

# Final Report of the CSUS-AAUP Committee on Student Opinion Surveys

## ***Introduction***

On November 26, 2007, the Board of Trustees for the Connecticut State University System and the Connecticut State University American Association of University Professors signed a “Letter of Agreement Regarding Student Opinion Surveys” in which the parties “agree to appoint a Committee to study and make recommendations to the Chancellor of CSUS and the President of CSU-AAUP regarding the use of student opinion surveys.” On March 28, 2008, CSUS Chancellor David Carter and CSU-AAUP President David Walsh convened the first meeting of the CSU/AAUP Student Opinion Survey Study Committee at the CSUS headquarters office. The Committee consisted of the following four tenured faculty members appointed by President Walsh and four academic officers appointed by Chancellor Carter:

### CCSU

Nanjundiah Sadanand, Professor, Physics and Earth Sciences  
Carl Lovitt, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

### ECSU

Andrew Nilsson, Professor, Sociology  
Carmen Cid, Dean of Arts and Sciences

### SCSU

Debra Emmelman, Professor, Sociology<sup>1</sup>  
Selase Williams, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs<sup>2</sup>

### WCSU

Cigdem Usekes, Associate Professor, English<sup>3</sup>  
Linda Rinker, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

Chancellor Carter and President Walsh charged the Committee with investigating and making recommendations concerning the following:

- essential elements that should be part of all student opinion surveys for full-time, part-time, and online faculty;
- method of administration of the student opinion surveys;
- frequency with which student opinion surveys should be administered
- reporting the results of the student opinion surveys; and
- appropriate use of the results of the student opinion surveys.

Following the presentation of the charge, the Committee elected Provost Carl Lovitt and Professor Andrew Nilsson to serve as co-chairs.

## ***Discussion and Conclusions***

In preparation for the second meeting, committee members agreed to obtain and analyze student opinion surveys from different departments in their respective universities. In addition, committee members agreed to read a review of the literature on course information surveys that had been prepared by a faculty senate subcommittee at Southern Connecticut State University. At the second

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Emmelman was subsequently replaced on the Committee by John Bloch, Professor of Sociology.

<sup>2</sup> Provost Williams was subsequently replaced on the Committee by Associate Vice President Marianne Kennedy.

<sup>3</sup> Professor Usekes was subsequently replaced on the Committee by Oluwoye Owoye, Professor of Economics.

meeting, which was held at CCSU on April 14, 2008, committee members discussed the literature review of research on student opinion surveys from SCSU, which presented insights into the reliability of student opinion surveys and examined factors that influence how students evaluate courses and instructors. Committee members then discussed what they had learned about the administration of student opinion surveys at their respective universities. Although many departments have adopted the standardized "Course Information Survey," student opinion surveys vary considerably from department to department.

The committee then considered the strengths and weaknesses of specific kinds of questions included in the various instruments examined. The Committee paid particular attention to the extensive Student Opinion Survey that had been developed by faculty at SCSU. This survey, which consists of 98 questions, asks students to provide general information about the course, an evaluation of the course, student demographic information, and a self-evaluation; the survey also includes a separate set of questions for online courses. Although committee members expressed concerns about the length of the survey, they were favorably impressed by the quality of the questions and the breadth of the focus.

Based on their discussions, the committee members came to the following conclusions about the kinds of questions that should form the core for a student opinion survey:

- questions about the overall quality of the course and the instructor, which are based on each student's unspecified criteria, are of limited value yet tend to subordinate all other questions
- surveys should not ask questions beyond the students' knowledge or expertise (e.g., assess the instructor's knowledge of the subject matter)
- core questions should focus on student learning, not on the teacher's personality or course management
- core questions should inquire about the behaviors, practices, and factors that contributed to (or inhibited) student learning
- core questions should encourage student reflection about their own learning experiences

Each committee member agreed to draft a set of core questions to be reviewed and refined at the third meeting. To help guide this process, Bill Gammell of the System Office also provide the committee with copies of different national standardized student teaching surveys.

The third meeting of the committee was held at CCSU on May 1, 2008. Based on input from the committee members, Provost Lovitt compiled a list of 16 core questions: 13 "Likert scale" questions and three "open-ended" questions. Following extensive discussion, the committee unanimously approved a common core of questions.

The current variety of survey instruments indicates that there is no consensus about what constitutes effective teaching or about how to evaluate it within the CSUS. The lack of a common instrument deprives promotion and tenure committees and administrators of a basis for understanding judgments about teaching from department to department. The Committee therefore recommends that the set of core questions below be incorporated in a standardized CSUS Student Opinion Survey, which all teaching faculty would be expected to administer:

All responses use the following Likert scale:

*Strongly agree*

*Agree*

*No Opinion*

*Disagree*

*Strongly disagree*

*Not applicable*

1. The syllabus or course outline described what I would learn in this course (“learning goals”).
2. This course helped me meet those learning goals.
3. This course evaluated how well I met those learning goals.
4. My experience in this course helped me appreciate this subject.
5. The way the course was taught helped me understand course material.
6. The instructor responded constructively to students’ questions.
7. The instructor created a supportive atmosphere in which to learn.
8. The assignments and exercises in this course helped me understand the subject matter.
9. The course readings and/or materials helped me understand the subject matter.
10. The instructor provided regular feedback on my performance in this course.
11. The instructor had high standards for student achievement.
12. The instructor encouraged me to take responsibility for my own learning.
13. I was motivated to work hard to be successful in this course.

#### **Open-ended questions**

1. Which aspects of this class (e.g., lectures, discussions, readings, assignments, tests, etc.) were the most helpful for learning course material?
2. Which aspects of this class were the least helpful for learning course material?
3. What other comments do you have about the strengths and weaknesses of this course?

#### **Additional Core Questions for Online Courses (Likert scale)**

1. The instructor was easily reached by email, phone, discussion board, chat room, or other means.
2. The instructor was available to help students at reasonable hours and responded to questions promptly.
3. The course content was available when I needed it.
4. The threaded discussion/course conference contributed to my learning.
5. This course included interactive assignments and links to examples from the Web that helped me learn course content.
6. There were an adequate number of online activities provided for practice.
7. The course website was well-designed, easy to read, and included effective graphics.
8. It was easy to navigate through course materials.
9. It was easy to submit assignments to the instructor.
10. I experienced only minor, or no, technical problems with this course.
11. I received timely assistance with technical problems.
12. Support services to help me with this course were available and easy to access.

In preparation for the fourth meeting, scheduled for May 14 at CCSU, the committee members agreed to review the CSU-AAUP Collective Bargaining Agreement provisions concerning student opinion surveys and to prepare responses to the remaining elements of the Committee's charge: method of administration, frequency, reporting, and appropriate use of student opinion surveys.

At the May 14 meeting, the committee reached the following conclusions about the remaining elements of its charge:

*Method of Administration:*

The committee discussed whether to continue administering a paper version of the student opinion survey or to recommend that it be administered online. Because of concerns that the student response rate would decrease for an online survey, the committee recommends that a paper survey continue to be administered. However, the committee encourages each university to pilot the online administration of the student opinion survey.

To ensure the integrity of the method of administration of student opinion surveys, the committee recommends that departments consider the following procedure: department secretaries distribute to faculty members envelopes containing the number of surveys equal to the number of students enrolled in each of their courses. As called for in the CBA, a "third party" (student, staff member, or faculty member) distributes the survey to the class, collects the completed surveys, and returns to the department secretary the envelope containing the completed surveys plus blanks for any surveys that were not completed, which the department secretary takes to the appropriate office for processing. (If students are selected as the third party, faculty members may wish to consider asking two students to distribute, collect, and return the surveys.)

The committee also recommends that *all* faculty members, regardless of their status, administer the proposed survey.

*Frequency of Administration:*

The committee discussed various options regarding the frequency of administration for the student opinion surveys. The committee concluded that surveys should be administered within the last two weeks of class, including final exam week. The committee also encourages faculty to solicit student feedback about their courses near the midpoint of the semester, with the understanding that the results would be viewed only by the instructor.

The committee also recommends that the student opinion survey be administered in all courses every semester, with the exception of courses with too few students to protect students' anonymity.

*Reporting Student Survey Results:*

The committee's discussion of reporting survey results centered on the question of whether the faculty member should be responsible for reporting survey results to the DEC, or whether the results should be independently obtained by the DEC. As the contract explicitly states that "the DEC shall obtain and use the data from a written student survey instrument" (4.11.7), the committee recommends that a complete, original set of survey results be independently available for consultation by the DEC. Thus, the committee recommends scanning and creating .pdf files of the survey results, which would be distributed to the faculty member and stored in a secure folder that only authorized evaluators in the promotion and tenure process would be able to access; authorized evaluators include the Department Chair, the Department Evaluation Committee (DEC),

the Dean, the Promotion and Tenure Committee, and the Provost or Vice President for Academic Affairs.

*Appropriate Use of Student Survey Results:*

The committee concluded that student opinion survey data may serve only two purposes: (1) to fulfill the contractual requirements of administering the surveys to evaluate faculty members for promotion and tenure, and (2) to give faculty members feedback regarding their teaching. This does not preclude the use of aggregated data from the surveys for program review, accreditation, and institutional research purposes. These aggregated data shall not include any identifiable information about individual faculty members or students.

Because any other uses of student opinion survey results would be prohibited, the committee recommends that security measures be instituted to ensure that student opinion survey results be accessible only to authorized users for approved purposes.

**Summary of Recommendations for Student Opinion Surveys:**

- Each university will administer every semester to students in all courses a student opinion survey containing a common core of questions.
- All faculty members, regardless of their rank or status, will administer a student opinion survey, minimally including these core questions, for all courses taught.
- Schools, departments, or faculty members may include supplementary questions in the survey, as well as additional open-ended inquiries.
- Faculty members will continue to administer paper surveys but schools are encouraged to pilot the online administration of student opinion surveys.
- Student opinion surveys will be administered as follows:
  1. the department secretary distributes to faculty members envelopes containing the number of surveys equal to the number of students enrolled in each of their courses
  2. a “third party” (student, staff member, or faculty member) distributes the survey to the class, collects the completed surveys, and returns to the department secretary the envelope containing the completed surveys (including blank surveys that were not completed)
  3. the department secretary delivers the completed survey to the appropriate office for processing
- Surveys will be administered during the last two weeks of class (including final exam week).
- Faculty members are encouraged to solicit student input about their courses throughout the semester.
- Student opinion survey results and written comments be scanned and saved in .pdf files. Only those specified in the CBA will be granted access to the survey data.