2005

Evaluations dialogue from Senate Listserv

Georgia Southern University

Senate Executive Committee

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Hi Debbie,

What Richard Flynn was referring to when he reminded Provost Bleicken is the university's habitual adoption of an old and WIDELY discredited management trick called "Bait and Switch."

Remember when Post-Tenure Review was introduced and we were told that those who scored VERY highly would be eligible for a salary bonus???? Well, . . . the administration pulled the money for that after only two years, BUT we still have post-tenure review. So, evaluations are here to stay, too. The only way for the on-line scenario to be stopped is to stop it now and stop it cold. There are soooo many holes in this sort of proposal that any Senate worthy of its name should have no problem shutting this proposal down.

BUT, . . . I am really responding to this posting because I have specific point to make for the Senate to consider when thinking about their response to this proposal. Who will fill it in???

Consider that filling in the form is completely voluntary, those who will bother to complete it will be those who want to and, just like the dubious on-line services such as "Pick-a-Proff.com" and others, the ones who fill in the evaluations will be those who either: 1.) really LOVE the teachers, or those who 2.) HATE the teacher's guts. What a WONDERFUL evaluation tool.

The forms should be filled in by the students who get their butts to class. This is a critical point. Almost everyone I know never takes attendance because that is sooooo High School juvenile. So, the ones who currently fill in the forms are the folks who are MUCH more likely to be in class. Now, some of them may or may not LOVE/HATE the professor, but the extremes will be balanced out by the VAST majority. Meanwhile, the folks who are blowing off their college opportunity will not be included in this already questionable statistical exercise.

Paul A. Rodell

P.S. Please feel free to distribute these thoughts as far and wide as you wish.

PAR

October 1, 2005 -

Dear Senators,

Concerning electronic delivery of course evaluations, I am forwarding a remark I made in response to a SUFF posting that will be of general interest to the Senate. I am not a "member" or
whatever of SUFF, but I am happy to be on their mailing list.

The message should be read from the bottom up, as is the nature of these things in our highly advanced electronic age. (what followed was Paul Rodell’s posting which is above -- Pat).

-- David Robinson

+++++++++++ Begin forwarded message +++++++++++++

The future has already arrived and it is electronic evaluations. On-line classes are already being evaluated via a form hosted on WebCT by order of the previous provost, and it's hard to see what else one could do. The centrality of physical classrooms is going to continue eroding in the coming years as teaching resources increasingly are best accessed over the Internet. Any approach to evaluations (which are, as I said at the Seante meeting, also problematic for plenty of other reasons) that assumes that classrooms are the norm and that electronic attendance is an exception is not going to prove helpful even for our current circumstances.

So what is the on-line, virtual equivalent of "butts in classes"? I am no visionary on the subject of butts virtual or otherwise, but I think the question needs to be looked at differently in view of the technology. In a virtual class, nobody is present / everybody is present. "Presence" doesn't mean occupying a chair, it means performing tasks. We accept that people will be missing from traditional classrooms on the day that student course evaluations are administered because of practical necessity -- we can't force people to physically show up. (Note: that is not to say that any particular group -- those who love you, those who hate you -- is going to preferentially be or not be present. I have seen it go both ways.) But things have changed. In terms of gathering valuable data, the ideal in this case is 100% response to the evaluation, and the asynchronous nature of virtual teaching (which is already all teaching to some extent) makes that entirely achievable. You simply require that people submit an evaluation before they receive a grade for the class. Presto!

Paul might anticipate that results from 100% participation will have a different profile than the data we currently collect; maybe, maybe not (see parenthesis above). The data *will* be more valid than what we currently get, though, by which I mean that we will be more accurately measuring whatever student course valuations measure. There is no reason to get upset or paranoid because every student is actually submitting an evaluation; that would be a good thing, in principle. The problem is that this is the only assessment tool being used, and it doesn't even measure what really should be measured, namely, learning outcomes in that classroom in that term.

-- David Robinson

Date: Sunday - October 2, 2005 9:25 PM
Subject: Re: SUFF: Feedback coming in on Electronic Evals
Mime.822 (3924 bytes) [View] [Save As]

From: Charles Crouch
I would like to add a follow-up to David Robinson's comment. Another interesting aspect of this electronic student evaluation is the ability to electronically correlate a student evaluation with a final grade in the course. Yes, I know there is not supposed to be a correlation, but I believe the studies that say otherwise are flawed, and electronic evaluation give us the opportunity to study the issue with our own students. The result of such a study is a better interpretation of the value of student evaluations. I was anxious about the thought of electronic student evaluations, but I am no more as long as the administration can assure me that a student will get only one chance to make an evaluation in a given course. That also should be simple to arrange by appropriate software.

Deb, I would echo Paul's comment concerning the on-line evaluations: they are fraught with imponderables to quote Jeeves. It is a bad idea being foisted upon us by some techno-phile without considering the deeper issues of the evaluation process. Charlie Crouch

October 3, 2005

Dear Senate Folk:

Even in classes where I do take attendance, I can't guarantee student attendance on any given day (not even, Lord help us, an announced exam day). Also, I tend not to announce when I'm giving evaluations, since my guess is that that would be an open invitation to students to not bother coming (unless they really hate me). Insofar as the overall outcome (i.e. rating numbers for any given question or overall), I doubt there'd be much difference between what we get with "butts in seats" and what we would get electronically -- something that could be confirmed or disproved by having some test runs.

The major concern I see is that, speaking as someone who was once a student, if (especially at the busy end of term) I weren't forced to fill out an off-the-class-clock evaluation, I wouldn't take the time to do so. The "no grade given/reported till the evaluation is completed in full" stick would, I think, have to be applied, and a way of wielding it developed. Are there any legal issues there, by the way?

A more important question, I think, is about the current questions we ask and the value (or lack thereof) of responses. I believe David Robinson, for one, is working on this, too.

-- Marc Cyr, CLASS

October 3, 2005

Senate:

I agree that the way to achieve optimal value from electronic evaluations, at the end of very busy semesters, would be to require students to fill them out in order to receive their grade. I, also, wonder if there are, A.) legal issues to requiring this, B.) would students feel free to evaluate honestly if they know that professors can find who did or did not fill in an evaluation; would they believe the professor could not also access the information in the evaluation before giving them...
their grade? It seems either a structure needs to be clarified (for both students and faculty) that allows faculty access to knowing who has finished the evaluation without accessing content, or faculty need to accept that only students who love/hate them will take time to evaluate at end of the semester when students feel overloaded

--Pat Walker

October 3, 2005 –

Pat's approach is better than tilting against the windmill of technological change. (I've seen an attack on arrogant "techno-philes" lately off-list, as though technophobia were a reasoned response to technophilia.) Change will happen; electronic processing of evaluations will save a great deal of labor and class time and will be less subject to environmental vagaries -- it's a natural. And (to repeat myself) it's already here and it's already the only way to carry out evaluations in some classes. Our efforts are better spent managing the process than trying to halt it. Following up on Pat's and Marc's questions: I doubt that legalities would prevent requiring evaluations to be submitted, considering how many other things we require, but that's for the lawyers. Students certainly could evade the requirement (and preserve their God-given right, shared with faculty, to be cussed) by submitting empty evaluations. And the management of the evaluation requirement could be handled at the registrar's level -- professors never need know if a student did or didn't submit an evaluation. In short, compliance can be enhanced without undue coercion, and confidentiality can be maintained.

Cussedly,

David Robinson

October 6, 2005 –

To add some information to the discussion on student evaluations.

I spoke with Lisa Spence of IT Services yesterday about this (and Technology Fee awards). According to her, they are not very far down the path toward electronic evaluations. It came up as an idea last spring, and nothing was really done over the summer. COE has software from TK20 (which can interface with Banner) which is used for evaluation. This apparently has an on-line Student Evaluation component. The software vendors will be on campus this coming Monday, October 10 to discuss the capabilities of the system and some of GSU's concerns on the matter.

If the meeting goes well, they will move on to a further identification of the issues (can we "force" students to fill them out, security, etc), and visits to other campuses who are using the system, and a project plan. In a best/worst case, they will be looking at just a few faculty and a few classes to try for a pilot this semester, and an incremental implementation further down the line.

In any case, it's my opinion that we need to look at the issue of evaluations in general. We're all seen the forms where students mark a single column all the way, or (god forbid for the statistics) mark the column of 1's (strongly disagree/hate) then give glowing comments on the back side. What to do with them? Do these evaluations measure what we think/hope they do? Assessment is becoming part of the game. The public schools now have "No Child Left Behind/Untested." It's coming for us both from the BOR and
Accrediting bodies. One of the big comments from the SACS people last spring was how we will assess the QEP.

I'm open to constructive ideas.

--Pat Humphrey

October 6, 2005

I have keep quiet long enough on this matter. TO use student evaluations for anything important is a joke. It is like having a blind man evaluate an eye surgeon on their bedside manner rather than on their increase in vision. Do you realize the only way you get to be an evaluator is by not knowing the subject. Think about that and then think of a question that ask “did you learn a lot in this class?” Well I have no dammed idea. I'm in the class because I don't know all the ramifications of the subject. I suppose if you give me a grade of "A" I will say I learned a lot if you give me an “F” I say I didn't. By the way what I am supposed to know? How about this truly insightful question "would you recommend this instructor to a friend?" "Yes because he is easy." "No because he makes me work to hard." Excuse me what answer do I want on my evaluation to this question do I want a strongly agree or strongly disagree? You want to evaluate faculty them measure learning outcomes. Student evaluations are the stock and trade of a lazy administrator.

--Bill Francisco

October 6, 2005

"You want to evaluate faculty the[n] measure learning outcomes."

Precisely. And how to do that is a worthwhile investigation. I have been working with "knowledge surveys" that require students to self-assess their knowledge relative to a set of content-based questions, before and after taking a course. Other approaches are no doubt also possible (and, by the by, they will ALL be practical only via Web-based tools). But I fear that there is going to be a disconnect between purely technical questions (how to set up the on-line evaluations) and any genuine critical thinking about the evaluations or their successor assessment tool. The administration is under pressure to improve assessment methods, but nobody should mistake the technical side for the real issue.

-- David Robinson

October 6, 2005

I must say I agree with both David and Bill (who has a lot of experience in this realm - (School Board). HAVE we taught our students something tangible/valuable? That's really the question. Did we do it in a way that boosted their self-esteem? I don't really care. Did I make them work? That's part of the process. (I'm always proud when I see lots of my students say they work far more in my class than in others...) I also know (and we've had many discussions in Academic Standards Committee) that most students do NOT work at all like the "assumptions (3 hrs per class hr)" say they should. I survey my students the first day of class (for data to use in class). They report that, on average, they study about 5 hours per week, and work 30-40 hours
per week. Where's the priority???

Pre/Post testing could be a great benefit. I wouldn't go to student-assessed measures of what they think they know.

My 2 cents worth.

Patricia Humphrey

October 7, 2005 –

Though I agree with you, Pat, I think we have to be careful about “assumptions.” Ideally, yes, we'd like students to put all the hours in (especially when I have to read 6000-8000 words for every English 1101/1102 student!), but who are we kidding? Think of us, the faculty---how much time are we expected to devote to service, research, teaching---but we choose to prioritize for reasons not always most admirable. Our students are no different: they prioritize by content they are interested in, just as we spend more time on things we care about as faculty and professionals---or when a deadline approaches. This is life, I think, and we sometimes forget that students are still learning how to manage (and again, I realize, not always wisely) the demands.
Also, as part of my dissertation, I interviewed with some of our students here during their first term (and always in discussions with my GSU 1210 classes), students tell me that they don't "count" reading assignments as homework; they see them as separate activities, not both as studying. Though I was surprised by that perception, I wonder how much more time they do "study" than your question/data reveals?
Raising you a nickel,
Kathy Albertson

Director
Georgia Southern Writing Project

October 7, 2005 –

Yup, if we are going to have student evaluations, they need to measure what the students have learned; whether they and/or the professor worked hard (and really the standard should be "worked well") can be inferred from such data. Re: student self-esteem, it seems to me that they will esteem themselves highly if they recognize that they have EARNED knowledge and ability: does anyone think that a sports team with a losing record actually believes it when their cheerleaders howl "We're Number One"?

Re: the number of hours students apply to schoolwork vs. hours applied to jobs, while I think we can assume that contemporary students have far higher "lifestyle" expectations than we did (as we had higher ones than our parents, I believe) -- DVDs, beer, hot cars, beer, wardrobe, beer, vacations, jello shots, etc. -- we also need to recognize that the costs of college and living at college have risen considerably in the last couple of decades, and that wages have not risen accordingly. I don't have stats, but it's possible that the lifestyle you and I could maintain in college working ten hours a week now takes twenty. Also, I think our students are likely taking more credit hours per term than I did, at least partly because we've added hours (often more-or-less remedial) to what we still euphemistically call a four-year degree (mind you, I never had to repeat a course, either). While our students' number one priority should be doing well in their
classes, as it was mine, a prerequisite to that priority is being able to live in a condition at least minimally conducive to that objective.

Do I think many/most of our students live high on the hog and still think themselves hard done to? Yup. Are their priorities screwed up? Yup. Am I an anal retentive, pointy-headed academic old fart who yearns for the Golden Youths of Yore, of whom I was one? Yup. And if we're going to remedy the situation, I think we need to do something other than rail against it, such as limit the number of hours a full-time student can work, thereby forcing them to cut back on their lifestyles or support those lifestyles via parents, loans, etc. Or we can just maintain our standards and flunk students in droves until they realize that THEY have to take the initiative and cut back on their hours (whether credit or work or party) . . . wait, what's that sound I hear? Is it the arrival of the Millenium?

-- Marc Cyr, CLASS

October 7, 2005 –

Early on, Bill Averett wrote on the evil eval issue wondering whether there could really be a reconsideration of how valuable or worthless they are and what to do about it. I suggested forwarding his e-mail to Linda Bleiken; he consented. How about forwarding all the contributions to this thread to Bleiken?

cbls  (Candy Schille)

October 7, 2005 –

I completely agree that the evaluations could be a lot more meaningful, and perhaps David's pilot project will prove useful in making them so. My concern about electronic evaluations is that there are no controls over the circumstances under which they are administered and completed. Given, say, a two week period of online availability, what's to prevent collaboration among students, for instance? At least the way they are done now, the colleague who administers the evaluations can keep the students from talking to each other while they put their pencil marks in the bubbles.

Electronic evaluations make sense for electronic classes. For a face to face class, I prefer that the students be in the classroom writing the evaluations in longhand, unless I happen to be teaching an internet class.

Evaluations need not be evil. I've learned things even from our current and, in my opinion, seriously flawed evaluations.

By the way, to follow up on what I alluded to at the last senate meeting, section 205.07 of the faculty handbook states "During the implementation of the current instrument, every faculty member is rated in every course each term." Previously, senior faculty didn't have to do evaluations in every course each term. It's no big deal for me to do them, but what I want to know is, have we finished implementing the current instrument? And if so, has anyone tested and confirmed the instrument's validity?
I will also say that far too much weight is given to these evaluations here at Georgia Southern and that the whole question of how we can meaningfully evaluate teaching needs to be examined carefully. No single measure, especially not student evaluations, should carry undue weight.

Richard (Flynn)

October 7, 2005 –

I, also, would like to see evaluation forms revised to measure course content learned and not reflect whether the professor was nice, friendly or even liked. It surprised me as I aged how my attitude changed toward that Professor who pushed the students in his courses, that though I disliked him at the time he ended up being the one I remember best and who gave me the most.

It is hard for students to evaluate course content until after they are in their chosen field working. A course that seems too difficult now may be the best course they took 10 years from now. Likewise a course seen as popular now, with just the right amount of work expected, may be seen years later as having been too easy. As in the adage: you don't know what you don't know, students don't know what they will need. Are they ready to evaluate course content? Should we focus on developing an instrument that measures only what was learned in the course and leaves out whether they "liked" learning the course content and would tell their friends to take this professor?

--Pat Walker