March 31, 2021

TO: Jason Stajich, Chair
    Riverside Division of the Academic Senate

FROM: Lucille Chia, Chair
      CHASS Executive Committee

RE: Final Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Evaluation of Faculty Teaching

The following are comments based on the CHASS Executive Committee’s review of this report. The main points which the EC noted with approval are:

1. the detailed recommendations to revise the current Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) to reduce the bias toward women faculty and non-White faculty, and to emphasize student learning rather than unclear evaluation of the instructor

2. the insistence on evaluating a faculty member’s pedagogy through not just SET but other kinds of evaluations such as a teaching portfolio, a teaching self-statement, and observations by a colleague.

The EC was not surprised that the survey (p. 1) of faculty experience and opinions of the current iEval system revealed “widespread dissatisfaction with the current system.”

The EC agrees with Subcommittee A’s recognition that “the problem of bias as among the most serious flaws in our current SET and its uses on our campus.” On Subcommittee A’s overall recommendations: the EC

--agrees with #1, that students should be better educated to understand the purposes of the evaluations and learn how to give suitable (“helpful”) feedback, although the challenge is how to find the resources (time, instructors, training program, etc.) to do so

--#2: agrees that there should be fewer and more precise questions

--#3: questions referred to don’t seem to be consistent with those listed in Appendix C

--#4: thinks that the stress “Student evaluation of learning” rather than instructor performance seems like a good idea, but this would require effective implementation of #1, in particular, that the students are educated in understanding how to evaluate their own learning, a difficult task, and as the report suggests, students may not accurately appreciate what they have learned until some time after they have taken the course, possibly after they have left UCR—any way to make this recommendation practical?

--#5: “Consider including the instructor’s stated learning outcomes or learning objectives for the course as a component of the student evaluation.” Again, this requires educating the
students to be able to evaluate appropriately the instructor’s goals (e.g., a student looking for infotainment may not appreciate an instructor’s less than entertaining approach to lecturing).

#6: “Narrative comment fields should be retained, but the iEval survey should provide carefully crafted prompts that guide the scope of student comments rather than simply having an open-ended Comments field.” This is a good suggestion, perhaps even more than the subcommittee’s original intent: it provides those reading the evaluations a fuller sense of a student’s approach toward the class and provides clues to how much effort the student put into the class, and what the student’s notion of a college course requires.

#7: “A statement or “preamble” about bias should be presented to students at the beginning of the survey (see example below).” --a good suggestion, though how effective remains to be seen

#8: “A statement or “preamble” about bias should be presented to students at the beginning of the survey (see example below).” definitely

#9: the problematic correlation of the numerical evaluation and the related narrative answer is important to address: “The placement of prompts for written comments relative to scale-based questions may influence numerical ratings. It is possible that providing written comments first, particularly if the student is invited to reflect on their role in the learning process, may provoke a more thoughtful and less biased consideration of scores on scale-based questions.”

This may alert those reading the evaluations to be aware of comments from students who seek to punish instructors by giving them the lowest possible numerical evaluations and then extremely negative and even false comments.

The EC also notes that the persistent problem of low response rates for the current SET system, due to a number of factors, which the report did not address. For example, iEval is not a user-friendly system for students using a mobile phone—something that ITS should be invited to work on. In any case, until response rates can be increase for the SET, skewed numerical data may lead to problematic assessment, especially for departments that put a great deal of emphasis in these data.

As for the part of the report by Subcommittee B, which had the broader task of giving the campus “recommendations to the campus on how to interpret and use teaching evaluations responsibly for merit/promotions”, the EC found it generally more problematic than the discussion of Subcommittee A.

For the four categories of questions discussed in recommendations 1 and 2:, category 3 should not be replaced by questions by those that “reflect those aspects of the course that directly impact student learning and the use of technology and degree of engagement in the absence of personal contact.”

Considering that online instruction is an inevitable part of future UC teaching. And the subcommittee admits, “Many institutions of higher education are still struggling with how to effectively evaluate online formats for courses.” We therefore need as much information from these evaluations of teaching and learning as possible.

Under Items 4&5: “Teaching effectiveness does not refer only to in-class teaching but includes all other aspects of educating students such as, but not limited to, general guidance, mentoring, supervising, and advising at all levels.” This should be put in bold and caps.
The last several paragraphs of Subcommittee B’s report make worthy recommendations about facilitating (and “enforcing”—the subcommittee’s term) the serious consideration of teaching effectiveness through means other than SET, but again, the implementation of these recommendations is challenging. For instance, for what the subcommittee terms “peer review” (visits to classes, examining the syllabus and teaching materials, etc.) require much work by the candidate’s peers will be time consuming and may prove difficult to assess knowledgeably and equitably if the observers are insufficiently familiar with subject/field of the course in general.