

STUDENT COURSE  
OPINION QUESTIONNAIRE  
COMMITTEE REPORT

December 8, 2010

## Student Course Opinion Questionnaire Committee Report

Dear Dean Lennie,

The committee unanimously recommends adoption of a modified version of the Rogge/Zahn proposal, as described below (though with minority dissent over some details in item ii.c).

We have shared our suggested modifications with Prof. Rogge and are pleased that he endorses them and finds them to be consistent with the aims of his proposed revisions of the SCOQ evaluation system. Our modifications include:

- (i) The minor rewording of some questions to address members' concerns about applicability, relevance, and tone (see p. 2), and
- (ii) The addition of some global questions *at the end* (the fifth category on p. 2), with the understanding that the results for these questions will
  - (a) *not* be included in the calculation of the overall course quality score, which will be based solely on the first four sets of questions below in accordance with the equation referred to in the Rogge/Zahn proposal,
  - (b) *not* be treated by administrators as summary, overall scores (for the reasons given in the study), and
  - (c) *not* be published along with the other scores, but will be provided to the faculty member and his/her department, and retained for purposes of continued assessment of the revised system as it is implemented.

The second modification requires some comment. While the committee acknowledges the problems of bias identified by the Rogge/Zahn study in connection with global questions, we are concerned that some issues that matter to faculty—such as student perceptions of value gained from the course—are not adequately captured by the new, more specific questions in the four main categories, which focus more on issues of presentation and technique than on content. Many members felt that the global questions in the fifth category may provide useful information despite their vulnerability to certain forms of bias, and that this information should continue to be available to faculty. It may also be important to have this information for purposes of long-term consistency and comparability, and the committee recommends continued assessment of how results under the new system, focused on the first four categories, compare to results on the more traditional, global questions at the end.

We recognize that it would be potentially confusing, especially to students trying to make use of the data in making course decisions, to continue to publish the results of the global questions alongside the new overall scores based on the improved questions in the first four categories; these might well conflict significantly, in which case it would be unclear to students how to interpret the data and the bias-reducing goals of the proposed revisions would likely be undermined. This is why we recommend that the global questions continue to be employed, but only at the end of the questionnaire and not for purposes of public consumption. They are meant simply to provide faculty and departments, along with those continuing to research the system, with further information they may desire, while acknowledging the limitations of that information. The committee's recommendation on this matter is unanimous with regard to the third and fourth questions in category five, though as mentioned above, there was minority dissent over not publishing the results of the *first two* questions: some felt that the information gained from those questions should continue to be made

available to students. Again, however, the majority recommendation is that *none* of the results from the questions in category five be included in the published results.

The modified proposal for the new questions is as follows:

1. Teaching skills

The instructor explained and emphasized important points clearly and effectively.  
The instructor used examples that helped with understanding the material.  
The instructor noticed when students did not understand and adjusted accordingly.

2. Rapport with students

The instructor demonstrated sincere respect for students.  
The instructor was willing to listen to student questions and/or opinions.  
The instructor made himself/herself available for extra help.

3. Quality of exams/assignments

The exams/assignments covered important aspects of the course.  
The assignments were helpful in understanding the material.  
The exams/assignments were clearly worded.

4. Organization

Lectures / class discussions were well organized or well managed.  
The instructor tended to be well prepared for class.  
Classes tended to stay appropriately on topic.

5. General (Global evaluation items)

I have a stronger interest in the subject because of the instructor.  
I feel this class was valuable.  
What overall rating would you give this instructor?  
What overall rating, would you give this course?

- For the last two questions in section 5, a different set of categories would need to be provided, analogous to the five categories for the preceding questions. The preceding questions use:

Not at all      A little      Somewhat      Quite a bit      Very

The final two global questions would instead use something like:

Very poor      Not very good      Average      Very good      Excellent

(This parallel ordering should be preserved to avoid confusion.)

- Following the above five categories of questions would be the four open-ended questions listed in the proposed course evaluation sheet (from the Rogge/Zahn proposal), allowing for written comments. These would be followed by a final space for any additional comments.

#### **ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS AND ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION:**

- Some members of the committee remain concerned about relatively low student response rate with the online evaluation, despite the finding in the study that lower response rates (at least above a certain threshold) are significantly less distorting with these new questions than with the old SCOQ questions. We discussed the possibility of making the submission of an evaluation (or at least going to the site and opting out) a *requirement*, so that students cannot access their grades until they have either submitted an evaluation or at least gone online and opted out. One worry, however, is that this might be counterproductive, leading many students just to opt out in order to get their grades and then never returning to complete the evaluation.

Our sense is that the most effective means to increase student response rates online is probably (i) for instructors informally to encourage students to complete the evaluations, expressing genuine interest in the feedback, and (ii) for the administration (e.g., Nancy Speck) to have a system that emails only students who have not yet submitted their evaluations, by a certain date, to remind them to do so, and then follows up, *but does not continue emailing once the evaluations have been submitted*. The student members of the committee stressed the last point, as many students are unhappy about email reminders that continue after they have completed the questionnaires.

A remaining concern, however, is that *small* courses may never hit the threshold for reliable or "minimally distorting" evaluations with an online system, even with emailed reminders. There may be a rationale for returning to paper responses for smaller classes, or for finding some other way to deal with this lingering problem.

- Finally, in light of student difficulty in finding the results of the SCOQ's, the committee suggests implementing a clear online course evaluation site for students to reference as they choose courses. It could be tied to course descriptions or it could be separate from them. The latter model has been used successfully at Brown University, for example (and some committee members can provide further details if desired). See below for more on this.

The student members of the committee had the following further recommendations:

- We would like to ensure that professors are encouraged to add specific questions to the evaluations that pertain to their course/teaching style, since such information gathered from course-specific questions can be of great help.
- Regarding student access to the results (not including short response question) of the evaluations: it would seem most helpful to integrate the *filling out* of the questionnaires with Blackboard, and to integrate the *viewing of results* with CDCS. These are sites that students access on a very frequent basis, and integration of the SCOQ with such web pages could be very beneficial.
- The TA evaluation process might helpfully be revised in various ways, in light of the diversity among TAs and their duties (graduate vs. undergraduate, and lab vs. recitation vs. grading TAs).

There might be a few, simple questions as part of the SCOQ for the course, e.g., “How was your TA in helping you to understand that material presented in class/recitation?”

- There would be advantages to having University Information Technology design the system for the SCOQ. The in-house development of this system would provide for increased compatibility and flexibility over time.
- Perhaps there could be a pop-up for students before accessing grades, as a last resort to students before checking their grades. Once they accessed their grades, though, they would not be able to go back and fill out the evaluations.

Sincerely,

Mark Bills  
Kara Bren  
Joseph Ciminelli  
William FitzPatrick  
Bradley Halpern  
Rosemary Kegl  
Kevin McFarland-Porter  
Bonnie Meguid  
Kevin Parker  
David Williams