Teaching and Advising Committee
Minutes
30 October 2017

Phinney 102 Conference Room
Present: Stephan Flores (Chair), Allan Caplan, Erin Chapman, Helen Joyner, Matt Doumit, Christine Slater, and Carlos Vazquez.

Stephan called the meeting to order at 12:32 p.m.

The Minutes of the meeting of October 9 were approved, with abstentions from those who were not able to attend that meeting.

Main topic was follow-up discussion continuing from email exchange, prompted Stephan having received a request/directive from Dale Pietrzak to ask TeAC to weigh in on whether we approve or have any objection to proceeding with the intended and approved plan from prior 2015-2016 TeAC to transition beyond the ‘transitional’ students’ evaluation of teaching form and questions to move to the anticipated ‘final’ form of the revised evaluation forms, particularly relative to the original/old form with its questions.

Stephan had passed along from Dale in his email to TeAC the old form/questions, the transitional form (about which TeAC already received feedback from Dale and which was the subject of TeAC first couple of meetings early this fall semester, and which as validated—as Stephan put it—no one seemed that inclined to mess with, and also a third document which is the intended final form, that basically cuts out a series of older questions that were in the transitional form.

Here is an excerpt from Dale’s email, for reference in these minutes:
“I just wanted to be clear as I had reported a process that I understood Faculty Senate had wanted us to follow.

1.) That a review of the old form be done. This was completed and a summary appears on the web site now.
2.) That the “new” forms and/or items be developed by TeAC and approved by faculty Senate and the President for testing and review. This was completed.
3.) That a “transitional” form be developed and used for the testing and review in the FA16 and SP16 terms. With the analysis and recommendation from IEA be provided by FA17 term. Approval from the President, Provost and Faculty Senate (TeAC Committee as part of the Faculty Senate process). This is partially completed. The analysis and reporting was completed and forwarded to each channel for review. The President and Provost have approved of it at this point. The Faculty Senate side has not been finalized as yet.
4.) If/Once finalized the “transitional form” used on line be replaced with the “final” form attached here (both are attached). This “final” version pulls the old questions and the “validation questions”, shortening it from the transitional form.

I am fine with your not asking for it to be changed, however if we receive questions from Faculty Senate I want to be sure you had all the information on this process.”

As noted further above, TeAC continued its discussion: Stephan led off by summarizing/reminding members of Allan’s preference (expressed initially by email) for something like the provisional form that has the additional questions, though he also noted that the drawback is that the more questions you ask, the more quickly you lose the interest of the students and the more likely they are to not answer anything. Therefore, Allan also was agreeable with the shorter form. Karen had expressed by email the value of reviewing the forms yet also supported moving toward approving the final form, relative to the original questions.

Allan also expressed concern and critique about the form’s emphasis on asking “how much did the course contribute to your understanding”, with the emphasis on the word understanding. That is, good (i.e., successful)
students might have enough perspective to compare what was taught to what the field requires, but poor students will not (if they knew the topic that well, they would probably do better, or be in another course). It’s like saying, did this course teach you everything you needed to know to get around in France? If you have never been there, how could you all the little differences between life there and here?

Helen agreed with Allan’s points, noting in particular that it is difficult for students to judge their absolute knowledge about something. She suggests that we may want to focus on asking about learning gains, e.g. “Overall, I learned a lot in this course” or “The instructor’s teaching style helped me significantly increase my knowledge about the course topics.”

Helen had also expressed that she is wary of questions that ask about multiple things, e.g. how much did A and B contribute to X. As she put it, “If A contributed greatly and B did not, you end up with a huge range of variation in the answer. There are a couple of questions like this and each should be split into two different questions so they are clearer about what they are asking.”

Stephan agreed in general, with the potential problem of questions that ask—as do questions numbers four and five on the final form—about two things, but he wondered if in this case whether the summative value of the emphasis on what was learned “overall,” suggests that the point of these questions is not to worry unduly over whether the emphases are different or blurred. For example, in question four, might “content” and “organization” be more like flip sides of the same coin—you can’t have one without the other?

Helen and Erin expressed some appreciation of this possibility, but expressed that in question five, “delivery” and “efforts” are such different things that this question conflates what it purports to measure and that these things should be separated into different questions for better measurement.

Helen and others also expressed concern over question six with its mention of the instructor’s helpfulness “outside of class or online learning environment”—is this meant to stress individual help and also to include multiple contexts for online learning?

Matt noted that deans and department chairs have valued and relied upon the old form’s two questions that rate the instructor’s performance in teaching and the quality of the course. He also found that much of the import of these questions appear to continue in questions four and five in the new/final form.

Substantial discussion followed, ranging across such topics/issues as response rates, incentives and methods for increasing response rates and also how late the evaluation period can possibly be—perhaps into finals week?—as well as drawbacks to instructors’ rewarding students for a class’s high response rates, the limits of what student evaluations of teaching can measure, including research that shows that what is measured is how students regard the general ‘atmosphere’ or mood of the classroom. Kenton also had expressed by email an interest in extending the evaluation period into finals week.

As time ran out, the committee agreed that, if possible/permissible, the questions on the proposed ‘final’ form could be reviewed and revised a bit further.

The meeting adjourned at 12:31 p.m.

Next meeting we are likely to continue the conversation as well as take up discussion of plus/minus grading. When: 12:30 p.m. -1:25 p.m. Monday November 6, 2017 Where: Phinney 102 conference room

Minutes submitted respectfully by Stephan Flores.