April 3, 1991

MEMORANDUM

TO: Evaluation Policy Committee
FROM: Lilian Brannon, Chair
SUBJ: Student Evaluation of Courses

While Monday's meeting brought to all our attention the many complicated issues surrounding the use of student evaluations for multiple purposes (in this case, for a part of the consideration for promotion and tenure and for a student's guide to course offerings), I thought we also discussed a very inventive plan for meeting both the faculty's and the students' needs. I would like to make my understanding of our conversation into a recommendation for the Educational Policy Committee (EPC) to which we report. Their last meeting for the semester is scheduled for April 10. Because we do not have time for another full meeting of our Committee before EPC meets, I thought it appropriate for me to draft what I heard as a consensus of our committee's discussion for your response. The recommendation I would like to make follows.

BACKGROUND

The EPC and its Committee on Evaluation Policy have played a central role over the years in campus deliberations about student ratings of instruction. The EPC sponsored Senate Bill No. 8384-07 which culminated a fifteen year attempt to forge an acceptable campus policy (see attached chronology). In 1985-86 and again in 1987-88 the Committee on Evaluation Policy was asked to re-examine campus policy and practice, and each time confirmed the recommendations of the earlier Ratcliff Committee Report contained in the Senate Bill. The most recent Evaluation Policy Committee report concludes in part:

(a) that all students must be given the opportunity to evaluate their courses and instructors for purposes of both instructional improvement and personnel decision making;

(b) that the Student Instructional Rating Form (SIRF) is neither appropriate nor sufficient for all evaluation purposes in all departments; but its value can be enhanced by encouraging students also to submit anonymous written comments which identify instructional strengths and weaknesses;

(c) that we do not recommend using SIRF, nor most existing departmental survey forms, for purposes of assisting student course selection. These items were not designed for that purpose, and research suggests that students shade their responses differently depending on how they think the data will be used.
Nevertheless, there remains some feeling that the University should do more to assist students, especially since academic advisement receives generally bad reviews from students and faculty alike. In the Spring of 1990, the Vice-President for Academic Affairs, after consultation, gave the Student Government authorization to ask each faculty member for permission to release the results of their student evaluations and, if permission were granted, to publish that information for student use in course selection. This authorization was granted for one year. This year's Evaluation Policy Committee believes that the students deserve access to the best information available about courses and faculty. The student rating instrument designed by Evaluation Policy and approved by EPC partially provides such information. Some research studies, however, point to a potential problem when instruments designed for one kind of assessment are used in other ways. Since SIRF is designed for promotion and tenure consideration, students' responses are aimed at providing information used in the peer evaluation of teaching. Student responses might differ if they thought students were to use these ratings for guidance on course selection. Moreover, other items would need to be designed for this other purpose.

While the research literature suggests an answer, we do not know for sure if the kinds of questions we ask on our student evaluation forms would elicit different answers for different audiences. We do know after conversation with Student Government that the success of their efforts depends greatly on the faculty's cooperation and support. The students do not have the resources to develop their own instrument and are concerned, as we are, in getting the best information available. Further, all are concerned about not wanting to take up valuable class time administering multiple instruments which may partially duplicate one another.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A. For the academic year 1991–92, the students should be allowed to continue requesting permission from faculty to publish existing student ratings data, even though these ratings are ostensibly collected for another purpose.

B. During the 1991–92, The EPC requests the Evaluation Policy Committee to study the feasibility and appropriateness of developing a new portion of the Student Instructional Rating Form, one that would be administered as a regular part of the Student Rating process but that would be designed:

1.) to meet the needs of a student audience concerned with issues of course selection;

2.) to test the assertion that students will answer questions differently depending on the audience.

C. In carrying out this task, the Evaluation Policy Committee should seek advice from Student Government, CUE, Distinguished Teaching Faculty, Institutional Research, and interested faculty.

I need to know if the substance of this recommendation meets your approval. If, for whatever reason, you find this recommendation problematic, I need to know that. Would you please contact Fred Volkwein's office at Ext. 5410 and give him your response to this recommendation before 5:00 p.m. on Monday, April 8. All non-substantive changes---changes in wording, additions for clarity, etc.---are also appreciated.

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A CHRONOLOGY OF UNIVERSITY ACTIONS REGARDING
STUDENT RATINGS OF INSTRUCTION
AT SUNY-ALBANY
(Revised June 1983)

March 1969  A University Task Force on Instruction, chaired by Professor
Van Cleve, after a year of study submitted its report
recommending (among other things) that all faculty participate
in the Student Evaluation of Courses and Teachers (SECT) and
that administration and faculty assist SECT with money and
consultant services. It also recommended that promotion and
tenure guidelines be revised to include student ratings of
instruction. [Subsequently, SECT received administrative funds
and space but SECT died in large part because it was heavily
dependent upon student labor, and because its voluntary nature
led to low participation. The benefits did not justify the
effort and cost. SECT was resurrected in 1974 as Assessment of
Courses and Teachers (ACT).]

May 3, 1971  The Senate approved Bill 197071-37 as recommended by CPCA. The
bill revised the guidelines for promotion and tenure and called
for systematic and quantitative student evaluations of teaching
in every class each term.

May 8, 1972  The University Senate passed Bill 197172-40 requiring the
Executive Committee of the Senate (to) name an ad hoc committee
of faculty and students "which shall recommend to the Senate
adoption of a uniform instrument to be used for the purposes of
student evaluation of teachers throughout the University . . .
Data for each candidate for promotion and/or continuing
appointment shall be provided using this instrument effective
no later than the fall semester, 1973."

April 1, 1974  The University Senate Executive Committee introduces Bill No.
197374-36 (subsequently tabled by the Senate) specifying that
"The Council on Promotions and Continuing Appointments shall
forward only those recommendations on personnel cases of
promotion and/or continuing appointment in which data from a
uniform instrument of student opinion on teaching (gathered
University-wide) is available for the case in question." The
Bill also asked that the President, Deans and Academic VP
should consider only those cases for which student ratings data
are presented. While the Bill generated considerable debate,
it was never approved.

Jan. 24, 1979  President O'Leary acting upon a request from EPC, appoints the
Committee on the Improvement of Undergraduate Teaching, chaired
by Professor Tompkins, and in part charges the committee, "to
develop university-wide methods of evaluating teaching." [EPC
members urged the President to take this action in part because
of faculty concern that the CPCA and Senate policies requiring
student ratings had not been consistently enforced during the
1970's, even for those being considered for Promotion and
Tenure.]
Dec. 3, 1979  Four student senators introduce Bill 197980-14 calling for a University-wide teacher evaluation instrument which will elicit student opinions and publish the results. The bill was referred by the Senate to the EPC in view of the EPC’s prior charge to the Tompkins Committee.

Dec. 13, 1979  The Tompkins Committee Report is forwarded to EPC, and shared with the UAC. Their comprehensive report included a recommendation for the design and testing of a uniform campus-wide rating form for soliciting student opinion.

March 14, 1980  Regarding the Tompkins Committee Report, the EPC votes to take steps to test as widely as possible the recommended instrument and to circulate to the deans and chairpersons the content of Recommendations 2 through 7 of the report, indicating that the EPC is seriously considering their adoption as policy and asking for their comments.

April 7, 1980  The EPC reports back to the Senate regarding Bill 197980-14. The EPC reported that it had approved for pilot testing a uniform campus-wide rating scale which would solicit student opinions for the purpose of assessing teaching performance for promotion, tenure, and teaching award decisions. EPC recommended that we enter an experimental period during which we will test an instrument which will have multiple purposes—teaching improvement, personnel decision making, and student course selection. Different sections of the instrument will have different uses, and the data will be treated differently, some published and some unpublished. EPC recommended that the competing Bill 197980-14 be dropped, and the student sponsors withdrew it.

May 16, 1980  Vice President Martin sends a memorandum to Deans and Department Chairs advising them that EPC had reached consensus that "A uniform campus-wide rating scale is absolutely necessary for fairness in assessing teaching performance across disciplines and departments, especially for tenure, promotion, and teaching award decisions; and we should move ahead quickly to develop one." Martin noted that EPC considered the Tompkins Committee recommendations (as revised) to be a good beginning, and that the deans and chairpersons should be advised that "EPC is seriously considering their adoption as policy, and asking for your (deans and chairs') comments."

March 20, 1981 Committee on Evaluation Policy approves plans for pilot test of instructional rating form (SIFF). The Form that is approved for testing contains items from Tompkins Committee Report as revised by EPC, and incorporates recommendations of UAC, deans and department heads (responses to Vice President Martin's memorandum of May 16, 1980), and recommendations of Committee on Evaluation Policy itself. The pilot instrument is subsequently administered to 367 course sections in 18 departments and schools. In all, useable responses were obtained from 9,500 students on 245 participating instructors.
May 1982  EPC approves a recommendation from its Committee on Evaluation Policy that the Committee develop during 1982-83 a comprehensive policy statement on instructional evaluation. The EPC action in part resulted from recognition that the Tompkins Committee recommendations were not practicable, and from faculty objections to Vice President Martin's attempts to implement the Tompkins Committee recommendations.

Dec. 1982  The analysis of the SIRF pilot test is completed and shared with Deans and Chairs. Departments across the campus are encouraged to use the SIRF instrument and the Office of Institutional Research coordinates its administration and scoring. [Subsequently, 21 departments use SIRF for at least some courses.]

Sept. 1983  The Committee on Evaluation Policy chaired by Prof. Ratcliff submits to EPC a comprehensive proposed policy on the evaluation of teaching, using faculty peer review. While insisting on the collection and analysis of student opinion as an element in the peer review process, these recommendations give departments much discretion in how this is to be carried out. This represents a major departure from the recommendations of the Van Cleve and Tompkins Committees.

Oct. 1983  EPC adopts the policy recommended by the Committee on Evaluation Policy and forwards it to the Senate.

Dec. 1983  The Senate approves the EPC recommended Bill No. 8384-07. The policy is designed both to improve teaching and to provide systematic information about teaching in personnel decisions. In general, the policy calls for the peer evaluation of teaching, outlines the major elements to be contained in such evaluations, and specifically calls for the systematic collection of student opinion as a necessary but not sufficient part of the peer review of teaching effectiveness.

1984-85  The Office of Academic Affairs implements the new Senate Bill by incorporating key sections of the 1983 Ratcliff Committee Report into the Guidelines for Deans and Chairs.

1985-86  Responding to a request by the Student Association, the EPC Committee on Evaluation Policy examines at length the advantages and disadvantages of a joint multipurpose rating form along the lines recommended in 1979 by the Tompkins Committee, and concludes negatively.

1987-88  Acting on a request from EPC, the Committee on Evaluation Policy again examines campus policy and departmental practices regarding the collection of student ratings. The Committee report, subsequently endorsed by EPC, restates the campus policy which gives all students the opportunity to evaluate their courses and instructors, finds most departments in compliance with the policy, and recommends that University efforts be aimed at those departments which have less than 80% participation in collecting student ratings. Additionally, the report reaffirms previous EPC recommendations against the use of SIRF for student course selection, and against the development of SIRF campus norms.