

Beyond SIRS:

Other Ways to Evaluate Effective Teaching

In response to a request from the Provost's Office for ideas from UCAP on how teaching at MSU might be evaluated beyond the S.I.R.S. currently in use, we offer the following thoughts on how this might be accomplished:

- We recommend the formation of a university task-force to fully explore the question, including a survey of teaching evaluation methods at other universities and a thorough survey of published research on the topic.

- While there are several alternative methods for evaluating teaching performance beyond S.I.R.S., it should be pointed out that each involves a greater expenditure of time for both faculty and administrators.

- Several alternative methods for evaluating effective teaching—with some advantages and disadvantages of each—are outlined below. This is a partial list—outlining only a few of the more commonly used methods of evaluation—and should be seen as a starting place for further inquiry.

1) Expanded / Improved SIRS form

- A SIRS form with less reliance on the computer-scored bubble-sheet, and more emphasis on short written responses. Better questions = more useful and reliable feedback.

- **Advantages:**

- Easily administered at the end of the semester.
- Comparatively easy to evaluate.
- Doesn't involve a major departure from the current system.

• **Disadvantages:**

- Fraught with many of the perceived difficulties of the current SIRS system.
- Time consuming and thus, more expensive than the current system.

2) Classroom Visits

- Annual / Semi-annual visits to classroom / lab by other faculty members designed to monitor classroom teaching.

• **Advantages:**

- Provides a professional (non-student) perspective on a faculty member's classroom methods.
- Provides a beneficial exposure to other perspectives on teaching for both faculty members.

• **Disadvantages:**

- Time consuming: may be seen as yet another burden on faculty.
- May be seen as invasive.
- Subject to cronyism / departmental politics.
- Limited in scope: evaluates only one day's classroom activities, and ignores the fact that much teaching occurs *outside* the classroom.

3) Teaching Portfolios

- A “paper trail” of a faculty member’s teaching effectiveness which could be annually reviewed. Might include items such as syllabi, problem sets, assignments, self evaluations, student comments / letters, and other evidence of innovative and effective teaching.

- **Advantages:**

- Perhaps the most detailed and all-inclusive method of evaluating teaching.
- The process of putting together a teaching portfolio can be, in itself, a step towards more effective teaching.

- **Disadvantages:**

- Can be time consuming and difficult to evaluate.
- Subjective, and thus apt to focus on strengths rather than weaknesses.
- Concerns over whether a polished teaching portfolio = great teaching.

4) Annual self evaluation by faculty

- A yearly document, written by each faculty member, discussing in detail his or her teaching performance during the previous year.

- **Advantages:**

- May be completed annually as a regular part of year-end activities.
- As with the use of teaching portfolios, self reflection about one year’s teaching may lead to improvement in the next year’s work.

- **Disadvantages:**

- Subjective

5) “Exit Evaluations” by upper division students

- S.I.R.S.-type (or other) evaluations completed by students a year or more *after* a course—or sequence of courses—has ended.

- **Advantages:**

- May allow greater objectivity in student responses.
- May allow first-year students a greater basis for comparison in deciding what constitutes “average,” or “excellent” teaching.

- **Disadvantages:**

- Passage of time between course and evaluation may result in inaccurate responses.
- Provides much slower feedback for faculty than current S.I.R.S. system.