



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY  
Vol. 2, No. 13

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA  
March 15, 1990

## Faculty Responses

Ms. Carol Stephens raises some vital issues in her *Forum* opinion piece. One that strikes me particularly is the effort to quantify teaching effectiveness. From an administrative perspective, devising an accurate number-scale for rating teachers--much as we try to do with students--would seem far more desirable than the collection of vague, subjective indicators we seem to use now: "seems well prepared in class," "gets along well with students," "makes himself available to students outside of class."

But numbers without careful, logical design for the means of evaluation can be worse than meaningless. When Ms. Stephens asks, "what do the numbers really mean?" she is asking a question which might also be asked of our attempts to quantify our students' work and skill levels. The answer seems to depend partly on how well-designed the whole system of evaluation is. When a student makes a grade less than he is satisfied with--particularly early on in the term--I provide an opportunity for him to revise his work. Yet when the course winds down, I am forced to let the accumulated numbers represent my evaluation of his work and skills relative to the course goals and objectives. The key issue is how clear are those goals and objectives?

For this reason, I applaud Ms. Stephens' point that "we cannot afford random or subjective evaluation procedures nor can we afford our major career decision being based on inadequate data." The first step, as she points out, is to define precise goals and objectives within each department and unit and to discuss how to evaluate these fairly, with the primary goal being to help one another improve the quality of our teaching.

Steve Eberly, English

The simplistic misuse of student evaluations is ubiquitous on this campus. Most shocking is the common reliance in AFE/TPR evaluations on a single item from an evaluation form (usually something like "this is one of the best instructors I have ever had"). Psychometrically, it is empirically impossible for a single item of any kind to be reliable or valid. Almost as outrageous is the use of meaningless averages summed across different types of evaluation items (the infamous fruit cocktail recipe involving the combination of apples and oranges). In either case, teaching is too complex to be described by such methods. An unfortunate corollary to this procedure is the rank ordering of faculty by these magic numbers without attention to the fact that contiguous ranks are based on numbers that are not statistically (or meaningfully) different from one another. Tenured faculty members should yell and scream in protest and do something. Untenured faculty members should worry a lot and pray for change.

Carol's opinion piece also leads me to raise another issue related to student evaluations: faculty members should be aware of and discuss the problems associated with the effect of student complaints on the evaluation of teaching. Cognitive psychologists have pointed out

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the powerfully disproportionate effects on decision making of negative information that is available and recent. Complaints from a very small, unrepresentative sample of students can often have a major impact on how administrators and members of TPR committees view faculty effectiveness. Faculty members who demand a great deal from students, who use innovative teaching or grading methods, or who frequently disagree with their supervisors on any matter do so at great risk. The cognitive research suggests that it would take an unusually wise evaluator to overcome the pitfalls in any decision-making process.

We must work much harder than we have to date to find ways to evaluate the scholarship of what we do, not only in teaching but in research and service. It will not be easy, but it won't happen at all if we don't try.

anonymous

Carol Stephens has written a very incisive article on evaluating teaching effectiveness. She has asked the right questions concerning the human elements in the process and the institutional systems that are created when a procedure like this is codified. Her opinion piece gives us a sound basis for developing an effective system for evaluating teaching effectiveness.

James Syphers, Social Work

Everyone is so excited about creating exquisite assessment tools but no one has stopped to realize how impossible it will be. Assessment without subjectivity is impossible and we cannot assess quality in the university any more than we can in the real world; any attempt to do so will founder on our complete lack of confidence in subjective judgment. Is there rational assessment of quality anywhere in our culture? No! And if we try to do it here, there will be so much blood on the walls it will make the St. Valentines Day Massacre look like a church picnic. Forget all attempts at rational assessment! Create a bogus and mechanical assessment system for teaching like we already have for publications: count 'em up, no matter what they are; assert that some are more valuable than others; but don't attempt to really assess anything. Imagine what would happen if we applied thoroughly rational assessment criteria to publications. Clearly, it's not done and never can be done. The same barriers (and more!) apply to assessing teaching.

anonymous

To Carol Stephens' editorial on the evaluation of teaching I offer a voice of qualified support. A great deal of literature exists regarding the evaluation of teaching. In particular, evaluating teaching solely on the basis of student evaluation seems quite inappropriate.

But clearly, research on the use of student evaluations is contradictory and cluttered. Some research indicates that students in their major courses and in small classes tend to rate the instructor at a higher level. Other literature indicates that student ratings are more valid when collected over several years and not from semester to semester. Still more studies indicate that teacher ratings are raised if one is prone to flattery and praise prior to administering the evaluation form. Of course, there are other thoughts, beliefs, and research findings, but most seem to be consonant with Ms. Stephens' views and questions. Are we collecting the appropriate data in the appropriate manner to really provide adequate feedback regarding the evaluation of our teaching skills?

Susan Brown, Sport Management