

# **FINAL REPORT**

## **JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE ON STUDENT EVALUATIONS OF TEACHING**

**JANUARY 2008**

### **SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS**

**FOR UWOFA: ROBERT BAILEY, REBECCA COULTER, KIM  
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**SUBCOMMITTEE CHAIR: GLORIA LECKIE**

**Final Report  
Joint Subcommittee on Student Evaluations of Teaching  
January 2008**

**Subcommittee Members:**

**For UWOFA: Robert Bailey, Rebecca Coulter, Kim Verwaayen  
For the Employer (UWO): John Doerksen, Craig Dunbar, Harry Murray  
Subcommittee Chair: Gloria Leckie**

**Background:**

In keeping with the terms outlined in *Letter of Understanding-M of the Collective Agreement, 2006-2010* (Appendix 1), made between the Association and the Employer, the Joint Subcommittee on Student Evaluations of Teaching was struck in early 2007 by the Joint Committee. The task of the Subcommittee was to

- 1) review current practice and policies relating to the design and collection of student evaluations of teaching;
- 2) consider the design of and philosophy behind those instruments currently used to assess teaching at Western;
- 3) make recommendations for change if the committee agreed by consensus that change was needed in any of the above areas.

The final report of the Subcommittee was to be provided within one year of the date of ratification of the current Collective Agreement (i.e., January 2008) to the Association and the Provost.

**Historical Context:**

The current campus-wide evaluation form for student assessment of teaching was approved by Senate in 1996 for use in all UWO faculties and departments. The distinctive features of the evaluation form include numerical ratings of 16 different teacher and course characteristics, use of a 7-point poor-outstanding rating scale rather than the traditional 5-point agree-disagree scale, written comments from students on the instructor and the course, and assessment of potential biasing factors such as student class attendance and expected grade that can be taken into account in the interpretation of ratings. The teacher and course characteristics included on the new teaching evaluation form were selected on the basis of surveys of UWO faculty members and students as to what they considered to be the most important components of effective university teaching. Also, the items selected for inclusion in the evaluation form were believed to satisfy each of the following criteria: (1) observable by students, (2) under the control of the instructor, (3) applicable to all or nearly all forms of teaching, and (4) positively related to student learning.

The current campus-wide teaching evaluation form was designed primarily for use in salary, promotion, and tenure decisions, but was also considered appropriate for the secondary purposes of feedback to faculty members and information used by students in selecting courses. It was anticipated that departments or individual faculty members who wanted more detailed feedback for improvement of teaching would make use of services provided by the Teaching Support Centre and/or develop their own additional evaluation instruments (such as mid-term feedback, peer evaluation etc.) for this purpose.

The evaluation form as approved by Senate was considered appropriate for use in all Faculties and departments and in all types of courses. Nonetheless, it was approved that departments could choose to incorporate supplementary questions to the standard form, as appropriate to their needs. Furthermore, it was assumed (and approved by Senate) that departments would be free to develop supplementary evaluation forms for atypical or non-traditional courses (such as independent studies, studio courses, practica, service learning etc.).

### **Process Undertaken:**

After much discussion, the current Subcommittee determined that a multidimensional approach would be needed to gather all the information relevant to the task at hand. Accordingly, the Subcommittee undertook the following diverse methods of data collection and information-gathering:

- 1) a review of the current UWO Senate document entitled “University-Wide Instrument for Student Evaluation of Teachers and Courses” (June 1996 – Appendix 2);
- 2) a review of the current UWO evaluation instrument (Appendix 3);
- 3) collection of comparable Senate policies from other Ontario universities, if available;
- 4) collection of statements regarding student evaluations of teaching from other Ontario faculty unions, if available;
- 5) collection and review of survey instruments from other selected institutions;
- 6) discussion with Dr. Joy Mighty, head of a similar committee at Queen’s University;
- 7) development of a survey for Western’s academic administrators, sent out in August 2007, exploring their understanding, implementation and use of student evaluations of teaching (survey Appendix 4A; results in Appendices 4B and 4C);
- 8) three Town Hall meetings in late Sept. and early Oct. 2007 to gather faculty input;
- 9) consultations in Nov. 2007 with the Society of Graduate Students and the University Students’ Council.

It was useful to have this wide variety of methods to understand the rather complex landscape of teaching evaluation at Canadian universities. For example, although the request for Senate policies from other Ontario universities yielded little useful information, it did alert us to the fact that a number of universities do not have written policies on teaching evaluation. Similarly, interactions with university faculty unions revealed that there are other committees working on the issue of student evaluations of teaching and that evaluations have been challenged legally on some campuses. Furthermore, the discussion with Dr. Joy Mighty at Queen’s (who chairs a similar committee there) was very revealing. That committee has been working on the issue of student evaluations of teaching for almost two years, and the process is still ongoing. The committee sought extensive advice from educational specialists during the first year (including attending a number of conferences and seminars), and decided to completely revise the Queen’s student evaluation of teaching instrument. The new instrument is a radical departure and has instituted questions related to learning (e.g. Did the course improve your analytic skills?) instead of teaching (e.g. Is your professor well organized?). We learned valuable lessons from the ongoing Queen’s experience, particularly that there is a very substantial investment of time required to make material improvements to the evaluation process and/or instrument and that meaningful change is possible but requires an extensive process of faculty consultation and testing of any new instrument devised. While we recognize the importance of such work, our subcommittee thought that we were not in a position to undertake it given the time and resources available to us.

Another method employed was the survey developed by the committee and sent in August 2007 to all academic administrators on campus (Appendix 4A). This survey explored a variety of issues surrounding student evaluations of teaching, including

- knowledge about the Senate policy on student evaluations of teaching;
- types of courses that are evaluated in each department/unit;
- level of awareness re ability to add supplementary questions to the standard instrument;
- use of peer evaluation as an alternate method of evaluation;
- the practices/processes regarding the administration of teaching evaluations;
- use of the results of student evaluations of teaching in annual performance reviews;
- use of the results of student evaluations of teaching in P &T reviews;

- use of additional questions on the standard instrument (course status, % of classes attended, level of enthusiasm for the course etc.) as factors influencing the result of the evaluations;
- administrators' observations regarding elements that are missing from the current evaluation instrument.

The questionnaire was sent via the Deans to all Department Chairs and program administrators who are responsible for ensuring that student evaluations of teaching are conducted; forty-three administrators responded. While we had hoped for a greater number of responses, the surveys that were returned yielded valuable information and reinforced the subcommittee's thinking on the problems that seemed to be arising, particularly around the range of very different practices across Faculties and departments in terms of administration of student evaluations of teaching, and their use (see Findings 1 through 4, and 7, 9, 13 in particular).

Meetings with various constituent groups also were informative. The Town Halls for faculty input had small attendance of very engaged people. As expected, their viewpoints varied substantially, and were sometimes at odds with each other, although a number of common issues emerged (see Findings 5 through 12). Similarly, our meetings with student groups (SOGS and USC) again highlighted for us a number of recurring themes and so ultimately were useful events for the subcommittee (see Findings 13 and 14).

### **Findings:**

After analysis, consideration and discussion of all the information collected through our various methods, the subcommittee agreed that a number of issues regarding student evaluations of teaching at Western had emerged and were evident repeatedly throughout our process. These recurring issues include:

- 1) Lack of awareness of the existence of the Senate policy. It is interesting to note here that 62% of the academic administrators surveyed did not have a copy of the policy in their files and only 19% did have a copy. (The remaining 19% were either unsure or left the answer blank).
- 2) Difficulty in accessing the Senate policy on student evaluations of teaching. The policy is located in the Handbook of Academic and Scholarship Policy but this may not be known to most faculty members. Attempting to find the policy on the Senate minutes website is almost impossible. A keyword search on the Senate site under the phrase "evaluation of teaching" returned 622 items, a daunting list and most of them not relevant. Further, of the 33% of administrators who indicated on the survey they had tried at some point to locate the policy, only 16% indicated success.
- 3) Lack of clarity/detail as to correct administrative procedures in the current Senate policy, resulting in
  - a. inconsistent administration of surveys across departments and Faculties. See, for example, wide variation across the undergraduate and graduate evaluation cut-off in relation to class size in charts 4a and 6a (Appendix 4B) and the array of comments at 4b and 6b in Text Responses, (Appendix 4C). That some departments require a minimum number of students in the class for evaluation to take place, where others do not (28% of Administrators indicated their departments will only evaluate undergraduate classes of a certain size, with a range of answers from 5 students through 10 as the cut-off) suggests potential bias, one way or the other, for members' preparation of APE and P&T files;

b. great variability in who actually conducts the teaching evaluations (including staff, TAs, undergraduate students, other faculty members; see especially the chart results at question 14, Appendix 4B);

c. lack of awareness that questions can be added. Indeed, 70% of administrators responding to our survey were not aware of this possibility (see question 9, Appendix 4B);

d. variability as to whether faculty members in various departments have any say as to the timing of the evaluations for their courses (see chart at 15a, Appendix 4B). The most frequent answers to the question on instructor input in the evaluation process were choice in date and/or time, but only seven administrators indicated that faculty did have such input in their departments.

e. lack of consistency as to whether graduate courses are evaluated. As one Administrator stated “A standardized process for evaluating the quality of supervision of both graduate students and fourth year research project students would be welcome. This is only done during the promotion and tenure process by students who choose to participate in the process. It remains as confidential information. Furthermore, evaluations of coordinators of research courses are also problematic. The questions don’t really apply, and thus, may lead to a misleading evaluation.” (Q23b, Text Responses, Appendix 4C)

4) An apparent lack of knowledge as to the proper use of the data from the current teaching evaluation forms. For instance, when the current evaluation instrument was created, the intention was that each course evaluation should be compared only to the evaluation for a comparable course (such as a large lecture course, or a smaller seminar course) since course size and a variety of other factors (such as course level, whether the course is mandatory or elective etc.) could affect the evaluation results. However, this kind of close comparison seems rarely to be done on campus. Fifty-four % of administrators indicated that they do not consider student data (such as percentage of classes attended, expected grade, etc.; see chart 21 Appendix 4B) for P&T or APE processes – but as indicated in the “Historical Context” of this report, assessment of this data as “potential biasing factors” was intended to aid in interpreting evaluation results.

5) Confusion as to the purpose of the evaluation instrument (i.e. Is it primarily for P&T purposes, or as a service to students?? Is it even useful as an aid to improving teaching? Several faculty at the Town Hall meetings commented that they genuinely wanted to improve their teaching but found no useful information for this purpose in the evaluation results.) This is an important issue since various purposes may conflict with one another. For instance, questions which might be useful to administrators and faculty peers for P&T purposes may not be the kinds of questions that would help a faculty member to improve his/her teaching. Furthermore, those kinds of questions may not be useful or appropriate for students who want information for course selection.

6) Disagreement on whether the questions on the current instrument should address learning outcomes, teaching abilities, or a combination of both. For instance, most of the current questions address teaching abilities (e.g. 3. Explains concepts clearly and understandably) yet the final question 16 (Overall rating of course as a learning experience) addresses learning.

7) Perceptions by some faculty that the survey instrument provides a “personality” score, and that it would be beneficial to use more outcome-based questions (e.g. Did this course give you a broader or deeper understanding of the subject matter and significantly change your way of thinking about the discipline?) While these were concerns raised at several of the Town Hall meetings, further examples are available in the Administrators’ comments at 23b, Text Responses, Appendix 4C).

8) Disagreement among some faculty (even those who create these types of surveys regularly) as to whether the current questions are valid and whether the scale is appropriate. What are the questions intended to measure? Do they actually measure what is intended? Is the scale too large? (i.e. it was suggested on several occasions that a 5 point scale would be more reliable).

9) Several faculty members questioned whether students had the necessary background to evaluate the intellectual content of the course (i.e., they may understand the value of the course only much later). Does the current instrument actually address what students have the knowledge to evaluate? For instance, question 12 asks the students to rate the professor's methods of class evaluation as befitting the subject matter. How would the student know what methods of evaluation the professor should be using given the subject matter, when the student is likely not all that familiar with the subject matter in the first place? This is highly problematic. See also two of the survey results at 23b, Text Responses, Appendix 4C (in response to other criteria not on the current instrument that Administrators would like to see added): suggestions included "How the teaching materials and other aids affect student experience/success -- the relationship between student experience and success in a particular course they 'like' to success at higher levels" and "Impact on students many years after graduation." (Of course, exactly *how* to measure these things is beyond the purview of this Subcommittee).

10) Given the mixed messages regarding the purpose of the evaluation instrument, there is controversy over whether the evaluation results should be made available to the university community. For instance, if the primary purpose of the evaluation is to contribute to performance review and P&T processes, then an argument can be made that the results are confidential to each faculty member and should not be available to the university community. A number of faculty at the town hall meetings suggested that publication (web or paper) of evaluations should be eliminated.

11) Widespread faculty concerns over the anonymous comments on the instrument, which in many cases, are offensive, hurtful and/or inappropriate, and can be very demoralizing, particularly for untenured faculty. It was suggested at faculty town hall meetings that the nature and use of text comments should be eliminated or more carefully managed, although it was also noted that racist, sexist or homophobic slurs could provide a context for understanding course ratings.

12) Concerns from some faculty that there is too much reliance on the current evaluation instrument as the only source of information for the evaluation of teaching. It was suggested at the town hall meetings that greater incorporation of peer review of teaching would be desirable. On the other hand, our survey of administrators indicates that virtually all units do not rely exclusively on teaching ratings for performance evaluation and P&T, with most indicating that some peer evaluation is typically considered, especially for P&T.

13) Graduate students shared their thoughts from two perspectives – as students, and as TAs – including observations that

- most grad courses were not evaluated using the standard form, nor was there much demand for evaluations;
- no-one had the opportunity to evaluate his/her supervisor, although most indicated a desire to do so;
- those working as TAs expressed similar concerns as faculty, such as concern over the lack of accountability for anonymous comments;
- there was general interest in a special undergrad course evaluation form for TAs that would recognize their status as novice teachers.

14) Undergraduate students also had comments about student evaluations of teaching, particularly relating to

- transparency of the process – wondering how the evaluations would be used, not knowing the process of administering the evaluations, or the timing of them;
- access – although students expressed desire to see the outcome of evaluations, most thought they were difficult to find;
- anonymity – most felt anonymity was important to reduce concerns re future interactions with faculty;
- the survey instrument – questions were too long and confusing; not enough time to complete the survey; a need to split the process, possibility of doing the numerical evaluation in class and the written comments outside of class.

### **Recommendations:**

*1. The Subcommittee recommends that the Senate policy on the administration and use of student evaluations of teaching be a) revised, b) better publicized and c) made more easily accessible.*

With respect to the revisions (item a above), the Subcommittee notes that the current Senate policy is so vague as to be quite unhelpful, such that the administration of student evaluations of teaching across campus has varied greatly and as a result, may be disadvantageous to faculty and students in some units. Accordingly, the Subcommittee recommends that the following issues be attended to in the revised policy:

- a clear statement as to the role and purpose of student evaluations of teaching at Western;
- the standard timing of student evaluations of teaching;
- the process of giving notice as to the timing of the evaluations both to students and faculty members;
- whether faculty members can provide input into the evaluation process;
- clarification that supplementary questions may be added by each department/unit and how such questions should be developed;
- specification of how supplementary questions would be handled in terms of data analysis and communication of results;
- how the standard evaluation instrument should be administered in courses, and by whom (note that some units use TAs for this, others use secretaries or allow an undergraduate student in the class to have this responsibility);
- how the completed evaluation surveys should be collected and delivered to the home unit;
- the status of anonymous comments (e.g. Should the practice of allowing comments be continued? If comments are continued, will these be edited or unedited? If edited, how is that work to be done and supervised? Should comments be done in class, or could students do them electronically at a later time? Should comments remain anonymous?);
- the status of graduate courses with respect to evaluation (i.e. should graduate courses be evaluated consistently across campus?);
- the status of non-standard courses (practica, distance education courses both on-line and print. independent studies, studio courses, clinical courses etc.) with respect to evaluation;
- the ability of units to devise supplementary evaluation instruments to accompany the standard evaluation instrument, and the handling of data from such supplementary instruments;

- reconsideration of whether the data from the evaluations should be available on the web to students and other faculty;
- if available as noted above, better and easier access to the tabulated data.

We recommend that a task force/working group be struck to revise the policy, consisting of an equal number of representatives named by the Provost and by UWOFa respectively. The task force should be given sufficient time and administrative support to accomplish the work assigned to it.

Second, with respect to the publicizing of a newly revised policy (item b above), the Subcommittee recommends that the revised policy be drawn to the attention of all relevant academic administrators via a memorandum from the Provost and to new academic administrators through their letters of appointment. Any job-related orientation documentation that is given out to administrators must include the revised Senate policy on student evaluations of teaching, as well as the guidelines for the use and interpretation of the evaluation data (see Recommendation 2).

Third, with respect to accessibility (item c above), the Subcommittee recommends that the University enhance the current Academic Resources web site for faculty so that resources about teaching are publicly and electronically accessible in a location that is intuitive and easy to find. In particular, the site should include the Senate policy on student evaluations of teaching, along with other information useful for faculty with respect to their teaching. As an aside here, one could argue that the entire Handbook of Academic and Scholarship Policy is not intuitive to find, either on the Teaching Support Centre site or on the University Secretariat website. The subcommittee recommends, therefore, that the University consider relocating the policies most relevant to teaching to a more prominent location on the Academic Resources web site.

***2. The Subcommittee recommends that a university-wide consulting group be established to help Faculties and departments with the analysis and interpretation of data from the evaluation instrument, and that guidelines for the proper use and interpretation of such data be established.***

The Provost and the Association should jointly create a consulting group, consisting of faculty and staff with expertise in measurement, evaluation, and statistical analysis, which would be available to help departments with technical problems in the area of evaluation of teaching. This could include advice as to how to control potential sources of bias in student evaluations of teaching through statistical estimation, the use of separate norm groups for different course types and course levels, and/or assistance in the development of alternative evaluation forms for atypical courses or supplementary questions or diagnostic feedback.

***3. The Subcommittee recommends that a task force/working group (with membership agreed to jointly by the Provost and the Association) be struck in three years' time to review the recommendations made in this report, and the actions following from them. At the time of the review, the task force should consider whether a review of the teaching evaluation instrument is needed.***

Through appropriate campus-wide consultation with both faculty and administrators, the mandate of the task force should be to ensure that the revised Senate policy (from Recommendation 1) is indeed clear about both the purpose and the administrative processes regarding student evaluations of teaching, and that the newly formed consulting group (from Recommendation 2) is working as intended. Although our Subcommittee did not see widespread dissatisfaction with the questions on the instrument per se, nonetheless concerns were raised about the primary purpose of the evaluation instrument and whether the questions were appropriate to the purpose. In light of the fact that the survey instrument has not been evaluated since the PACTL review in 1998-99, the task force should consider whether another review of the instrument is appropriate given the changes made to the Senate policy. What is the evaluation intended to measure, and are the current questions the right ones for the task? Is



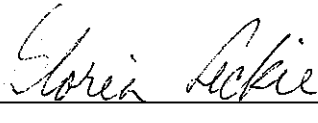
the current instrument overly focused on teaching activities rather than learning? These are examples of the kinds of questions that the proposed task force should consider if such a review is undertaken.

**Acceptance of the Final Report  
of the Joint Subcommittee on Student Evaluations of Teaching**

We, the Subcommittee members, duly sign this document to indicate our acceptance of the substance of the report and the recommendations made.

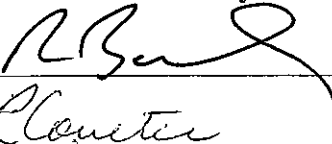
**Subcommittee Chair:**

Dr. Gloria Leckie

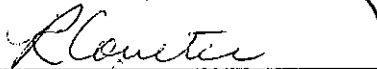


**For the University of Western Ontario Faculty Association:**

Dr. Robert Bailey



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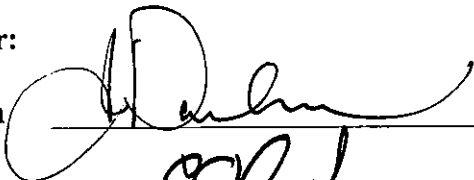


Dr. Kim Verwaayen



**For the Employer:**

Dr. John Doerksen



Dr. Craig Dunbar



Dr. Harry Murray\*

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*\* Note: Dr. Murray is currently out of the country. Email acceptance by him will be forwarded as soon as it is received.*