

Academic Quality Committee
Western Kentucky University

Report to Faculty Senate

Date: 28 April 2014

From: Alison Langdon, chair

Committee members in attendance: Alison Langdon; Tammera Race; Kristin Wilson; Freida Russell Curley; Eggleton; Doug McElroy

The Academic Quality Committee met on 28 April 2014 to continue our ongoing discussion concerning SITEs. We make the following recommendation:

Faculty have repeatedly expressed frustration with WKU's current method of student evaluation. The university-wide questions on the current instrument are as follows:

1. What is your expected grade in this course?
2. My instructor displays a clear understanding of course topics.
3. My instructor is well-prepared for class.
4. Performance measures (exams, assignments, etc.) are well constructed.
5. My instructor provides helpful feedback.
6. Overall, my instructor is effective.
7. I have learned a lot in this course.
8. My instructor treats me fairly with regard to race, age, sex, religion, national origin, disability, and sexual orientation.

To address this issue in the short term, the Academic Quality Committee has identified several questions above that we find to be particularly ineffective in evaluating faculty and/or courses:

2. My instructor displays a clear understanding of course topics.
3. My instructor is well-prepared for class.

Both of these questions ask students to evaluate instructors at the bare minimum of expectations. Moreover, it is questionable whether novice students are able to assess content knowledge.

4. Performance measures (exams, assignments, etc.) are well constructed.

Committee members agree that students are generally not in an adequate position to define what "well-constructed" performance measures in fact are. A better question would define this more clearly for students.

5. My instructor provides helpful feedback.

While this question addresses an important element of teaching, it could be more precise.

We have revisited the list of possible questions from which the current instrument was drawn and recommend exchanging the questions above for the following:

2. Expectations for course assignments are clear and specific.
3. This course has effectively challenged me to think.

Both of these questions ask students to evaluate based on criteria that are both pedagogically important and appropriate.

4. Assignments/exams are coordinated with course learning objectives.

The proposed question provides some context within which students may evaluate performance measures. Furthermore, research suggests that connecting evaluation items to course learning objectives increases the validity of student responses (McKeachie 1997, Zhao & Gallant 2012).

5. My instructor provides timely and constructive feedback on my progress in learning.

The revised language clarifies what we believe constitutes “helpful” feedback.

Some of these proposed questions may overlap with individual department-specific questions, so departments will need to review and revise those questions for redundancy. We realize that the revised instrument we recommend has not been tested for reliability and validity; however, the same is true for the current instrument.

In the long term, to create a truly effective instrument the Academic Quality Committee recommends that the Faculty Senate reconsider the purpose of student evaluations so as to give some direction for future revisions to our system. To that end, we propose a discussion in Senate of the following issues:

- What is/are the primary purpose(s) of the evaluations? How can we best balance the need for administrative review with the opportunity for faculty to reflect upon and improve pedagogical practice?
- What kind of information do we want to receive from the evaluations? What would be most helpful in terms of improving our own pedagogy and evaluating performance?
- Are we content to revise our current evaluation questions, or should we continue to seek out a new instrument entirely (bearing in mind that any such instrument must be in the public domain to be financially viable)? If the latter, to what extent do we agree that such an instrument must be tested for validity and reliability?
- To what extent are university-wide evaluation questions necessary and beneficial to our purposes, or would we be better served by relying on department-specific questions?

If the Senate is not able to come to agreement on these fundamental questions, it will not be possible for Academic Quality to proceed.