Date: April 27, 2010

To: Sue Wiegand, Chair, Executive Committee of the Faculty Assembly

From: Karen Chambers, Committee on Faculty Affairs

Re: Student Course Evaluations

The Committee on Rank and Tenure wrote a memo in March, 2008 that asked the question: “Is it time once again for the faculty to discuss changing the current student evaluation form?” At the beginning of the academic year 09-10, the Executive Committee of the Faculty Assembly charged the Committee on Faculty Affairs with answering this question. In response, we sent a brief survey out to the entire faculty to determine whether the faculty wished for a systematic discussion about a revision of the course evaluations to occur.

The outcome of the survey would lead us to conclude that there is support among the faculty to discuss changing the current evaluation form used for course evaluation. Specifically, when asked, “do you feel that the Faculty Assembly should consider revising the content of the current course evaluation” 59.8% (N=52) answered yes and 40.2% (N = 35) answered no (total N=87).

Not surprisingly, the open-ended comments varied greatly; however, a few themes did seem to emerge. Among the most common themes were:

* The purpose of the current evaluations is unclear (e.g., is it currently a customer satisfaction survey?, is it a faculty or a course evaluation?, is it for improvement of courses or for promotion and tenure?) .
* The current evaluations are open to discriminatory and biased language.
* We should reconsider whether it is appropriate to use anonymous evaluations.
* Students are not qualified to judge the quality of teaching. They don’t have the perspective or knowledge of pedagogy that allows for a meaningful evaluation.
* The current evaluations are not appropriate for courses that are taught in non-traditional ways (e.g., team taught, non-lecture).
* Concerns about the monitoring of evaluations were expressed.
* We should include more questions about course content and more emphasis on student effort and experience.

Finally, we asked whether the Faculty Assembly should consider the use of online course evaluations in place of in-class course evaluations. The answer to this question was quite divided and would likely take a concerted effort to understand the advantages and disadvantages of an online survey system before any recommendation or decision is made on this. Specifically, 29.9% (N=26) answered yes, 27.6% (N=24) answered no, 40.2% (N=35) answered need to learn more, and 2.4% (N=2) abstained from the question.

In summary, we have completed the charge given us by the Assembly in response to the question from R &T. The results of the questionnaire suggest that there is support among the faculty for such a discussion. We know the issue of course evaluation is important; therefore, we recommend  faculty-wide discussion about purpose, kinds of questions, and format before the Faculty Assembly acts further on the matter.

Sincerely,

Members of the Committee on Faculty Affairs

Karen Chambers

Nancy Menk

Joanne Snow

Jennifer Zachman

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