To: Academic Committee
From: Morton J. Mendelson, Associate Dean (Academic)
Date: October 27, 2004
Re: Report of AC Workgroup on Course Evaluations

Workgroup: Rhonda Amsel, Jim Cline, Jennifer Hunter, Bettina Kemme, Christopher Lee (SUS), and Morton J Mendelson (Chair)

A. Accessibility of Course Evaluation Results to the McGill Community

Course evaluations from many units in the Faculty of Science are not treated uniformly across the Faculty and are not readily available to the McGill community. Specifically, units offering BSc programs have been underrepresented on the Provost's course evaluation website <http://www.mcgill.ca/provost/courseevaluations/>.

The administrative process required for numeric summaries to be posted on the website has not been followed by most departments and units. In some cases, the permission forms have not been distributed or signed by professors, perhaps mistakenly, although some units have explicitly opted for independent dissemination of the information. In other cases, units have failed to send their data to the NCS for processing, perhaps because they analyze the results locally.

For example, one unit retains a hard copy that can be seen by students, but the method effectively limits students' access. It is not clear how students would know about the copy in the unit, especially students who are registered in programs offered by other units. Also, students interested in accessing the information may be intimidated about asking for it. Finally, students may not be able to access the information when they actually need it—i.e., when making decisions about registration.

Another unit posts some, but not all, of the numerical information on its own website, which at once prevents students from accessing information that they should have, but does not restrict access to the McGill community. Given that the unit's website does not comply with University regulations, the web master of the Provost's web site is unwilling to provide links to the unit's site on the central site.

Reminders

… Senate policy (1980) and subsequent recommendations (1992, 2002) require that all courses taught at McGill should be evaluated, and stipulate that all McGill students are allowed access to the results of the numeric portions of course evaluations, provided that the instructor grants permission, that the instructor has had an academic teaching appointment for more than two (2) years at any university, and that a minimum number of students in the class have responded to the course evaluation, which number is to be fixed by the individual department/school/ faculty.
(www.mcgill.ca/provost/courseevaluations/memo/, October 15, 2004)

While all courses offered at McGill University have to be evaluated by students, only the numeric data (e.g. means, frequency distributions) from course evaluations are made public and access to the website where they are posted is restricted to the McGill community.
(http://www.mcgill.ca/provost/courseevaluations/procedure/ October 18, 2004)

Recommendations

1. Units offering BSc Majors should make numeric summaries of course evaluations public on the Provost's website, subject to the restrictions allowed by University regulations, especially instructors'[1] rights to maintain the privacy of their own course evaluations. To accomplish this, chairs/directors should ensure that instructors complete and submit permission forms (but see 3e) and that the data for paper-based evaluations are duly submitted to NCS.

2. The Faculty of Science should endorse the following suggestions to the University:

    a) The University website should list courses individually, rather than by department.

    b) The website should include a tool to enable students to easily access the information for specific courses and to search for information based on instructor, semester, and year.

    c) The University should enhance the readability and usefulness of the displayed information.

    d) The website should display similar types of information regardless of the source—i.e., from electronic or paper-based evaluations—but also indicate the source for each course.

    e) Different procedures should be adopted to increase awareness about permission forms. Deputy-Provost Masi is apparently planning to enable instructors to submit or deny permission on line, which would be a significant improvement over the current system, especially if his office took responsibility for reminding instructors to complete the forms.

    f) Whatever the format for permission forms, efforts should be made to increase the response rate so that all instructors *explicitly* give or withhold permission.

    g) Instructors should be able to grant permission for summaries of their course evaluations to be made public separately for questions deemed by the unit to relate to the course as a whole and for questions deemed to relate to the instructors' teaching per se.

B. McGill On-Line Evaluation (MOLE) Project

The Deputy Provost's Office is investigating the use of on-line course evaluations and undertook the MOLE pilot project last year. The goals for on-line evaluations are to reduce costs, to increase student participation, and to reduce the number of times that information regarding course evaluations is handled from the time students provide responses to the time the information is made available to students, instructors, and chairs/directors.

The report on the project[2] concluded that it was successful. It cost less than the existing system, and 96% of the students who completed the on-line evaluations preferred the method to the paper forms. Professors appreciated the faster results, did not find evidence of bias, but concluded that students needed reminders. The average response rate was about 62% in winter 2004 about 51% in summer 2004[3].

The report also concluded that the project adequately dealt with several of the problems anticipated with an on-line system: Student anonymity was protected. Access was limited to the appropriate group—i.e., only

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[1] *Instructor* in these recommendations refers also, as appropriate, to the course coordinator.
[2] MOLE Pilot Project Report. Office of the Deputy Provost & CIO, McGill University. August 2004.
[3] Letter to the Deans and Chairs, Laura R. Winer, Office of the Deputy Provost & CIO.

students registered in the course had access to the evaluation and they could use it only once. The site was considered secure and required students to login with their Minerva ID and password.

MOLE was opened to units or individual instructors in 2004-05. It will address problems encountered with the pilot project. Although evaluations were obtained in the pilot project earlier than for in-class paper evaluations, the response window will now be the last 2 weeks of the semester, including the weekends.

The report concluded that there were benefits of on-line evaluations with respect to comments. While the total number of comments was almost the same for electronic and paper-based evaluations, students provided more detailed comments on line, especially mixed comments, which were positive statements with a suggestion for improvement. Also, the number of students who provided at least one comment was higher.

The issue of team-taught courses was handled effectively in MOLE. Students filled out one set of questions regarding the course and a set of questions regarding instructors for each one in the course. In multi-sectioned courses, students answered questions regarding the section in which they registered, without ascertaining if that was the section they attended. However, students registered in one section may actually attend the lectures in another section, perhaps because of unexpected changes in their schedule or because they prefer the instructor in the second section.

One problem noted in the report was the need for repeated solicitation of responses from the students. Different professors used different methods to encourage students to complete the questionnaires. The Workgroup felt that there was a problem having to rely on professors to fulfill this function. It should be noted that response rates ranged from 39% to 90%, perhaps reflecting the type of reminders used by the instructors.

There was some concern that students who never or rarely attend class can fill out an on-line evaluation. However, it was also noted that regular attendees who miss the wrong class can lose the chance to fill out paper evaluations that are administered in that class. Addressing the general issue, the report stated, "More research is required to determine if and how responses are biased from certain groups of students as previous studies have had mixed or inconclusive results" (p. 13).

The Workgroup was particularly concerned about possible differences between the results of on-line versus paper-based evaluations. It is necessary to know if the results are comparable for the two types of evaluations in order to make appropriate decisions regarding tenure, promotion, and merit. Based on previous studies, the report concluded that "results from online and paper surveys are essentially the same overall" (p. 13). There were not sufficient data from the pilot to draw any firm conclusions about this issue in the context of McGill.

Given that the use of on-line evaluations appears to be inevitable, it must be noted that, in the short term, there are potential problems, which may be particularly important for assistant professors coming up for tenure. *If* on-line evaluations are systematically different from paper-based evaluations, then instructors' course evaluations may be affected beneficially or adversely depending on what format is used in their courses. However, the point of reference, which is often the average departmental evaluation, may also be affected by the relative number of courses that are evaluated on-line or with paper.

Recommendations

3. On-line evaluations in courses administered by Science should be phased-in as follows:
   - 2004-05: paper-based evaluations are the default, with an option for on-line evaluations;
   - 2005-06: on-line evaluations are the default, with an option for paper-based evaluations;
   - 2006-07: all evaluations should be on-line, provided that the concerns listed here are addressed, as indicated by a report from the Associate Dean (Academic) with a recommendation to Faculty:

   a. Appropriate centrally administered methods should be in place to ensure suitable response rates from students, such as
      - e-mail message(s) to students from the Deputy-Provost, explaining the importance of course evaluations, with a link to the sign-in page for evaluations;
      - automatic cross-listing of links to the course-evaluation web page on WebCT pages of participating courses;
      - links on Minerva to the course-evaluation results page, which would improve access to evaluations when students register for courses and which would generally increase awareness of the importance of course evaluations;
      - advertising on posters and in the student press;
      - "lottery" incentives for completing course evaluations, with a credit at the Book Store or some other reasonable prize.

   b. The on-line evaluations should ensure that instructors in multi-instructor courses are properly identified, at least by a reference to the topics that they covered, if not by their picture. Moreover, instructors in such courses should not be presented in a fixed order, to avoid order effects and/or the possibility that fewer responses are provided for instructors mentioned last.

   c. It should be possible to include questions on on-line evaluations regarding Teaching Assistants, with responses collected for specific TAs. Proper identification of the TAs should be ensured, and students should be able to evaluate the TA(s) with whom they had contact. [Note: Summaries of evaluations of TAs are not made public.]

   d. Appropriate procedures should be in place to ensure that the evaluations of instructors who withhold permission to publicize their course evaluations are not inadvertently made public.

   e. Procedures should be in place to ensure that comments submitted by students can be viewed *only* by instructors and their chairs/directors. Once receipt of comments has been acknowledged, they should be deleted from the MOLE server.

   f. The central administration should continue to collect data on MOLE and update the report on the pilot project, to ensure that as much information as possible is available regarding possible differences between on-line and paper-based evaluations.

   g. Course evaluations of multi-sectioned courses should be conducted in a way that enables students to evaluate the section they attend, even if it is different from the one in which they are registered.

4. During 2004-05 and 2005-06 the decision to opt in or out of MOLE should not be up to departments, but up to instructors, even those coming up for tenure or promotion.

5. Instructors submitting teaching dossiers should clearly indicate whether course evaluations that they report were conducted on-line or with paper.