

April 10, 2020

TO: Dylan Rodriguez, Chair
Academic Senate

FROM: Philip Brisk, Chair 
BCOE Executive Committee

RE: Campus 5-year plan

Dear Dylan,

The BCOE Executive Committee discussed the proposal to suspend Course Evaluation (iEval) for Spring 2020, put forth in a memo dated March 30, 2020, by Profs. Kohl and Weems (Art History). Opinions among the BCOE Executive Committee members varied: among the Committee members who participated in the discussion, four opposed the proposal, one supported it, and two other members contributed to the discussion without explicitly taking sides. The Student Representative, in private comment to me, not shared with the other committee members, also opposed the proposal.

The general sentiment of those who opposed the proposal was that UCR's merit and promotion process would not penalize professors who had low student evaluations for Spring 2020 resulting from the rapid transition to online instruction in response to COVID-19. Professors who seek merit advancements or promotions could address specific challenges that they experienced in their self-statement, while Department and Chair's letters could address overall Departmental trends. While not explicitly stated, it was assumed that various committees (e.g., CAP) and persons (e.g., the VPAP) who review merit and promotion files would not hold lower-than-usual teaching evaluations for Spring 2020 against any professor. Some committee members also felt that students who submit the iEvals understand and respect the challenges that the instructors faced, and consequently would not be unduly judgmental in their evaluations.

Those who opposed the proposal also felt that the feedback provided from students who took courses during Spring 2020 has value, regardless. Dean Lynch, who I will quote directly, stated that "This is an incredible opportunity to find out how we did in an emergency and what we could change with some advance planning." Optimistically, even negative feedback could be converted into a useful collection of "lessons learned" that could, for example, lead to positive improvements in ongoing online teaching programs, such as MSOL.

Several Committee members proposed adjusting the iEval questions asked for Spring 2020 to focus primarily on the remote teaching experience. Another proposal is to adjust The Call to allow professors seeking merit advancements to provide a 1-page supplementary document to explain how the campus closure and the rapid transition to online instruction impacted their teaching for Spring 2020; this would be particularly useful for merits which impose a strict limit on the length of the self-statement.

I will quote the Student Representative directly: "As a student, iEval is definitely one way to do exactly what the name suggests "evaluate." Students are "evaluated" based off the grade they receive in a course, which has not changed during these times. I do agree that the questions should be adjusted to accommodate and assess distance learning. Truthfully, having iEvals this quarter will probably be the most advantageous to evaluate professors and teaching assistants. For instance, I have several professors that are extremely receptive to commentary from students and make adjustments as the course goes on, and I want to be able to praise them for their hard-work and willingness to be a students advocate. On the contrary, I have professors who are making distance learning difficult and frustrating (i.e., having an uninformative syllabus available to students, starting course meetings before the registered times, being non-responsive to student emails, making significant adjustments to assignments hours before they are due), all points that should be made aware to the person who reads iEvals."

Another unique suggestion from the Student Representative was to create an evaluation mechanism to assess UCR's response to the sudden change and to find general ways to improve online education.

The one faculty member who supported the proposal highlighted inequities under which the transition to online teaching may impact some faculty more than others. For example, two professors who live in the same residence and whose lectures are scheduled at the same time may experience network bandwidth limitations, thus degrading the quality of content delivery to the students. Faculty who lack child care, and especially those with young children, single parents, etc., may experience greater stress than others, are likely to have a much tougher time transitioning to online instruction. This member noted that campus has taken unprecedented actions to alleviate student and staff anxiety, but has not extended the same courtesies to faculty.

While the Committee did not reach consensus on any one issue, we believe that the discussion was fruitful and we hope that some of the thoughts and ideas expressed within this letter are beneficial to both the Riverside Division of the Academic Senate and the Administration in terms of figuring out how to evaluate teaching for Spring 2020 moving forward.

