One of the recommendations of NYU’s recent Self-Study Report on Undergraduate Education for the Middle States Association was to ensure that all courses in all of the undergraduate schools are evaluated and to explore the advantages of moving toward an all-University course/teacher evaluation process. The Undergraduate Academic Affairs Committee discussed the topic of a University-wide course evaluation in three meetings during the fall 2004 semester. It had available to it “A Proposal for a Program of Comprehensive Evaluation of Teaching,” completed in September 2004 by the Task Force on the Evaluation of Teaching, chaired by Ken Bain, the Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence. Ken also met with the Committee to answer questions and provide advice. The Committee’s discussions to date have focused particularly on one question—whether or not NYU should move to an all-University uniform course evaluation system (like the various student evaluation methods currently employed by the different schools). In the context of discussing this narrow topic, student course feedback, the Committee also explored broader issues concerning course assessment and improvement. The recommendations that follow are addressed primarily to the narrower question of course feedback from students.

Centralization. The involvement of the Provost’s Office in a student course evaluation process would send a desirable signal about the importance that the University places on the quality of teaching and learning. The central administration of student rating forms would also ensure reliable and efficient processing of the data.

Common Questions vs. Customization. The inclusion of a small number of core questions, like the five proposed by the Task Force on the Evaluation of Teaching, provides at least a modicum of commonality across school lines. It was also agreed that departments and schools should have the ability to add customized questions to any evaluation instrument.

Types of Questions. Questions with numerical answers (closed-form questions) have the advantage that results can readily be quantified and used in comparisons. Such questions, however, can yield only limited information about the quality of teaching and learning in a course. For that reason, it is important also to have essay (or open-ended) questions or room on the questionnaires for free-form comments. Demographic questions of the sort proposed by the Task Force on the Evaluation of Teaching could gather information pertinent to the “degree of difficulty” of teaching the course, a factor that can influence ratings.

Midterm vs. End of Term. Especially since the ultimate use of these evaluations is to promote improvement in the quality of teaching and learning (see below), the Committee notes that, as some departments have already found, an additional evaluation around the middle of

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1 See pp. 68–69 of the Self-Study Report.
the term would be useful, since some modifications suggested by the feedback might still be undertaken at that time.

**Uses of Evaluations.** Student course ratings, except at the extreme ends, are of limited use in deciding on faculty merit increases, especially given the small pool of money available for this purpose. They can, however, be one (though only one) component in such decisions, as well as in tenure and promotion decisions and, especially, in the renewal decisions for contract faculty. (Some departments would welcome additional guidelines regarding what the other components should be and how they might be brought to bear on such decisions.) How the evaluations are to be used for these purposes should be determined by the individual schools and departments. For them, however, and for the University as a whole, the ultimate use of the student evaluations is as one tool for promoting improvement in students’ learning and instructors’ teaching at NYU.

**Operational Issues.** If the student feedback forms are distributed in class, sufficient time should be set aside for the completion of the forms, in order to allow for serious reflection and comment on the part of students. Instructors can also help by making it clear before the administration that they welcome considered and candid feedback. The Committee is not prepared, however, to recommend at this time whether the University-wide evaluation should be administered in class (the traditional way) or online (as Stern has begun to do). It recognizes that online evaluation is less labor-intensive, provides greater flexibility as to timing, and makes possible instant capture of information. On the other hand, very few of our peer and target institutions administer end-of-term student course feedback forms in this way. The common belief is that in-class administration assures not only a high response rate but also some important constants (all students respond at the same time and under the same constraints), which would be lost with online administration. The advantages and disadvantages of a web-based system, especially in light of the experiences at other institutions, need to be studied further.

**Other Considerations.** End-of-term or midterm student course evaluations should be regarded not as the sole source but only as one or two points on a much broader continuum of assessment. Student feedback can also be useful at other moments—e.g., at the start of the term, when students can be asked what their expectations of the course are, and later in the term, when focus groups can tease out other kinds of information. The recent availability of such technology as “clickers” offers new possibilities for obtaining quick and easy feedback on specific lectures or classes, especially for large courses. The Committee will consider these and other issues next term.