

**Date:** 2013-03-12

**To:** Karen Roche, Secretary of Senate

**From:** Jane Nicholas, Chair of Senate Teaching and Learning Committee

**Subject:** Report of the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee (STLC) to Senate

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## 1. Online Student Evaluation of Teaching

Student evaluation of teaching (SET) is an important component in the overall assessment of teaching and learning. The Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning wants to emphasize that SETs should not be seen as the sole source of information to examine teaching or to document satisfactory teaching. While SETs are an important component in understanding student perspectives, by themselves they cannot provide a full picture of the multifaceted nature of teaching.

Stakeholders in the process for evaluation of teaching include faculty, students, administration, and support staff. For faculty members, course satisfaction surveys are important in providing evidence of teaching effectiveness for promotion, tenure, and renewal and merit, as well as in re-evaluating pedagogical practices and course design. Section 16.06.02 (B) of the current collective agreement requires faculty members to provide a specific sub-set of summary scores as part of their annual report. For students, the surveys provide an opportunity to give feedback on the quality of instruction and the course content. The aggregate data provide an important snapshot of teaching effectiveness across campus. For the Office of Institutional Analysis and support staff across campus, the administration of the surveys consumes a significant amount of their time and resources.

The Senate Teaching and Learning committee is of the opinion that online SETs offer significant benefits to all stakeholders and will provide better controls for the care and custody of data, more representative data, better assurances of student anonymity, and improved accessibility for students.

Lakehead University's current process is exclusively comprised of paper course evaluations that are distributed to faculty members to be distributed to students and completed in class. The data gathered depends entirely on the students present in the class on a given day. Students are occasionally responsible for the return of completed evaluations, which may be returned to the appropriate Dean's office, the department's administrative assistant, or Security. Once the Technology Service Centre (TSC) receives the completed forms, staff hand feed each evaluation into a Scantron machine. The process consumes a significant amount of time and resources (over 170 hours for TSC alone) and in the scanning there is a 10% margin of error. The course evaluations along with summary scores are typically returned to faculty members between eight and ten weeks after they are completed by students.

Online SETs will streamline the process of collecting the data, will provide more representative data and will ensure a more secure and confidential collection process. They will allow faculty members more immediate access to the data. They would also allow faculty to have their results centrally and securely archived for their future use. An online system would also allow for students to be provided with a

standard explanation of the purpose of the evaluation process and the subsequent use of the data collected. Evaluations conducted online do not use class time and allow students to reflect for a greater length of time on their experience within the course (Ernst, 2005). Recent research shows that there is increased quality and quantity of written comments as well as more thoughtful comments (Murphy 2004, Revelli 2000). Although there have been widespread concerns that an online method of delivering the survey would lead to more negative evaluations, this has not proven to be the case. Studies comparing online and paper SETs show that there were no meaningful differences in statistical scores based on survey method (Benton, et al 2010 Liu 2005, Thorpe 2002, Johnson 2002). Crews and Curtis (2010) also note that online course evaluations offer increased confidentiality for students when compared with traditional, hand-written paper ones. Online SETs would also improve student accessibility.

In the future, the current survey instrument could also be customized so faculties or professors could include additional questions from a Senate-approved bank of questions appropriate to their disciplines and/or pedagogical practices.

Online SETs substantially decrease the costs of administering the evaluations, while providing more representative data and better controls in collecting it. Currently, the cost for administering the surveys is covered by the Deans' budgets. In addition to purchasing the forms, the costs included the dispersed and inefficient labour costs, including having support staff hand feed each of the approximately 40,000 forms into the Scantron machine.

A limitation of online SETs has been decreased response rates. Research suggests that reminders by faculty (Murphy 2004), offering incentives (Anderson, Cain and Bird, 2005), and ensuring convenient access all improve response rates so they are approximately equal with traditional paper evaluations. There have been a number of successful strategies to advertise and promote completion of the surveys employed by other Ontario universities with a positive result. Successful strategies for increasing response rates through advertising and promotional campaigns include, but are not limited to: email reminders, passing out promotional stickers, and campus-wide advertisements. Moving to online SETs would require a convenient system offered through 'myinfo' with email reminders being sent to students when evaluations begin and until they close. Faculty members could also remind students of the availability of the evaluation. Such strategies would maximize online response rates, and moving to online SETs would require a commitment to advertising and promoting them.

In sum, online student evaluations of teaching have significant benefits, including:

- increased security of data
- more representative data
- increased quality and quantity of comments
- increased confidentiality and accessibility for students
- increased accessibility for students
- more timely feedback to faculty members
- decreased costs
- potential to customize survey instrument

Based on consideration of these factors, the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning believes that student evaluation of teaching should be conducted online starting in 2013. Should this be approved the Committee has outlined a proposed transition plan.

#### Proposed Transition Plan:

Phase 1: Existing survey instrument made available online through myinfo for 2013 spring/summer courses. This would mean SETs would now be conducted for spring/summer courses.

Phase 2: Existing survey instrument made available online through myinfo for all 2013-2014 courses.

Phase 3: Pending approval, in 2014-2015, the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee will evaluate the use of online SETs and explore opportunities for faculties, departments or schools to customize the existing survey instrument by adding further questions. Additional questions to customize the survey would come to Senate for approval and form a bank of approved additional questions for customization of the existing survey. Any further Senate-approved questions to customize the existing survey would strictly be optional additions to the existing survey.

## 2. Regulation on Timely Feedback

The Committee recently approved a draft regulation on timely feedback. It has now been referred to the Registrar.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

MOVED that the procedure for administering the existing instrument for student evaluation of teaching be conducted online through the Lakehead University website using myInfo.

MOVED that the Senate Teaching & Learning Committee's proposed Transition Plan be accepted.

Respectfully submitted,  
Jane Nicholas