Goals for SET in ISAT

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Purpose

The purpose of this document is to articulate the goals of student evaluation of teaching (SET) in the ISAT department. This discussion is prompted by general dissatisfaction with our department's current practices (circa 2016-2017) around evaluating teaching. More specifically:

1. There is general dissatisfaction with the SET instrument that has been used by the department for the last couple of decades
2. There is general dissatisfaction with the way that the SET instrument has been employed to determine:
    a. The quality of teaching for annual performance, promotion and tenure evaluation, and
    b. The best practices for the ongoing improvement of teaching

This document is designed to provide a set of guiding principles that will support decision-making with respect to the selection, administration, and interpretation of a new SET instrument. It is designed to be a guide for faculty who want to:

1. Create syllabi that reflect and are in alignment with the core values of the department
2. Implement long-term strategies for establishing the quality of their teaching in the eyes of both the Academic Unit Head (AUH) and the Personnel Advisory Committee (PAC)
3. Develop a practice of reflection, innovation and continuous improvement with respect to their teaching

This document is also designed to be a guide for the AUH and PAC as they make determinations about the quality of individual faculty members' teaching, and more specifically as they work to determine to what extent SET should be incorporated into those evaluations.

Foundational Values

The following sections will articulate the shared values of the ISAT department that concern the quality of instruction, and as such, should be considered when working to determine the quality of that instruction. The values and principles discussed here derive either from key documents, such as the *Criteria Guidelines for Annual Evaluation, Reappointment, Promotion, and Tenure*, the ISAT Department's 2014 Strategic Plan, or from the ISAT Department's August 2016 Summit and the subsequent faculty meetings in which faculty members articulated and discussed our shared departmental values.

Quality of Instruction

The importance of high-quality instruction is reflected in the ISAT promotion and tenure criteria in that in order for a faculty member to be promoted to the rank of Professor, he or she must receive a rating of “Excellent” in the Teaching category. This value is supported by the academic literature. The quality of instruction is a significant factor in the quality of student learning (Benton, 2008). Bloom (1984) demonstrated that students who received one-on-one tutoring showed learning gains two standard deviations higher than students taught in a traditional classroom setting. Furthermore, students taught in a classroom that followed a mastery learning approach outperformed the traditionally taught students by one standard deviation. At a more macro scale, Sanders’ (1994) value-added methodology demonstrated that the effects of exceptionally high or exceptionally low instructional quality can be detected several years beyond the time of instruction.

Autonomy

The ISAT Department values pedagogical autonomy. We believe that it is up to each and every member of the department who is involved in instruction to determine independently:

- The specific *content* that will be covered in any course, with the caveat that instructors will endeavor to meet any learning objectives that have been jointly decided by the faculty, and in accordance with the course description provided in the course catalog
- The *means and medium* of instruction
- The *type and means of assessment*, including, but not limited to, how students are graded

We expect and require that each member of the faculty practice that autonomy in good faith, and we have trust that they do so. By “good faith,” we mean that we expect instruction to be student-centered, appropriately challenging, and in alignment with course and program goals and objectives. Outside of these parameters, we will not prescribe to our colleagues what or how they are to provide instruction to their students, nor how they assess the students’ learning, even if we disagree with their approach.

Autonomy is a key ingredient of motivation and of basic psychological health and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). We recognize that faculty members will do their best work if, and only if, they feel in control over how they perform that work. At its highest levels, motivation will be intrinsic--instructors will strive to be excellent purely for the satisfaction of having done so. Barring that, high levels of instructional quality will only be achieved when instructors have internalized the value of student-centered pedagogy and are fully committed to seeing their students succeed. To do so, it is critical that instructors are allowed to practice their teaching in a manner of their own choosing.

Innovation

Our Vision statement says that we

> *aspire to be at the national forefront of developing agile academic programs that operate at a range of intersections of diverse physical and social sciences and their associated technologies. These programs should be designed and encouraged to evolve to meet the changing demands of society and the changing opportunities of these sciences and technologies.*

Implicit in this Vision statement is the belief that the ideal of "high-quality" instruction is a moving target, and that as individuals, and as a faculty, we must work constantly to determine the nature of society's "changing demands" and how our pedagogy may best evolve to meet them. In other words, we expect faculty members to innovate, to research, to develop and test new approaches to creating content and delivering instruction. We accept that with innovation comes risk, and that not all, perhaps not even a majority, of these new approaches will be successful. We trust that innovation will be student-centered, i.e. it will endeavor, at worst, not to have an overly negative impact on students.

Self-Reflection and Transparency

Given the freedom and respect to be autonomous innovators, we expect faculty members to be mindful, reflective practitioners of their craft. We expect that each instructor will think deeply about the impacts of their instructional practices on students, on colleagues, on the department, and on society. Furthermore, we expect faculty members will transparently share evidence of this self-reflection with the department in the form of their annual FAR-FAAP and in their applications for promotion and tenure. We also expect that their actions and behaviors will evolve as a result of this self-reflection, and that these behaviors will serve as further evidence of their mindfulness.

Student Connection, Equity, and Diversity

Apart from autonomy, a second key component of motivation is relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). "Relatedness" describes a feeling of safety and connection with both the people and the ideas in one's environment. In an educational context, researchers have "observed lower intrinsic motivation in students who experienced their teachers as cold and uncaring," (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p71). Underpinning the need for relatedness is a more basic human need just to be seen as a living, breathing entity valued for no other reason than that they exist (Rochat, 2009). As such, the ISAT Department values, and sees as critical, the ability to create a classroom atmosphere where diverse students feel that they are seen and valued and that they have an equal opportunity to succeed.

Real-World Focus

Again citing our departmental Vision statement (see above), we value instruction that is practical and relevant to becoming an accomplished professional in today's world, and instruction that is seen as such by our students, by potential employers, and others outside the department. The third pillar of intrinsic motivation is competence, or a feeling of mastery of the skills and knowledge required to complete a task (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Tied to this motivation is a belief by learners in the practical relevance of the content being studied (Theall & Franklin, 1999).

Other Values

The above values are those seen as most critical in identifying and evaluating high-quality teaching. However, they are not all of the values shared by the department. Other values include work-life balance, interdisciplinarity, appreciation, and collaboration. Effective instructors will likely demonstrate and incorporate these values into their teaching. For example, an appreciation of work-life balance may be expressed as setting tasks for students that can be accomplished in a reasonable amount of time each week, taking into account that students have lives outside of the classroom, including other classes, jobs, health-maintenance, and extracurricular activities. That being said, these values are not considered central to the evaluation of high-quality teaching.

Roles and Contexts

It is important to consider the various contexts of evaluation and the roles of various actors within those contexts.

The AUH and Annual Evaluations

JMU requires that the Academic Unit Head (AUH) perform an annual evaluation of the quality of teaching of each faculty member. While at times these evaluations play a role in determining things like the faculty member's share of merit pay raises or whether or not a faculty member is promoted or receives tenure, these situations tend to be the exception and may even play at cross purposes to the AUH's broader role of promoting the health and vitality of the department, the department's faculty, the academic programs run by the department, and of course, the students within those programs. As such, we believe that the most appropriate role for the AUH in the context of evaluation of teaching is as ***witness***, ***coach***, and ***advocate***, rather than judge.

As a *witness*, the AUH's role is simply to observe benignly the efforts of faculty members and acknowledge that effort. Rooted in the psychological concept of social facilitation (Zajonc, 1965), people are motivated to perform at higher levels when they know someone is watching them, and conversely, to be more apathetic if they know or feel that nobody sees or is watching

what they are doing. The AUH needs to convey to each faculty member the message “I see you.” It is important to point out that the witness is not there to judge, but merely to convey the message that the activities of the person being watched are valuable and worthy of recognition. If the person being observed has any doubt that the witness does not have his or her best interests at heart, they may be motivated to hide their activities from view.

As a *coach*, the AUH’s role is to provide feedback on the faculty member’s performance with the explicit goal of helping the instructor improve that performance. A coach’s’ feedback is not always positive, but if delivered effectively, conveys the sentiment that the coach has confidence in the person being coached, and sincerely wants them to improve and succeed in order to support the success of the team.

As an *advocate*, the AUH’s role is to identify and provide resources that will aid the faculty member in achieving their fullest potential as an instructor. Everyone is different and has different strengths and weaknesses. Resources can be anything from recognition, to TA support, to course release, to support for attending professional development events. It is important for the AUH to pay attention to the needs expressed by the faculty member, as well as those that arise from an analysis of the evidence of the quality of their teaching.

Accordingly, the annual conversation between each faculty member and the AUH regarding their performance in the preceding year should seek to address the following questions:

1. What did you do this year?
2. What did you do well?
3. Where were the weaknesses in your performance?
4. What are your goals for improvement and/or innovation?
5. What can I do, as AUH, to help you achieve those goals in the upcoming year?

Obviously this conversation encompasses a much broader area of activity than can be addressed by student evaluations of teaching, however high-quality student evaluations can provide critical evidence of instructional vitality, and can be instrumental in helping faculty members identify concrete areas for improvement and/or innovation.

It is extraordinarily important to stress that “negative” student evaluations are not equivalent to low-quality teaching. It is important that instructors are able to acknowledge negative feedback from students without fear of punishment or retribution by the department. Part of trusting that our colleagues are conscientious practitioners of their craft is trusting that a negative response from students, in and of itself, will be enough of an admonishment and motivation for them to work to improve. Intentional self-development begins with an ability to see honestly the disconnect between one’s ideal performance and one’s actual performance (Pappas, 2012). We have to recognize that any attempt to improve or innovate necessarily entails doing something new; doing something new or differently entails risk and will not always be successful. If we punish people for “failing,” we will extinguish their motivation to improve.

As such, the AUH performing annual evaluations needs to play the role of an impartial, yet benevolent, observer. They need to support faculty in being honest, and reflective about their performance over the past year, and give them no reason to want to hide their imperfections. To do this, however, it is absolutely essential that the feedback gleaned from student evaluations be ***meaningful*** and ***actionable***. Furthermore, in order to facilitate a timely and efficient evaluation process, the feedback needs to come in a form that can quickly and easily be converted from raw data into an interpretable report.

The PAC, AUH and P&T Decisions

Other than annual performance evaluations, the other key context in which student evaluations play a role is in the determination of a faculty member's eligibility for tenure and/or promotion. These events do not entail a discussion between the reviewer and the reviewee, and the results of the review nearly always have significant impacts on the person being reviewed. It is in the interest of the department and the program that the applicant be honest and forthcoming about both strengths and weaknesses. It is clearly in the interest of the applicant to portray his or her actions in a favorable light. Other than receiving tenure or being promoted, the applicant generally receives little or no meaningful feedback from the PAC and AUH following P&T reviews. The exception to this rule is the 3rd year review, which is designed specifically to provide meaningful and actionable feedback to the applicant.

The context of P&T decisions has the potential to undermine the usefulness of annual evaluations--a faculty member who believes that a PAC or AUH will use "negative" course evaluations as a reason to deny a promotion or tenure application may avoid pedagogical innovation or introspection, and instead adopt conservative approaches and/or cynical tactics designed to maximize "positive" evaluations from students. This situation is antithetical to the ISAT Vision statement, and may compromise the health and vitality of the department's effort to establish and maintain its reputation as a pedagogical innovator. Serious consideration should be given to ways to design the course evaluation process that can mitigate the potentially undermining effects of the P&T process.

It is important to understand that departments have a great deal of latitude when it comes to how they conduct reviews for the purposes of P&T decisions. Just because our current process is secretive, non-communicative, engenders distrust, and fosters suspicion between and among faculty--not only between the PAC and the applicant, but also between members of the PAC--doesn't mean that it has to be that way. With sufficient creativity and willpower, the P&T process could be completely redesigned to meet the needs of the department and individual applicants without generating rancor, hurt feelings, or ill will. While such a process may be unconventional, JMU has a history and culture of delegating autonomy to programs and trusting in the wisdom of each department to manage itself in the way it deems best.

That being said, a full redesign of the P&T process is beyond the scope of this document, and in any case, there is a simpler, if less holistic, way to address the issue.

In order to prevent faculty from acting in a manner calculated to maximize the likelihood of a positive P&T decision at the expense of transparent, humble, self-reflection, faculty would need to have a high degree of trust that the PAC and AUH would not be empowered to use “negative” course evaluations against them except in tightly specified circumstances. Essentially, the base position of the AUH/PAC must be that nobody is perfect and that all of us are bound to receive less than stellar reviews at one point or another, perhaps even frequently, for reasons that are likely to be beyond our control, such as the subject matter/difficulty of the course, the gender of the instructor, non-native accent and/or command of English. As such, what is important is not the content of the evaluations, but rather the manner in which the faculty member responds to them. The questions the PAC/AUH would seek to answer are:

- Is there evidence that the instructor is paying attention to the feedback from students?
- If and when there was “negative” feedback, how did the instructor respond? What adjustments to their teaching practice did they make?
- If negative evaluations persist over time, despite the best efforts of the instructor to alter his or her practice to alleviate them,

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