STUDENT EVALUATION OF TEACHING AND COURSES

TEACHING & COURSE EVALUATION PROJECT
FINAL REPORT

APPENDIX IX: FOCUS GROUP KEY FINDINGS SUMMARY

NOVEMBER 18, 2013

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604.765.4610
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## DOCUMENT CONTROL

### DOCUMENT INFORMATION

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### DOCUMENT HISTORY

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<td>October 17, 2013</td>
<td>Revisions to Education</td>
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<td>0.3</td>
<td>November 15, 2013</td>
<td>Revisions and addition of focus groups</td>
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1 INTRODUCTION

The literature research and consultation with other institutions provided the Teaching and Course Evaluation (TCE) project team with context for engagement with the SFU community. An essential component of community engagement was a series of focus groups with stakeholder groups. The focus groups were aimed at exploring questions in more depth with participants. Stakeholder groups were strongly encouraged to include participants with a wide range of views on the topic. It was repeatedly stressed that all points of view were welcome.

The goal was to use this information to help inform our recommendations to Senate for instrument selection and related processes. Understanding what our faculties and departments are doing today provides meaningful input for instrument selection and support. This report provides a summary of key findings from this stage of engagement with the SFU community.

2 OVERVIEW OF FOCUS GROUPS

The TCE project team conducted 11 focus groups across 6 faculties and 3 important stakeholder groups within the SFU community. Table 1 summarizes the focus groups and the dates they were held. Table 2 provides a summary of the roles of participants in each focus group.

Table 1: Focus Groups and the Dates they were Conducted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Education</td>
<td>May 31, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Oct 30, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences</td>
<td>December 6, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>December 13, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Applied Sciences (School of Engineering)</td>
<td>February 13, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(School of Computing Science)</td>
<td>March 14, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beedie School of Business</td>
<td>February 22, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Science</td>
<td>February 25, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Health Sciences</td>
<td>April 15, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPC Chairs</td>
<td>April 19, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFU Faculty Association</td>
<td>May 30, 2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Overview of the Roles of Focus Group Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roles of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beedie School of Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin Staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Admin Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Applied Sciences</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited-term Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Admin Staff</td>
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<td>Lecturer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education Consultant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty of Education</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty of Health Sciences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty (Lecturer)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Admin Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty (Lecturer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Rep (Undergraduate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty (Associate Professor)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty (Assistant Professor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
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<td>Professor</td>
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<td>Professor</td>
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<td>Professor</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SFU Faculty Association</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admin staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beedie School of Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFU Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department of Linguistics</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TPC Chairs</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Former TPC Chair (Molecular Biology and Biochemistry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former TPC Chair (English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former TPC Chair (Education)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 Learning Commons Peer Educators</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 APPROACH

Our goal was to gather the needs of the SFU community and understand its concerns. To facilitate this, each session began with a brief overview of the project that included highlights from the literature review and consultation with other institutions. Then dialogue was structured around key questions that helped to explore how concerns might be addressed through relevant instrument design principles.

3.1 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the focus groups were to:

- Gather faculty/department/school/program needs with respect to student evaluation of teaching and courses
- Understand attitudes, feelings and concerns with respect to the student evaluation of teaching and courses instrumentation and use of data acquired with the instrument
- Ensure the community feels that we are actively listening to their attitudes, feelings and concerns
- Address some of the concerns that arise with instrument design principles, review of the research, and practice at other institutions.

3.2 QUESTIONS FOR FACULTY

The four questions considered at each focus group session with faculty were:

1) How are student evaluations of teaching and courses used in your faculty? (Tenure and promotion? Improvement of teaching? Improvement of courses?)
2) How do you feel about the current instrument?
3) How do you feel about how the evaluation data are used?
4) What are your main concerns with respect to student evaluation of teaching? Within your own faculty? In the institution as a whole?
5) How can we make improvements that will address these concerns?

3.3 QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

Questions considered at the focus group with students included:

1) What is your perception of how student evaluations of teaching and courses are used at Simon Fraser University? (Instructor evaluation? Improvement of teaching? Improvement of courses?)
2) What do you feel are the most important reasons for giving a low evaluation of teaching and courses?
3) What do you feel are the most important reasons for giving a high evaluation of teaching and courses?
4) What are your main concerns with respect to student evaluation of teaching and courses? Within your program? In the institution as a whole? What should be done with the results versus what is currently done?
5) How can we make improvements that will address your concerns?
## 4 HIGH-LEVEL OVERVIEW

Table 3 below provides a high-level overview of comments and discussion from each of the stakeholder groups, with the exception of the student focus group. The different perspectives of evaluation topics that were discussed at each session, including the student focus group are provided in the detailed summaries that follow.

### Table 3: High Level Overview of Comments and Discussion from each Stakeholder Group (except Students)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CURRENT INSTRUMENT</th>
<th>COMMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Beedie School of Business** | Current system asks students about teaching  
No context to different types of courses/classes is provided  
Some like the existing instrument – others think it needs to be revised  
Provides data for tenure and promotion |
| **Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences** | Evaluations are imposed  
Many instructors conducting their own formative evaluations  
Don’t trust that the instrument produces accurate results  
Instrument doesn’t help students see the difference between learning outcomes and teaching performance |
| **Faculty of Applied Sciences (School of Engineering)** | Paper based forms that include both bubble and open-answer formats  
Intro paragraph that explains what evaluation results are used for  
Find the forms “useless”  
Some instructors have created their own surveys |
| **Faculty of Applied Sciences (School of Computing Science)** | Paper based instrument that gathers student feedback on teaching  
Used for tenure and promotion  
Instrument is too narrow – doesn’t ask the right questions  
Meets SFU policy  
Instructors conducting their own formative evaluations |
| **Faculty of Education** | Instrument is not used effectively  
Unreliable / unvalidated instrument |
| **Faculty of Health Sciences** | Online instrument is used  
Data is used by instructors and committees responsible for promotion, tenure and hiring  
Dislike the low response rate (approximately 50%)  
Instructors encourage students to complete the survey, incentives are offered  
Instrument is too narrow – asks the wrong questions |
| **Faculty of Science** | Used to gather student feedback on teaching  
Data is used for making improvements to teaching and making decisions about tenure and promotion  
Instrument is too narrow – it doesn’t ask the right questions  
The instrument is used too late in the semester to be effective |
| **SFU Faculty Association** | Instruments place more emphasis on tenure and promotion than on enhancing teaching and learning  
Paper based instruments work well  
In some cases, there’s a lack of clarity about what the instrument is evaluating |
| **TPC Chairs** | TPC uses results to review salaries or make decisions about instructor merit, tenure or promotion  
Compare results for similar courses  
Review student comments |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>USE OF DATA</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Beedie School of Business | Used for tenure and promotion  
Used for making hiring decisions about new lecturers  
Used by the Associate Dean and department chairs to assess instructors  
Some instructors use data and written comments in a formative way  
Some instructors conduct their own mid-term evaluations to receive formative data |
| Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences | Results are used for promotion and tenure  
Departments all use data in different ways – use of data is selective  
Evaluation may or may not impact teaching methods  
Some data is not useful for instructors at all |
| Faculty of Applied Sciences | Used for making tenure and promotion decisions  
Lack of context provided for data  
Used to improve teaching and curriculum  
Instructors interested in written comments |
| Faculty of Applied Sciences  (School of Computing Science) | Data is almost exclusively used for teaching and promotion decision-making  
Data is usually considered out of context  
Instructors use written comments |
| Faculty of Education | Issues with formatting and inflexibility of questions  
No best practices used  
Not sure the data is accurate  
Not enough time to interpret the data  
No comparative analysis  
Not consistently used for teaching improvement or tenure/promotion |
| Faculty of Health Sciences | Summative data is used for administrative purposes  
Instructors use written comments in a formative way |
| Faculty of Science | Very limited use, mostly for tenure and promotion  
Numbers are not a good indicator of teaching quality  
Context of the data is not considered  
Data is not flexible and accessible |
| SFU Faculty Association | Used for tenure and promotion  
Does not do a good job of measuring lab performance  
In some cases, the data is considered useless  
The timing of evaluations is important |
| TPC Chairs | The way results are used depends on the department rather than the faculty  
Inconsistencies could be related to the lack of training for TPC chairs |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY CONCERNS</th>
<th>Instructors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Beedie School of Business | Perception of how data used  
The current instrument just assesses teaching, not courses  
Access to data is an issue  
Students don’t know how to complete evaluations  
Timing of the evaluation |
| Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences | Student responses are not accurate or helpful  
Ineffective instrument  
Pressured to share results with students  
Many distrust the evaluation process because of inconsistencies  
Instrument is challenging to use which could contribute to low response rates  
Data is inaccurate  
Some courses are destined to receive negative feedback from students  
Student resistance to course learning outcomes and learner-centered instruction |
| Faculty of Applied Sciences | Data used for tenure and promotion is out of context  
Results are negatively impacted because of external factors and not being able to get all students to complete the evaluation |
| Faculty of Applied Sciences (School of Computing Science) | Students don’t care about giving feedback  
Low response rate  
Lack of accountability for students  
Added workload for faculty and staff  
Questions are too generic  
Too many characteristic-oriented questions  
Questions are not worded so that all students can interpret them |
| Faculty of Education | Communication with students about the process is necessary  
Students misinterpret questions  
Results not being used consistently for tenure / promotion or for making teaching improvement |
| Faculty of Health Sciences | Students lack of interest and negative comments  
External factors and instructors’ job satisfaction can negatively impact evaluations  
Teachers are being hired despite bad reviews  
Inaccurate data |
| Faculty of Science | The ethical and appropriate use of data  
Types of questions used  
Added workload for faculty and staff  
Students and faculty don’t care about evaluations |
| SFU Faculty Association | Most concerns relate to how data is used  
Viewpoint that TPCs “always extract the negative information” from evaluations  
Several faculty members don’t care about the evaluation process  
Issues moving to an online system  
Students colluding or getting together to fill out evaluations  
Concern that the existing system is not obsolete |
| TPC Chairs | Lower response rates and instructor ratings using online instrument  
Instructors want to return to paper based system  
Faculty do not respect the evaluations  
Giving the survey out at the end of a class devalues the evaluations  
Validity and reliability of the instrument and data is poor  
Peers without expertise shouldn’t evaluate peers  
Cannot force new forms of evaluation on instructors  
Students are not qualified to comment on some aspects  
No standards for extracting and analyzing data / student comments  
The context of questions on the survey impact the data  
Evaluation data is often used “sloppily” |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beedie School of Business</td>
<td>Clearly identify the problems with the existing evaluation that need to be fixed&lt;br&gt;Provide meaningful data&lt;br&gt;Consistency with tenure and promotion&lt;br&gt;Provide communication and instruction about the evaluation process to both instructors and students&lt;br&gt;Include peer evaluations&lt;br&gt;Design and structure questions that would provide a better experience for students and better data for departments/instructors&lt;br&gt;Consider the timing and instrument used for the evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences</td>
<td>Better communication with students – define expectations for evaluation process&lt;br&gt;Keep students involved – instructors should respond to feedback&lt;br&gt;Offer an online option&lt;br&gt;Provide better recognition for teaching excellence&lt;br&gt;Structure the survey better – ask more detailed questions&lt;br&gt;Consider influences that could impact student responses when analyzing data&lt;br&gt;Evaluations from peers/education consultants&lt;br&gt;Collect formative and summative data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Applied Sciences</td>
<td>Use an online instrument&lt;br&gt;Collect feedback on programs&lt;br&gt;Ask questions after each class&lt;br&gt;Use a question bank&lt;br&gt;Use core questions combined with customizable options&lt;br&gt;Ask open-ended questions&lt;br&gt;Have a tool that can compile results for sharing and provide context&lt;br&gt;Indicate how many students haven’t completed the evaluation&lt;br&gt;Conduct an alumni survey&lt;br&gt;Get feedback from other instructors&lt;br&gt;Make the use of data for tenure and promotion more consistent&lt;br&gt;Offer incentives to students&lt;br&gt;Share results with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Applied Sciences (School of Computing Science)</td>
<td>Evaluate departments and programs&lt;br&gt;Create a set of best practices for the institution&lt;br&gt;Have an online evaluation instrument that’s easy to use&lt;br&gt;Use a 5-point scale&lt;br&gt;Have an instrument than can be tailored for each department, course and level&lt;br&gt;Use specific questions about courses&lt;br&gt;Explain to students the reasons for conducting evaluations&lt;br&gt;Offer incentives to students&lt;br&gt;Make evaluations compulsory&lt;br&gt;Employ different types of evaluations&lt;br&gt;Include other evaluation methods and perspectives&lt;br&gt;Conduct the evaluation at strategic times during the semester&lt;br&gt;Allow instructors to conduct their own evaluations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Education</td>
<td>Use the evaluation to identify teaching excellence</td>
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<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Create a balance between quantitative and qualitative data</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Focus on learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Develop a bank of questions that will provide reliable data</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Flexibility in the selection of questions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ability to compare/analyze data more effectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Health Sciences</td>
<td>Explain to students the value of participating in the evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offer incentives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make the results public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use an instrument that is flexible across departments, courses, levels and instructors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide the right tools, resources and facilities for instructors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer evaluation and professional help with teaching</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Make evaluations mandatory for students</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do not tolerate inappropriate comments from students</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Survey faculties on barriers to teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty of Science</td>
<td>Use specific questions designed to help improve teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have a flexible instrument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tailor surveys for departments, courses and levels</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explain to students the reason for the evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conduct mid-term evaluations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making the results available to students as soon as possible</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offer incentives like additional marks</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An easy-to-use instrument that doesn’t increase instructor workload</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Opportunity for faculty to explain context of low scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluations from educational consultants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFU Faculty Association</td>
<td>Needs for evaluations include: student learning, tenure and promotion and a flexible instrument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Define the purpose of student evaluations of teaching and courses for Senate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluate the merits of online versus paper evaluations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Define how evaluation data should be used</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Design measurements of performance outside the lecture setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Add context to evaluation reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPC Chairs</td>
<td>Determine what students should be evaluating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Give attention to valid data interpretation – provide guidance and training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use a flexible online instrument with a question bank</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Allow departments to create questions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Use better questions that are in the right sequence</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use a system that doesn’t increase department workload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change departmental guidelines to include other forms of evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consider more data than just evaluation results for tenure and promotion</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Publish evaluation results</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Look at the results over time and consider trajectories, not simply a moment in time</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research students’ ability to rate/discriminate across a scale</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have an instrument or program that can analyze/correlate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encourage student participation by having instructors promote the evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5 DETAILED SUMMARIES

5.1 BEEDIE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

CURRENT INSTRUMENT

The current teaching and course evaluation system asks students about teaching but provides no context – it doesn’t distinguish between different types of classes/courses: small and large classes; seminar vs. lecture courses, first- vs. fourth-year courses; or experiential vs. traditional approaches. It also doesn’t account for the use of technology.

The group was split in its opinion of the current instrument – some don’t have a problem with it and are quite happy to continue using it; while others think that it’s outdated and needs to be revised according to more up-to-date research. One participant pointed out that “we have no evidence that the teaching and course evaluation is working well, but we have some evidence of problems.”

Mostly the instrument is used to provide data for tenure and promotion. Though, the scales used to measure performance are inconsistent which yields results that aren’t transparent for students and teachers.

USE OF DATA

The evaluation process is “primarily about evaluating instructors.” Typically the data is used for tenure and promotion or for making hiring decisions about new lecturers. “The results are most important for non-tenure-track (teaching) faculty…if they don’t stink as teachers, they will get promoted as long as their research is good.” “Another shortcoming is that instructors aren’t rated on their own merit – they are compared to others in their cohort.”

While this process is mainly focused on summative data, there are many cases where instructors consider the comments for formative purposes. Some instructors collect their own data early in the term to improve their own courses and others pay close attention to how the data combines with written comments. In this way individual instructors take the initiative to find trends, identify contradictions and predict what needs to change. Even a comment like there’s “too much colour in your PowerPoint slides” can be helpful and one participant noted responding to feedback like this.

Other individuals that use the data include the Associate Dean and area coordinators (like department chairs) who use the data to assess instructors.

CONCERNS

Transparency and perception of how data used is a concern: “The perception that results matter is false.” It’s also widely believed “that demanding teachers get worse evaluations.” Not everyone has an accurate understanding of how courses are evaluated because the current instrument just assesses teaching, not courses.

Access to data is an issue – it’s not available to all stakeholders (e.g. course coordinators), instructors have to wait a long time to get the results, and sometimes results are just filed away and only a few instructors request to see it.

Another issue is that “students don’t know how to do evaluations…some come from a reactive perspective.” Instructors don’t understand how “students could possibly know what good teaching is, given that they have only short-term exposure to teaching.”

Several participants also stated that timing is a concern, too. Evaluations could be done at more appropriate times during the semester. Right now, the evaluation is conducted during the last week of the semester when students have high stress levels and before they know what the course outcomes are (i.e. what their final grade is).

Finally, concerns were discussed about the possibility of sharing data with students:

- “Public dissemination involves a shaming factor.”
- “The culture of shaming doesn’t work.”
- “When you announce results to students, you are announcing them to the world.”
SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

In order to effectively revise the evaluation process the institution “needs to address a fundamental question: What problem are you trying to fix?” This implies taking a holistic approach – “look at how everything around the evaluation tool works...because everything is connected...the tool won’t matter if the context or the current evaluation system is broken.”

Meaningful data – that has context and is relevant – along with a more consistent approach to tenure and promotion is also required. Help faculty and TPC chairs to take a more standardized approach to how they use data by working to bring them “on board with how evaluations are done...proper use requires education (training) beyond just a manual that they have to read.” Further to that the entire TPC process needs to fundamentally value teaching.

“Those, like tenured professors, who are not ‘at risk’ don’t care about teaching evaluations...if the data isn’t being used meaningfully, then it shouldn’t be collected; if it is used only for teaching faculty, then it shouldn’t be collected for research faculty.”

Another key recommendation was to provide plenty of communication and instruction about the evaluation process to both instructors and students. Being able to trust the process is important for instructors – they need to be supported for taking initiative to welcome student feedback. Starting with the TPC process, instructors want to know that teaching is valued – that a well-rounded approach is taken to evaluating each individual instructor. For example, including peer evaluations, allowing instructors to select their own questions, and creating opportunities to conduct mid-term evaluations would help instructors be more interested in receiving feedback.

Students also need to know how evaluations are used:

- “The data would be better if students took the process seriously.”
- “Some think the process is a joke until I tell them that this is the only way I’m assessed for raises, etc.”
- “When I tell them that [evaluations] make a difference, some are surprised.”
- “Students [think] that the process doesn’t make a difference because they see bad tenured teachers coming back again.”

One suggestion offered was to provide ongoing instruction to students about the importance of the evaluations. This kind of messaging would also need to be reinforced by instructors each time they introduce evaluations.

It’s also important to design and structure questions for the instrument in a way that would provide a better experience for students and better data for departments/instructors:

- Ask questions that instructors are not already asking
- Rather than placing the most important questions at the end, place them in order of importance
- Ask more objective questions that will produce concrete results (e.g. did course readings match assignments?).

Finally, the group thought that the timing and instrument used for evaluations is crucial because this can impact the results. One participant recalled that even when she gave students in-class time to do evaluations online, half did not complete them; in the next class she gave them paper forms and the response rate was much higher.
5.2 FACULTY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

CURRENT INSTRUMENT

The group shared the various evaluation methods used in their departments – some use a form that includes an introductory paragraph that explains what evaluation results are used for, the engineering department commented that they've never used an online instrument – always paper based forms with bubble and open-answer formats.

One participant comment that the SFU forms are “useless” and has created her own surveys using WebCT, with an emphasis on short-answer questions about likes, dislikes, methods, etc.

USE OF DATA

Both comments and numerical data are used for making tenure and promotion decisions. Though, it’s felt that “results are all anecdotal…there is always debate about the value of a number to quantify teaching effectiveness.” There’s definitely a lack of context for the data being considered.

Evaluations are also being used to improve teaching and curriculum. Instructors are typically interested in the comments that students make and sometimes they even conduct their own evaluations to get student feedback. One instructor said: “I tell students I don’t care about the bubble questions; I want their comments because narrative information tells me more.”

CONCERNS

Some have focused their concerns on the way that data is being used for tenure and promotion – that it’s being used out of context or in a “simplistic” fashion. Other measures, such as summaries of professional development activities should be more effectively incorporated into this process.

Related to this, instructors mentioned some items that can negatively impact the results:

- External factors beyond the instructor’s control
- Students don’t bother to complete the form because “everything was good,” suggesting that negative perspectives tend to be overrepresented in the data
- Class attendance affects the ability to get students to all complete the evaluation
- Students don’t know their final grade when they do the evaluation
- Students may be concerned about anonymity with online forms
- No transfer of results back to students which results in students using “RateMyProf”-type sites
SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

The group agreed that the best approach is to gather formative and summative data at the same time, preferably online. Their requirements for an evaluation instrument that could do this include:

- Have the option to collect feedback on programs
- The ability to ask questions after each class
- Use a question bank
- Use core questions combined with customizable options
- Ask open-ended questions
- Have a tool that can compile results for sharing and provide context (i.e. demographic data, GPA)
- Indicate to students and instructors who haven't completed the evaluations.

Other ways of getting feedback could also include:

- Conducting an alumni survey (i.e. find out what students think about a course a few years down the road, maybe after they've started working)
- Getting feedback on courses from other instructors.

Suggestions were made about making the use of data for tenure and promotion more consistent. “We need to go beyond providing user guidelines; maybe doing training sessions with directors or TPC chairs. They need clear guidance on how to use teaching and course evaluation results.” “The idea of briefing TPC on the use of evaluations and the ground rules could standardize the process.”

Providing incentives to students was mentioned as a strategy, too. Offering bonus marks (e.g. 1-2%) or withholding a final grade could be plenty of encouragement for students to participate.

While faculty are generally not in favour of sharing results with students, there were some in this group who thought this is a good approach:

- “Certainly we need to balance and filter the data, but we need to show students that they are being listened to
- “Can we present the results to show students and faculty how feedback transformed courses?”
5.3 FACULTY OF APPLIED SCIENCES (SCHOOL OF COMPUTING SCIENCE)

CURRENT INSTRUMENT

The existing instrument gathers student feedback on teaching and is used for tenure and promotion. The evaluation is paper based: “It's always been done that way...it's archaic but keeps it consistent.”

Some mentioned that the instrument is too narrow and doesn't ask the right questions. However, this approach continues to be used because it meets SFU policy on course evaluation and also because "we can never agree on a model."

This has led some instructors to ask their own questions throughout the term:

- “I use formative evaluations more. I put questions in the final for students to evaluate the course content.”
- “I don't doubt the wisdom in students. But the instrument is not helpful. I do my own surveys to improve my courses.”

USE OF DATA

Data is almost exclusively used for teaching and promotion decision-making and “not so much for the improvement of teaching.” Instructors view that it’s not a bad indicator of teaching ability, but feel that it's definitely “far from perfect.” One reason is because data is usually considered out of context (e.g. the size of a class).

Most instructors pay close attention to the written comments. Although, some commented:

- “Some questions are useless such as the punctuality question. Why should I care how students evaluate my ability to start and finish on time?”
- "Students are not always the best audience to answer the questions asked in course evaluations – questions knowledge, teach ability or expertise.”

CONCERNS

General concerns about the evaluation process include:

- Students don’t care about giving feedback which makes the response rate low
- There’s a lack of accountability for students
- The process creates added workload for faculty and staff
- “Sometimes I feel like I need to have discussion about the answers.”
- "I have a moral concern with incentives...I don't like the idea of a student receiving a lower grade because he or she failed to fill out a course evaluation.”

Some concerns about questions used on the existing instrument are:

- All of the questions are too generic
- There are too many characteristic-oriented questions
- Questions are not worded so that all students can interpret them (considering that approximately 20% of students are international).
SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

Recommendations from the group included:

- Evaluate departments and programs (e.g. "Are we offering the right courses?")
- Create a set of best practices for the institution
- Have an online evaluation instrument that’s easy to use (e.g. on smart phones, perhaps)
- Use a 5-point scale (instead of 4)
- Have an instrument than can be tailored for each department, course and level
- Use specific questions about courses (e.g. labs, assignments). “Questions like ‘this course is too easy’ or ‘too difficult’ are not the right ones to ask. How do they know if it’s easy or difficult?”
- Explain to students the reasons for conducting evaluations
- Offer incentives like bonus marks (1%) or early registration for filling out evaluations
- Make evaluations compulsory – don’t release grades unless evaluations have been completed
- Employ different types of evaluations depending on how the results need to be used (e.g. one evaluation for TPC and another for teaching improvement). "I have no interest in how difficult they find the course. Instead I want to know if the assignments and labs were useful. If they weren’t, then tell me what was wrong with them. There should be two sets of questions or two instruments: one for TPC and one for course improvement."
- Include other evaluation methods and perspectives
- Conduct the evaluation at strategic times during the semester
- Allow instructors to conduct their own evaluations.
CURRENT INSTRUMENT

The group felt that the evaluation process is imposed—“we do evaluations because we have to.” Even still, participants indicated that most instructors take evaluations seriously. “Teaching is hard and serious so evaluation has a complex set of considerations.” Many instructors are doing formative evaluations on their own as a way to improve their teaching; however, even though pedagogy may be discussed with students, the student evaluation should not be the only method by which an instructor is evaluated.

Many feel that the current instrument is not effective at capturing accurate results. In fact, some felt that all forms of evaluation will have the same problem: that it’s not about improving teaching. However, open comments from students may yield some useful information and be helpful in a formative way.

The current instrument is also limited by the fact that it doesn’t help students separate learning outcomes from teaching performance – linking these together has “terrible implications” for the way people teach. The group noted that curriculum and desired learning outcomes need to be clearly defined in order for students to know what to evaluate so that faculty can identify any gaps in students’ understanding.

USE OF DATA

Most often student evaluation results are “used pragmatically” for tenure and promotion, salary review or for intervention when an instructor gets a lower than average score. Most of the time, “instructors are given summary sheets with numbers [and] individual comments.” However, it seems “departments can be very different in how they use the results”—only using them selectively and contingently. Some departments report average scores; some conduct mid-term evaluations; sometimes professors are evaluated as a TA; and a few instructors collect feedback after each class. Unless there seems to be any anomalies in the data, most departments and instructors focus on comments from students over the bubble responses.

The evaluation may or not may not alter teaching tremendously, especially since the primary audience of evaluation results is the TPC. Evaluations are seen by many as a tool to “find flaws and deny tenure.” Some commented that teaching evaluations have been given an “unconscionable weight” because they continue to be used as the only basis for making hiring and pay decisions. This puts a great deal of stress on some faculty while others have their teaching evaluations treated more informally.

Some reported: “Summative evaluation should be about the course, curriculum, class, learning outcomes; while formative should be about teaching, so teachers can change their teaching.” Instructors are more interested in students’ comments and ongoing forms of evaluation that can be used in a formative way to help improve teaching. One participant noted that “many instructors do formative evaluations all the way through the semester…there are lots of feedback loops that aren’t part of the formal process but are very important in improving teaching.”

There are also some cases where evaluation responses are not useful, for example:

- “I don’t want to know that there’s too much reading or that deadlines are too close to the exams.”
- “Certain evaluation results aren’t useful in practice. For example, asking how passionate or enthusiastic an instructor is – how can this rating be usefully employed? What do the results mean?”
- “Students evaluate from the gut without being qualified…much of what they say is of minimal or no value.”
CONCERNS

Instructors are feeling very pressured to share their evaluation data with students. However, this approach is met with great trepidation because the instrument hasn’t proven effective, student responses often don’t seem accurate and departments use data inconsistently.

The approach taken in some departments has caused many to distrust the evaluation process:

- “Teaching does not improve.”
- “[Our] department only looks for the good things that come out in reports.”
- “People have been denied tenure based only on the numbers [and] no other sources.”
- “It’s important for administration; it’s not about teaching, but about things like accreditation.”
- “I find it hard to imagine any new system that would be an improvement…it will only lead to the same morass.”

There’s also a wide array of concerns related to how students complete evaluations:

- “Students don’t know how to evaluate. Lots of student comments are not helpful, useless, and a waste of time.”
- Some students don’t bother coming to class but they use the survey to express very strong opinions.
- “Some courses don’t require attendance [so it’s] difficult to get everyone to complete the evaluation. And often times the higher the [response] rate the lower the score.”
- Evaluations don’t accurately capture information about students’ participation in the course or their relationship with the instructor. “No matter how much effort you put into it, there are still some students say who you are never available.”
- Students don’t read the syllabus and they don’t understand how the evaluation process works – it’s felt that students just want the “bad teachers” fired.
- The evaluation can be used by students as a tool for disseminating awful or cruel remarks. “There are biased and hateful evaluations, which will not benefit teaching practice.” “Junior faculty may be bullied and intimidated.”
- Timing, external influences and other people may impact how students complete the evaluation (e.g. students may take out their frustration about the strike during the evaluation).
- Students generally have no idea of course design or pedagogical structure.
- “Evaluations among students have a lot of dissonance; it’s hard to believe they are from the same class.”
- “Students are partly responsible for the classroom learning environment, but instructors are the only ones being evaluated.”

Other concerns were about the instrument itself and the accuracy of the data that it produces:

- The instrument seems challenging to use which could have an impact on response rates. This, in turn, may mean that there’s not a solid representation of data available: “If only 70 percent answered a question, how representative is it?”
- Some courses are just destined to receive negative evaluations because of things like time of day, sensitive course content, course accessibility, or optional versus mandatory courses.
- Faculties all use the data for different reasons – some look at the numbers for teaching awards and study leave, other scientific departments use evaluation as a weapon against faculty to deny what they are working toward.

Some also commented that resistance to the learning outcomes could transfer into student evaluations of teaching and courses. The suggestion was made that learning outcomes should be settled first before evaluating teaching.

Incorporating a learner-centred approach to instruction was also raised as a concern. Many faculty members are onside with this approach, but students are viewed as a “huge hurdle” to implementing it because they’re often extremely resistant to different instructional methodologies.
SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

Everyone agreed the evaluation can make students feel included by giving them a valuable role to play, but sometimes their expectations are unfounded. For example, “if they have terrible experiences, they want [their] instructor fired.” More effective results would come from better communication with students – clearly letting them know what the expectations are for the process. One instructor shared: “I let the class know how I teach, how evaluations are used and how I will respond to student feedback, but I maintain the right to teach the class.”

Instead of forcing students to complete the evaluation at the end of class, positive results could come from providing the option for students to complete it online at their leisure. Having the opportunity to officially respond to student feedback given through mid-term evaluations or informal discussions throughout the term would also help students feel involved and engaged.

Gaining popularity with students doesn’t necessarily mean that an instructor is an effective teacher. The university needs to recognize good teaching using methods other than just the evaluation; otherwise “there is no incentive to be a good teacher.” One way to do this is by using better questions – more detailed questions or ones that are appropriate and useful. Instead of asking about instructor enthusiasm, ask: “Did you take this class specifically because of this professor?”

Suggestions were made about how the evaluation survey could be structured:

- Offer options for small and large classes
- Collect information about the student’s study behaviours (e.g. how many hours a student devotes to study) and why they may not be coming to class
- Create departmental-specific questions
- Use more specific questions that can help in a formative way (e.g. what was the most helpful part of the course? What was the least helpful part of the course? Was the syllabus clear?)
- Get feedback on instructor behaviour and classroom environment/space
- Have the option to include open-ended questions, not just the standard survey questions
- Explain on the evaluation form that inappropriate comments will not be passed on to the instructor
- Ask students how they would design the syllabus.

Getting data that is useful for both summative and formative purposes is really at the core of what the group shared. One participant mentioned that asking students for reflective papers and “letters to successors” was a useful feedback mechanism that is more meaningful for both students and instructors: “Students are experts in their own experience; evaluations should ask about this and separate those inquiries from performance evaluations.”

Other suggestions for improving the data included averaging course evaluation results for instructors, discarding extremely high / low scores and holding students accountable for unnecessary hurtful comments.

Offering a safe, non-threatening environment for evaluation from peers or education consultants could help foster more interest with instructors about making teaching improvements. One instructor said: “I learn only 20% from survey results, but [when] consultants come in my class [they] add more to my teaching.” Another commented: “We all want to teach well. That’s why colleagues’ in-class observation is useful. We get information that we can never get from surveys or students but from people who know pedagogy.” Further to this approach, an evaluation support unit or consultative group with teaching experience would prove to be an excellent resource for instructors.

Some other suggestions included:

- Considering external influences, class size or other unique factors that could impact results
- A complete separation of formative and summative evaluations (i.e. formative only for teaching evaluations and summative only for course evaluations).

Finally, the group recommended giving consideration to the “inter-culturalization and internationalization of teaching.” Many students are here from different countries and they bring with them expectations associated with different pedagogies. “Students may think the teacher is not doing what they are supposed to do based on different expectations.” Summative evaluation does not help address this – the best way is to give students the opportunity to “talk about their experiences.”
### 5.5 FACULTY OF EDUCATION

#### CURRENT INSTRUMENT

When asked how student evaluations of teaching and courses are used in their faculty, participants initially responded: “Badly!”, “It’s hardly used because of the instrument.”

Other comments indicated the reliability of the existing instrument is unverified which makes it challenging to use the data in a constructive way. “Shoddy” was used to describe the current data interpretation process – there’s not enough time or any best practices to interpret the data in a more rigorous fashion. This includes not being able to analyse the answers to open-ended questions for qualitative value.

Finally, issues like formatting and inflexibility with presentation of questions were also mentioned as challenges with the existing instrument.

#### USE OF DATA

When it comes to using the data, everyone agreed that a consistent method for data analysis needs to be a core component of any future evaluation instrument. “Validity and inference are key” – a validated instrument is required in order for data to be interpreted and used properly.

“The data is almost always used individually, but we need to look at data collectively, what’s working, what’s not working, looking for patterns.” While it would be “interesting to look at patterns across instructors for a given course,” it was felt by some that data shouldn’t be compared across departments – “it’s a destructive way to use the data.” Others felt that if the data is used validly and appropriately for comparison, then it might be okay.

“Clear guidelines on how to interpret the data are essential.” Systematic use of data that follows a set of standards or guidelines is necessary. Standardizing how data is collected or compared will really improve its accuracy. Right now, data is not analysed systematically – especially qualitative data, like answers to open-ended questions. Often numbers are just averaged and sometimes written comments can seem contradictory or even get omitted. It was also noted that TPCs routinely skip using quantitative data because it is undifferentiated. “We need better questions that will differentiate” – for example, using longer rating scales like 1 – 10.

“The ultimate test is whether the evaluation data is actually useful for making decisions.” When it comes to making serious decisions (e.g. firing), its imperative that the data is accurate. There could be situations where anomalies are found, like when an instructor receives a poor evaluation from an extremely large class – or outlier. Some felt that large class sizes definitely get lower ratings. Using data to deal with these kinds of non-typical situations makes it “important to define if or when there is an obligation to take action.”

#### CONCERNS

The group mentioned it’s important for students to understand the purpose behind the evaluation. Creating an awareness of the opportunity they have to effect change through the evaluation process could help foster a sense of responsibility towards it. “The evaluation is an opportunity to ask students to describe their experience…students are more engaged when they know that their feedback will be applied.”

Misunderstanding or misinterpreting the wording of items and temporal features of the evaluation make it less valuable for students and departments alike.

What’s at the heart of the evaluation process for most instructors is striving for teaching excellence. “Some individuals do look at it to help improve their teaching.” In some cases, the evaluation process is perceived as an aid to making improvements to teaching. However, because the evaluations are also used for tenure, promotion and review of faculty, it’s challenging for instructors to remain unbiased to the process. For example, instructors are able to create their own files for TPC review which means that they will often opt to only include “kudos” comments to sway the TPC’s opinion.
SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

“We need to identify teaching excellence.” Feeling accurately represented is critical for instructors. Within the evaluation framework, it’s important to make a clear distinction between instructor characteristics and teaching effectiveness. Also, there needs to be opportunity for instructors to identify potential courses as outliers – classes that are extremely large or that cover difficult or sensitive content. The challenge for departments will be striking the reasonable balance between listening to what instructors say about a class versus responding to student input and taking action when necessary. Having solid, reliable data will make this easier.

A key recommendation from the group was to use question selection that would create a balance between qualitative and quantitative data – focusing more on learning, teaching and student satisfaction. These kinds of questions would need to offer flexibility, be clear for students to interpret, and provide reliable data. Using response theory would help create a bank of pre-defined questions that instructors or administrators could select from that would generate reliable data.

Taking this kind of standardized approach to using questions would also make it easier to use data for both formative and summative purposes. For example, offering the option for instructors to add their own items to a survey so that they can privately review student feedback and implement changes to their course delivery.

Flexibility in the development of questions would also include:

- Creating questions for different courses, fields or instructors
- Allowing departments and instructors to select and create their own questions
- Offering open-ended questions.

Finally, the group recommended creating a guide of best practices that could be used institution-wide for conducting evaluations and interpreting data consistently. A goal for the future instrument and its guidelines: “people find the instrument / document useful.” Some notes for the guide:

- “When changes are first implemented, evaluations tend to be lower”
- “When an instructor tries new things, ratings often drop”
- Surveys “shouldn’t be too long”
- “We want quality, not quantity”.

A more automated, online instrument could create “lots of opportunity to contextualize data.” In order for data to be put data into context, it needs to be analysed and compared. Some recommendations for improving evaluation data included:

- Compare and analyse data over time; before and after course completion (e.g. mid-term evaluations); or across instructors or departments
- Use available software to assist with data interpretation
- Triangulate multiple data sets
- Include more demographics like course descriptions or number of hours required
- Work with institutional experts to help with best practices for data interpretation.
5.6 FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES

CURRENT INSTRUMENT

An online evaluation system is used to gather student feedback on teaching. Response data is used by instructors for making improvements and by committees responsible for tenure, promotion and hiring.

Moving to an online instrument has caused a dip in response rates – currently the average response rate is around 50%. An incentive is offered to students for participating: if the participation rate of the class is over 65%, the entire class is entered into a draw for a prize.

Instructors are sure to encourage that students complete the evaluations. Sometimes, for smaller classes, faculty members take their students to a computer lab to fill out the course evaluation.

Participants commented that the current instrument is too narrow – that it doesn’t ask the right questions. There’s also dissatisfaction concerning the fact that the online participation rate is lower than paper. “I personally dislike the system. The one-size-fits-all model is not working. You can’t evaluate a 500-person class the same way as a boutique course.”

USE OF DATA

Participants felt that summative data is only “useful from an administrative point of view.” In fact, some commented that they weren’t even certain the data is reviewed very closely: “I don’t think the Faculty of Health Sciences views the course evaluations in detail, otherwise they wouldn’t keep hiring the really horrible teachers.”

Instructors prefer to have student responses to open-ended questions because these can provide useful information for making insightful improvements to teaching and course content. “I do my own course evaluations with more open-ended questions. For example, I ask students to describe an ‘aha moment’ in the class.”

CONCERNS

Some key concerns raised by the group include:

- Students don’t care about giving feedback
- Institutional factors that have potential to negatively impact evaluations
- The relationship between instructors’ job satisfaction and course evaluations
- That teachers are being hired despite bad reviews
- That students can make derogatory or extremely negative comments about instructors
- That the data isn’t accurate because students are inclined to only complete evaluations if they enjoyed the course or if they felt it was really horrible.
SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

Primarily suggestions were offered to help make the process of more value to students. Explaining the reasons for the evaluation, clearly defining expectations, offering incentives and making the results public were highlighted as options:

- “Consider how students of different class, gender, race, etc. experience their courses. Is there difference? If so, how can we address issues?”
- “When students are registering for courses they need to know: What are the course requirements? What’s the instructor’s teaching style? How many hours should be spent on course assignments? If you make the results of course evaluations public then they can access this kind of information.”

Further to this, a flexible instrument is required that can be tailored for each department, course, level and instructor. This would make it possible to ask specific questions about courses details like presentation formatting, labs, assignments or items that were specifically valuable/useful to student learning. Instructors felt strongly that forms should be designed to provide qualitative feedback by asking the right questions – open-ended, specific questions.

Ensuring that instructors have the right tools and resources is also essential: “Things in the classroom should flow smoothly…students get frustrated and take it out on instructors in course evaluation, while a failing computer or microphone is not the fault of the instructor.”

Peer evaluation and professional help with teaching (e.g. from the Teaching and Learning Centre) are welcome opportunities for improving teaching. This approach could help instructors to focus on the strategies of teaching: “We are so content-oriented [that we] don’t think about teaching strategy and pedagogy.”

Some also felt that the completing evaluations should be mandatory for students to receive their grades – this could help raise the response rate for some classes. Additionally, the institution should:

- Develop a zero-tolerance policy for evaluations with inappropriate, derogatory comments
- Create an annual survey for faculties on “barriers to teaching”.


5.7 FACULTY OF SCIENCE

CURRENT INSTRUMENT

The existing instrument is used to gather student feedback on teaching. The data is used for making decisions about tenure and promotion and sometimes instructors use it to make teaching and course improvements.

Many feel that the existing instrument is too narrow because it doesn’t ask the right questions – too much emphasis is placed on close-ended questions and the open-ended questions used are too general. Further to this, the instrument is used too late in the semester to be effective – “students care less at the end of the semester.” An instructor who conducted their own mid-term evaluation said the responses were useful “because [the students] have a stake in the course and care about giving comments.”

USE OF DATA

Currently, evaluation data is used in a very limited way, mostly for tenure and promotion decision-making. One individual said: “We can’t only focus on numbers for TPC – the feedback we get from students is useful.” The group agreed that numbers matter but they are not necessarily a reliable indicator of teaching quality.

The context of the data is also important – “faculty consider the evaluation in terms of tenure and promotion, while students look at it differently.”

Having data that is both flexible and accessible is also challenging:

- “There are lots of policy considerations in place.”
- “I find that the evaluation documents are too long to read.”

CONCERNS

The ethical and appropriate use of data was commented on as an issue. Currently there are no guidelines that govern who has access to the data, where it’s stored or how it will be used. One participant commented: “Hiring sessionals based on evaluation scores is problematic. For example, a sessional gives a hard exam, gets a low rating and doesn’t get rehired.”

Other issues with the existing instrument include the:

- Types of questions used
- Added workload for faculty and staff
- Fact that students don’t care about giving feedback and faculty aren’t interested in receiving it.
SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

“You can’t improve without good measurement. The question to be asked is: ‘Are we asking the right questions?’” Suggestions for creating questions that would help improve teaching included:

- Ask specific questions about what the student learned from the course like key terms, theories, topics or skills
- Incorporate discipline-specific questions
- Include questions on organization: “Is the instructor punctual? Organized?”
- Have more open-ended questions that are specific: “If you could change something, what would it be?”

To that end, a flexible instrument is required so that surveys can be tailored for each department, course and level (1st year 2nd year, etc.).

Some comments focused on making the evaluation experience better for students. Explaining the reason for the evaluation (e.g. “it’s not a popularity contest”), conducting mid-term evaluations and making the results available as soon as possible would all help students feel empowered. “We need to consider that students have a sense of entitlement when they pay for their education.” Offering incentives like additional marks (e.g. 1%) for completing an evaluation would also encourage student participation.

Instructors also see the need to have an instrument that aligns with what they do. For starters, they suggested the evaluation process should be uncomplicated and streamlined. For example, efficiencies could be gained by having an online system that interfaced with Canvas. They’d also like to know what happens to the data as well – so that they have opportunity to respond to low scores and explain context.

Incorporating observation and feedback from educational consultants would help induce instructors’ confidence in the evaluation process: “I would pick a pedagogy expert’s opinion about my teaching over student evaluations.”
5.8 SFU FACULTY ASSOCIATION

CURRENT INSTRUMENT

This group indicated that the existing instruments in their respective faculties place more emphasis on tenure and promotion than on enhancing teaching and learning. Some instruments are not considered obsolete and are valued, especially ones that are paper based because they only permit students who come to class to complete the evaluation. Though, one participant said the instrument used in their faculty is “completely useless” due to the lack of clarity about what it's evaluating.

USE OF DATA

Here are some points made by participants about how data is used:

- The data is not used to support faculty members
- The current instrument does not do a good job of measuring lab performance.
- “The current data is useless... in our department, we don't use it at all.”
- The timing of evaluations is important: “formative evaluations need to be done early in the semester.”

CONCERNS

Most concerns relate to how data is used – “there’s no clear idea of what we are looking for in evaluations.” Departments are not consulting “experts” to help manage their instruments or analyse the results.

When it relates to tenure and promotion, the evaluation process isn’t considered a means for positive use – it doesn’t help advance careers. It’s widely thought that TPCs “always extract the negative information” from evaluations. This has led to many faculty members not caring about the feedback they receive and are, therefore, not interested in taking an active role in effecting changes the system.

Thinking about potential of an online evaluation system triggered thoughts about:

- Lack of security
- Participation from students who don’t attend class. “With paper based evaluations you can get the opinion of those who regularly come to class and have some knowledge about the course. But with an online system, even people who do not come to class can evaluate.”
- Students colluding or getting together to fill out evaluations

For some, moving to a new system in general causes concern:

- “Who decided that the current system is obsolete?”
- “Who’s designing the questions for evaluations?”
- “What is the design process?”
SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

The top three needs highlighted for student evaluations were:

- Student learning
- Tenure and promotion
- Flexible evaluations that measure different aspects of performance (e.g. labs) and allows faculty members to conduct formative evaluations (e.g. early or mid-semester evaluations)

One participant commented: “It doesn't matter what instrument you are using...what's important is how the data is being used. For example, if you are interested in improving teaching and learning, you should be interested in formative evaluation.”

The following recommendations were made for moving forward:

- Define the purpose of student evaluations of teaching and courses for Senate
- Evaluate the merits of online versus paper evaluations – don't assume that paper based is obsolete
- Define how evaluation data should be used (e.g. for what purpose)
- Design measurements of performance outside the lecture setting (e.g. labs)
- Add "context" (i.e. demographic information) to evaluation reports
5.9 TPC CHAIRS

CURRENT INSTRUMENT

Typically the Tenure and Promotion Committee (TPC) uses teaching and course evaluation results to review salaries or make decisions about instructor merit, tenure or promotion.

One participant commented that the TPC used question 22 as a red-flag indicator for problems with instructors. This question was something like: “How would you evaluate the effectiveness of this person’s teaching?” One participant mentioned that in Education, they use a form with just three questions: “What are the best and worst features of the course? What would you change? How would you rate your instructor (based on a rating scale)?”

Comparison of results for similar courses (classified by size, format, etc.) and student comments are also important factors. It was interesting to note that the online survey provided more comments to work with than bubble forms – this was useful because the TPC looks at a wider range of factors for tenure and promotion.

For salary assessment, TPC members look at overall evaluation results for instructors. When there are extreme results (good or bad), they drill down to see what students think is very well done or very poorly done (e.g., attitudes toward students, communication skills, etc.). In general, students’ views correlate with TPC members’ own experiences with particular individuals.

USE OF DATA

“The results are not an indication of whether a person is a good teacher – they are a factor, but there’s a lot more.”

The way teaching and course evaluation results are used depends on the department rather than the faculty. Any inconsistencies could be related to the lack of training received by TPC chairs.

CONCERNS

The following are some issues and concerns raised by the group:

- Lower response rates and instructor ratings using online instrument – instructors want to return to paper based system
- “Faculty members do not respect the evaluations and if they convey this attitude to students, students won’t take them seriously either.”
- Giving the evaluations out at the end of a class can show a lack of value which impacts responses
- Validity and reliability of the instrument and data is poor – cannot make effective decisions based on it
- Peers without expertise shouldn’t evaluate peers
- Cannot force new forms of evaluation (e.g. classroom visits) on instructors
- Students are not qualified to comment on some aspects (e.g. “Is your instructor knowledgeable about the topic?”)
- No standards for extracting and analysing data / student comments
- The context of questions on the survey impact the data
- Evaluation data is often used “sloppily”
SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

The following were improvements suggested by the group:

- Determine what students should be evaluating and consider why particular questions are being asked
- Instead of focusing on whether an instrument is valid or not, give more attention making sure interpretations of data are valid
- Use an online instrument (potentially interfaced with Canvas) that has a question bank but also allows some latitude for departments to create questions
- Use a clear standard for comparison in questions – for example, “if you say ‘compared to other courses,’ you need to specify which courses”
- Consider question sequence to avoid bias
- Develop guidelines on what questions to use and how to interpret data
- Use a system that doesn't increase department workload
- Change departmental guidelines to include other forms of evaluation (e.g. peer reviews)
- Consider more data than just evaluation results for tenure and promotion
- Publish evaluation results
- Look at the results over time and consider trajectories, not simply a moment in time
- Do some psychometric studies on students’ ability to rate/discriminate across a scale
- Provide guidance and training on statistical interpretation and data analysis
- Have an instrument that can track student demographics and make correlations using this data
- Use data analysis programs that can suggest accuracy of results by particular profiles / contexts
- Encourage student participation by having instructors promote the evaluation
5.10 STUDENTS

STUDENT PERCEPTION

Students commented that they “did not think the course evaluations were actually used.” In place of evidence, rumours have created the notion that evaluations are simply used for evaluating sessionals / TAs and making decisions about rehiring them. If evaluations were used for making improvements to teaching or revising curriculum, students indicate that they “would like to be able to give feedback on other issues, such as pre-requisites.”

Overall, the experience with evaluations depends on the class and the instructor. There are some instructors who encourage that students complete evaluations and it’s obvious that they take feedback seriously; while others show little or no interest in the process at all. Some small classes are having positive outcomes using qualitative evaluations that focus more on what students are thinking – one student commented that this “feels more democratic and instructors take it seriously.”

The question was raised, “should evaluations be optional or mandatory?” Because the existing process is not mandatory, the sample data is probably very limited.

REASONS FOR LOW EVALUATIONS

Behaviour or triggers that could cause students to provide a low evaluation include:

- No evidence of changed teaching behaviour despite student expectations
- Instructors that are rude or negative to students
- Classes that are boring or seem like there’s no point in attending (e.g. when an instructor just reads off slides)
- Instructor’s lack of interest in the course or students
- Instructors that are unclear or don’t communicate well
- Unapproachable instructors or instructors who lack attention during office hours
- Instructor acts like it’s a chore to come to class
- Instructors that aren’t competent or equipped to teach concepts
- Using dated materials
- Instructors with extremely narrow/rigid viewpoints and who are not open to other ideas.

REASONS FOR HIGH EVALUATIONS

Behaviour or triggers that could cause students to provide a high evaluation include:

- Very original class format/delivery
- Instructors who know their material in great depth and can explain topics well
- Instructor demonstrates a passion for subject
- Courses that effectively use media and technology
- Instructors who “go beyond call of duty” and are flexible for the needs of students (e.g. extending office hours when needed)
- Instructors who give a lot of feedback to help students improve
- Instructors who clear communicators – even when there may be a language barrier
- Instructors who are positive, cheerful and nice.
CONCERNS

Student concerns about the teaching and course evaluation were varied. The majority of comments focused on how the evaluation process could impact course selection. Sometimes there’s no choice but to take a course when it’s offered, though, if students have the option, they’d like to be selective about which courses they take. Currently, students inform themselves by word of mouth and online forums (e.g. Rate My Professor), or by using course outlines. Having evaluation results available or an SFU-specific online forum for course discussion would help this process a great deal.

Other concerns were about the method and timing used for conducting evaluations. For example, the group held the opinion that “students won’t take time outside of class to fill [the evaluations] out”. This could lead to skewed results if the evaluation forms are moved to an online format due to lower response rates. Sometimes students feel that the evaluation is completed too early – that there hasn’t been enough time to evaluate the course fairly.

“The harder the course, the lower the evaluations” – some courses are just harder to give a high evaluation for because they’re challenging. There’s also a fear that tenured faculty don’t want to make improvements to their teaching and, therefore, aren’t interested in receiving feedback from students.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS

Even if “instructors make a promise to read them,” students feel that the evaluation process doesn’t make a difference. Since this is the case, it’s important for the institution to establish credibility in the evaluation system. Expectations need to be clearly defined and communicated. Instructors need to be held accountable for making changes – “it’s a moral hazard when there are no accountability mechanisms.”

One example was given of an instructor who distributes cue cards every class to ask what was clear, what was not and when to hold office hours. Students felt that this example highlighted the importance of ongoing evaluation processes like:

- Introducing mid-term evaluations to allow opportunities for instructors to enhance their teaching
- Conducting pre and post student expectation surveys.

Other suggestions for improvement included:

- Look at common themes across departments or certain types of courses
- Ask for feedback on exam formats/questions
- Ask for feedback on departmental issues
- Eliminate the GPA question and focus on more relevant biographical information such as learning style, study habits, language background or major
- Ask for comments on the way the course was taught
- Seek more feedback on course content
- Split questions into sections: course content, teaching style, textbook.