Dean Richard McCarty called the meeting to order at 4:10 p.m. in Wilson Hall 103. Approximately 47 faculty members were in attendance.

1. Approval of the Minutes of the Faculty Meeting of January 17, 2006.

There were no comments or questions, and the minutes were approved.

2. Executive Motion Calendar.

Professor Damon, Chair of the A&S Faculty Council, presented several items for action. The first of these, from the A&S Dean’s Office, was a Proposal to create an A&S Course Evaluation web site. Professor Damon asked Dean McCarty to present the proposal.

Dean McCarty stated that the proposed A&S course evaluation web site would have several distinct advantages over the current Student Government Association (SGA) web site (see the course evaluation web site proposal attached to these Minutes). The College of Arts and Science would more promptly, reliably, and accurately post course evaluation data to the web site, and A&S could better manage the site. Access would be restricted to those persons who have VUnet IDs. The results of questions 1 through 9 and 15 on the standard course evaluation form would be provided, but as histograms rather than as means and standard deviations. In this form the data would be easy to interpret but difficult to “mine.” Furthermore, information would be presented for only one course at a time, and printing would be restricted. Course evaluation information would be available for three years and then be archived. Some information and courses would not be given on the web site: written comments, summer courses, courses with fewer than five students, and courses with less than a 50% response rate. Faculty members could also petition the Dean, through their department chairs, to withhold course evaluation information for compelling reasons.

Dean McCarty noted that the SGA president is receptive to the proposed changes and continued that some of the other Vanderbilt undergraduate colleges have expressed interest in adopting the proposed web site for their courses. Similar course evaluation web sites exist at a number of our peer institutions, including the University of Chicago, Washington University in St. Louis, Columbia University, and Yale University. Many others operate roughly as we currently do, with web sites run by undergraduate student associations. This is the case at many Ivy League universities, such as Princeton, Harvard, and Brown. Dean McCarty then illustrated a test version of the proposed new Vanderbilt A&S web site.
Professor Sloop asked whether instructors would still be able to add their own individualized questions to the course evaluations, and, if so, would these personalized questions appear on the web site. Dean McCarty replied that, yes, instructors would still be able to add personalized questions, and responses to these questions would not be included on the web site.

Professor Gould then read a prepared argument against the proposal (see his statement attached to these Minutes). Professor Ellingham supported many of Professor Gould’s points. He argued that the proposal raises serious issues about faculty privacy, runs counter to the original purpose of the evaluations, has undesirable effects, and has weak reasons in favor of it. He was especially concerned that, with the web site, students would be more likely to select courses on the basis of the published course evaluations rather than on the content of the courses. Professor Ellingham also stated that he was not persuaded by the survey of peer institutions: Just because other universities are publishing course evaluation data does not mean that it is a good idea. He would prefer that A&S not publish any course evaluation information at all, but if it does, it should at least allow instructors to withhold their course evaluation information from publication.

Professor Tellinghuisen argued that in certain situations providing course evaluation information to students could be detrimental. If a student has committed himself or herself to a major and discovers that an instructor for a required course has received poor student evaluations, then he or she might adopt a negative attitude toward that course and that instructor. Professor Tellinghuisen then asked, following a subject raised by Professors Gould and Ellingham, why A&S does not provide the grade point average of a course along with the course evaluation information. This would give students an important piece of information about the course and would also allow others to ascertain whether for that course there is a strong relationship between course evaluation scores and grades. Without providing this information, grade inflation is exacerbated. Dean McCarty replied that A&S has to be pro-active in response to grade inflation.

Professor Sloop stated that he was hesitantly in favor of the proposal. He argued, contra Professors Gould and Ellingham, that the history of course evaluations at Vanderbilt is irrelevant to the merits of this proposal, that being granted access to patient evaluations of doctors might be a good idea (referring to an analogy used by Professor Ellingham), that course evaluations are only one piece of information that students use to select courses, and to overemphasize the role of course evaluation data in the selection process is unreasonable.

Professor Hess noted that the course evaluation proposal had come from the Dean’s Office and asked why it had not been studied by a faculty committee. Dean McCarty responded that the proposal was thoroughly discussed and approved by the Faculty Council. The Faculty Council is a faculty committee.

Professor McCarthy stated that he was sympathetic to some of Professor Ellingham’s concerns about the proposal. Perhaps faculty should reflect on the underlying issues
involved with the increased use of course evaluation data and on the motives that students would have for accessing the data. Students might take courses for the wrong reasons. Further, he encouraged faculty to discuss the possibility of allowing instructors to opt out of the publication of their course evaluation data. Dean McCarty replied that the concern that students might select courses for the wrong reasons underestimates our students.

Professor Landers raised two points against the proposal. First, the survey questions have been the same for many years, and several are problematic and poorly worded. Second, female and minority instructors would be reluctant to file petitions to have their course evaluation data withheld. Dean McCarty responded that Faculty Council last year carefully examined course evaluation data for gender and ethnic biases and concluded that such biases were not significant. He further expressed confidence that junior faculty would be willing to petition, if necessary, to have their course evaluation data withheld from publication. On the matter of survey content, he noted that it is important to retain the same questions over time in order to build a database of dependable and reproducible evaluation information. Peer institutions use similar questions on their course evaluation forms.

Professor Gines asked why the opt-out choice would no longer be available to most instructors. Dean McCarty replied that all course evaluations should be available to students. Creating a course evaluation web site is the next logical step after implementing the online course evaluation system last fall. Professor Gaca asked whether peer institutions allow instructors to opt out. Dean McCarty responded that he did not know.

Professor McCarthy asked what was the principle underlying the denial of the opt-out to instructors. Dean McCarty replied that consistency is the principle. Students should have access to all of the course evaluation information and should not have to resort to course evaluation information from unreliable sources, such as the various national course evaluation web sites. Professor McCarthy then asked why the student’s right to this information should override the faculty right to academic freedom. Dean McCarty responded that he does not think that posting evaluations is a matter of academic freedom. The proposal recognizes that we are in a changing world and that A&S should reliably and consistently provide course evaluation information to students.

Professor McCarthy proposed that the A&S faculty review the course evaluation web site after three years, if it were approved. Dean McCarty agreed to this suggestion, and Professor Damon deemed it to be a friendly amendment to the Council motion to approve the web site proposal.

Professor Casper asked whether graduate courses would be included on the web site. Dean McCarty replied that the results of graduate courses that had at least five responses would be included. Professor Burrus stated that she would be more comfortable with the proposal if the web site only included the results of questions 4 and 9 of the course evaluation form. Dean McCarty responded that the results of all questions should be included, for consistency purposes.
Professor Neamtu stated that he was voting against the proposal because the current system of course evaluations is not scientific. Statistical studies, he said, have demonstrated that there is a significant correlation between grading leniency and high course evaluation scores. Course evaluations are also not scientific because experts are rated by non-experts. He also considered that the publication of course evaluation data was inconsistent with academic freedom. Dean McCarty replied that peer evaluation of teaching, which is the alternative to student course evaluations, takes an enormous amount of time. He stated that if one looks at the evaluations, the best teachers are often the toughest graders.

Professor Campbell acknowledged that opponents of this proposal have raised some good points, but stated that she was in favor of it. She was troubled by the notion that students are not capable of evaluating instructors. Students could be interpreted as indigenous experts on teaching. Dean McCarty agreed with this point; the A&S teaching awards are based on course evaluations, and he pointed out that no one can deny that the award recipients are excellent teachers.

The motion to approve the course evaluation web site proposal, with the friendly amendment to review the web site in 36 months, failed for a lack of majority, 21 in favor and 10 opposed, with 15 abstentions.

Professor Damon returned to the podium to present the additional items from the A&S Faculty Council:

(B) From the Committee on Educational Programs (CEP), Division of the Department of Art and Art History. Professor Ellingham asked, as a point of information, how many faculty members would there be in each department. Professors Johns and Murphy replied that the Department of Studio Art would have three tenured and tenure track faculty, four Senior Lecturers, two part-time Senior Lecturers, and one additional full-time Senior Lecturer next fall; and the Department of History of Art would have nine full-time faculty members. There were no other questions or discussion, and the motion to approve this division passed.

(C) Elimination of Information Systems track in Managerial Studies minor. There were no questions or discussion, and the motion to approve this change passed.

(D) Addition of a Chinese Area Studies track in Beijing, CET Study Abroad academic programs. Professor McCarthy asked whether the courses offered in this program would be taught in English. Professor Damon replied that the courses relating to Chinese culture and history would be taught in English. There were no other questions or discussion, and the motion to approve this new track passed.

(E) From the Committee on Academic Standards and Procedures (CASP), Recommendations from the Second Language Acquisition Committee. Professor McCarthy asked whether these recommendations applied only to those students who take
a foreign language course in the same language in which they have received Advanced Placement credit. Professor Damon replied yes. There were no other questions or discussion, and the motion to approve these recommendations passed.

3. **Changes in Freshman Orientation and the implications for A&S.**

Dean McCarty explained that he and Mark Bandas are co-chairs of the new Orientation to Vanderbilt Norms and Values Committee. This committee is one of four that Chancellor Gee created in response to the recommendations of the Safety Task Force. The Safety Task Force suggested extending freshman orientation for the entire year, and the Orientation Committee is charged with implementing this idea, which would represent a fundamental change in freshman orientation at Vanderbilt. Dean McCarty proposed that orientation activities be conducted primarily in groups of about 20 students. The small learning communities would be co-facilitated by faculty members, VUceptors, and Student Life professionals. Eighty faculty members (up to 60 from the College of Arts and Science) would be needed. These learning communities, based on the model developed by the Vanderbilt Visions Committee, would meet on move-in day and continue to meet roughly once a week until April. All of the small groups would follow the same framework of topics and be provided with the same resources, but each group would work independently on a set of academic challenges. Students would earn one credit, on a pass/fail basis, for their participation. This redesigned Freshman Orientation program would be a prelude to the Freshman Commons, scheduled to open in August, 2008. Dean McCarty noted that he did not expect faculty members to become experts in student life issues, like alcohol consumption or sexual assault. Professionals from the Student Life Office would help guide these kinds of discussions. Dean McCarty added that a more detailed proposal from the Orientation Committee would be forthcoming, probably before the next A&S faculty meeting. Similar proposals would be advancing within the other Vanderbilt undergraduate schools. The Provost strongly supports these proposed changes and has committed financial resources for faculty members who volunteer as facilitators of the small learning groups. Dean McCarty said that he would soon ask faculty members to volunteer for this program.

Professor Ellingham asked about the content of each learning community session. Dean McCarty responded that this would be up to each facilitator and learning community. There could be a common reading or a series of readings that might address the themes of sameness and difference or respect for others. Professor Ellingham queried whether the topics would be intellectually based. Dean McCarty replied that they would be. The learning communities could also have a service component as part of their program and could include attendance at “star” faculty presentations. There could be 80 different ways, he suggested, to implement the general framework of the program.

4. **Original Motion Calendar.**

No issues were raised.
5. **Good of the College.**

No issues were raised.

6. **Adjournment.**

The meeting adjourned at 5:35 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Joel Tellinghuisen, Secretary of the Faculty

[Professor Gould’s prepared statement regarding the course evaluation web site proposal. Presented at the February 21, 2006 A&S Faculty meeting.]

Because yesterday was Presidents’ Day, I’m tempted to begin my remarks by referring to an important event that took place four score and seven years ago. But the event I have in mind occurred only about three decades and seven years ago. I’m referring to the introduction of course evaluations in the College of Arts and Science. Back then, the stated purpose—indeed, the only purpose—of course evaluations was to enable faculty to improve their teaching. Data from an instructor’s evaluations was made available only to the instructor—not to the department chair, not to the Dean’s office, and not to the student body. Eventually, as we all know, more eyes were permitted to see the evaluations, and they were used for more purposes. Indeed, I recall being required to tell my students that the opinions expressed on course evaluations would be used in making personnel decisions. Although the faculty never voted to allow course evaluations to be used for that purpose, we all came to accept that use as a normal condition of our employment. More recently, perhaps about ten years ago, the Provost decreed (without a faculty vote) that numerical data from course evaluations would thenceforth be made available to the Student Government Association for publication. However, the Provost allowed individual faculty to opt out, that is, to deny permission to transmit their evaluation data to the SGA. The proposal now before us would revoke that opt-out provision except in extraordinary cases.

I see this revocation of the opt-out right as a serious infringement of our academic freedom and a violation of confidentiality. This infringement of faculty rights is proposed out of concern for the students’ alleged right to use course evaluation data in selecting classes and professors. I believe that this concern reflects an undue emphasis on the economic model of the educational enterprise. When we faculty are viewed as purveyors of educational goods and the students are viewed as consumers, it is all too easy for us to adopt the attitude that the customer is always right, and that the customer’s rights trump our academic freedom.

I don’t deny that students find it useful to have access to course evaluation data. Similarly, I would find it useful to have access to the grades that my students were
assigned in other classes. Confidentiality of students’ grades is a fundamental tenet of our educational system and is mandated by law in a federal act known as the Buckley Amendment. But even without a federal law, I believe we should safeguard the grades that our students give us just as zealously as we safeguard the grades we give them. Reporting data only in the form of histograms is not a sufficient safeguard, nor is it sufficient to report only numerical data rather than students’ written comments. I call upon my colleagues to defeat this proposal and subsequently to engage in a serious debate about the purposes of course evaluations.