

Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Student Evaluation and the Improvement of Teaching

I. Our Charge and Its Background

On May 2, 2006, the Faculty, constituting itself as The Committee of the Whole, voted (61 in favor, 50 opposed, and 4 abstaining) the following motion: *The Faculty endorses the larger CAP Report goal to improve teaching throughout the College. In order to help achieve this goal, student teaching evaluations of all Faculty should be required. The evaluations solicited for senior faculty will be made available only to the faculty member in question.* The subsequent deliberation of the Faculty resulted in a formal vote on May 25, 2006 (84 in favor, 24 opposed, and 4 abstaining) endorsing "the priorities and goals of the Report on the Committee on Academic Priorities (CAP), as modified and clarified by the Sum and Substance [that quoted, *inter alia*, the italicized language above], ... as a strategy for moving forward." This Committee was implicitly charged with exploring specific schemes for the improvement of teaching at all ranks, including proposals for evaluation of tenured faculty by students.

II. Our Procedure

We started meeting in the fall semester of 2006. We began by reading the relevant sections of the CAP report, the Faculty Minutes, and the Committee of Six Minutes to learn about the range and depth of views colleagues had expressed on the matter of required student evaluations for tenured faculty. This review was very helpful in understanding the benefits and costs of evaluations themselves as well as of various schemes for soliciting these evaluations.

Colleagues who support teaching evaluations made several arguments about the merits of this form of evaluation. Some thought that providing senior members of the Faculty with more information about the nature of student evaluations might prove useful when evaluating junior members' teaching at their times of reappointment and tenure, while others suggested that such evaluations might send a (worthy) message to our students that Amherst values their opinions and takes seriously its commitment to excellence in teaching, a message that might also be important to Trustees and others (for instance accreditors). Still others hoped the process might dim the distinction between junior and senior members of the Faculty, since currently only junior members are required to solicit evaluations. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, many claimed that reading, and reflecting on, student evaluations could only help professors improve their teaching.

We also recognized several commonly occurring concerns about student evaluation of tenured colleagues. One concern was that requiring evaluations for Associate Professors might be problematic, since this issue is already being addressed by the Ad Hoc Committee on Promotion. Another concern was that student evaluations might provide biased assessments of teaching, given that such evaluations can be influenced by the age or gender of the professor, grading or workload expectations, or by the nature of the material being taught. Still other concerns were raised about "evaluation fatigue," which could occur if students were regularly required to complete four evaluations each semester, and about the loss of class time to complete evaluations. Yet others noted that many tenured colleagues already use, and pay attention to, teaching evaluations from students.

Most colleagues seemed to recognize the worth of attending to the quality of teaching, but differed in their judgment of the role of student evaluations in that process. We agree wholeheartedly that student evaluations are simply one way of assessing teaching, and reflecting on them is certainly not the only or perhaps even the best way of improving one's teaching. We strongly support the development of other methods for the improvement of teaching, including making workshops on curriculum and course development available, creating opportunities for members of the Faculty to participate in discussion groups on pedagogy, and so on.

We gathered information on the practices of a dozen or so other colleges with which we often compare ourselves. Carleton, Haverford, and Swarthmore, we learned, do not have any mandatory system in place and are not currently contemplating creating such a system. All of the other schools (Bates, Bowdoin, Colby, Hamilton, Macalester, Mount Holyoke, Oberlin, Pomona, Wellesley, and Williams) either have a long-standing practice of mandatory evaluation or are in the process of instituting such a practice. In almost all cases, the required evaluations are shared with deans, department chairs, or receive some other form of administrative scrutiny. Some colleges use standardized forms; in the cases where we could obtain copies, we looked at the forms as well to get a sense of the questions asked. Finally, we met with the Committee on Educational Policy and also held several open meetings with members of the Faculty.

III. Our Proposal

We propose that each Full Professor (other than those on phased retirement) request one or more colleagues, also at the rank Full Professor, to serve as his or her "Teaching Instruction Partner" (hereafter, TIP(s)). We expect that in some cases colleagues will choose to serve as one another's TIP(s), but in other cases the relationship will not be reciprocal. In some cases TIP(s) will belong to one's own department, but in other cases not. We imagine that a colleague's choice of TIP(s) will be guided by their common pedagogical strategies, by shared research interest, or by other pertinent shared reference points. The relationship is meant to last a period of several years, but may be shorter if leaves or other considerations intrude.

We propose that, at the beginning of each academic year, all teaching Full Professors will communicate to the Dean whether they intend to evaluate any of their courses that year and, if so, who their TIP(s) will be. We do not propose or encourage that any additional information be transmitted to the Dean's Office.

We propose that during each three-year period, a Full Professor will have students evaluate three courses, using evaluation forms that he or she has created, perhaps in consultation with his or her TIP(s). (Those holding half-time FTE appointments will evaluate one course every two years.) We encourage colleagues to choose different types of courses for evaluation when appropriate. We also encourage the creation of a bank of templates posted on a Web site that colleagues could consult in designing their questionnaires. Of course, different evaluation forms could be designed for different kinds of courses.

We propose that the evaluation forms be unsigned. This will reduce the administrative burdens associated with the scheme: no one need spend time or effort to render evaluation forms anonymous. In addition, the anonymity of the letters/forms in effect guarantees that they will be of no possible use beyond the informing of a reflective conversation about pedagogy. We encourage the destruction of all evaluations (whether on the Web or on paper) at the end of the following semester.

We propose that, during the semester following the one in which a course is evaluated, the Full Professor and his or her TIP(s) meet to discuss the comments received from the students. Perhaps additional interactions might take place between the Full Professor and his or her TIP(s), such as class room visits or consultation on the development of syllabi; however, such additional measures are not part of this proposal. We know that such conversations about pedagogy are common among colleagues and friends. In many cases, the TIP arrangements will simply highlight and accord some institutional recognition to these laudable ongoing practices.

Should this scheme be adopted, we propose that the Faculty assesses its success six years after implementation. It is not our place to prescribe in fine detail how an evaluation of the system might be conducted. However, just for purposes of illustration, we can imagine that an ad hoc committee might be constituted in the fifth year of the program. This committee might solicit views from participating senior colleagues (but not, of course, the details of anyone's evaluations or conversations with TIPs). The questions might pertain to the relevance of the program, its usefulness to pedagogy, the ease of carrying out its provisions, and ways the program might be improved. This committee might also consider whether the program is on balance worth continuing.

IV. Our Rationale

In proposing that senior colleagues share student evaluations with his or her TIP(s), we diverge from the motion of the Committee of the Whole of May 2, 2006. We believe that a mandated system in which student evaluations are read only by the Faculty member in question, is likely to generate skepticism, even cynicism, on all sides, and might disintegrate over time. On the other hand, we are reluctant to promote a system that is insensitive to the concern that evaluations, once collected by a department or the Administration, will end up playing an unintended and undesirable role. Our proposal preserves the autonomy and control of our tenured colleagues. Furthermore, because the proposed system builds on structures of collegiality that are already part of the fabric of the College, it is our hope that Full Professors will not find it alien and indeed will take to it naturally.

In designing this system, we paid careful attention to the concerns raised by colleagues last spring about the use of student evaluations of teaching, and we believe that our proposal minimizes potential negative consequences in several ways. First, we are restricting our proposal to Full Professors to preserve the right of the Faculty to determine on its own, in a separate way, how teaching evaluations might or might not be used in promotion. Second, we are proposing that colleagues create their own forms for evaluations, which should allow each of us to determine the most appropriate and useful questions to ask given the nature of our courses. Third, to avoid "evaluation fatigue," we are proposing that senior colleagues arrange to evaluate on average only one of their courses each year. Fourth, to avoid problems associated with the use of class time for evaluation, we are proposing that colleagues be given the option of choosing whether students complete the evaluation during class or outside of class. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, to avoid problems associated with "slippery slope" concerns, we believe that only senior colleagues and their TIPs should have access to these evaluations: student evaluations should not be given to Chairs or to members of the Administration, and they should not be used to decide matters of salary, research awards, or other benefits. In order to cement this last "firewall," we have proposed that evaluation forms be unsigned.

This procedure yields a system which accords greater respect to the students who go to

the trouble of offering their responses and which also is more conducive to the kinds of conversations and exchanges of information and ideas that are likely to prove beneficial to our teaching. Our focus is on improvement and critical self-examination of pedagogy, rather than on administrative scrutiny. The involvement of colleagues is an affirmation of the best in Amherst's tradition of collaborative teaching. While we believe that the evaluations of students might have some direct role to play in the improvement of teaching, we are more confident that the collegial conversations arising from reflection on such evaluations are likely to be more beneficial. In any case, we conclude by stressing that the provisions of the current proposal are just some important steps, and not necessarily the most important ones, in our continuing efforts at improvement of teaching.

Alexander George
Jagu Jagannathan (Chair)
Marisa Parham
Catherine Sanderson

April 6, 2007