Date: June 10, 2007

To: Mike Quinn  
Faculty Senate Executive Committee

From: John Edwards, Chair  
Advancement of Teaching Committee

Re: Student Evaluation of Teaching Recommendations

The Faculty Senate Executive Committee had asked the Advancement of Teaching Committee to consider two recommendations from the student group Leaders for Positive Innovation. The AoT met to consider these recommendations on Wednesday, May 30th. John Edwards, Ed Jensen, and Pejmon Sadri were in attendance.

1) The first question we were asked to address was whether OSU should administer its Student Evaluation of Teaching forms online. Universities that have done this typically do so because of the cost savings associated with online as compared to paper and pencil administration of SETs. Online administration also frees up valuable course time that is currently used to administer the SETs. The primary issue with online SETs is response rate. In the absence of incentives to complete the SETs, other universities have seen response rates as low as 10% when they’ve moved to online SETs. Use of incentives (e.g., extra credit in the class, raffle entries) can move the response rate as high as 50%, but such incentives typically don’t raise it above 30-40%. These numbers are lower than our current response rate (which is chiefly driven by course attendance). Some research suggests the possibility of bias in who completes online SETs (women, juniors and seniors, and those with higher GPAs are more likely to do them). Some schools resolve this issue by making SET completion mandatory – students get an I in the class until they do them (e.g., UCLA med school). One advantage to online SETs, noted by one university, is the possibility of more detailed written comments.

The AoT committee feels that online course evaluations should not be done unless we can resolve the response rate issue. Mandatory completion has problems which we believe preclude its use at OSU. A suggestion that we recommend (thanks to Pejmon for this) is to give students grades, but not allow them online access to the grade until they’ve completed the SET. We also feel that students should be given the ability to “opt out” of doing the evaluation if they wish. We recommend that such a system be piloted, preferably across a range of class types, before full implementation.

2) The second question we were asked to address was whether OSU should post the results from its SETs online. The committee was unanimously opposed to this for a number of reasons. First, there is the possibility that doing this will reinforce the already low opinion many faculty have of the SET process, such that they believe it to be more of a popularity contest that either a true evaluation of teaching or a formative exercise. Related to this is the possibility that web posting undermines one goal, perhaps the chief goal, of SETs, which is formative rather than evaluative.
Second, online course evaluation information is useless and possibly misleading in the absence of comparative information (typically departmental/college/university averages). Simply posting scores online, as U of O does, really communicates little by way of accurate information. Choosing appropriate comparison points is actually quite complex, since one wants to equate only similar sorts of classes. Even with comparison information, some statistical knowledge (especially what constitutes a significant difference between scores) is necessary to evaluate them properly. Because this information changes over time, it is hard to imagine a system where appropriate comparison information can be communicated to consumers of SETs posted on the internet.

Third, posting SETs online reinforces the bad practice of assuming that SETs are the “gold standard” of teaching evaluation, and the related notion that they are the only type of evaluation of teaching that is necessary. Although SETs certainly have a role in evaluation of teaching, they are only one component of a proper evaluation of teaching (and not one of more valid ones at that).

Fourth, this practice can be seen as inherently unfair to new instructors, who, among other things, do not yet have the experience at OSU to get high SETs.

Fifth, the reason for doing this wasn’t clear to us. We can imagine two possibilities. One is to help students choose among courses based on instructor teaching ability. Points # 2 and 3 above suggest that an internet SET may be a bad tool for this purpose. In our current environment, we suspect that students have little flexibility in choosing courses anyway – how often is the same course taught by different instructors in the same term, at equally convenient times? Note that online resources (e.g., ratemyprofessor.com) already exist for this purpose, which limits the “added value” of OSU’s expenditures on such an endeavour. The other reason for posting SETs online may be accountability, the notion being that online postings will somehow embarrass instructors into performing better. We believe that such accountability concerns are far better handled in a formal administrative fashion. Note that information other than SET forms, such as number of course drops, may be much more informative regarding teaching problems.

We suspect that part of the motivation for this has more to do with a lack of trust in the system – students don’t believe that SETs influence personnel decisions. In our experience, SETs are probably more influential than they should be rather than less so. Indeed, many departments use SETs as their only real evaluation of teaching. This suggests that rather than posting SETs, the appropriate action would be a dialogue about SETs and accountability with students.