Minutes of the Faculty Standards Committee, University Senate, 3/7/2016

In Attendance:
- Jc Beall, Chair, Philosophy
- Sandra Bellini, Nursing
- Pam Bramble, Fine Arts
- Preston Britner, Human Development and Family Studies
- Jack Clausen, Natural Resources and the Environment
- Dipak Dey, Statistics
- Maria-Luz Fernandez, Nutritional Sciences
- Michael Fischl, Law
- Elizabeth Jockusch, Ecology & Evolutionary Biology
- Shariq Mohammed, GSS
- Lisa Werkmeister-Rozas, Social Work [by phone]
- Fred Wanjera, OIRE
- Susanne Yelin, Physics

Jc Beall called the meeting to order at 1:30 p.m.

The minutes of the 2/1/2016 meeting were approved, with one revision.

Agenda Item 1: Free Speech and Civility Subcommittee

The Free Speech and Civility Subcommittee presented its draft statement on free speech and civility. There was extensive discussion related to the charge, scope, subject matter, and issues of wording.

Based on the discussion, the Free Speech and Civility Subcommittee will draft a statement for distribution by the end of the week. [This was done on 3/9/2016, and an extensive email discussion ensued from 3/9 to 3/11, at which time an extension was given. FSC will take up the discussion at its 4/4/2016 meeting.]

Agenda Item 2: Teaching-Performance Subcommittee

The Teaching-Performance Subcommittee presented its draft document. The subcommittee will revise the draft document in light of feedback and submit a final version within a week. [This was done, and the document was shared with the Senate Executive Committee.] [Final version of report attached]

The meeting was adjourned at 2:55 p.m.

_____
Minutes respectfully submitted by Preston Britner and Elizabeth Jockusch.

Faculty Standards Committee Report on Seeking Assistance in Improving Teaching

charge: The SEC would like Faculty Standards to take up the issue of how faculty may be encouraged to seek assistance in improving teaching when some set of indicators demonstrate clear problems in the classroom. Questions that can be interrogated include but are not limited to:

* What are the best measures for evaluating teaching?

Quality course instruction is a mainstay of a great university. High quality teaching, along with research and service, are the pillars used to evaluate faculty for tenure, promotion, and merit. The most frequent and widespread contact between faculty and students occurs within courses taught by faculty. Students have a right to expect their interaction with faculty is positive and the courses they take are taught well. Therefore, the university must not only recognize faculty who teach well, but also work with faculty who are less effective instructors to improve their teaching. This committee has been charged with providing options for measuring and evaluating teaching in order to ensure the university maintains a high teaching standard.

The committee is cognizant of the biases reported in many studies of teaching evaluations, especially biases related to gender and membership in underrepresented groups. There are also other evaluation patterns related to course attributes, such as class size, whether or not a class is required, and average course grades. These must be considered in any decision made using the current Student Evaluation of Teaching survey (SETs; see UConn policy document: http://provost.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/192/2012/10/SEoT.guidelines.pdf).

Three key changes, in addition to moving to the electronic format, occurred with the introduction of the current SET. First, medians, rather than means are reported. This change reflected a concern over the large effect of extremely low ratings by one or two disgruntled students on the calculation of the mean in small classes. Reporting the median should avoid this problem. The second change involved creating a single question that sought an overall rating of the instructor's teaching, rather than averaging the instructor's scores on various aspects of his or her instructional practice. The committee that created the latest SET reviewed research related to using a single question and determined it was more valid that an average of dispersant instructional strategies. Finally, the rating scale changed from a 10-point response scale with only the end point labeled to a 5-point scale with five labelled ratings: poor, fair, good, very good, and excellent. The 5-point scale contains more positive responses than negative responses. A faculty member who is rated as a fair teacher receives 2 on the 5-point scale. When only the numeric value is used, rather than the label associated with it, 2 is often interpreted as inadequate, rather than "fair" teaching as the students

indicated.

While it is not without drawbacks, the SET is a starting point for evaluating teaching with reasonable sample sizes with adequate response rates. A SET median teaching rating of 1.5 or below probably indicates a teaching problem that should be reviewed by the department head. However, the department head should take into consideration factors such as past teaching performance (e.g., Was this a single low incident within a more successful teaching pattern?), number of times the instructor has taught the course (e.g., Is this a new course prep for the instructor?), and the experience of the faculty (e.g., Is this a first year faculty who is developing several new courses and trying to establish a research agenda?). Other factors that may be indicative of ineffective teaching can include unexplained large numbers of student withdrawals from a course, unusually high number of grades being contested over more than one semester, and students from a given section performing poorly relative to students from other sections on a common exam or in the next level of a course sequence. These situations would also prompt the department head into reviewing the faculty member's teaching by reviewing SET scores or direct observations of classroom instruction.

The committee also discussed another class of potential problems: direct student complaints about inappropriate classroom conduct. These should be investigated immediately without waiting for end-of-semester SET evaluations.

The individual items on the SET provide additional useful information when working with faculty to improve their teaching. Direct observations of teaching are also recommended. However, observations may be biased, since faculty may put extra effort into their teaching if they know they will be observed and the observer may have a bias toward a given instructional style. Departments might wish to create a cadre of trained faculty to observe teaching.

If we believe extremely poor teaching exists at UCONN, what are the appropriate ways to document it?

In general, the methods of evaluation mentioned in the section above should be used as documentation. In addition, there should be documentation that a discussion about concerns related to teaching effectiveness was held between the faculty member and the department head or his or her deputy.

Should Faculty Standards encourage departments and programs to review teaching through peer review and mentorship programs?

Yes, this should be done, but only for those cases where concerns have been raised. Exceptions are pre-tenure and non-tenure track instructors, where this might be a standard practice.

If the SET is insufficient to measure teaching what other options should be

included?

SET is one option, but it should not be used as the only form of evaluation once concerns are identified. Peer teaching observations, teaching portfolios, and assessments by the CETL are additional options.

* In the case of documented and extremely poor teaching (for example consistent "1"s on the SET survey instrument and/or consistent and universal complaints) what options should a department head or dean have to invite, or require the faculty to seek advice and help in improving teaching?

Depending on the context, it would be appropriate for the department head to ask the faculty member to seek help at CETL and/or to agree to work with a peer-teaching mentor. If the faculty member does not wish to pursue those options in collaboration with the Department Head or their designee, the faculty member should be encouraged to develop a teaching improvement plan, share the plan with the Department Head in writing, and then take the appropriate follow-up steps to improve instruction. All of these efforts should be documented and teaching progress monitored. (In cases where low SETs are an outlier relative to past performance by the faculty member, it may not be necessary to take any steps beyond an initial conversation between the Department Head and the faculty member.

* What is the threshold, or triggering mechanisms to define "poor" teaching?

We discussed this in the first section.

* When is it appropriate to actively approach a faculty member about taking a positive set of steps to improve teaching?

One semester of mostly "1" in a single course is a trigger to look into the problem (i.e., discussion with department head in order to gauge whether there are special circumstances). Longer lasting problems mandate sequence of actions as outlined above.

* If over time, and after requests by the Department Head or Dean to invite the faculty member into a positive program of teaching improvement are rebuffed, what options should exist to require the faculty member to participate?

Tenure would be in jeopardy for non-tenured faculty on the tenure track.

If a tenured faculty member **refuses** to work on the issue of poor teaching, they may be reminded that teaching performance and ability is one of the three major qualities desired in faculty members (Bylaws, Article XIV, Section D.2.b) and is thus a component of professional fitness

To what extent is an inability to teach a subject in English another factor in the perception of poor teaching in some instances?

We are not addressing this separately, since this is not an issue that usually leads by itself to "1" evaluations.

In the case that teaching in English is seen as a problem, what steps, consistent with, or separate from the above questions might be considered?

See previous question