

Guidance on course evaluations

Email from Provost Thomas Stephenson to department chairs, 10/14/2013

Dear department chairs,

At our meeting earlier in the semester, I promised to provide clearer guidance on the subject of course/curriculum evaluations. Here, at long last, it is. At least, it is my intent that this is a clarification. You may recall that in the spring of 2012, the Academic Assessment Committee attempted to change the guidance that was provided to departments on the subject of course evaluations, responding to what they perceived as criticism leveled at the way the system had evolved over the preceding few years. Those attempts at reforms seemed to create even more confusion and discord.

After even more discussion, the Division Chairs and I concluded that in fact the original assessment plan adopted in 2006 had balanced the competing interests just about right. My purpose today is to ask that departments return to that original formulation of departmentally based course evaluations that are focused squarely on determining whether students are meeting the goals that we establish for them, and not on the performance of individual members of the faculty. For your reference, I have attached excerpts from the May, 2006 report to the faculty by the Assessment Planning Committee that describe the course evaluation process.

Several features of this description are of note:

First, the course evaluations that are mandated for the assessment plan are to be designed at the departmental level and are to be focused on determining whether a course (or seminar) is meeting the goals that the department has for that course (or seminar). They are not to be focused on whether an individual instructor is performing well in the classroom.

Second, an instructor is free to add questions of her/his own choosing to an evaluation, but these elective questions are not part of the review to be carried out with the Department Chair, unless the instructor chooses to share those results with the Chair.

Third, while the use of the evaluations by departments to focus on a common curricular element in a given year (Honors seminars, first-year seminars, etc.) is encouraged, this is not required.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Tom

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Excerpts from May 8, 2006 Report of the Assessment Planning Committee (APC)

Course Evaluations

Many faculty members already use mid-semester and end-of-semester course evaluations in their classes and seminars and find them a useful means to collect information about student learning and how it relates to features of the class or seminar. The plan systematizes the use of course evaluations and makes them more useful by requiring that each faculty member distribute end-of-semester course evaluations in at least one course per year.

The plan does not call for a standardized form across the College. We believe that each department or program can best tailor a form that will effectively elicit the types of information most relevant to that department. Thus, the plan calls for systematic use of course evaluations by ensuring that all faculty participate, but stops short of prescribing specific questions or forms that might not be well suited to a particular discipline.

The course evaluation forms will consist of a section that is generated at the department level and that seeks to determine whether the department's goals for that course are being met. Faculty can supplement this section with any additional questions that would be useful. We anticipate the departmental questions will seek to collect information about intellectual engagement, improvement in skills (such as writing or critical thinking), articulation and achievement of learning goals, and the relationship between learning goals and class assessment, such as exams and papers. Course evaluations will also provide an opportunity to determine whether students in a particular class and department feel that they are getting the support they need (e.g., from ITS, the libraries, departmental clinics, and Writing Associates). (See Appendix C for suggested questions to include in the departmental course evaluation.)

The departmental portion of the course evaluations will be reviewed by the faculty member and the Department Chair (or another colleague designated by the Chair). We believe that this discussion is an important component of making the course evaluations worthwhile; the discussion can provide an opportunity for the faculty member and the Chair to discuss whether it would be useful to consider changes to the course or to other courses in the department or to identify strategies to address issues raised in the evaluations. The objective here is not to focus on the faculty member's popularity or appeal but to focus on the student's perceptions of learning that occurred in the course and the facets of the course that contributed to or hindered that learning. To be explicit: we do not intend for the course evaluations to be used as part of tenure and promotion decisions.

We encourage departments to use these evaluations as an opportunity to assess particular components of their curriculum. For example, in a given year the department might have all the faculty teaching an introductory course select that course as the one in which they do the evaluations; the department could then develop a set of questions that specifically address the goals and learning in the introductory courses. Alternatively, a department might look at mid-level courses as a group to see whether students are prepared as they enter the courses and prepared for higher-level work as they leave. Again, we recognize that the scope for these types of integrated assessment efforts using course evaluations will vary across departments.

Therefore we do not make this approach a requirement but do urge departments to consider whether they can incorporate such an approach.

Appendix C: Departmental Course Evaluation Guidelines

In at least one course per year, each faculty member will administer departmental course evaluations. We believe that these departmental evaluations can provide useful insight into student perceptions of their experience in specific courses. These evaluations will be reviewed by the individual faculty member and Department Chair (or someone designated by the Chair).

We encourage individual faculty members to supplement the departmental evaluation forms with any additional questions of interest to the faculty member. Although the committee makes no recommendation regarding review of this component of course evaluations, we encourage individual faculty to review the answers to the supplemental questions with the Chair or another colleague when it seems that a conversation about the evaluation responses will contribute to the faculty member's development.

The APC generated a list of questions to illustrate the types of questions that might be included in departmental course evaluations. We offer these questions, listed below, simply as suggestions. The Committee is fully aware that each department will have its own needs and will identify areas of greatest departmental interest. The questions give a sense of some of the kinds of insights into student learning that the Committee thought could be gained through the use of well-designed course evaluations; the Committee hopes that they are useful in helping departments start the work of creating their own course evaluation forms.

A. Questions applicable to any course:

1. How did this course contribute to your intellectual growth? Were you exposed to new concepts or perspectives? Please elaborate.
2. Were the goals and expectations for this course clear? Do you feel that you achieved them? Explain.
3. Why did you take this course? How well were your own goals met?
4. What skills were you supposed to acquire? To what extent do you feel that you have acquired them? Please explain.
5. How did the course help you improve _____ (here specify skills, e.g., writing, presentation skills, ability to analyze data)?
6. Were the written and oral assignments and tests well designed so that completing them helped you meet the learning goals for the course? Please explain.
7. How did grades and feedback on papers, tests, and other assignments help you understand whether you were or were not meeting the goals and expectations of the course?

8. Did this course stimulate your interest in _____ (specify the department or program)? How?
9. What factors promote or reduce the "esprit de corps" of the students in this course?
10. Is the format of the course (e.g., lecture, seminar, discussion, etc.) appropriate to its content? Why or why not?
11. Was class time used well? Was the course well organized? Please explain.
12. Did you receive adequate support for learning from tutors, library staff, ITS staff, and language resource center staff, as needed? Please explain.

B. Questions for non-introductory course with prerequisites:

1. Did your previous coursework prepare you adequately for this course? Were the assumptions about what you knew coming into the course accurate and/or fair? Please explain.
2. What role did the prerequisites play in your comprehension of the subject matter in this course?

C. Questions for courses with lab/drills:

1. Did the laboratory experience/drill complement the content of the course? What changes, if any, would you like to see implemented?
2. One of the goals of the laboratory/drill curriculum is _____. How do you think that this lab/drill contributed to achieving this goal?

D. Questions for introductory courses:

1. Was the field you studied in this course completely new to you or have you had any previous academic experience with this field? Please explain.
2. Were the assumptions about what you knew coming in to the course accurate and/or fair? Please explain.
3. Did the course help you understand concepts, methods, and/or content in this discipline? Please elaborate.
4. Did this course stimulate your interest in _____ (the department or program)?
5. Having taken this course, are you more or less likely to enroll in another course in this department? Why?