

UCAP Observations on
Report from UCAP to Provost Simon
Improving Undergraduate Instruction at MSU

Teaching Evaluation
and
Enhancing the Perceived Importance of
Undergraduate Instruction at MSU

Introduction

One of the issues charged to UCAP for the year 2000-2001 was investigating alternative methods for evaluating and valuing classroom instruction by faculty. After an initial discussion, several members questioned exactly what our charge was and also whether putting effort into this issue would yield significant results. UCAP invited the Provost to a meeting to discuss further their concerns as well as the broad issue of teacher evaluation.

On January 11, 2001, at a regularly scheduled UCAP meeting, the Provost clarified her charge to UCAP. Over the past few years, UCAP has felt strongly encouraged by the responsiveness of the Provost to concerns raised by UCAP. Again the Provost confirmed her commitment to strengthen faculty perception regarding the importance of instruction in general, and teacher evaluation in particular, based in part on feedback from UCAP.

Subsequently UCAP members categorized the issues under consideration to fall into three overlapping topics:

- Specific tools for evaluation of faculty teaching
- Successful incorporation of teaching evaluation into the reward and promotion system

· Effective positive change of the campus culture regarding faculty perceptions of the concrete importance laid on teaching and instructional development for purposes of career advancement at MSU

The Provost requested UCAP to "brainstorm" and offer ideas, but not necessarily to provide a detailed plan, nor to do extensive research on this topic. In this report UCAP lists several such "brainstorming" ideas. In addition UCAP members view this as a complex issue, worthy of serious study by a group of experts with credentials that address all three of the above topics. While desiring the expertise of researchers in this area, UCAP also views it as crucial that representatives from the academic community, with diverse opinions, are an integral part of the deliberations and entire review process. Hence UCAP would like to work in conjunction with the group of experts. Details on this follow. UCAP members were concerned that there appeared to be a lack of follow up to a previous study (CIERT: Committee on Improvement, Evaluation, and Reward for Teaching) on this same issue roughly ten years ago (in 1994). CIERT yielded little effect regarding at least one critical issue: the culture. That is; the common perception by faculty (and students) is that departments and central administration do not value teaching. UCAP would like a major goal to be a substantive change in the current campus culture toward acknowledgement and increased value on the importance of classroom instruction.

This report consists of three major sections:

- The recommendation for formation of a group of experts
- "Brainstorming" ideas
- Comments and recommendations concerning ways other than SIRS to evaluate instruction.

Part 1

Group of Experts: Establishment and charge

UCAP recommends the formation of a small group of faculty with expertise in evaluating, rewarding and emphasizing teaching.

As a first step UCAP suggests this group synthesize what has been done and publicize the resources that are available. UCAP would like this group to fully explore the issues, including reviewing current practices at MSU and at peer (and other) institutions, as well as the results of past efforts in this regard (e.g., the CIERT report).

UCAP feels one of the most crucial issues - the campus culture - remains essentially unaffected by past efforts. UCAP asks why. Is it because past recommendations were insufficient to effect a change? Is it because critical recommendations were not implemented? Have there been successful programs at comparable institutions to improve the perceived importance of instruction within the campus culture? Or is the perception here based on facts that simply have not changed, but could be changed by administrative or other actions? If so, what actions? UCAP offers some ideas in this report, but one of the persistent problems is that UCAP members are not expert in this area and have neither the expertise, resources, nor tools to do an adequate study. The issue of the campus culture, perhaps the most recalcitrant of all issues, has central importance. Without an effective plan to actually change the importance laid on teaching within our campus community, no other action that might be taken will likely be effective.

An essential part of the culture issue is how to meaningfully incorporate or revise the overall reward structure for faculty so that it substantively reflects the importance of instruction. UCAP suggests that this issue, and more broadly the issue of campus culture, be specifically examined by the group of experts.

Finally UCAP suggests they determine what other options exist and produce a report, with recommendations, for further discussion by the members of UCAP (and possibly UCFA). UCAP would like to continue to be consulted (and/or to contribute to the formation of final recommendations) regarding this important issue.

Part 2: "Brainstorming" Ideas

Accountability of Administrative Unit Heads

It seems past focus often has been on evaluating faculty teaching, on how chairs reward teaching and what funds are available from the administration for rewards. However, it appears that another link often was not addressed: How accountable are administrative units regarding the teaching issue? Is this a serious responsibility and how is this judged? Is there simply a question or two, with no substantive way of evaluation? Does the unit administrator simply glance at courses, lack of student complaints, student credit hours, the number of majors in a

program? Is there real accountability in a serious way regarding quality of teaching and whether individual faculty are seriously rewarded for quality teaching—at the dean, unit director level? Does the dean or unit director send messages to chairs asking about how teaching is evaluated, or whether teaching is rewarded? Is there a clear message from the administration, backed up by the dean's **own** accountability, that teaching does count?

Create a Meaningful Weighting Factor for Instruction in the Determination of Salary, Promotion and Tenure Decisions

A clear-cut and central problem lies in the disparity between what many faculty experience in their annual evaluation and what is listed as evaluation criteria. Current University policy stipulates that merit, tenure and promotion are based on what constitutes meritorious performance and/or excellence in instruction, research and outreach/service as related to percentage of assignment. For many faculty members, teaching “counts” at least 40%, **on paper**. In practice, for the same faculty, teaching counts for nearly nothing. This is the common view. UCAP believes there is a problem both in reality and in the perception among faculty and students. The perception among faculty on campus is that quality instruction doesn't count for much period, and certainly when compared with research productivity.

With few exceptions, the reported experiences confirm that teaching, unless done extremely poorly, will have negligible impact on one's evaluation, raises, promotion—even respect—within one's department. Even when according to the departmental bylaws or stated procedures, teaching is evaluated on some sort of comparable basis with research, the scoring itself is often biased - requiring as a prerequisite for obtaining a “good” teaching mark, the person be highly active in research. For example, someone who is an excellent undergraduate teacher but is not as active in research, may not be counted as being equal, even in the teaching aspect of their evaluation, to someone who is not as effective as a teacher but who is active in research, and hence has graduate students, and, following the chain one step further, may teach an advanced level seminar in their research area. This is of great concern to UCAP in particular, given its charge regarding undergraduate education. In light of all this, it is admirable that most faculty members do take their undergraduate teaching seriously.

One possible approach for addressing this commonly held faculty perception is to have the Provost's office issue a policy guideline on faculty evaluation that requires that the final determination of merit, promotion or tenure for any particular faculty member be based on their percentage of assignment as reflected in their workload - AND that such an evaluative determination be clearly reflected and explainable using a numerical formulation so that instruction evaluation is independent of research activities.

Selected other ideas

- Effective communication between administration and faculty, backed by visible action. If teaching is important, then the administration could incorporate more of an emphasis on this in its Chair's seminars. As an example, chairs could be encouraged to instigate seminars or programs devoted to teaching. For example, Chairs can be encouraged to have even a day or two a semester with meetings regarding exchanging ideas on teaching certain courses, or types of courses.
- Video taping of classroom teaching can be offered and encouraged (with appropriate staff available). However, UCAP recommends that this be used in a positive, constructive way and not as a tool for evaluation. This can be extremely helpful to faculty to improve their teaching. Providing constructive services such as this also could affect the climate and show the university's increased emphasis on and appreciation of teaching.
- Establishment of a strong, central unit devoted to being a resource for teaching. The video taping service could be one facet of this unit.
- Possible establishment of a mandated minimum of cases in which teaching excellence is the sole or primary measure of receipt of reward, equal in scale to rewards earned through fund-raising and scholarship. In addition, the creation of a few large-scale awards comparable to Distinguished Professorships (based here on outstanding teaching).
- Universal promotion of improvement of teaching competence, as opposed to self-selected subgroups of faculty participating in improvement programs. An effective way to accomplish this may be to make the taking of skill-enhancing training a regular part of the work load, with other parts of the work load adjusted to compensate for this part. Participation and outcome would be part of annual evaluations.

- Enhancement of unit abilities to support teaching. Rather than having annual 1% cutbacks in S&S, a strong positive message would be sent by having teaching support resources enhanced.

Part 3: Alternative Ways to Evaluate Effective Teaching (beyond SIRS)

While there are several alternative methods for evaluating teaching performance beyond S.I.R.S., it should be pointed out as strong preface 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. Evaluation of Student Learning

- Testing done at the end of a course or course sequence to determine if the faculty member's class has succeeded in learning key skills and concepts.

· *Advantages:*

- Offers a clear and demonstrable picture of the results of a faculty member's course.
- Course specific, and thus, more accurate and detailed than more generalized methods.

· *Disadvantages:*

- Easier to implement in some courses (math, science) than others (writing, humanities).
- Time consuming, greater expense.
- May also necessitate entry exams to establish a baseline of student knowledge.

3. **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.
- Reluctance to evaluate colleague when there are financial / tenure implications.
- Limited in scope: evaluates only one day's classroom activities, and ignores the fact that much teaching occurs throughout the semester, and often, *outside* the classroom.

4. **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.

5. **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

6. **“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.