

Commission on Faculty Affairs
Minutes
March 6, 2009

Members attending: Gary Long (chair), Debbie Smith, Allisyn Dunn, Jack Finney (for Dean Chang), Carol Burger, Ed Lener, Dennis Welch, Brad Klein, Patricia Hyer

Agenda for the meeting included two items: updates on CFA policy initiatives and University Committee on Evaluation of Teaching.

The minutes of the CFA meeting on February 27, 2009, were approved without change.

Updates on CFA Policy Initiatives:

PI Removal Resolution

The resolution was approved by the University Council on March 2, 2009. The resolution will be presented to the Board of Visitors during the March 22-23, 2009, meeting.

Professors of Practice

The resolution was approved by the University Council on March 2, 2009. The resolution will be presented to the Board of Visitors at the March 23, 2009, meeting.

University Committee on Evaluation of Teaching:

Hyer updated the CFA on actions taken since the February 27 meeting. Karlin is posting the report to the Provost's website. University Relations will prepare a news release with Terry Wildman's assistance for the Virginia Tech Daily News. Wildman met with Daniel Wubah, vice president and dean for undergraduate education, to discuss the background on the committee and its findings. Wubah is prepared to oversee the effort and will engage Ray Van Dyke, director of academic assessment, and Peter Doolittle, director of the Center for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, in moving forward with implementation. Wubah will attend the CFA meeting on March 27 to hear the CFA members' feedback about the teaching evaluation report.

General Discussion

Sam Riley, who was unable to attend this meeting, provided several pages of comments about the report to the chair. Some of these comments were addressed throughout the committee's discussion.

Carol Burger suggested that the committee's recommendations should address student learning, not just teaching. Several tools for measuring student learning were proposed such as concept inventories, standardized achievement tests, and certification exams. Some members mentioned that the SACS accreditation process, which is currently underway at Virginia Tech, requires the establishment of learning outcomes for each program. However the unit of analysis is at the program level not the individual level. There will need to be a different instrument for measurement of teaching effectiveness.

CFA members felt strongly that senior leaders must demonstrate greater commitment to the value of teaching. CFA members want some assurance that the significant effort required to redesign the teaching evaluation system will be worthwhile and used in a meaningful way. However, it is also true that better instruments and measurements related to teaching are needed to balance the more easily measured research contributions and to argue for greater weight to be given to teaching in the promotion, tenure, and annual review processes.

CFA members then reviewed each of the 18 recommendations separately. They noted that there was a lot of overlap in the recommendation statements and they would be easier to follow if organized by topic.

Review of Committee Recommendations (recommendation in italics):

Recommendation 1: Recognizing the complexity of teaching and the fundamental principles of measurement and evaluation, Virginia Tech should determine institutionally to implement a holistic evaluation of teaching process that includes at a minimum the use of student perceptions, reviews by peers, and instructor self-assessments.

CFA members generally agree with the recommendation but suggested adding the notion of student learning.

Recommendation 2: Virginia Tech should take steps to ensure that the purposes of the teaching evaluation system are clearly articulated and broadly shared.

CFA members viewed sharing the uses of the teaching evaluation system as important as articulating the purposes.

Recommendation 3: Virginia Tech administration should take immediate steps to address what appears to be a crisis of confidence in the reward system for faculty.

CFA members echoed this concern and discussed programs that could elevate the importance of teaching such as: programs focused on the scholarship of teaching and master teacher programs.

Recommendation 4: Establish clear stewardship and ownership of the teaching evaluation process.

CFA members agreed that the vice president and dean of undergraduate education is the appropriate steward and “owner” of the process (using the language of the report).

Recommendation 5: In response to recommendation 4 the committee recommends the immediate formation of a steering committee for the teaching evaluation process at Virginia Tech.

CFA members see the value in having a steering committee in addition to a working group.

Recommendation 6: Virginia Tech should reaffirm the importance of collecting and using student perceptions data as one key component of the teaching evaluation system.

CFA members emphasized the importance of both numerical and written student feedback.

Recommendation 7: Any effort to assess effective teaching must have as a starting point some reasonably clear way of defining the concept—what is our conception of effectiveness? Consequently, we must engage in what is essentially a two-part process. One part involves determining from relevant research on learning and instruction where we might best focus our attention. The other involves engaging members of the university community in a focused initiative that defines the range of good practices across diverse settings.

CFA members viewed defining teaching effectiveness as one of the roles of the steering committee.

Recommendation 8: In response to recommendation 7 a new working group should be formed to continue the process described above, and to produce prototype instruments that may then be pilot tested across distinctly different instructional settings on the Virginia Tech campus.

CFA members supported the committee's recommendations for two groups, the steering committee and working group.

Recommendation 9: With respect to the use of student surveys, steps should be taken to ensure quality and uniformity in administration of surveys so that students can be assured of confidentiality and downstream users can be sure the data are free from contamination.

CFA members viewed assurance of quality and uniformity as the responsibility of the process owner.

Recommendation 10: The results of student surveys need to be conveyed to users in formats and displays that support appropriate interpretation, and explanations for, and guides to, understanding and making use of survey results need to be readily accessible.

CFA members strongly agreed with this recommendation.

Recommendation 11: Clarity needs to be restored to the issue of who receives and controls student perceptions data.

CFA members suggested the steering committee should ensure consistency across colleges and acknowledged that there will be local data ownership at the departmental and college levels.

Recommendation 12: Explicit support should be provided to faculty members who are attempting to utilize feedback to improve performance.

CFA members agreed that CEUT and the Faculty Development Institute are the appropriate entities to provide support to faculty members seeking to improve their teaching.

Recommendation 13: Administrators, particularly at the department head level, should receive training in how to utilize evaluation of teaching data in personnel decisions. Such training should also be extended to members of promotion and tenure committees.

CFA members discussed incorporating teaching evaluation process training into fall sessions training/information sessions for promotion and tenure committee members.

Recommendation 14: Tremendous amounts of data are generated by the requirement that student evaluations be conducted on each course delivered. Yet, there is no formal provision to conduct research using these data. This failure to support an ongoing program of inquiry means that decision makers are flying blind with respect to all kinds of trends that may be of interest. This should be corrected by assigning research responsibility to an existing office, such as the Office of Academic Assessment, which is currently staffed to conduct such analyses as may be needed to help us better understand how the system is working and keep us alert to adjustments that may be needed.

CFA members agreed the Office of Academic Assessment could fill this role.

Recommendation 15: Develop ways to communicate with students more effectively concerning their important role in the evaluation of teaching.

CFA members proposed developing a uniform statement to communicate the purpose of the evaluations and encouraging faculty members to include the statement on all course syllabi.

Recommendation 16: Virginia Tech should develop and employ a peer review process that meets best practice standards.

CFA members strongly agreed with the recommendation. They suggested incorporating this process into existing programs such as the Academy of Teaching Excellence and using efficient training methods such as podcasts or web-based media.

Recommendation 17: Following recommendation 16 above, a working group should be formed to investigate further the gap between Virginia Tech's current practice in peer review and recommended best practices. Recommendations should then be formed to correct deficiencies noted. This same group, or another, should then be tasked with the responsibility of leading the actual transformation of peer review of teaching at Virginia Tech.

CFA members agreed with the recommendation.

Recommendation 18: Finally, following the notion that the evaluation of teaching rests on three foundational legs, Virginia Tech should reinforce and support instructor self-assessment as an expected component to the system.

CFA members concurred with the recommendation.

A CFA member suggested adding a recommendation that the teaching evaluation system should parallel measures of research productivity and allow greater recognition for accomplishments and contributions to the instructional mission. Most CFA members believed this would be hard to accomplish because of the difficulty in measuring excellence in teaching and reaching consensus on ways to compare across disciplines and faculty members.

The March 20 meeting has been cancelled. At the March 27 meeting, CFA members will discuss feedback about the committee's report with Dr. Wubah. Hyer will invite Doolittle and Van Dyke to attend.

Recorder, Cindy Wilkinson