

Report of the Task Force on Student Evaluation of Teaching

April 20, 2001

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Report of the Student Evaluation of Teaching Committee April 2001

Introduction

In Spring 2000, the Government of the Student Body (GSB) and the Executive Committee of the Faculty Senate began discussing student evaluation of teaching and the need to provide feedback to students. A variety of issues were identified, many of which created strong feelings among faculty and students. All parties agreed that a joint effort among the GSB, the Faculty Senate, and the central administration was needed. In October 2000, Provost Richmond asked GSB and the Faculty Senate to suggest representatives, and in November he appointed the Task Force on Student Evaluation of Teaching.

Task Force Charge

The Task Force was given the following charge:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current system of student evaluation of teaching?
- What models are available from other institutions that incorporate the use of the web and other tools, and how might such models be adapted at Iowa State?
- What issues need to be addressed in order to improve our system, and who should address them?

Task Force Process

The task force met once near the end of the Fall semester and then weekly in January and February, 2001. The process involved three initial stages:

- 1) Brainstorming and categorizing issues of concern to different constituencies and understanding the purposes for which student input and feedback are needed.
- 2) Studying the current ISU evaluation system and comparing it with the literature on effective use of student input to improve teaching and learning.
- 3) Studying evaluation systems in place at other institutions.

This work was completed by the end of February, and the Task Force spent the month of March developing its draft report and recommended actions. The Task Force members

believe they have developed an understanding of some of the complex issues involved in a student evaluation and feedback system as well as a fairly complete idea of what is available for such purposes. We believe we have laid a good foundation for further work and that those who carry on with this effort will have a solid starting point.*

Evaluation of Current System

ISU has an established system of teaching evaluation in place in which students complete end-of-course rating forms. In many instances, the instruments used for this purpose have been in place for long periods, and a great deal of data have been accumulated over time. These data are used by faculty for feedback on the effectiveness of their instruction, and the data play a role in annual faculty evaluation as well as in the promotion and tenure process. In some colleges, more comprehensive student evaluation systems have been developed to address the needs of students, faculty, and administration.

The Task Force acknowledges the importance of student input in improving instruction and evaluating courses and instructors. However, we have identified several general concerns about the efficacy and usefulness of the overall system as it now stands:

- The current system of evaluation is not implemented in a uniform manner across campus. Some faculty, students, and administrators find this lack of consistency problematic.
- Many individuals question what the current system actually measures.
- The evaluative questions asked of students often relate more to student satisfaction than to student learning.
- The current system is only indirectly tied to the learning expectations of students or faculty.
- Because the evaluative information is not referenced to criteria for effective teaching, the system provides little formative, or developmental, information that can lead to improved teaching.

* A brief bibliography is included at the end of this document.

- The current system focuses primarily on teaching behaviors and supports the premise that the instructor is at the center of the learning experience. Some believe that the system should foster more student responsibility for learning.
- Because of the high stakes use of the data for such things as promotion and tenure, faculty are often reluctant to take risks (that is, open themselves up to criticism) and try new techniques or approaches.
- The heavy reliance on student evaluation data in tenure and promotion decisions leads to a mentality that the information is used primarily to punish those at the low end and that there is little interest in promoting growth and development.

Guiding Perspective

In light of the above critique of the current system of evaluation of teaching, the Task Force is in favor of developing a more effective system for determining and enhancing the quality of teaching. The goal would be to approach the task from a different perspective. The ideal direction would be to build communities of faculty and student learners at ISU in which faculty members and students enrolled in their courses engage in two-way communication about the many ways to facilitate student learning.

Continuously improving ISU courses and students' learning experiences through a well-designed communication and feedback system would be an important component in achieving Goal 1 of ISU's *Strategic Plan for 2000-2005*: "Enhance learning through exceptional learner-centered teaching, services, and enrichment opportunities."

Learner-centered education includes what is called "active learning," an educational philosophy that places the student at the center of his or her education. It begins with an understanding of the educational contexts from which a student comes. It continues with the instructor and the student evaluating the student's progress toward clearly identified learning objectives. A learner-centered focus helps the student acquire the basic skills to learn and ultimately provides a basis for learning throughout life. Educators who adopt a learner-centered focus urge students to join them in the learning process. Learners assume primary responsibility for their choices and exercise control over their learning.

Improving teaching in this context calls for a system of continuous feedback about teaching and learning based on a consistent conceptual framework. As a basis for such a framework, the Task Force agrees on the following fundamental principles that reinforce the centrality of student learning at ISU:

Fundamental Principles

- 1) Students have a right to receive information about a course in order to assist them with academic planning. The information should reveal the anticipated learning experience in the course.
- 2) Students and professors share responsibility for student learning.
- 3) Assessing the effectiveness of pedagogical techniques in promoting learning is a legitimate form of scholarly inquiry.
- 4) Just as students need feedback to improve their learning, so professors need feedback to improve their teaching in ways that enhance learning.
- 5) Feedback should focus on the effectiveness of various components of the learning environment such as the instructor's role in promoting learning, the student's role and responsibility in the learning process, the course materials and activities, the course assignments, etc. The feedback components should reflect principles of good practice in education that derive from research findings.
- 6) All forms of feedback information should be reliable and valid for the purposes for which they are used.
- 7) The dissemination of feedback information should be limited based on the purposes for which it is used.
- 8) Feedback information can take many forms and serve many purposes (ongoing course improvement, annual review, promotion and tenure, student academic planning, etc.)
- 9) Improving learning in courses requires a feedback system that includes multiple measures and complementary feedback strategies. The information collected should

include quantitative and qualitative information, some of which is formative (during the course) and some of which is summative (at the end of the course).

- 10) Legitimate sources of feedback about the effectiveness of courses include a variety of reflections and opinions from students, faculty peers, administrators, and instructors themselves.

Conceptual Framework for Enhancing Learning

The Task Force has developed the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1 to guide future deliberations about using feedback to enhance learning at ISU. The framework presents a continuous improvement concept to support learning in undergraduate and graduate courses. In this system, feedback for professors and students is generated before, during, and after the course.

Before the Course

Professors would share course information with students as they consider enrolling in it. The information would reveal to prospective students the type of learning experience they could anticipate in the course. The information could address a variety of factors such as course content, the instructor's teaching styles, artifacts from the course, and data that summarize the observations of previous students.

During the Course

The professor and the students enrolled in the course would engage in two-way feedback. The professor would share information with individuals about their progress in learning, and students would share information with the professor about aspects of the course that facilitate or interfere with learning. Faculty peers could also observe the course and share insights with the instructor and/or students about how teaching and learning appear to be unfolding in the course.

At the End of the Course

Professors would prepare final grades for students, and students would complete an end-of-course feedback form. Information gathered before, during, and after the course could be part of the faculty member's teaching portfolio and could be shared with appropriate

colleagues and administrators during annual reviews or during promotion and tenure reviews. Information about the course and how it promotes learning might also appear on the professor's web page or in scholarly outlets as part of the professor's scholarship of teaching.

In order to organize and support the efforts embodied in the diagram of Figure 1, the Task Force supports the Provost's plan to appoint a Council on Learning Enhancement. The Council will be a broad-based group charged with 1) coordinating and assessing the University's activities to enhance learning, and 2) providing a mechanism for on-going review of progress in meeting Goal 1 of the 2000-2005 Strategic Plan. The Council will have the specific charge to oversee continued development of an effective system of student input and feedback to enhance learning.

Recommended Actions

Task Force on Student Evaluation of Teaching

April, 2001

To develop and implement a comprehensive feedback system leading to continuous improvement of learning at ISU, the Task Force recommends the following actions:

1. Create opportunities for students, faculty, and administrators to discuss, endorse, and adopt the principles developed by the Task Force.

Responsible party: GSB, Faculty Senate, Provost Office
Timeline: Adoption by December 2001

2. Develop and implement a student information website.

Responsible party: Committee appointed by the Provost with representatives from GSB, Faculty Senate, and appropriate academic units
Timeline: Pilot: May 2002; Fully-functioning site: May 2003

3. Develop an improved formative feedback system.

Responsible party: Council on Learning Enhancement to be appointed by the Provost
Timeline: Council appointed by October, 2001; On-going development

4. Develop an improved summative feedback system.

Responsible party: Council on Learning Enhancement to be appointed by the Provost
Timeline: Council appointed by October, 2001; On-going development

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Figure 1: A Continuous Improvement Feedback System to Support Learning in Undergraduate and Graduate Courses

