To: A&S Faculty Council  
From: Dean Richard McCarty  
Date: February 3, 2006  

Re: Proposal for the Creation of an A&S Course Evaluation web site

For the past several years, the College of Arts and Science has provided the Student Government Association with course evaluation data. The SGA has edited these data and posted them on their web site, http://www.vanderbilt.edu/sga. Faculty members have been given the option of withholding their course evaluation data from the SGA, and many faculty members and several departments have chosen to withhold data. Most of the course evaluation data, however, has been and is downloadable by any person who accesses the SGA web site and enters his or her VUnet ID.

I request that the Faculty Council of the College of Arts and Science consider a proposal whereby A&S will create its own course evaluation web site and semi-annually post data to it. There are several advantages to this proposal over the current practice. A&S would more promptly, reliably, and accurately post course evaluation data to the web site. The site could also be better managed; for example, by making the link to the site more noticeable and by restricting access to it to the Vanderbilt community. Faculty members would not unnecessarily cede or delegate authority to the SGA to publish the course evaluation data and would be better able to present and format the data appropriately. Further, since A&S has started to conduct course evaluations online, the results can be directly posted to the new course evaluation web site.

Vanderbilt students should have access to course evaluation data. It is one of several important sources of information by which students can prudently make their course selections. Moreover, several universities currently make this information available to their students and/or to the world at large, and the trend among our peer institutions is to increasingly disclose course evaluation information to students. An interesting case in point is the University of Chicago. Please see the survey attached to this proposal.

Making course evaluation information systematically available will encourage students to gain more sense of ownership of the course evaluation process and, perhaps, increase participation and course evaluation response rates. Since A&S collects and stores these data for its own purposes, it would be a disservice to the students to withhold this information from them.

Access to the A&S course evaluation web site will be restricted to members of the Vanderbilt community (i.e. those persons who have VUnet IDs). Prospective students, parents of existing or prospective students, and the general public would not have access to the course evaluation information.

The A&S course evaluation web site would be formatted to include the results for questions 1 through 9 and 15 on the course evaluation form. Unlike the current SGA site, the responses will be graphically displayed as histograms. We believe that histograms will convey the course evaluation information more effectively than a mean and standard deviation. Except for the number of students enrolled and the number responding, numerical raw scores will not be posted. This approach will also make “data mining” by unauthorized persons or for unauthorized purposes more difficult.
Course evaluation data for a semester will be posted at least two weeks prior to the next registration period. Data for any particular course would be retained on the web site for three years, after which the information will be deleted. Visitors to the site, using their VUnet IDs, would be able to access the data by clicking on a semester, and then by either clicking on the instructor name and then the specific course or clicking on the department name and then the specific course. A general disclaimer shall be placed at the bottom of the course evaluation web site to the effect that the course evaluation results posted on the web site are only one indicator of teaching quality and effectiveness and that these data should be interpreted with this point in mind.

Some course evaluation data would not be posted to the web site. Summer courses and courses with fewer than five students would not be included. The written comments by students on the standard course evaluation form would also not be included. Written comments are a private form of communication between a student and an instructor. Further, courses that had less than a fifty per cent course evaluation response rate would not be included. As a general principle, all other course evaluation results would be posted to the web site. If an instructor has compelling reasons why evaluation results for a particular course or semester should not be posted, he or she may present a case to the department chair, who will then submit a recommendation to the Dean. Other requests will also be considered on a case-by-case basis. Such requests would be based on incidents of personal or familial tragedy, on the course being experimental, or on unusual and exceptional circumstances, such as an instructor taking over a course for another instructor in the middle of the semester.

In sum, we believe this approach will provide students with better and more complete information in a more timely fashion. It will allow students to obtain a glimpse of the dynamics of a particular course at a particular time. But, by using histograms, it will also undermine attempts to make simplistic comparisons of faculty teaching by focusing on numerical scores alone.

Thank you for your consideration.