

Riverside, March 30, 2020

Memo: Request Suspension of Course Evaluation (iEval) for Spring 2020

From: Jeanette Kohl, Art History, Acting Director Center for Ideas and Society

Jason Weems, Chair, Art History

To: Dylan Rodriguez, Chair of the Academic Senate, UCR Division

With this memo, we reiterate the contents and the suggestions made in earlier emails to the Vice Provost for Academic Personnel, Ameae Walker (with cc to the Interim Provost Thomas Smith and the Chair of the Academic Senate, Dylan Rodriguez, on March 20 and March 24 respectively), about the need to set aside usual practices of course/instructor evaluation (including iEval) in the upcoming spring quarter of 2020.

Due to the campus closure and the measures to contain the current COVID-19 pandemic, we all find ourselves in an unusual and difficult situation. This concerns not least the continuation and the nature of our teaching. In her email to faculty of March 20, Ameae Walker addressed the difficulties (lack of time for preparation, problems in revamping and reformatting courses for online teaching) and of potential effects on teaching evaluations as follows:

“We anticipate that student evaluations of teaching (Winter and Spring 2020) may be negatively impacted by the need to move to remote learning and *general student dissatisfaction with what has happened.*” At the same time, her email mentioned that each personnel file “still requires two assessments of teaching, and one has to be from students per the APM. For most, it will *be easiest* to continue to use the iEval online system.”

In light of Dr. Walker’s email, we suggest a different course. Extraordinary times require extraordinary measures, among which the *most appropriate* solution would be to suspend iEval for the spring quarter 2020. A suspension would help ease the current situation of uncertainty for faculty and students alike, in particular as to the expectations for the spring quarter courses.

It is our opinion that iEval in its current form is based on premises and parameters that do not apply for the unusual situation of improvised online teaching (with de facto only one week of preparation time for new course formats) in the upcoming spring quarter and that in consequence an exception must be made. Suspending iEval for a quarter in which the task of teaching can be expected to be much more demanding and chaotic than usual, would be an important gesture of goodwill from leadership and an acknowledgement of the extra burden we are all carrying.

If, on the contrary, the current evaluation system remains in place we risk creating inequities based on the variability of faculty circumstances during the pandemic, their prior experience with remote technology, the quality of home offices, and conduciveness of different disciplines to remote presentation. Many instructors have to learn remote teaching from scratch, in only a few days, and without the advantage of full developmental support. This creates an unavoidable advantage for those that do not. Furthermore, course content is now vulnerable to internet outages and other technical difficulties that may hit unevenly and over which instructors have absolutely no control. To avoid such inequities, we suggest setting everything and everyone on equal footing by suspending a system that otherwise would create injustice. Faculty and leadership should not have to read their colleagues' evaluations on how they taught and if they handled things well during a very unusual and challenging situation, where the majority of us are forced to improvise and step far outside of our knowledge base.

Without any doubt, evaluations from our students form an important part of our teaching. We learn from their feedback. Clearly, they are more than numeric indicators for merit and promotion files. They are deeply psychological (and at times emotional) in nature, on the part of the student who writes them and on the part of the instructor who receives them. Suspending them for the spring quarter will be a major contribution to easing the unusual pressure we all feel in terms of how the quarter will go and how our students will react.

We urge you to also take note of AAUP's recommendations in their response to COVID-19, in particular in paragraphs 9 and 11 respectively:

“All staff members should be provided the authority to telework, and the appropriate equipment and supplies to support telework, during this crisis, regardless of their faculty, staff, exempt or nonexempt

status. All who use telework should be protected from any negative evaluations associated with telework arrangements.”

And: “Faculty members, particularly adjunct/contingent faculty and those on the tenure track who are not yet tenured, should be protected against the punitive use of negative teaching evaluations during the period of the disruption (e.g., a quick transition to an online format may create a lack of depth; a faculty member may not have been adequately trained to teach online, etc.).”

https://www.aaup.org/news/aft-and-aaup-principles-higher-education-response-covid-19#.Xn_UxC2ZP-Y

We think that these matters are important and ask that a suspension of course evaluation (iEval) for one quarter and related measures be discussed in the appropriate Standing Committees, with concrete outcomes in the form of recommendations to be presented as soon as possible to leadership in charge, in particular the Vice Provost for Academic Personnel and the Interim Provost.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Kohl", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jeanette Kohl

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Weems", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jason Weems