

CLAS Faculty Development Committee
Statement of Principle on Student Evaluations of Teaching

Approved by FDC April 2008

(Endorsed by CLAS Faculty Council, Personnel Committee, and Curriculum Committee)

Teaching is the central function of faculty members at GVSU. Evaluating teaching is therefore essential for the continued formative improvement of the practice of teaching, and is important for summative evaluation in contract renewals, tenure, and promotion. At the same time, effective teaching is a complex activity, even an art; it cannot be easily reduced to an assessment number and must instead be appreciated in a broader context. Student evaluations of teaching (“evaluations” hereafter) provide one important part of the context in which teaching efficacy may be assessed, though they should not be considered the primary source for deciding an instructor’s effectiveness.

Course evaluation forms (“forms” hereafter) provide data that give individual instructors broad feedback about students’ overall reactions to a course. The form should present ample opportunity for students to give open-ended written responses, as well as uniform Likert-style questions to generate numerical data, all of which should be used by individual instructors as one avenue for reflection on how effective a course was for student learning. In this sense evaluations should be used formatively by faculty to confirm, strengthen, alter, and improve various aspects of their own work in the classroom. Self-evaluation and self-reflection by the faculty member are a critical component for growth and development as an instructor in the art of teaching.

In light of the diversity of units in CLAS and variation among currently used forms, a common core of questions for the student evaluation of teaching effectiveness across all CLAS units and programs is desirable, but again should be only one component in the evaluation of teaching effectiveness. The form should allow units to add a customized component to seek data unique to their particular department. Units, programs, and individual faculty members are strongly encouraged to use additional, complementary methods that will be given weight in accordance with unit personnel policies. Evaluation of teaching effectiveness in CLAS should ideally include a variety of different measures that look at instructor efficacy from different professional perspectives and pedagogies, and not only student perceptions of teaching effectiveness. Student evaluation forms should not impose any particular pedagogic style on instructors.

Student responses on forms should be employed carefully in the salary evaluation, contract renewal, tenure, and promotion processes as one source of overall student feedback about an instructor’s efficacy. Through a self-evaluation or a portfolio of related materials, the instructor under review should provide context in which the evaluations may be interpreted. Evaluations should also be broadly interpreted in light of the course being taught (required/elective, median course grade, gen ed/major, SWS, etc.), instructor methodology, unit expectations, and possible biases because of perceived identity characteristics of the instructor (national origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc). Evaluations from a candidate’s first year should be understood in the context of and the challenges of a new experience at a different institution. Peers, review committees, unit heads, and deans should read evaluations for broad trends over several years.

Research indicates that students are qualified to express the impression that the teaching leaves upon them in certain important areas. Questions should be asked that explore students’ perception of the level of intellectual challenge, instructor’s preparedness, clarity of communication, openness to students’ questions and respect for them, availability and willingness to help students, and the quality and value of interactions in the classroom, studio, or lab and assigned work. Although responses to

these questions will vary within a class, an impression arises from the entire set of evaluations: broad trends in the responses – both from individual classes and multiple classes over several years – give an important portion of the picture of the impact the faculty member is having. Again, because teaching is an art, no individual number or single comment should stand in isolation; rather, such information must be considered in light of trends demonstrated over time and in the context provided by the instructor. Ideally, numerical data in forms should be considered in reference to historical averages in courses of similar size, level, difficulty, and status (elective/required). Written comments in evaluations unrelated to teaching and learning should be disregarded. On issues such as whether the professor is knowledgeable on the subject or assignments and whether tests are appropriately challenging according to unit standards, the assessment of teaching is best done by one's peers.

Feedback from students is most meaningful when the largest possible number of students in a class participate thoughtfully in filling out evaluations. The ideal context in which to conduct teaching evaluations is the regular meeting time and place, either on paper or on computers (if present in the meeting room). Units are strongly urged to administer forms in ways that ensure the highest possible percentage of student responses and provide sufficient time for students to complete thoughtful evaluations.