

## **Committee on Educational Policy (CEP)**

**October 6, 2015**

**In attendance: Faculty: David S. Hall, chair; Alexander George; Caroline Goutte; Klára Móricz; Sean Redding. Catherine Epstein, dean. Students: Samuel Keaser '16, Rashid (Chico) Kosber '17. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Associate Dean of Admission and Researcher for Academic Projects.**

David Hall, Chair of the Committee on Educational Policy (CEP), called to order the CEP meeting at 3:00 p.m. in the Physics and Astronomy Meeting Room (Merrill Science Center 222), and the committee approved the minutes of the meeting of September 29, 2015.

### **Senior faculty course evaluations**

At 3:15 p.m., the committee welcomed hari stephen kumar to the meeting to discuss the default questions that will be sent to students for the purpose of evaluating the courses of senior faculty members. He explained that there are two types of evaluation—formative and summative—and they serve different purposes. He suggested the committee consider several key decisions before designing the questions, think about best practices in design, and then think about how to reverse engineer the drafted questions so they will result in more useful information.

Formative evaluations, he explained, are usually used to obtain information that will improve teaching and are generally confidential, intended for the instructor to use in exploring whether and how a specific aspect of the course could be improved. These work best if they are based on open-ended focused questions that have been crafted to gather actionable information from students to aid the instructor's analysis of the course, such as to provide insight into the design of an assignment, assess students' needs, improve in-class participation, or provide feedback on content clarity or material.

Summative evaluations are generally used to rate the effectiveness of teaching along particular criteria and are usually based on questions that have more constrained choices. Questions might address the instructor's organizational skills, methods for fostering student engagement, etc., and usually do so using a rating or Likert scale.

Turning to key decisions, he suggested the committee consider what the faculty is trying to measure and try to avoid mixing formative and summative evaluations in the same question. He also encouraged the committee to consider how it could mitigate implicit bias in its questions and suggested it would be prudent to think about the timing of the questions. The end of semester is a time when students often feel survey fatigue and may not provide as thoughtful responses. Turning to the questions, he said that good questions will just measure one concept and will be worded as simply and unambiguously as possible, such that the meaning is clear to all respondents. He suggested avoiding yes/no questions, vague terms, and complex sentences. The questions should be clear about the underlying concept the question is trying to measure. He thought it helpful to consider the kinds of responses that are expected and how useful they will be in measuring the intended concept.

He then turned to the drafted questions that the committee had sent to the faculty last spring. The committee agreed that these were intended to be mostly formative questions and acknowledged that the first question, which addressed the merit of the course, used a formative format (open-ended response) to ask a summative question (“evaluate the effectiveness” along suggested criteria). As a result, hari thought it might not result in actionable information for the instructors. Caroline said the committee’s intent was to elicit an assessment of the course’s merit but she acknowledged that students may be unclear about what this means. She suggested the goal was to ask the students if they feel that they have learned something. hari suggested making the question more focused on learning. The question could ask students, for example, to describe some things they had learned that they would now like to pursue further. Klára said she thought that question would lead students to list the things they had learned, which would not be her intention.

Caroline then clarified that what she really wants to know is whether students were supported in their learning, challenged intellectually. hari suggested that the wheel need not be re-invented, but instead suggested turning to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) survey, which has questions on specific dimensions of student learning. Faculty could ask how effective the course was in helping students understand higher order learning or in what ways the course helped students learn something that changed the way they understood an issue or concept. The questions could also address modes of learning, asking about the balance between hours students spent working on homework by themselves versus with a peer or how often students learned something from a peer’s contribution to class discussion. Another question might address how often students found their point of view being constructively challenged.

Alex said that while these are questions that would be of great value to the individual instructor, the committee is tasked with developing generic questions that might apply to a range of courses. He thought it difficult to see any one question doing that. Caroline wondered if it might be possible to provide a range of questions, with a link that would allow faculty to click on questions they would want to add. Klára suggested the questions ask a generic question about the effectiveness of the course and then offer several examples of what the course could achieve. Sean thought many faculty would not want to customize their questions. Caroline suggested it would depend on how easily it could be done. David recommended that the committee formulate default questions such that each would be meaningful to a significant subgroup of the faculty.

hari suggested the committee aim for three to five questions, each focusing on a different dimension. The first could focus, for example, on the learning environment; the second could focus on an aspect of students working together; and a third could address the work load. The committee could offer a default question for each focus area and some additional questions that could be substituted. Turning to the drafted questions, he said the first is purely summative in nature (the educational merit of the course, quality of the instructor) but the question’s current wording is too vague to be productive. It would benefit from being made more specific, and redrafted with more formative wording that asks for constructive feedback rather than evaluative comments. The second question seems to address the quantity of required work. Perhaps this question could ask whether the students feel they received timely and fair feedback, or offer constructive suggestions on what kinds of feedback they would find

more helpful. The third question relates to the transfer of knowledge—how the students’ experience in the course has helped them to think about these issues or problems in other contexts. He suggested the committee give him feedback about what it actually wants and he will draft some questions.

Klára said she opposes using a Likert scaled set of questions and would prefer something more thoughtful. She wants to inspire the students to articulate their experience in the course in their own words. Sam and Chico thought the faculty would get more feedback with scaled responses. hari thought the committee should think about what would be most helpful for faculty to read. Faculty will get more thoughtful responses if they make clear that they want feedback and can boost the quantity and quality if they share these dimensions at the beginning of the course and explain they will be asking for feedback on these at the end of the semester. They can also show their responses to the students the following year as a way to encourage constructive feedback. It is important to give a clear message that the feedback will be taken seriously by instructors to help them improve their teaching. Chico agreed that if a student thinks the feedback will be taken seriously and shape the future of the course, the students will take it seriously.

Caroline thought the committee was in agreement that the questions should be formative. Catherine was interested in changing the timing to earlier in the semester, but Alex pointed out that the legislation as passed by the faculty prevented the committee from changing the timing. Caroline said she has found an end-of-semester feedback form to be very useful to learn how best to improve the course for the next time around. hari emphasized that faculty members should be encouraged to explain the purpose of the questions to their students and why this feedback is important. This switches the genre away from a “satisfaction survey” and instead into a dialog about the learning experience. Klára said at the end of the semester students can see the trajectory of the whole course, and this would be valuable in their evaluation. hari added that, at end of the course, faculty can learn about the students’ experience—what they learned that was useful and how their orientation might have changed as a result of the course. Caroline added that she saw incredible value in asking students to reflect on a course. The committee thanked hari who offered to send examples and links to more questions. David said he would contact him for further assistance, and at 3:55 p.m. hari departed.

### **Second round of pre-registration proposal**

David pointed the committee’s attention next to the latest version of the proposal. Klára made a few suggestions and recommended that he revise the exceptions section to focus on how instructors who wish to manage their own course enrollments should proceed. Sean advised the committee to think through possible questions that the faculty might raise. David said he will send this revised document to the Committee of Six.

### **Course proposals**

Committee members considered the proposals, focusing in several instances on student eligibility and prerequisites, compactness of descriptions, enrollment caps, meeting times, and overlap between course offerings. The meeting adjourned at 4:25 p.m.