November 19, 2018

Members of the Teaching and Learning Committee
UBC Vancouver Senate
2016-1874 East Mall
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1

Members of the Academic Policy Committee
UBC Okanagan Senate Standing Committees
UNC 322, 3333 University Way
Kelowna, BC V1V 1V7

Dear Members,

In 2007, the UBC Vancouver Senate passed a policy on the use of student evaluations of teaching. One goal of this policy was (https://senate.ubc.ca/vancouver/policies/student-evaluation-teaching):

To provide the University with data on the quality of teaching to be used for operational purposes, including but not limited to assessment of faculty for merit and/or performance adjustment salary awards, promotion, tenure and institutional recognition.

Part 4 (Conditions of Appointment for Faculty) of the Collective Agreement, Article 4.02 specifies that for the purposes of appointment, reappointment, promotion, and tenure, faculty are evaluated on teaching “effectiveness.” We thus interpret the purpose stated above as saying that the policy seeks to provide the University with reliable data on teaching effectiveness through the use of student evaluations of teaching.

Unfortunately, since 2007, a rapidly growing body of research literature has indicated that student evaluations of teaching do not provide reliable evidence of teaching effectiveness. Indeed, a good portion of the research literature indicates that student evaluation scores are biased against faculty who are members of protected categories under the BC Human Rights Code—for example, there is evidence that student evaluations are biased against female and racialized faculty.

Here is a blog at the London School of Economics that gives a broad sense of the literature: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/02/04/student-evaluations-of-teaching-gender-bias/

A more recent study alleging evidence of bias against women in student evaluations is reported on here: https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/03/14/study-says-students-rate-men-more-highly-women-even-when-theyre-teaching-identical
In light of these problems with student evaluations, the CAUT issued two policy statements in November 2016 that say that such surveys ought not be used in the evaluation of teaching and that they ought not be used “in any career procedures and decision making involving academic staff.”


More recently, an Ontario arbitration decision rendered on 28 June 2018 offered the following direction to Ryerson University: “The collective agreement is to be amended to ensure that FCS [Faculty Course Survey] results are not used to measure teaching effectiveness for promotion or tenure.” William Kaplan, the arbitrator, based his decision in part upon the evidence embedded in the growing body of research mentioned above and was unequivocal in his reasoning (http://www.rfanet.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/2009.12-FCS.pdf):

That evidence, as earlier noted, was virtually uncontradicted. It establishes, with little ambiguity, that a key tool in assessing teaching effectiveness is flawed, while the use of averages is fundamentally and irreparably flawed. It bears repeating: the expert evidence called by the Association was not challenged in any legally or factually significant way. As set out above, the assessment of teaching effectiveness is critical, for faculty and the University, and it has to be done right. The ubiquity of the SET tool is not a justification, in light of the evidence about its potential impact, for its continuation, or for mere tinkering. The evidence is dispositive that some of the questions do not elicit any useful information about teaching effectiveness and are subject to bias, while the use of averages – individual, Departmental, Faculty and University – provides no relevant information about teaching effectiveness.

In light of all these facts, we urge that the UBC Senate Academic Policy Committees immediately begin a review of the UBC policies on student evaluations of teaching. In light of the research evidence, the Ryerson arbitration decision, and the CAUT Policy statements, the UBC Faculty Association recommends that a revised UBC policy not permit the use of student evaluations in any summative evaluation of teaching, whether for appointment, reappointment, promotion, tenure, merit, performance salary adjustment, or any other purpose. If it continues with its current policy UBC runs the risk of assessing faculty teaching effectiveness with metrics known to be unreliable and potentially to be biased in a manner contrary to the BC Human Rights Code.

Members of the UBC Faculty Association will also be bringing this request for a review of the current policy forward as a motion through various faculties.

Sincerely,

Bronwen Sprout
President
On behalf of the Executive Committee