

– CEPP Recommendations for All-College Student Rating Form–

Skidmore College is a small liberal arts institution that values highly effective teaching. However, assessing teaching, is likely an equally challenging endeavor. Historically, Skidmore, and nearly every higher education institution, has relied on survey of students as a primary mechanism of evaluating teaching effectiveness. Skidmore prides itself on teaching quality and on the hard work of assessing teaching effectiveness in a comprehensive manner.

Accordingly, in 2013 CEPP, with the work of many others, stewarded a new student ratings form. When Skidmore faculty voted to adopt the current all-college ratings form, the legislation stipulated CEPP review the form after a period of time. CEPP has taken up this work over the last two years and recently provided a report to the faculty in the Spring of 2019 of its findings. A number of concerns have arisen in the course of the CEPP reviewing the all-college *student rating of courses and teaching* form (a.k.a Deans Card, quantitative student evaluations of teaching, etc.). These concerns are also to be taken in the greater context of academia at large, as we are not alone in examining our approach and devising potential strategies to avoid the known pitfalls of assessing teaching effectiveness via student survey.

In addition to CEPP's own deliberations and consultation with Ginger Clark (Associate Vice Provost for Academic and Faculty Affairs. In Academic Affairs, USC), the American Sociological Society (ASA) recently drafted a statement, endorsed by other professional organizations, which has helped to shape this current set of recommendations, along with other published sources. Our guiding principles in drafting these recommendations have been: considering the input of the faculty (via faculty-wide survey), the risk-benefit ratio, and the potential feasibility of a given recommendation. We entered into this process in good faith, recognizing the importance of our task but also the ongoing work of our colleagues serving in various capacities who utilize the ratings form. The ratings form, and its use, is part of a much larger institutional network. This document summarizes a list of potential recommendations from CEPP for consideration by the faculty at large, departments/programs, faculty governance committees, and administrators.

1. General recommendations regarding instituting a more holistic approach to evaluating teaching effectiveness
 - a. We ask that the ATC, in consultation with the DOF, consider requiring a reflection upon teaching or teaching statement as part of the teaching portfolio for tenure.
 - b. As noted above, our deliberations included consultation with an external party (Dr. Ginger Clark, USC). Based on our interpretation of her valuable insights, we recommend that the college consider how we might evolve our assessment of teaching effectiveness. We believe that ATC, PC and Department Chairs would need to have a central role in deciding how such a new system would be structured. Such discussions would center on a bolstered peer evaluation through classroom visitation, as well as critical review of assignments, assessment of student work, feedback to students, and advising. Stakeholders with expertise will likely be needed to identify and establish best practices in how to conduct such peer evaluation. Instructions for faculty (discussed below) would need to be updated to reflect these new criteria.
 - c. We recommend that ATC and PC consider the ASA statement with regards to current practices in interpreting data from the ratings forms. ASA, and others, have suggested faculty ought not be compared to others, but only onto themselves. Our current ratings forms provide data with reference to the course (in the case of multiple sections), the department/program

(code, e.g. EN), and the College at large. CEPP has drafted a best practices document that includes the ASA guidance with regards to interpretation, which may align with existing ATC/PC practices.

2. Recommendations about bias mitigation
 - a. CEPP has facilitated adopting language in the directions to students document, based upon recent peer reviewed publication, that is aimed at mitigating bias (See appendix A). The new language will be included as a prominent section in the packet directions along with the ratings forms. A student should be delegated by the instructor to return the forms to the appropriate party (e.g. administrative assistant) and read aloud the directions stipulated to do so inside the folder.
 - b. CEPP has drafted guidance for faculty to consider when evaluating another instructor that draws attention to the known biases in ratings forms, including those found at Skidmore.
 - c. We recommend, that the DOF/VPAA form a panel of faculty, with relevant expertise, that will build on recent institutional work to peer-review departmental long forms aiming to provide feedback and reduce potential for bias and improve consistency, where possible and/or appropriate.

3. Recommendations about providing resources for faculty and students
 - a. CEPP recommends that students receive some formal education upon entry to Skidmore, in the First Year Experience program, of the process of providing feedback, but more importantly the principles that should guide their feedback, and offer opportunity for dialog. The peer mentors shall receive training in helping to facilitate such discussions, and to whatever extent possible instructors would be encouraged to participate. CEPP is consulting with the Directors of the FYE, Bridge Experience, CLTL and other relevant parties to further develop this educational intervention.
 - b. Related to the point above, given the potential complexity of ratings and associated statistics, and the recommendation put forth in the ASA statement, faculty in positions of evaluation should consider adopting guidance from the “Best Practices” document, to facilitate appropriate interpretation of the ratings summaries. Adopting and abiding by this document may help to lessen concerns regarding evaluation of ratings summaries.
 - c. Instructors should follow guidance outlined in the best practices document, and elsewhere, when administering the ratings forms.
 - d. The CLTL should consider providing new faculty with a copy of the ratings form, and encourage conversation with their department.
 - e. The DOF/VPAA should consider updating the department chairs and program director’s handbook to include information about orienting and mentoring new faculty or instructors with specific regards to departmental approaches to student feedback and how such information be used.

4. Recommendations concerning the Faculty Handbook
 - a. To ensure consistency with the nomenclature of the form itself, and the general connotation in the literature (recent ASA statement), that the term student evaluations not be used, the faculty handbook shall be revised accordingly (Appendix B).

- b. Related to above points 4.d, the ATC, PC, DOF, and FEC may consider these items in the context of potential clarifications to the faculty handbook.

5. Recommendations about the *Guidelines on Assembling Materials for Tenure* document

This is the document created by the Dean of Faculty's office, vetted by ATC. While these are meant as guidelines, in practice, they carry weight in terms of how faculty members put together tenure files and thus how they are read. This document should be updated based upon the following considerations and perhaps any further dialogue by ATC.

- a. Consider including the standard deviation or the variability in the measurement in the summary table. It is important when considering scores.
- b. Consider including the number of students who completed the survey out of those enrolled, rather than enrollment relative to course cap, as these numbers reflect the actual number of students who completed the ratings form out of the class population, providing insight into the representativeness of the data.
- c. Consider the rules of significant figures, in so far as, not reporting digits calculated beyond the precision of the original data or the precision of the instrument (e.g. 4.12345, when the form only measures in whole numbers). While mathematically possible, one should question the value, or significance, of these digits, and appropriate rounding should be considered.
- d. Consider interrogating the language used in the guidelines document stipulating that department forms are required. While the wording in the faculty handbook is quite clear that the all-college ratings forms are required (shall be included), such language is not present in the context of the department forms. It is generally understood that in practice the department forms are to be included, and the ATC operating code demands them, but a close reading of page 219 of the faculty handbook, raises the question of clarity around whether such a requirement exists, and clarification may prove beneficial.
- e. Update and clarify the instructions for candidates for tenure and promotion to reflect changes in the required elements of tenure and promotion files.

In summary, the above recommendations should not be considered an exhaustive list of recommendations or practices that could be evolved to better assist in our evaluation of teaching, nor the end of such discussion. The faculty interest group may continue to foster discussion, and CEPP should never cease to engage in such matters of evaluation and assessment. As education evolves, so too should its assessment. Given the sentiment of the faculty and findings of our internal review, the above actions are short-term actionable items the College can take to improve the administration, interpretation, and utilization of the ratings form, if its use is to be continued in evaluating the teaching by our colleagues.

APPENDIX A

Modification to Instructions to Students

Instructions are provided below for students filling out student ratings of courses and teaching forms, which will be included at the forefront of the directions sheet included with every packet containing all-college ratings forms.

[The following is to be read aloud by a student designated by the instructor.

“Student ratings of teaching play an important role in the review of instructors. Research on American higher education has shown that women and instructors of color are systematically rated lower than white men, even when there are no actual differences in the instruction or in what students have learned. Skidmore College recognizes that bias may emerge from perceptions of the instructor’s race, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, national origin, first language, religious and spiritual tradition, age, ability, and socioeconomic status.

As you fill out the course ratings please keep this in mind and make an effort to resist unconscious and unintentional bias. Focus on your opinions about the content of the course (the assignments, the textbook, the in-class material) and teaching effectiveness, and not unrelated matters (e.g. the instructor’s appearance).”

APPENDIX B

MOTION

RATIONALE: CEPP would like to put forth the motion to modify the language in the faculty handbook regarding the all-college student ratings form. We are proposing the modifications below, in part, as a housekeeping action to ensure consistent use of language, but also in part to recognize the nature of the ratings form as feedback and not as a formal evaluation of teaching. Thus, where the term “student evaluations” is used currently, the suggested language is revised in multiple locations to “student ratings” to be in harmony with the name of the form, and “student feedback” when departmental/program forms are mentioned, or “Ratings and feedback” when a collective term is desired.

MOTION: to amend the 2019-2020 Faculty Handbook as follows, with change highlighted in red:

Table of Contents,

page i, Part One, section VII.C.7,

7. Student **Ratings and Feedback**

page iv, Part Two, section III.F

F. Student **Ratings and Feedback**,

1. All-College Student **Ratings**,

2. Departmental Student **Feedback**

Part One, Section VII.A.4. pg. 111

4. Because **student ratings and feedback are** used in several decision-making processes, faculty members have a right to receive fair and honest ratings and **feedback**.

Part One, Section VII.C.7. pg. 112

7. Student **Ratings and Feedback**: Faculty members are required to **obtain student ratings and feedback** in their courses (see Part Two, Article III [Academic Policies], Section F).

Part One, Section VIII.A.1. pg. 115

.... and careful readings of student course **ratings and feedback**.

Part One, Section VIII.E.5.viii. pg. 127

viii. **Evaluation of Teaching**....., number 7 [Student **Ratings and Feedback**]....and Section F [Student **Ratings and Feedback**].

Part One, Section VIII.F.2..a.vii.3 pg. 132

(3) the ten most recent consecutive semesters of teaching **ratings and feedback**.

Part One, Section XIII.D.3 pg. 143

The Director has access to teaching faculty's curriculum vitae, syllabi, and **student ratings and feedback** for courses in the program.

Part Two, Section III.F.3 pg. 219

F. Student **Ratings and Feedback**

1. All-College Student **Rating of Courses and Instructor**

a. All members of the Faculty will have their courses **rated** each term by students enrolled in their courses. The **rating form** shall be administered in a uniform manner which protects confidentiality. The Dean of the Faculty/Vice President for Academic Affairs will provide the forms to each department.

b. Each term, Department Chairs shall return the completed **rating forms** to the Dean of the Faculty/Vice President for Academic Affairs, who shall be responsible for **overseeing Institutional Research Office processing of the forms**. The Dean of the Faculty/Vice President for Academic Affairs shall **ensure the Institutional Research Office** returns the **summaries of the ratings forms** to the Department Chairs for retention in department files.

c. **Summaries of the ratings forms from Institutional Research** shall be made available each term to the faculty being **rated**.

d. The **summaries of the ratings forms** shall be **made** available to the Associate Dean of the Faculty (faculty affairs), to the Dean of the Faculty/Vice President for Academic Affairs, and to the President for their examination during consideration of reappointment, tenure, promotions, or salary advancement. In addition, the **summaries of the ratings forms** shall be available to ATC and PC for its examination during consideration for reappointment, promotions, or tenure.

e. Faculty members have a right to receive fair and honest **ratings**. A faculty member who feels this right has been violated may pursue the matter through any of several channels (Department Chair, Dean of the Faculty/Vice President for Academic Affairs, CAFR, etc.) that seem appropriate to the particular case.

2. Departmental Student Evaluations

Student **feedback forms** administered by departments or programs are required for all lecture, discussion, laboratory, and studio courses. At the discretion of the instructor, departmental **feedback forms** may also be used to **get feedback from** independent studies, internships, and thesis or individual research courses. These **forms** should be administered in such a way as to ensure validity, responsibility, and where possible, confidentiality.

a. Validity shall mean that the methods each department may devise for its own needs be likely to produce nearly complete returns from each class.

b. Responsibility shall mean that students sign the **feedback forms** they fill out, and that no anonymous **form** be accepted. Although signatures must be separated from the completed forms before

they are shown to the faculty member concerned, or kept confidential in some other fashion, some record of who **completed a given form** must be established.

c. Confidentiality shall mean that no faculty member shall learn the name of the student who **completed a given form** for one of their own courses. If, on the other hand, allegations suggesting unprofessional conduct appear in a student evaluation, the Department Chair or CAFR may seek to interview the student to determine whether further review is warranted.