

Final Report of the Student Evaluation of Teaching Committee

Executive Summary

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Submitted to:

**Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs
University of South Alabama
Mobile, AL 36688**

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Final Report of the Student Evaluation of Teaching Committee

Executive Summary

A university wide committee, with representatives from USA administration, faculty and students, was established in September 2001. The Student Evaluation of Teaching Committee was charged to: (1) Study the broad issue of student evaluation of teaching; (2) Examine the issue of whether or not results of such evaluations should be made available to students; and (3) Examine the issue of whether or not the University of South Alabama should establish a requirement that all sections of all classes be evaluated each semester.

The committee completed four tasks: (1) Inventoried student evaluation of teaching (SET) policies and procedures at USA; (2) Reviewed the scientific literature to identify best SET practices used at U.S. colleges and universities; (3) Conducted a survey of chief academic officers to estimate the percentage of schools that publish results of student ratings of instruction, and to identify the likely effects of publication on faculty and student morale; and, based on the findings from these activities, (4) Developed recommendations for changing policies and procedures at USA.

Based on its research and deliberations, the SET committee makes the following recommendations:

*1. The committee does **not** recommend, at this time, that results of student ratings of instructional effectiveness be published and made available to students (7 votes in favor, 0 opposed, 2 abstentions).*

Rationale: We reached this decision based on the following:

a. Our surveys of chief academic officers indicated that publication of SET results had only modest benefits for those institutions that currently engage in the practice. The likely primary benefit of such a policy would be symbolic: The policy would communicate that USA is friendly to student interests in effective teaching. We believe that if we were to publish such findings on our campus, it is likely that our experience would mirror that of these other institutions: We, too, would achieve a modest symbolic benefit.

b. The most important potential beneficiaries of a policy to publish such results are students. Our committee could not detect much student interest in this issue. The student members of our committee did not report much enthusiasm for the topic. When it was reported to us that student government had passed a resolution in favor of the practice, we requested a copy of the resolution. Our student committee members were

unable to produce it. Our committee was open to student input, and actively solicited it, but we received very little indication of student interest.

c. Based on the results of our survey of other campuses, and anecdotal reports to committee members from USA faculty, we believe that a large number of faculty members at USA would be opposed to this policy.

d. Many faculty members lack confidence in the validity, reliability and utility of the current evaluation form used in their departments. To publish evaluation results gathered using a form that is widely perceived to have questionable validity would create unnecessary conflict on campus.

e. Given the lack of student interest, the perception of significant faculty opposition to the policy, the perception that we currently use a flawed SET form and the likely small benefits to be realized, the SET committee does not believe, at this time, that the potential benefits exceed the costs of such a policy. If students become mobilized on this topic in the future, and if USA develops an evaluation form and procedure that are widely perceived as legitimate, then the committee recommends that the University be open to reconsideration of the issue of publishing SET results.

2. The committee recommends that all colleges require that student evaluations of teaching effectiveness be collected for all classes taught each semester (7 votes in favor, 1 opposed, 1 abstention)

Rationale: Currently, some units of the University only collect data at periodic intervals – it is common in Arts and Sciences, for example, for data to be collected only in fall semester. Other units gather student ratings in all classes. There are two major purposes for assessing student perceptions of teaching effectiveness. The first is summative (or evaluative): to be used in making personnel decisions (e.g. tenure and promotion and annual evaluations). The second is formative: to assist with improvement of instruction. If SET results are to be used in personnel decisions, then systematic sampling (e.g. only collecting data in fall semester) can yield biased data. For example, if one faculty member only teaches lower division classes in the fall, graduate and upper division classes in the spring, and evaluation data is only gathered in the former, his or her evaluation scores may be biased negatively since evaluations tend to be lower in freshmen level courses. To avoid this and similar sources of bias, it makes sense to collect data in every section taught. If SET results are to be used to improve instruction, it also makes sense to collect the data for all courses – presumably we want to improve all instruction, not only that which is delivered in selected classes.

3. The committee recommends that a new standard evaluation form be developed that may be used campus wide (9 votes in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstentions).

Rationale: Each of the experts identified in our literature review recommended that evaluation forms and procedures be developed with full participation and “buy-in” by the faculty. We believe that the standard form currently used by many programs lacks the confidence of the faculty. We recommend that a new form, or new forms, be developed. One good approach, recommended by several experts, uses a two part form. The first part would include a common set of questions that can be used in all classes regardless of teaching format. The second part of the form would be tailored to the particular characteristics of the class, could vary by class format, and would allow for considerable flexibility on the part of departments and individual instructors. Regardless of the final structure of the questionnaire, we feel that a new form needs to be developed, ideally by a committee primarily composed of faculty members, at least some of whom have expertise in social science and/or education research methods, including measurement issues in questionnaire construction. Student participation in this effort is also encouraged. This committee should consider adopting (and adapting as needed to the local environment) forms and procedures validated through use at other universities.

4. All SET instruments should be evaluated for reliability and validity. This evaluation should occur during the construction of the instruments, and periodically thereafter (9 votes in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstentions).

Rationale: All experts in SET recommend this approach. The committee believes that many USA faculty question the face validity of the current standard form, and therefore systematic evaluation of SET instrumentation will increase the perceived legitimacy of the SET process.

5. The Committee recommends that several improvements in SET procedures be implemented. We recommend that results be archived electronically to allow for comparisons among faculty within departments and colleges within a given semester, and across semesters. We recommend that meaningful reports of SET results be prepared for all users of the results, including instructors, chairs and deans. We recommend that the data collection process be made user friendly, reducing the coding burden on proctors as much as possible. (9 votes in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstentions)

Rationale: All of these reforms will increase confidence in the SET process among faculty.

6. Finally, the Committee recommends that the Office of Institutional Research, or some other academic support unit, should be charged with maintaining an effective, valid, and reliable SET process (9 votes in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstentions).

Rationale: Current SET processes are decentralized, without coordination across Colleges, and without much support from any University office. The computing center handles physical processing, but does not deal with issues such as measurement quality (reliability and validity) or interpretation of results. Current reports are misleading and

not easily interpreted. The computer center does not archive data, and therefore cannot produce reports that contain meaningful comparisons, either across time or across academic programs. Assigning data collection, analysis, and reporting tasks to a single support unit will facilitate the reforms identified in recommendation #5.