Final Report: EPC Subcommittee on Student Course Evaluations

To: The AS&E Faculty and Administration and the Educational Policy Committee (EPC)

Committee Work and Accomplishments

The EPC subcommittee on student course evaluations has met frequently over the last 2 years (14 times since October, 2012) and has accomplished the two main goals of its charge as outlined in an EPC resolution in 2011:

1. In meetings from the Fall 2011 to October 2012 we established a plan with the parameters and coordination for the first online administration of Student Course Evaluations (SCEs) at Tufts in the Fall 2012.

2. We designed a new SCE form for use online that will replace the existing form that has been used as a paper form since the 1980’s (and was migrated online in the 2012-2013 academic year). The new online form is attached at the end of this document. The new form was approved for use beginning in Fall 2013 by a nearly unanimous vote of the AS&E Faculty at their meeting on March 27, 2013. As part of the design process we established a list of principles that guided our work. The committee would like to make these principles available to future committees charged with similar missions related to SCEs.

Recommendations for the Future

The subcommittee has gained some experience and knowledge of SCEs over the course of the last two years while revamping the SCE system at Tufts. So that future committees will not have to reinvent the wheel in their deliberations, we will try to pass along our experience. Above all, we have come to realize how difficult it is to design an SCE form that can be used as a uniform evaluation and that there is no perfect SCE form that can serve as an evaluation tool for all courses and all situations to everyone’s satisfaction. We are certain, as was evident by questions at the AS&E Faculty meeting (March 27, 2013), that Tufts’ SCE system will continue to evolve to meet the changing needs of the faculty.

Periodic Review

Given the changing nature of student course evaluations, faculty and student views on these evaluations, and teaching practices, it is essential that the SCE system at Tufts be periodically reviewed to improve the SCE system and also to make it consistent with changing teaching practices at Tufts. We view the SCE system as one that will evolve over time, something that has been made possible by its online administration. In short, we should take advantage of the online system, which allows us the flexibility to make changes. This should include not only the tweaking of individual questions but also removal and addition of questions as different evaluation issues emerge. For example, we may find in the future that the rating scale could be worded differently to provide better separation of scale items or there may be an open response question that does not
yield responses or does not provide significant information. We can respond to these situations by editing, adding, replacing or dropping questions.

The committee recommends the following as a part of periodic review:

1. There should be a periodic review of the SCE form by a faculty, administration, and student committee, perhaps every few years, and recommendations for change should be brought to the faculty for approval. Perhaps this should be considered a standing committee or permanent subcommittee of EPC.

2. The guiding principles established by the subcommittee for question writing should be used as a guide to future revisions. These principles are listed later in this document. If future committees see the need to go outside these parameters then the guiding principles should be changed to reflect this trend and carried forward with new proposals for SCE changes.

3. Periodic review should include an analysis of a student focus group to determine how students interpret the questions on the SCE form.

Teaching Practice at Tufts

It has become clear in trying to establish a new SCE form that there is a need at Tufts to establish a written statement of our ideals of teaching excellence. Students and faculty should have opportunities to discuss and reflect on what courses at Tufts are and should be trying to achieve. This is different than the university’s mission statement which describes overarching principles that may not all be a part of the goals of every course. This discussion also needs to make room for a discussion of where teaching in AS&E is and should be headed, and also how we should promote new methods of teaching.

Future Online Implementation

A major concern over the last two years in moving the paper form of SCE to an online platform (TRUNK) has been maintaining high participation rates. Participation rates using the old paper form were generally between 70-75% (with a wide variation between different courses), when most evaluations were completed by students in the last class of the semester. During our first semester online (Fall 2012) participation rates were at 78%. This participation rate was achieved with an evaluation period of two weeks (the last two weeks of classes) and constant email reminders to students to complete the forms. In response to faculty feedback the Spring 2013 participation period will be adjusted to start later and include only the last week of classes and the reading period.

It has been clear from our survey of other institutions that unless some sort of incentive program is put in place, online student participation will drop when the novelty of doing SCEs online fades. At other institutions this is usually a drop to 30-40%, which would not be a high enough yield at Tufts to maintain any hope of the results being meaningful.
The committee asks the administration to quickly implement an incentive program, taking advantage of iSIS capabilities, that would allow students completing all of their evaluations to view their grades sooner than students who do not complete all of their evaluations.

Some Other Considerations

The committee is very concerned about future revisions of the SCE system and how it will evolve over time. At this time, we have specifically targeted only faculty course instructors in an attempt to avoid too many moving parts while trying to formulate a new SCE. We have had two concerns, the first being the length of the evaluation form. If the form is too long it will reduce the time that students will be willing to spend on open response questions, which we believe is one of the benefits of the new form and also what faculty have identified as the most valuable part of evaluations. Our other major concern is to be able to gauge how the new form works in evaluating the main instructional component of courses before taking on other components that may complicate or even interfere with this function. Since SCEs are currently the primary way in which teaching is evaluated in tenure, promotion, and salary decisions we felt that it was necessary to get this component of the evaluation constructed and operating correctly and to determine its effectiveness before moving on to other components.

In future years we advise against the temptation to add components that do not adhere to the principles we used in formulating the questions on the SCE form. Very important is keeping the form short if student participation rates are to remain high. Specifically, the committee would like to respond to three questions that were raised at the March 27, 2013 AS&E Faculty meeting and were related to the inclusion of new items on the evaluation form.

1. **Service Learning** - We acknowledge that service learning is a part of the mission at Tufts and the promotion of service learning is something that makes Tufts stand out from our peer institutions. However, service learning is not something that lends itself to every part of the AS&E curriculum. So, should this be included in the SCE? We have not included this on the current form because service learning is not a component of many courses at Tufts and is not a required component of courses at Tufts.

2. **Graduate Student TA Evaluations** - We have not included evaluations of graduate student TAs who serve as discussion leaders, graders, and as recitation and lab instructors on the new SCE form. For now, this issue was too complicated given the highly varied roles that TAs fulfill (i.e. it represents a very complicated moving part, and iSIS is not currently set up to track graduate students as auxiliary instructors, which would have to happen for TA evaluations to be a part of the SCE form). A small component of the old (formerly paper) evaluation did ask about TAs but it has not been a very useful source of information and many graduate departments supplement this information with their own TA evaluation. We acknowledge that TA evaluations are important and their work certainly has an influence on the overall evaluation of a course. We also acknowledge that a uniform evaluation of TAs would relieve the work load that separate evaluation requires in some departments. However, we would be careful in that a rapid attempt to include this as a SCE component could easily miss the mark, be of little value, or could have a negative influence on the main evaluation of faculty instructors if the length of the form is an issue. If a TA evaluation is to
be uniform and useful, all relevant departments need to be consulted. Some departments already do their own evaluations and in our experience not all graduate departments are excited or interested in participating in anything other than their current in-house evaluation, which is already well-tailored to the function of their TAs.

3. Tailoring Your Own Evaluation - The SCE systems at some universities allow instructors to add questions of their own choosing to the evaluation of their course. This tailoring of the evaluation form is usually in addition to a series of uniform evaluation questions and instructors may be limited to a finite number of added questions, typically 2 or 3. Situations vary from school to school and the questions may be chosen from a bank of pre-written questions, may be written and submitted for inclusion, or may be submitted and vetted by a committee or chairperson before being included. Given the current administration of SCEs at Tufts via TRUNK, all of these options would be difficult to accommodate. The committee suggests two other options for instructors wishing to gather more information at this time:

A) You can use the last class of the semester or a short online questionnaire (through Qualtrics, for example) to have students address any additional issues that you may think warrant review that are not specifically covered by the SCE form. This could be in the form of a questionnaire or a class discussion.

B) You can ask the students to address specific issues when they fill out the SCE form online. This has the disadvantage of the potential for students to forget your request and it can also reframe the SCE form with students concentrating on your request rather than other issues that would normally appear in their responses.

C) We also encourage you to consider a mid-semester review of your courses, which may be helpful in resolving issues while a course is being taught and is known to significantly improve teaching. At Tufts the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT) can help facilitate a mid-semester review. See http://provost.tufts.edu/cełt/mid-term-feedback/ for more information on mid-term feedback.

Sincerely, On behalf of the SCE subcommittee

April 12, 2013

Jack Ridge, convener

The convener of the committee would like to thank and acknowledge the current and past members of the committee for their hard work on this project over the last two years. This group has been extremely attentive to detail and has been extremely good at resolving issues that sometimes began as disagreements. We have reached a consensus on the new SCE form through many instances of individual compromise, which is an achievement in itself given the diversity of opinions on student course evaluations.

Sincerely, Jack Ridge
Members of the committee:

**Faculty Members (current):**
- Christoph Borgers, Mathematics
- Mitch McVey, Biology
- Ellen Pinderhughes, Child Development
- Jack Ridge, Earth and Ocean Sciences
- Laura Rogers, Education
- Samuel Sommers, Psychology

**Administration:**
- Jean Herbert, Associate Dean
- Janet Hill, Univ. Information Technology
- Jo Ann Jack, Registrar (or representative)
- Donna Qualters, CELT
- Dawn Terkla, Institutional Research

**Students:**
- Simran Kaushal, graduate student
- Meredith Goldberg, undergraduate
- Darien Headen, undergraduate

**Past Members:**
- Daniel Abramson, Art History (2011-2012)
- Lee Edelman, English (sabbatical 2013)
- David Hammer, Education (2011-2012)
- Carmen Lowe, Dean Acad. Advising & Undergraduate Study (2011-2012)

**Guiding Principles for Question Writing (and Revision)**

The SCE subcommittee on Student Course Evaluations adopted overriding principles that helped us select topics to be queried on the SCE form and that guided our research, writing, and refinement of SCE questions.

1. Questions should reflect Tufts’ high regard for teaching excellence.

2. Questions should inquire about things that students are in a unique position to answer. This survey should be recognized as providing a student perspective and not as a comprehensive evaluation of teaching or courses.

3. The delivery and wording of questions should make every attempt to protect the confidentiality of students who respond to the evaluation.

4. Questions should be applicable to any course in Arts, Sciences, and Engineering.

5. Questions should allow for written responses that provide information for the improvement of teaching.

6. The evaluation should be as short as possible.

7. Questions should be guided by the best available research and practices regarding student course evaluations. Key references to summary analyses of studies on student course evaluations will be posted on the CELT web site under Resources and this link will be made available as soon as it is ready.
New Online SCE Form

Opening Statement

Student Course Evaluations play an important role in the effort to assess and improve teaching at Tufts. Your honest, constructive, and detailed feedback not only is essential for evaluating the courses you are taking now, but also will benefit future students. Responses are confidential, and instructors will gain access to anonymous results only after final grades are posted. Thank you for your participation.

Course Questions

1. How would you rate the success of the course in accomplishing its objectives as stated on the course syllabus?
   (5) Excellent  (4) Very Good  (3) Satisfactory  (2) Less than Satisfactory  (1) Very poor  ( ) No answer

2. How would you rate the use of class time (lectures, discussions, demonstrations, labs, etc.) to promote your learning?
   (5) Excellent  (4) Very Good  (3) Satisfactory  (2) Less than Satisfactory  (1) Very poor  ( ) No answer

3. How would you rate the use of out-of-class activities (reading assignments, homework, papers, projects, etc.) to promote your learning?
   (5) Excellent  (4) Very Good  (3) Satisfactory  (2) Less than Satisfactory  (1) Very poor  ( ) No answer

4. How would you rate the way the course engaged your interest?
   (5) Excellent  (4) Very Good  (3) Satisfactory  (2) Less than Satisfactory  (1) Very poor  ( ) No answer

5. Based on your answers above, and any other factors you consider important, please provide an overall evaluation of the course.
   (5) Excellent  (4) Very Good  (3) Satisfactory  (2) Less than Satisfactory  (1) Very poor  ( ) No answer

6. In what ways has this course made you think differently or more deeply? Please provide examples.
   Open response

7. What aspects of this course worked best to facilitate your learning?
   Open response

8. What suggestions do you have for improving this course?
   Open response

Instructor Questions

1. How would you rate the instructor’s organization of each class?
   (5) Excellent  (4) Very Good  (3) Satisfactory  (2) Less than Satisfactory  (1) Very poor  ( ) No answer
2. How would you rate the instructor’s success in explaining concepts and ideas?
   (5) Excellent  (4) Very Good  (3) Satisfactory  (2) Less than Satisfactory  (1) Very poor  ( ) No answer

3. How would you rate the timeliness of the instructor’s feedback on assignments, exams, and other work?
   (5) Excellent  (4) Very Good  (3) Satisfactory  (2) Less than Satisfactory  (1) Very poor  ( ) No answer

4. How would you rate the usefulness of the instructor’s feedback on assignments, exams, and other work?
   (5) Excellent  (4) Very Good  (3) Satisfactory  (2) Less than Satisfactory  (1) Very poor  ( ) No answer

5. How would you rate the instructor’s success in creating and maintaining an inclusive class, respectful of all students?
   (5) Excellent  (4) Very Good  (3) Satisfactory  (2) Less than Satisfactory  (1) Very poor  ( ) No answer

6. How would you rate the instructor’s communication with you outside of class?
   (5) Excellent  (4) Very Good  (3) Satisfactory  (2) Less than Satisfactory  (1) Very poor  ( ) No answer

7. Based on your answers above, and any other factors you consider important, please provide an overall evaluation of the instructor.
   (5) Excellent  (4) Very Good  (3) Satisfactory  (2) Less than Satisfactory  (1) Very poor  ( ) No answer

8. Please provide any additional comments regarding the instructor.
   Open response