

**New York University  
Undergraduate Academic Affairs Committee**

**Advisory #3 on Student Course Evaluations  
Fall 2014**

**I. Background**

The Undergraduate Academic Affairs Committee (UAAC) has in the past issued two advisories on the topic of student course evaluations. In December 2004,<sup>1</sup> it recommended that: **(1)** the Provost's Office should provide some oversight for the student course evaluation process, to signal the importance that the University places teaching and to ensure reliable and efficient processing of the data; **(2)** a small number of common questions should be included on all schools' questionnaires; **(3)** questions should be both qualitative and demographic, and qualitative questions should include both numerical (or closed-form) and essay (or open-ended) questions; **(4)** schools should consider administering mid-term evaluations in addition to end-of-semester evaluations; **(5)** student course evaluations should be understood primarily as a tool for promoting improvement in teaching and learning; and **(6)** further study should take place of the advantages and disadvantages of a web-based system. In May 2006, the UAAC issued a second advisory,<sup>2</sup> which made further recommendations: **(7)** all NYU schools should include a set of nine common demographic and qualitative questions on their survey questionnaires, in addition to school- or department-specific questions and open-ended questions; **(8)** the Office of Institutional Research should provide schools with advice and assistance with technical issues regarding their evaluation instruments; **(9)** faculty should be made aware that the University has resources to help them become more effective teachers; **(10)** the relevant dean or chair should share the results of the evaluation with the faculty member; and **(11)** schools' survey forms should make it possible for students to rate the performance of recitation or lab instructors.

Since these two advisories, a number of changes were made in the evaluation process, and further discussions have taken place outside the UAAC. During the 2011-12 academic year, in response to a request from the Student Senators Council (SSC), the Faculty-Student Relations Committee of the Faculty Senators Council (FSC) explored the possibility of developing a University-wide system of administering student course evaluations and publicizing survey data. In May 2012, the FSC issued a unanimous resolution recommending (a) "that all NYU schools be encouraged to conduct end-of-semester evaluations of all undergraduate and graduate classes and instructors, either on paper or online," and (b) "that this information be available to students on a familiar NYU website like Albert." In response to the FSC's resolution, and at the request of the Provost, throughout the 2013-14 academic year the UAAC took up once again the question of student course evaluations. In keeping with its discussions in 2004 and 2006, the

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<sup>1</sup> "Report on a University-wide Course Evaluation" (Dec. 2004) [<http://www.nyu.edu/about/leadership-university-administration/office-of-the-president/office-of-the-provost/redirect/advisory-committees-and-special-advisors/advisory-committee-on-undergraduate-academic-affairs.html>]

<sup>2</sup> "Report on Student Course Ratings (Student Course Feedback)" (May 2006) [<http://www.nyu.edu/about/leadership-university-administration/office-of-the-president/office-of-the-provost/redirect/advisory-committees-and-special-advisors/advisory-committee-on-undergraduate-academic-affairs.html>]

committee took a broad approach, rather than discussing in isolation the FSC's recommendation that all survey data be posted online. Thus, in addition to this topic, the UAAC also revisited the question of the course evaluation questionnaires themselves. Discussions took place both in a subcommittee and in plenary sessions.

## II. Recommendations

The committee acknowledges that different constituencies have different needs and desires attached to evaluations—for example:

- *The University* needs to provide reliable information (vs. RateMyProfessor and cognate sources) to students, and to gather data and information about the quality of teaching, for purposes of assessment and accreditation.
- *Individual faculty members* need this information to improve their teaching.
- *Students* need to have a reliable basis upon which to select courses and professors.
- *Departments* need to have a reliable metric for determining which classes are drawing students and meeting learning objectives.
- *Promotion and tenure/contract extension committees* need to have a reliable and comparable basis upon which to evaluate the teaching of people eligible for tenure, promotion, and contract renewals.
- Some NYU schools (e.g., professional schools such as Engineering, Nursing, and Social Work) need course evaluation data for certification and accreditation purposes.

Given its charge, the committee makes the following recommendations (which apply only to undergraduate schools and programs):

1. Evaluations should be one tool among others in assessing promotion, tenure, merit, and contract extensions. They should not be stand-alone tools. Their weight should be properly designated in overall methods of evaluation, and those schools in which teaching and classroom performance are a primary tool for evaluation must be clear about how evaluations are being assessed and used.
2. Meta-data generating scales (e.g., 1 to 5) need to be uniform across the University (all schools, all locations, portals included).
3. Students are now able much more easily to take classes across the University, and throughout NYU's global network. This means that they need to have access to course evaluations and instructor evaluations across the University and its network. Thus, there should be no blanket "carve-outs" for any NYU school or location. Carve-outs should be limited to: (a) small classes, or classes in which, by their nature, anonymity is not possible; and (b) first-time classes, at the instructor's discretion.
4. Any student in any part of NYU should be able to see *quantitative* results of evaluations for all courses and instructors (including recitation/lab instructors). Having access to the

(quantitative) responses is a powerful incentive to students to fill out the evaluations. If no access is granted, students are far less likely to take the evaluations seriously.

5. Essay or narrative comments should be available only to (a) the instructor of the course, (b) the relevant department chair; (c) the relevant director of undergraduate studies; and (d) where applicable, the chair of the relevant departmental/school promotion and tenure committee.
6. Some portion of the questions on the evaluations should be the same across the University. School and/or course-specific questions can be added to the common questions. (The longer the form, the less likely students are to complete it; therefore, questions must be targeted and kept to a minimum.)
7. The shelf life of publicly available evaluations should be no more than 5 years (4 years of student cycle plus one).
8. The Provost should make the following points explicit:
  - The quality of teaching is an important component for recommendations on promotion, tenure, and renewal. Evaluations are part of assessing quality.
  - NYU Abu Dhabi and NYU Shanghai must be attentive to the importance of evaluations, and must encourage students (who might otherwise be unfamiliar with evaluating courses and professors) on how to engage in this process in a constructive and helpful fashion.
  - A different committee, composed of specialists in the field of evaluations and learning as well as of relevant people from the different schools across NYU's global network, should be appointed to develop a set of common questions that can be used for data-generation purposes. These questions should not be only about demographic issues, but some qualitative questions as well. The goal should be a portion of questions that are universal and thus universally agreed-upon and worded. Ideally, there would be a single University-wide questionnaire, with one or more sections that can be customized as necessary by individual schools.