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Online Student Evaluations
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Submitted by Barry Balleck
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Question: In light of discussions at last senate meeting, and subsequent discussions by members of the senate and the GSU Student Government Association, faculty senate needs additional discussion on this issue:

Rationale: Because of the amount of speculation, and confusion, by both faculty and students about online evaluations, it is incumbent upon the faculty senate to address this issue.

Response: Barry Balleck submitted a request to further discuss online student evaluations in light of the discussion about this topic and evaluations in general which took place on the Senate Listserv last month. Michael Moore volunteered to check with Bryan Griffin and others on the committee that developed the current form. He prepared a small history, which was also posted on the web. The item about discussing online student evaluations is #11 on today’s agenda. Discussion item “Online Student Evaluations.”

Barry Balleck (CLASS): I think that if anyone follows the listserv or the Senate discussion list, and I hope you do, there was about a two week flurry of activity on the list during the time between our last meeting and this meeting, containing expression of some very strong sentiments about online student evaluations. I want to make the point that I realize that this is in its formative stages right now, but I think in discussing this matter with members of my own department, with student government leaders and so forth, that there is a lot of confusion about what we are actually trying to accomplish with online evaluations. There is confusion about what these evaluations are actually
going to do. Are they simply taking the place of the paper evaluations we have now, or are we trying to do something more? And to me, I think the larger question is whether this is an example of how the Senate has been placed in a reactive rather than proactive situation. Obviously, this is a situation that greatly affects faculty, greatly affects students, and yet, as I understand the process that took place, a committee met last spring with Lisa Spence of IT services, not much was done (as Dr. Humphrey said on the discussion list), and not much was done over the summer. Yet in the Librarian’s Report in September there was a blurb that we are going to start testing this thing. There was absolutely no indication on the part of faculty members or student leaders or students in general as to what these were about. I think there has also been some good subsequent discussion on the list, as David Robinson pointed out. What are we trying to measure? Are we simply going to translate what we have now into an electronic form? Is there something more that we should be trying to measure with these evaluations? Is it something that is going to benefit us in the long run, or are we simply buying into the technology spree that seems to be out there? And I think another thing that concerned me as I began thinking about online evaluations, was that, as I brought this up at the SGA, a student senator came up to me afterwards and stated that it is a great idea as long as students can have access to them as well. The student said that way he/she will not have to subscribe to pickaprof.com. Students can simply see what the evaluations from students here at Georgia Southern say about a professor, and they will be able to make determinations of which class to take and which professors to stay away from based on those evaluations. I think there are some real issues here that we need to discuss and decide regarding how we are going to approach these things, primarily for the reason of being able to inform our colleagues. As I said, the Political Science Department, when I brought this up was absolutely clueless as to what was happening here and quite frankly I have to admit that I was clueless as well. I do not think I had a good understanding as to what we are trying to accomplish with evaluations from our last meeting. That is why I made this item. Pat Humphrey (COST) Senate Moderator: Point of information for those of you who may not have noticed it, I did distill all of the emails that crossed my computer and put them in chronological order and had those posted on the senate web page, as well as Dr. Moore’s short history on the process. David Robinson (CLASS): I think that the effort from Lisa Spence and the administration to streamline the process of evaluations is a good one. I think that electronic solutions are an obvious improvement in a lot of ways. What specifically I’m worried about at this present juncture is that we are about to
embark on a test program, if I understand correctly, about how to actually administer these. We have vendors who are coming in trying to sell us solutions, and I think that alone seems problematic in view of the fact that faculty unease, or displeasure about the general state of evaluations was never taken into account in a formal way leading up to this. So I think that we maybe throwing money in a fairly arbitrary direction, if we actually start purchasing solutions for implementing some particular version of evaluations on campus. I think it might be a good time to pause, and maybe appoint a different kind of working group or committee to examine this situation; a Senate ad hoc committee to review the broader context of all those questions that we were just listening to. What are we measuring? How do we want to measure it? How well is the current situation working? So, before we charge off into the brave new world, which I am a card-carrying citizen of (I like it there), I would still like to see some reflection principally from faculty. Linda Bleicken (Provost): I just want to address, as a point of clarification, at least one of your statements, David. I think you raised some very good points. The notion that we were going out and spending a lot of money to do this is one that is not the case. In fact, we have a company that we have contracted with known as TK20, which has been working for the last couple of years with the College of Education. They are also working with us as part of an already in-place contract, which means no additional dollars. They have some additional applications, and this is one of them.

And so that was a piece of how this came about, and once again, please understand this was not a conspiracy. It was really an attempt to look at an issue that had arisen primarily because of the security of these documents. We were having some problems with the security of administering evaluations, and that resulted in a question that came before the Deans’ Council. It was discussed fully in the Deans’ Council, and I am sorry that that did not filter down to you. And we did talk with Lisa about the possibility of looking at a pilot. She worked with a small committee of faculty members on a pilot. The idea was simply that here is another way of administering evaluations. Thank you.

Michael Nielsen (CLASS): I just had a couple of thoughts. I thought the Listserv discussion was interesting, useful, and many of you brought up points that I found instructive. I had the opportunity to talk with Bryan Griffin yesterday about his experience with evaluations, and, as was mentioned, he was on the committee or in charge of the committee that came up with the current system, and so he was thoroughly immersed in the process. What I found most interesting about his comments is that for the past several
semesters, he has been teaching online courses where all the instruction is online, so the students customarily use that mode of interaction as the class. He said that he was troubled, as I recall, by the fact that in his online classes, only about 30% of the students complete the evaluations. So there is a good statistical reason to be very skeptical of those kinds of data, based on such a small sample of the population. Those are the two main things I thought would be worth contributing to the discussion now.

Gautam Kundu (CLASS): On a lesser note, I would be curious to know how many of our peer institutions or aspiring institutions have done something like this, and with what results? Pat Humphrey (COST) Senate Moderator): I have no idea.

Ken Clark (COE): Dr. Bleicken has anybody looked at the online courses, and what percentage of the students in the online courses actually fills out evaluations compared to the number of students in the online courses?

Linda Bleicken (Provost): I really do not know the answer to that question. I do not think that was part of the charge that Lisa had; it was more of a technical issue. They may have. I just simply do not know the answer to that.

Ken Clark (COE): I was just wondering, because I taught two online courses last semester and had a total of 65 students. I had 3 out of 65, after I told them during one of their online chats about the online evaluations, actually do an online evaluation, and talking to other faculty in the College of Education, that is about norm. Alice Hall (CHHS): I do not know what the methodology for the pilot would be, but I would think if you give the online evaluation and the written evaluation to the same students and use a secure protocol (because I can understand if it is not given correctly in a written form and you do not secure it, it could be falsified), and then compare those results and see statically whether you are getting the same feedback at least as we were in writing, you would have an idea of whether you are going to get the same information online as you did in written form. So, looking at the methodology of the pilot, I think would be important.

Pat Walker (CLASS): I think my comment goes back to what David Robinson said before about forming an ad hoc committee. I thought I was getting a lot from the discussion we were having. It seems to me at this point that maybe we are putting the cart before the horse. Before we start talking about how to administer the evaluations in a new way, it might
make sense to evaluate the content and effectiveness of the current model and to create an effective evaluation model that the faculty feel comfortable with, and then talk about administering. Ming Fang He (COE): I do have personal experience with online evaluation. I have no objection to doing a pilot project on online evaluations. I do have personal concerns. I can share some of my experiences with online evaluations. Some of the online evaluations were never done with undergraduate students, but with doctoral students. You imagine the doctoral students would be more responsible, but some are adults, and they are not very technology-oriented. So, because of limited technology capabilities, some of the graduate students tended not to do the evaluations.

Marc Cyr (CLASS): We need to know what kind of questions we are going to ask first. That is linked to how we do it—electronically or paper, but they are really two separate issues for consideration. You have to take them in series. Then you have a third issue, which is how to apply or use the data, for personnel actions or for allowing students to read them, and perhaps not take my classes. How will online evaluations be applied? To whom will the evaluations be available? They are all related issues, but you have to move in a series on this.

Godfrey Gibbison (COBA): As an economist, I have got to ask to what extent were there problems, or inaccuracies, or tinkering with the previous system? If we are going to spend money, and it seems like we are going that way, to do online evaluations at some point, somebody needs to show that there were grave problems with the previous evaluations to justify spending some money doing that; otherwise, we best use that money to do something else.

Mary Hazeldine (COBA): First of all, Godfrey, there are major problems when you have 65 students and only 3 respond. That is a major problem right there. Now, what I want to know is whether the questions on the online survey will be the same as the ones that we deliver in our classroom. They cannot be. Okay. So, first of all, I would suggest that we pick a cohort of online students and run a factor analysis of some kind of construct validity and look at the reliability of it, so that we can feel good about the content of the questions. The second problem, of course, is even if you have a valid and reliable instrument, how do you get students to fill it out? When I walk into a classroom and administer class evaluations of a colleague of mine, the students are sitting ducks. They fill it out. This is not going to be the case online. So the procedure to fill this out is very important. Bev Graham (CLASS): I would like to go back to Godfrey’s
point. I really would feel a whole lot better about this if we could see how widespread the impact of the existing problem is. We heard one situation; one case, but I think it would help us to have some grounding to sort of see and know what kind of problems we have with the current system. Pat Humphrey (COST) Senate Moderator: I think what Ken was saying was that the online evaluations did not work; not that the current paper ones did not. Bev Graham (CLASS): Yes, right, but I would feel better before we continue with this discussion of throwing out the old and trying something new, if we knew exactly what some of the concerns were, what some of the problems were, what the impact of those problems was, how severe they were.

Godfrey Gibbison (COBA): And paying money for it.

Candy Schille (CLASS): Just to sort of facilitate things, I wonder if David Robinson’s idea was not sort of one way to get the ball rolling--have some kind of an ad hoc committee with a carefully drafted charge that would include, for instance, things like Dr. Kundu’s suggestion that we look into sister institutions’ practices. I think that the handwritten evaluations are of limited use as a measurement of my professionalism frankly, but we have got to have something, so I wonder if David Robinson’s idea is a workable one. Or shall we just have more conversation here this evening? Or how do we want to proceed?

Bob Cook (CIT) Parliamentarian: Agenda item as discussion. So you could limit discussion, go to new business, and then propose to have a committee.

Pat Humphrey (COST) Senate Moderator asked for a vote to limit discussion and move forward to unfinished business. A vote was taken, and discussion was terminated.

David Robinson (CLASS): I move that we appoint a Senate ad hoc committee to address the following questions: 1. First of all, the current state of evaluation procedures on this campus. 2. The advisability and methodology of implementing that method, or some other method, electronically, and 3. To organize a statistically, scientifically valid study or guarantee that this does take place when this pilot program, which otherwise sounds like its going to be merely a technical exercise, takes place. I would hope that lots of people from the College of Education who know something about creating surveys, and understanding them would be involved in this. Anyway let’s form a committee to discuss all these issues, and also to meet with the existing working group
that is constituted by the administrators, Lisa Spence and whoever else.

Pat Humphrey (COST) Senate Moderator: Is there a second? All right, we have a motion to appoint an ad hoc committee to examine among other things: 1. The current state of evaluations; 2. The advisability of and methodology of the method of administration, paper versus online; and 3. To organize a statistical validity study, and 4. Confer with the current task force looking at online evaluations. Is there a discussion? Michael Moore (COE): I want to underscore what David said, especially in part one, and not think of the evaluation instrument as the sole instrument in how we evaluate teaching. Because when I talked to Bob Haney a few days ago in regard to this matter, one of the things that he mentioned to me that he thought was more important than even the instrument, were the principles of using the results, and at the time the current instrument was adopted, we were going through a kind of teaching assessment revival. We had McKeachie on campus. We had department chairs undergoing, I’m sure Dr. Bleicken might remember this, sensitivity training on evaluation and evaluating faculty. And there were a number of principles, some of them included such things as trying to find out what happens if someone who had consistently had high evaluations suddenly started to receive low evaluations. Other results, or other means of evaluation, then the instrument, syllabi, observation by colleagues, and those sorts of things, so I think that for the charge of this committee we’ve got to be very careful, in how we charge the committee, and also look at you know the broader issue of this instrument being just one component of an assessment.

Barry Balleck (CLASS): I have another question, Dr. Humphrey, you said in one of the discussions that there was supposed to be representatives from the software company here on Monday, October 8th to discuss the capabilities of the system if the meeting goes well, further identify processes, and so forth. Did those people show up? Did that meeting occur? Did those things happen? Pat Humphrey (COST) Senate Moderator: To tell you the truth, I haven’t heard anything back.

Linda Bleicken (Provost): The software company was on campus. They are on campus for a much broader purpose though than simply to look at online evaluations, as I said before, this company has been working with the College of Education for over two years looking at an electronic way of gathering assessment data. The meeting that they had and I do believe that they had that meeting was one that this was a very small part of. So we did not invite
somebody here for the sole purpose of that.

Barry Balleck (CLASS): Okay. Well, I have another question. Along those lines, I mean, when we start talking about assessment data and things like this, I mean, I guess one of the concerns that I have as well is, you know, at what point do we take this information beyond simply using it for evaluation. At what point do we start breaking people down by race, or age, or whatever other criteria we want to do, and maybe somebody wants to do a statistical study on something like this, and that information is out there. What legal ramifications are there to keep that information sacred, if you will, and not only that, I mean, are we all naive enough to think that there are no ways to break into these systems, and have, you know, complete security, just as we have had problems in the past with the written ones? I mean, I think that’s another thing we need to look at and address. That there’s got to be some sort of online security that we can be assured of that these are going to be kept in the purview that they need to be kept. That they are going to be kept within the realm of who should be looking at them. Are other faculty members going to be able to access these things? Are we going to have to have a passcode to access our own evaluations? Is the chair going to get a hard copy of these, and then he or she is going to discuss these, in our annual evaluations. I mean, I think these are all questions that this task force has to, or this ad hoc committee has to look at. I mean, there obviously are a lot of questions that we need to answer and I think also that I don’t know how this wasn’t addressed in the motion, but are we going to proceed with this, you know, pilot study, if you will, in the light of the, this ad hoc committee, if in fact it is formed.

Godfrey Gibbison (COBA): Again, we are talking as if we’re going there, we’re talking about results of a process as if we’re going there without anybody saying why, and what the cost is going to be, and whether or not it’s justified, and what I’m basically saying, to be plain about it, is if one guy cheats on his evaluation in one hundred years should we run out and change the system, that’s all I’m asking. If it’s two guys who cheated on their evaluations in thirty years, is it worth go completely in another direction? I would like for somebody to say, what exactly, how widespread and deep are those problems?

Candy Schille (CLASS): Call the question. Pat Humphrey (COST) Senate Moderator: Okay, the question has been called. That’s not debatable, and requires a two-thirds vote. All those in favor of calling the question, please raise your hand. Motion carries. All right. So as I have it the motion before us is that the Senate, that we shall appoint a Senate ad hoc committee charged
with the following:

1. Examine the current state of evaluations;

2. Look at the advisability and methodology of different modes of administration;

3. Organize a statistical validity study, and

4. Meet with the current online task force. All those in favor of the motion, please say aye. All those opposed? Thank you. The motion passes.

The SEC had discussed this issue at our meeting last week, and we had already envisioned forming an ad hoc committee. Thank you, David.

Mary Hazeldine with lots of experience in statistical studies and marketing research has agreed to chair the task force. And we will look at expanding that with a good cross section of other colleges and possibly some student representation as well. Does that meet the approval of the body?