THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
REGENTS COMMUNICATION

ITEM FOR INFORMATION

Subject: Faculty Governance Update: On-Line Instructor Evaluations and Placement Examinations

At its April 2007 meeting, the Senate Assembly was apprised of an initiative proposed by the Office of the Provost to explore the prospect of conducting by electronic means two activities that have traditionally been done on paper. The first of these are the end-of-term evaluations by students for each course in which they are enrolled. The other is the use of placement examinations at the time of admission to assign students to appropriate courses. Although there are strong motivations by administration to make these transitions, they are not without potential unintended consequences, and so thoughtful review is in order. The principal notion behind a seemingly inevitable move away from paper evaluations and paper placement exams to electronic ones appears to be that economies will be achieved by reducing annual processing costs, even though there may be a high initial cost for developing the new system.

On-line Course Instructor Evaluations

A new electronic system must contain safeguards that irreversibly strip the identities of all student participants from all evaluations, to preserve the desirable features of anonymity that the existing paper-based system has. There must also be protection against the real possibility that internal or external groups may seek to acquire the free-format and often personal comments written by students about instructors, their courses, and the university through FOIA, subsequently representing them publicly as U-M sanctioned reviews. The U-M risks granting a patina of institutional sponsorship to individual remarks that at times can resemble the anonymous writings on the walls of public places. In fact, it is doubtful that these free-format written comments obtained during the evaluation process should be transmitted to anyone but the course instructor; otherwise they should be irreversibly purged from any servers. This is the model that is employed by the Administration Evaluation Committee in the faculty's annual evaluation of academic administrators.

Pilot studies have suggested that student participation rates can be as high on-line as on paper, but results varied with academic culture: they were higher in engineering than in sociology, for example. Some have suggested that student participation should be compelled by sanction or reward. Others argue that doing so could undermine the pedagogical rationale for such evaluations. In particular, the use of sanctions could be tantamount to adding a new graduation requirement. The prospect of using of cell phones or wireless technology to administer evaluations during class time could be beneficial, however.

Pilot studies likewise suggest that median evaluation scores will drop by about 0.2 points using on-line evaluation. The scores are in truth good to only about 0.5 points, but sadly, in some units the scores are overly scrutinized and probably misused.

On-line Placement Examinations

When it comes to on-line examinations, it is clear that unproctored exams without safeguards against fraudulent behavior should not be used to grant academic credit or standing, as Duke University has learned to its embarrassment. If transition to on-line course placement exams results in cheating, the

Regents' Bylaw 4.04. The Senate Assembly shall serve as the legislative arm of the senate…The assembly shall have power to consider and advise regarding all matters within the jurisdiction of the University Senate which affect the functioning of the University as an institution of higher learning, which concern its obligations to the state and to the community at large, and which relate to its internal organization insofar as such matters of internal organization involve general questions of educational policy.

one who suffers most would be the student who enters an inappropriate course. However, there is an unintended consequence of shifting from paper exams to on-line ones: the test-taking strategies that are currently taught in the schools (e.g., underline important sentences, do the easy questions first, cross out the answers that are obviously wrong) will become ineffective.

On-line Textbook Reporting

The Assembly also learned at its April meeting about an initiative to improve timeliness of notice to students about required textbooks. Here, too, the proposed solution is a web-based one. The idea is to notify students of required texts sooner, so that they can shop on-line and perhaps realize savings.

(Submitted, May, 2007)