

## A Proposed New Online Student Course Evaluation Instrument

The EPC Subcommittee on Student Course Evaluations is today delivering to you a new online uniform course evaluation form for your approval in AS&E for the Fall 2013. The Subcommittee was created by an AS&E faculty vote in favor of an EPC resolution in the Fall 2011. The committee's charge has been to: 1) oversee the transfer of the paper course evaluation form used since the 1980's (an update was given to the faculty disclosing this plan in October 2012 and it was used for the first time last fall) and 2) create a new online SCE form that better polls student opinions on their courses and instructors. The subcommittee also intends for this evaluation to provide better feedback that can lead to improvement of courses and teaching.

### Today's Vote

The Subcommittee on Student Course Evaluations requests that the faculty approve the adoption of the new (proposed) student course evaluation form (p. 5-6) that will replace the current form online beginning in the Fall 2013.

- A vote **“in favor”** would replace the current online form with the form proposed below in Fall 2013.
- A vote **“opposed”** would keep the form that has been used (on paper and online) since the 1980's.

### The Process of Designing the New Online SCE Form

The development of the new online form began with the polling of the faculty in 2010 about their opinions on the paper form used at Tufts since the 1980's (and now administered online as of Fall 2012). There was a wide range of faculty complaints. There were many instances where faculty feedback was contradictory and it was clear that there is a range of opinions on some of the issues listed below. A few examples of faculty complaints are:

- 1) question redundancy,
- 2) question ambiguity,
- 3) uselessness of many questions,
- 4) length of the form,
- 5) non-applicability of some questions to some courses,
- 6) the legitimacy versus abuse of overall rating questions (some faculty thought they should be abandoned while others thought they were the only useful part of the old paper form),
- 7) inadequate feedback that could be useful for improving courses and instruction,
- 8) a single open response question that had no direction and often solicited comments of limited number and content,
- 9) questions asking for student opinions on topics that they are not in a good position to evaluate, and
- 10) the absence of student self-reflection and inadequate demographic questions (some faculty thought these question have little value and demographic questions were unnecessary).

The writing of the proposed SCE instrument began in the Spring 2012. Since Fall 2012 and through March 2013, the committee has met 12 times and has also spent considerable time exchanging drafts via email. This process started with all members of the committee reviewing faculty comments regarding the existing form and then contributing question topics for the new form. We reviewed recent reports made by committees from other universities charged with the

same task; we invited another university to meet with us to describe their process; we reviewed summaries of research on the design and use of student course evaluations. In Fall 2012 the committee agreed upon six key question topic areas. Groups of several committee members then submitted questions for each topic. These questions included items with rating scale answers as well as open response items. In Spring 2013 these questions and rating scales have been refined. The whole process created tremendous discussion at every meeting and required everyone on the committee to make compromises to assemble the proposed evaluation form.

The process of formulating a new online form has been a very difficult and time-consuming task. We are sure that the product will not please everyone. In fact we are certain that many faculty will find something on the new form that they do not like or will want something included that has been left out. Indeed, even among members of the subcommittee, there is sentiment that the proposed version of the SCE instrument could still be tweaked to improve the evaluation of their own courses, but as a group we strove to keep in mind the objective that this be a uniform course evaluation that serves the purpose of evaluating all courses in AS&E. We also note that if individual instructors are curious about student opinions on specific aspects of their course, they should be encouraged to collect their own data in class, either during the course or at the end of the semester. The committee encourages administration and faculty to continue to review additional methods of evaluating excellence in teaching beyond student evaluations that currently exist in some departments.

### **Guiding Principles for Question Writing**

We adopted overriding principles that helped us select topics to be queried on the SCE form and that guided our research, writing, and refinement of SCE questions.

1. Questions should reflect Tufts' high regard for teaching excellence.
2. Questions should inquire about things that students are in a unique position to answer. This survey should be recognized as providing a student perspective and not as a comprehensive evaluation of teaching or courses.
3. The delivery and wording of questions should make every attempt to protect the confidentiality of students who respond to the evaluation.
4. Questions should be applicable to any course in Arts, Sciences, and Engineering.
5. Questions should allow for written responses that provide information for the improvement of teaching.
6. The evaluation should be as short as possible.
7. Questions should be guided by the best available research and practices regarding student course evaluations. Key references to summary analyses of studies on student course evaluations will be posted on the CELT web site under Resources and this link will be made available as soon as it is ready.

## **Some Decisions by the Subcommittee**

Decisions were made by the subcommittee were guided by the principles of keeping the evaluation form short, including only questions that provided relevant information that could be interpreted with the least ambiguity. The proposed form consists of a total of 16 questions divided by course and instructor. It was necessary to establish a form that could be used to evaluate both single and multiple instructor courses. In the case of multiple instructor courses the instructor questions will be repeated for each instructor. The proposed form has 8 course questions, 5 with numerical rating answers and 3 open responses; and 8 instructor questions, 7 with numerical rating answers and 1 open response. Open response questions target specific aspects of courses and will hopefully lead to more detailed responses that can be used to improve teaching. The committee is confident that the proposed form is an improvement over the old form, which has 21 numerical rating questions and no direction to its single open response question.

### **A. Student Self Reflection and Demographic Questions**

In Spring 2013 we unanimously decided not to include questions that asked students to reflect on their own performance in the course, asked them for their expected grade in the course, or solicited demographic information. We made this decision in spite of contrary advice from some of our colleagues (faculty complaint #10 above). There are a number of reasons for not asking these questions:

1. An individual's demographic response (class year, major or non-major, reason for taking course, etc.) should not be tied to any other response on the form if we want to maintain student confidentiality in all courses. Aggregate demographic information for a course is available from other sources such as the class roster and course reports available to chairs on Faculty Web Center.
2. Questions regarding a student's commitment to a course (for example related to attendance, class participation, etc.) could sacrifice confidentiality, particularly in a small course.
3. It is difficult to compile answers within the TRUNK instrument in different ways for different questions (i.e., they are all easily listed for an individual respondent in an Excel or CSV file, but it is difficult to eliminate some questions from this compilation to only be compiled in the aggregate).
4. The subcommittee did not support the notion that asking self-reflection questions would inevitably prepared students for more honest or tempered answers. In some cases these questions could have the opposite effect.
5. The subcommittee determined that asking a question about the student's expected grade in the course would frame the evaluation in the context of grades, something we tried to avoid.
6. These questions would have lengthened the survey form.

### **B. Overall Rating Questions**

After much discussion beginning in Fall 2012 the subcommittee also decided to continue the practice of asking overall rating questions for the course and instructor. Although we are not unanimous on this subject, the overall rating questions have value in serving as measures of a course or instructor. In our 2010 survey of faculty it was clear that many faculty saw these questions as the only questions that had any value, meaning, or importance on the paper evaluation form, while a few others thought we should employ only open response written

answer questions. On the current form the overall evaluation questions are asked in the context of other questions that students are in a position to evaluate, perhaps framing the overall rating questions better than on the previous form. The overall rating questions may provide a metric for a rapid evaluation of courses, but the committee warns against using this as the most heavily weighted or only tool of evaluation, as might be the case in some instances with promotion decisions and annual salary decisions. We feared that if overall evaluation questions did not appear on the evaluation form, chairs and administrators would come up with their own way of synthesizing and comparing evaluations that were not uniform across the university and we did not feel that averages, weighted or not, of instructor or course questions provided a better metric for an overall evaluation. We also view the overall evaluation questions as the only way of formulating comparisons of the results of the new online form and the old online/paper form.

### **C. Separate Course Components and Graduate Student Evaluations**

The committee has decided not to include a separate area of the new online evaluation to inquire into different parts of a single course, such as recitations, discussions, and labs that are instructed by graduate students. Graduate students teach in many different ways that may require separate or parallel forms of evaluation, which focus on their specific duties and training as teachers. We believe gathering this information should continue to occur separately from the uniform course evaluation, which focuses on faculty teaching. In addition, most, if not all, graduate departments and programs already perform their own analysis of graduate student teaching that is specific to their discipline and at this point there appears to be no reason to have a separate metric that can be used to compare graduate student teaching across departments. The separate evaluation of graduate students should continue and should not be duplicated in an inferior form on the uniform course evaluation. The subcommittee also fears that with the addition to the SCE form of components taught by graduate students the form will become too long. We have already had to lengthen the form to allow separate evaluations of faculty instructors in multi-instructor courses, perhaps to the detriment of more reflective written responses in these courses.

### **Members of the EPC Subcommittee on Student Course Evaluations**

Jack Ridge, convener (non-voting), Earth and Ocean Sciences

#### **Faculty Members:**

Christoph Borgers, Mathematics  
Mitch McVey, Biology  
Ellen Pinderhughes, Child Development  
Laura Rogers, Education  
Samuel Sommers, Psychology

#### **Administration:**

Jean Herbert, Associate Dean  
Janet Hill, Univ. Inform. Technology  
Jo Ann Jack, Registrar  
Donna Qualters, CELT  
Dawn Terkla, Institutional Research

#### **Students:**

Simran Kaushal, graduate student  
Meredith Goldberg, undergraduate  
Darien Headen, undergraduate

#### **Past Members:**

Daniel Abramson, Art History  
Lee Edelman, English (sabbatical 2013)  
David Hammer, Education  
Carmen Lowe, Dean Acad. Advising &  
Undergraduate Study

## Proposed (New) Online SCE Form

### Opening Statement for SCE online form

Student Course Evaluations play an important role in the effort to assess and improve teaching at Tufts. Your honest, constructive, and detailed feedback not only is essential for evaluating the courses you are taking now, but also will benefit future students. Responses are confidential, and instructors will gain access to anonymous results only after final grades are posted. Thank you for your participation.

### Course Questions

1. How would you rate the success of the course in accomplishing its objectives as stated on the course syllabus?  
(5) Excellent (4) Very Good (3) Satisfactory (2) Less than Satisfactory (1) Very poor ( ) No answer
2. How would you rate the use of class time (lectures, discussions, demonstrations, labs, etc.) to promote your learning?  
(5) Excellent (4) Very Good (3) Satisfactory (2) Less than Satisfactory (1) Very poor ( ) No answer
3. How would you rate the use of out-of-class activities (reading assignments, homework, papers, projects, etc.) to promote your learning?  
(5) Excellent (4) Very Good (3) Satisfactory (2) Less than Satisfactory (1) Very poor ( ) No answer
4. How would you rate the way the course engaged your interest?  
(5) Excellent (4) Very Good (3) Satisfactory (2) Less than Satisfactory (1) Very poor ( ) No answer
5. Based on your answers above, and any other factors you consider important, please provide an overall evaluation of the course.  
(5) Excellent (4) Very Good (3) Satisfactory (2) Less than Satisfactory (1) Very poor ( ) No answer
6. In what ways has this course made you think differently or more deeply? Please provide examples.  
**Open response**
7. What aspects of this course worked best to facilitate your learning?  
**Open response**
8. What suggestions do you have for improving this course?  
**Open response**

### Instructor Questions

1. How would you rate the instructor's organization of each class?  
(5) Excellent (4) Very Good (3) Satisfactory (2) Less than Satisfactory (1) Very poor ( ) No answer
2. How would you rate the instructor's success in explaining concepts and ideas?  
(5) Excellent (4) Very Good (3) Satisfactory (2) Less than Satisfactory (1) Very poor ( ) No answer

3. How would you rate the timeliness of the instructor's feedback on assignments, exams, and other work?  
**(5) Excellent (4) Very Good (3) Satisfactory (2) Less than Satisfactory (1) Very poor ( ) No answer**
4. How would you rate the usefulness of the instructor's feedback on assignments, exams, and other work?  
**(5) Excellent (4) Very Good (3) Satisfactory (2) Less than Satisfactory (1) Very poor ( ) No answer**
5. How would you rate the instructor's success in creating and maintaining an inclusive class, respectful of all students?  
**(5) Excellent (4) Very Good (3) Satisfactory (2) Less than Satisfactory (1) Very poor ( ) No answer**
6. How would you rate the instructor's communication with you outside of class?  
**(5) Excellent (4) Very Good (3) Satisfactory (2) Less than Satisfactory (1) Very poor ( ) No answer**
7. Based on your answers above, and any other factors you consider important, please provide an overall evaluation of the instructor.  
**(5) Excellent (4) Very Good (3) Satisfactory (2) Less than Satisfactory (1) Very poor ( ) No answer**
8. Please provide any additional comments regarding the instructor.  
**Open response**