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MEMORANDUM

ATTENTION	Senate	**DATE**	March 29, 2011
FROM	Jon Driver, Vice-President, Academic and Provost	**PAGES**	1/3
RE:	Teaching and Learning Evaluation		

"...it is not a matter of whether we evaluate teaching but rather a question of how we do it. What ends do we have in mind and who controls the process? If academics fail to take responsibility for evaluation of teaching, it is clear that others will be eager to do so" (Christopher Knapper 2001 "Broadening Our Approach to Teaching Evaluation", in Fresh Approaches to the Evaluation of Teaching and Learning, ed. C. Knapper and P. Cranton, pp 3-9. New Directions in Teaching and Learning 88. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco)

Background

One of the major themes of the 2010-2013 Academic Plan is "teaching and learning in a research university", and the plan contains a number of initiatives to ensure we focus on providing the best learning opportunities for students.

Clearly, instructors play a crucial role in the quality of teaching and learning. For many years Simon Fraser University has required that instructors be evaluated in various ways, and that for continuing employees these evaluations should be part of the evidence assessed during salary review, contract renewal, tenure, and promotion. For limited term employees, the same instruments can be used for salary review and reappointment decisions. Much of the literature on student evaluations suggests that these should be used in conjunction with other forms of evaluation for the purposes of assessment of instructors.

However, course and instructor evaluations should not be used solely for evaluation of employees. Other important purposes include:

a) evaluation of most effective teaching and learning methods
b) evaluation of innovation in teaching and learning
c) comparison of student assessment of learning outcomes with the intended objectives of a course or program
d) self-reflection by instructors

In 2008 the Senate Committee on University Teaching (SCUTL) prepared a report "Evaluating How We Evaluate" that examined the processes used to evaluate instructors and courses. The Senate Committee on Agenda and Rules suggested that the recommendations be considered within the Task Force on Teaching and Learning's (TFTL) work. In the TFTL's environmental scan, the same issues were found as by SCUTL, and SCUTL's recommendations were then incorporated into the TFTL's report. The SCUTL report was presented to Senate for information in December 2010, and the VPA made a commitment to begin a review of the evaluation process and, if appropriate, initiate changes.

The SCUTL report (2008) focused largely on how SFU has evaluated teaching skills of instructors and the content and structure of courses. It also reviewed some of the current literature on evaluation, and looked at some options for improvement. Its overall recommendations were:

- Develop more effective forms that can be used to evaluate courses and instructors
- Create best-practice guidelines for academic units on how to evaluate teaching and courses, and how to use information collected
- Enhance the University's support and professional development opportunities for instructors

The TFTL devoted one of four working groups to the evaluation and recognition of teaching and learning. The TFTL report (2010) recommended that SFU, "Increase awareness of policy provisions that address the importance accorded to teaching and learning, promote a consistent interpretation of policy provisions, and implement further initiatives that value the teaching mission of the University." One of the sub-recommendations suggested developing a coherent system to evaluate teaching and learning effectiveness and to do so, would require developing and offering new course and instructor evaluation forms as well as related support for instructors and departments and a more comprehensive approach to evaluate teaching and learning effectiveness.

As well, embedded in its final recommendations to the VPA are a number of relevant items:

- The University should evaluate instructors, courses and programs regularly for learning effectiveness
- There should be more consistent recognition of good/effective teaching, with a reward system to match
- Instructors should be encouraged to experiment with new methods, and evaluation methods should make allowance for experiments that do not succeed
- The scholarship of teaching and learning should be recognized as a valid research contribution

Taken together, these two reports clearly indicate the need for action around the evaluation of teaching and learning, and the use to which those evaluations are put. The fact that the University is also seeking accreditation through the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities is another reason for re-thinking our evaluation methods. NWCCU emphasizes the need to evaluate learning and program outcomes, and this will require a shift in how we approach program design and how instructors implement programs and program components. Such changes will be reflected in course and instructor evaluations.

It is important to recognize that the desire to re-consider evaluation of instructors and courses does not arise from significant dissatisfaction on the part of students or academic administrators about the quality of instruction or curriculum. However, we now have much better information on what constitutes effective practice, when compared with our state of knowledge 30 years ago when the basic structure of our evaluation process was developed. Bearing this in mind, any development of new evaluation methods must include input from instructors, and we have to be careful to ensure that new forms of evaluation do not create new workload for instructors and academic departments, and that they do not stifle creativity.

Process

The VPA requests: (1) that Senate approve the following terms of reference for a project to be led by SCUTL, and (2) that Senate requests SCUTL to report to Senate by March 2012.

1. SCUTL will serve as an oversight committee for a project to be funded by the VPA.

2. SCUTL will oversee the preparation of a report for Senate that includes:
   a) instrument(s) and processes that collect student input on the effectiveness of individual instructors

b) instrument(s) and processes that collect student input on the value of an individual course to their program of study
c) a range of instruments for different types of educational settings (e.g. large classes, seminars, field work, graduate programs etc.) commonly experienced at SFU
d) for all instruments, recommendations to ensure that efficient methods of data collection and storage are used, and to ensure that privacy of instructors is maintained
e) for all instruments, "core" questions that would be common to all evaluations, as well as an opportunity for academic departments to customize some questions, either for a program or for individual courses.

3. SCUTL will prepare a second document that provides a set of guidelines for best practices in the following areas:
   a) methods for evaluation of instructors and courses that can be used in the development of department-specific guidelines, as required by policies A11.05 and A12.01 and by the TSSU collective agreement;
   b) the use of evaluations by students as a component of a broader set of evaluative processes
   c) processes to ensure that innovation and experimentation in teaching (either by individual instructors or by programs) is not deterred by fear of negative evaluations
   d) preparation by instructors of teaching dossiers/portfolios that respond to or reflect on teaching evaluations.

4. VPA will provide a budget to hire or second a project manager/researcher/writer with expertise in teaching evaluation in post-secondary education and evaluation who will develop the instruments and other documents, and who will report to the Director of the Teaching and Learning Centre, who is also secretary to SCUTL.

5. SCUTL is expected to ensure consultation with academic administrators, faculty members and other instructors, SFUFA and TSSU, experts in teaching and learning, and students.

6. SCUTL is expected to consult with SFU academic units about practices that have been effective, and to undertake research on effective practices that have been developed by other institutions.

7. SCUTL should advise Senate on opportunities and problems that would be encountered if the University changed to electronic methods for soliciting student feedback.

8. SCUTL will provide a status update in November 2011 and report back to Senate by March 2012.