USC University of Southern California

OFFICE OF THE PROVOST

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MEMORANDUM

To: USC Faculty

From: Elizabeth Graddy
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Date: October 19, 2017

Subject: Revising the Student Course Evaluation at USC

Summary

Since 2013, three different faculty committees have agreed that USC's system of supporting, evaluating, and rewarding teaching requires a significant overhaul. Each committee called for improved measures for assessing teaching quality, and recommended the same peer review standard used to evaluate scholarly work should be used to evaluate teaching. Recommendations for changes were:

- Revision of student evaluations, including articulated constructs to be measured, revised items, and a more robust analysis
- Use of student evaluations to provide feedback about students' learning experiences, but not as a primary measure of teaching effectiveness due to their lack of validity and vulnerability to implicit bias
- Implementation of a menu of valid teaching evaluation approaches, including peer review of classroom practices, syllabi, teaching portfolios, and teaching statements, as well as implementation of student learning outcome measures and long-term impact measures
- Implementation of transparent evaluation processes that include clear criteria and training

While many of these changes will soon be implemented, this memo outlines the rationale and process for enacting the first recommendation: *Revising the USC student course evaluation*. This process will be led using Item Response Theory (Wilson, 2012; Fox, 2010), a validated measurement design approach, which requires faculty and student feedback on the selected items. Multiple pilots of the measure will be run to ensure it is measuring the desired constructs. We have identified five constructs of student learning experience to be measured: 1) Course design, 2) Instructional practices, 3) Inclusive design and practices, 4) Assessment practices, and 5) Course impact. Open-ended questions as well as items assessing students' investment in their own learning will be included to give more robust and contextualized information. These items apply to the university-wide student evaluation form; however, schools will continue to have the option to include additional customized items on their forms. The timeline is detailed below, but full implementation of the measure will begin Spring 2018.

Course Evaluation Change Rationale and Process

In response to recommendations made by three USC faculty committees, Vice Provost Elizabeth Graddy has initiated a revision of the USC student course evaluation questionnaire.

Faculty Recommendations (2013-2017)

Over the last four years, three faculty committees (2013 Academic Senate Task Force on Teaching Evaluations, 2016 Provost's Task Force on Teaching Effectiveness, and 2016-2017 Provost/Senate Committee on Teaching and Academic Programs) made recommendations for changing how teaching is supported, evaluated, and rewarded at USC. Below is a summary of the recommendations *specifically for student evaluations*.

The committees agreed that although more valid forms of evaluating teaching should be used, student course evaluations still provide valuable information about student experiences, and USC's questionnaire should be modified to better measure that experience in the following ways: The new questionnaire should articulate specific domains of students' learning experience, using multiple items with subscale scores. Items should evaluate students' experience of course design, instruction, inclusion practices, assessment, and impact. Customized open-ended questions should be included, and rubrics should be used for reviewing qualitative comments. Items on student self-assessment of learning as well as variables such as grade, required/elective, small/medium/large enrollments, and graduate/undergraduate should be used to weigh and analyze the data. These variables should be described in a summary when student evaluation results are examined to give context to the instructor's teaching environment. In addition, data such as course evaluation means, standard scores, and percent responding should be included. All of the data from the questionnaire should be utilized, not just one or two items, and cumulative data over a specified time frame should be used to identify patterns in student experiences. Response rates must increase to ensure reliability of the measure, using required compliance for release of grades or orienting students to the importance and intended use of the evaluations as motivation for completion. Once a new questionnaire is constructed, a systematic evaluation should be conducted, with regular follow-up evaluations, to ensure the questionnaire measures, and continues to measure, the desired constructs.

New Student Course Evaluation Questionnaire

The recommendations for student evaluation data analysis and use will be addressed at a later date. This memo focuses only on revising the items used in the questionnaire. While the current questionnaire has items specific to various domains of student experience, they are not combined into identified subscales, and only items 11 (*Overall, how would you rate this instructor)* and 12 (*Overall, how would you rate this course*) are widely used in faculty review processes. These umbrella items do not provide specific information about students' experience with their faculty or courses. The new questionnaire will include items that measure students' perceptions of: 1) Course design, 2) Instructional practices, 3) Inclusion practices (embedded in the other subscales to decrease response bias), 4) Assessment practices, and 5) Course impact. Open-ended items will be included, and schools will continue to have the option of adding customized items. To make analysis of student responses more robust, items on student investment in their own learning will be included, as this variable has a positive correlation with student ratings, and the items will encourage self-reflection on student accountability. The intent of this revised instrument is to provide better contextualized information about students' experience. The design process will use the validated Item Response Theory approach to measurement design (Wilson, 2012; Fox, 2010).

Faculty and Staff Leading the Change

To begin the process of change, Professor Gale Sinatra from the Rossier School of Education was consulted due to her experience in revising student evaluations at two other universities. She worked with a faculty committee in the Rossier School including Professors Harry O'Neil, Sandy Kaplan, Julie Slayton, Ken Yates, Kim Hirabayashi, Artineh Samkian, and Ruth Chung to identify items to measure the variables outlined above. From there, a new committee was formed to further develop and test those items for the entire University. The committee is comprised of Gisele Ragusa, Professor of Engineering Education and an expert in Item Response Theory and measurement design; Heather Rosoff, Director of Data Policy and Analysis in the Office of the Vice Provost for Academic and Faculty Affairs; Robyn Goldberg, Course Evaluation Administrator in the Office of Institutional Research; and Ginger Clark, Assistant Vice Provost for Academic and Faculty Affairs and the Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching.

Process

Item Response Theory calls for *feedback from subject matter experts* (faculty) on the items being used to ensure they capture the type of behavior, experiences, and perceptions we want to assess. It requires a *cognitive questioning process from those being assessed* (students) to confirm that the items are being interpreted accurately. And it requires formative *pilot studies* using confirmatory factor analysis to ensure the items cluster into the variables we hope to measure. *Adjustments and item substitutions* are then made until the measure assesses the desired variables.

This process will take approximately six months before full implementation, and then one year until the new course evaluation instrument is finalized. The timeline will be as follows:

- 10/18: The Academic Senate reviewed the evaluation process and new pool of items, and was asked to provide feedback from their Faculty Councils on the items by 11/1
- 10/18 through 11/1: Feedback will be collected from Faculty Councils
- 10/18 through 11/1: Cognitive interviews will take place with students evaluating the clarity of the items
- 11/1 through 11/12: Feedback from faculty and students will be used to modify and select items for the first pilot questionnaire
- 11/13-11/17: First small pilot will be run on a cross-section of courses from each school. Confirmatory factor analysis will be used to determine whether items are measuring the variables we want them to measure, and modifications will be made for the second pilot
- February 2018: Second larger pilot will be conducted followed by analysis and modifications
- April 2018: Full implementation of the new student evaluation will take place, replacing the old evaluation form. This is to ensure the course evaluations for the next merit cycle are consistent for the Spring and Fall for the 2018 faculty review process
- April 2018 & December 2018: Data will be examined from the Spring 2018 and Fall 2018 evaluations to make slight alterations to the measure
- April 2019: Final version of the measure will be implemented, with periodic analysis to ensure the measure continues to assess desired domains of student experience

References

Fox, J. P. (2010). *Bayesian Item Response Modeling: Theory and Applications.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Springer.

Wilson, M. (2012). *Constructing Measures: An Item Response Theory Approach*. New Jersey, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.