive discussion on the adjusted grading policy for Spring 2020. Committee members queried faculty in their units to get feedback on the proposed grading policy, information we provided to the Senate. Our discussion on this topic was similar to the debate in the Senate and ultimately helped with communication and understanding of the implemented policy.
Appendix 1

Committee Interactions with the Offices of the President, Provost, and Senior Vice President

1. During the past calendar year has the President, Provost, or Senior Vice President (or their respective offices) announced initiatives or goals or acted upon issues that fall under the charge of your Committee? If so, was your Committee consulted by the President, Provost, or Senior Vice President in a timely manner before the announcement or action? If not, do you believe your Committee should have been consulted? Would it have been helpful to have had the input of your Committee from the outset?

*Decisions to eliminate the use of Student Evaluation of Teaching from the Spring 2020 curriculum, and perhaps subsequent terms during the covid-19 crisis, were made without consultation of this committee. We realize the crisis nature of decisions made this year due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, however in the future, decisions of this nature should include representation of the committee.*

2. Did your Committee seek information or input from the President, Provost, or Senior Vice President or members of their staffs? If so, did they respond adequately and in a timely manner?

*In preparation for the Spring 2020 administration of the Student Evaluation of Teaching Pilot developed by the committee, the Provost provided support for selection of courses and empowering participating faculty to elect to use or remove results of the pilot SET evaluations from their annual reports, without consequence to their annual review. The Provost responded quickly and was fully supportive of committee efforts regarding faculty participation in the study.*

3. Please suggest how you believe the President, Provost, Senior Vice President and/or their staffs might more effectively interact with your Committee in the future, if necessary.

*Although the committee works primarily with the Provost Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning (OIEP), we could have more involvement with the Stearns Center to consult and promote their initiatives. This will be particularly important to ensure the use of the Policy Recommendations for Revising Faculty Evaluation Procedures adopted by the Senate (Appendix 2)*

4. Please relate any additional information you may have regarding interactions between your Committee and the President, Provost, Senior Vice President, or their staff.

*The committee has a good, productive working relationship with the Provost’s office. We look forward to working with the new Provost in the future.*
Appendix 2
Policy Recommendations to the Faculty Senate of George Mason University for Revising Faculty Evaluation Procedures
Developed by the Effective Teaching Committee and Approved by the Faculty Senate, Spring 2019

Part I. Institutional/University Level Recommendations

I. Implementation from paper to online forms

The Committee has been made aware by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning (OIEP) that online evaluation of faculty is being seriously considered due to its cost-effectiveness. While this Committee does not take a position on whether or not an online Course Evaluation Form should be made mandatory for all instructors, we do have some concerns based on our reading of the research on this topic, the experiences of other universities, and stakeholder feedback. Our primary concern regards low response rates, which have been repeatedly documented when course evaluation forms go online. Another concern is the assumptions that are made when asking students for their input on the effectiveness of their instructors’ teaching. Stakeholder feedback suggests that students are unaware of how responses are being used, e.g., to make career decisions about instructors. The following recommendations are intended to address these concerns.

Recommendation 1: The Committee recommends that Course Evaluation Forms be administered in class to retain or enhance response rates.

- For the purpose of completing online forms in class, the University will need to ensure reliable Internet access in every classroom to enable students to access evaluation forms via laptop and mobile devices.
- The University will need to change instructions for administration of the Course Evaluation Form to include reserving 15 to 20 minutes of class time for completing the form. The time required is consistent with the time required in the current administration of paper-based forms.

Recommendation 2: The Committee recommends the University establish strategies to increase response rates for any Course Evaluation Forms that are administered online.

- For this purpose, the University can issue multiple automatic reminders (automatic and personalized by instructor).
- Any online Course Evaluation Form should allow students to save and resume their responses.
- Incentives should be determined at the university/college level and may need to be rolled out over multiple years. To prevent corruption of the evaluation process, the Committee strongly advises against the use of incentives by the instructor (e.g., extra credit). The Committee recommends monitoring the effectiveness of implemented incentives for increasing response rates.

Possible incentives may include:

- Providing early access to grades.
- Providing students with upload certification on Blackboard.
- Providing students early access to future course registration.
- Providing transcript credits for graduates or other credits such as Mason money for copies or bookstore purchases.
- Providing a lottery/raffle with small prizes.
- Recognizing academic programs for meeting target responses rates.
Recommendation 3: The Committee recommends that the University engage in education of the faculty on how to communicate the uses of the Course Evaluation Form results to students.

For this purpose, the University can develop training materials and/or information sessions regarding the role and use of the Course Evaluation Form and the purposes behind latest revisions being made to the form. The University can convey the Committee’s recommendations for instructor level practices (see below), such as developing and providing program/college level discussions regarding transparency on the use of Course Evaluation Forms in faculty evaluation, promotion, and tenure decisions.

Recommendation 4: The Committee recommends that the University engage in the education of students on how the results from Course Evaluation Forms are used in the faculty evaluation process.

To this end, the University should consider the following approaches:

- Involving student organizations and associations in developing and promoting training materials about the importance of evaluations.
- Encouraging use of midterm formative evaluations as an opportunity to educate students about the importance of student evaluations. These midterm evaluations can also show students that their opinion is taken into account by instructors.
- Including training materials in orientation and transfer packets.
- Involving advisors.
- Offering a university-wide competition for students to prepare education materials (e.g. video).

Recommendation 5: The Committee recommends that in the transition from paper to online Course Evaluation Forms, the University provide increased accessibility to data sets and reports to individual course instructors.

The University should continue to provide access to raw data resulting from Course Evaluation Forms to programs/colleges/departments and faculty to enable academic units to conduct their own statistical analysis in order to aid decision making.

- The University should continue to provide measures of central tendency (mode, median, mean), variability, and percentages in the standard report to faculty based on the results of the Course Evaluation Form used in each course.
- Departments and/or units should be provided with reports analyzing the relationship between class characteristics (student information items) and item responses.

Recommendation 6: The Committee recommends that University ensure that all buildings allow for Internet access during the period designated for students to complete the Course Evaluation Forms.

This will require infrastructure upgrades, as not all classrooms on campus have the Wi-Fi capability to allow large numbers of students online at the same time.
II. Evaluation and Monitoring of Changes to the Course Evaluation Process

The Course Evaluation Form should be periodically reviewed and revised based on careful monitoring of its use in evaluating course instructors. As noted in its charge, the Committee recommends required periodic review of the Course Evaluation Form and of the faculty evaluation process.

Recommendation 7: The Committee recommends that OIRE collaborate with faculty to conduct research on how the results of Course Evaluation Forms are used to evaluate faculty and to improve teaching.

- For this purpose, the University should require colleges/programs to use results of the Course Evaluation Form responsibly in determining hiring, promotion and contract renewal decisions.
- The University should also require programs to determine minimum response rates by class size and/or related factors to ensure fair and appropriate use of Course Evaluation Forms.
- The University should support and encourage the use of multiple measures beyond Course Evaluation Forms in evaluating faculty including: peer observations, self-assessment, and portfolios.

Part II: Program & College Level Recommendations

Programs and colleges have flexibility in determining how to evaluate instructional faculty, so some variation is evident between one academic unit and another. On the other hand, many units share common practices when it comes to the faculty evaluation process and using the Course Evaluation Form to evaluate instructional faculty. In particular, Course Evaluation Forms are typically used for only summative evaluation at the end of a course, when improvement of teaching in the current course is no longer a possibility. Second, of all the items provided on the Course Evaluation Form, academic units tend to use only one or two overall numbers to make determinations of teaching quality. Third, programs and academic units often do not require student feedback for formative purposes, i.e., improving teaching effectiveness at any time during the course of instruction. To address these concerns, the following recommendations are offered.

Recommendation 8: The Committee recommends that the primary purpose of faculty evaluation, and of the Course Evaluation Form as part of that evaluation, should be for formative purposes, i.e., the improvement of teaching effectiveness.

With that goal in mind, academic units need to educate both faculty and students on the processes of formative assessment. This could include:

- Ensuring that course instructors are informed of the potential individualization of items on the Course Evaluation Form. The new Course Evaluation Form can be individualized to provide information to improve their teaching. Instructors need to be educated on how to add items to the form.
- Preparing faculty to use student feedback, and the results of the Course Evaluation Form in particular, to improve teaching.

Instructors need to be guided in obtaining student feedback multiple times for more frequent feedback throughout each semester or course. Formative assessment is only useful while a course and the teaching are in process rather than at the end of the experience. Programs and colleges can use items from the Course Evaluation Form to devise alternative formats and sample forms for obtaining student feedback and examples of how that feedback can be used to improve teaching.
Recommendation 9: The Committee recommends that programs and colleges educate students on the uses of the Course Evaluation Form.

Programs and colleges should ensure that students know their unique role in the faculty evaluation process. In addition, programs and colleges should provide clear acknowledgment in writing that their feedback is confidential and will not be used to affect the grading process, as instructors are required to submit grades before receiving the results of Course Evaluation Forms. Academic units should consider adding a statement to each course syllabus regarding the purpose and use of the Course Evaluation Form in making high-stakes decisions for faculty accountability and assuring confidentiality of student responses.

Programs and colleges should plan on phased implementation of outreach and education efforts for both faculty and students. For example, in the initial year of implementation, programs and colleges can volunteer for faculty training, with rolling implementation of other colleges in subsequent years. In the second year, programs and colleges can proceed with student training by individual college, again with rolling implementation across subsequent years.

Recommendation 10: The Committee recommends that faculty evaluation should have as its secondary purpose accountability, and programs and academic units should make use of multiple measures for this process, including peer review.

Peer Review
Faculty should be evaluated for accountability purposes in making decisions regarding merit, hiring, tenure, and promotion. Peer review should be part of this evaluation process. While peer review is commonly used for decisions of promotion and tenure, it is less frequently used for the purpose of annual faculty evaluation. To prepare faculty for peer evaluation, programs and colleges should provide instructor training in the process of peer observation and the use of scoring protocols. This training should include approaches for limiting bias and increasing the validity of inferences and rater training for scoring protocols to ensure reliability of outcomes.

Peer evaluation should include review of syllabi, course materials, assessments, and grading practices. The process should also be based on classroom observation of instruction and the development and field-testing/validation of observation protocols. In addition, measures of learning outcomes and student perceptions of learning, such as the Student Assessment of Learning Gains (SALG) should be included in the evaluation process. Course instructors should be provided with formats for self-assessment and documentation of their teaching, such as teaching portfolios and reflection statements based on student feedback.

Programs and colleges should plan on phased implementation of new annual evaluation procedures so that faculty are gradually introduced to and enabled to engage in self-assessment and peer review. For example, in the first year of implementation, instructors could be provided with information and guidance on preparing a teaching portfolio or statement. In the same year, some faculty could engage in peer review training, including the use of criteria for syllabus review. In subsequent years, faculty could be trained on how to conduct peer reviews based on class observations. Since peer review for annual faculty evaluation is probably not feasible for all faculty, programs and colleges could decide how often to conduct peer reviews, such as in alternating years, and how to determine eligibility of faculty for peer review.

Multiple Measures
Programs and academic units should use multiple measures to ensure the validity and reliability of the outcomes used in the faculty evaluation process. Given the high-stakes nature of faculty evaluation for career decision-
making, programs and colleges should ensure the accuracy and fairness of the evaluation process for both full-time and part-time faculty.

To ensure metric reliability and validity, programs and colleges need to use multiple measures and take steps to ensure that no single or overall score is used to determine the teaching effectiveness of any course instructor. Instead of a single overall number or mean on Course Evaluation Forms, programs and colleges can use total mode, median, or mean scores in combination with other indicators of teaching effectiveness. Vague descriptors on the Course Evaluation Form or in scoring protocols need to be removed in order to improve the reliability of outcomes.

To increase the validity of inferences based on Course Evaluation Form results, programs and colleges should consider eliminating results of Course Evaluation Forms from faculty evaluation when response rates are low.

Programs and colleges should plan on phased implementation of revised faculty evaluation procedures, such as using the first year to determine the multiple measures to be used for faculty evaluation and developing those measures in a following year. In subsequent years, those measures can be pilot-tested and later implemented.

**Differentiating the Use of Course Evaluation Results**

Because in any given year some faculty teach more courses than others or teach required courses with large enrollments, or online courses, evaluations of teaching should be proportional to each instructor’s teaching load and course characteristics.

Programs and colleges should develop guidelines for instructor evaluation based on course characteristics such as course or student level, required vs. optional course, class size, delivery platform, and Course Evaluation Form response rate. Some suggested weights might include 50% for peer review, 30% for self-assessment, and 20% of the total evaluation score based on the results of the Course Evaluation form, as each program determines these to be appropriate. Programs and colleges can apply weights to Course Evaluation Form results as determined by course load and course characteristics.

Programs and colleges should plan on phased implementation of differentiation of Course Evaluation Form results, such as using the first year to determine category weights for effective teaching by faculty role and the second year for determining policies for using results of the Course Evaluation Form.

**Recommendation 11: The Committee recommends that course instructors be informed of and educated on the migration from paper to online Course Evaluation Forms.**

The process of informing faculty about the move from paper to online forms could include the following:

- Explaining the timeline for the transition.
- Discussing how evaluations will be used in faculty evaluation.
- Considering how shifting response rates may impact faculty evaluation process.
- Ensuring that instructors know that they need to be proactive to ensure strong response rates, e.g., including statements in syllabi addressing course evaluations.
Part III. Instructor Level Recommendations

I. Phased implementation from paper to online forms

With Mason likely to be moving from paper to online Course Evaluation Forms, plans must be made to prepare both course instructors and students on the implications and ramifications of this migration. The recommendations below suggest actions that could be taken to prepare instructors and students for the migration.

Recommendation 12: The Committee recommends that course instructors educate students on the importance, purposes, and uses of the Course Evaluation Form.

Students need to be provided with information on the following:

- The purposes of the form, both formative and summative assessment
- Responses on the Course Evaluation Form are anonymous even though students must log in with student credentials to access the form
- Final grades are submitted before instructors receive results of the Course Evaluation Forms and, as such, are not affected by their responses on the form
- Assure students that the Course Evaluation Form has been developed and pilot-tested with feedback from all stakeholders, including both graduate and undergraduate students.

Instructors should describe the role of the Course Evaluation Form in the instructor evaluation process, e.g., for determining high-stakes decisions such as annual evaluation, promotion, contract renewal, and salary setting.

In addition, instructors can let students know that they plan to use their feedback on the form as formative assessment to improve the course.

II. Increasing online response rates

Research suggests that instructors can take steps to increase online response rates for Course Evaluation Forms. The committee does not support the use of instructor-based incentives (e.g., extra credit for completing Course Evaluation Forms, snacks), as this will likely result in respondent bias.

Recommendation 13: The Committee recommends that course instructors of face-to-face courses use class time to allow students to complete the Course Evaluation Form.

In a process similar to paper forms, online Course Evaluation Forms can also be administered by setting aside 15 – 20 minutes of class time. During this time, students can logon and go online to access the form.

Instructors need to check their assigned classroom to determine that it can support all students on Wi-Fi at the same time so that the Course Evaluation Form can be completed during class time.

For online courses, instructors should monitor response rates and provide frequent written and oral reminders to students regarding completion of the form.

Recommendation 14: The Committee recommends that course instructors conduct multiple informal, mid-semester, anonymous, course evaluations.

Instructors can use online polling tools (e.g., Survey Monkey) to determine student perceptions of their teaching effectiveness and of student efficacy, such as approaches that encourage learning or challenges posed by the course.
Instructors can summarize this feedback to the class with an indication of how it will be used to improve the course, such as which student suggestions will be implemented and which are not possible to implement. When the Course Evaluation Form is distributed at the end of the semester, instructors can remind students of the mid-semester evaluation to highlight that student feedback is valued, anonymous, meaningful, and implemented, while also explaining the end-of-semester form has much higher stakes.