

# SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

5.82-78

## MEMORANDUM

To..... SENATE

From..... SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGENDA AND RULES

Subject..... STUDENT TEACHING ASSESSMENTS

Date..... JUNE 17, 1982

The following motion from K. E. Rieckhoff was received by the Senate Committee on Agenda and Rules for discussion at Senate.

### MOTION:

"That the Senate of Simon Fraser University goes on record as endorsing the recommendations I to VII regarding assessments of teaching effectiveness as stated in the memo of April 20th, 1982 by K. E. Rieckhoff on the subject of "Student Teaching Assessments" and requests the administration to implement these recommendations as a matter of policy"

Senator Rieckhoff's memorandum of April 20, 1982 is attached.

# MEMORANDUM

To....."TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN".....

Dr. K. E. Rieckhoff  
From: Professor of Physics  
Member of S.F.U. Senate  
Member of S.F.U. Board of  
Governors

Subj: "Student Teaching Assessments"

Date: April 20, 1982

A recent memo by a department chairman to his faculty and lab. instructors regarding "STUDENT TEACHING ASSESSMENTS" prompts me into action. The use and particularly the misuse of such assessments has been a longstanding concern of mine. Only the mature and wise attitude regarding such assessments in my own department, i.e. to leave it up to individual instructors to decide on their use and to take them only "cum grano salis" rather than as true measures of teaching effectiveness, has prevented me from going public with my concerns. I am beginning to realize that as a responsible member of the Senate and of the Board of Governors I cannot continue in the luxury of such a parochial attitude. Elsewhere in the university academic careers are endangered, promoted, or efforts misdirected on the basis of the widespread and gross misuse of information of questionable real value to anyone with the possible exception of the affected instructor. How seriously such assessments are taken by academic administrators is exemplified by the following quote from the memo referred to above: "This perspective on teaching effectiveness is an important one and it is expected that all faculty and instructors will ensure that students have an opportunity to assess their teaching."

I shall address myself briefly to a number of questions in the hope of provoking thought, examination and discussion among my colleagues, within the Faculty Association, among the senior academic administrators, and perhaps even within the Senate and the Board and their appropriate committees with a view to corrective action to eliminate this serious threat to our academic integrity. The questions are the following.

- 1) Why do I consider the present practice to be deplorable and a threat to our academic integrity?
- 2) How did the present practice evolve and why is it widely tolerated by so many faculty members and academic administrators?
- 3) What measures can and should be taken to eliminate the misuse and abuse of student teaching assessments.?

1) Most academic departments at S.F.U. use student teaching assessments in an attempt to measure the teaching effectiveness of their instructional staff. Often, as exemplified by the memo quoted above, considerable pressure is put on faculty to cooperate in the practice for "...all classes, large and small." The instruments, (i.e. questionnaires) used for this purpose vary in sophistication and some have had the benefit of social science methodological expertise in their design. Usually the student is asked to rate on a numerical scale a number of aspects of both the course itself and the instructor and/or teaching assistant. The questions can range from integrated judgments on the part of the student about the course such as: "Would you recommend this course..." to specifics such as: "On a scale of 1 to 5 rate the helpfulness, preparation, approachability, etc. of the instructor." Besides such attempts at "objective" ratings, frequently general and specific open ended comments are solicited. Only rarely, if ever, is the student asked to identify his/her own base of judgment, i.e. his/her age, academic goal, academic background and standing etc.

The return rate on these questionnaires while not always 100% is usually quite high. The results are made available to the instructors and provide in most departments one of the most important, and often only, pieces of information which are used by academic administrators, as well as departmental and university tenure committees, when applicable, to judge the professional performance of faculty in their role as teachers. These judgments are used for purposes of renewal, tenure, promotion and merit assessment in salary considerations.

In the light of the assumption that by and large students will be conscientious and honest in filling out these forms (an assumption I am prepared to accept as reasonable in the light of my personal knowledge of and experience with students over many years) to what may one object? There would be nothing to criticize if these surveys were used by instructors as information on student opinion. The objection arises out of the misuse made by assuming a unique relationship between student opinion as expressed in such surveys and teaching effectiveness and/or teacher quality. Such an assumption is purely based on faith and cannot be backed up by any evidence except in extreme cases of poor performance and downright irresponsibility on the part of the teacher.

In the first place there are no agreed upon criteria by which teaching effectiveness at the university level can be assessed. At this time there exists no scholarly consensus outside a few rather obvious desirable and a similar number of obviously undesirable characteristics of an "effective teacher". Even on some of those, exceptions to the rule can often be found except for the one rule that an effective teacher must know and understand the subject matter that he/she is teaching. But leaving aside the absence of a consensus on what constitutes "effective teaching", there is a further absence of consensus as to what extent student surveys are valid tools to measure anything (even if there were an agreement on what constitutes teaching effectiveness). Studies have been made and I have read myself some of the original literature in the field. All that can be said at this time is that these studies are controversial and that no consensus has emerged.

This state of affairs is not really surprising. In the first instance, a student's evaluation will be strongly influenced by his/her past experience with teachers and by his/her expectations regarding a particular course. If his/her previous exposure to teachers has led him/her to expect very little, then merely competent and conscientious teaching will appear "good" and "very good" to him/her. In the second place, student populations are not homogeneous and their differences extend to likes and dislikes and differential responses regarding particular modes of learning and teaching. The importance of these factors to the student evaluation is exemplified by evaluations in which a particular teacher in a particular course was rated by some students as "exceptionally good", by others as "exceptionally bad". These are not imaginary situations. They occur all the time and I am aware of at least one instance where such a dichotomy was further explored in an open-ended questionnaire, where the reason for the assessment was asked for, and identical reasons were given for these divergent judgments, i.e. what appeared to some students to be an exceptionally good aspect of the course was considered by others in a totally different way. In some disciplines ideological compatibility between student and instructor has been shown to be an important factor influencing assessments.

But the problem of validity, reliability, and meaning of these opinion surveys is compounded by the fact that the results are considered, interpreted, and used - I prefer to say "misused" - by our so-called "peers", i.e. people who, with some notable exceptions, have absolutely no professional knowledge regarding

appropriate social science methodology and its possible ramifications. Thus the "data", which are suspect in the first place, are interpreted and used in ways that in themselves leave a lot to be desired. Specifically we find divergences in interpretation which depend not only on the methodological sophistication of individuals but also on their personal idiosyncracies and even prejudices. As examples let me cite the use of ratings averaged over a class without much regard to the distribution, the use of one extreme part of a bimodal distribution to justify a personal prejudice either in favour or against a colleague, the arbitrary weighting and discounting of specific aspects of a rating etc. All in all one can only say that, under the appearance of objectivity in assessment, arbitrary judgments are in fact made and rationalized. Such practices should really not be condoned in an institution that purports to value scholarship and intellectual integrity. That is probably the reason that many years ago the CAUT explicitly cautioned the academic community regarding the use of student opinion surveys. It specifically recommended against their use for the purposes of tenure, promotion, and other career decisions and suggested restricting their use to feedback to the instructor.

2) In the light of the massive indictment given under 1) one may legitimately wonder how, given the validity of this indictment, the practice evolved and has become so widely accepted. I believe the answer to be a mutually reinforcing complex of historical, political and psychological reasons.

History placed the founding of S.F.U. into a period of legitimate concern about the seriousness of the commitment of academics to their teaching responsibilities particularly in the U.S.A. academic establishment. Thus one of the earliest announced intentions of S.F.U. was to take undergraduate teaching most seriously and assure its quality.

Politically, this period was also the time in which "student-power" became an important concept in universities and legitimate as well as merely ideologically oriented demands were raised and responded to by increasing student participation in all levels of university governance. The willingness to listen

to the student and give consideration to his opinion became a public "motherhood" issue. This led to almost totally uncritical acceptance of a variety of concepts that tended to abolish, as presumably "undemocratic" or "elitist" discrimination on the basis of differential knowledge. These trends together with the absence of clear alternatives that could be characterized as "objective" teaching assessments led to the acceptance of student opinion surveys as the dominant tool for such assessments.

The psychological factor abetting such acceptance will be familiar to everybody who has access to unfiltered student opinion: By and large students are exceptionally kind and generous in their assessments of faculty teaching. Being aware of their limited knowledge and information base, they tend to give the benefit of the doubt to their teachers, rating faculty of merely average professional competence and normal care and conscientiousness as "good" or even "very good", acknowledging normal courtesies shown to them as if they were almost unheard of kindnesses, and judging even professors who treat them with disdain and who are sloppy and unreliable as "o.k." or average. Of course, there are a fair number of students who never experienced truly competent teachers and are thus unduly impressed by what they find at S.F.U.. Their assessments, will err far more frequently in ways that favour and flatter us than the other way around. Furthermore, there exist a number of effective ways in which career-conscious instructors can manipulate students to achieve favourable ratings to the detriment of true learning: generosity in giving grades is only one of the cruder and more obvious ways to do this.

The combination of these factors leads to the general acquiescence of faculty, since the practice rarely hurts them and is frequently to their advantage. Academic administrators naturally love a system about which faculty rarely complain, which gives them the opportunity to point out how students opinion is treasured and used, and allows them to be seen by the public in a demonstrable way as guardian of the teaching quality of the institution.

With a situation in which students, faculty, and administration conspire to fool themselves, each other and the public by the maintenance of a pleasant set of illusions (not necessarily identical illusions for the various groups) why would anyone wish a change in this state of affairs? I shall leave it to you to decide on that question.

3) Having addressed myself to the above questions, I already hear the reply: "student questionnaires may have their faults but they are the best tools we have for teaching assessment and lacking better ones we must continue to use them." My answer and the recommendations arising from it have two aspects: It would be honest to acknowledge the deficiencies in the first place and in the second place, given the extent of the deficiencies, it would be preferable not to use any teaching assessment even if nothing else could be substituted. But there are ways in which we can avoid intellectual fraud and yet use student input to make sufficient, albeit admittedly subjective, judgments with respect to a rough assessment of teaching effectiveness.

Here then are my recommendations:

- I) Abandon any attempt to judge teaching effectiveness for purposes of renewal, promotion, tenure, and salary review on a scale that is finer than the following broad categories. "Exceptionally good", "acceptable", and "unacceptably bad".
- II) Assume in the absence of any specific evidence to the contrary that any instructor, who demonstrably knows the subject matter of the course he/she is teaching, falls into the group classifiable as "acceptable".
- III) Accept as "specific evidence" for other than "acceptable" performance only the following in decreasing order of importance:
  - i) Corroborated testimony from professional colleagues both within and outside the university who have personally attended lectures, seminars etc. of the person to be judged.
  - ii) A consistent pattern of compliments or complaints by past and present students who have taken courses from the person to be judged and whose comments have been investigated and weighed according to the commentators academic standing, experience, and general reliability. (In the case of complaints, the faculty complained about must, of course, have been given the opportunity to respond and his/her responses must also be considered).
  - iii) Statistical opinion surveys of alumni not enrolled as students at the time of the survey who have taken courses from the person to be judged.

- IV) Prohibit as a matter of policy the use of opinion surveys administered to students still enrolled at the university for purposes of making judgments about a faculty members renewal, promotion, tenure and salary review.
- V) Prohibit as a matter of policy the exertion of any pressure expressed or implied on the part of academic administrators on course instructors to use student opinion surveys.
- VI) Where course instructors for their own purposes and benefit wish to use student opinion surveys they are of course at liberty to do so, but the use of results of such surveys should be restricted to the instructor.
- VII) Encourage students dissatisfied or exceptionally pleased with the performance of an instructor to make their complaints and/or compliments known to the chair of a department for appropriate action or (if they are too unsure of themselves) have them go to the ombuds-person of the Student Society who may then act in their behalf.

Concluding remarks:

I am aware that I am attacking something that will be perceived by some as "a sacred cow", which, however, to me appears to be merely a myth. I urge the reader to take the time to read the above carefully, to consider it as free of emotion as is possible, to discuss the merits of my remarks with others, and, ultimately, to respond in concrete fashion to my recommendations. Your considered opinion will be of interest to me and should be of interest to our senior academic administrators. Let's hear from you.

Sincerely,

  
Dr. K.E. Rieckhoff

KER/mlb

Current University policy concerning the evaluation of teaching is as follows:

1. Faculty

Appendix II to Policy AC 2 (Renewal, Tenure, and Promotion) includes the following statement:

"2.1 Teaching Effectiveness

Success as a teacher, however measured or assessed, is the paramount criterion for evaluation. Generation of enthusiasm in students, dedicated involvement within one's discipline, openness to innovation and the capacity for a broad approach to one's subject matter are all important aspects of teaching effectiveness."

2. TSSU Bargaining Unit Employees

A copy of Article XVII of the Collective Agreement between the University and TSSU is shown below.

Article XVII Employment Evaluation

- A. An employee may be evaluated at least once during any semester in which she/he is employed. An employee may request that an evaluation of her/his performance be undertaken during a semester and an evaluation will be made provided such a request is received by the Department Chairman at least one month before classes end in that semester.
- B. Evaluation shall be made on the performance of the duties assigned to the employee.
- C. Evaluation may include assessment of the employee's performance by the students assigned to the employee, and by the person to whom the employee is responsible and/or such other person(s) as may be designated by the Chairman.
- D. A copy of the evaluation shall be forwarded to the employee and she/he shall be permitted to add relevant comments on the evaluation to her/his employment file.
- E. Departments that do not currently have formal systems of evaluation of the work performance of bargaining unit employees shall be encouraged by the University to initiate and maintain such systems.
- F. The design, administration and interpretation of such evaluations falls within the area of management's rights and responsibilities.